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To the Stars

by Hieronym

Summary

After centuries of turmoil, Humanity has expanded to the stars, just as the Incubators promised. The half-AI Government of Earth is determined to turn the planet into its vision of utopia, but the shadows of utopia hide many secrets. When an alien threat the Incubators failed to mention threatens the peace, one of those secrets steps out into the light.

In the midst of it all, an ordinary girl looks to the sky, wondering at her place in the universe.

A Wish (Volume I: Quantum Entanglement)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

> While basic instruction on the consequences and responsibilities of wish-making is, from an ethical standpoint, mandatory, this requirement must be balanced against the greater good of Human society. Instructors are forbidden from divulging more about the Incubator system than is present in the course curriculum; this restriction lasts until pupils are past recruitment age, typically considered as ending at twenty. While concern for your pupils is laudable, silence is your responsibility as a citizen, and as a member of Human society. Violation of this policy will be met with immediate loss of position followed by possible punitive measures…
>
> **— *"Universal Guidelines for Middle School Instructors (12th revision),"* excerpt.**
>
> Taking into account the updated military requirements forwarded to me by *MAISL*, my projections indicate that production will soon be insufficient to meet aggregate demand. Therefore, I recommend immediate cuts to Alloc distribution to all households and civilian organizations, distributed regressively down the volunteer productivity scale, as outlined in the accompanying charts. In addition, Chart Five outlines classes of goods and services that will now require Allocs to purchase. Consultation with *CHAI* indicates that while morale will suffer, civic unrest will remain nominal. Unfortunately, times have changed.
>
> **— Recommendation by the *Production and Allocation Machine* (PAL), adopted unanimously by the *CEC* under expedited procedures.**

Shizuki Ryouko opened her eyes slowly, the ceiling sharpening into focus above her.

It had been a nice dream, involving cake.

She sat up and stretched, one arm raised high, instinctively querying her chronometer.

It was *10:11:23,* it seemed, the knowledge injecting itself into her stream of consciousness.

She grunted in annoyance. She had hoped to get up earlier than that. Ah well, it hadn't been worth setting an alarm.

Slipping out of her covers, she slid her feet into her favorite bunny slippers, the ones that squeaked as she walked. They had sentimental value, but she insisted to her friends that they were "just some old slippers that were a gift." Her diminutive stature seemed to cause her friends to think of her as a bit of a child, and she didn't want to do anything to further that impression.

Grabbing a change of clothes off the rack, she started pulling off her nightclothes. It was a little tedious; some people, especially many of her male classmates, were lazy enough to just wear the same self-cleaning clothes all day, every day. Others, preferring a more personal touch, had robots to do the dressing for them.

Her family was a bit more traditional—and less well-funded—than that.

Sometimes she envied adults, she thought, not for the first time, pulling up a nice skirt she had picked out the night before. Most adults used the standard sleep-suppressing regimen of drugs and nanotreatments, and consequently slept anywhere from three hours a day to nothing at all, depending on preference. That same regimen was considered possibly unsafe in 14–year-olds like her, and not a good idea anyway; Governance ideology stressed the importance of having each new generation of children experience a little of the human condition, even the outdated parts. That way they wouldn't forget their roots and grow into soulless posthuman monsters. Something like that.

The government always made a big deal about things like that. Governance ideology was responsible for the built-in restrictions on direct mental communication and virtual reality, for instance. They were expected to move their lips to talk, except for deliberately slow long-range messaging, and time tickets to activate your VR implants were exorbitantly expensive.

Anything else would be inhuman, after all.

Except for occasional moments of weakness, though, she didn't really mind sleeping all those extra hours. She didn't know what people wanted to rush for. Nowadays, there was nothing *worth* rushing for, and all the time in the world to do what you wanted.

Nothing at all.

She ordered her blinds open with a thought, then leaned onto her windowsill, observing the cityscape from her vantage point on the forty-second story. Behind her, her long hair silently untangled itself, prehensile strands waking up for the day. *That* was one convenience that was not restricted—hair that maintained constant length, cleaned itself, and arranged itself was astonishingly useful.

She felt really stupid sometimes, like a square peg in a world of round holes. It had been drilled into their heads in school: the story of human history was all about escape. Escape from hunger, from need, from want. Now, humanity had really reached the end of history, and was finally on its way to building a perfect society.

It didn't feel perfect to her.

She looked out at Mitakihara City. The city hummed with activity, with transportation vehicles constantly on the move on the surface, along the countless elevated roads and tubes, and, she knew, deep underground. Air vehicles had turned out to be impractical and inefficient—the only true solution to congestion was to go 3–D.

Pedestrians and bicyclists swarmed the skyways, drones patrolled the skies and, if you looked hard enough, you could see the edges of the species diversity preserve, the SDP.

But, inevitably, her eyes went to the starport.

A seemingly unassuming structure, flat and squat against the horizon, its name was a bit of a misnomer; the starport didn't send anyone into space, not directly. Instead, it packed passengers into scramjets bound for the true ports, the space elevators ringing the equator. The Mitakihara starport was particularly important, and was thus unusually large and busy, jets going in and out constantly.

She looked at it with longing.

In a world where you could have almost anything, spaceflight was still one of the true scarcities.

Heavily restricted and carefully regulated, pleasure flights were deliberately priced to absurd levels, to restrict civilian travel. You could go and be a tourist if you wanted—if you were willing to pay.

It hadn't always been like this. But nowadays, space was reserved for colonists—and the military.

Indeed, looking up, Ryouko could even see a glimmer from one of the numerous defense stations orbiting Earth.

She leaned over and peered into the telescope she had mounted next to her window, tossing the dustcover onto her bed. A gift from her grandmother, it was one of those automatic models, requiring only a transmitted instruction from her cortical implants to automatically find and focus on the desired target. Easy.

The space station was one of the newer Bucky models, so called for their geodesic, soccer ball-like shapes. Since the military kept the specifications tightly classified, no one knew why the fundamental shape had been changed, only that it was better somehow. Suffice to say, there were hundreds of them, each almost certainly capable of deflecting major asteroids or wiping out continents on the surface below, and they were constantly being upgraded, added to, or replaced.

Nobody knew if they'd be enough, if they were ever really needed.

Her classmates, her parents, everyone around her, seemed happy with their lives here. Seemingly endless abundance, nothing to really worry about, productive work all voluntary—nowadays, residents of Earth wiled away their time at their hobbies, becoming artists, physicists, athletes, fulfilling the dreams that would have once been stymied by lack of opportunity, burning away the endless years of their clinically immortal lives.

But not her. She wasn't happy here.

She kept telling herself she'd get over it, that she'd find a hobby, maybe get a boyfriend or develop a fixation on Advanced Field Theory, but it never happened. Instead, she kept finding herself looking up, at the universe, where she felt her heart truly lay.

Maybe someday she would get to go.

"Come on, Ryouko-chan," her father said, appearing behind her in the doorway. "You've already missed breakfast with the rest of us. You know how your mother gets when you do that. Don't make her wait any longer."

He didn't look a day over thirty, despite being well over a hundred years old.

Easy to nag when you don't have to sleep, Ryouko thought, but said out loud:

"Alright, I'm coming."

She lingered a bit longer, looking out at the horizon. Then she tossed the dustcover back onto her telescope and walked out her door, letting her bedsheets make themselves.

"Can you believe this shit?" her grandfather asked, as she entered the main room.

It was a crowded room, designed to serve as living space, entertainment area, and dining area, with modular furniture to suit it. Many things were cheap, but space in a dense urban hub like Mitakihara City was always at a premium. As a consequence, most families in the city rubbed elbows in extremely cramped flats—and no one wanted to live outside a city, because it was both expensive and boring. Not the flats—those were government-allocated anyway, and *much* easier

to get when away from the city. With the majority of citizens spending government distributed incomes, differences in prices between urban and rural areas reflected mostly the cost of transporting goods—and thus, goods were always more expensive away from the centers of production, in the cities. Governance was disinclined to mitigate the difference, since it preferred denser cities anyway for productivity, efficiency, environmental, and surveillance reasons.

It was just one of the many practical compromises to theoretical eudaimonia.

“I told you not to swear in front of Ryouko, Dad,” her mother said, frowning, as Ryouko took a seat at the table.

“She hears worse in school all the time, I assure you,” the man said stubbornly.

“Besides, have you seen the news?” he demanded, turning to gesture at the words appearing on the wall behind him, which had turned temporarily glass-like.

“Yes, Dad,” her mother said, in her patented long-suffering tone. “We can all check our news feeds perfectly fine.”

“What news?” Ryouko asked. Unlike her parents, she didn’t care to have the news delivered to her brain every morning. She found it distracting.

“They’re cutting resource allocations *again*!” the man said. “What a travesty! I thought we lived in the future! That’s what they keep telling us, anyway.”

“Don’t be stubborn. You know what the situation is,” her mother said, voice sharp.

She tapped her fingers on the table restlessly. A sour mood seemed to settle on the table.

Something was wrong, Ryouko intuited.

“Besides, if you don’t change your mind soon,” she added. “I’m sure your extra allocation will easily tide us over.”

She sounded sarcastic.

“Look, I know you disapprove,” the old man said, immediately following the lines of the old argument. “But my mind is made up.”

“I just don’t see what appeal it has to you.”

“Look,” Ryouko’s father interrupted, sticking his hand forward, as if to physically separate the two of them. “Let’s not rehash this argument again. He’s an adult. He can make his own decisions.”

“That’s right,” the old man said, somewhat nonplussed by the unexpected defense.

“I just want him to know we don’t need the Allocs,” her mother insisted. “We’ll be fine without it. I just don’t want to see you die, Dad.”

The blunt phrasing cast an additional pallor over the table.

“I could easily make it out alive,” the old man said, having heard it before.

“Most don’t,” her mother rebutted.

“Come on, you two,” Ryouko’s father tried to interject.

“Your mother is still alive, isn’t she?” her grandfather pointed out.

In truth, the only reason they knew that was because they had yet to receive an official death notice. Sometime over the past twelve years, the woman had simply stopped writing.

“I know you’re trying to follow her,” Ryouko’s mother argued, voice anguished and angry, forcing the words out. “But please. Give it up. She’s not coming back. She doesn’t love you anymore.”

“Dear!” her father said, grabbing her mother’s shoulder. That was a step too far.

“I can’t be happy here,” her grandfather said, head bowed. “I just can’t. I’ve tried. Maybe there’s something out there for me.”

For those living on Earth who were unhappy with their medically eternal lives, there was a ready solution. Those with ennui, those unable to fit into society, those who had divorced after sixty years of happy matrimony—they all joined the military, who welcomed them with open arms. It was the natural destination of those seeking to change their lives—or seeking an end.

And, if by some stroke of luck you survived, a new life waited for you in the colonies, should you desire it.

The only requirement was that you be over a hundred, and could thus reasonably attest that you had seen much of what Earth life had to offer.

That was where her grandmother had gone, and where the old man was going now.

“Please, can we not have this argument again in front of Ryouko?” her father pleaded. “She’s already heard entirely too much of this.”

The old man—who didn’t look old at all, in fact—hung his head.

Ryouko knew he felt guilty about leaving, and that she was the only reason he had managed to force himself to stay all these years.

She swallowed.

“Enjoy your time in space, granddad,” Ryouko said, giving him a hug. “Do what you want to do. Don’t feel guilty.”

She buried her face in his shoulder, not wanting to look at her mother. She meant what she said, but she didn’t want to see the look on her mother’s face.

The man smiled back at her weakly.

He was going next week. Monday, as a matter of fact.

That’s right, Ryouko thought. *In a hundred years, I might follow you.*

Her mother cleared her throat, grabbing Ryouko’s breakfast for her off a nearby counter.

“Well, speaking of resource cuts,” she said, changing topics with disturbing efficiency. “The food synthesizer is on the fritz again. Nothing came out this morning but inedible mush.”

“Yes, I did notice the dry cereal for breakfast,” her father said dryly.

“We’ll get right on it,” the old man promised, referring to him and his son-in-law, as Ryouko looked without much interest at her bowl of corn flakes.

“If it doesn’t work right this time, I’m having a technician come repair it,” her mother said. “I don’t care how expensive it is. Consider this warning.”

Ryouko’s father grunted.

“I’ll get food at school, then,” Ryouko said, getting up. “I wanted to have some crêpes, anyway.”

“Alright, have fun,” her mother said, reclaiming the bowl of cereal and pouring it right back in its container.

She wasn’t happy with her daughter.

Ryouko waved goodbye to all of them, and headed out the door.

In the hallway, she stepped into an elevator already waiting for her. It zipped down to the fortieth floor, where she got off, walked four feet, and exited onto the departure terminal. Her ride, a personal auto-transport, was already waiting.

She stepped in, the doors closed, and the vehicle sped off, down the on-ramp onto the tube-like skyway, where it would switch from self-driven propulsion to drawing power from the oscillating magnetic fields around it.

Ryouko ordered the seat to recline, laying back. She looked at the sun above her through the many layers of distorting transparency above her, traffic tubes criss-crossing the sky above her like the output of an enormous, transit-optimizing spider.

The vehicle sped its way along at a dizzying speed, in perfect synchronized order with those around it.

Far too quickly, she was able to step off at the thirtieth floor entrance to her school. She often wished the ride would take longer, so she would have time to watch the sky and think to herself.

Truth be told, in these days of consciousness feeds and universal knowledge access, there were more efficient ways of learning a skill than going to school. Even irreplaceable personal learning interactions could be achieved by simply finding someone who lived nearby willing to teach you in person—and for every imaginable topic, there were plenty. People simply had a lot of time.

No, it wasn’t about the learning, at least not directly. It was about socializing with your peers and, more importantly, figuring out what you *wanted* to learn about. Once you did that, things flowed easily, and they left you more or less on your own.

It was incredibly important, and she had yet to achieve it.

She was early, so she stopped by the school cafeteria, as promised. In the age of 3–D printed food, school food was indistinguishable from what your mother made—unless your mother, or someone in your family at least, had traditional cooking as a hobby.

Well, synthesized food was quite good, so it wasn’t that big a deal.

“Ryouko!” her friends called to her, as she stepped into the room.

She looked around, tracing the source, a table about halfway across the room.

She squeezed her way past other tables, seating herself firmly next to Simona, a foreign exchange student who had joined her little group of friends. Across from her sat her two other friends, the long-haired Chiaki and the pig-tailed Ruiko.

Her tray of crepes was already there, waiting, deposited by the robotic server.

“Ah, what a surprise it is to see you here,” the girl said, accented syntax clearly stabilized by a internal language feedback module, as you could tell from the subtle lag time on some of the words. Eventually, she wouldn’t need it, but she had only been here two months, and even enhanced learning wasn’t *that* fast.

Ryouko nodded. She didn’t usually like to socialize in the morning. It was how she was.

“The synthesizer was out,” she said, making a “*You can’t help it”* expression.

Simona, and the others across from her, made noises of sympathy.

In truth, they and Simona could communicate perfectly fine using Human Standard—a.k.a internationalized and mutated English—but learning the native language was, after all, part of the reason she was here. And they understood each other fine, with all that technology in the middle.

“Well, this girl here,” Chiaki began, gesturing at Ruiko, “was just telling us about how she wants to be a nanoengineer.”

“Ooo,” Ryouko said politely. “That’s prestigious. But what happened to theoretical physics?”

“It turns out,” Ruiko said. “Advanced Field Theory bores me to tears. So I dropped that.”

“You don’t have to do Field Theory to be a physicist,” Simona pointed out.

“Yeah, but you do for all the cool kinds of physics.”

Ryouko kept any further opinions to herself, stabbing quietly at her strawberry and chocolate crepe with a fork. This “nanoengineer” in training was one of the flightiest girls she knew, switching from preference to preference almost without pause. Nanoengineering was one of the hardest topics to study, and Ryouko was sure that before the end of the month, the girl would be moving on to study chemistry or who knows, maybe contemporary art. You couldn’t really tell with her.

“What about you, Ryouko?” Chiaki asked

“Huh? Oh, uh—” she began, startled out of her thoughts.

“She wants to be a space traveler,” Simona said.

Ryouko gave her a warning look, but the damage was done.

“Yeah, but that’s not something you can really do,” Chiaki said. “Unfortunately. What with the age requirement, and the need to enter combat—you can’t really want to do that?”

“Well, train to be a spaceflight engineer or something,” Ruiko said, chewing her food, assuming Ryouko’s response was a no. “Or I don’t know, something to do with space elevators. I haven’t really looked into it myself. Actually, it doesn’t sound half-bad.”

“I might do something like that,” Ryouko said gamely, just trying to end the topic.

“I tell you—” Chiaki began, waving her chopsticks.

Ryouko lucked out. The girl stopped midsentence, as they all simultaneously received internal reminders that Mandatory Session was beginning very soon, and it would be impolite to be late.

“Ugh,” Chiaki finished, as they got up to leave. “Mandatory Session is so *boring*.”

“It is your civic duty,” Simona said to the aspiring violinist. “Every citizen is required to understand the sciences at a basic level, and to know basic manufacturing techniques, just in case it’s needed.”

The other girl rolled her eyes.

Ryouko sympathized. Simona sounded like some sort of government pamphlet. She thought, however, that she detected a hint of irony in the girl’s voice.

Mandatory Session did indeed serve a good purpose, though. Instituted at the start of the current war, it was intended for the eventuality that the war got so serious that the government was obliged to switch the economy from what they called “Eudaimonic” back into a scarcity mode. If that ever happened, family AC’s would start being tied to productivity, essentially making productive activity nonvoluntary. And if things truly got bad, they might even have to go back to something capitalistic.

It was starting to happen a little already. Citizens had always gotten extra allocs for certain types of work, but these extra payments were getting more substantial every month, as did the intricacy of the payment tier system. Combined with the continuous basic allocation cuts, it created an environment where many of those with useful skills sought paying work, and many others were having a change of heart about being an archaeologist, or a specialist in tea ceremonies.

It was even reaching the point where many popular musicians, formerly happy to distribute their productions for free, were starting to ask their fans for nominal donations. Similar things were happening everywhere—many things which had once been free were starting to once again be priced.

“Thinking about something?” Simona asked, solicitous as always.

“Economics,” Ryouko said.

The girl laughed, rich and vibrant.

“Primary School Civics must have really gotten to you,” she said, teasing. “I never would have taken you for an aspiring central planner.”

“You never know,” Ryouko said, smiling.

Mandatory session was interrupted by a rather interesting event.

They had been discussing the finer points of light railgun construction. In the era of direct-to-memory brain feeds, everyone could remember and regurgitate the information with ease—the real question was whether you could apply it, and that was what they were practicing. In the rather cold terms of the government: teaching was about replicating valuable neural circuits.

“Whoa!” said a boy near the window, looking out.

The instructor broke off his dictation of the necessary specs to look at the boy skeptically, clearly about to launch into a rebuke about politeness.

Before he could, the boy turned and pointed dramatically at the far wall, calling up an image of what he was seeing, a clear violation of in-class technology-usage policies.

The larger-than-life image had all the absurd clarity of direct retinal output, displaying the image in massively greater detail than any human brain would have actually received. In the center, the subject of the excitement was outlined in bright red, walking along the pedestrian skyway adjacent to their classroom.

It was, to put it shortly, a celebrity sighting.

All of the students immediately rushed to that side of the room.

The instructor shrugged, then walked over to claim a view for himself. It was a pretty big deal, and some leniency was acceptable.

“Tomoe Mami!” a girl said, unnecessarily.

“What is she doing here?”

“Wow!”

“Mami-sama!”

“We’re her home city, guys. Of course she would show up once in a while. Come on!”

“Stop trying to act cool. Mami’s a big deal. You’re trying to look, too.”

The girl—or rather, woman—in question, was wearing casual clothing, rather than either of the two uniforms familiar from holograms of her in newsfeeds. Yet despite what everyone knew to be her great age, she looked nineteen, twenty at most, far younger than the optimal age nanotechnology froze most adults at.

An appearance choice that was only possible for a magical girl.

As they watched, the girl stopped midwalk and turned her face up to look at them, smiling. She waved charismatically, her characteristic hairstyle bobbing.

“Yeah! Mami!” several of the students said, while as many as who thought they could be seen waved back excitedly. The windows on this floor wouldn’t open, for safety reasons, but they shouted anyway.

Ryouko looked out the window quietly, unlike the others, though she had fought her way in for a good spot.

She wondered what it would be like to be someone like her.

I wonder whether this is really worth it, Mami thought to Kyubey, who hung by his arms from Mami’s right shoulder. *This excursion is blowing my cover.*

I thought you liked children, the alien Incubator replied.

Of course I do, Mami thought. *But you know very well the problems with me being here.*

She waved up at the classroom, smiling kindly at the teenagers waving back.

Well, I found what we came here to seek, the creature said.

So there is a prospect here after all?

Yes, and quite powerful.

Should we go recruit?

No, I do not think that will be necessary. She needs little persuasion. I can have another Incubator do the job, if necessary.

Mami stopped waving and continued onward, trying to ignore the gawking pedestrians, many of whom had stopped to take pictures with their optical implants.

Despite the situation, I can't help but feel a little relieved. I never like recruiting.

That is a feeling I cannot understand. However, you should be satisfied that there are others doing the work for you.

It's silly, isn't it? Feeling better about it just because I'm not doing it personally. And yet I enjoy the mentoring.

It is not something I can comment on. In this case, however, you will be blameless. This girl will contract quite happily without your intervention.

I don't feel any better—and no, don't say it. I know you don't understand.

They held this entire conversation with faces as motionless as if they were carved of alabaster. For Kyubey, this was typical, but for Mami, it was something she had learned painstakingly over the years.

Reaching a narrow, one vehicle wide private tube, she stepped through a doorway sized for one person, which closed behind her.

She stepped into her personal vehicle, and in her case, it really was *personal,* intended for only her use at all times, and rather larger than the typical model. Then, in a maneuver that dated back into the mists of human history, she got out the other side into the backside of the tube, relying on the bulk of the vehicle to block her from view. Its size really helped in situations like this.

She transformed, ribbons of light enveloping her, hoping the brightness of the event wasn't obvious from the other side.

With a thought, she accessed authorization routines that were keyed to respond only to those with the proper permissions—magical girls with codes issued by the government.

In front of her, a small, opening iris opened in the tube, letting in the sound of roaring wind.

It was intended as a fast passageway for magical girls going demon-hunting, but she was using it for something else entirely.

She took a breath, and jumped out into the empty air.

After Mandatory Session, Ryouko headed to a room where, according to the schedule, a specialist would be introducing students to the fundamentals of Spaceflight Engineering. Despite the aspersions she had privately cast on the suggestion earlier, it was probably her only realistic

option, and she had been going to this class for over a week, though her friends didn't know it.

But despite all the interest she should have had for it, she just couldn't get herself interested in the material. It was fun talking about fusion thrusters and elevator ascension in terms of actually *doing* it, but the details of the operating principles, the equations and materials used, just didn't excite her.

She wanted to be out there exploring, like the European explorers of old, not the carpenter in the dock putting together the ship.

Try as she might, she didn't manage to involve herself more than cursorily in the discussion. Instead, she mused on other topics.

Being a magical girl…

Many girls dreamed of it, despite all their parents' illegal discouragement of it. After all, you could have one wish for whatever you wanted, and the certainty of being lauded as a hero besides. In exchange for that, many, viewing the sterile desert of their current lives, would gladly pay the price.

More importantly for her, magical girls were not bound by any of the travel restrictions that encumbered mere normal folk, though whether this was a blessing or a curse depended on your perspective.

By the special conscription acts enacted nearly twenty years ago, all new girls owed the Earth military thirty years of service, immediately, and the minimum age for combat involvement was dropped drastically, to thirteen.

In the service, they were sent all across the local region of space, to planets and stations that no mere civilian could see. Outside of it, on leave or after—hypothetical—honorable discharge, they received the same bonuses accorded to all military veterans, which included unlimited travel wherever you wanted on Earth or its colonies, and the right to settle anywhere.

Once you accepted the forced entry into the military, Earth treated its saviors quite well. They entered not as privates, but as second lieutenants, with associated training, pay, and benefits, and could easily climb upward with good performance. They received special living quarters, special mentoring, and the best damn psychiatric care and monitoring possible.

Nor were you cut off from family, like the more human soldiers. Your parents could be flown in as often as once every two weeks, depending on location, or never, depending on which the doctors decided was better for your mental state.

And on leave, you were treated as a hero by your community. The media wrote laudatory life stories and children adored you. Humanity felt guilty about its demands, and did everything it could to make it up to you.

It was only your family, and the families of other magical girls, who dared watched you with sad eyes.

Strictly speaking, this was all Ryouko was supposed to know. However, the Information Restriction Acts were impossible to enforce, and with the most cursory of Internet searches, one could easily obtain myriad other, forbidden facts and figures.

And Ryouko had done far more than a cursory search.

For instance, no one was supposed to know about the soul extraction process, or about the terrible

tie between one's emotional state and the corruption of one's gem. No one was supposed to know that how many died in their first combat assignment, or before their first leave. No one was supposed to notice that first leave was often extraordinarily long, the haunted looks in the eyes of some returning for the first time, or the way these some were fed grief cubes as if their lives depended on it—as of course they did.

Ryouko swallowed.

Despite everything, though, Ryouko envied them.

She didn't even need the inducements or the mind-blowing powers, though they certainly sweetened the pot. Such a life sounded so much more like a life she could enjoy living, rather than the sterile, prosaic life she had here. There, perhaps, she could feel that she was doing something with her life, rather than sitting around uselessly.

But it was a dream she refused to indulge, even if she had spent the time to learn everything she could about the system, even if she fantasized about it occasionally.

Incubator selection was extremely rare, and there was nothing you could do to lure them to you. No amount of private wishing or public pleading would help. You needed "potential", and the Incubators were famously reticent about what exactly produced potential. They chose the gifted and the ordinary, the orphaned and those with happy families, and—in the colonies—the rich and the poor. Without potential, they would never come.

But if you had potential, then one day, even if you didn't have a wish ready, even if you didn't want to contract, an Incubator would appear, often with a magical girl recruiter to help convince you.

All anyone could figure out was that all of those chosen would, at the time of their wish, have a deep, intense, and personal desire, something they thought truly worth of their soul—but plenty who did went unchosen, even if their wishes seem perfectly in accordance with the Incubators' desires. No one understood it.

It was something one could neither cultivate nor strive for. You didn't call for the Incubators. The Incubators came for you.

So she didn't dream.

Mami dropped to the ground in a descent that could best be described as "controlled falling." She leveraged herself repeatedly off of the many tubes and structures in her path, interspersed with ribbon grabs and swings to control her speed and trajectory, moving steadily downward and forward.

She was in one of the inner rings of the city, near the hubs of production and research that undergirded its planned economy, and near the starport that she had arrived from. As she descended, she passed Shizuki Consumer Goods, Hephaestus Nanotechnology, Chronos Biologics, and, finally, the renowned Zeus and Prometheus Research Centers, unique to Mitakihara City.

All the newer buildings shared an obvious naming theme, and, seen from below, every single one dominated the sky.

The two research centers faced each other, brooding over the narrow causeway between them, strangely devoid of structures. At the bottom of this chasm, right in the middle, was her goal.

Latching herself to part of the Prometheus building's superstructure, she began her final descent, reaching the ground at a bone-rattling speed that was reasonable only because of her enhanced body.

She abolished the ribbon, then the rest of her costume, and turned to face what she sought: the rear entrance of an old-fashioned Catholic-style church, anomalous in the middle of the towering urban superstructures. Recently reconstructed and restored, it looked far newer than most buildings of its type. The regenerative architecture and glass certainly helped in this.

Mami had landed in the garden in the back, among the carefully maintained flowers and vines. Behind her, the whisper of surface traffic in the distance was nearly constant.

She sighed, remembering when the heart of Mitakihara had been far away indeed, and this church had been in a mere suburb.

Well, things change.

Was it really necessary to do all that?, Kyubey asked, clinging to her shoulder, almost sounding worried. *You nearly lost me on the third swing.*

"A little exercise is good for you," she said, out loud this time. "And it is not as if you can be killed."

Bodies do not come cheap, Kyubey said.

"You know why it was necessary," Mami said. "So stop complaining. And I would appreciate some privacy."

Alright, alright, the Incubator thought, jumping off her shoulder onto the cobblestoned ground. *I got it.*

Until later, Kyubey thought, trotting off.

"Goodbye," Mami said politely, before focusing her attention back on the task at hand.

She had left the public transport channels because she wanted to get off the surveillance grids.

There were sentries monitoring the airspace outside of the tubes, of course, but they studiously ignored magical girls, who constantly prowled the intertubular spaces, hunting for prey. They knew there was no need to save them from falls, or anything of that sort.

Most importantly, the passage of these girls was not even recorded, carefully scrubbed from the daily records. It was not considered necessary for the public to be able to deduce the details of demon activity near their residences, for fear of panic or, just as likely, attempted spectating.

Traveling by air was thus considerably more private than using her government-assigned private transport or walking along the pedestrian skyways.

And she had her reasons for maintaining secrecy of passage.

Striding forward, she reached into her skirt pocket and pulled out an old-fashioned metal key. This was an unnecessary complication—the electronic monitors of the building were watching, and could easily open the door—but the rebuilder had been remarkably insistent on things like having old-fashioned keys and locks.

Mami slipped into the hallway, carefully closing the wooden door behind her.

She took a moment to breathe in the scent of the wood. It was so rare to find wood anywhere nowadays, except in the form of trees.

Then she walked down the hallway, the distant voice of a sermon echoing through the building.

A girl stepped to the side to let her pass, her eyes widening with recognition. Another watched her from the corner, eyes strangely passive.

Mami didn't worry about that. Everyone here could be trusted.

She opened the door to a small room deep inside the church, a bedroom for one. It was so cramped it was almost claustrophobic, but that was how its occupant preferred it. The girl could certainly have gotten a much larger room, with a lot more amenities, but she chose not to, for reasons she kept to herself.

It was not something Mami ever pried into.

The girl in question, with the appearance of only a teenager, sat on the small bed, seemingly lost in thought. She was biting into an apple, long ponytail bobbing slightly. On the table, a teapot cooled silently.

Mami reflected briefly on how young Kyouko looked to her now. Things had been different, back when they had both been young, but now Mami looked clearly the elder. That was of course only a choice—Mami had allowed herself to age to a reasonable nineteen or so, while Kyouko had chosen to remain perpetually fourteen.

That, too, was something Mami never asked about.

Mami opened her mouth to break the girl's reverie, but Kyouko surprised her by speaking first.

"Good afternoon, Marshal," the girl greeted, without so much as a glance back.

Mami frowned.

"Don't tease me, Sakura-san," she said.

The girl smiled mischievously, tilting her head back.

"Close the door."

Mami did so, and when she turned back, she found Kyouko sitting on the bed facing her.

"Well, no need to be shy," Kyouko said, patting a spot next to her on the bed.

Mami sat. There wasn't really anywhere else to sit, except an uncomfortable-looking wooden chair.

"So how are things?" she asked.

"Not bad," Kyouko said, chewing her apple enthusiastically. "The more mainstream religions are kicking up a fuss again, but it won't amount to anything. Those bastards can't touch me, and they know it."

Mami frowned at the language.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Kyouko said insincerely. "I'll work on it."

Four hundred years of "working on it" had so far amounted to nothing.

She handed Mami an apple, which she took politely. Mami wondered idly if it were a naturally-grown apple, or synthesized..

“What about you?” Kyouko asked.

“Same as always,” Mami said, pouring herself a cup of tea. “Meetings, speeches, publicity events, the occasional campaign—you have no idea how hard it was to pull leave time and come here.”

Kyouko snorted.

“Well, it’s not as if I’m any less busy.”

Mami smiled, biting her apple. She didn’t fully approve of Kyouko’s newfound direction in life, but she wasn’t going to say anything, not about something the girl clearly had a passion for.

And if she was truly bringing peace to people’s lives, then why not? That, too, was one fulfillment of the ideals they both strove for.

“Any news about Homura?” Kyouko asked, looking at her apple core.

Mami shook her head.

“Of course not,” she said, sipping her tea.

“Just checking,” Kyouko said.

“You check every time,” Mami said, without reproach.

Kyouko sighed, looking up at the ceiling.

“Sometimes I miss the old days,” Kyouko said. “Just the four of us, alone in the world, fighting demons. None of this complication with the MSY, and the government, and the military, and the aliens.”

Mami looked up too, allowing herself to be drawn into the reminiscence.

“I understand,” she said. “Even though it hurt being so alone, thinking back, we really had something special.”

In truth, she felt the nostalgia more acutely than Kyouko ever seemed to, but that was one of the things she never spoke about.

“I wonder where she is,” Kyouko said wistfully. “I want to know why she left.”

“Searching for her Goddess,” Mami said. “You of all people should know that.”

Kyouko gave her an annoyed glance.

“Of course I know that, bastard,” she said bitterly. “But was it really worth leaving us? Where is she, Mami? What is she doing?”

“If she doesn’t want to be found, then no one is going to find her, it’s as simple as that,” Mami said, shrugging and sipping her tea.

Kyouko stayed silent, toying with the soul gem ring on her hand.

Mami watched her, wondering what the girl was thinking about.

She probably knew.

That day twenty years ago had changed Kyouko's life.

Neither of them had ever put any stock before in Homura's crazy babblings about a Goddess of Hope waiting for them at the end of the Law of Cycles, or her dark mutterings about the state of the world.

How had she put it…

"Come on!" Homura had been fond of saying, usually flipping her long hair in the process. *"Stop whining! I'm appalled she sacrificed herself for magical girls as slow as you two! Can't you keep up?"*

Oh, yeah, it was easy to complain about others being slow when you had *magical wings* and could *fly.*

But after what Homura did that day, Kyouko *believed.* Mami had seen in it her eyes.

Despite all that had happened in her life, Kyouko had never truly given up the religion of her family. She had always wanted to believe, always wanted to see hope at the end of the tunnel, but the events of her life had destroyed her ability to do so.

Until that day.

That day Mami had seen that tiny flame in her eyes grow back into a fiery roar she hadn't seen in centuries.

It wasn't something Mami could agree with. What Homura had done was awe-inspiring, of course, but it was nothing but an expression of the power of her soul, something they all had. There was no need to invoke a Goddess to explain it.

But Kyouko…

She had thrown herself full-heartedly into her new passion, turning on a level of charisma Mami never knew she had. She had leveraged their new public spotlight to its absolute hilt, going out constantly to talk to other magical girls about what she had seen and what she now believed.

Like her father before her, too practical to be bound by dogma, she reinterpreted and refreshed everything her religion said and, in a development that stunned everyone, actually attracted followers, at first a trickle, and then a flood.

Naturally, the Cult of Hope had a limited audience, but it was essentially the only living religion managing to gain members, an accomplishment astonishing enough that it had earned a back-handed acknowledgment by such entities as the Anglican Church itself. Kyouko and her followers, they said, were as lost sheep—full of heretical ideas but easily capable of redemption, with a little guidance. Critically, this carefully-crafted formulation allowed the Church to count her membership numbers into their own, badly deteriorating numbers, even if the Cult itself disagreed.

Not that Kyouko cared. She didn't want their attention, nor did she need it—not that they ever stopped trying to convince her she did. Despite all their attempts, however, she had no intention of being a shill for the Church that had killed her father, and she had more than enough donations to keep herself afloat. After all, it had been with that money that she had rebuilt this church, the

church where her family had once lived, so long ago.

And it was with that money that hundreds of her followers spent their leave time searching records and combing Human space for their apostle; one Akemi Homura, who one week after helping save the Human colony at Epsilon Eridani and breaking Kyouko's conception of the world, bid her friends adieu—and vanished.

This was all rather off-topic.

"I miss her too, Sakura-san, but why did you call me here?" Mami asked, interrupting the girl's reverie. "It can't have just been to reminisce. Not if you asked me to visit off-the-record. That means it's *MSY* business."

Kyouko shook herself out of her reverie, and looked at Mami from the corner of the eye.

"You mean the Union?" she teased, tossing her nearly-completely consumed apple core in the garbage.

Mami narrowed her eyes. That particular nickname had been a passing fad, lasting only a few decades, but it had irked Mami to no end. Being a magical girl wasn't just a job, and the Incubators certainly weren't their bosses. Kyouko loved to toy with her, though.

Come to think of it, Homura had hated that name even more than Mami had.

"Alright, alright," Kyouko said, looking away.

She cleared her throat.

"It's possible I'm being overly paranoid," Kyouko said, voice taking on a detached quality, "but as you know, we have several ongoing research projects dedicated to improving the lives of our members."

"Yes, of course," Mami said. "I helped establish most of them."

She suppressed a smirk. Once, long ago, she would have scoffed at the idea of Kyouko saying anything with the word "research" built in.

She took a bite of her own apple.

"Remember the grief cube audit?" Kyouko asked, querying Mami with her eyes.

Mami thought carefully, chewing fruit in her mouth, putting her finger to her cheek.

"No, I can't say I do, sorry," after she had finished swallowing. "Not offhand, anyway."

It was unfamiliar territory for both of them. A *very* long time ago, back when the once-secret *Mahou Shoujo Youkai* had still been in its formative stages, it had been Homura who had spearheaded the data collection initiatives, insisting that everyone take great care to report in exacting detail on each and every battle they fought, how many grief cubes they had received, how many they had used, and so forth. No one else really had the appetite for that sort of thing, especially not after she took to trapping them all in long presentations on statistics. Most found these stupefyingly boring, and Mami could still remember Kyouko falling asleep in her chair every single time, drool dripping from her mouth unbecomingly.

It had also been extremely divisive. Many of the early members were instinctively secretive, and while everyone agreed on the importance of working together, they resented Homura insisting

forcefully at every meeting on territory adjustments, team reorganizations, strategy changes, and whatever else she thought was a good idea. It also certainly didn't help that Homura's rather eccentric beliefs were widely known. Mami, Kyouko, and Yuma had spent literally years calming ruffled feathers, Mami's apartment playing host to tea party after tea party.

She had backed Homura, but would have had to confess that she was never sure it wasn't another one of Homura's crazed obsessions, like that Goddess of hers, even if Kyubey agreed that each and every change was "probably a good idea."

After a few years she stopped questioning, and so did everyone else. Death rates to demons had dropped precipitously, and the shared grief cube pool had started accumulating absurd surpluses, surpluses so large that the Incubators were actively consuming even those that gone unused.

It really wasn't the statistics that convinced the members. It was the realization that, whenever they met another team and chatted, talk of so-and-so's death or disappearance had become practically unheard-of, rather than the previous near-certainty.

Nowadays, while Kyouko and Mami were still the respected executive heads of the "union", they delegated all the boring stuff to members who enjoyed things like that.

Yuma, however, was still quite involved.

"Well, that's understandable," Kyouko said. "I was only recently reminded of it myself. You remember though? It was that meeting where that French girl kept banging the table about how we couldn't trust the government and got everyone worked up. She had that ridiculous hairstyle?"

A lightbulb went on in Mami's head.

"Oh, right, her, with the hairpins," she said, not at all cognizant of the irony of remembering someone for their "ridiculous" hairstyle.

"I remember now," Mami said, leaning forward, signature hair bobbing. "She had a point, too. The government has different interests from us, and not everyone is happy that we've turned over part of grief cube logistics to them, even if it was an emergency measure."

"Right, right," Kyouko said, not wanting to go through the reasons again. "Well, anyway, so I volunteered to use Church resources to help do the data collection, since we already have the infrastructure in place."

Members always referred to the Cult as the *Church,* even when no one outside of it called it that.

"Right," Mami agreed.

In truth, the Cult "volunteered" to handle nearly all the data collection nowadays. It was just efficient use of resources, given how deeply they had penetrated the ranks of magical girls.

Mami wasn't sure how to feel about that. In some ways, the Cult was starting to take on official religion status for the *MSY*, and that was not something the organization had ever had to deal with.

"The results are in," Kyouko said, watching Mami's expression. "It's not what we expected, I'll say that."

Mami tilted her head.

"Hmm?" she asked, tossing her apple core off-hand into the trash. "So they really *are* trying to play favorites?"

“More confusing than that,” Kyouko said. “It’s—”

She paused, thinking about how to explain it.

“It’s almost as if there’s something wrong with the supply computers. It’s very rare, but on a seemingly random basis, squads on the front line will find themselves with far too few grief cubes, usually when there's not even time to do anything about it. The occurrence seems random, and no one has been hit twice, but it's getting girls killed.”

Hmm,” Mami said, frowning. “Sounds like a computer problem. So all those people complaining have a point after all. This has to be fixed immediately.”

“Only computers don’t make mistakes like that,” Kyouko said. “Not anymore. And just to be sure, I had some girls examine the computer systems—secretly, of course. As far as they can tell, everything should be working perfectly fine.”

“Could still be a mistake,” Mami said.

“There’s more,” Kyouko said.

She paused, again thinking about what to say.

“When we began asking, we started getting a lot of the same kind of story. Girls who seem like they should make it are sent behind the lines and never come back. Girls who suffer emotional breakdowns are sent home and also never come back. It’s a disturbing trend.”

Mami thought about it.

“I’m sorry about those girls,” she said, “but these things happen. It just sounds like things didn’t work out.”

“Maybe, but everyone we talk to swears they should have made it,” Kyouko said, sounding annoyed. “And our statisticians tell us the numbers look weird.”

She leaned forward, looking suddenly pensive.

“While I was visiting Wolf 359, I had half a platoon of infantry practically breaking down my door, demanding that I help them find ‘little Saya-chan.’ Apparently they risked everything to drag her body and soul gem back to safety, and barely managed to stabilize her, and then they never saw her again. I looked into it, but I wasn’t able to track where she went, which is already pretty weird. Mami, I had two-hundred-year-old men crying in my office!”

She turned and leaned on her small wooden desk, surprised by her own outburst.

Mami cringed, both at the story and at the unfortunate name. It can’t have been a good reminder for Kyouko.

This was also not quite the right time to point out that, in an age competition between those two-hundred-year-olds and Kyouko, Kyouko won easily. Or lost, rather.

Mami thought about it.

“So you say the math people think the numbers don’t look right,” she said, trying to draw the conversation back on topic.

“That’s right,” Kyouko said, growling. “If those guys are fucking up wound treatment somehow,

or they're trying to practice 'efficient resource allocation', I'll wring their necks! This was *not* in the agreement."

"I'll look into it," Mami said, trying to raise a calming hand. "I can't promise too much though. Even after all these years, I'm still an outsider to the officer corps."

"You're our main representative inside the military," Kyouko said, watching her with fiery eyes. "You have access permissions that none of us have. Geez, you even participate in campaign planning and crisis response, *Field Marshal.* They even let you lead, sometimes."

"I know," Mami said, voice low. "I know. I feel the responsibility, trust me. But I'm only there because we demanded representation. I didn't climb the ranks. They don't see me as one of them, and I'm not. They don't trust me. I have to tread carefully."

Kyouko leaned back, giving her a sneering expression.

"Kyouko, I promise I'll do my best!" Mami protested. "I'm not saying I'm not going to try! I'm just saying that I don't have direct authority over supply chain and logistics, so I can't just look into it myself. I have to ask people, and search, and root around in computer records. It's not easy, okay?"

Kyouko took a calming breath, and rubbed the back of her head.

"Alright," she said. "I'm sorry for going off like that. I trust you, Mami. But some of the stories I've read are absolutely terrible. Look into it, and I'll see what the Church can do."

"Have you told anyone else about this?" Mami asked.

Kyouko shook her head.

"I've told people to stay quiet."

She looked at Mami.

"I'm going to call a meeting of the leadership committee to discuss this before we spread it around," Kyouko said. "We need to decide what to do."

"Bring it up with Yuma-chan too, okay?" Mami said, finally daring to drink more of the tea. "I might be Military, but she's Government. Who knows? The politicians might be useful."

"Yeah, of course."

Kyouko cleared her throat.

"I'm sorry to cut our reunion short," she said. "But my chronometer is telling me I'm expected for a sermon. Actually, I'm already ten minutes late."

"Oh no, that's alright," Mami said. "I'm behind schedule too."

"Oh, too bad," Kyouko said. "I was going to ask you to attend."

"I wish I could," Mami said, smiling and thinking that she really didn't want to.

"You know the way out?"

"I'll go back the way I came."

Kyouko nodded.

“So would you like to go to see a movie with me?” the boy asked.

“What?” Ryouko asked, turning to look at the boy, confused. She had just been about to leave with her friends, and his comment had come out of nowhere.

“The holotheatre, on the twelfth floor,” he said, eyes darting back and forth. “I’m thinking we could go this weekend. That new movie is out, you know, uh, *Akemi,* and I was thinking we could see it. Or whatever you want, it doesn’t have to be that one.”

Ryouko blinked rapidly, then glanced around, feeling the quiet stares of Simona and the other girls.

She suppressed whatever facial expressions she may have had. She had literally no idea how to respond.

“It’s alright if you don’t want to,” the boy retreated, panicked by her hesitation.

“No, no,” she hastened to say, head spinning, not wanting to appear cold—

Guitarist, mediocre grades, considered quite attractive, a little short, her mind spat out.

—“It’s, *uh,* sure, why not, I guess?” she said, not believing the words that were coming out of her mouth.

No, no, why did I say that!? I should have said I needed to think!

“Oh, cool!” the kid said, looking pathetically relieved. “So, uh, noon?”

“Okay, noon, sure,” Ryouko agreed, face red, wishing the conversation over.

She turned to leave with undue haste, stumbling and almost dropping her bag.

She rushed outward, head bowed, and her friends at least had the decency to leave her alone until they were almost out of the building.

“So,” Simona said, as they stepped out to the main exit. “We’re all thinking it so I’ll just ask. Care to comment on that earlier incident?”

“I have no idea why I said yes,” Ryouko said, looking away. “I think I panicked.”

The other two girls looked at her as if she were crazy, but Simona chuckled.

“I thought so,” she said.

She grabbed Ryouko by the shoulder.

“It’s alright though,” she said reassuringly, looking her in the eye. “It won’t be that bad. And if you change your mind, invite me along. That should send the message clearly enough. I’ve been wanting to see that movie, anyway. I hear it has quite nice effects.”

Ryouko nodded, swallowing. Why was she so flustered?

“Thanks, but that probably won’t be necessary.”

Simona smiled amiably.

Ryouko stepped into their group vehicle, and the others followed suit.

They chatted as their transport headed for the newly opened park, at the other edge of the city, near the species diversity preserve.

It was another unacknowledged sign of the times, that the city could finally squeeze out new open space. It meant the population was down, just a little. People said it might be a sign that birth permits might be easier to get in the future. It didn't matter to her; her parents were firmly uninterested in having any more kids—for now anyway.

In the end, the park was nothing overwhelmingly special, especially not compared to the municipal green spaces that already existed. Still, though, it was something. Besides, it had only been an excuse to go out and have fun. They had walked on the field of carefully tended grass, marveling at the birds and—most excitingly—unimpeded sunlight. The traffic tubes in the area had been deliberately rerouted around the airspace of the park. In terms of three-dimensional space the park was laying claim to, it was a real luxury.

The others looked up in surprise when, on the way back, the transport asked them to confirm a new, unfamiliar destination.

“Ah,” Ryouko said, apologizing. “Sorry, I asked it to switch dropoff points. There’s a famous physicist who lives here, and I promised to meet him. I’ll go home myself later.”

When she got to the designated location, the door open, and she stepped out, waving good-bye.

“Ah, mind if I go with you?” Simona asked, catching the door before it could close. “I have nothing better to do today. And I might be interested to hear what he has to say as well. Unless he would mind?”

Ryouko looked at her carefully, then shook her head.

“No, it’s fine. He even said I could bring friends if I wanted to.”

She held a smile, hoping fervently neither of the other two would take her up on the implied offer.

The other two glanced curiously at them, but smiled and said additional goodbyes.

Ryouko watched the transport speed off.

“So where does this guy live?” Simona asked, a moment later.

“Nowhere,” Ryouko said. “I made him up.”

“I thought so,” the other girl said.

Somehow she always knows, Ryouko thought.

Ryouko stayed silent, though, turning and walking toward their left. The other girl followed.

They walked that way, in silence, until they reached a riverbank flanked by grassy ridges on both sides.

It was a quiet area, flanked by industrial buildings. Behind them, a solar collector field quietly absorbed the light of the sun, interrupted by the occasional wind turbine, protruding outward like a tree among bushes. The river was a natural channel for wind, and even if there was grass for

æsthetic reasons, why waste energy where you could get it?

She lay down on the grass, looking across the water. They were directly across from the starport.

“Why did you follow me?” Ryouko asked. “Actually, before you answer that, how did you even know to follow me?”

The tanned Simona sat down, then lay down, emulating her position.

“It was obvious,” she said. “Why else would you be here?”

“Was it really?”

Simona made a noncommittal gesture with her hand, shifting the grass.

Ryouko didn’t press the topic.

Simona raised her hand, looking through the gaps between her fingers at the sky.

“You know,” she said. “I’m somewhat interested in languages but, really, not *that* much. Honestly, I’d much rather be somewhere else entirely.”

Ryouko turned her head, giving her a questioning expression. It was a strange thing for a foreign exchange student to say, especially one that was supposedly visiting precisely for the chance to learn a language.

“The truth is,” Simona said, switching unexpectedly from Japanese into Human Standard. “I’m only doing it to get away from my family. My parents argue all the time. It’s terrible. I think they would have divorced a long time ago, if it weren’t for me.”

Ryouko watched the other girl, leaning sideways on the grass. What was going on? Why was this conversation happening?

“That’s why I’m here,” Simona said, with a strange smile. “That, and maybe, with me gone, they’ll finally go ahead and do it. Or maybe they argue less with me gone. I don’t know. Either way I don’t have to see it. I wish I knew how to make it all work.”

The girl smiled awkwardly.

“Is that how it is for you, Ryouko-san? Is that why you want to leave so badly?”

Ryouko’s eyes widened, surprised by the question.

She sat up, shaking her head.

“No. My family is wonderful,” following the other girl into Standard.

“Then why?”

Ryouko looked back at the starport, across the river, in the distance. As she watched, a scramjet lifted into the air, using an antigrav assist, eerily silent. It was the best view you could get without actually going inside.

“I don’t know,” she said, honestly, picking at the grass with one hand. “I’ve just never felt at home here, somehow. But maybe…”

She curled her knees under her arms, as her hair danced in the sudden strong breeze, seeming to

enjoy the cooling.

"I can't explain it to you, at your age," her grandmother had said, in explanation of why she was leaving. *"I want to see something better than this static Earth. I want a new life. But…"*

The woman had paused.

"It's all excuses, really. That's all true, but it's also true that I have something I lost, and I want to find it again. I hope you never lose something like that."

That conversation had been on this very riverbank, a much younger Ryouko clutching her grandmother's fingers, but Ryouko wasn't in the mood to share that.

That wasn't the only reason, though.

"I can't really explain it," she said. "Nothing here excites me. Nothing I could do seems worth it. The humans on Earth don't *do* anything anymore, except at best sit home and think. I feel useless, being here."

"It used to be you could escape by going somewhere else on the planet," Simona added. "But not anymore. Of all people, *I* should know. Earth is the same now anywhere you go. Zaire, Persia, America—it doesn't matter. The people speak different languages, and they make a painful show of keeping their cultures intact, but it's really the same people everywhere, now. The same people, the same cities, the same ideas—the *monoculture.* If you can't fit in, you have nowhere to go but *up.*"

The words resonated with Ryouko in a disturbing manner. Somehow, she knew exactly what followed.

"At least out there," she said, finishing the monologue, gesturing with her hand at the sky. "At least out *there,* things still *change.* Humans fight for their place in the universe, and the rules aren't set. Maybe there, there's a place to be different."

Simona closed her eyes.

"I knew you understood," she said. "That's the only reason I opted to stay an extra year. I didn't have to, you know. I was going to stay in Argentina next. The year isn't even close to up, but I already know I want another."

She sat up, and looked at Ryouko.

"That's not the only reason though, is it?" she said, leaning forward. "Just like what I said about my parents. It's the truth, but not the whole truth, is it?"

Ryouko looked back into the girl's eyes.

"Get out of my head," she ordered.

Simona leaned back, laughing.

"Well," she said, a moment later. "I hope it's worth it, what I'm about to do."

"What?" Ryouko asked, confused.

"Actually," Simona said. "I have something else to say."

“So what do *you* think happened to Akemi-san?” Mami asked, launching herself up to a higher platform.

This is now the twelfth time you have asked me this, Tomoe Mami, the Incubator thought, clinging firmly to her shoulder.

“Humor me,” Mami said. “You might have new information this time.”

Kyubey transmitted a mental sigh, in one of those misleadingly human mannerisms it had. It sounded almost exasperated.

No, Mami, we do not, it thought, as she used a ribbon to grab hold of a nearby building. *Things are just as before. As far as we know, she disappeared as completely as one of you girls do when your soul gems exhausts, except you insist she did not disappear.*

Mami opened her mouth to speak, but Kyubey surprised her by continuing.

She truly is an enigma. She accomplished feats that should have been far beyond her power, then disappeared in an unprecedented manner. Her delusions—

It’s rude to call them those, Mami interrupted, thinking it instead of saying it.

She was not sure why she suddenly felt so annoyed by Kyubey calling Homura’s delusions what they were.

As I was saying, Kyubey continued a moment later. *A delusion is, among other things, a belief not shared by any other sentient being. But even a belief held in the mind of only one person can still be true.*

Mami vaulted upward another two levels, somersaulting as she did so.

“Are you saying you think Kyouko and Homura might be right?” Mami asked, astonished, though it was difficult to show in the midst of mid-air acrobatics.

It is extremely improbable, Kyubey said, clinging on for dear life by its front paws. *But I believe one of your popular fictional characters has a saying about the impossible and the improbable. And we are dealing with you magical girls, after all.*

Mami stopped abruptly, using a ribbon to lurch herself forward onto a piece of fourteenth story skyway tubing, on a service platform intended for patrolling drones. It was so abrupt Kyubey almost lost hold, and was forced to grab onto her back.

“Kyubey,” she said, peering forward and downward into the near distance. “I’m sorry to interrupt this conversation, but do you sense that?”

The furry critter reappeared on her shoulder, pulling itself up.

It’s unmistakable, isn’t it? Kyubey thought. *A miasma.*

And it’s close, Mami thought.

She pointed at the location.

“Where’s the team in charge of that region?” Mami demanded, eyes fierce, turning her head to look at Kyubey even though there was no expression to see.

Unfortunately, harvesting resources have been stretched rather thin recently. Given the lack of

human presence in that area, it is not covered well. The regular daytime patrol is currently at a considerable distance. Even if you contacted them, they would not arrive for quite some time.

It paused.

However, we have contingency plans for this.

"The rapid response team," Mami ordered. "Get them mobilized. The local base must be right there in the church. It shouldn't take them too long."

Message relayed, Kyubey thought.

Mami started to run forward.

What is your intention? the Incubator thought, its voice carrying a trace of urgency.

I can't take the risk that someone is under attack, Mami thought.

Operating alone is a violation of regulations, especially for someone of your rank. This is an industrial area, where humans rarely go. It—

I wrote those regulations! Mami thought, gathering herself for a jump. *Now get off my shoulder!*

Kyubey complied, landing onto the platform, and Mami dove back down among the tubing.

Besides, she thought back to Kyubey, feeling a little guilty, as she allowed herself to fall through the air, *I'll have backup soon. I'll focus on rescuing any civilians and keeping myself safe. That should be enough, right? I can even count this as my regular obligation!*

Kyubey didn't respond.

Ryouko tilted her head questioningly.

"Well, out with it," she said, wondering what was taking the other girl so long.

"The truth is…" Simona began, hesitantly, switching back to Japanese.

Ryouko opened her mouth to hurry her some more, but was distracted by a sudden shadow appearing over them.

Her eyes widened.

"I—" Simona began.

She was cut off with an "Oomph!," as Ryouko dove forward to shove the girl out of the way.

"What the hell—" Simona began, shocked—and then she saw it too.

The white-robed figure loomed over them, as tall as three men. Strangely insubstantial, its body passed right *through* several solar collectors, like a shallow mockery of a ghost. The pale head at the top resembled a monk, except that instead of discernible eyes, its head was shrouded by a pixilated fog.

And where they had been sitting, the steaming mist of the demon's debilitating attack.

Ryouko pulled the other girl up, beginning a panicked run forward, the two of them supporting

each other through the initial stumbles.

Demon attack! I need help! Ryouko thought, relaying the message through emergency channels, just as they had been trained over and over as children. To her left, Simona was almost certainly doing the same thing.

There was no guarantee the signal could even make it out from within the miasma, but if they were lucky they weren't in *that* deep.

"I can't see a goddamn thing!" Simona said. "This damn miasma—"

"Over here!" Ryouko said, dashing to the left and pulling the two of them behind the cover of a turbine column. They felt the heat of an attack hitting the column behind them.

"We have to keep moving!" Ryouko said. "Remember the training simulations!"

"How?" Simona said. "I couldn't see in those things, and I can't see now! It's just mist and sand and—"

Ryouko ignored her, and jerked her forward, putting back into a run.

"Follow me!" she ordered, dragging the other girl by the hand.

〈*Adrenaline levels beyond threshold,*〉 a mechanical voice thought in her head. 〈*Activate Emergency Mode?*〉

A certain sense of mental *expectation* filled her mind, making it clear that it was waiting for her response.

Yes! Do it! Yes! she thought back.

Facts and figures flooded the lower levels of her consciousness—heart rate, glucose reserves, blood oxygenation—and, far more importantly, she suddenly found her legs a lot more powerful, and her lungs a lot more capacious.

Symbols flashed across her vision, and Ryouko had never been as grateful for modern technology as she was then. Frankly, she had forgotten she even had this subsystem.

They ran, not daring to look back, Ryouko pulling them behind another turbine, followed by another short run, then a crouch behind a railing, Ryouko practically dragging the other girl by this point.

Ryouko dared a glance over the railing, and found the area swarming with the massive demons, several heading in their direction. It would have been laughable to suggest that the short railing would provide sufficient cover.

"How do you even know where you're going?" Simona asked, panting. "Keep moving, yes, but we're also supposed to stay in the same area!"

"Not now, Simona!" Ryouko said, even though she knew Simona was quoting the proper procedure. "Turn on your enhancements!"

"I can't!" Simona said. "It's not working! Miasma interference or something!"

〈*Run!*〉 the mechanical voice ordered, the optimal path across the deserted street overlaid on her vision.

Ryouko was already moving, dragging Simona up.

The man-machine interface was wired at much deeper levels than vision and hearing.

“You’re going to get us killed!” Simona said, looking around in a panic, clearly blind.

“We’ll be decimated if we stay back there!” Ryouko said, as they ran. “I can see, okay? I don’t know how, but it all looks normal—”

A searing pain burning itself into her back.

She wasn’t even aware of herself screaming.

“Ryouko!” Simona yelled.

Ryouko lay on the floor, but somehow—somehow she was fine. That was what her monitors told her, and how she felt.

“Shit, shit—” Simona repeated, trying to pull her up, glancing with fear back at the demon behind them, gathering up another attack.

With a burst of strength, Ryouko launched herself up, pulling a surprised Simona with her.

She didn’t stop until they were behind the wall of a building across the street, giving Simona a few seconds to breathe. Behind them, the demons finished lashing the spot they had been with intense beams of illusory light.

“I—I don’t—” Simona began, barely getting the words through her labored breathing.

“Don’t talk,” Ryouko said, voice weirdly detached. “You don’t have the air for it. Not with your enhancements disabled. I don’t know why mine are working, but it’s the only thing keeping us alive. Just follow me. I can see.”

Simona nodded, biting her lip.

Ryouko pulled them forward, to the first floor entrance of the building, which opened before she even got there. Technology.

“There’s a transport waiting for us at the third floor skyway,” Ryouko said, as they ran past rows of robotic manufacturing equipment. “If we can get to it by elevator, we should make it.”

She was trying to be reassuring, but Simona probably hadn’t even known they were in a building until she mentioned it. Such is the miasma.

It’s a good thing there’s no one else here, she thought. *It’d be a disaster.*

That’s probably why the magical girls haven’t already taken care of it, another part of her responded.

A smile quirked across her lips. So this was what emergency mode was like. She should be absolutely terrified, but instead, here she was rationalizing her situation.

Of course, her monitors were telling her that her brain was currently flooded with mood-altering drugs, and that that her neuroelectrode arrays were firing at full processing capacity, but that was a philosophical issue she could worry about later.

They were almost there.

“Alright, Simona—” she began.

A millisecond before it would have been too late, she screeched to a halt, wrenched Simona back, and sent them both diving to the floor.

The searing beams of light barely missed them, but the radiant heat scorched the skin on her back painfully. The damage reports began pouring into her awareness. Second degree, third degree, healing to superficial damage deferred until safety reached—

She jumped back up immediately nonetheless, pulling Simona up with her bodily, the pain suppressed.

My emergency energy reserves are depleting, she thought. *This isn’t—*

She stopped.

Simona made a scared noise.

They were surrounded by four of the monsters. The elevator, enticingly open just meters in front of them, was useless now.

The demons reared back, charging an attack.

〈*I am sorry to say your survival can no longer be salvaged,*〉 the civilian-issue Emergency Safety Package in her head thought, lightning-fast. 〈*However, given the demons’ orientation, they appear to have prioritized targeting you. With the sacrifice of your life, it is possible to get Simona to the elevator, and she may even survive.*〉

She made her decision.

Drugged as she was, she wasn’t even scared. She turned, preparing to grab the girl and rush forward to the elevator using her own body as a shield. Her cortex began flooding with endorphins to dull the expected pain.

Simona looked up at her with wide eyes, comprehension dawning.

Faster than thought, the wall to Ryouko’s left exploded open with searing light, blasting the demon in front of her with rubble. The bodies of the two demons to her right shattered and the demon to her left of lurched backwards, dragged by a ribbon around its body. It wildly misfired, its laser uselessly hitting the ceiling. Its skull then blew open, shards dissipating even as they flew off.

All of this took place faster than even Ryouko’s accelerated nervous system could react, and she found herself judging the results post-event.

A single figure clad in yellow dove through the chasm in the wall, landing elegantly next to them.

The surreal apparition of a girl was resplendent, wearing long stockings and a ruffled yellow dress. On her head perched a beret with a jeweled hairpin. She carried a single ornately-decorated musket, one hand on the stock, the barrel resting casually on her shoulder.

The girl smiled at them, then turned and fired a shot, eviscerating a demon that had been creeping up on the opening in the wall. The musket vanished into thin air.

It was a figure familiar to them from a dozen movies, a hundred propaganda events, and a

thousand government news flashes.

“Mami-sama!” Ryouko exclaimed, while Simona merely gaped.

“Now *that* was a close call,” the field marshal said, turning back to talk to them. “It’s not safe to wander this far into the industrial districts, girls. But now’s not the time. Let’s see about getting you to safety.”

〈 *Emergency Mode off.* 〉

Ryouko staggered on her feet, keeling over, not from pain—the damage had healed during the trip up here—but from the delayed mental impact of recent events. The drugs were being rapidly purged from her system. She suppressed the sudden urge to vomit.

“Ryouko!” Simona exclaimed, grabbing her arm.

“Easy,” Mami said, grabbing her other arm. “It’s always like that, the first time. Easy.”

They helped her stand back up.

It felt as if she was experiencing it all at once: fear, pain, exhaustion, all stacked on top of one another, almost unbearably.

Thankfully, it was receding—albeit very, very slowly.

They were standing on the twentieth floor observation deck of a building near where they had been, looking down on the landscape. On the ground, Mami’s soul gem was discharging its corruption into four adjacent grief cubes.

“It’s recoil,” the magical girl said, now back in normal clothing, by way of explanation. “Your brain is trying to return to normal. Trust me; I had to learn all about it when I became an officer. You’ll be fine, just give it some time.”

Mami continued to bend over slightly, watching over Ryouko with a worried face. It was one thing to hear about it, and another entirely to experience it.

Simona bowed shakily.

“T–Thank you for saving our lives, fi-field—” she said.

“No problem, obviously,” Mami said, smiling. “And you can call me Mami-san. Please. That title embarrasses me.”

“Mami-sama.”

“Mami-**san**,” the general insisted.

“Mami-*san*,” the girl echoed.

“You did quite well, Shizuki-san,” Mami said, helping Ryouko to stand back up. “I saw you, through the crowd of demons. You were quite brave. Without your actions, I wouldn’t have made it on time.”

Ryouko nodded unsteadily.

“That’s right, Ryouko,” Simona said, voice shaky, eyes downcast. “That was amazing. And I saw

—you should have tried to make it to the elevator alone! I was just a burden. You should have—"

"It wasn't possible," Ryouko said, swallowing. "And I didn't do anything special; it was just the enhancements. Please. It's okay."

She didn't want to be reminded of what she had almost done. It was brave, yes, but she had no idea if the Ryouko she was now would have been capable of the same thing. That fear of death—she had only felt it just now, and it still cast on a pallor on her mood.

"Is that what it's like for them, Mami-san?" Ryouko asked turning looking at Mami.

"Hmm?" Mami asked, having been lost in thought. "What it's like for whom?"

"The infantry," Ryouko explained. "Out there in the war."

Mami watched her for a moment, then looked up at the darkening sky.

"Far worse, actually," she said. "The civilian issue emergency packages are very basic. The military is different. Sometimes, soldiers operate for weeks without turning them off. Depending on what they've gone through, recoil might even require the services of medical ward or healer. It's very traumatic, but it keeps them alive."

"And what about you?" Ryouko asked. "Magical girls, I mean. Do you have the same thing?"

Mami looked at her, expression strangely neutral.

"Our bodies are better than anything that the military has ever managed," she said flatly. "And the mental enhancements damage our combat performance; we *need* our emotions, for obvious reasons. Not to mention that the recoil could easily be a fatal disaster if it happened in a magical girl."

She stopped suddenly, looking to her right.

A flying drone, resembling a shoebox with small conical boosters on the bottom, had appeared, beeping insistently. Mami casually tossed her spare grief cubes into the drone, which then flew off the way it had come.

"No," Mami continued, as if nothing had happened. "For better or worse, we fight mostly as we are."

Ryouko nodded silently.

Mami looked down over the edge of the platform, and for a long moment, Ryouko thought she wouldn't say any more.

"Would you like to be a magical girl, Shizuki-san?" the field marshal asked, refusing eye contact. "It's not an easy life, not at all. Honestly, it's a terrible one. Your only consolation is the protection you give Humanity; that, and the wish you make."

Her voice sounded so sad, so different from her public speeches, that Simona and Ryouko blinked in surprise, before realizing just what she had said.

"What-what are you saying?" Ryouko asked, stepping forward. "I don't think I can, can I?"

The general didn't respond, bending down to pick up her soul gem and saturated grief cubes.

Ryouko swallowed, trying to remember what she had thought earlier.

"I—I mean, I've definitely thought about it," she said, stammering. "I won't lie; I've always admired you, but are you sure? And shouldn't I talk to–*uh*–my family first? And—why would I be able to? Doesn't it take an Incubator?"

Her questions were rather incoherent.

"What are you saying?" Simona said, aghast, looking back and forth between the two of them.

"Standard recruitment policy is to minimize familial involvement," Mami said, voice empty of emotion. "It risks tainting the purity of the wish. I won't stop you from talking to them, but there's a strong chance that this is a one-time offer."

Mami turned suddenly to face her, and the magical girl's face looked almost angry, but not at her.

"It's not a coincidence I brought you up here," she said, pointing forward with her hand. "Look."

Ryouko looked, at the hordes of demons dispersing through the streets and up buildings. They were plain as day. In the far distance, a single woman strolled the streets, thankfully greatly out of range and headed the other way.

"You can see them, can't you?" Mami said. "Simona can't."

It wasn't a question, even though Simona immediately squinted her eyes and tried.

"I've taken us far outside the miasma," Mami explained. "No ordinary human should still be able to see the demons."

Ryouko's eyes widened.

"I saw you earlier," Mami said. "You should have been running blind, like your friend. None of your enhancements should have even been functioning. Instead, you ran exactly where you needed to."

She looked at the two of them.

"And you were hit by a demon attack," Mami said. "It should have sapped your will to live. Instead, you were fine, and the demons starting using their fatal laser attacks instead of their standard attacks. Don't you wonder why they did that?"

Ryouko looked down. Yes, she too had realized that things had been strange, though she hadn't quite put the pieces together.

She was beginning to understand, now.

"What are you saying?" Simona demanded. "Is she—"

She has potential, Kyubey thought, appearing from behind them.

Mami spun around, while Ryouko jumped at the unexpected voice in her head. Simona, of course, hadn't stopped talking until they reacted.

It walked up to them. Ryouko looked at it with wide eyes, Mami watched it with a conflicted expression, and Simona looked at the empty space where they were staring with confusion.

It looks like I was wrong to criticize you, Mami, it thought. *I apologize. If you had listened to me, Ryouko here would be dead.*

Simona looked back and forth between the two of them.

“It’s an Incubator,” Ryouko explained wondrously. “I can see it.”

Mami tossed Kyubey her spent grief cubes, and the incubator gracefully caught the entire assortment in its paws, before tossing them into the hole on its back.

The rapid response team is here, the Incubator thought, a moment later. *You should take a look.*

They turned to watch, Simona again a step behind.

In the distance, a tiny spark of light appeared and grew, expanding into what appeared to be a purple bubble the size of several vehicles. When it popped, five tiny figures appeared in the air, dropping down.

“Teleportation,” Mami said, by way of explanation. She leaned forward, appearing to be looking carefully at something.

Simona squinted her eyes, seeing nothing.

The demons in their vicinity turned to attack, but their numbers melted rapidly, torn down by a flood of projectiles, sword slashes, and spear thrusts.

That could be you, Kyubey thought, walking up next to her.

Ryouko and Mami looked at it.

Your soul rebels at the karma of your life, the creature thought, looking up at Ryouko. *You have reached the threshold for becoming a magical girl. You may make any wish, so long as your soul truly desires it.*

“I need to—” Ryouko began.

I should inform you, the Incubator continued. *Mami was correct. In your case, breaking the secrecy of your situation by speaking to your family would almost certainly taint the resolution of your soul. Even your friend’s presence here has already risked the viability of the contract. This is, indeed, a one-time offer.*

Mami turned away, choosing to watch the battle unfolding behind her instead.

“Ryouko, what’s going on?” Simona asked, the outsider in everything.

Do you have a wish prepared? Kyubey asked. *With what wish will your soul gem shine?*

Ryouko looked down and closed her eyes, trying to think.

It was one thing to think to yourself that you envied the magical girls, that you envied the centenarians and would leave Earth if you were allowed to. It was another to face, all at once, the prospect of leaving everything you had ever known behind.

But what was I here for? My friends don’t understand me. Nothing in school interests me. I don’t fit in!

And her parents… well they could visit often. She knew that.

I’m sorry.

No, her decision had been made the moment the Incubator had appeared.

Mami averted her eyes even further.

“I wish I could leave Earth,” Ryouko said, looking down, “and explore this world. I want to go where no one else has gone before and find my place in this universe.”

“Ryouko!” Simona said, finally catching up to everything. “What are you doing?”

Despite everything they had said earlier, Simona’s voice sounded betrayed.

Wish granted, the Incubator thought. *Your soul has successfully reduced entropy.*

Immeasurable pain coursed through every fiber of Ryouko’s being, as if her entire body, every cell, every neuron and hepatocyte, were screaming in protest. It was terrible, worse than anything she could imagine.

And then it was over, and there was only the bright light rising in front of her eyes.

Take it, Kyubey ordered. *It is your destiny.*

Ryouko did so, stretching out her hands.

Behind her, unseen, a girl appeared onto the platform, jumping up from below. She was clad entirely in red, hair tied in a ponytail with a ribbon, mouth chewing on a chocolate covered bread stick, and hand carrying an enormous spear.

“I miss anything?” she asked casually.

Mami glared at her.

“Oh,” the new girl said, spotting the girl in front of her.

That girl stared at the luminescent green soul gem in her hands wondrously, head swimming, trying to get a grasp on her new life.

The spear-wielding girl closed her eyes and clasped her hands in benediction.

“May your soul gem burn bright and long,” Sakura Kyouko said, “and the Goddess save you from despair.”

Chapter End Notes

> Author’s note: So I’m basically going all out, and taking Kyubey’s assertion about humans joining them in space fully seriously. We will see how honest he was. Field Marshal Mami has a nice ring to it, don’t you think?

Fantasma

Among the astounding powers, seemingly immortal bodies, and sheer, absurd firepower, it is easy to forget that magical girls come with another, much subtler advantage. Nearly every girl is born into their contract with an instinct to combat, and an excellent understanding of their own skills and how to use them. Coupled with superhuman—no, super*machine*—reflexes, even the greenest of rookies can be terrifying on the battlefield."

However, this must not be misconstrued. There is always much to learn, and experience is geometrically enhancing, as it is for all types of combat. Indeed, there is no need to pity those rare girls who find themselves with no instinct for battle—experience shows that these are often the most dangerous of all.

— Daughters of the Contract: A Documentary

The mentorship system began as a quite natural response to the isolation prevalent throughout the magical girl community. Few elder girls were heartless enough to allow new girls to flail about aimlessly, and new girls were always desperate for someone to cling to.

As populations grew, and societies contracted into urban centers, the number of girls finding themselves rubbing elbows with other magical girls increased dramatically. And while hostilities were common, the rewards of cooperation proved too dramatic to ignore. Pairs of magical girls became trios, then full-fledged teams, rapidly accruing new contractees as members. The only restraints on their size were the shocking attrition rates, and local grief cube supply, which prevented multiple teams from settling in one area.

For a while, then, the ideal of mentorship was replaced by a new ideal—that of cohesion and teamwork. It was only with the rise of the *MSY,* and the placement of certain girls into specific, highly specialized roles, that it again became common to see pairs of girls operating as teacher-student. Afterwards came formalization, and with that, certain benefits—death notices, most morbidly. This led, seemingly paradoxically, to a certain relaxation of formality. Mentors became more comfortable sending students farther away, and some girls began 'mentoring' others hardly even in the same department.

— Julian Bradshaw, *"Mahou Shoujo: Their World, their History,"* excerpt.

Mami hated recruiting.

She hated how innocent the girls were, with their sweet, naïve smiles and their touching belief in *Mami-sama.* She hated that her face and her voice were being using to sell so many on a choice that would likely mean their death. She hated everything about it.

Above all, she hated that terrible contradiction between her love for the girls and her embedded sense of duty.

Mami didn't have to take Ryouko and Simona up to the observation deck that day, after all. She could have sent them home, and let Ryouko's recruiting be someone else's business.

She couldn't let herself do that, though. She didn't want to dodge the guilt and shirk the responsibility. Let this girl, at least, hear it from her. Plus—and this was where duty kicked in—immediately after a demon attack, in the throes of emotion, was an excellent time to recruit, one she couldn't legitimately pass up.

Mami felt dirty, like one of those used car salesmen that had existed so long ago.

It was all a bunch of gamesmanship. The principal complication nowadays was the lack of secrecy around the contract system. Experience had taught both Incubator and Magical Girl that allowing potential contractees to talk about it with their more mundane friends and family members was a sure-fire way to damage the purity of their wish and destroy whatever it was that gave a girl potential. Telling the girls to keep it secret, even giving them the reasons *why* it had to be secret, was less effective than had been desired.

Girls just couldn't resist. There was no longer the risk that they would be labeled delusional for talking, and the Incubators could no longer use whatever unsavory methods they had previously used to stop them.

Alright, so that last part was only speculation among magical girls, but fairly well-founded speculation, at that.

Thus, nowadays, despite the impression given to the public that the contract decision was deliberate and carefully thought out, potential recruits were rushed through their contracts like so many sheep, with phrases like "one-time offer" and "limited-time only." This was done even if it risked alienating the girls.

It was, indeed, exactly like selling a used car.

Thankfully, in this post-capitalist era, no one tried that hard to sell anything anymore, so the girls had never seen such techniques in their lives—on Earth, anyway.

Letting Simona stick around, instead of telling her to go home and talking to Ryouko privately, was a judgment call. Letting her stay risked the contract, but it also allowed Mami to legitimately say that the offer would probably be lost very soon, a very important sales point.

And Mami hated lying, too.

The guilt, like always, would stick with her for a long time.

Still, though, her job wasn't finished. Indeed, it was only just beginning.

She would make sure of it.

"I can't believe you!" Simona was saying, emotional. "You became a magical girl, just like that? You're just going to leave?"

"What are you talking about?" Ryouko asked, overwhelmed, glancing back and forth between Simona and the soul gem in her hand. "Weren't you the one who understood why I wanted to get out? What happened to that?"

Mami had to intervene. The last thing she wanted was for the girl to have doubts injected into her so soon after making the contract.

In short, she needed to get Simona out of the way.

Mami cleared her throat, solely for the purpose of interrupting them.

“Let’s discuss what to do now,” she said, giving them a meaningful look.

She turned to Kyouko dramatically.

“You have free time?”

“I cut my sermon short to see what Mami-*senpai* was up to,” the girl said, placing a teasing lilt on “senpai,” “So yeah, I got some time.”

“Alright, do you mind escorting the civilian here home?” Mami asked. “I’ll show the new girl the ropes.”

Kyouko frowned.

“You’ve already been in combat, Mami,” she said. “Let me take care of it.”

Privately, Kyouko thought:

Those are my subordinates fighting down there, you know. Give me a chance to look cool once in a while! Don’t steal all the fun.

Mami thought about it. She really wanted to be the one to show Ryouko around, but there were advantages to letting Kyouko do it. If she went with Simona, she could take the opportunity to program her into *not* discouraging Ryouko, and to indoctrinate her in a few other things. That would help.

She nodded.

“Alright,” she said. “I’ll take her home then. Don’t teach Shizuki-san anything funny, okay? I don’t want to have to clean up your mess.”

“Of course not, *senpai*,” Kyouko said, winking.

“Come on, let’s go,” Mami said, gesturing at Simona, her expression making it clear she wasn’t to be argued with.

Simona looked at Ryouko, clearly not wanting to be cooperative. Ryouko stared back.

“Come on,” Mami repeated, tugging at Simona’s arm and, this time, the girl acquiesced.

“Shizuki Ryouko, eh?” Kyouko said, as Mami and Simona walked off. “Interesting name.”

Indeed it is, Mami thought, walking off.

As a matter of course, she had mentally looked up the names of both girls on the way up, so she wouldn’t have to ask.

Kyubey jumped onto her shoulder as she stepped into the elevator with Simona.

Ryouko stared at the new girl, who was twirling her spear about in an impressive fashion.

“Interesting name,” the girl had said, and Ryouko now found herself absolutely tongue-tied.

Sakura Kyouko, her facial recognition service—her *nomenclator*—informed her when she

queried.

Sakura Kyouko

Age: *undisclosed*

Occupation: *Magical Girl* (active service)

Rank: *Lieutenant General*

Special Comments:

- *Founder,* Cult of Hope

A quiet sense of expectation registered in her mind, an implied recommendation that she read up on the "Cult of Hope." She dismissed it.

I guess I'm meeting everyone today, she thought.

Nowhere near as famous as Mami or Homura or Yuma, Kyouko was still a celebrity in her own right. She was one of the Mitakihara Four, after all. She was one of the team that had formed the nucleus around which grew the famous magical girl union, the *MSY.*

She was also the least famous. Founding the Cult was nothing to sniff at, but it paled in comparison to the kind of legends Mami and Homura had carved out for themselves, or to Yuma's constant appearances within the Directorate.

In fact, to be perfectly honest, Ryouko didn't know much about the Cult at all. She thought of them as part of the persistent religious subculture that was still present everywhere. Put another way, the Cult was to magical girls as door-to-door Christian evangelists were to most of the world —or even all of human space.

She hadn't recognized the girl, but it made sense that she would be here. She had just met Mami, after all.

With that thought, reality once more crashed in on her.

What have I gotten myself into? she thought.

She could feel the steady pulse of her soul gem, which had obligingly formed itself into a ring on her hand.

No, she would have to remember now. The soul gem *was* her.

She held her hand up, looking at it, noticing finally the green five-pointed star that had appeared on her fingernail. She blinked.

"Is that—" she began.

Yes, it's normal, the voice responded in her head.

She jumped, then looked again at the girl in front of her. That girl was watching her with amused eyes.

"I thought for sure Mami had introduced you to the telepathy," Kyouko said, watching her. "I guess not. Maybe she didn't want to overwhelm you. And yes, the fingernail mark is normal. It's

one of the lesser-known signs of being a magical girl."

With that, Kyouko stepped forward and grabbed her hand, ignoring her slight recoil.

"Oh, a green star," Kyouko said, inspecting the nail. "How cute."

Ryouko couldn't read Kyouko's tone of voice.

Then, Kyouko dropped her hand.

"Summon your soul gem," Kyouko ordered.

"What?" Ryouko asked, blinking.

"Turn it back into its gem form," Kyouko repeated, tapping her foot. "Come on. You know how to do it."

Ryouko complied.

She was surprised she knew how, actually. But she didn't have to think about it any harder then she thought about turning her lights off at night. It responded to her will even more fluidly than those lights did and, what's more, she seemed to know exactly what to do with it.

She swallowed, looking at her soul, glowing bright green in her hands, crested by the five-pointed star that was apparently her insignia.

"Alright, good," Kyouko said. "I'm sorry to rush you so much, but if we don't hurry, the battle will be over. I intend for you to participate."

Ryouko blinked.

"What? Already?"

"You're a magical girl," Kyouko said. "You should have basic competence, even without training. It comes with the contract."

She rested her chin on the back of her hand, which held the shaft of her spear.

Kyouko sighed.

"I wonder what Sayaka would think of me doing this," she mused out loud, reaching into her dress and pulling out another of her strange chocolate sticks. "She'd probably be mad that I didn't treat her so nicely."

"Who's Sayaka?" Ryouko asked, tilting her head.

"No one," Kyouko said, looking back towards her. "I'm just an old lady talking too much."

Now, Kyouko thought. *Transform. I shouldn't have to explain.*

Indeed she didn't. Hardly had the intention to try formed in Ryouko's mind that the gem shot out bright streamers of green light, seeking to grasp her in their embrace. The light was momentarily blinding, seeming to ensheath her eyes—and then it was over.

Instinctively, she looked down.

She found herself wearing a bright green dress, a lacy affair running all the way from her chest to

her calves, where it flared out and ruffled. The sleeves were similar, and the chest was ornately decorated with various green buttons, the centerpiece of which was the shining green star soul gem attached to the base of her neck, seemingly stuck there.

Conscious of a weight on her left hand, she raised it—and found herself looking at a crossbow nearly the length of her entire arm. But yet, despite its size and obvious weight, it was hardly any effort at all to manage. It seemed almost like an extension of herself.

Specifically, it was an *arbalest,* and she would never have to load or prime it manually. Somehow she knew that.

Frilly, the other girl thought. *Not many girls go for that nowadays.*

"Sakura-san," Ryouko began.

Kyouko, the response came. *And use your telepathy. Just so you know how.*

Kyo–Kyouko, Ryouko thought, finding once again that she knew instinctually how to do it.

Kyouko, she repeated, trying to look the other girl in the eye. *I'm sorry. I only just contracted. I'm feeling a bit shaky. I want to talk to my parents—*

Suddenly, Kyouko's face was bearing down on hers, outlined against the late afternoon sky.

"What kind of resolution is that?" the girl asked. "I thought you had a *wish.* You knew what you were getting into. You're getting a chance to train with the great Sakura Kyouko, and you want to bail out?"

The girls eyes drilled into hers until Ryouko, finally, shook her head, swallowing covertly.

Kyouko pulled back.

"Listen, rookie," she said, her voice serious. "You'll get your chance to say goodbye, but I'm not cutting you any slack while you're here. If there's anything I've learned in all my years, it's that it's better to toughen up early. *Capisce*?"

Ryouko nodded hastily, even before her brain registered her language module's translation of the Italian.

"I'm sorry," Ryouko said, bowing. "I'm just—"

"*Don't* apologize!" Kyouko asserted, and Ryouko flinched at the spearpoint suddenly at her neck.

"Now, rookie," Kyouko said. "What's your primary power? Demonstrate it to me, if you can."

Ryouko hadn't even thought to check, but the moment she thought about it, she knew.

The world shifted five feet to her right, leaving her briefly disoriented.

"I said *demonstrate*!" Kyouko snarled, seemingly not at all perturbed by her blink to the left. "You have combat reflexes, use them!"

With that, the girl moved her spear to stab Ryouko, with seemingly complete sincerity.

Before she knew it, she was looking at the back of Kyouko's head, raising her arbalest—and then she was on her knees, grabbing her stomach, feeling fit to vomit.

Physical injury detected, a machine voice thought. *Emergency—*

No, Ryouko thought.

"Sorry about that," the red-clothed girl apologized, looming over her. "It was the only way to make sure you didn't actually shoot me."

The girl had slammed the blunt end of her spear backward into Ryouko's abdomen at almost the exact moment she had appeared.

"Don't feel bad," Kyouko said. "Every teleporter's instinct is to blink behind the opponent. It's a good instinct; I've just had experience fighting."

She offered Ryouko a hand up.

Feeling the pain recede slightly, Ryouko forced herself up without help, hand on knee.

Kyouko smiled mischievously.

"So you've got spirit. I like that."

"Who would want to accept help from a bully like you?" Ryouko asked, staggering a little.

She was *angry.* That blow had hurt, and she was pretty certain some of her organs had taken damage from it.

Come to think of it, why was she so blasé about that?

Kyouko laughed, and turned away from her, spear behind her back.

"You don't know the half of it, but don't take it personally, kid," she said. "By the way, did you happen to activate your emergency mode?"

No. Ryouko thought, since the girl wasn't looking at her and she didn't feel like speaking.

"Good," Kyouko said, chewing on her chocolate stick. "You would have discovered that most of the functions are broken or useless. They *still* haven't found a way for the magic and science to work together. They're working on it, though."

The girl turned, displaying a small, black cube. Trying to focus her eyes on it, Ryouko found she had difficulty doing so. It was *fuzzy* somehow. There was something… disturbing about looking at it. Somehow, it seemed blacker than black.

"Know how these work?" Kyouko asked. Ryouko nodded.

She tossed the cube over, then watched Ryouko hold it up to her soul gem to drain the—frankly minor—traces of corruption that had arisen.

It felt… strangely relaxing, Ryouko decided, as if a great weight were coming off her shoulders. And perhaps it was just her imagination, but she was pretty sure her abdomen was feeling better.

Also, she didn't feel that angry anymore.

The grief cube felt strangely slippery in her hands, like it was trying to escape.

"Now, teleporter," Kyouko addressed, holding her spear at her side. "Tell me some things for the record. What is your mass carrying capacity?"

“Two thousand kilograms,” she said, *knowing* somehow. “Maybe more if I push it.”

“Can you move objects you are not touching?”

“No.”

“Can you teleport objects without teleporting yourself?”

“No.”

“What is your maximal range?”

“Two hundred kilometers.”

“Good. Then let’s—”

Kyouko stopped midsentence.

“Is something wrong?” Ryouko asked, after a moment of hesitation.

“You’re not lying, are you?” Kyouko asked, giving her a severe look, head tilted. “Two hundred? Seriously?”

“Y–Yes,” Ryouko said, sure that was the correct number. Could she be wrong somehow?

“But I’d need grief cubes immediately,” she added, not sure why the girl was looking at her like she was crazy. “So I couldn’t do it more than once an hour or so, even with cubes. And I’d have to focus for a long time. In terms of jumps I could do consistently, I’m probably limited to about a quarter-kilometer—”

“The standing record is sixty-three kilometers,” Kyouko said flatly.

Ryouko blinked.

“Oh.”

Kyouko banged her spear on the floor, ignoring the cracks that appeared underneath.

“It looks like Mami found a gem after all,” she commented. “She sure has a knack.”

Kyouko leaned on her spear.

“Anyway, how does your teleportation operate? Do you know? It affects whether or not you can do anything else.”

Ryouko thought about that.

“I’m not sure. I have this vague sense it’s related to… manipulating space? I knew everything else, but I don’t know this. I don’t know why.”

She knew, somehow, that she was moving space around her somehow, or maybe even punching a hole, but it was frustratingly unspecific.

“That’s okay,” Kyouko said. “It’s like that sometimes. Just work on figuring it out. If you’re lucky, you can get some secondary skills relating to it. If you’re unlucky, you can even forget how to do it. Take it from me.”

Ryouko nodded, absorbing the lesson.

"*Can* you do anything else right now? Do you know?"

Ryouko shook her head.

"Not in terms of skills," she said. "But in terms of weapons…"

She began lifting her arbalest.

"No it's okay," Kyouko said, waving her hand. "I don't have much patience for this kind of debriefing. Just make sure to show me everything you can later, okay?"

Ryouko blinked, then nodded. Frankly, that seemed a little irresponsible of Kyouko, but who was she to question?

"Let's just go ahead and register you," Kyouko said, looking upward.

Ryouko watched the girl's eyes unfocus slightly, a sure sign that she had switched attention to some internal menu. Ryouko relaxed slightly, turning to watch the fight still unfolding in the distance. It was starting to get dark; her parents would wonder where she was.

Suddenly, Kyouko chuckled to herself.

"Well, that's smart of her," Kyouko said. "Take the good ones for herself."

"What?" Ryouko asked, unsure if the girl intended for her to respond or not.

"Mami just registered you," Kyouko said, still looking off into space. "All I could do was input the additional information. That means that in about five minutes, you're going to be flooded with messages from the military. Welcome messages and stupid things like that. Read it later when you have time. Not now. For now, I'm going to mark you 'occupied.'"

"You can do that?" Ryouko asked, confused.

It was her personal status. No one else could touch it.

"I can now," Kyouko said. "I'm your new commanding officer. Temporarily."

"Oh," Ryouko said.

Kyouko looked at her expectantly, eyebrow raised.

"Commanding officer," Kyouko repeated.

Realizing what was going on, Ryouko stiffened her back and raised her hand awkwardly to salute.

"Uh, I mean, yes, ma'—"

"None of that," Kyouko said, waving her hand "I was just messing with you. We don't observe the formalities. Not among our own kind. But it's a good reflex to have."

"Oh, okay," she said, relaxing.

Kyouko leaned forward.

“And just so you know, you are now fully emancipated. Welcome to adulthood.”

Ryouko looked back at the girl’s amused eyes, wonder what she was supposed to say to that.

“I don’t feel like one,” she settled on, only half-joking.

Kyouko smiled.

“Take a look at your personnel file,” she recommended.

For a moment, Ryouko was lost. *What* personnel file?

Here, Kyouko thought, and the file manifested in Ryouko’s consciousness.

That alone was interesting. Mind-to-mind communication of that sort was strictly restricted by the government.

Now was not the time to think about it.

Shizuki Ryouko

Magical Girl–Second Lieutenant

Classification: Teleporter

Immediate Commanding Officer: Sakura Kyouko, Lieutenant General

Primary Mentor (Optional): Tomoe Mami, Field Marshal

Her expression must have given it away, because Kyouko smiled and said:

“It’s a rare honor.”

Ryouko nodded, even though she wasn’t sure what exactly it meant.

“I guess you’ll be the envy of everyone you meet, then,” Kyouko said. “Since I ain’t gonna let this one just float by.”

And then, suddenly, a new entry appeared:

Additional Mentors (Not Recommended): Sakura Kyouko, Lieutenant General

“Well, then,” Kyouko said, turning to face the scenery, not giving her time to respond. “Looks like they’ve almost got it over with. There should be a couple left for you to hunt, though.”

“Kyouko, it’s an honor—” she began, though honestly, she was confused why she was being singled out.

“Here,” Kyouko interrupted.

Kyouko stuck out her hand. Ryouko looked at the strangely shaped metal object with confusion.

“It’s a soul gem cover,” Kyouko said. “It has all sorts of fancy technology to protect your—well, *you.* It’s my spare. You can use it until you get something more formal.”

Ryouko took it, wondering how it would fit. It didn’t look—

Kyouko grabbed it back, then leaned forward, pressing it to the star soul gem below her throat. The device came suddenly alive, liquefying and flowing to shape itself around the gem, and then turning transparent.

“You’ll learn the details later,” Kyouko said, nodding in satisfaction.

Then Kyouko turned once again to face the battle scene.

“Are you ready?” Kyouko asked.

“Not really,” she said. “I still think it’s too fast. But if you say so, I’ll—”

“I said, are you *ready*?” Kyouko insisted

“Y–Yes?” Ryouko said, not quite managing the tone she felt was being demanded.

Kyouko glanced at her, but didn’t seem angry.

She sniffed arrogantly.

“Of course you’re not. But—”

As she spoke, she reached into a hidden pocket on her dress, pulling out a small plastic box. Inside was a whole assortment of the chocolate sticks Kyouko had been chewing on.

“—I’ll be there to save you in case anything happens. Trust me.”

Ryouko looked between the box and the girl’s face, wondering if she was supposed to take one or what.

Finally, she did so.

Kyouko withdrew the box, smiling.

“Can you believe it?” Kyouko said. “I have to insert my own custom design into every synthesizer I use. No pre-existing models. What is this world coming to?”

Ryouko didn’t know what to say to that, so she didn’t say anything.

“Now then, ready or not—” Kyouko began, grabbing her by the hand.

Ryouko looked up in surprise.

Kyouko pointed with her spear at a small unattended cluster of demons.

—take us there, teleporter!”

Ryouko nodded, swallowing.

If that’s how it’s going to be, then I’ll make sure to impress her!

“I’ll drop us in the middle of them, okay?” Ryouko asked, steeling her resolve.

“That’s how I prefer it,” Kyouko said.

“Simona,” Mami addressed severely, as the elevator was mid-ascent to the nearest skyway exit.

She had just finished inputting Ryouko's registration, and it was time to get down to business.

The girl looked up at her, awoken from whatever miserable line of thought she had been engaged in. Mami did not look her in the eye.

"I would thank you not to undermine your friend at a time like this," she said. "Put your feelings aside. Her decision is made, and giving her doubts could only hurt her. I trust you understand what I'm saying."

Mami didn't look, and the girl didn't respond.

Kyubey, perched in its customary spot on Mami's shoulder, chose not to comment, especially since Simona couldn't hear him anyway.

Their elevator reached the designated floor, and they stepped out, Mami first. They approached Mami's personal vehicle, politely waiting at the correct spot. She let Simona get in first.

The girl's face was blank.

Mami sighed.

Kyubey, I'd appreciate it if you left.

She does not even know I am here, Mami.

It would make me feel better, okay?

Kyubey jumped off her shoulder.

Alright then, it said. *I will see you at the spaceport. I have recruits to attend to, after all.*

It almost sounded peeved.

Mami let herself smile slightly. Sometimes she swore the Incubator missed her. It could be relied upon to show up to greet her the moment she stepped foot in Mitakihara city, and also to say farewell whenever she left.

That was a foolish thing to think, of course.

And then she got in the vehicle too. It was time to change tacks.

She lifted a small door and reached into the synthesizer in front of her, pulling out two tea cups on a plate, setting it on the flat surface in front of them. They were already full and piping hot, and there were scones piled next to them.

Well, it was *her* vehicle, after all, and being a Field Marshal had its perks.

She gestured at the plate, offering. Simona shook her head.

"Look, I understand how you feel," Mami said, blowing on her cup as the vehicle gained speed. "But you have to think about how *she* feels. Even if you hurt, you have to see her off with a smile. It's the right thing to do."

Mami leaned over, giving her best "motherly Mami" smile.

For a moment, she thought she wasn't going to get through.

Then Simona shifted her head downward, just a little.

“I feel like such a hypocrite,” the girl said, tugging at her jeans. Her voice was hoarse.

“Why?” Mami asked.

The girl shook her head.

Mami waited, sipping her tea.

“We were supposed to go together,” Simona began again, voice shaky. “Somehow…”

She understood, then.

“I’m sorry,” Mami said, setting her cup down. “But it can’t be helped. Does she know? Have you confessed?”

She felt Simona glance at her with shock.

“What do you mean?” the girl insisted. “I only meant—”

“Oh, come on,” Mami interrupted, smiling cynically. “I’ve been alive for over four hundred years, and I spent a lot of it surrounded by girls who didn’t have any male choice of partners. You wanted to stay together with her? In this context, what else could that *possibly* mean?”

Simona looked away.

“So I take it you haven’t said anything, then?” Mami asked. “Ryouko clearly treats you as a friend.”

“I was going to,” Simona said bitterly. “And then those damn demons showed up.”

The girl hugged herself.

“I want to blame you,” she said. “For recruiting her. But how can I? We were just talking about how badly we want to leave. How can I blame her for following through, just because I wanted it to happen a different way? Just because she didn’t see me as anyone special?”

Mami looked down at her hands. She had seen this particular tragedy played out at least a dozen times in her life. The details differed, the genders differed, but the feelings were always the same. Humans… were like that.

“I should have seen it coming,” Simona said, shaking her head. “I fell right into it. All the signs were there.”

Mami frowned, a little perplexed by the statement.

“Well, nothing can be done about it,” she said, returning to what she needed to say. “And if you truly love her, you’ll keep quiet now. Like I said, show her off with a smile, and let her leave nothing behind.”

This time, Mami watched Simona carefully, but the girl kept her head down in silence.

Finally, she nodded, slowly.

With suspiciously good timing—Mami had ordered to transport to slow down to give them time—they were at Simona’s home.

“You live alone, right?” Mami asked rhetorically.

Simona nodded, stepping outside.

“Then I won’t intrude on your hospitality,” Mami said.

But the girl was already walking away.

Mami smiled thinly. She remembered living alone.

The capsule door closed, but Mami let her transport stay idle, thinking.

She was glad she had come. Left alone, Simona could have become a major blight on Ryouko’s happiness, coming at a time like this. She had headed it off at the pass, like a good mentor should. She didn’t *have* to do Ryouko’s initial training herself; Kyouko was an excellent trainer, despite whatever jokes Mami made about it. Still, it was reasonable to do something like this. A relationship would more acceptable later, *after* the girl was more settled.

Reviewing the events of the day, Mami frowned. This new grief cube issue was troubling. Grief cube distribution was the lifeblood of all magical girls, and even the slightest hint of irregularity would be enough to sow discord throughout their ranks. Besides that, there were genuinely troubling aspects to the whole issue. A computer problem would have almost been preferable, since it would be easy to understand and address. A system that appeared to be functioning perfectly, but produced imperfect results—that had disturbing implications.

She would have to tread carefully. A combination of covert investigation and private inquiries would be required.

Mentally, she started to issue a classified order—then paused. She reworded the message to ask for a personal meeting. A better idea than putting it in writing.

And yes, Yuma should be talked to, but Kyouko could take care of that.

She leaned back, relaxing.

Then, with nothing better to do, she checked her messages.

The set of messages that asserted themselves at the edge of her consciousness was merely the small subset of her messages that her personal AI, Machina, rated important. In truth, there were probably many more important messages than just that, but her assistant provided her with only what she could realistically read in one sitting. Always busy.

She grabbed a scone and began munching at it, reading the ones that most interested her first, letting them dump their contents into her memory.

She raised an eyebrow. Really? Kyouko was going to jump in on this? What kind of game was she playing?

Well, it can’t hurt, I suppose.

Then she read the next one and *really* raised her eyebrow.

Two hundred kilometers? Now that’s *impressive. It might be useful.*

She reached for her tea, sipping. It was still hot. Thermoceramic was amazing stuff.

Her next message was a voice message from Admiral Xing. He was very annoyed at General Blackwell, and wished to express his feeling that Blackwell's lack of cooperation—Mami grunted in annoyance. The two men's feud was growing tiresome.

She made a note to Machina to schedule a meeting with the both of them. It was time to sort this out.

What am I doing? she thought. *I still have six hours of vacation left, and here I am doing work.*

Well, what am I supposed to do? she thought. *It'd be impolite to show up and interrupt Kyouko now, and I have nowhere to go.*

She sighed. She really should have made some friends.

She returned to her messages.

So, the production committee of *Akemi* and related propaganda committees wanted her to schedule an appearance at a screening for recruitment purposes—she felt her desire to keep reading draining away by the second.

I really should schedule something though, she thought. She had already gone to the trouble of allowing them to interview her, and had even done a little publicity…

But, she thought. Maybe a movie was just the thing. Not a public appearance, which she was certainly not in the mood for, and for which it was too late anyway, but if she could sneak herself into a holotheater, she could check out just what kind of terrible historical inaccuracies about her Hollywood was peddling now.

Of all the cities to stay the same over the centuries, of course *that* city would.

She hoped it wouldn't be too bad, given how interminably long the interview had been, answering questions about Homura's hairstyle and personality and history and so forth.

At the very least, it would be an amusing way to spend a couple of hours. She was genuinely curious.

She told her personal transport to get moving, finishing her scone. She could feel her mood improving already.

The trick, of course, was to get into the theater incognito.

There was a brief period, just a few seconds, where Ryouko had to focus, and she could feel something shifting around her—

And then they were there, in mid-air, already falling into the middle of the cross formed by a major, deserted intersection. There, the crowd of demons was already starting to shift, sensing something above them. She had no time to even regret dropping them hundreds of feet above the ground. Why *had* she done that?

"Do your best!" Kyouko exhorted, and the girl propelled herself forward despite the lack of anything to push on.

Ryouko shook her head. It was time to focus.

Below her, the demons were starting to look up, at her and the darkening sky. There wasn't much

time left before they would start attacking her.

She spun in the air, pointing her arm downward. Summoning an explosive crossbow bolt, its tip an angry green pulsating mass, she fired, glancing to make sure wasn't about hit Kyouko.

I'm fine! Kyouko thought to her. *I can take care of myself, rookie! Just warn me next time! And don't worry about property damage!*

The street below her erupted, ejecting fire and debris high into the air, brilliant against the twilight. She understood, then, why she had placed herself so into the air. It gave her the high ground.

And then she blinked to ten feet to her left, allowing the beams from the demons which she had missed to strike her previous position.

It really does come naturally, she thought.

She twirled in the air, extending her left arm downward, arbalest bolts deploying and firing at an absurd rate, the string of the bow humming with speed. Her spin spread the bolts outward in a wide arc, spearing demons in a wide circle below her.

Between her arbalest and the stationary green bolts were the narrowest of strings, barely visible. But they were enough to connect her to them through the gaseous air.

With a thought, she blinked again, only a few feet—and took with her the strings, and the bolts, and a good large chunk of every demon she had speared.

These demons, now missing large chunks of their bodies, or their heads, or even their entire lower halves, disintegrated, unable to maintain themselves.

And once again, searing beams criss-crossed the spot where she had been.

As she readied her next salvo, she realized that, somehow, a smile had crept onto her face.

I'm enjoying this? she thought, with a start.

A demon just below her caught her eye—and she blinked to her side, as a beam tore through her former position.

One beam? she thought—and then she blinked again, dodging another shot.

What is—and then she was forced to blink again.

—going on?

Damn—

—it. They've chang—

—ed strategies!

They were trying to wear her out. She couldn't keep up constant blinking forever, and they weren't letting her gather energy to fire, or giving her the time to teleport farther. She was already being forced to jump upward slightly each time to maintain altitude. She was surprised she could still even think.

Rooftop? No I'll—

—lose momentum! I—

—but what can I—

The ground erupted just below her and to her right, taking with it a small set of demons.

She spotted Kyouko jump out of the explosion, clearly having driven downward into the ground with her spear.

A group of demons in the vicinity turned to focus on the new threat.

The rest continued to try and keep Ryouko in the air, but their rate of fire slowed. It was the opening she needed.

Now's your chance! Kyouko's voice in her head.

She blinked straight down the ground, pressing her hand to the pavement, even though she didn't really need to. She was right in the middle of a dense pack of demons, who hadn't even yet realized she was there.

Again, a small smile snuck onto her face.

And then she was on the other side of the street, hand still pressed to a thin layer of the same pavement, surrounded by the bottom halves of over a dozen demons, which quickly vanished.

The street was clear. They had almost gotten her. She couldn't maintain constant blinking like that. She was nearly out—

She heard something behind her.

She blinked back to the other side of street, the beam again nearly hitting her.

Scowling, she blasted the demon responsible with a barrage of green bolts. She needed *time.* She simply couldn't keep teleporting so rapidly. She didn't know why, but she *couldn't.*

She spun around, slashing outward with her left arm, sending the next barrage of bolts out in a wide arc, trying to ward off the unexpected crowd of demons that had appeared behind her.

She jumped to her left, dodging several beams that had come her way anyway—and barely turned herself in time to avoid the beam that had targeted her new position. The radiant heat was hot against her face.

Running backwards while firing, she dug deep within herself, trying to gather another blink, perhaps up to the rooftop—and she couldn't. She was out, for now.

I have to get out of here. I'm not built for this kind of combat!

She looked at the mob of the demons advancing on her. Where had they come from?

I didn't think I'd die so quickly, she thought morbidly.

She raised her arbalest, gathering the energy for an explosive bolt, hoping desperately that none of them would fire on her in the seconds that would take.

The red apparition that was Kyouko shot out of a side street, slashing.

And then another. And another.

Even with her superhuman reflexes, Ryouko boggled at the multiple Kyoukos, despite appreciating the distraction they had provided. The explosive bolt lay in her bow, ready to fire.

Fire, fire! Kyouko exhorted. *They're decoys!*

Ryouko fired, at the ground under the demons, shattering a large part of the crowd, and the illusory Kyoukos, who dissolved like the mirages they were.

Another Kyouko—and this time, Ryouko was pretty sure this was the real one, appeared above them, descending from one of the rooftops.

Prepare another! Kyouko thought. Ryouko nodded and complied, swallowing even as she watched Kyouko dodge and weave among the remaining demons, neatly compacting them into a smaller mass with some sort of red chain-linked wall, even as their beams failed to strike home. She even speared a couple while she was at it.

Finally Kyouko leapt away from the pack, leveraging herself high into the air with her spear. Ryouko didn't have to be told. She fired into the mass.

Breathing heavily, she squinted. They were gone.

"That's why I do this," Kyouko said, diving down to land in front of her. "Nothing teaches like experience, and you won't find anyone better at keeping you alive than me. Today was my best chance."

The girl said it proudly, even as Ryouko looked down.

"Three lessons here, rookie," Kyouko said, pointing at her with a finger. "One, don't get overconfident."

Ryouko nodded, head bowed.

"Two, don't rely solely on your eyes."

Kyouko banged the side of a building with the blunt end of her spear.

"You're a magical girl. You can *sense* demons. I know you know that. So why did you assume you were clear if the street was empty? The demons can walk through walls, if they choose."

Ryouko gritted her teeth. So that was it.

Stupid. So stupid.

"Though that's unfair," Kyouko said. "I didn't warn you about that. Still, it's a lesson worth learning through fear, and that is why I didn't tell you."

"No," Ryouko said. "I should have known."

Kyouko looked at her, arcing and eyebrow.

"I saw them do it, when I was attacked earlier," she explained. "I don't know why I forgot."

Kyouko gave her a strange look.

"Don't be too hard on yourself," Kyouko said, frowning slightly. "It's excusable. Anyway, point three. Always leave something in reserve, even if you have to back off to do it. I knew you were

in trouble the moment you started dancing around like a pinball. Why didn't you escape to a rooftop?"

Ryouko bit her lip.

"It's okay to retreat, if you have to," Kyouko said. "The moment you knew you were being drained, you should have regrouped. The only exception is if you're trying to save someone, or you can't back out without leaving someone's back open."

Kyouko paused.

"Finally," She said. "Communication. Always let your teammates know what's going on. I was keeping an eye on you, but when you finish training, people will be relying on you to tell them what's going on. You didn't say a single thing to me the whole time."

Ryouko nodded once more.

"Let me make it up to you," she said quietly.

Kyouko tilted her head, hair curling around the spear she was leaning on her shoulder.

"There's nothing to make up," Kyouko said. "Don't sweat it."

Ryouko looked up.

She could feel it. Another concentration of demons nearby. Not close enough to threaten them, but…

"Let me try something, then," she said. "I think my teleportation is partly recharged. I'm going to go on the rooftop."

Kyouko rubbed her chin thoughtfully, then looked in the direction of the demons they both sensed.

"Alright," she said. "But long-range only. And teleport back here immediately when you're done. That's an order."

Ryouko nodded, then took a breath.

Then, she was on the rooftop, Kyouko in the street directly below her, looking up at her.

Ryouko took a moment to admire the twilight view, then faced the crowd of demons, allowing her standard-issue ocular implants to bring them into sharper focus.

They were far enough away that they didn't even notice her presence.

She deployed one of her stringed bolts, breathing as she aimed the shot.

She had thought about this during her fall through the sky earlier, before she had been interrupted.

From her position, she wouldn't be forced to teleport the string into solid matter—something she was essentially incapable of—nor would she have to do the same for anything on the other end. The positioning was perfect.

Exhaling, she fired.

The bolt shot through the air, leaving a green trail behind it. It soared over the rooftops, turned

downward, and landed in the ground in the middle of the mass of demons, just as she had planned.

She teleported onto the building across the street, taking the string with her.

Then she abolished her string and, taking a few seconds, teleported high up into the air above the designated spot, looking down.

On the ground where she had left it was a small chunk of pavement—only a tiny chunk and it looked it had snapped somehow.

She was disappointed. She probably didn't get a single demon.

"Well, what was that about?" Kyouko asked, when she returned.

"Didn't work," Ryouko said sullenly. "I guess it was too far. I wanted to see if I could teleport them from here."

But it would have worked if I had been closer, she thought. *I can shoot the ground and tear the demons apart that way with less fuss.*

But why hadn't it worked? She had been well under her mass limit, and she couldn't think of any other restrictions that would have applied.

"Well, then, rookie," Kyouko said, dropping her spear into the ready position. "Ready for another round? First, let's grab up the grief cubes we left behind and then, if we finish off that cluster you were trying to snipe, I think we'll be done for the day. And probably just in time for your bedtime."

Ryouko nodded, and grabbed Kyouko by the upper arm, preparing for the teleport.

"By the way," Kyouko commented. "You should enjoy it. It's probably the last time you'll ever sleep a full night. Now let's go."

They went.

Midnight found them both relaxing on a third-floor skyway bench, tired from the day. Kyouko had been wrong. There was no way Ryouko would even come close to making curfew.

Surreptitiously, she had sent a terse message home, solely so the three wouldn't panic and start looking for her.

The message had said only: "Be home really late. I'll explain when I get back. It's pretty important." Probably the understatement of her life.

"No, don't worry about it," Kyouko had told her, spinning her spear again for no reason. *"For as long as I keep you in active combat status, your parents are unable to track your location. Plus, you're emancipated, so you could shut them out if you want to. Public Services won't reveal anything to them, if they try to ask for help. Trust me, they'll never find you."*

That's not why I'm worried! she had thought.

As for why they were relaxing here in normal clothes, instead of meeting the rest of the girls, Kyouko had explained that it wasn't her style to micromanage, and that they could surely both use a break. Ryouko wasn't sure she agreed with the reasoning, but Kyouko was the *senpai* here. Not

to mention commanding officer.

It had been a little strange when the other girl chose to use her shoulder as a pillow, but she bore with it. Maybe it was what they did to rookies.

Kyouko had said something else interesting too.

You know, once upon a time, people had to worry about temperature, she had said. *Not like your generation, which doesn't even know what it means to be cold or hot. It's freezing, but you don't even see anything unusual about neither of us wearing a jacket. It's damn amazing is what it is. I'm getting old…*

Suddenly, Ryouko had a strange feeling, like someone was approaching. Not a demon, but a—

"Patricia has found something interesting, Kyouko," the approaching girl said, jumping out of the nighttime sky, clouds brightened by the city below.

Ryouko looked up, then at Kyouko, then back at the girl. Then, she couldn't help but stare.

The girl wore an armored breastplate and skirt, and had two scabbards for dual swords.

Kyouko lifted her head off of Ryouko's shoulder, blinking, then raised her arms and yawned expressively.

"Couldn't it wait, Maki?" Kyouko asked. "I told you I was training a rookie."

"Patricia thinks you need to see it personally," the girl said.

Kyouko shrugged.

"If she says so."

Goddess forbid she send a message or use telepathy, Kyouko thought.

Like that ever wakes you up, the other girl thought back. *So this the new girl?*

The girl nodded in Ryouko's direction.

Yes, that's me, Ryouko thought. *It's nice to meet you.*

They didn't ask names. There was no need to.

A teleporter, Kyouko thought. *A damn good one, it seems.*

We saw, the other girl thought.

Kyouko got up, and Ryouko moved to follow.

"I can teleport us there, if you give me an idea of where I'm going," Ryouko offered, donning her costume with a burst of light.

"Don't waste your magic," Kyouko said, transforming in turn. "I'm not *that* lazy. We'll go the old-fashioned way."

The other two launched themselves into the air, jumping off the sides of the buildings. After a moment, Ryouko followed, just a little unsteady. She may have an instinct for it, but that didn't mean she was *used* to it. There was just something *wrong* about jumping out into empty air.

Which was just *weird,* considering that earlier she had gleefully teleported herself throughout the air without feeling a thing.

Now that she thought about it. It had been *exhilarating.*

There's something weird about this one, Kyouko thought to Maki, privately.

Oh, how so? the other girl thought, stepping off the glass ceiling of a skyway.

I've never seen a rookie with battlelust, Kyouko thought. *But she was smiling like an idiot half the time.*

That why you chose to mentor her? the other girl thought. *I'm jealous. I've finally lost my place as the youngest.*

Don't sweat it, Kyouko thought. *Mami's going to be taking on most of the duty, if I know her. But I just know she's someone to keep an eye on.*

If you say so, the other girl thought, pouting slightly.

She started dropping straight to the ground, and Kyouko followed.

Ryouko stalled on an upper platform, looking down at the three girls at the bottom. It was nearly pitch-black, looking down at the lightless street, but she could see them.

Don't worry, someone at the bottom thought. *The fall won't hurt you.*

Ryouko could deduce that, given that Kyouko and Maki had both hit the ground and stood back up without any apparent scratches. Still, though, it was far. Maybe she should just teleport—

No, what the hell is wrong with me? I was doing fine earlier! I'm not going to waste power being stupid!

She swallowed, and jumped, forcing herself to keep her eyes open.

After what seemed like a small eternity, she hit the ground, bending down to absorb some of the force—and she was fine, as expected. Her bones didn't even seem to mind.

The sound of clapping drew her attention.

"Don't patronize her," Maki said, glaring at the source.

"But I'm being serious," the source, a girl with a long ponytail, said.

It wasn't the ponytail that caught Ryouko's eyes though, or the dual daggers planted in the belt of her dress. Nor was it the way her silhouette defined itself against the darkness.

It was the EM assault rifle she carried casually in her arm.

She turned to address Ryouko, Kyouko watching in amusement.

"I thought for sure you'd panic," she said. "I know I did, the first time I had to make a jump like that."

Ryouko's eyes widened. "But it doesn't make sense!" Ryouko said, stepping forward. "I just got out of a fight, and I don't remember panicking at anything back then!"

“Battles are different,” the girl—*Shirou Asaka,* according to her nomenclator—said. “Your instincts take over, and we all have good instincts. Outside of battle, it’s hard to remember that you’re not Human. Not anymore.”

“It’s one of the first things they teach you,” Maki said, injecting herself into the conversation. “Vacuum chambers, being underwater, jumps from heights. It’s not fun, but it gets the point drilled into your head.”

Kyouko nodded sagely, giving implicit approval to what was being said.

Somewhere nearby, a girl cleared her throat

Ryouko turned to look, and saw a girl, in costume, yes, but with no obvious weapons. She was obviously European and…

Patricia von Rohr

Curious, Ryouko queried further.

Occupation: *Magical Girl* (active service)
Rank: *Colonel*
MG Classification: *Miscellaneous*, *Technological Specialist*
MG Weapon: *Drone Swarms*
Immediate Commanding Officer: *Sakura Kyouko, Lieutenant General*
Primary Mentor (Optional): *None*

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Rohr said. “But it’s not safe to just leave them there. You should look sooner rather than later.

“Leave what?” Kyouko asked, but the girl had already turned away. Kyouko shrugged and followed. So did the others.

They walked around the corner of a building, heading down a narrow alleyway. Now there was no light at all except the tiny amount coming from the clouds above. It was enough, though, even for normal humans with their enhancements.

Looking forward while walking, Ryouko started slightly, recognizing where she was.

“What is it?” Kyouko asked, looking at her out of the corner of her eyes, spear braced casually on her shoulder, nearly taking up the entire causeway.

“This is near where we—I was attacked,” Ryouko said.

She pointed straight forward, at the windmills visible at the end of the alleyway, spinning silently.

“We were sitting over in that direction.”

“Interesting,” Patricia commented. “This grows more disturbing.”

Just before reaching the end of the alleyway, passing a side entrance into one of the buildings she turned ninety degrees to the right, so abruptly she seemed to just vanish from in front of them.

But of course it was another passageway, wider this time.

“Here,” Patricia said, pointing down, then moving aside so the others could have a look.

On the ground, inside a small concavity in the building, was a small pile of grief cubes.

They were almost entirely filled, Ryouko could sense. The malaise exuding from them was almost palpable.

“Leaving grief cubes lying around like this breaks Goddess knows how many regulations,” Patricia said.

“Not to mention it’s incredibly dangerous,” Kyouko said, bending down to get a closer look. “A tiny bit of grief, from anywhere, and these could spawn demons. No magical girl is stupid enough to leave these lying around.”

“And it can’t have been an accident with the logistics drones,” Asaka said, thoughtfully. “Saturated cubes like these are never transported around civilian areas. They go straight to the Incubators.”

Ryouko looked down at the pile of cubes, a dark cloud settling in the pit of her stomach. She was new here, so maybe she was wrong, but something seemed—

“It’s fishy,” Kyouko said. “There’s no reason these would ever be here.”

She looked at Ryouko.

“Where *exactly* were you when you were attacked?” Kyouko asked.

Ryouko blinked.

“We were lying on the riverbank somewhere. I don’t recognize this building, so probably not near this one, but…”

She stopped, noticing that the others weren’t paying attention anymore. They wore dark, suspicious looks. She saw Kyouko exchange a glance with Patricia.

“You see why I was disturbed,” Patricia said. “I didn’t know that this was where those girls had been, or I would have been even more worried.”

Ryouko looked around.

No girl would accidentally leave these cubes lying around, knowing how dangerous they were. Those flying robots wouldn’t carry them around. That seemed to imply that…

“Kyouko,” Ryouko addressed. “I’m sorry to ask, but this does this mean—”

“Someone left them here deliberately,” Kyouko said. “And I’d bet a week’s worth of meals that the pile was much larger than this when they did.”

She crouched down.

“Whoever it was must have screwed up, for these to still be here,” she said, turning one over in her fingers. “They were probably intended to all become demons. It would explain what that horde of demons was doing here, with nobody around. There’s a reason no one patrols this district.”

“Who would?” Maki asked. “There’s no reason anyone would do something like this.”

“I could have been a gambit by an Incubator to get Ryouko here to contract,” Asaka said, looking

at Ryouko.

“With no magical girls around?” Kyouko asked. “It was pure coincidence Mami was passing by. Otherwise, they’d be dead. They don’t take those kinds of risks. Not unless they think there’s a big payoff waiting for them.”

You are correct. We did not put those cubes there.

They turned to look at the source of the thought, who had phased into existence behind them.

It looked exactly liked Kyubey, but Ryouko could tell—

“You’re not Kyubey,” Patricia said, almost accusingly. “I asked for Kyubey.”

Kyubey is with Tomoe Mami at the spaceport, the Incubator thought. *I am taking his role here, briefly.*

The Incubator walked up to the pile of cubes. As Ryouko watched, disturbingly fascinated, the tear-shaped insignia on its back lifted open, revealing the black chasm underneath. No—not merely black. It was the same color as the cubes.

It began adroitly tossing the cubes into the hole.

She hadn’t been paying attention the last time she had seen this, when Kyubey was around, but now that she looked carefully, trying to see inside the Incubator’s back, there was something… terrifying about it. Ineffably creepy.

She hadn’t been aware *this* was how they processed the cubes. She had always assumed they just took them and stuck them in a machine somewhere.

“What do you think this means, Incubator?” Kyouko asked.

It is definitely very strange, the Incubator thought. *It would have been a shame to lose a potential contractor to something silly like this.*

Finished, it began to walk off.

My job is done here.

“Hey, wait—” Kyouko began, raising her arm.

But it was gone.

“Kyubey is nicer,” Patricia commented.

“Patricia,” Kyouko said, expression shaded. “Keep this matter within the Church for now. See if you can find out what’s going on. If you can’t, call in the *MSY*. Don’t bring in Governance unless you have to.”

Patricia nodded.

Ryouko stayed silent. What did this mean? Was someone trying to kill her? It was the only explanation she could think of.

But that didn’t make any sense.

She was still thinking about it by the time she finally started heading home.

Kyouko sat across from her in the vehicle, chewing thoughtfully on a piece of jerky.

“We’ll get to the bottom of this,” she said, looking up at the transparent roof of the vehicle, through which the lights of the city punctuated the night.

“I hope so,” Ryouko replied, elbows on her knees.

“Hey, don’t be so gloomy,” Kyouko said. “We need you smiling, when we meet your parents.”

Ryouko cringed. She had almost managed to forget.

“I prefer thinking about how I almost died,” she said drily.

Kyouko laughed, spreading her arms out over her seat.

“It won’t be that bad,” she said.

“I hope not,” Ryouko said.

“Well anyway,” Kyouko said. “Before I forget, I told Asaka you were going to meet with her tomorrow at one. She’ll get you your basic equipment, take you to have your internal grid reprogrammed, things like that.”

Ryouko nodded.

“Okay,” Kyouko said. “Two bits of wisdom I want to impart right now, so listen up.”

Ryouko looked up, listening.

“One, what your wish is your own private business,” Kyouko said. “Mami heard it, and she typed it into the database, but other than that *no one* except the computers gets to see it. Maybe you don’t care if everyone knows, but don’t go around telling everyone. It’s not how the culture works. You only tell your best friends. People like Mami and me, we’re all exceptions to the rule.”

Ryouko nodded.

“Second, do you have any climactic attacks? Anything loud and flashy? Some sort of finisher?” Kyouko asked.

Ryouko blinked. She thought about it.

“I do,” she said. “But I have no idea what kind of situation would call for it. It doesn’t seem to fit in with anything.”

“Whatever you do,” Kyouko said. “Don’t let Mami give it a name. Just don’t.”

Ryouko tilted her head quizzically.

“But everyone loves Tiro Finale,” she said. “And Rosso Fantasma is pretty popular too.”

“Now imagine everyone expecting you to yell it enthusiastically every time you do it,” Kyouko said.

“Oh,” Ryouko said.

She thought about that.

“It can’t be that bad, can it?”

“Just trust me, okay?” Kyouko said.

Ryouko smiled.

Still though, she could shake the weird foreboding that had settled over her.

Nor could she forget the woman she had seen in the distance, just before she had made her contract.

She had recalled the memory, but it was too faded, and she had been too far, even with ocular implants, for the facial recognition algorithms to obtain a lock. And probably, she had had a good reason to be there, walking away from the area, right after the demon attack. It wouldn’t do to suspect random pedestrians.

Still, it bothered her.

Mami Watches a Movie, Part One

〈*In the following text,* 〈〉① *indicates content redacted to those without security clearance. The number indicates the degree of security clearance required to access enclosed content.*〉

〈Officially, the government will hold the stance that:〉②

1. 〈Soul gems tap into the power of a girl's soul, without directly *being* her soul.〉②
2. 〈Depletion of a soul gem's energy has no effect on a girl's mental state.〉②
3. 〈Any other modifications to the truth that may be required to conform to the above facts.〉②

〈Given the regrettable amount of information that has already been released, it is not anticipated that it will be possible to fully enforce these provisions. Maximal effort towards information control will be exerted towards girls of contracting age and younger. These efforts will be carried out by the appropriate committees, such as the Committee for Truth in Media…〉②

— *Information Restriction Acts,* excerpt.

Despite the intense efforts of numerous investigators, Akemi Homura's early life remains an enigma. It began before the era of ubiquitous record-keeping, and many of the records that did exist were destroyed in the tumultuous Unification eras of the twenty-second and twenty-third centuries, a fact which has long frustrated biographers. With this publication, the author is pleased to announce, based on the recovery of long-lost records, the definitive identification of her childhood home, long believed to be a Catholic convent within Greater Tokyo. The aim of this paper…

— Ishihara Tomoya, *"Definitive Identification of Akemi Homura's Childhood Home,"* Journal of MG History, abstract.

By the time Mami reached the theatre, she had changed her entire appearance.

Most of the disguise was quite trivial. It was simple to ask her hair to drop down into a relaxed conformation—she was extremely thankful she no longer had to do her hair every morning—simple to transform her soulgem into a less standard bracelet, and also simple to dismiss her *personal* transport in a secluded area and instead board a civilian-standard model.

If only she could grab a hooded coat out of a clothing supplier and then be done with it.

Unfortunately, in this age of ubiquitous facial recognition, that simply wouldn't be enough.

Thus, she was obliged to walk into the theatre with a miniature holoemitter stuck to the side of her cheek, one capable of distorting her appearance to that of someone else who lived in the area, someone who vaguely resembled the famous Marshal Mami, but obviously wasn't. Another one stuck to her finger concealed the tell-tale flower fingernail mark.

It was widely known that the government granted exceptions to the regulations against identity disguise, but that didn't make her disguise any less effective. Sure, she wouldn't fool any of the surveillance monitors, but it was more than sufficient to mislead the casual inspection of passerby. And the monitors knew not to attract anyone's attention to her.

She had considered showing up dressed for the occasion, picturing herself stepping out of the nighttime lights into the brightness of the theatre in a stunning dress, and wearing the face of someone *particularly* attractive, but in the end had decided against it. Turning heads in her direction would be risky, even if she had an urge to have people do it for reasons other than "It's Mami-san!"

Besides, other than being puerile by trying to grab attention, what would be the point? She had stayed relationship-free her entire life—a number of years she didn't like to think about—and didn't see it as a good idea to change that anytime soon.

So she showed up in the theatre dressed in the exact same clothes she had worn before, a stylish but nondescript blouse and skirt. Around her, couples and groups chatted, nearly all dressed better than her. She frowned. Ironically, she might attract attention for being too *poorly* dressed.

It would be a chilly night, she thought to herself, checking her chronometer. 18:30.

Once, long ago, that would have forced everyone to show up in jackets and heavier clothing. As a magical girl, she had always been carefully aware of things like that. Once you realized the degree to which it was possible to manipulate your own body, it was startlingly easy to forget yourself and just walk everywhere in the same clothing, mindless of the temperature.

Both Kyouko and Homura came to mind there, though Yuma had always held a mindset more similar to Mami's, until the later years.

Nowadays, though, every ordinary human was capable of ignoring the temperature just as stubbornly, so they no longer had to bother. Still, though, Mami remembered.

She stopped to admire the giant posed holostatues in the main atrium.

In the middle stood the star, Homura with a fierce expression, purple flaming bow drawn and arrow pointed, the display contrived so that no matter where you stood, it was pointing at *you.*

To her right, Kyouko stood, spear drawn and pointed aggressively, crouching in combat posture. In the sort of detail that biographers always missed, Kyouko did *not* have any food in her mouth or with her.

Behind Kyouko, Yuma stood, blunt mace at her feet, looking up wondrously at an imaginary sky. She was portrayed slightly younger than the others, even though that had stopped being accurate rather early.

Above them all, in a cloud of white mist, you could almost make out the form of a girl, embracing them all. It was a nice touch, and entirely appropriate, Mami thought. It was a movie about *Homura's* life, after all, and her Goddess had clearly been real to her, if to no one else.

And, of course, to Homura's left stood Mami herself, musket at attention on her shoulder, two more floating in the air pointed at imaginary targets. She looked regal.

Mami couldn't help but smile a little. Nowadays, computers carefully retouched the actors faces and bodies so that they looked just like the originals, but they could never resist turning up the attractiveness just a little. Personally, Mami couldn't recall either Kyouko or Homura having chests *quite* that large, but she supposed she shouldn't begrudge a little pandering to the audience.

The movie industry definitely kept up with the latest technology, for what it was worth. For instance, given how much easier it was to do nowadays, it was now considered a point of professionalism for actors to become fluent in the language their characters spoke, and audiences were expected to their use their language enhancements to keep up, if that language wasn't their own—though the lazier ones could activate a voice-over if they really wanted. It was a better experience to do it the harder way, however.

She moved on, avoiding the obvious temptation to just stand and stare, especially at herself. It would have been a little suspicious.

She glided past the entrance to the virtual reality version of the movie, even though, as a serving member of the military, it wouldn't have even cost her anything.

She had gotten more than enough of the real thing.

Instead, she stepped into the area for standard holographic viewing, the entrances to the various different rooms arrayed concentrically around a large, circular middle area with yet another concession stand in the middle.

The food was free, but Mami didn't partake, instead stopping to ponder on whether she should go for a private room or try to have a more proletarian experience, as part of a group.

Suddenly, she realized that she was standing directly across from another customer, a woman with short, cropped hair, civilian-standard age twenty-seven or so. She looked similarly indecisive, and they looked at each other. Perhaps Mami would have someone to go with, after all.

Mami opened her mouth to say something—

—when a girl appeared at her side. She appeared nineteen, which meant she really *was* nineteen, since civilians all froze their apparent ages in their late twenties.

"Hey, want to join us, Chito-san?" the girl asked, face friendly. "We have a slot empty in our room, and you look a little lonely, so…"

She addressed her by the name attached to her face, as was polite. It wasn't her fault Mami wasn't wearing the right face.

Mami glanced at the group behind her, who waved. Mami waved back, thinking about how strange it was that magical girls had developed the practice of maintaining the appearance of teenagers and, occasionally, children. Nowadays, it helped them stand out on the battlefield—and made them smaller targets—but its main purpose was as a show of solidarity.

No one else could truly understand them. Never forget that.

Mami glanced back, looking for the woman with the cropped hair, but she was gone.

She probably shouldn't have, but Mami nodded. "Sure—"

Nodame Riko, her nomenclator fed her.

"Nodame-san," she finished.

She walked over to join them.

Privately, she laughed to herself.

I guess I did look a little lonely, didn't I? she thought, mirthful. *And here I am trying to pretend to be nineteen. If Kyouko ever finds out…*

"So did you go to school here, Chito-san?" the girl asked, as they stepped into the doorway.

Mami nodded, even though she had no idea if it was true.

"Funny, I've never seen you. But I guess you could have had a different focus."

The door slid shut behind them, the system acknowledging that the room now had a full quota. They headed for their seats.

Chito Hiroko, huh? Mami thought, committing the name of the person she was impersonating to memory. It wouldn't do to slip up, after all.

Modern holotheatres were rather impressive affairs, straining at the utmost limits of what was possible without directly accessing a person's government-restricted VR implants—which could only be done in the prohibitively-expensive paid VR sections of the theatre. In an effect similar to that which had been done to the Homura statue at the entrance, every seat was given a view from what the director felt to be the optimal perspective, and, in a slight concession by the government, the theatre-owners were allowed to use the VR implants to rotate a person's head for them, and to blink the eyes—this could be refused, but that was only recommended for a second viewing.

Besides that, scents were pumped into the room, sounds were funneled directly into the same intercranial systems used to process voice calls, and the ground itself shook when necessary. Antigravity and gravity generators throughout the walls—a serious luxuy, given how rare antigrav was—changed the direction of gravity as needed relative to the viewer's head.

The line was drawn only at directly shaking or otherwise perturbing the viewer's chair-people didn't seem to like it.

All of that resource usage, and they were still free to attend, stubbornly resistant to the economic trends prevailing elsewhere.

The main lights dimmed to darkness—a completely unnecessary effect that was mostly an homage to the past—and the four walls lit up with images that quickly seeped out into the air itself and solidified, until they became literally everything Mami could see, blocking out the people around her, the walls, her body, and even her nose. She granted the machine permission to access her auditory implants, and immediately her head filled with orchestral music. Seven girls clad in stolas danced around her, giggling, before their images dissolved and reformed in front of her to form… the logo of Seven Muses Technologies.

"Damn it, do they have to do that every time?" some boy to her left complained, invisible. Someone hushed him.

He should be grateful he doesn't have to also deal with twenty minutes of ads, Mami thought drily.

In truth, it was easily possible to also block out the voices of the other members of the audience, but it was deliberately not done. What was the point of a group viewing if you were going to be isolated in a bubble the entire time? The whole point was so you could hear the reactions of those around you, in the form of "ooo's" and "aahs." Extended commentary was usually not appreciated, however.

Despite the boy's complaints, the movie got to the point refreshingly fast, at least from Mami's antiquated perspective, pausing only to let all of them make their choices about whether to allow

the movie to direct what they turned their head to look at. Mami went ahead and agreed. She was content to let the director take her wherever he or she wanted to.

Mami found herself looking at eye-level down a broken-down paved street, of the old asphalt style. It was deserted, and the houses looked run-down.

It was raining, and she could hear raindrops hitting an umbrella above her.

She heard the panting breath of a running woman, heard the taps of footfalls on pavement, and her view shook slightly, advancing down the street. Mami realized that she was *in* the perspective of the running woman.

She looked behind her, seeing only the same road again, then looked down, and saw what the woman was carrying in her arms: A swaddled infant in a basket, sleeping calmly despite the circumstances, thumb in mouth.

The woman looked back up, and seemed to be getting tired—she was definitely slowing down, and the panting was getting heavier—but was approaching her destination, the back door of an impressive-looking stained-glass church, well-maintained and bright compared to the surroundings. On the sign, partly hidden, the name of the city could be barely read: Tokyo.

The woman placed the infant on the back steps, gingerly and slowly, despite the hurry she seemed to be in. She pulled out a water-stained piece of paper, and her hands shook as she wrote the name.

Mami had deduced what was coming, and did her best not to roll her eyes.

“Homura,” it said.

Then, after what seemed to be hesitation, she added in front:

“Akemi.”

Slipping the paper into the basket, the woman looked up at the rain—the room kindly gave Mami’s face a few raindrops to emphasize the point—then looked back down, setting the umbrella carefully against the wall so that it shielded the infant from the rain.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

Finally, the perspective changed, and instead of being the women, she turned her head left to watch the back of the woman as she ran away through the rain, weeping. She had the distinct feeling of lying on her back.

She turned her head to look back up, and saw the umbrella above her, shielding her. Next to her, the wooden door creaked open.

The scene faded to black.

It was a very sentimental scene, Mami decided, but it was almost certainly overly dramatized and definitely fictionalized. Homura had never clearly explained to any of them how her parents had ended up leaving her in the care of a nunnery, and Mami suspected Homura didn’t really know anything about it either. Mami had never even been sure if Homura was really an orphan.

The opening sequence that followed was a typical exercise in stretching the special effects as far as the production crew could manage, taking the audience on a flying ride through pitch darkness, past a series of images dissolving into mist: a soulgem, a demon preparing an attack, Homura

diving out of the sky on white wings, Kyouko and Mami following, Yuma crying on the floor, Homura giving a speech in front of a podium, and finally, Homura, eyes blazing with rage, stooping like a hawk into a clearly-panicking alien armor formation, wings tormented and black.

The movie reviewed Homura's childhood in the orphanage, the strict discipline of the nuns, the religious lessons, the little girl quiet, introverted, and studious, playing with the others, making friends, doing everything normally, but still seeming somehow detached from it all.

This part was probably as accurate as it could get, Mami thought, even though it was all guesswork. Homura had never said anything about her childhood, and for all she knew Homura had been a totally different person before her sickness—but somehow she doubted it.

"I can't describe it," one of the nuns said, shaking her head. "There's something strange about her. Sometimes, I get the feeling that she's waiting for something. Ridiculous, I know, but that's what it looks like to me. The way she looks out the window, sometimes…"

She shook her head again.

"And she prays so fervently," she continued. "Ordinarily, I'd welcome that kind of devotion, but it's disturbing, somehow."

"Can you blame her?" her colleague responded. "Is it wrong, to keep your eyes on heaven? Isn't that what we aspire to? She will make an excellent novice."

Then, one day, while playing a game of tag, her head swam, the world spun, and the ground rose up to meet her.

Later that day, in the hospital, the girl sat with her eyes wide, uncomprehending, as the doctor repeated his words and the nun stood by her side in her habit, struggling to maintain her stoic composure.

Then came the hospital stays, the drugs, the surgical procedures, the girl sedated, or else whimpering in pain. The nuns shook their heads at each other and began to openly whisper that, perhaps, she wasn't truly meant for this world after all.

The girl grew older, and lost her faith, hurling away her leather bible when one of the nuns tried to pray with her, weeping so inconsolably in her hospital bed that the nun was asked to leave, and the hospital counselor called in.

Finally, miraculously, one final operation, and the girl was pronounced fit to be discharged, still alive after all. She was old enough now to leave the orphanage, and when her caretakers arrived to beg their former sure recruit to stay and attend the Catholic school, she refused, head bowed but inflexible. They conferred, shook their heads sadly, and told her that they would arrange an apartment for her and bring her the forms for a new school, that she would find money in an account every month, and that they hoped that she would find it in her heart to forgive God.

The day of the discharge approached, and the girl prepared herself solemnly, telling herself that it would be the start of a new life. No more waiting.

Mami sipped at a cup of iced tea she had had surreptitiously delivered. She wondered if the Catholic Church had somehow insinuated itself into the production committee. It was a lovely story, and for all Mami knew, it was even true, but it seemed a little overly friendly to the church. Besides, Mami thought, was that even how Church orphanages had operated? There were a few troubling points.

For what it was worth, though, Homura had never brought up her Catholic upbringing, other than

to matter-of-factly mention that she used to attend a Catholic school. Only additional questioning had uncovered the orphanage angle, and not even Kyouko had dared to ask what Homura thought about the faith.

Homura entered her new school, and found that her hopes had been too optimistic. After so much time alone, she was too nervous to respond to the friendly advances of her classmates, and the health officer, a cold and arrogant girl, wasn't much help. She couldn't do any of the math problems on the board, couldn't keep up in PE—an anachronism to the viewers of this future age—couldn't do anything right, in short, or so she thought.

Now, finally, the movie reached a timeframe whose accuracy Mami could actually evaluate. Thankfully, they hadn't done much to butcher it—they managed to get Homura's glasses and pigtails exactly right, among other things—except to make things a little more dramatic than they actually had been, and to fill in details Mami hadn't been there to personally see.

And Mami had been there to see, indeed. It was surreal, and slightly disturbing, to view her first appearance in the movie, a memory she had replayed in her own mind countless times, one that had stuck in her mind despite everything that had happened since then.

"So that's her, huh?" the holographic Kyouko said, appearing dramatically out of a shadow, wearing the uniform of the school. The viewer was obliged to watch her back, the shadow of a support column cutting diagonally between her shoulders. The girl looked out of a window overlooking the schoolyard.

"Yes," the virtual Mami said, suddenly appearing in front of the real Mami, having walked through the viewer's point of perspective. She leaned on a railing.

Kyubey says she has unheard-of potential, the girl thought, the director focusing on Mami's face to show her unmoving lips, a time-honored method of implying telepathy.

"She doesn't look like much, honestly," Kyouko said, tossing her hair with a flick of her hand.

"Appearances don't necessarily mean anything, Sakura-san," the other girl said. "You know that."

"Should we be really letting this happen?" Kyouko said. "I feel sorry for her already."

Maybe we should tell Kyubey to back off.

"He would never listen, Sakura-san," Mami said, looking at Kyouko with one eye. "As if he would follow our wishes for something like that."

Kyouko leaned back against the support column.

"I know," she said, sounding peeved. "I just wanted to say it."

"Besides," Mami said. "We need a third. It would make our lives easier, and she looks like a nice girl."

It's not just the demons. It would also help convince the southern group to stop infringing on our territory.

"How stupid it all is," Kyouko spat. "*Why* couldn't we just work together? There's nothing stopping us except pettiness."

Watching a movie about herself was proving surprisingly awkward. They had done quite well. The moment was adequately recreated, despite the differing details: the overly-busty Kyouko, the

support column and shadows in a school Mami had *told* them was all glass and light.

The holographic Mami smiled slightly, and Mami shivered at the memory.

That was eerie. The real Mami had done the exact same thing, and it wasn't a detail she had thought worthy of sharing with the scriptwriters.

At the time, she had been thinking to herself about how glad she was that Kyouko had abandoned the outrageous attitude she had adopted after the "incident" with her family. It had taken her so, so long to coax Kyouko back into working together, and even—after another "incident" with the southern group—to move in and join the school. Kyouko was finally started to bury the wound, Mami had realized.

If only she could truly heal it, Mami thought. *If only she hadn't aggravated it even more.*

"Well, that's just how it is," the holographic Mami said. "Maybe we can change it someday."

Kyouko looked down, and the viewer, looking at the back of her head, could see that she was looking at Homura, panting exhausted in the shade of a tree.

"Maybe," she said.

"Let's go back to class," Mami said. "They'll be wondering where we went."

As a point of fact, Mami had spotted Homura while going to the bathroom, and telepathically called Kyouko out from a different class entirely, but she didn't expect the movie to explain something so minor.

Kyouko nodded, and they walked back into the shadows.

That day, going home alone over a bridge, the fictional Homura fell into a deep depression.

I can't do anything right, she thought, head bowed. *I'm useless!*

Why? Why did it have to be me? Why did I have to have this heart problem? Why does anyone? What kind of world is this?

"Why am I alive anyway?" she demanded, screaming up at the sky. "If I'm just going to occupy space uselessly, than I might as well just die!"

And then she saw it, silent as a ghost, approaching the edge of the bridge.

"What—who are you?" she asked, quietly this time, the audience now sharing her perspective, looking up at the giant.

The demon said nothing, several companions materializing at its sides.

Homura stood her ground nervously, obviously unsure whether she should be welcoming them or running away.

The audience, of course, knew, and Mami could hear several of her young companions yelling variations of "Run!" and "Get out of there!."

The demons grew closer and Homura began to shake in fear, an event shared by the audience.

Finally, the three of them reared up their heads, light gathering at their apices, and Homura finally

lost her nerve, turning to flee.

She recoiled just in time at another demon that had appeared behind her.

And then a beam struck her, and everything turned to white, almost blinding to behold. Her ears rang, and the audience's auditory cortices rang in sympathy.

Mami leaned forward in anticipation, despite the situation. This was the moment where she would show up heroically…

It didn't happen.

Instead, a vaguely-defined white form, a little girl, appeared in front of her, all mist, embracing her, and therefore Homura. It was strangely beautiful—the special-effects people knew how to do their jobs.

The audience perspective returned to third person, in that white world.

Homura stood there, eyes wide.

"I'm sorry I can't protect your world," the girl said, voice airy. "It's not something I can do. But I promise you I'll make it up to you someday. You asked what the purpose of your life is. You are my apostle, here to defend the world in my stead. Please. I sacrificed myself for this world. Protect it. Please."

The mist began to dissipate rapidly, and by the time Homura managed to shout out:

"Wait! Who are you?"

—she was already gone.

Suddenly, the world was thrown into chaos, Homura—and the audience—finding herself on the floor, looking up at an incomprehensible scene.

Explosions, demons falling apart left and right, archaic muskets floating and firing in midair, and in the middle of the chaos, two strange apparitions, clad respectively in red and yellow, moving so fast they were blurs—or they were supposed to be, but Mami's eyes could follow them—dancing through the chaos, tending to it, tearing the demons apart.

It was spectacular, but still not as spectacular as the real thing, to Mami's trained eye.

Still, though, she was enthralled, and when the virtual Mami yelled "Tiro Finale!," summoning her signature giant musket to blast away the last formation of demons, it took a disturbing percentage of Mami's willpower not to shout it too.

Though she probably could have gotten away with it, given how many of the others did exactly that, especially the males.

Magical girl movies were the guilty pleasure of that demographic, since it was almost like an action movie. Almost: you wouldn't catch most of them dead going to one alone.

Finally, the scene nearly over, Mami could think about what she had just seen.

Despite her constant vague allusions and complaints, Homura had always been reticent about giving any details about why she believed in her Goddess. As she had put it:

"If you're not going to believe anything I say, why would I embarrass myself explaining the

details?"

Mami didn't mind the writers inventing something plausible for this movie, though. They had to put *something,* after all.

Oh, but it was just now getting to the good part.

Mami had mentally tuned out the part where she and Kyouko explained the system to Homura, and where Kyubey appeared to explain that Homura, too, had potential. She had heard it too many times before to want to hear it again.

Now that the audience perspective was shifted again, it was clear that, somehow, Homura's hair had unbraided itself during the previous encounter with the "Goddess." In actuality, Homura had never explained why she changed hairstyles, and they had never asked. Kyouko and Mami had both agreed, privately, that it was a great improvement.

The Homura she saw here hadn't even noticed yet.

Do you have a wish prepared, then? Kyubey asked, making his debut appearance.

The girl swallowed, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her nose nervously.

What am I waiting for? she thought, the audience privy to her thoughts. *I had a vision, and if that wasn't a sign, what is? Wasn't I demanding to know what the purpose of my life is? I have it now.*

"I wish to defend this world," she said, at first quiet but voice rising. "I wish to protect this world which God has abandoned, and defend it against everything that threatens it!"

Mami started in her chair.

Mami and Kyouko had stubbornly kept Homura's wish secret all these years, and the movie was no exception. They had insisted to the writers that they make up a wish, because they certainly weren't telling.

The writers had guessed essentially right.

It had been an audacious wish, as she had realized when she first heard Homura make it. Homura was the only girl she knew who had made a wish like that.

It was one of the reasons why Mami and Kyouko had never believed that she was truly gone. Her wish wouldn't permit it.

Mami was surprised, even though she shouldn't have been, when a soul gem ring appeared magically on Homura's hand, the audience looking down on it carefully, using Homura's eyes.

"But that's not—" she began, biting her tongue just in time.

Right. The censorship. She had forgotten.

"Is something wrong, Chito-san?" the girl next to her asked, face invisible. The proximity of her voice implied she had turned her head to look at Mami, even though there was nothing to see. The theatre didn't paralyze your neck muscles—it couldn't, in fact. That would be silly and uncomfortable. It only moved your head when necessary. Audiences nowadays were used to mostly not moving on their own, though.

"No," Mami said, not turning her head. "It's fine. I was just, uh, confused by something."

The ring turned into a glowing gem in the palm of Homura's hand, crested by the four-pointed star that was Homura's insignia.

"This gem draws on the power of your soul to grant you magical powers," Kyubey said. "I will warn you now, though, you have to be careful not overuse it, though, or the strain might kill you. I'll let the other two here explain about grief cubes."

Bullshit, Mami thought, then cringed at her own language.

While the Incubators were slippery and masters at being deliberately misleading, they never misled girls on something like that. They were always quite clear: the gem *is* your soul. And it wasn't "might kill you," it was "*would* kill you."

Of course, the censorship on the movie would never allow the truth through. Within the movie, this fake Kyubey's explanation of the situation would be entirely true.

Mami really tired of the propaganda sometimes.

Settle down, Tomoe-san, she thought. *It's just entertainment. No need to get worked up.*

She had to work hard to keep that in mind over the next few scenes, as the producers recreated Homura's first few demon battles, creating a spectacle that was completely unrecognizable. For instance, Homura hadn't been quite *that* bad with her powers initially, and she certainly had never gotten airsickness while trying to fly. Also, while the movie made a big deal of Homura discovering her most valuable power, the real Homura had known what hers was right off the bat. Finally, their school had never come under attack, yet here was a scene with the three of them dramatically slaughtering demons while working to make sure the miasma prevented them from being noticed.

It wasn't their fault, she had to remind herself. It wasn't a detail they had gotten much into, so the writers were just creating what they felt was appropriate.

However, this heart-warming scene with the holographic Mami confessing how lonely she was and how much she missed her family—that was just downright uncomfortable. She was glad no one around her could see her face.

Everyone knew *her* wish, of course, since it had become common knowledge long before it had become tradition to keep it a secret from everyone but friends, and Mami had never seen a reason to keep it that private.

Mami mused briefly on Homura's aura, the power which they had been constantly grateful to have. Simply put, Homura could grant everyone around her a slower rate of soul gem corruption. It was one of Mami's own traits written large, and the combination of the two had enabled her to gleefully summon muskets with nary a thought to power consumption. It had also been a tremendous help against the southern group.

An audacious power in exchange for an audacious wish, she supposed.

Finally, Sayaka appeared, a fourth recruit for the team, and this time the appearance was… off. All they had to go off of, after all, was a copy of a picture Kyouko still had for some reason, and some fuzzy memory reconstructions. It hadn't quite worked out.

The movie breezed through the story of her life, partly because it wasn't too relevant, partly because neither Mami nor Kyouko had actually known too much of what was going on. She had been in love with a boy, and it was at one of his auditions where her life had ended, overexerting herself against the demons. That was all they really knew, though Kyouko said she could tell

something had happened, in those last few weeks.

This version of Kyouko didn't show any unusual interest in the girl, since that was one of those details that there was no need to mention.

At the end of the sequence, Sayaka's body dissolved into thin air.

They're pushing the censorship, Mami thought. *But… technically it is fine.*

Then "it" happened.

The audience was shifted into Homura's point of view.

She saw Sayaka's soul appearing from where her body had been, smiling back at her. Around her, Mami and Kyouko were frozen, as was the dissolving miasma. The world was fuzzy, as if shrouded.

Homura raised her hand towards Sayaka, and then the white-misted girl appeared behind Sayaka. Homura gasped.

The girl took Sayaka's hand, they nodded to each other, and their former fourth recruit disappeared into the mist.

"I did as you asked," Homura managed, finally.

The girl turned, and started floating towards Homura.

"You're a goddess, aren't you?" Homura said. "Answer me!"

"I'm glad you did," the apparition said, approaching closer. "I can't make up for your sacrifice today, but I can give you a gift. I can return your memories."

Homura blinked.

"What are you—"

The girl touched her hand to Homura's forehead.

The audience was treated then to an exploding kaleidoscope of scenery, randomly shifting images of Homura running, eating, laughing, clearly from another life, but vague enough so as not to give away what exactly she had been doing—since Homura flatly refused to discuss what she claimed to remember doing in her past life.

And then, they found themselves looking down at Homura's hand, and a red ribbon that had appeared there. Mami was in the middle of talking about the "law of cycles."

Homura broke down crying, and the others turned to look at her.

"My goddess," she lamented.

And the screen faded to black.

Of course, once again, the writers were more or less making things up, since Mami and Kyouko, their two primary sources of information, didn't know what exactly had happened to Homura that day, except that that had been the day when her personality had shifted markedly, and she had started talking about a Goddess, and alluding to a previous life and… well, generally acting like she was crazy. But again, the movie was about her, not Mami.

When the next scene began, Mami nodded to herself.

The focus was now on a young teenager, younger than any of the other girls, stepping off a bus in the middle of an empty intersection, looking bewildered and lost. She clutched a slip of paper, on which there appeared to be directions.

Yuma.

The girl swallowed, and walked down the street, approaching a building that was supposed to be Mami's old housing complex—they had actually gotten the look entirely wrong, but nevermind that.

"What are you doing here?" Kyouko's voice demanded, as the girl tried to walk up the stairs.

Yuma recoiled.

Her costume brilliantly red, the spearman flipped in the air and landed in front of the cowering teenager, brandishing her spear in her face.

"You should know better than to intrude on our territory," Mami's voice rang out, the yellow-costumed girl appearing behind Yuma. "Is this some sort of challenge?"

"I'm tired of the games," Kyouko said, thrusting the spear forward and forcing Yuma down the steps. "Tell your master to stop sending little girls out to mess with us!"

Homura appeared behind Kyouko.

"What's going on?" she asked. "What is she doing here?"

"She's a member of that southern group we were telling you about," Kyouko growled. "The ones who attacked us during a demon hunt."

"No, please!" Yuma pleaded, actually falling onto her knees on the steps. "I had nothing to do with that! I was the youngest member! I had no say!"

She placed her hands to her face and began sobbing openly.

"They're all dead!" she said, chest heaving and forcing out sentences between breaths. "I have nowhere to go. I can't survive on my own. You're the only other girls I know! I don't even have anywhere to live anymore!"

Kyouko backed off, moving her spear to her side. Her expression became, suddenly, markedly more sympathetic.

"You have to admit," Mami said, appearing from inside the apartment. "She did always look a little reluctant. And she's so young…"

"You better not be lying," Kyouko said.

"I'm not!" Yuma asserted, tear-stained face looking up pleadingly.

"I think we should give her a chance," Homura said, tilting her head and letting her long hair fall.

"I'm not sure about this," Kyouko said. "I can't just accept a former enemy so quickly."

"I have a suggestion," Mami said.

They turned to look at her. She was holding out her hand. From the way the camera kept switching between Mami, Kyouko, and Homura, it was clear they were using telepathy, but this time the audience was denied entry into their thoughts.

“What is your name?” Mami asked, finally.

“Chi—Chitose Yuma.”

“Chitose-san, give me your soul gem.”

The girl recoiled, instinctively the ring on her hand.

“Why? I’d never give up my magic!”

Mami rolled her eyes. Sure, she would be giving up her magic… and something else that was rather important. Censorship…

“As a guarantee,” Mami said. “If what you said is true, then we will probably have to expand our territory to include what is formerly yours. I propose we scout it now, and if you are telling the truth, we won’t be attacked. I will hold on to your soul gem as a guarantee, and give it back afterwards.”

Yuma shook her head.

Mami’s face softened.

“Please,” she said. “You want us to trust you, and take you in. Trust me too, then. I don’t want to doubt you, but we need proof you aren’t lying. Too much has happened in the past.”

Yuma looked around, bewildered, but they only met her with determined, if sympathetic faces—mostly sympathetic, in Homura’s case.

Finally, the girl nodded, slipping off her ring and offering it to Mami, and they departed.

Mami nodded again—but not in approval at the scene’s accuracy. The scene was flagrantly fictional, and had never even come close to happening. This time, it wasn’t because the writers didn’t know, or because they were dramatizing, or because of censorship—it was because Kyouko, Mami, and Yuma had all lied through their teeth.

She nodded because the lie had been perpetuated.

If anything, what had really happened to Yuma was *more* dramatic, but the less spoken about that, the better.

A few scenes later, the film performed a timeskip, the words “Ten Years Later” blazing themselves in front of her eyes.

The scene now was Mami’s apartment, again, but different. The room obviously belonged to the same owner, but the furniture was in different places, and the location of the doors changed. It was, Mami knew, the filmmakers’ way of hinting what she knew—that a few years after high school graduation, they had all been obliged to move.

It had been a combination of reasons. Partly, it was prompted by the sense that the neighbors were starting to get too suspicious of Mami-san and her strange friends, who had graduated school but showed no signs of a job, or boyfriends, or college—too suspicious of the girls who came and

went at all times of day, and who appeared not to have any family.

The last straw had really been when their next door neighbor, a kind, matronly lady, had emerged onto the balcony late one night and found, on the other balcony, Mami carrying Kyouko in her arms, the girl bleeding heavily out of an abdominal wound, barely staunched by ribbons.

It had been terrible timing—Mami had just landed a jump from the ceiling and Yuma had been with Homura in another part of the city, and had only just then got back—but there was nothing that could be done, and it was more important to get Kyouko healed than to try to talk to the woman next door.

Mami still remembered the wide-eyed look on the woman's face when Mami told her to "Tell *no one*" as she carried Kyouko in.

But of course, she told someone, even when Mami went next door and implored her to cancel the emergency call, and the paramedics and police arrived just in time to find Kyouko asleep with Yuma fussing over her, but with no obvious wounds, and to find Mami and Homura in the middle of trying to remove blood stains from the floor—because none of them had any magical skills particularly useful for cleaning.

They were able to come up with some terribly implausible explanation for the police inquiry—that actually worked, somehow—but it was obviously time to go.

Posing as her own mother, Homura rented a new room elsewhere in the city, and they spent two weeks carrying all of their possessions to the new location—the furniture flown over in the dead of night by Homura. They kept themselves shut in as much as possible, so that hopefully no one would notice that they seemed to be getting progressively younger.

Finally, one day, they left, suddenly and abruptly, leaving behind as little of a trail as they could manage without outright changing identities or leaving their territory. They arrived at their new location teenagers again, to throw off anyone who might recognize them, and so that they could exploit the sympathies of their neighbors.

There was a lot to be nostalgic about, but Mami didn't miss the way they had to constantly fight to maintain secrecy.

But there was another reason they had needed to move, and this was implied by the threadbare furniture, the somewhat lower-quality tea being served, and the smaller room they sat in.

Frankly put, it was money. None of them had a source—the Church had stopped supporting Homura at twenty, and Mami's family funds, though substantial, were starting to strain to support all four of them. They took part-time jobs at grocery stores and the like, but they were becoming deplorably reliant on Kyouko's regular ATM robberies. It simply wasn't possible to take a steadier job—not with the constant need to leave to fight demons, the irregular sleep schedules, the inconsistent ages…

Which, conveniently, was the current topic of conversation.

"To wrap this up," Homura began, addressing the audience of girls. "I'd like to talk about a topic we haven't yet covered, just to introduce the idea. We all see the benefits of cooperation, and we agreed yesterday on the details of how it would work, but there's another enticing possibility we have yet to go over that I want to cover."

It was a special weekend. The Mitakihara Four were hosting representatives from five magical girl groups, representing outlying regions of the city and the suburbs. This planning meeting was the

culmination of nearly a decade of conciliatory gestures, tentative friendship meetings, and joint fights against demon concentrations.

Without the southern group jamming up the works, the area had become a much friendlier place.

The five girls, a hodgepodge of apparent ages, clothing choices, and hairstyles—one even still wearing glasses—watched with interest, seated with the other three on the cramped floor around a coffee table, looking up at the wall. They held plates with chocolate cake and crackers, as well as cups full of tea. Homura was gesturing at a presentation shone onto the surface by a brand-new holoprojector. From a perch on a nearby counter, Kyubey watched passively, implicitly blessing the proceedings; he had already done so explicitly earlier.

"Money, that is," Homura said, making a hand gesture. The wall shifted to show a wide variety of denominations of Yen. One of the girls laughed half-heartedly.

"Money?" another repeated, the one with the long hair to her waist.

Yasuhiro, Mami mentally named.

"Yes," Homura said, pacing, hair undulating back and forth. "If we had more of it, then I wouldn't have had to steal this projector, and we could be dining on tiramisu instead of whatever the heck this is. Let's face it, we're all in pretty dire straits, aren't we?"

She looked around the room, and the new girls all nodded. It was a fact of life, unless you were lucky enough to have an heiress on your team.

Homura changed slides and continued talking. This slide listed the reasons why a magical girl can't get a job, with accompanying humorous illustrations.

"The primary thing stopping us from getting real jobs is the constant emergencies we can't explain to anyone," Homura said, stretching out her hand to point at the slide. "It's one thing ditching school—it's another ditching a job. Even something as stupid as newspaper delivery—miss just one day and they throw you out. I know the University Area Group—"

She nodded at the girl with glasses, Kuroi, who was their representative.

—runs their own food stand, but don't the customers get tired of the unreliability? You show up wanting food, and one day out of four, no one is even there!"

"Yes, they complain about it all the time," the girl said. "They only show up because it's so cheap we hardly make any money out of it."

"You have the right idea," Homura said, leaning forward. "With no boss, you can run to your own schedule, but the customers still expect you to be there when needed. With just three girls and demons to fight, it's just not possible to keep it up."

"But with the new cooperation plan, we can, is that where you're going with this?" said the girl with spiked hair, Tanaka.

"Exactly," Homura said, pointing. "With the efficiencies we could extract, it should always be possible to have at least one girl minding the counter, so to speak. And I have a better idea than a snack stand, one that takes advantage of our unique skills."

She changed slides, and the new slide said "Mitakihara Delivery Service" at the top.

"In the course of our patrols, we're constantly running around the city anyway," Homura said.

“We can get around the city faster than anyone, and we know all the nooks and crannies. It should be more than possible to set up a phone number hotline and make money delivering packages. We could do it faster than anyone. We might even throw in errand-running while we’re at it.”

The girls looked at her dubiously, including her three comrades, who hadn’t heard this particular scheme before.

Hastily, Homura waved and changed slides. This time it was a slide with financial figures.

“Anyway,” she said. “I ran some numbers—”

“Akemi-san, is this really the time to bring this up?” Mami said. “I mean, these girls traveled all this way to discuss an alliance, and you’re talking about founding a business.”

It was true. The slide even mentioned tax benefits.

That always was one of Homura’s cute points, the *real* Mami thought. *Her strange obsession with things like this. They’ve captured it well.*

“Look, I know it’s a bit far-fetched,” Homura said, pouting slightly. “But I really think it could work.”

She toyed with the ribbon on her head, a nervous habit of hers.

“Well, I think it’s a good idea,” Kuroi said brashly. “And let’s face it. We could all use money.”

They turned to look at her. A few nodded thoughtfully.

“And just look what kind of money we’re talking about!” another girl, also with long hair, ventured. “If those numbers are right, I could finally buy myself that purse I’ve always wanted.”

It is a logically sound idea, Kyubey thought, standing up, asserting its presence for the first time, causing some of those present to startle slightly. *Though success would depend on the implementation. We are intrigued at the concept.*

They stared at it for a moment, before Homura cleared her throat to regain their attention.

“Anyway,” Homura said, changing slides, looking both vindicated and embarrassed. “It’s just a suggestion to illustrate the point. The point is, by working together, we can start thinking of ways to do things like this, and stop having to steal just to feed ourselves. If we can put together a working money-making scheme, we can get ourselves metaphorically off the streets.”

“It doesn’t have to be this idea,” she said, leaning forward again. “It can be anything. Think about it. We have all sorts of new possibilities. Anything, so we can stop robbing ATMs. Thank you.”

Homura waved her hand, and the slideshow ended in a black screen.

She moved to sit down.

Kyouko got up to her feet and took her spot, looking at the others

“Look, I’m tired of having to work alone, quibbling with everyone about territory and stupid things like that,” Kyouko said. “It’s high time we worked together for a change. Maybe then we can have some free time, or buy ourselves some damn purses if we want! Nevermind Homura’s crazy schemes; we’ve blown two days talking about this! It’s almost time for you to be heading home, so this is it: are you in or are you out?”

The girls looked at each other.

“I’m in,” Kuroi said. “Was there any doubt? I’m amazed how well we got it to work. I’ll sign, and I think my group would agree.”

“I second that,” Yasuhiro said.

“If we weren’t interested, I wouldn’t have come,” Tanaka said.

The remaining two also chimed their agreement.

“In that case,” Homura began, grabbing several sheets of paper from on top of the TV, “let’s get this done. We agreed we wanted everything signed and in writing, so I went ahead and printed out everything from yesterday.”

She placed them on the coffee table in front of them

“I still say this isn’t necessary,” Tanaka commented, elbow on knee. “Why are we insisting on this silly formality?”

“Look,” Kuroi said. “This way, no one can pretend they didn’t know any of the details. We’ve been over this. And besides, Kyubey thinks it’s a good idea.”

“What a bland name,” the girl with cropped hair, Takara, said, thumbing through the documents. “*Mahou Shoujo Youkai.* I still can’t believe we didn’t think of anything cooler.”

“It’s functional,” Homura said, shrugging.

She pointed down at one of the pages.

“Anyway, sign here, and I’ll go make copies for all of us. Then we can exchange contact information. We can meet next weekend to plan patrol schedules and decide how to exchange grief cubes.”

“I’ll go get us all some more tea,” Mami offered, lifting the teapot from the table.

The girls grabbed pens and signed on the indicated line.

It’s amazing every time I think about it, Mami thought. *We really didn’t have a clue what we were doing.*

That stack of papers, with signatures at the end, now had its own airtight display case in the *MSY* main administration building, located in—where else?—Mitakihara City.

And the Mitakihara Delivery Service? Renamed the *D&E Corporation,* it would become among the most valuable of the *MSY* corporations, before the economic restructuring dissolved it. It was hard to compete with a company that secretly used teleporters to expedite their deliveries.

Mami leaned back, chewing on some chocolates she had had delivered, watching the montage being displayed. It highlighted the growth of the *MSY* from a simple cooperation agreement in Mitakihara City, to a formal organization spanning the entire prefecture, to an umbrella organization spanning all of Japan, to one with branches extending through both sides of the Pacific, to, finally, one that encompassed nearly every magical girl alive.

There, at every step of the way, was the now *First Executive* Homura, shaking hands, giving speeches, chairing meetings, providing the ideas and organizational brilliance necessary to raise

the *MSY* out of the mud. And next to her, nearly all the time, were the strangely charismatic Kyouko, the diplomatic Mami, and the—as it turned out—scheming and manipulative Yuma.

It was a shame that the writers had chosen to skim over this part of history. They were skipping over some of the most interesting stories—not to mention hundreds of years of time.

Mami understood why they did, though. Firstly, it would be an extended exercise in politics and conspiracy, extending the running time of the movie by *hours,* and their target audience was here to see drama and explosions. Secondly, a good deal, maybe most, of the best material was sensitive, and all three of them—Mami, Kyouko, and Yuma—had essentially refused to say anything about their more interesting exploits. They had given them nothing to work with.

So it was pretty much their fault. It was still a shame, though. Maybe someday it would be safe to talk about.

The climax of the movie was approaching.

It began with stock footage familiar to every currently living human. Footage from twenty years ago, Aurora colony, the first Human world to be attacked.

The confused first reports appearing on the interstellar internet: ships in orbit, shooting stars in the sky, no response to transmissions.

The breathless reporters, addressing viewers at home.

The first explosions, the panic, the screams of civilians whose Emergency Packages had not at the time included combat routines.

The surveillance camera footage of an endless sky of alien drones, and of the horrible cephalopodan aliens, wielding laser weapons with the four prehensile upper limbs of their armored suits, like something out of a distorted Lovecraftian nightmare.

And all of them firing indiscriminately, destroying everything in sight, killing everything in sight, in an ostentatious, genocidal display of power that was all the more horrifying in the knowledge that they *didn't have to.* They could have just wiped the surface from orbit. It would have been easy too, with a brand-new colony like Aurora.

Iconic images, all of it, gathered from chaotic transmissions and charred ruins left behind by the aliens.

A child, crying in front of her robotic teddy bear, the kind with a built-in camera, next to the bodies of her parents, before an alien drone appeared to end her life.

The students of the local college, recording last messages for whatever relatives they had off-world before charging to their deaths, wielding nothing but reprogrammed vehicles and drones, hastily manufactured small arms, the emptied contents of research labs, and the courage of the dead.

The moribund military ships, arriving in orbit, trying to organize an evacuation—and every single one of them blown into a thousand, orbiting fragments.

In the end, there were no survivors, not one, not even among the resident magical girls.

The second time was not too much better.

When the aliens arrived around the brand new colony world of Atlas, they found that the Human worlds had started to rouse their economies for war. They found orbital defense platforms, city defense systems, merchant ships sporting antimatter weapons, a small infantry garrison, and a civilian population with newly installed combat routines and synthesizers reprogrammed to produce weaponry if necessary.

All of it in only a week, possible with the miracle of modern nanoassembly and direct-to-cortex learning routines.

It didn't really matter.

The platforms and ships dented the arriving fleet only slightly, and while the infantry and population fought valiantly this time, it took only days to overrun the colony, and the aliens still refrained from any orbital bombardments.

This time though, they seemed to choose their targets more carefully—but their logic still defied understanding. They would expend surprising effort to eliminate an infant, then ignore the adults in the vicinity. Or they would kill three people in a group of four, and ignore the fourth even if the fourth happened to be firing in their direction. It followed no pattern anyone could discern.

There were many survivors this time, and, strangely, evacuation ships were simply allowed through.

That proved to be a mistake.

Finally leaving the realm of stock footage, the movie focused on a single girl, packed in the cargo hold of a refugee ship, literally knocking elbows with five other people. The refugees were desperate and frightened, many clutching crying children, some in prayer, despondent at the seemingly inevitable prospect of being eviscerated by alien spacecraft.

That girl clutched a ring on one of her fingers.

A soul gem.

Mami leaned forward as the scene transitioned, the words *"Mahou Shoujo Youkai*: *Emergency Full Session"* appearing and disappearing in front of her.

Then she let out a groan.

Of course they would skip it, she thought.

The holography now seated her in the middle of a vast, virtual amphitheatre, packed to the brim with the avatars of magical girls.

It was one of those technology tricks, since actually all of them had, in their own view, the best possible seat, and the theatre in reality couldn't possibly have fit all of them. It was virtual reality, *MSY* technicians having long-since circumvented *that* particular restriction for its members.

In front of them, on the stage, standing at the podium, emblazoned with the logo of the *MSY*—a shooting star, rising up into the sky—Akemi Homura was preparing to address them.

It was perfectly dramatic, and skipped nearly everything that was important. What had happened *first* was that the Leadership Committee had debated the issues around a virtual table, with the membership in quiet observation, and anyone wishing to speak materializing in front of them. Then the Committee had voted to submit the extraordinary measure for general approval, and it had passed with ninety-six percent approval. *Then* Homura had given a speech.

That kind of democratic system was a pride of the *MSY,* and Mami, along with the others, had repeated numerous times to the writers that, this once, the politics should be shown. They had even handed over an exact transcript of the meeting!

And the screenwriters had skipped to the end anyway.

Mami sat back into her chair. Well, at least it was a *good* speech.

"Fellow magical girls!" the girl on stage began, arm raised.

"I don't need to explain why we are all here. We have all read reports, seen the videos, heard the sorrow. I don't need to tell you about the five million who died on Aurora, or the six million who died on Atlas. Some of us—"

She nodded at a girl in the audience and, briefly, everyone had a focused view of who she was nodding at, a teary-eyed girl from Zambia.

"Some of us had family on those planets. Some of us had friends. Five hundred of us personally *died* on those worlds. These aliens—"

Here she banged the podium with her fist.

"These aliens think they can show up and *massacre* innocents, and laugh and taunt us while they do it! They think they can kill us with impunity, for the Goddess only knows whatever sick reasons they have."

Here she paused, head bowed briefly.

"And why not? You've seen the intelligence reports. Earth's military is a laughingstock, compared to them. We use railguns and use lasers only when we can spare the power, while *they* fire freely. *Their* armor has personal force fields, which we don't even *understand.* Their drones are smarter than ours, their stealth better, their armor stronger, their ships faster. And on top of all of that, we can't mobilize soldiers fast enough to match their numbers. If we let our pathetic military defend us, how long until the aliens come to *your world*? How long until they come to *Earth*?"

She stopped, allowing the audience to roar its disapproval. The oratory was enchanting and, Mami noted, this was not an exaggeration. Sometime over the centuries Homura had gotten exceptionally good at her speeches.

Homura spread out her arms in an embracing gesture.

"We have voted," she said. "And the Incubators have approved it. We will not stand for this, even if it means sacrificing the comfortable lives we have known for so long, and the secrecy which has been our shield. We will defend ourselves, and the innocents we devote our lives to protect, and we know where to do it."

She paused again.

"Epsilon Eridani," she said. "In one week."

She nodded at the audience, and this time the focus was on the girl who had been on the refugee ship.

Amelia Giovanni, Mami noted silently.

"We were lucky that one of our mind-readers was able to discern this information," Homura

continued. “We know Epsilon Eridani is the next system being targetted, that New Athens is the next world targeted. And now the military knows too; our spies have planted it in their simulations. Perhaps the aliens wish to intimidate us, by attacking so close to Earth. Well, it won’t work!”

She flung her arm out dramatically, the anger showing on her face.

“We will go to New Athens, and we will paralyze this invasion of theirs in its track. We will swarm them on the ground, in the skies, and in space. They think they know *war*—but they don’t know war like we do! *We will seek vengeance until the blood of their soldiers stains the stars themselves!*”

This time, the roar of the crowd was overpowering, washing over Mami like a tidal wave. She wasn’t sure, but she thought she could hear some of her companion audience members cheering along as well.

When it finally died down, Homura continued.

“New Athens has a population of one hundred million. It is the largest world they have yet dared attack. Our projections based on past behavior indicate that the invasion force will number about one million ground troops and about two hundred of their ships. We won’t rely on the Human military to provide anything too meaningful.”

“As mentioned, I will go there personally, along with anyone who wishes to go. The *MSY* will charter every ship possible, secrecy be damned, and carry as many volunteers there as possible. Girls from the orbital colonies and space stations, those with space combat experience, will be prioritized, due to their rarity. If you still have close family, you will not be allowed to go.”

Her voice grew somber.

“Our projections indicate we will end up being able to send about one hundred thousand. That’s a ten to one ratio. I know we fight the demons twenty-five-to-one, but this will be different. I wish we could send more. We are taking a risk. One hundred thousand is roughly six percent of our member count. I don’t want anyone going who doesn’t understand the risks involved.”

“You can count on us!” someone in the audience shouted.

“Definitely!” someone else repeated.

The affirmations grew slowly in volume, until they grew nearly as loud as the cheering before.

“Of course I can,” Homura said, looking up.

She nodded.

“Then let’s do this,” she said.

The world faded to black in a wave of applause.

Mami Watches a Movie, Part Two

They came down from the sky onto an unsuspecting humanity, no longer used to war.

They massacred millions for incomprehensible goals, cthuloid monstrosities striking fear and panic throughout the colony worlds, and even on Earth itself.

Aurora Colony, Atlas Colony, wiped off the face of the map, and the human military seemed helpless to stop them. Even fully mobilized, the technological disparity would have been too great.

Seeing the writing on the wall, Earth Governance had begun implementing procedures it had hoped never to invoke, hastily and secretly preparing long-range colony ships to—hopefully—seed humanity on distant planets beyond the reach of the aliens.

New Athens changed everything. It was like a Hollywood movie, a band of hard-bitten, world-weary veterans, banding together to do what the military could not.

Only, these veterans were a little different from the stereotype…

— Emilio Gonzales, online article.

The *MSY,* in its vast entangled bureaucracy, had been preparing its entire existence for all sorts of absurd contingencies. Its agents watched the military, even though the military hadn't been relevant for centuries. It owned its own fleet of disguised and stealth ships, one that was consistently labeled a boondoggle by internal politicians, but persisted nonetheless. It had contingency plans for fighting the military, overthrowing governments, all sorts of ridiculous scenarios, just in case.

And even though they somehow never thought to prepare for an alien invasion, all these plans, all these ships and preparations, would prove their worth in one giant spasm of glory.

— Julian Bradshaw, *"Mahou Shoujo: Their World, their History,"* excerpt.

Boom!

The ground shook underneath them.

A drop-pod has landed in our sector, a girl thought from somewhere. *The military has opened fire, but their shield is holding. Alien drones are deploying.*

A pause.

Also, I believe I sense air superiority platforms and fighters.

The message relayed its way into Homura's—well, the audience's—mind, bouncing its way from the clairvoyant through what was probably hundreds of girls to the improvised command post.

Thank you, Homura thought back. *Remember the plan, everyone. We're not going to be able to deny low orbit for a while, so we want them to commit themselves into their demonstration attack before we surprise them. We don't want them to change their minds and vaporize us all from orbit.*

Her voice registered in Mami's mind, the actor's cadences modified to sound just like the actual girl, the words just as Mami had recalled to the writers. It was quiet, yet commanding, and the only thing ruining the effect was that the implant-mediated sound just wasn't the same as true magical girl telepathy. You could tell, somehow.

In the background was the—faked—endless murmur of telepathy, team captains and scouts and local directors communicating.

With two decades of experience, Mami idly analyzed the attack, knowing that the virtual Mami standing next to Homura was doing nothing of the sort.

The *MSY*'s—and the military's—assessment of the situation at the time, after over three weeks of complete panic, was that the aliens were, for lack of a better word, showboating. A demonstration attack, as Homura had said.

Looking at it now, Mami could see that they had been completely correct.

It was stupid, she thought. *The militarily correct thing to do would be to try and obliterate the surface from orbit. New Athens didn't even have any heavy fortifications ready.*

Nowadays, colony worlds all had extensive lower orbit defenses designed to delay such a genocidal attack long enough for the human fleets to, hopefully, stop the attempt. Back then, not even Earth had had anything like that.

Neither was it particularly smart to simply land in circles around the densely packed urban centers and expect to march their way in—not even bothering to claim the high points, or establish air support, or protect their flanks, or guard against the possibility of being surrounded in turn.

We don't need to be strategic, the aliens had been saying. *We can steamroll you in the stupidest way possible, and you can't touch us.*

Well, they got the surprise they were asking for, Mami thought, rather vindictively.

She knew the details behind what was happening in front of her.

They had arrived in chartered spaceships, and as passengers on commercial liners, by the tens of thousands, in a phenomenon so marked it had even attracted the attention of the media. Why were so many apparently school-age girls heading for Episilon Eridani? Why did none of them appear to have living parents? Why weren't any of them enrolled in school? How had so many of them slipped under society's radar? Who were the mysteriously named social organizations chartering all these ships and paying for the tickets? What was their goal? It would definitely have been the story of the year, if it weren't for the ongoing alien invasion occupying everyone's full attention.

The government, Yuma reported, was conducting a quiet investigation into the anomaly, but hadn't stopped any of the travelers, partly due to the efforts of embedded *MSY* representatives. And, not surprisingly, the invasion occupied all its time.

Now, the girls, for the most part posing as groups of tourists, had slipped away from the

evacuation queues—this time, everything was organized, and it had already been decided who would stay and who would leave immediately—to head to predetermined spots throughout the region. They ignored the warnings and drones and MP's warning them to go back, using their powers when necessary to proceed, and when they reached where they were going, they settled down and waited. The most vulnerable teams, near the expected landing points, or within close proximity of military units, were accompanied by those rare girls that had cloaking powers.

Above them, orbiting near the battle in space, helpless refugee ships struggled with supposed engine problems, and weapons platforms with military grade cloaking waited silently, the cargo holds of both packed with girls in space combat suits, with as high a ratio of girls from the space stations as possible.

They didn't *need* the suits, since they didn't *need* to breathe, but it was a lot less taxing on the soul gem to have the suit. In the same way, they could all fly their way through a vacuum competently, but the maneuvering jets used less magic.

Like those on the ground, the girls in space had spent a week in a crash course on military combat. They watched videos of alien operations on Atlas, absorbed pilfered military training manuals directly into their minds, and rehearsed an entirely new set of tactics, planning how to respond to an entirely new set of weapons. Not giant demons with laser beams, but cephalopods with laser cannons, and shields, and rapid-fire laser rifles, and drones with explosives, and smart missiles, and other exotic weapons.

Like those on the ground, they waited for the signal to swarm the alien cruisers and troop transports.

Not yet, Homura thought.

She and the facsimile Mami were seated inside an agricultural silo, on a now-abandoned farm. They wore signal amplifiers attached to the back of their necks, to reinforce their ability to view the situation at hand.

This Mami still maintained a teenage appearance, in solidarity with the strange preferences of her friends. It was only later that Mami had chosen to age herself slightly, since it was a bit difficult to project command authority as a teenage girl.

Nearby, a teleporter and shield generator stood nervously, acting as a bodyguard, along with several other girls working pieces of equipment. Outside, a sizable concentration of girls occupied the farm grounds and arborage, part of the mobile reserve. Several of them maintained a shroud over the area.

All were members of the *Soul Guard,* the enforcement division of the *MSY,* in ordinary times tasked with taking down the abhorrent and the insane.

Farther up the hill, a contingent of artillery produced an endless succession of zapping noises, as their railguns provided fire at some distant target. They were accompanied by a nervous group of volunteer militia and air defense drones, waiting for combat to activate their enhancements.

None of them noticed the startling number of teenage girls lurking just two hundred meters downhill.

You heard her! Kyouko thought, somewhere distant. *We want surprise! Don't break discipline!*

Mami enjoyed the experience of being, for once, in the movie Mami's point of view. Inside her eyes, in an interface freshly hacked by *MSY* technicians, she watched as magical girl teams silently

withdrew in the face of alien advances, holding back, waiting for the signal.

Looking at it, the deployment depicted in front of her was inaccurate. The actual deployment they had used was a lot more flawed with, in retrospect, numerous deficiencies. The aliens might not have been trying, but the magical girls were going solely by books and electronic guides.

It didn't matter that they had all taken the time to cram military manuals into their brains, or that the telepathy surrounding them was full of freshly-learned military jargon, thought with the tones of those unused to the words. They had had no idea what they were doing.

Not to mention this was by far the largest organized attack they had ever planned. Organizing raids on demon hordes was, at the very most, a thirty girl affair, covering perhaps twenty city blocks. Even the most complicated of MSY operations only involved perhaps one hundred girls covering a single city. Not one hundred thousand girls covering an area the size of central Europe.

They hadn't been holding a battlefront—it had just been teams of girls doing what they done for centuries, with a sprinkling of fresh military training in the mix.

There hadn't been time to organize any better.

The military is losing ground! one of the team captains relayed. *Just to the drones! And their fliers are getting massacred! They're going to lose air control! Let us intervene!*

No, not yet! both Mami and Homura relayed, Mami having, once again, the surreal expression of having her own voice blare through her head.

Any moment now…

Dropships are arriving, someone thought.

Follow the plan. Homura thought. *We want to catch them mid-deployment. Let them get troops on the ground so they can't plaster the area.*

Mami remembered how painful those few minutes had been, waiting and waiting, knowing that somewhere, Earth's military and militia were getting slaughtered by the newly arriving infantry. The movie choose to accentuate it by showing montages of the aliens deploying, laser weapons shattering the foliage, human infantry cowering behind cover despite their armored suits, some of them getting shattered by the high-energy beams anyway. Alien drones and air platforms rained fire from the air, now virtually unopposed, shattering the hulls of human armored vehicles attempting to maneuver and fire, melting incoming artillery shells *out of the air,* while the shields of the marching monsters and the larger drones deflected bullets and laser cannon fire like it was a bad joke.

On the ground, even the human drone swarms were being overwhelmed, and the infantry and militia found themselves swarmed by microdrones, who tore at their suits or, in the case of the often unarmored militia, skipped the formalities and began injecting powerful toxins. It was a terrible way to die, and the directors clearly wanted the audience to never forget it.

It was an absolute miracle no one attacked early.

Then, finally:

Now! Homura and Mami thought simultaneously.

A moment of anticlimax, aliens in suits languidly falling out of dropships, almost peacefully, drones buzzing.

Then, chaos.

The signature of the *mahou shoujo.*

Great shockwaves traversed the ground, shining purple and bright, blowing back and dismembering the plethora of advancing drones and alien infantry, releasing gushes of bright-green blood. Drones, air platforms, and fighters exploded and fell out of the sky under an onslaught of unrecognizable projectiles—bright bolts of light of every color and description, entangling webs trapping them, bullets somehow powerful enough to break shields, an eclectic assortment of firepower that was nonetheless deadly.

And the dropships—the dropships were the primary target. The one closest to the audience *sheared* in half, as if sliced by an invisible blade. Half of the one behind it vanished, the audience catching just the tiniest of glimpses of a girl appearing on the hull. Another unceremoniously developed a giant hole in its hull. Another one crashed itself in the ground. Another one seemed to explode for no reason at all.

And they all shattered, or fell, or detonated, with their crews and any unfortunate infantry on-board dying gruesomely.

Those dropships still arriving, witnessing the massacre on the ground suddenly reversing itself against them, turned to flee. Some fell out of the sky, but many were able to return to orbit—where they found no solace.

The alien cruisers, troop transports, and fighters found themselves with a new, almost ridiculous phenomenon—ten of thousands of humans in breathing suits, floating in orbit, *lunging* at them. It was absurd. Their shipboard AIs leveled weapons, and fighters changed vectors, firing and expecting slaughter.

Instead, they got a fight, and cruisers and interceptors and troop transports began breaking into fragments, their debris littering orbit, the troop transports losing great masses of troops and equipment out of hull breaches, escape pods launching and exploding en route.

And like their brethren in outer space, the surviving human infantry regiments and armor on the ground could only watch, open-mouthed, as an equally ridiculous tableau played out before them. Groups of what appeared to be *teenage girls* appeared and disappeared in thin air, wearing ridiculous costumes, laying devastation on the enemy, dealing absurd damage with weapons as ridiculous as bows and muskets and Springfield rifles. On the ground, girls with archaic swords and spears and axes and needles and daggers danced through alien fire, dodging with absurd speed and slicing apart the aliens in their suits as if the shielding and armor meant nothing at all, shrugging off alien drones with great bursts of light.

Then, as a group, the infantry and militia rallied, began firing their weapons again, and began retaking ground from the invaders, in attempted coordination with the newcomers. Their commanding AIs and officers reasoned that, all things considered, they *knew* the aliens would kill them, while the others, who at least appeared human, showed no signs of wanting to kill them. There was no need to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“You do not have to know who we are, or what we are,” Homura’s voice said over their internal intercoms, her transmission accepted by their AIs. “Just know that we are human, and we are here to help. Assist if you can, and obey any orders they give you. What else can you do?”

It was compelling logic, and most listened. The Human commanders began repositioning their forces, and even the militia corps up the hill moved out farther forward, now that a shattering penetration was no longer expected.

In the silo command post, the mood was euphoric. Both the ground and space battles were going better than expected. The aliens had been completely unprepared. The rings around the urban centers were broken in multiple places, the flanks being rolled up. At this rate, it would turn into a rout.

Mami and Homura shared a look, and smiled.

Then, in a certain sector of the perimeter, near the largest of the cities, the triangles representing magical girl teams began disappearing rapidly off the displays. Circles representing alien forces appeared and disappeared rapidly. Others began carrying special flags marking them as "Armor".

Chilling screams and curses began streaming in telepathically, rapidly shattering the mood.

That's Kyouko's sector! Mami thought.

What the hell is going on? Homura thought, tense.

They're firing on us from orbit, Kyouko thought. *They're vaporizing teams all around the city! And some sort of alien tank, and some of them have stealth. The empaths and mind readers are picking them up, but they're tearing us apart!*

Homura and Mami glanced at the reports from orbit, preempting the *real* Mami, who was about to turn her head to do the same. The girls in space were trying to reach the ships firing downward, but it would be tough going, and they were unlikely to get there fast enough. On the ground, the entire sector was beginning to fall apart, despite the magical teams and militia and infantry units streaming in to try and fill the gap. Grief cube shortages were beginning to proliferate.

And it was clear why the strike was there, too. Capturing the associated city would open the metaphoric gates into the wide plains behind, allowing them to drive further into the other sectors.

So many dead, Mami thought, shaken.

Yes, Homura agreed. *It's clearly time for reinforcements. Should we send the whole reserve?*

How can you stay so calm? Mami thought.

What would panic do? Homura thought. *We knew this could happen. Every one of us is a volunteer. Now, what is your opinion?*

The Mami commanding the forces took a deep breath, and the Mami sitting in her audience's seat did so as well. She could still remember the feel of Homura's mind at that moment, hard as steel and cold as ice, a side of her she had only rarely experienced. It had been deeply unsettling.

What do you think are the chances the aliens have any more such surprises in store? Mami thought, a moment later.

Not high, Homura thought. *If I were them, I'd launch everything at once, after a surprise like this. And we have the mobility to redeploy, if we have to.*

Even so, we should leave some here, Mami thought. *We shouldn't overcommit.*

Yes, Homura agreed.

I will warn the others of what to watch for, Mami thought.

Homura got up, nodding at the technology staff around her, and went outside, to personally lead

the counter-attack.

As she emerged, she nodded to the girls around her, most of whom were already on the move, twenty thousand strong. They traveled by every improvisation imaginable, some by ground vehicle, others wielding their powers to give themselves and the others around them a speed boost.

Besides the girls in the command post, however, a small group remained, consisting of some of the most powerful girls who had come to the planet.

One of them tossed her a small handful of grief cubes, which she used to charge her soul gem just a little more before tossing them back.

Let's go, Homura thought. *You've received your instructions. Stick close to the empaths.*

And then, en masse, the teleporters there activated their powers.

It was a relay, one teleporter stretching her range to the utmost of her ability, then taking a break, recharging with grief cubes, while another prepared her own teleport. The scenery changed repeatedly—the bank of a river, the side of a mountain, a wide plain, the middle of a city, the militia garrison blinking at them in surprise.

And finally, the wasteland that was their destination.

It used to be farmland. Now it was scorched everywhere with wide swaths of uptorn earth. The alien armor that they had been hearing about tore across the landscape, sloped devices with bulbous guns, scurrying along on roach-like legs.

They could hear telepathic screams.

"What have they done here?" one of the girls next to her said, appalled.

They're not invincible, Kyouko thought, from somewhere. *I smashed a few myself. But they surprised us, and they're moving too fast for us to rally. And we have to watch our backs too much with all that stealth around.*

Pull the melee girls out, anywhere there's stealth, Mami thought, distant. *Assemble kill teams, ranged and empaths. It seems their stealthed vehicles are easier to destroy.*

Homura turned to face the others.

We're at the edge of their spearhead, she thought. *They're getting greedy. They haven't covered their flanks. They don't think we have this kind of mobility. We're cutting them off.*

She relayed this not only telepathically, but electronically, to the commander of an armored division she knew was nearby, hastily trying to retreat and regroup.

Give us whatever support you can, she thought, to them only this time, relaying their positions. *You know who I am. Get whatever approval you need to. This could decide everything.*

Then, without waiting, she gave the order to attack, transforming and launching herself up into the air, white-feathered wings spreading outward.

Yes, sir! the commander finally responded, forgetting that she wasn't in the military hierarchy.

Two empaths detached and headed for the Humans, to give them guidance. The long-range girls hung back, finding a point of high ground.

A purple aura spreading out from Homura, the ability that made her one of the most valuable magical girls alive, the one that slowed soul gem corruption.

They descended on the armored columns, the faster girls and Homura traversing the distance at maximum speed, the rest teleporting their way along, all dodging the arriving firepower and ignoring the scurrying drones trying to stop them.

The vehicles shattered, their shielding and armor breaking apart, not effortlessly as it had been with the infantry, but under the overwhelming weight of concerted attack. Three were lifted magically into the air and hurled forward, as both projectiles and metal shields, by Nadya Antipova, the strongest telekinetic alive. Other vehicles disappeared in large chunks. Homura soared into the air, spun to smash approaching drones with her wings, and unleashed a downward volley.

They're calling in an orbital strike! A mind reader mentally shouted. *I can hear them!*

Another confirmed.

They scattered, getting out of the area, trying to find cover that wasn't there in the open landscape. There was barely time to protest *But they're firing on themselves!*

The explosion that followed was eardrum-shattering—or would have been, were anyone in the audience actually using their eardrums.

They re-engaged, Homura diving to the ground to scoop up the surviving soulgem of a girl whose body had been caught in the blast, her upper body gone. Better to remove it, rather than have it burn itself out trying to regenerate this one.

The movie lingered for a moment on that, Homura forming the soul gem into another ring to wear, so she could carry it easily, looking at the body.

Then she launched herself back up.

Stealth units! Someone thought.

Everything after that was pyrotechnic chaos.

A girl in orange slicing thin air with katana, the explosion revealing that it hadn't been thin air at all, but a stealth vehicle—

An empath losing a leg, screaming—

A healer, working on a girl with a hole in her stomach, the two of them hiding behind a giant chunk of metal, still shimmering with partial stealth—

Homura running forward, wings folded in front of her, deflecting lasers, drones, explosives, shielding several girls carrying melee weapons—

An enormous volley of projectiles from the long-range specialists, breaking the back of an attempted counter-attack—

Specialist teleporters arriving with grief cubes, blinking the cubes in to the hands of everyone with enough time to cleanse themselves—

Homura picking up another soul gem—

Nadya screaming in fury, arm missing, freezing and redirecting an artillery volley with pure force, soul gem darkening, a healer rushing forward with grief cubes—

Another orbital strike, and in the confusion, only a few scattered in time—

The alien infantry finally arriving, adding their firepower to the mess—

The Human armored column arriving in turn, treaded monstrosities moving and firing their heavy railguns, and exploding as well—

The arrival of a heavy alien counterattack, waves of vehicles and drones appearing on the horizon —

Alien fighters falling out of the sky—

An alien and Human armored infantry member in direct melee, the alien heavily damaged and missing two tentacles, for the moment as evenly matched as two wrestlers, until the cepahlopod's head exploded, the victim of a distant magical girl sniper—

The arrival of the rest of the magical girls, Kyouko among them, a giant spear rising from the ground to impale an alien tank, spear slicing off one of the legs of another—

An orbital strike—

Another orbital strike—

Another orbital strike—

And Homura herself falling out of the sky, wings finally broken.

She landed with a cringe-inducing *snap!*

The audience, from Homura's perspective, saw her raise her hand to her eyes, her diamond soul gem nearly entirely black.

"No, *NO!*" Kyouko yelled, appearing out of nowhere to drag her body to cover and cradle Homura's head in her hands.

"Not like this," she said.

Does anyone have a grief cube? She thought, desperately.

I'm sorry.

I used mine.

If only I hadn't—

I didn't think—

I'm on my way!

But the last one was too far away, and would never get there in time, even with teleportation.

"No, not like this," Kyouko repeated, tears falling.

Ake–Homura! Hang in there! Please! Mami begged, distantly.

A chorus of other thoughts followed.

Homura grabbed Kyouko's hand in hers.

Finish what we started here, she thought, relaying the thought outward to everyone, starting to cry.

Mami, in the audience, wiped her eyes with a handkerchief. She remembered what it had been like, helpless in her command post, listening to her friend dying, hearing Homura cry for the first time *ever.*

It was the moment everyone who was there remembered, from the sobbing technicians in the command post, to the girls in active combat fighting tears of rage.

Don't let me down. I gave my soul to defend this world! Homura exhorted.

Then, smiling slightly:

I'm just happy I can finally see her again.

"How can you be happy, you idiot?" Kyouko demanded. "Don't just give up!"

Homura just shook her head and reached up, pulling the ribbon out of her hair. The ribbon which had survived centuries. She held it, clutching it to her heart.

I–I only want— Homura began.

She stopped.

She was looking with incredulity at her soul gem, which was now entirely black, except for a single point of light at the bottom, radiantly bright, that wasn't going away.

I can't die, she thought.

"Yes, of course you can't, that's better," Kyouko said, not understanding, bowing her head, refusing to look. "Don't die."

"No!" Homura said, sitting up suddenly, broken back somehow healed. "I *can't.* Not as long as I remember her!"

"What are you—" Kyouko began, blindingly happy at the recovery, crying from the situation, confused at what was going on.

She was interrupted by Homura's heart-rending scream.

"What's happening?" she demanded "Homura, answer me!"

Homura was sitting, nearly catatonic, shaking and sweating, staring at her soul gem and ribbon, now together in her hand.

She was repeated to herself: "How long? How long? Can I ever see you again?"

Kyouko followed her gaze—and recoiled, witnessing the cloud of corruption forming around her gem.

"Homura!" Kyouko repeated, swallowing and shaking the girl, trying to ignore the phenomenon. "Are you alright?"

“But why?” Homura demanded. “What must I do?”

Damn it, hurry up with those grief cubes! Kyouko thought, lashing out through the telepathy network.

“I’m fine, Kyouko,” Homura said suddenly, voice lacking affect.

“No, you’re no—” Kyouko began, then stared as Homura stood up, retying her ribbon.

Homura’s face was smooth, clearly in command again, but something was ineffably wrong, as if it hurt her to stay that way.

The corruption was forming a cloud around her hand.

She extended her wings, and they were not the pure, white wings which had earned her the secretly whispered nickname “The Angel”. Instead, they were black and coiling, seeming to be made of the same corruption that had blackened her soul.

They couldn’t quite capture the effect here, Mami mused. The descriptions of those who had seen it had made clear that it was deeply disturbing. The best description had come from one of the teleporters in the area:

“Looking at those wings… was like looking into a nightmare. And not just your nightmare. The nightmares of every human who has ever lived, ever since the Incubators raised us out of animals.”

Overblown, perhaps, but everyone who was there agreed to something of that effect. Mami, who *hadn’t* been there, wasn’t sure whether to be disappointed or very, very glad.

Well, it wasn’t the filmmakers’ fault they couldn’t duplicate it.

Kyouko stepped back involuntarily from this version of Homura.

“Ho–Homura?” she asked.

“We have a battle to win,” Homura said, looking back.

She pointed at the horizon, at the edge of the devastation zone, where the aliens were now cautiously moving forward to probe the gap opened by the orbital bombardments, hoping they could reestablish contact with their broken spearhead on the other end.

She launched herself into the air on those wings, soaring forward, ignoring the clear disparity in numbers.

“Damn it!” Kyouko said, running forward to follow her.

I don’t know what the hell she’s doing! Kyouko thought to the others. *The rest of you get the wounded and their soul gems out of here, and fall back—*

Belay that, Homura said. *Get the wounded out of here, yes, but we are attacking.*

Are you crazy? Kyouko demanded. *That attack decimated—*

I know what I’m doing, Homura thought.

Suddenly, she dove forward, adding on an absurd amount of speed, almost instantly covering the

remaining distance, becoming a speck high in the air.

You idiot—

The aliens opened fire, hundreds of heavy laser cannons opening fire on the exposed girl foolishly flying into range, drones swarming and firing their own weapons—

And as Kyouko, the other magical girls, and the surviving human soldiers watched, mouths agape, the laser beams bent around her, refusing to strike her, and instead turned *back* towards their sources, bombarding the alien position with their own firepower.

Homura then stooped downward, the aliens holding fire in confusion as to what to do, and then—

It was too far to see exactly what was happening, except that there was a great number of explosions, the alien vehicles seemed to be decreasing in number, and the alien drones kept trying to swarm, and kept failing.

Finally:

They're retreating! one of the Human tank commanders reported, broadcasting a mental image of his sensor screen, showing the alien units pulling back in headlong flight.

Any other questions? Homura demanded.

Kyouko swallowed, still gaping.

You heard her! she thought, swallowing her misgivings. *Let's drive those bastards back to whatever planet they come from!*

By rights, the battle shouldn't have been over, but that didn't take into account Homura.

Gone was the bow, the careful positioning, the teamwork. This version of Homura didn't care, and didn't need it.

She attacked like a banshee, rising and swooping out of the air, heedless of personal injury, none of the incoming attacks coming close to striking her.

Those that came close to her died.

Those who dared fire on her died.

Those who tried to use stealth found that she could see them perfectly fine.

She gestured with her hand, and vehicles shattered and armored suits exploded.

She gestured with her other hand, and corruption oozed out of the ground, slaughtering the aliens who happened to be in the area.

The orbital strikes, so feared, kept landing—and at the end of each, it would be the alien positions that were devastated, until finally the strikes stopped, their controllers realizing something was wrong.

The aliens began to flee at the sight of her, abandoning their invasion, withdrawing, calling for dropships.

The humans just stayed out of the way.

It seemed as if it were time to cheer, but then:

Get out of there! Mami exhorted. *Everyone! Get out! They're preparing some kind of orbital superweapon!*

What the hell are the space forces doing? Kyouko demanded, looking into her own interface.

The aliens had got them good, the movie-watching Mami thought, drinking her tea. The space forces were desperately trying to press forward and eliminate the device, but the aliens were throwing in their last-ditch forces to protect it, and the device would fire within minutes. They hadn't been looking for it, because none of them had expected that the aliens would fire on their own forces like this.

Stupid. It had been *stupid.*

The movie accentuated the point by showing a shot of space, of magical girls trying desperately to take it *down.*

Here it is, Mami thought, and she could hear the others around her sucking in their breaths.

The movie returned to the ground, where, as the humans tried to flee, Kyouko instead stood still and watched, aghast, as Homura instead flew straight up, hand reaching for the sky.

The massive particle beam coming downward turned the sky white with light, bearing down upon them, and Kyouko knew that none of them would escape, that it didn't make sense to run, that the only hope was that Homura was not absolutely insane to fly straight up into it. She watched, dropping her spear.

It was a moment that would become legendary, searing itself into the collective Human memory, recorded on a thousand holocams, and the eyes of everyone who dared to look up.

Homura's wings expanded to enormous size, turning the entire sky into a chiaroscuro between the brilliant white light and her nightmarishly-black wings.

And then—

—the light disappeared, and alien and human alike blinked in confusion.

It returned, bright and scorching, and for a moment Kyouko thought all was lost—and then she realized, somehow, that it was now headed the other way.

In what was undoubtedly the cinematic climax of the movie, the audience watched from space as the alien cruiser bearing the weapon received the full force of its own shot, detonating cataclysmically, destroying everything around it, its own defenses, the other alien cruisers, troop transports, *everything,* until the only aliens left in space were the thin outer shell of fighters who, realizing they had nothing left to defend, tried desperately to escape, charging their faster-than-light engines.

Then Kyouko dropped to her knees, like so many others that day, unsure whether she was looking at the Akemi Homura she knew—or a god.

Then the black wings disappeared, and there were only the two small white wings, which disappeared in turn, and all that was left then was a human girl, dressed in ordinary clothing, falling through the air, the only sign of anything unusual the ribbon in her hair glowing white.

Kyouko ran forward to catch her.

The scene ended with a voiceover of Kyouko's thoughts.

Is it true? she thought. *Is everything she said true? Then, what have I been doing with my life?*

There was only one scene left.

There was brief shot of the sign of the Acropolis Hotel, to help establish location, and a glimpse of the reporters camped outside, to help establish the situation.

Kyouko and Mami around a mahogany and glass table piled high with plates of delicate hors d'oeuvres. The room was palatial, huge even by the standards of the uncramped colonies. Every possible luxury was thought of, from the decorations on the wall, to the enormous bed, to the wine cooler and gold trimmings.

It was one of those rooms that would have actually cost Allocs back on Earth, and was positively exorbitant here in New Athens.

It was Mami's room, as she recalled, and it was all compliments of the local colonial government. The hors d'oeuvres were compliment of hotel management.

The curtains were closed.

"I still don't think that's good enough evidence," Mami was insisting.

"What are you talking about, evidence?" Kyouko demanded, banging the table with a fist. "Look, I know you weren't there, but didn't you at least look up?"

"I was in the command post, trying to direct an evacuation," Mami said, a slight edge to her voice. "I'm sorry, but I didn't see anything."

That too, was a memory. Those terrifying minutes when Mami had thought she was going to die, and had resolved to spend those minutes getting as many girls out of the area as possible.

Mami cringed, knowing what was coming. She and Kyouko had been honest to the scriptwriters —perhaps too honest. This was not going to be a pleasant conversation.

"Still, though," Kyouko said. "She redirected a particle beam capable of wiping out half of Europe!"

"Which is amazing, I know," Mami said. "But think about what she claims. Some magical girl she knew sacrificed herself to become a Goddess and recreate the universe to bring hope to us all. Hope? What does that even mean? She's never even explained."

"How stubborn do you have to be to deny the evidence?" Kyouko demanded, banging the table again.

"Why do you want to believe so badly?" Mami responded in counterpoint. "I know you, Sakura-san. I know you've always wanted to believe in something like this. I know you still visit the spot where Miki-san died, but just because—"

"What does that have to do with anything?" Kyouko snapped, far too quickly.

"Everything!" Mami shot back. "I've tried so hard to keep you grounded. I don't want you losing yourself—"

“And I thought I was a cynic,” Kyouko said, standing up. “Do you really like it so much, watching me drift my way through life, like you? It’s boring! What about *your* faith, Mami? What do *you* fight for?”

Mami stayed silent, head bowed.

“You don’t know, do you?” Kyouko said. “Neither do I. We’ve been alive so long we can’t even remember what’s so good about living.”

“I live for the sake of the others,” Mami said quietly. “So that they can enjoy life. What’s so bad about that? How can you say we don’t live for anything? We just saved this planet. Didn’t you want to be a hero when you contracted? We’re heroes now.”

Kyouko thought for a moment.

“Yes, we are, and yes I did,” she said. “But you can’t live life for the sake of others. I’ve definitely learned that over the years. I want to know that I fight for something. Maybe, finally, I’ve found it.”

She peered down at Mami, who sat quietly.

“Let’s talk about something else,” Mami said, voice subdued.

Kyouko watched for a few moments longer, then sat back down.

“Okay,” she agreed finally, grabbing food off of one of the plates.

Mami sighed, collapsing down onto the table.

“You know, we talk about being heroes and such, but I had no idea it was so *tiring*,” she said, looking up at Kyouko, who was industriously polishing away several quiches.

“It has its benefits,” Kyouko mumbled, mouth full of food.

She then gestured at the food and at the room, unnecessarily.

“Yes,” Mami agreed. “And I know we had no choice, since secrecy was impossible, but everything is moving too fast. My inbox is jammed full of interview requests, *those people* are camped outside with drones, and the news shows talk about nothing but us. I had no idea press conferences were so *exhausting*.”

“It’s not much better for the other girls, either, you know,” Kyouko said. “Sure, they focus the most on us, but anyone will do for an interview.”

“Which there are plenty of girls willing to do,” Mami said. “I mean, we had a media strategy, but that’s gone to hell now. Everyone is just saying whatever they want.”

“They’re probably scouring Earth too, you know,” Kyouko said, grabbing a plate with a small stack of meat pastries. “And everywhere else. I bet you, every girl who looks even a little like one of us is probably getting weird looks from everyone.”

“I feel sorry for the girls who still have family and things like that,” Mami said. “I have no idea how I’d explain something like that.”

“We knew it’d be like this,” Kyouko said, looking at her out of the corner of her eye. “We voted for this anyway.”

“I know we did,” Mami said, sitting up, and grabbing one of the pastries before they all disappeared. “But, knowing about it and actually doing it—those are two different things.”

Kyouko stayed silent, eating her pastry.

“And that’s just the easy part,” Mami said. “I’m sure you’ve seen it too. It’s not just the media. Everything is going crazy, and everyone wants to talk to us. The Government wants all of us to testify in front of the Directorate, starting with Yuma. The Military wants to talk about future operations. The Colonial Council wants us for photo ops, so they can declare a new yearly holiday and put up some statues. The Commanding General wants to meet us. We’re getting letters from girls wanting to join. I don’t think I’ve gotten as many messages in my life as I’ve gotten these past few days.”

“Field Marshal Mengale,” Kyouko said, holding up her hand as if to read from an invisible list. “General Sullivan. General Abdulla. Fleet Admiral O’Hara.”

“Science and Technology,” Mami said, picking up the cue. “Military Affairs. Manufacturing and Distribution. Health and Happiness. Colonial Affairs and Colonization. Law and Order. Artificial Intelligence. Public Opinion. And those are only the government representatives who happen to also sit on the Directorate.”

“I can start on major media personas,” Kyouko suggested facetiously.

Mami snorted.

“Yes, we clearly both understand that approximately five hundred people want to meet us in the next week,” Mami said. “What are we going to do about it? We’re not ready for any of this!”

“Yes,” Kyouko said. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t do it.”

She put her hand on Mami’s shoulder.

“Come on,” she said, smiling. “We can take it. As long as we stick together.”

“Yes,” Mami said, smiling back.

The double doors to the room opened. There was only one other person the in-room AI was instructed to allow in so easily.

“Homura,” Kyouko said, looking up at the long-haired girl walking over to the table, wearing long pants and a blouse.

Just a week ago, Kyouko would have made a rude comment about how late she was, probably something along the lines of “Took you long enough.”

Not today, though.

Uncharacteristically, Homura looked hesitant and unsure too—and just a little unsteady. It was reminiscent of what Mami had come to think of as the “other” Homura, from so long ago, before Sayaka’s demise. It was things like this that helped remind Mami that, other things aside, they were indeed the same person.

Homura carried a medium-size travel bag, which she set down next to her chair when she sat down.

“Preparation materials for all those interviews?” Mami asked, trying to lighten the mood, which

was stagnating under the combined influence of Homura's strange behavior and Kyouko's seeming unwillingness to talk.

Homura didn't respond, looking down at the table.

Mami watched her carefully.

In the time between the "incident" and the time of this conversation, Homura had been unusually taciturn, Mami—*both* Mamis—mused. Not just taciturn, but constantly brooding, mumbling to herself more than usual, as if thinking about something. She just hadn't seemed the same person, and while she went about her tasks as efficiently as usual, something was off. She lacked dynamism, and came off as cold when the deliriously grateful soldiers, militia, and, eventually, colonists and reporters tried to talk to her. The light in her eyes was gone.

She had spent those days alone and cooped up in her room, even when the situation demanded she come out and talk. Sometimes, she and Kyouko spent long hours talking, and Mami wondered if that was really a good idea.

Mami had worried, of course, but she had never anticipated what was about to happen.

"Is something wrong?" the holographic Mami asked. "You've been acting strange for days, Akemi-san."

Homura remained silent, but her face seemed to tighten slightly, her eyes growing pained.

"We can't help if you won't even properly explain what happened," Mami ventured.

"I'm sorry," Homura said, in a choked voice Mami had never heard before.

"What? Sorry for what?" Kyouko asked, coming alive at the strangest of moments.

"I can't do it anymore," Homura said, voice broken. "Ever since I ended up in this world, I've looked forward to only one thing."

She sucked in a breath.

"I always knew that, someday, I would fall in battle and could reunite with her," she said, head hanging over the table.

Neither Kyouko nor Mami needed clarification on who "her" was.

"As long as I knew that," Homura said. "I was willing to keep doing this. But she won't let me die!"

With this, she thrust out her hand to display the soul gem on her palm.

Mami and Kyouko gasped simultaneously.

It was pitch-black, just as it had been on that fateful day—except, again, for a single point of purple of light.

"What the hell have you been doing?" Kyouko snapped, grabbing Homura's wrist with one hand, reaching for the gem with the other—but it was already back as a ring.

"I've been testing her resolve," Homura said, "but I understand. My job isn't done here."

She jerked her hand away.

“Wishes are inviolate,” Homura said, standing up shakily. “And my wish isn’t over yet. But I didn’t make that wish. Do you understand now?”

Homura looked down, at the ring on her finger.

“It’s interesting to operate from the pits of despair,” she said, voice clinical, not taking her eyes off the ring. “It’s so easy to lose focus. I’d use a grief cube, but I don’t want to forget. I want to remember, how much it hurts.”

Wait, they actually managed to sneak that by the censors? Mami the viewer thought.

“What on earth is going on?” Mami the hologram demanded.

She’s acting crazy, Mami thought, in such a way that only Kyouko would hear. She avoided giving any outward sign of the telepathy.

Kyouko looked up at Homura, gritting her teeth.

It’s so distressing for her, to be separated from the Goddess, Kyouko thought back.

No, Sakura-san. Don’t talk as if her insanity is true, Mami thought. *We’ve ignored it all these years, and it’s finally coming back to haunt us.*

Homura shook her head rapidly, as if to clear it.

“I’m sorry,” she said again.

She bent down, reaching into the bag she had carried in, and pulled out two sheets of paper—not virtual documents, but actual fabricated paper, complete with all the necessary electronic encryption seals to verify its legitimacy.

She placed them on the table.

“It’s my resignation and withdrawal from the organization,” Homura explained quietly. “I’m sorry to do this to you. I thought about just going, but it wouldn’t be right not to say goodbye.”

They stared at her for a long moment. Outside, holocam drones could be heard buzzing around the window, trying to sneak a view in somehow. The joke was on them—the room was infrared-shielded.

“What?” Mami said, jumping out of her chair. “What the hell are you talking about? You’re not thinking clearly, Akemi-san.”

“I agree,” Kyouko said, standing up shakily. “What the hell, Homura? What are you doing? Look, I know you’re torn up, but—”

“My mind is made up,” Homura said, averting her eyes.

She clenched her eyes briefly, then pulled a ribbon out of her pocket.

It was a twin to the one she wore on her head, one they had never seen before.

“I’ll leave this with you,” she said, placing it on the table. “It was hers.”

Mami stepped forward and grabbed Homura by the shoulders.

“No, Akemi-san,” Mami said, trying to project authority with her voice. “I won’t let you. I don’t know what’s going on with you. But I won’t let you make a decision like—”

And suddenly, she found herself grabbing thin air. Did Homura just—

“I’ll be going now,” Homura said, standing to her left, grabbing her bag.

She bowed to them.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Kyouko demanded, stepping in front of Homura.

“I’m going to go look for her,” Homura said, suddenly on the *other side* of Kyouko, still walking for the door. “I will protect the world another way.”

“I told you,” Mami insisted, growling.

She strode forward, body glowing, transforming.

“I won’t let you—” she began, raising her hand, summoning the ribbons necessary to bind Homura.

But Homura was gone, bags and all.

Goodbye, Homura thought, somewhere.

And just like that, the screen faded to black. The audience didn’t need to be told the rest, how Kyouko and Mami had practically torn apart the building looking for her, and how the *MSY,* thrown into disarray, had mounted an interstellar search that turned up nothing.

The Leadership Committee refused the resignation, on the observation that they had never considered magical girls with depleted soul gems capable of rational decision making.

But Homura never reappeared.

Mami sat, as the credits rolled by in a montage of Homura’s life, all the happy scenes, playing with the other kids as a child, drinking tea with the others…

The other around her began chatting, but Mami stayed quiet, thinking.

It had taken a long time for them to understand, but Homura had run away. Run away from everything in search of what she really wanted, in her heart.

What had happened to her that day on New Athens had destroyed something within her.

Kyouko, and by extension the Cult, viewed Homura as a lost, fallen angel, wandering the world in search of her love, straying from the path. They saw it as their duty to get her back.

Mami viewed Homura as a girl they had failed. They hadn’t been there when she needed them, and she had collapsed.

Still, though, she remembered all they had to go through after her disappearance. Her departure had broken them. Kyouko left to found her silly Cult. Yuma, already distant, buried herself in her work even deeper. And Mami…

Mami became a Field Marshal.

It wasn’t the job. The jobs were all the same, to her. It was the fracturing of the group.

She hated what Homura had done, and hated herself for allowing it, and hated herself for hating Homura.

She wished she would come back.

Mami fondled the soul gem bracelet around her wrist, hidden by the holography of the movie.

Honestly, she didn't know what to think anymore. Maybe Homura really had been an insane genius, a genius with astounding magical powers. That was the only reasonable explanation.

But every time she thought that, every time she rehashed the arguments Kyouko and her no longer openly had, she always remembered Homura's soul gem.

Pitch black, with a single point of light, inextinguishable.

As the credits ended with a shot of Homura's second ribbon, now firmly enshrined in Kyouko's church, Mami thought about something else entirely.

She remembered Homura's last words to them, the words they had never revealed to anyone, the ones they didn't know if they had even been intended to hear, the ones full of despair, and determination:

If it is your will that I suffer so, if this is what you truly want, then I will continue to protect this world. I swear it.

"Would you like to join us next time?" Nodame Riko asked Mami, as they exited the theatre.

Mami looked up, startled from her reverie. She had followed them out of the building mindlessly.

"I'm serious," the girl said, smiling at her. "You seem like a nice girl."

Internally, Mami cringed. She had been afraid of this.

"Sure, why not?" she said, feeling bad about lying, but knowing it wouldn't matter soon enough. "But I'm sorry. I have to go. I promised my brother I'd go somewhere with him."

Does Chito even have a brother? Mami thought. *Damn it. Well, they're not going to check a detail like that.*

"Alright," Riko said, looking disappointed. "We were going to go bar-hopping. See you next time then. I'll give you a call."

"Goodbye," Mami said, bowing.

The other girl turned, waving goodbye as the group headed down the skyway.

Waiting for her transport, Mami heard them speaking in the distance. They didn't think she could hear them, but she could. It was one of those things about not having a human body.

"Damn, Riko, you're such a predator!" one of the boys was saying to her.

"Shut it, Shino," Riko said. "She was looking lonely. I was cheering her up."

A smile crept up Mami's face, and she suppressed the urge to laugh.

She looked up, trying to find some stars. Instead she found clouds.

Ah, that's right, she thought. *It's scheduled to rain tomorrow.*

She checked her chronometer. It was nearly midnight.

Mami looked back down and there, just down the street, was the girl with the short hair again, about to step into a transport. Mami smiled at her, and she smiled back. Then, the girl stepped into her vehicle.

Mami's own vehicle arrived, and this time she hadn't bothered to pursue stealth. This was *her* vehicle. Let the pedestrians puzzle over that.

She took off her holoemitters, tossing them in a bin by the synthesizer.

It was time to stop pretending. Her vacation time was up.

Machina, attend, she thought, stepping into her vehicle.

"Machina" was the name she had assigned to her tactical AI. All members of the military had one installed. Most of those, however, were relatively primitive devices whom no one bothered to name.

A few years ago, a directive had gone out instructing General Staff members that they would be upgraded to a new, vastly improved version. She had gone through with it rather skeptically. Unlike most of her peers, she wasn't a fan of burying yourself among the machines, an attitude that, among other things, motivated Yuma to make fun of her for being old-fashioned.

To her surprise, though, she had rather liked the new version. It was a lot more personable and intelligent than the older model. One no longer had the feeling of talking to a machine, and it could even hold good conversations. It was like talking with a True Sentient. The only strange thing was the fact that it took weeks to reach full functionality, when the older model could be up and running within the hour.

It was only later, when looking at the technical specs, that she realized why.

Designing a processing system with power and space efficiency comparable to organic systems had vexed both Human and AI designers ever since the first computer was ever built. Yes, AIs existed, and there was a plethora of smarter-than-human machines around, but in terms of building one both small enough and energy-efficient enough to compete with humans on the battlefield—that had never been solved. Not even the aliens seemed to have solved this problem.

The designers had cheated. It wasn't merely a powerful nanoelectrode array, or merely a self-assembled implant. An implant it was, yes, but this one wasn't content to sit quietly on the spinal column with its mesh array. This one actively recruited stem cells out of the bloodstream and manipulated them into growing around the device, intricately and carefully rebuilding the entire area. Nearly ten years of research and development, it was one of the most advanced pieces of technology humanity had.

One that behaved so human, she had felt obligated to give it a name—and she later found out that pretty much everyone who got one eventually did. It wasn't so much a tactical AI as a *personal assistant* AI.

It also meant Mami had a giant neural cluster sitting somewhere in her abdomen, constructed out of her own neurons.

It was a little disturbing, and she tried not to think about it.

Well, in any case, Machina had been there the whole time, but Mami preferred to have her head to herself when she was on vacation. Sometimes, she wondered if the device was offended by that, or whether it even could be offended. No one was sure how sentient they were.

It never showed offense, for what it was worth.

Good evening, Mami-san, the device thought, in the same Japanese that Mami tended to think in. It had her voice. *How was your vacation?*

Excellent, thank you, Mami thought, even though they both knew that the device knew exactly how her vacation had been, down to the last detail.

Mami was glad that *MSY* technicians inspected every last such device, ensuring that they had loyalty only to their owner and not to, for example, the government.

Write up an article for the Akemi *Production Committee, would you?* Mami thought. *Mention how I watched it in secret, I liked it, and so forth; it's for public consumption. Also, tell them I'm sorry, but I can't make any publicity events, but that they can use the article however they like.*

Done, Machina thought.

Truth be told, there was no need for Mami to think everything out so elaborately, in words. She could just as easily let Machina read her mind and take care of it, like they did in combat. But she liked the conversational interaction. That way, it felt like talking to a personal assistant.

Mami thought briefly.

Also, type out some personal messages to those people I was just with, and apologize for misleading them.

I will take care of it, Machina thought.

After a moment, it continued.

Your bodyguards will be waiting at the starport, it thought. *As will François-san, as you requested.*

Excellent, Mami thought. *That will be all.*

The device went dormant again, the sensation of its presence disappearing from Mami's awareness. It had returned to its normal activities—the endless process of sorting messages, planning schedules, issuing replies to messages that didn't warrant Mami's direct attention, and so forth. No modern general could function without her AI. The only difference was, messages that Mami didn't directly approve carried a little tag at the bottom indicating their machine-origin. No one was even offended by it anymore.

"Alright, time to go through the rest of these messages," Mami said to herself.

The work never ended.

Family

Beginning with wary gratitude, and transitioning through a sort of vague perplexity, public opinion of magical girls has now stabilized at patriotic adulation, a state constantly reinforced by government media efforts. For all their flaws, magical girls are collectively seen as humanity's heroes and saviors.

Parental opinion of magical girls has followed a very different trajectory. While the parents of teenage daughters genuinely admire and applaud the efforts of the magical girls in the field, privately, the consensus is clear: Not *my* girl. With the usual exceptions, parents worldwide quietly hint, imply, or outright say to their daughters not to contract, ever. Ham-handed government regulations aimed at prohibiting the practice has only made parents more suspicious. Having your daughter become a magical girl is treated in the same way joining the military once was.

But getting your teenage daughter to follow your proscriptions is a challenge at the best of times. What do you do if they go ahead and contract anyway?

For this special edition, we have conducted extensive interviews with parents, prominent psychiatrists, military officials, and even magical girls themselves. Our staff writers have collated the best advice they could gather into informative articles aimed at easing the transition, beginning with the realization that it is not the end of the world.

— Parenting Plexus Online, *"Special Edition: So Your Daughter Made a Contract. Now What?"* introduction, excerpt.

First out of the vehicle, Ryouko was surprised by a burst of light behind her. The bright red radiance, against the backdrop of the dead of night, cast the doorway in front of her in an eerie scarlet pallor, causing her to turn in surprise.

She found Kyouko transformed and clad in red, holding her spear at arm-length, considering it.

Finally, Kyouko grunted in annoyance and abolished the spear entirely. There was no dignified way to carry it inside.

"Should I transform too?" Ryouko asked.

"No," Kyouko said, grabbing her shoulder briefly as she passed Ryouko. "We don't want to overwhelm them all in one go. I only changed because it makes things easier to explain. You should know how these things go."

Ah, that's right, Ryouko thought, following Kyouko into the building.

The *Visit* had a legendary aura of its own, popularized by rumors, internet articles, and the popular media. It haunted the nightmares of less patriotic parents, and it was always the same. Your daughter appeared at the door, tailed by a magical girl in full costume, carrying her weapon. It was well-known that the military and the *MSY* preferred that it always be the same. It got the point across faster.

They ascended the elevator in silence, Ryouko feeling a sudden profound reluctance to keep going.

When they reached the forty-second floor, the doors slid open, and Kyouko nudged her to go first.

Ryouko approached the doorway of her family's flat, her pace slowing. It wouldn't help, really—she had already asked the door to open in anticipation of their arrival, which would be a sure signal to her family that she was back. Still, she couldn't help but—

"Aah!" she vocalized as Kyouko shoved her again, causing her to stumble into her own doorway.

Resting her arm on the doorjamb, she turned her head to look inside, where her family was watching her with a combination of worry and reproach. Her mother was in the middle of getting up from the sofa where her father was sitting, and her grandfather was seated at the kitchen table. They were all clearly waiting. It was one thirty am, which meant they'd normally be out of the house.

"Just what were you doing, young lady?" her mother demanded, stalking over. "You know you're forbidden to stay out this late."

"I'm sure she had a good reason," her grandfather said, also getting up. "If she said it was important, then it was important."

"Well, you could have at least explained better," her mother said, grabbing Ryouko by the shoulders and looking her up and down. "Do you know how worried we were? And the location tracking service was on the fritz, so we couldn't even track you."

"Ah, well, about that…" Ryouko began, avoiding eye contact.

"I believe I can explain that, ma'am," Kyouko said, stepping through the door, awkwardly maneuvering her spear through the doorway. For some reason, she had resummoned it, despite the obvious hazard it posed indoors. Ryouko moved aside, partly to get out of the way of the spear.

"What are you…" her mother began, glaring at the newcomer.

The words died stillborn.

The three of them, now all standing, stared at Kyouko, and it didn't take a mind-reader to know that they were all calling up their facial recognition routines to confirm what they were seeing.

"Sakura Kyouko, at your service," Kyouko said, bowing formally, face solemn.

She looked around the room.

"I believe we have a lot to discuss," she said.

She faced an extended silence.

Ryouko's mother was the first to respond, leaning onto the half-wall next to the door with a sudden defeated expression.

"No, after all we've—" she began, eye darting around manically.

She stepped back, looking at her daughter as if she were an alien beast.

"Tell me you didn't," her father said, walking over, obviously gritting his teeth to suppress a stronger reaction. "Tell me this isn't what it looks like."

He grabbed Ryouko by the shoulders.

“You know our opinion of the contracting system,” he said, eyes intense. “We’ve warned you, numerous times, what it’s like. Even knowing all that, you’d contract?

Ryouko avoided his gaze.

“It’s a life of misery, Ryouko,” her mother said, and Ryouko felt that, strangely, the woman wasn’t quite looking at her.

“That is not true, Kuroi-san,” Kyouko interjected, abolishing her spear now that it had served its purpose. “Combat may be a trial, but most magical girls live perfectly happy lives.”

“Ryouko, how could you?” her mother asked desperately, making a beseeching gesture in her direction. “After everything I said—”

“I assure you,” Kyouko interjected again, watching the woman carefully. “She has excellent mentors. She is likely to ascend the ranks quite handily, and that improves both survival and quality of life.”

Her statement didn’t quite address the central point, but it was doubtful that anything would.

Ryouko’s mother looked down at her hands with a shell-shocked expression. She seemed almost frozen.

“Mama?” Ryouko asked experimentally, but the woman didn’t respond.

“May I sit?” Kyouko asked, gesturing towards the dining table, trying to break the current flow of events.

No one said anything, so she walked over and sat down in the nearest available chair, drawing a bag of chocolates out and dropping it on the table, making sure the top was open enticingly.

“I thought it would be polite to bring food,” she said.

A moment later, her grandfather sat back down at the table, resting his elbows on the table and his head on his folded hands, watching Kyouko.

“Please, mama,” Ryouko pleaded, reaching over and shaking her mother by the shoulder. “We have a guest.”

“She’s earned this, Ryouko,” her father said sharply, giving her a withering look. “You lied to us. You don’t know how important this is to her. At least give her a moment.”

Grimacing, Ryouko stepped carefully around her parents, heading over to the table. In response to her order, one of the sidetables next to the sofa reformed itself into a fifth chair, tiny electronic modules scurrying over each other and reconnecting in their new positions. She grabbed it brusquely, moved it next to the table, and sat down.

“Tell me at least this has nothing to do with me leaving,” her grandfather said, watching her out of the corner of her eye. “If you were really *that* concerned, you could have just asked—”

Ryouko shook her head sharply.

“No, granddad,” she said. “This has nothing to do with you.”

Kyouko gave the man a strange look.

The old man closed his eyes, seeming to gather his composure.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Sakura-san,” he said, addressing Kyouko. “And I am afraid we have been rather rude to such a famous guest, but I had hoped that, if I were ever to meet someone like you, it would be under more pleasant circumstances.”

“This doesn’t have to be a negative conversation,” Kyouko insisted, sounding professional. “Think of it as a new beginning. There are many possibilities as a magical girl. Surely I myself am proof of that.”

Ryouko couldn’t help thinking that Kyouko sounded like she was quoting a promotional brochure. Her manner of speech seemed to have lost its customary casualness. Something was off about her.

Ryouko’s father, having finally walked over, shook his head sadly.

“I don’t know what to say, Ryouko,” her father said, looking at her with solemn eyes. “Whatever you wished for, it can’t have been worth it. We told you. Your life is worth more than this. If it was that important to you, we could have helped you achieve it.”

“What was it, Ryouko?” her mother asked, watching her with a penetrating gaze. “What did you wish for? What could be worth a terrible life like that? Tell me it at least wasn’t trivial.”

Ryouko’s insides twisted. It was painful, being here.

“I—” she began.

“Her wish is her own business,” Kyouko interrupted quietly but firmly. “It is not for you to judge. She doesn’t have to tell you.”

“I couldn’t be happy here,” Ryouko said, looking down at the table. “I don’t expect you to understand, but I don’t think this life is for me. I feel so useless here.”

“At your age?” her grandfather said, looking at her with that disturbingly appraising look he had. “I might sound hypocritical, but you should have at least given it a chance.”

“We talked about this!” her mother pointed out with sudden loudness, ignoring the fact that she was admitting to illegal activity. “You agreed that you never would!”

“You would have found something, Ryouko,” her father said. “We knew you weren’t doing well in school, but you would have found something. Everyone does.”

“And so she did,” Kyouko pointed out, levelly. “There is no reason to condemn her choice. It was hers to make. She’ll be in good hands.”

“I can’t understand it,” Ryouko’s father said, shaking his head at her. “It’s a terrible decision, becoming a girl like that. It was very immature of you.”

If Ryouko hadn’t happened to be looking in Kyouko’s direction, she would have missed it, but Kyouko’s right eye twitched, ever-so-slightly, and her face seemed to tighten.

“Whose hands?” her mother demanded. “The same military that treats you girls like nothing but weapons?”

“The military that is keeping us all *alive*,” Kyouko said, voice frozen cool anger. “Do not degrade her like this. I’ll have you know that’s prosecutable.”

Ryouko eyes widened, staring at Kyouko.

“Kyouko, please!” Ryouko pleaded.

Kyouko glanced at her and took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized, bowing her head slightly. “You all know my history, probably. I still do not take reminders of it well.”

“It’s alright,” Ryouko’s grandfather absolved.

I could have sent someone else, Kyouko thought to Ryouko. *Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea, coming here. I’d forgotten how much I hate meeting the parents.*

It’s okay, Ryouko thought.

“It’s the same military you elected to join,” Kyouko commented, turning to look at Ryouko’s grandfather. “It seems rather strange to disapprove from your position.”

“*I* am two hundred and twenty four years old,” the old man said. “I can make my decisions in that regard. *She* is far too young.”

“I agree,” Kyouko said. “But there is no choice in the matter. For what it’s worth, girls in my generation contracted under far less favorable circumstances.”

Something clicked in Ryouko’s head, and she realized what was off about Kyouko.

She sounded *old.*

Before, she had spoken with a delinquent’s accent and vocabulary, of the sort you only saw in movies nowadays. She had slept on Ryouko’s shoulder, cracked jokes, and in general had defied what might be expected from a girl that nearly doubled her grandfather in age. Now, she sat with straight back, speaking formally, giving the impression that she and Ryouko’s grandfather were peers. There was steel underlying her voice, as if to remind listeners that she was more than four centuries old, and could tear you to pieces if she wished.

It was discordant and unnerving, and the situation was getting out of hand.

“Please, mama, papa,” she pleaded, meeting their eyes. “It’s over. It was my choice. I want you to support me. Please? Don’t let it be like this.

The moment stretched out.

“She is right,” Kyouko said, when no one responded immediately. “Please, let’s put this all aside for now.”

Ryouko kept her head down, but Kyouko looked among the three adults, watching as their faces registered that, no, they really didn’t have a choice anymore. Any arguing or pontification about the military, or about the ethics of contracting girls barely out of infancy, was now a moot point. Empty words, as meaningful as static.

Her father took a deep, measured breath.

“Alright, Ryouko,” her father said, grabbing her hand and looking her in the eye. “Like you said,

what is done is done. You are an adult now. I hope you're ready."

Her mother merely nodded.

"Alright," she said quietly.

"Yes," her grandfather said, reaching forward to grab one of the chocolates and toss it in his mouth thoughtfully. "There is indeed no choice."

Kyouko tilted her head at the gesture. Her parents followed suit, grabbing the chocolates and eating them politely.

"Maybe we'll even get to see each other," her grandfather said, chewing the candy. "Don't you, uh, magical girls get to have family visits and such?"

"That is correct," Kyouko interjected. "And that brings us to the real reason I'm here. If you don't mind, I'd like to brief you all on having a magical girl as a daughter. There's certain things you must know."

Her eyes unfocused for a brief moment.

Every other person in the room felt the internal *ping!* of an arriving message, the kind of signal that everyone was well-used to ignoring during conversation.

"Read it later when you have time," Kyouko said. "But I'll walk you through it while I'm here. First off, yes, it is correct that you will be allowed to visit, although this will be restricted during initial training, and *you*—"

She indicated Ryouko's grandfather.

—will only get one extra week of leave a year, and will still have to arrange visits for leave. Now, unfortunately, given how tight things are on the front, she will have to depart rather quickly, but she'll be able to stay around for about a week. Other than basic equipment provision and internal mesh reconfiguration, there won't be any other requirements during the time. We will arrange grief cube delivery at necessary intervals, but you're generally free to do as you wish. The message you've received contains details on where and when to show up."

They watched her as she took a breath to say more, eyes unfocused, clearly starting to recite an official speech.

"She has been automatically disenrolled from school, so you don't have to worry about that. Since your family now contains a standing member of the military, you're all entitled to benefits, including enhanced Alloc distribution, that you can read about later. As you may be aware, Ryouko is now officially emancipated, which entails a dissolution of much of your legal parental rights and responsibilities."

She reached into one of the recesses of her magical girl dress and pulled out a set of holographic brochures.

"In case you prefer physical media," she explained, sliding the brochures forward onto the table. "You are also advised that members of the local media may attempt to come interview you. Whether you accept is up to you. Governance, the Armed Forces, and the *MSY* would like to emphasize their gratitude, and the gratitude of humanity, for the sacrifice your family has made and will make."

Kyouko's eyes focused again.

“And now I imagine you have questions you may want to ask.”

“You’re damn right we do,” Ryouko’s grandfather said, leaning forward. “First, who the hell recruited her? Was it you?”

“No,” Kyouko said, looking glad to be able to say so. “Tomoe Mami couldn’t make it today.”

“It was Tomoe *Mami*?” Ryouko’s father spat out involuntarily.

“She saved my life,” Ryouko commented. “Simona and I were the victims of a demon attack.”

“You were attacked?” her mother asked incredulously. “And you didn’t even tell us?”

“I was busy,” Ryouko explained lamely.

“I am told she performed quite well, for a civilian,” Kyouko commented.

Her mother and father glanced at each other.

“So what’s your power?” her mother asked. “That’s not verboten, is it?”

“She’s a teleporter,” Kyouko said, electing to answer the question for Ryouko. “And she carries a ranged weapon. She won’t be engaging in any close combat if we can help it.”

Ryouko’s father glowered, clearly realizing that Kyouko was trying to perform a sell job.

“You mentioned mentors,” he commented. “Shouldn’t she only have one? Who are they?”

“Oh, yes,” Ryouko answered, figuring that if she had to have this conversation, she might as well try to impress. “Mami and Kyouko here are going to be my mentors. It’s definitely an honor.”

“Mostly Mami,” Kyouko demurred. “But knowing Mami, that means Ryouko here is destined for a role on her command staff. You have little to worry about.”

Not that being on her command staff makes you that much safer, Kyouko commented to her, privately. *But nothing wrong with lying a little to make everyone feel better.*

Wait, command *staff?* Ryouko asked. *Is that really true?*

Yes, Kyouko said. *But like I said, don’t expect to be sitting behind a desk vegetating. Mami doesn’t do things like that.*

Meanwhile, Ryouko’s father made a noncommittal noise.

“Well, now that there’s no choice in the matter, it’s good to hear she’ll have opportunities,” her father said. “I expect you to try your best to advance ranks, Ryouko.”

“Of course,” she said, and meant it, too.

Your parents seem surprisingly knowledgeable, Kyouko thought. *They haven’t even asked about the grief cubes and the soul gem. That’s usually the first thing to come up.*

They were researchers, Ryouko thought, mentally shrugging.

So the files say, Kyouko commented.

Her mother was giving her father a strange look.

“Well, Sakura-san, I appreciate you coming out here,” she said, voice carrying a clear undertone of dismissal. “But I think it’s time Ryouko went to bed. Also, we need time to discuss things among ourselves. I hope you understand. Do either of you still have questions?”

She glanced around at her husband and father.

“I do,” Ryouko’s grandfather’s said. “But I agree. It's time for her to go bed.”

Ryouko glanced at Kyouko.

Go ahead, Kyouko thought. *If he has questions, he has questions. I’m sure you’re tired.*

Ryouko nodded—even though she shouldn’t have—and got up.

“We can speak separately,” Kyouko agreed amenably, speaking to the old man.

In the end, it was well past two by the time Ryouko got ready for bed.

Finally changed, Ryouko staggered towards her bed, narrowly avoiding tripping over her telescope.

Read it later when you have time, Kyouko’s voice mocked in her memory.

Not today, that’s for certain, she thought, collapsing onto her bed.

She was supposed to meet Asaka tomorrow at one. She never slept this late; she would feel terrible in the morning.

She wondered what it would be like, not having to sleep.

“Ryouko?”

She looked over to find her mother in the doorway.

“I’m sorry to disturb you,” the woman said. “But I thought we should talk.”

“No problem,” Ryouko lied, forcing herself to sit up on her pillows. The woman walked over, sitting in the chair next to Ryouko’s desk.

“I’m sorry, mama,” Ryouko said. “But I’ve thought this through. Trust me. I know you’ll be worried for me, but I guarantee you I’ll survive.”

I can’t die before my wish is fulfilled, after all.

Her mother sat down on her bed.

“I won’t lie, Ryouko,” she said. “You’ve made a terrible decision. It’s not about the survival. It’s about the lifestyle.”

Ryouko looked at her mother carefully.

“I disagree,” she said. “That’s all I can say.”

The corner of her mother’s mouth twitched upward.

“Well, I suppose you are my daughter after all,” the woman said. “I just hope…”

Her voice trailed off.

“Hope what?” Ryouko prodded.

Her mother shook her head.

“You know what kind of work your father and I used to do,” her mother said.

“Yes, mama,” Ryouko said.

They had been staff scientists at the Prometheus Research Facility. Volunteers, like all researchers. They had essentially quit to raise a daughter, though they still showed up at the lab most nights.

“There’s a reason we don’t talk about it,” her mother said. “It’s not a pretty world out there. I meant it when I said that the military treats… magical girls such as you as nothing but weapons.”

“I know,” Ryouko said, bowing her head. “I did my research.”

“Of course you did,” her mother said, sounded a tad skeptical. “Just remember who you are. That’s all I ask.”

Ryouko looked up at her mother, wondering what she was trying to say.

The woman sighed.

“We talked about this, Ryouko,” she said. “We told you about this. You agreed with us. What could have motivated you—”

“It’s not up for discussion!” Ryouko insisted sharply.

She looked back down.

“So I lied, okay?” she said. “I didn’t think it would ever matter, since I wasn’t expecting to really ever get a chance at a contract. I don’t want to live my life on Earth like a nobody! What help am I to anyone here? The world is bigger than this!”

Her mother closed her eyes.

“I wonder what it is about our family?” she asked. “None of us can sit still. I just wanted us all to live together happily. Was it that much to ask?”

“There’s no reason we can’t be happy separately,” Ryouko pointed out.

Her mother looked at her.

“You’re very cruel for a girl your age,” she said.

Ryouko blinked.

“Wait, let me reword that—” she began.

“No, it’s okay,” her mother said. “But I have a bit of a request.”

“Request?” Ryouko asked.

“Let me see you transform,” her mother said, smiling just a little, and Ryouko thought she could almost catch a twinkle in the woman’s eyes.

“What? Why?” Ryouko asked.

“Why not?” her mother asked. “Indulge an old woman.”

Put that bluntly, her mother was right. There was no real reason not to. Except, well, the embarrassment.

Ryouko summoned her soul gem into its gem form.

She stood up. She swallowed her embarrassment…

And then, with a flash, she was done.

She exhaled slightly. She felt strangely nervous, and it didn’t help that her mother, rather than being dazzled or shocked, was instead scrutinizing her carefully.

“Lacey,” her mother commented. “And *green.* That’s not what I would have predicted out of you.”

“Alright, so it’s lacey,” Ryouko said, more annoyed than she should have been. “It’s not like I got to choose.”

“I guess it makes sense,” her mother said. “And an *arbalest.* That’s appropriate.”

“How so?” Ryouko asked, confused.

The woman shrugged.

“Matches the costume,” her mother said.

“And you know what an arbalest is?” Ryouko asked. “I didn’t. Until I got this.”

She gestured with her crossbow-laden left arm, carefully avoiding hitting her telescope.

“Your old mom is quite the history buff, I’ll have you know,” her mother said. “Or used to be.”

“I know, mama,” Ryouko acknowledged, shaking her head in amusement. “I just didn’t think it extended to things like this.”

“It started on things like this,” her mother commented.

Then, looking down, the woman nodded to herself.

“Alright, I’ll let you sleep,” she said, getting up. “You and your grandfather have been scheduled to leave on the same day, so I’m going to try and have a little party before you all go. I have to plan. Invite your friends.”

Ryouko changed back as her mother headed for the door.

“You know, Ryouko,” her mother said, stopping at the door. “Your father and I haven’t lived alone together since before you were born. It might be hard to get used to.”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine, mama,” Ryouko said.

The woman shrugged, then walked away, the door closing behind her.

Ryouko lay back down. Finally, she could—

The door slid open.

"Yes?" she asked, exasperated.

"I forgot to say," her mother said. "If you ever manage to meet your grandmother, tell her we're sorry."

"Okay," Ryouko agreed, just trying to get rid of her.

The door closed.

Wait, why? she thought.

And she would have thought about it some more, but her eyes felt so heavy, and her blankets were so warm…

"With all due respect, Kuroi-san," Kyouko said, twirling the wine glass in her fingers. "I'm a busy girl. I can't sit here forever answering questions, especially if you're just going to ask about the military. They have brochures for that. I'm here to answer questions about magical girls."

She kept her intoxication controls on, which meant that the helpful little nanites in her bloodstream stayed busy breaking the alcohol down. It was polite to accept offers of drinks, but she didn't want to lose her focus.

At the other side of the table, the old man harrumphed, holding his own glass.

"'Girl', you say. Everyone knows how old you are. You're nearly twice my age. I don't know why you all like to pretend to be so young."

Kyouko raised an eyebrow. What a cheeky old man.

"Don't dodge the point," Kyouko said, looking at him. "I'm saying I have work to do. If you're going to sit here and ask me about weaponry, I could easily be doing something else."

Kuroi Abe swirled his glass, looking down into what remained of the authentic French Merlot.

"Yes," he said. "But you won't. In fact, I'm willing to bet you've cleared your schedule for the right of the night."

Kyouko kept her face passive, even though he was spot-on. She had indeed cleared her schedule, handing off her prepared sermons to one of the other priestesses. As Mami's message had said, if she wanted to be a mentor, she should be prepared to take some responsibility.

Not that Mami didn't owe her for this. Even if Mami had military duties, she would have to pay back in other ways.

"You're treading dangerous ground, *boy*," Kyouko said.

"I asked around, in the past," the old man said, shrugging and ignoring her threat. "The first thing you girls do after the family visit is to try and hang around as long as possible, seeing what things are like, how the family is reacting. Gathering information, to relay to your *MSY* Mental Health Division later. I don't mind. Ryouko is going to need all the support she can get."

“So you kept me here,” Kyouko said.

“Yes,” the old man said. “I figured you’d appreciate the help.”

She hadn’t needed the “help.” She could easily have monitored the household from the outside. But no matter how canny the old man was, he had no way of knowing that.

“Well, if you don’t mind me asking,” Kyouko said, leaning forward. “Why exactly were you asking about something like that? It’s not exactly common conversation material.”

“On this planet, Ryouko is practically all I still care about,” the old man said. “That, and my daughter, but she can take care of herself. Ryouko, I’m not so sure about.”

He set the glass down and leaned forward as well.

“Let’s just say I’ve had reason to suspect that this might happen, someday,” he said.

“The incidence rate of magical girl potential is only about one in ten thousand,” Kyouko commented. “That’s a rather specific thing to worry about.”

“I don’t have much else to do with my free time,” the old man said. “I might as well scout out all the possible angles. And her personality seemed about right. I don’t really approve of her decision but, unlike my daughter, I am willing to accept that it is her decision, my previous criticism aside. If I didn’t understand her urge to leave, I wouldn’t be leaving myself.”

“So you kept me here to talk,” Kyouko said drily.

“That’s right,” the old man said. “I thought I could fill you in on our family. Maybe save you some work.”

In truth, Kyouko didn’t enjoy doing these at all. Navigating family dynamics was tricky work, and magical girls tended to be more likely to come from dysfunctional families. It was made worse by the way the hysterical reactions of some parents grated her. She hated being reminded of her own past, no matter how indirectly, and the damn “Visits” were always awkward.

Nor did she particularly enjoy conversations with nosy two-hundred-year-olds. It was made worse by the fact that she was always forced to adopt a more adult persona to reassure parents. The older folk that saw that then became convinced that just because she could act Ancient if she wanted to, it made her one of them, despite her teenage appearance.

She didn’t like being one of them.

As if on cue, one of her internal monitors asked for attention.

She listened to what it was relaying to her.

—and that stunt where you encouraged her to advance the ranks, as if it were perfectly natural!” Ryouko’s mother was saying. *“You sounded like you were proud!”*

“No I didn’t,” the father asserted back. *“You’re putting words in my mouth again! I was just being reasonable. What would it help, if I acted all hysterical, like you? I’m only giving her the best advice I can. Telling her to try and get promoted is only logical.”*

“That’s just like you,” the woman responded. *“You don’t even think this is a big deal, do you?”*

“What the hell are you talking about? I’m not happy, you idiot!”

Kyouko gritted her teeth despite herself. Parents.

The old man looked at her curiously.

"We wouldn't even be in this situation if it weren't for you!" Ryouko's mother said.

"Oh, not this again. You have no proof—"

"You're the one who thought it would be a good idea!"

"And you agreed with me! Enthusiastically, if I recall right."

"Now who's making things up?"

"You!"

"You know what—"

"What is it?" the old man asked.

"Her parents are arguing," Kyouko said, still listening, head tilted.

Something about the conversation didn't make sense…

"How do you know?" the old man, unable to hear it through the soundproofing.

Kyouko sighed internally. Those chocolates had contained stealthed surveillance bugs, designed to last about a week or so. It was standard procedure, but she could hardly admit that.

She pointed at her ear instead.

"Magical girl, remember?" she said. "We have better hearing than the rest of you."

The comment was even technically true.

The old man grimaced.

"You want to talk so bad," Kyouko said. "Explain to me what's going on."

She shot him an audio transcript, and suppressed a smile as he grunted in surprise at the military level direct message protocol.

"Their marriage has been on the rocks for years," the old man said, sighing, a while later. "To be honest, before Ryouko was born, they almost divorced. The child license arrived at just the right time for them to agree to give it another shot. They thought it might bind them together, somehow."

The old man smiled vaguely.

"Honestly, my wife and I didn't really think so, but we wanted a grandchild and we thought, 'Hey, why not? It might work.' It wasn't a great decision."

The smile faded.

"Well, anyway, it didn't work," he said. "They keep up appearances, though, for Ryouko's sake. That girl may be smart, but she's terrible at noticing certain things."

Kyouko nodded.

“Okay, but what’s all this about it being her father’s ‘fault’? That doesn’t make sense. How could it be his fault she contracted? Your daughter almost makes it sound like he did something.”

Abe looked down at the table, and Kyouko could tell he was deciding whether to reveal something.

“Okay,” he said. “So you know they used to be researchers, right?”

“Of course,” Kyouko said. “But the files didn’t mention what.”

“They worked for the military,” the old man said. “Working with magical girls, as a matter of fact. Developing weapons, data-mining, things like that. Kuma thought it would be a good idea to inform Ryouko of some of the more unsavory details about you girls, to dissuade her from wanting to be one. Nakase agreed, at the time.”

“Later, we found out that all we did was make her more curious. She tried to hide it, but we knew she was active on the forums, things like that. It was one of the reasons why I was paranoid about her contracting. To be frank, Naka-chan is really being unfair here, but their marriage is at the point where they both find the silliest reasons to get angry at each other.”

Kyouko nodded.

The old man shook his head in exasperation.

“All the women in this family are stubborn like that. Get it from my wife, I suppose.”

“Was Ryouko close with her grandmother?” Kyouko asked.

“Very,” the old man said. “The woman doted on her, even if she's too young to remember it much anymore. That’s why I don’t understand…”

He shook his head.

“Forgive me, it’s a personal topic.”

“I understand,” Kyouko said. “Now, you two had two daughters?”

“Yes,” the old man said, knowing what she was driving at. “Ryouko doesn’t know about her aunt, though. Personally, I haven’t seen her in over a century. We stay in touch though. I’m sure you understand.”

“I see,” Kyouko said, making a mental note of the matter. This would have to be addressed.

“Your family is pretty complicated,” she commented, finally.

“Yes,” the old man agreed.

“Hey Ryouko-chan,” the voice behind her said.

Ryouko turned and looked up at the stranger.

“Who are you?” she asked, drawing out the word “you” *childishly.*

“A friend of your parents,” the girl said.

She was a teenager, wearing a long ponytail. She looked familiar somehow…

Ryouko stared up at the girl, waiting to know who it was.

“Oh, I wouldn’t trust the face thing if I were you,” the girl said. “That’s not my real name. Don’t bother.”

Ryouko wrinkled her nose.

“That sounds suspicious,” she said.

In a world where violent crime was virtually nonexistent, and your personal enhancement locked up your muscles if you ever tried, children were still taught to be suspicious of strangers. Not every possible crime was violent, after all.

The girl laughed.

“I guess it does,” she said. “Your mother taught you well.”

“Hey, hey!” a woman nearby yelled.

The primary school teacher pushed her way forward through the gaggle of children piling onto the group of waiting transports.

She confronted the teenager.

“The school surveillance doesn’t list you as authorized to pick her up,” the teacher said, pushing her face in front of that of the girl’s.

“Take a look at my face,” the girl said, pointing at said face.

The teacher frowned and did so. Her stern expression relaxed a little, but she shook her head.

“You’re still not authorized, the teacher said. “I’m going to have to ask her parents about this.”

“Listen,” the teenager said, leaning forward. “Can I have a word with you in private?”

The teacher frowned, but acquiesced, gesturing at Ryouko to stay still.

“Wait here,” she said.

Ryouko watched curiously as the two of them retreated to a corner to talk privately.

A long while later, so long that all the other children had boarded their vehicles, and Ryouko had gotten bored and was spinning pointlessly in circles, the two of them came back.

“You better not be lying,” the teacher warned. “I’m more than willing to call the authorities if necessary.”

“I’m not,” the teenager reassured. “I just want to spend some time with her. That’s all.”

She held her hands up in a gesture of harmlessness.

“I’ll be watching,” the teacher warned.

“Come on Ryouko-chan,” the girl said, offering her hand.

“Who are you?” Ryouko asked.

“I told you; I’m a friend of your parents,” the girl said “I just want to be friends.”

Ryouko considered for a moment, then grabbed the girl’s hand. What was the worst that could happen?

“Thanks, Ryouko!” the girl said cheerily. “Now come on, let’s sit on the bench over there!”

When they got there, the girl offered her a chocolate chip cookie to placate her. Ryouko bit into it silently as the girl talked.

“You’re a pretty cute little girl,” the teenager said. “You look just like Naka-chan.”

“Uh-huh,” Ryouko said, focusing on her cookie.

“Listen, Ryouko,” the girl said. “Have you ever seen one of these?”

Ryouko looked at the girl’s hand—and dropped her cookie straight down onto the floor.

“A soul gem!” she said. “You’re a magical girl!”

“Yup!” the girl said.

“Wow!” Ryouko said, suddenly enthused. For a girl of her age, meeting a magical girl was like meeting a princess and a superhero at the same time—except that you had a distant chance of actually being one, someday.

“Can I touch it?” she asked.

The girl shook her head.

“Sorry,” she said. “A magical girl’s soul gem is too precious to be touched.”

Ryouko nodded seriously. That made sense.

“Can you show me some magic?” Ryouko asked.

The girl put a finger to her cheek, thinking.

“I don’t see why not,” she said, finally.

Ryouko leaned forward as the girl got up. Her friends would be so jealous of her when she told them about this!

The girl was briefly ensheathed by spectacular purple flash, and then her clothes were replaced by the elaborate purple costume of a magical girl.

It was a lacey, with buttons, and the girl’s soul gem formed a bright six-pointed star at the base of her neck.

Ryouko just stared. *The girl was the same color as Akemi Homura—but her costume was a* lot *cooler.*

The girl carried a large wooden bow.

“It’s a composite bow,” the girl explained, aiming for the sky, summoning a bolt out of thin air.

She fired, and the bolt soared into the sky, past transparent tubing and buildings, before detonating in a radiant purple burst, resembling fireworks.

"Ryouko," it spelled in the sky.

Ryouko, who had jumped off of the bench to look, clapped ebulliently.

"Wow!" she repeated. "I can't wait to be old enough to be like you!"

Instead of being pleased at the compliment, the teenager frowned sharply, then returned to normal, her bow and costume dissolving near-instantly.

The girl shook her head, voice suddenly getting that "seriousness" that adults had sometimes.

"I know it's cool," she said. "But you should listen to your parents before you make any contracts, okay? I'm serious."

Ryouko frowned, peeved. That was what everyone *said.*

"I guess I couldn't resist showing off," the girl said, smiling to herself.

Then she bent down, reaching eye level with Ryouko. Ryouko looked into the girl's eyes, and she looked back.

"I got you a gift," the girl said, holding up something in her hand.

Ryouko took it without hesitation, by this point thoroughly won over.

"Ooh," she mouthed, holding the bracelet in two hands.

"Listen, Ryouko," she said, patting the girl on the head. "It's very important that you keep all of this a secret, including the bracelet. Especially from your parents."

"Why?" Ryouko asked, sliding the oversize bracelet onto her wrist.

"It's very important…" the girl said, her voice dissolving as the world shifted…

—that she not learn any of it!" her grandmother exclaimed loudly, causing Ryouko to startle, at her vantage point behind the door.

Ryouko looked up, marveling at how enormous the door appeared.

"But why?" Ryouko's father said. "Why shouldn't she know?"

"This family has lost enough to those damn Incubators already," the older woman said. "The last thing we need is for her to see a damn role model. No. She can't disappear a hundred years like that and just expect to come back home like it's no big deal!"

"You're being unfair," Ryouko's father said. "She had obvious reasons."

"The both of you quiet down," Ryouko's grandfather said. "We have a little visitor."

The sound of footsteps, then the door swinging wide open, causing an eavesdropping Ryouko to stumble and fall—

Ryouko startled awake, gasping.

What the hell was that? she thought, a few moments later.

She felt her forehead. She was sweating.

10:30:16, her internal chronometer told her.

She lay in her bed, staring up at the ceiling, nursing the headache and exhausting tiredness that came with sleeping off-cycle.

Ryouko hadn't thought about that purple magical girl in a long, long time, even though that girl had helped start her quiet fascination with the topic. It was a childhood memory, one she had, indeed, never told her parents.

But the other part of the dream—she didn't remember that at all. What the hell did it mean?

Ryouko sighed. She wasn't going to fall back asleep without strenuous effort, even if she had yet to slept a full night by her standards.

Struggling off her bed, she slid her feet into her favorite bunny slippers. She should bring them with her, she thought. They must allow a few personal effects in your luggage.

She stopped in front of her desk. At her thought, the topmost drawer slid open, the desk's internal organizers presenting her with exactly what she was looking for.

She picked up the bracelet, regarding it in the light. It was a fairly simple bracelet, but one designed to please a child. It still glowed softly after all these years, a mundane application of fantastic technology. A bit of artwork decorated the outer surface: a stylized shooting star, encircling the edge.

The emblem of the MSY, Ryouko thought, startled. She had never realized that before.

A moment later, she slipped it on. It fit perfectly, now.

As she dug through her closet for clothes, she chewed over her memories. Her memory of the purple magical girl had been just like a child's. She remembered the flashy bits, the name "Ryouko" written in bright sparkles in the sky, but the other details that had come up in her dream —she hadn't been able to recall any of that before.

Who the hell was she? Ryouko thought. *What kind of person can walk around with the wrong name attached to her face?*

And the part of the dream after that. Was that real? She hardly had any memories of her grandmother. She had been too young…

Her memories of her grandmother tended to be very specific, and this wasn't one she had ever recalled before.

Ryouko scowled, putting on a pair of pants. If she ever met the woman again, she was going to ask a few questions. Maybe she would actually answer them, unlike her parents.

Well, in any case, she had voicemail.

She listened to it as she shrugged on a shirt.

"I'm really sorry about yesterday," Simona's voice sounded in her head. *"I was just a little surprised, is all."*

Surprised, Ryouko thought drily. *Well, that's one way to put it.*

"I want to make it up to you," the girl continued. *"So I was thinking the four of us could do something, maybe go watch that movie you were supposed to go watch."*

Oh wow, that, Ryouko thought. She had forgotten completely about that. Well, at least she had gotten out of that date in probably the most decisive way possible.

"I don't know, though," Simona demurred. *"I think you might want to tell the others yourself. So I'll leave it to you to do that before I do anything."*

Right, Ryouko thought.

She thought out an affirmative reply message, then an additional message to her other friends, kept very vague. She wasn't feeling ready for any phone conversations, so she left it at strictly text.

"Good morning, Ryouko," her grandfather greeted as she stepped out into the main room.

"Good morning," she responded, yawning, glancing around.

Her father was apparently out, but her mother had gotten up from her early morning nap and was ready at the counter.

"I had the technician stop by while you were asleep, so you can have a proper breakfast," her mother said, setting out a bowl of rice, pickled vegetables, and a bowl of miso. "It's not like we're going to be short on Allocs anymore. Not with two family members in the military."

Not knowing what the proper response to that was, Ryouko settled for smiling sheepishly and taking her seat.

As she chewed through her food, her mother and grandfather sat and watched her with disturbing intensity, as if she might stab herself with the chopsticks if they didn't both stare at her hard enough.

"I was wondering," Ryouko said, looking around at the both of them carefully. "Now that all this has happened, is there, uh—"

She paused, thinking over how to word it. The fact of the matter was, she had always sensed that her family kept certain things from her. Now that she was technically an adult, maybe they'd be looser-lipped.

"Is there anything you're keeping from me?" she settled on. "Things from your work, maybe? Anything that might be relevant? I know there's laws about telling things to girls of my age."

She doubted that, if there was, it had anything to do with laws, but it was a way for them to save face.

Her mother and grandfather glanced at each other.

"I won't say there's nothing," her grandfather said. "But you'll probably find out soon enough anyway. It's not something that's best explained right now."

"That's right," her mother agreed.

"I can't be satisfied with something like that," Ryouko said, making her gaze harsh.

Her grandfather shrugged, completely ignoring her attempt to convey an anger she didn't feel.

Ryouko sighed. It was always like this. She couldn't get worked up about it anymore.

Glowering, she settled into reading through her messages—specifically, the metric ton of military messages that had settled into her inbox the night before. Looking into the middle distance, she let the words insert themselves into her memory.

First, she read the one labeled as highly important.

Okay, she had a scheduled appointment for initial orientation and outfitting at the local *MSY* branch office at 13:00. She knew that already.

The next message was a quick primer on grief cube usage, indicating that she would receive a set of three in her family's delivery slot exactly three and six days after first contract. It went on to state that standard basal usage was actually about one every three days, but, as a new recruit, she was receiving extra, as a countermeasure against probable emotional turmoil. Recruits were instructed to try to stay as calm as possible, and to ask their nearest mentor, recruiting officer, or magical girl, for an explanation of why.

It also told her not to hesitate to request more, that allowing more than minor corruption was highly dangerous, and that there would be packaging so she could deposit grief cubes, either excess or used, back in the same delivery slot. It was highly important that she handle the cubes herself, and not allow any civilians to touch it, so if she wouldn't be home to receive the delivery, please issue instructions…

Ryouko moved on to the next message.

This one was the official welcome message from the military, full of patriotic indoctrination and other things like that. It admonished her to read all her messages carefully, and to ask her mentor or local liaison officer for more information, if necessary. That liaison was Patricia, she noted, though she didn't expect it to matter. The message also made sure to inform her of all the fantastic privileges and benefits she could expect as a member of the military.

After that, somewhat more interestingly, was the welcome message from the *MSY*. It informed her of the privileges she could expect from membership, including a *very* cushy additional Alloc stipend, as well as her responsibilities—the expectation that she vote in elections, serve as either juror or tribunal member in the Soul Crimes court if requested, and so forth. It listed and linked a dizzying list of additional resources to peruse, regarding standing for election, cultural traditions, internal days of observations and so on and so forth.

The message after *that* asked her if she felt she had sufficient meaning in her life, and invited her to attend a sermon at the local Church of Hope which, as luck would have it, was also the headquarters church, where you could often see the inspirational Sakura Kyouko herself speaking- She trashed it. No offense to Kyouko, but she wasn't interested.

Though now that she thought about, neither Kyouko nor any of the girls with her had said a word about it, even though they were almost certainly all affiliated.

That was interesting.

And they just kept on coming. There was a primer on military protocol. There was an informational guide on Alloc distribution, conversion to local colonial currency, and the investment opportunities she might pursue in the colonies, if desired. There was an interesting guide on security clearances, from which she learned that she now had security clearance level

one. There was a listing of local magical girls and other recent recruits, should she wish to socialize or ask questions—it contained an invitation to some sort of get together later. There was an informative outline of the legal and practical implications of emancipation.

Perhaps the most amusing message was the one labeled “Important Health Message”. It asserted that “Contrary to common belief, being a magical girl has no effect on one’s ability to get pregnant, and continued functioning of one’s contraceptive implants is expected and normal. No attempts should be made to disable the implants.” This message was paired with the admonition that “While we are aware that it will be difficult being away from home for months, frivolous use of magic is, as always, highly discouraged.”

Ryouko had had to struggle to keep a straight face on that one.

And on and on the messages continued, until Ryouko felt numb trying to continue to process them all. Apologizing to her family, she never budged from her seat, and even had lunch sitting at that table, blindly transferring food into her mouth with her chopsticks. Her family watched her with concealed expressions as she did so.

Finally, she stopped, just before getting to a message detailing the mesh reconfigurations and enhancement modifications that she would have to undergo. It was getting late, and this message was *long*.

She figured she would find out soon enough anyway.

She got up, bade them farewell, and left for her appointment.

Military

"As the early MSY began absorbing magical girl teams at a growing pace, stretching its borders beyond the local prefecture and gaining branches in regional cities, its leadership faced a new dilemma.

Rampaging magical girls, [either] amoral villains drunk on the dregs of power [or girls gone insane under the stresses and horrors of their new lives], had been a plague on the system from the very beginning, terrorizing weaker girls, unconcerned with the human population, and generally out for only themselves. [Their psychological makeup rendered them immune to the despair-induced deaths that, for better or worse, otherwise cleansed the system, forcing their elimination to be based solely on the consumption of power.]

Traditionally, such abhorrents were only eliminated after strenuous effort by other girls and teams or, in the cases of the most powerful, by ad-hoc alliances devoted to the task. In the emerging new order, it was natural to turn to the MSY instead, which clearly had the necessary manpower. While the original charter called for informal cooperation between teams in an afflicted area, in numerous cases it had proven impossible to collect the necessary manpower before significant damage was done.

After extensive debate, several of the most powerful and willing girls were collected and placed into a new team dedicated to this task, initially headed by the legendary Tomoe Mami herself. They took to calling themselves the *Guardia di Anima*, the Soul Guard, and though the Italian version of the name never quite caught on, this name would eventually accrue to the organization that grew from them. They would become the police force of the MSY, the enforcers of the new order, and the nucleus of the elite military branch familiar to readers today.

[It was also from this organization that the secretive Black Heart would eventually emerge, when necessity called. This organization, the intelligence division, black-ops force, and secret police of the MSY, would similarly form the core of the Black Heart known today. A history of this organization is available in a separate report to readers of security clearance four or above.]***

But as the newly formed Soul Guard proved itself capable of not merely killing, but also capturing these abhorrents, the leadership was faced with yet another dilemma, one that would help spur the MSY on the road to becoming something not seen before in the history of the world: a secret government."

*—Julian Bradshaw, "Mahou Shoujo: Their World, their History", Excerpt. [] indicates content redacted to those without security clearance. []*** indicates content requiring Level Three clearance or above.*

"Look at the General Staff today, and one will find a membership much changed from before the war, when the institution was a council of Unification Era Veterans and careerist bureaucrats. Today, not one member of the General Staff has failed to prove their mettle in combat, and if there are holdouts from the prewar days, they are all holdouts who have proven their worth.

No one exemplifies this influx of new blood more than the current Chief of the General Staff, Field Marshal Erwynmark, Hero of Aurelia and Sahara, whose current position caps a meteoric, decade-long rise from Brigadier General of Volunteers.

There is, however, one glaring exception to this general meritocracy. Despite a tremendous influx of magical girls into the officer corps, and a proliferation of magical girl lieutenant generals and generals, except for the politically appointed Tomoe Mami, not one has attained the rank of Field

Marshal, or attained a seat on the General Staff.

This is reflective of two factors. Firstly, it reflects an institutional reluctance to hand magical girls any more power than they already have. It is widely felt in the military that, between the MSY, the Black Heart's subsumption of the intelligence services, and overwhelming magical girl control of the elite Soul Guard, there is no need for any more magical girl control in the military.

The second factor is more unfortunate, and is a result of prejudice among elements of the military against handing over power to what, after all, appear to be teenage girls. Despite widespread disapproval of such sentiments within both the government and the general public, such feelings have proven stubbornly difficult to stamp out.

In this case, it is telling that among the newer members of the upper echelons of the officer corps, those who have risen through the ranks through prowess in field combat, such opinions are unheard of. Such prejudices appear to be solely the domain of those officers who have never personally seen combat.

Despite this, however, the combination of institutional inertia and ingrained beliefs have made the highest tiers of the military an unexpectedly hostile place for magical girls. Antipathy for the General Staff is thus widespread among magical girls in the field.

Over the years, this poisonous state of affairs has begun more and more to concern the government. Under the combination of government pressure—via Governance: Military Affairs and Governance: Magical Girls—and continued political maneuvering by Marshal Tomoe and the more enlightened elements of the officer corps, most military observers expect that the day will soon come when a second magical girl will ascend to the General Staff."

—Avnit Haasan, A History of the General Staff, Prologue.

Twenty-one Years Ago

"Yo."

Mami turned at the familiar voice.

"Oh, hello, Sakura-san," she said, smiling at the familiar face standing at the other side of the kitchen counter.

"I brought snacks," Kyouko said, using both hands to hold up a box full of assorted pastries. "From that bake shop you like. Expensive, but damned if it isn't better than the synthesized stuff."

"Of course," Mami said, leaning forward over the counter so that her apron strained over her chest. "And you didn't have to."

Kyouko made an elaborate shrugging gesture, as if to say "you know how it is". It shifted the straps of the tanktop she wore, which was noticeably different from the outfit she normally wore, day in and day out. Not big on fashion, that girl. It may have stemmed from the year or so she spent on the "street".

"Well, anyway, there's more snacks on the table," Mami said, turning back to her cooking. "I'm not quite done with the food yet, so feel free to help yourself."

As she returned to chopping her—very rare and expensive—fresh vegetables, she couldn't help but hum a little tune to herself. Her passion for cooking was one of the reasons she had paid to even have a kitchen, when most people had none.

Sometimes she thought back to her life alone, all those centuries ago. If someone had told her then that she would still be alive four hundred years later, cooking for friends, she would have laughed and thanked whoever it was for trying to cheer her up. If that same person had told her she'd be an important politician on some sort of legislature for magical girls, she would have suggested—kindly, of course—that whoever it was quickly purify their soul gem, lest they lose even more of their sanity.

But all of that had turned out to be true, and here she was, watching pots boil on a stove—thermoceramic and powered by who-knows-what, mind you—while waiting for friends to arrive for a party.

She spared a moment to look out the window to her right, at the futuristic metropolis of Mitakihara City, with its skyways and bustling starport, glistening in the sunlight.

Mitakihara City, de facto capital of the MSY.

Unlike some of the parties she held, though, this would be an intimate affair. Today there would be only the four of them.

The legendary Mitakihara Four, together and alone. It didn't happen often.

"Chocolate croissants!" Kyouko commented from behind her. "Well, I don't mind if I do."

"So you're here," Yuma said, sticking her head into the room and rubbing her eyes. She had been napping, a very rare occurrence for her, and it showed in her frazzled hair.

Mami paused her chopping to turn and look, at Yuma sticking her head from Mami's bedroom, at Kyouko seated on the rightward sofa leaning greedily over a coffee table of stacked pastries, at the large picture window in the back, providing another view out over the city. Many families had robotic modular furniture nowadays, but Mami could afford—and had the space for—better.

Yuma's presence was just the slightest bit awkward, since of the four of them Yuma maintained the oldest chronological age, at twenty-seven or so. It was necessary to blend in properly with the government bureaucrats she spent so much time around. It was a little strange, though, considering the rest of them stayed fourteen or so.

"Onee-chan!" Yuma followed up, diving down and hugging the much shorter Kyouko enthusiastically, causing Kyouko to almost drop her food. Yuma had her hair down, not having had time to tie it into the ponytail she wore nowadays.

Correction: It was *really* awkward. Especially since, normally, Yuma maintained a composure that was very adult and seemed…faintly seductive. There was no other way to put it.

Which was not something Mami approved of, but she generally held her silence. Yuma was more than old enough to be her own girl. Obviously. Those few years of age difference between them were meaningless in comparison to the four centuries of lives they had led.

Or should have been, at least. Somehow, in private, Yuma had held onto her status as little sister of the group. So *maybe* they overacted it just a little, for nostalgia's sake. That didn't change how much it meant.

Yuma smiled infectiously, and both Mami and Kyouko found themselves smiling goofily in

return.

"I brought those custard pastries you like, Yuma-chan," Kyouko said teasingly.

"Awesome!" Yuma said, getting up and heading for the table where Kyouko had dropped them.

Mami hid another smile. Once, long ago, Yuma would have said "Yay!" but that probably seemed a bit much for a "twenty-seven"-year-old.

"Good afternoon," said a voice in the doorway.

"Homura-nee-chan!" Yuma responded, dashing over to give her a hug too, a tiny bit of custard stuck to her cheek. Homura hugged back, and smiled too, which was heart-warming in its own way. Mami remembered a time when Homura wouldn't have responded that way.

To this day, Mami still didn't understand what had happened to her, to cause her to change personalities overnight and start spouting insane nonsense.

Enough of that, Mami thought. *Not today.*

"So the girl of the hour is finally here," Mami said, stepping around the counter to greet Homura. Homura, too, had taken the time to dress up a little today, she noted.

"I still say it's silly," Homura said, reaching up to pat Yuma on the head. "It's wasteful."

"You're the one who's being silly," Mami said. "How could we not celebrate your birthday?"

"Technically," Homura said, "it's not my birthday. It is merely the day I arrived at the orphanage."

"Technicalities," Mami said disparagingly.

A brief strange look passed over Homura's eyes, but she quickly followed with a "What can you do?" gesture with her hands, shrugging and smiling lightly.

"I brought fruit," she said, dropping a synthetic paper bag of the stuff on the counter.

In all honesty, Mami doubted Homura was seriously bothered by it anymore. Having the same mini-argument year after year for centuries on end leaked any actual meaning out of the words, until you found yourself saying the same things just for nostalgia's sake. It was tradition.

Though it had been strange how much it used to bother Homura who, the first time, had mumbled something about not having had one in a long time.

"Are you going to throw the October Third party again this year, nee-chan?" Yuma asked, knowing full well the answer was yes.

"Of course," Homura answered levelly. "That party isn't for me, so I have no right to say it's wasteful."

Mami shared a glance with Kyouko.

A very long time ago, Kyouko had made the mistake of comparing Homura's criticism of her birthday party with October Third, the mysterious day where Homura would buy a cake, seal herself in a room, and sing Happy Birthday quietly to herself—as if she didn't already seem crazy enough.

Homura didn't speak to Kyouko for three days.

They were over that now, though, and the end result of the whole incident was that they somehow ended up throwing a whole party every year on October Third—for the birthday of the goddess Homura insisted existed.

Speaking of strange and awkward parties…

Though it wasn't really that bad, to be honest. It was actually good fun, and it was easy to think of it as politely attending a religious celebration for a devout friend. Only in this case the religion was rather eccentric, and the friend insisted on keeping her apartment decorated with a giant holographic pendulum and a rather…eccentric design scheme.

It was also the only party she insisted on overseeing herself, even though it was typical for Mami to always do it, though Mami had to admit Homura wasn't too bad at it.

In a strange way, all of it seemed to make Homura happier. She said her goddess would have wanted it to be lively and happy, with all of them, so she insisted they have a good time.

Those parties were some of the few times Mami felt that Homura was emotionally vulnerable. It was clear that Homura thought of her goddess as a friend, rather than as someone to be truly worshipped.

She was fond of making offhand comments that implied as much. Things like "Oh, She would have loved this dress," or "Your cakes are wonderful, Mami; She thought so too," always spoken so that, somehow, you could hear the capital S in "She".

Even so, their attempts to drill her for further information always came up empty.

Homura was always on her guard, afraid of something, and they had never gotten her to speak about what kind of girl she imagined her goddess to be, or why she thought she had ever tasted Mami's cakes.

For heaven's sake, after Sayaka's demise, they'd never even managed to get the name of the girl out of Homura again, and neither she nor Kyouko remembered it anymore.

Maybe if they could, it would be a clue, something they could look up. One of Mami's theories was that Homura's "Goddess" was actually just a dead friend of hers, someone she had worshiped and later obtained insane delusions about.

It was possible—just look at the fixation Kyouko still had on Sayaka. Maybe, if you were just a bit more obsessive…

Among other things, that was why she and, to a lesser degree, Kyouko and Yuma had spent the past few centuries hinting, cajoling, scheming, and even outright suggesting that Homura visit one of the MSY's friendly psychiatrists, someone discreet and reliable.

Mami had even gone so far as to trick Homura into meeting privately with one, which had been…

Well, the therapist—one of the best, a hybrid clairvoyant-telepath—had fled crying from the room, and when Mami confronted Homura about her rudeness, Homura explained blandly that she had merely fed the girl a few of her more bleak memories, the ones that weren't "cosmically censored".

Message taken; Mami never tried tricking her again.

She would have had a bit more success if Yuma and Kyouko would just *support* her a little, but the two of them just didn't seem to care that much, and Kyouko had even gone so far as to suggest

that Mami was getting a little obsessed herself.

One of these days she was going to figure out that Akemi Ho—

“Uh, Mami,” Kyouko interrupted, pulling at her shirt and gesturing at the pot boiling on the stove, which was threatening to overflow.

“Oh dear, ah, I’ll be right back,” Mami managed politely, rushing back over. She wasn't big on thought-controlled stoves, either.

“So how much of your primary consciousness is with us today?” Homura asked of Yuma, as Mami pulled the lid off the pot and starting hastily dropping in the soup ingredients.

“Seventy-three percent!” Yuma announced proudly. “It’s a special occasion.”

“Seventy-three, huh?” Kyouko repeated, sounding bored. “And what’s the other twenty-seven doing at a time like this, oh Public Order Representative?”

“Among other things, installing selective attention deficit scripts into the new generation of surveillance drones,” Yuma said. “So they don’t report seeing girls like you jumping around the tubes. Not that *you’d* care.”

It was a gross misuse of her power, Mami mused, reaching for a pan from the cabinet.

Some people had robotic assistants for minor things like that, and Mami could have afforded one, but that just seemed like cheating.

Though speaking of robots and Yuma, Mami had always wondered how Yuma evaded the AI watchdogs, and how she subverted her own second half. She wasn’t sure she wanted to know, though, honestly.

Mami turned her head, keeping an eye on the conversation behind her. They were all seated now.

“That can’t possibly be healthy,” Kyouko said, continuing the topic.

She leaned forward.

“Listen,” she added, eyes serious. “If the computer networks went down tomorrow, are you sure you wouldn’t go into some kind of coma?”

“That’d never happen. I run regular checks to make sure I still fulfill the Volokhov Criterion,” Yuma said, pursing her lip. “It’s a requirement.”

She was peeved, as you could tell from the emergence of a slight, annoyed lisp, pronouncing “Volokhov” as “Vo-yo-khov”.

“Well, I wouldn’t know what to do with myself if I were splitting my attention like that all the time,” Kyouko said, leaning back in the sofa.

Mami turned back to her cooking, reaching onto a shelf for some seasoning.

“Oh, I know what *you’d* do,” Yuma said. “It’s obvious. All those girls you know—”

“Don’t make lewd faces, Yuma-chan,” Homura chastised. “It doesn’t become you.”

Mami started heating the pan, pouring in some oil to start the cooking process.

“Besides,” Homura deadpanned. “Do it too much, and Kyouko here might start getting some ideas. We’re trying to preserve your innocence here.”

Mami choked back a laugh, managing not to drop her spoonful of chili sauce.

Homura and Yuma started laughing outright, both at the mockery of Kyouko and the suggestion that Yuma was “innocent” in any way.

“I hate you guys,” Kyouko said. “Those are just rumors! Unfounded, baseless slander and lies!”

“You see?” Yuma said, mirthfully. “When she starts feeling guilty, she starts using bigger words.”

“I see what you mean,” Homura agreed mercilessly.

“Oh, come on!” Kyouko said.

“Lay off her, girls,” Mami intervened, not looking away from the vegetables she had thrown in the pan. “Let’s save it for after I bring out the alcohol. We can discuss Kyouko’s transgressions then. It’ll be more fun.”

“Yeah, that’s righ—Wait, what?” Kyouko began. “Not you too!”

Mami ignored her, smiling as she stirred the food below her.

“So how’s your new pupil holding up, Homura?” Yuma asked, after she had finally caught her breath again, abruptly changing the topic.

“Fine, thank you very much,” Homura said, rather briskly.

“You know, we have an entire structure set up for that sort of thing,” Yuma commented, speaking to the girl of the hour. “Formal procedures and such. You should use it.”

“Except then it wouldn’t be secret,” Kyouko said. “And what that’s about, I’ll never get.”

“I don’t want people treating her specially just because she’s my pupil,” Homura explained, a slight edge to her voice.

“We both know that’s not true,” Kyouko insisted. “At the very least, you could tell us who she is. But *nooo*, it’s a secret. You know, we could find out with just a little effort. All we’d have to do is ask around. It’s not possible for no one to have seen you two.”

“That’d be rude, nee-chan,” Yuma said.

“See, this is way more suspicious than anything I’ve ever done,” Kyouko complained. “But I’m the only one that ever gets made fun of.”

“Oh, so that’s what you’re mad about,” Homura said, in the tone of one who's solved a puzzle.

“Come on, you know this ain’t fair,” Kyouko said. “Back me up on this, Mami.”

There was a pause.

“Mami?”

But Mami was no longer listening. Instead, she was staring down into her cooking, thinking.

“Innocence”, they had mentioned. Well, it had been a long time since they had possessed any of

that.

They had sacrificed it all.

But it was all worth it in the end, wasn't it? This idyllic world, free of strife, endlessly prosperous.

Especially for magical girls. Truth be told, Mami could afford to hold a subdued party like this every day, if she wanted. If she had the time. If she had friends to join her.

She watched the chopped shiitake mushrooms and bamboo sizzle in the pan, but saw instead the past, everything that had happened.

This was the world they had fought for, she thought. The world they had given everyone. What did it matter how much blood stained their hands? What did it matter what they had seen and done? What did it matter if the Yuma-chan they had once known was now nothing more than a pleasing veneer?

Wasn't it time to enjoy the fruits of their labors?

Later that night, they ate their way through the cake Mami had made for the occasion. In the corner of another table, the gifts to Homura were carefully piled, a box of chocolates from Kyouko, and—embarrassingly for the two girls who had obtained them—a pair of absolutely identical next-generation handguns, extracted nefariously from military prototype storehouses. It was made even worse by Homura admitting that she had already acquired her own, a while back.

"Aren't you getting tired of it all?" Mami asked, finally daring to push the question, tongue loosened by just a bit of alcohol.

"Eh?" Kyouko asked, mouth full of cake.

"All this work, all this politicking, the MSY," Mami said, gesturing expansively with her arm. "Part of me just wants to stay home and have my cake, so to speak."

The other three inspected her with suddenly serious eyes, everyone except Kyouko putting their forks back down.

Maybe it wasn't such a good idea to bring it up now, Mami thought.

"To be honest, I get what you mean," Kyouko said, gesturing at Mami with a fork that still had a tiny piece of cake speared on it. "It'd be nice to just lie back and relax, have some fun, and throw some parties for a while. It wouldn't even have to be permanent. You could always just go back to work in a few years if you wanted."

Kyouko took a moment to eat the cake, which was layered strawberry, with lemon filling.

"Or a few decades," Mami said, eyes casting downward for a moment. "But I wouldn't want to do something like that without someone to spend the time with."

She looked up, to read their expressions. They looked sympathetic, but…

"I couldn't forgive myself," Homura said. "Or, rather, I'd want something else to do, at the very least. I made a promise, you know. I'm not sure what else I *could* do, but maybe I'll think about it."

“I’m sorry, Mami,” Yuma said, abandoning all pretense that this was a conversation about hypotheticals. “I can’t imagine leaving my work behind. Not now. Not this century, honestly.”

The slight bounce that was usually in her voice was absent.

Yuma looked down into her cup of flavored sake.

“And frankly, I’d try to talk you out of it,” Yuma said. “You might not think so, but the organization needs you. It needs all of us. We can’t really just *leave*.”

“It’s okay,” Mami said, tracing a path through the rug with her finger. “I didn’t really expect otherwise.”

She said that, even though she had been hoping for a slightly more receptive response.

“If you want to take some time off, I’m sure none of us will have any objections,” Kyouko ameliorated. “I’ll probably even go with you. Maybe just have a vacation. Certainly we could do that.”

“Maybe we could take a tour of the colonies,” Mami said, looking up at the ceiling, thinking out loud. “I don’t think we’ve done enough in terms of getting to know the girls out there. So, you know, we could frame it as like work. Sort of.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Homura said, sipping some of her drink. “I’ll see what I can do about joining you.”

Yuma shook her head.

“I’m sorry, Mami,” Yuma said. “I couldn’t. Not unless it were a long time from now. The MSY relies on me to keep our cover from being blown, and as long as I have to be connected, I can’t really leave Earth. Plus, I’d have to spend a good deal of time, um, well, making sure of things.”

“Told you it wasn’t healthy,” Kyouko mumbled under her breath.

“Well, we’ll see,” Mami said, smiling amiably. She couldn’t have really hoped for better, and maybe a vacation in the colonies was just what the doctor ordered…

Present Day, Present Time

Mami opened her eyes.

She been reclining in her seat, not exactly sleeping, but dozing and thinking. Now, she stared upward, watching the stars through the multiple layers of transparent material between her and sky, as her vehicle drove her to the starport. Next to her lay the last few of the scones, uneaten. She had gotten tired of reading her messages, so she had taken a nap, or as much of one as she could.

That vacation had never happened. Events had intervened: the war, and all of its ramifications. Yuma had even less time now, Kyouko had her cult, and Homura…was missing.

She sighed, looking at the nearly full moon, with the familiar, pearly-white face she remembered from her past. At the bottom one could see a bright patch of blue and green, the beginning of an

ambitious plan to terraform the poles, now mostly suspended with the war. Clinging to the edge of this was the near side Armstrong Military Defense Station—formerly a scientific station—which could be discerned by the smoothly metallic sheen it gave to that region of the moon. On the invisible far side, Mami knew, was the much larger Aitken Defense Station, with its missile batteries, forcefields, heavily fortified bunkers, mining facilities, and so forth.

Who would have thought, all those years ago? Mami mused.

The forest of tubes above her was starting to grow denser and denser. Mami knew that this signaled that she was descending. Soon she would be in the subterranean networks near the starport, where the aboveground networks abruptly disappeared.

The moment she finished thinking that, it happened, the sky disappearing and Mami plunged into darkness for the briefest of moments. Then, the inner surface of the bubble around her lost its transparency, displaying Mami's preferred imagery, which was only a little brighter: a replica of the night sky, no tubes and full of stars. It brought to mind all those demon hunts in the dead of night, all those years ago.

Though Mami was aware she was romanticizing it, just a tad. After all, given the lights of the city, even back then, there was no way they could have seen the stars clearly.

Well, whatever.

And then she was there, the screen returning to transparency, showing her the brightly lit interior of an underground receiving station for the starport, one of those designated for high-ranking military and government officials, rather than the larger, more standard public stations.

Above her, the curved ceiling was decorated with an enormous stylized representation of human space, complete with a color-coded network of lines indicating the standard shipping and travel routes. Out of necessity, it was holographic, so that one was looking up into the galactic plane, with various systems at slightly closer or greater distances, scale exaggerated for effect.

Like all such receiving stations, it served two purposes: to enable newly arriving passengers to meet friends, other officials, and others before departing, and to enable those fresh off the scramjet to meet their receiving party. There was a deliberate gap between the receiving station and the intra-starport shuttles, to fulfill aesthetic considerations, and also to allow passengers to sort themselves into the right shuttles.

Her vehicle slid to a smooth stop at one of the berths, directly under the representation of Earth, rotating image of the planet overlaid by the austere symbol of the state: Two white block arrows, pointing in opposite directions.

She disposed of the scones into a discreet disposal slot, and stepped out of the vehicle.

There were a few good points to being back.

"Good evening, ladies," she greeted, smiling in the direction of the two girls who had walked up to the vehicle as it approached.

"Welcome back, Mami," they chimed in unison.

Dressed in casual clothing as they were, they would have blended in with the crowds on the streets outside—well, except for their obvious non-Japanese ethnicities. Strictly speaking, they should have been in uniform, but, as a rule, magical girls dodged wearing their formal uniforms when they could, a practice the military mostly turned a blind eye to.

Mami needed no facial recognition technology to identify her two bodyguards.

On the left, Karina Schei, the Norwegian shield generator with the green costume and battle-axe.

On the right, Shen Xiao Long, the Chinese teleporter, with the unusual pitch-black costume and *jian* sword.

The shield and the teleporter. That was the standard bodyguard that had been designed for the highest-ranked officers, including all full generals and, naturally, field marshals. Initially, Mami had felt guilty being required to make use of so much manpower just to protect herself, a sentiment shared by the other high officers.

After the first few months of the war, they stopped feeling guilty.

The three of them started to walk into the terminal, heading for the shuttles, Mami flanked on both sides by her bodyguards in a small triangle.

As they walked, they drew looks from those around them. The crowd here, mostly military personnel and magical girls, was a lot savvier, and didn't come crowding to look. Still, though, there were a few cries of "Mami-san!" and "Field Marshal!", and quite a few salutes, even though, since she was not in uniform, they were not required to.

Mami smiled and returned the salute of a young second lieutenant, one standing stock-still next to her as she passed by. The records listed him as one hundred sixty three, but he blushed like a schoolboy as they walked by. So did a telekinetic magical girl a few steps back.

Mami knew it wasn't just her. Put simply, she and her two bodyguards shared certain characteristics that ensured they made an impact on every room they walked into. It would have been have enough to make her suspect whoever assigned them to her, except that the "who" doing the assigning was an AI who couldn't care less.

Had she really been desirous of companionship, she could have managed it easily, Mami thought. But unlike certain others—she suspected Kyouko—she wasn't willing to exploit her commander's position for things of that sort.

Mami slowed her pace, glancing around. She had a meeting scheduled here, and she didn't see the person she was supposed to meet. Until she saw her, it wasn't a good idea to hop on the shuttles.

Lithe as a cat—which it almost was—the Incubator Kyubey appeared at Karina's feet, walking through her legs and like always, seeming to come out of nowhere.

Good evening, Mami, Kyubey thought.

"Good evening, Kyubey," Mami said, stopping and bending down to offer her arms. Kyubey obligingly jumped into them, then clambered into a perch on her shoulder.

Her two bodyguards smiled at each other, as if sharing a joke.

"Kyubey likes you the best, Mami," Xiao Long said.

"Nonsense," Mami replied. "He doesn't have any emotions. Isn't that right, Kyubey?"

That is correct, Mami, Kyubey thought. *I do not understand this constant fascination some of you have in claiming I have emotions I do not have.*

"Aw, don't be like that, Kyubey," Karina said, leaning forward and tapping the Incubator on the

nose. “You can admit it. We’ll keep your madness a secret.”

I am not insane, Kyubey thought.

Mami smiled slightly at the exchange. The newer generation just didn’t understand how ruthless the Incubators could be if they wanted to be.

But, it was probably harmless.

In any case, Kyubey thought, turning its head to look at Mami. *I am here to give you my regards as you leave. We Incubators would like to remind you that you are a valued contributor to preventing the Heat Death of the universe.*

Totally insane, Xiao Long thought, shaking her head.

I am not, Kyubey insisted. *However, before the three of you continue onward, I would also like to inform you that Marianne is waiting to speak to you.*

Where is she then? Mami asked. *I’ve been looking for her.*

Kyubey turned its head meaningfully to their right, and they followed its eyes.

Mami searched with her eyes for the girl, the magical girl from France with the mind reading powers, entangling strings, and smoothly professional demeanor, but saw no one she recognized.

Over here, someone thought, and Mami turned her attention to a nondescript female private resting on a bench. Japanese, or so she appeared.

I’ll leave you to it, then, Kyubey thought, jumping off Mami’s shoulder.

Mami nodded to her bodyguards, who nodded back with understanding.

Mami stopped, and walked over to a nearby bench, deliberately not looking at the girl. Just taking a break.

A few of the passerby looked over, curious, but most didn’t see anything untoward.

Marianne François was Mami’s Intelligence officer, and a Lieutenant General in the Black Heart, the secretive Special Operations branch of the military and government. It was also the Black Ops branch of the MSY, having in fact been founded for that purpose. It had been natural for the Black Heart to take over those operations, since they had experience and qualifications that no existing government department could match. It did, however, make the government just a little nervous.

The Black Heart was Yuma’s former division. In conspiracy theory and legend, it was a secret police, an assassins’ guild, a destroyer of governments, an instigator of revolutions, everything all rolled up in one.

And it was loyal to the MSY.

Mami knew about it better than most. The Black Heart was nominally a branch of the Soul Guard, after all.

Isn’t this a bit much, Marianne? Mami thought, leaving her bodyguards out of it.

You wanted a private meeting, Mami-san, the girl thought back. *And you hinted it was Black. So, I treated it as such.*

Black. Meaning: MSY business.

Fair enough, Mami thought, thinking that these spies enjoyed their games a bit too much. *Let me tell you what I want then.*

I want you to perform a thorough investigation of the grief cube supply and logistics chain, Mami thought. *Report back to me about any irregularities you find, and look into the causes. Anything beyond that that you may wish to follow up, I leave to your discretion.*

For your reference, I know of at least one probable irregularity. There appear to be occasional stoppages in the supply chain to some units, and I have it on good authority that it does not appear to be a technical fault. There are also allegations of damaged girls returning from the battlefield disappearing, but this is less certain, so it may also be fruitful to examine the medical departments.

There was a long pause.

That is quite a tall order, Mami-san, Marianne thought. *The entire supply chain?*

Feel free to focus on what you think are the relevant aspects, but yes, the entire thing. Also, just to be clear, what I just told you should not be further relayed. Any agents you want to use should not be informed of what our suspicions are.

My agents will perform better if they are informed of what they are looking for, Mami-san. Grief cubes are important, yes, and what you say is disturbing, but this seems a bit paranoid, especially for you. And that's coming from me.

I have a bad feeling about this one, Mami thought, thinking about the fact that Kyouko also seemed to have a bad feeling about it. *I will also do my best to probe around at the upper levels, but that is not usually productive, as you know.*

Understood, Mami-san, Marianne thought. *Because of how in-depth this is, I might not be able to deliver full results for weeks, though I will certainly keep you informed of anything interesting I find.*

That will be fine, François-san, Mami thought.

You can call me Marianne, Mami-san. I've said that before.

Mami got up from the bench, stretching her arms casually.

"Well, let's go, girls," she said to her bodyguards. "I'm done resting."

They gone up smoothly, as if nothing had happened.

They quickly routed themselves to the proper shuttle and, as they stepped through the double doors and found a seat, the others glanced at her but politely avoided staring. Due to space and efficiency considerations—primarily because there were only a fixed number of possible ending destinations—they were obliged to ride the shuttles with others scheduled for the same flight. To Mami, it brought back memories of public transportation.

Her bodyguards scanned the crowd around her idly, even though there was no need to. It fit their training.

The ideal personal protection complement would also include a mind-reader and a clairvoyant, but

such magical girls were too rare to be expended on escorting generals back and forth among safe locations on Earth. There was a certain limit to it.

The shuttle departed, taking them for a brief ride through the building, then stopped at the civilian receiving station. It was, of course, entirely possible to take the scramjets without a final destination in space, and earthbound travel was not under military control. As a field marshal, Mami could have requested a more private flight, but there were reasons not to be that extravagant.

“Oh wow, it’s Mami-san,” the murmurs began, the moment the doors opened, and people waved at her and said her name as they stepped through the doors and saw her. Some stopped and stared intently at her, trying to fix the image to send to friends.

“No need to stare people, don’t block the door,” Karina intoned ritualistically, getting up, and gently pushing any of them that were standing still. Of course, this was mostly just an excuse for Mami’s sake.

Soon the doors closed, indicating that the shuttle was at capacity.

Mami bore their looks stoically as the shuttle again departed. After all, the looks were awestruck rather than unfriendly.

From there it was only a short ride to the scramjet itself, where they stepped into narrow moving walkways flanking both sides of the plane, directing themselves into regularly-spaced opening leading into the plane itself. Fancy structural engineering for a fancy futuristic age.

Having timed her arrival quite well, Mami endured only a short wait inside the scramjet before it was announced that all planned passengers had arrived, except for those the system had determined were too far away to possibly make it on time. Given the to-the-second reliable city transportation systems, the extremely fast speed of the vehicles, and the numerous systems in-place to yell at you IN YOUR HEAD to get moving, it baffled Mami how you could still manage to miss a flight, especially given that it still cost a small—admittedly nominal—sum of allocs to book a new one.

Admittedly, it was a *lot* more pleasant than it used to be, but it was still enough incentive for most people to try to arrive as close to the last moment as possible. That was mostly intentional, and the practice of using multiple doors at once kept lines at a minimum. It helped that carry-on baggage was nonexistent, on the principle that flights were very short and the plane could provide everything you needed.

Overall, though, air travel was a lot more comfortable than it used to be. Synthesizers in every seat provided refreshments, snacks, and meals on-demand, and the entertainment was, relatively speaking, top-notch, or as top-notch as it could possibly be given that most travelers were still obliged to sit in chairs arranged in rows. The holography was impressive, but without access to the restricted VR implants, it couldn’t quite make you forget where you were.

At least there was a lot more leg room.

Beyond that, Mami was an exceptional case. Traveling in the highest-class cabin, she and her bodyguards had a room to themselves, with beds, should they desire. Personally, they had no luggage, even of the non-carry-on type. They had nothing to bring in either direction.

Mami was used to traveling high-class compared to others. She had been on many planes in her lifetime, and after the first couple of trips, the MSY was more than wealthy enough to send one of its “executives” around first class. Even if said executive looked like a teenage girl, and didn't

have any official titles to speak of…

She spent the time chatting with her bodyguards, reviewing messages, issuing orders, and planning her future itinerary, more or less all at once.

One of the reasons she had been able to take leave and travel to Earth was the fact that she wasn't currently active in the field. She was "field marshal" of the Yangtze sector which, while in the danger zone for alien attack, had yet to suffer more than the occasional long-distance raid. Inspecting defenses, dealing with bickering subordinates, and coordinating with colonial governments wasn't the most exciting job in the world, but it did provide a relatively high measure of free time.

The flight to the equatorial space elevator, anchored on a permanent adjustable platform in the ocean just southeast of Singapore, lasted a short twenty-five minutes.

They landed at the outer edge of the city, where most of the civilian passengers navigated their way to the waiting shuttles back into the starport, while the military passengers got on a separate tram, heading for the elevator terminus, which was temporarily connected to the land.

Following the general "just-in-time" policy of nearly all travel, arriving scramjets were scheduled to arrive as tightly packed as possible. Thus, when Mami and her bodyguards emerged from the terminus tunnel onto the freshly-assembled elevator platform, they found it already packed full of military personnel, with more arriving by the minute.

All things considered, it was fairly luxurious form of travel. The platform had floor space equivalent to the average school gymnasium—or rather, the gymnasiums Mami remembered from the past. In the center was a small food stand, already doing excellent business—or it would be if the food weren't free.

Scattered around the platform were a large assortment of benches, chairs, relaxation areas, and holography displays, for entertainments. There were even a substantial number of VR booths, free for the military and their active VR implants, exorbitant for those very rare civilian travelers—who generally could afford it anyway, given that they were already paying for space travel.

The outer edges appeared to be transparent, and in a certain sense this was true, though it was really a carefully managed view of the outside relayed through the wall with fiber optics. It was a far cry from the days of the first elevators, which involved claustrophobic metal discs hardly bigger than a large room in which, for various reasons, not more than a couple of people could be placed at once.

Mami wasn't hungry, nor was she in the mood for more attention, so she maneuvered her way around several groups of people, finding a private nook near the edge to look out at the ocean and city. As she did so, there was a palpable shift in attention towards her, the standard array of murmurs and salutes and stares, but nothing overwhelming. Everyone was military.

Earlier, she had taken the time to ask about her guard's vacations, which naturally coincided with hers. Shen had taken the time for a very quick visit to family back in Nanjing. Her family was one of those which had numerous girls scattered throughout the MSY, and consequently had managed to stay cohesive and supportive despite the secrecy that had once predominated.

Such families were surprisingly common, given the tendency of family members to have similar psychological makeups, and thus similar tendencies to contract. In fact, in the relative serenity of the MSY-order, there were many which considered being a *mahou shoujo* a family occupation of sorts. This raised the hackles of some of the older girls, who felt the consequent nepotism to be unfair. Others—primarily those with multiple contracted descendants—felt it to be no problem.

Theoretically, Mami did feel arrangements like that to be unfair, but had to concede that life was unfair sometimes. For one thing, all her pupils, such as the newly-contracted Ryouko, got a rather sweet deal compared to most, though she tried to make sure they earned it.

Speaking of which, she had been obliged to send a message to Kyouko apologizing and asking her to take care of things, though she assumed the girl had figured that out on her own. Mami just couldn't realistically take care of her pupils' early development nowadays.

Her other bodyguard, Schei, was, however, unique in her family, except for a distant cousin somewhere. She was a recent recruit, part of the initial boom in contracting that followed the onset of the war. Unfortunately, her family lived on Nova Roma, so it wasn't realistic for her to visit.

Schei had used the time off to play tourist—for the third time—around Mitakihara, taking in such sights as the University and nearby Science Division HQ, inside the complex near Chronos Biologics. This was part of the cluster that also contained the MSY Leadership and Rules Committee Offices, within the former corporate heart of the city. There was also the recently erected official museum, and, somewhat further away, the hybrid HQ of MSY Governmental Affairs and Governance: Magical Girls. The whole area was getting to be known as the Magi district.

Needless to say, they had all once been disguised as something else. Science Division had been the offices of Fiat Lux, a prestigious scientific organization known for supporting a variety of famous labs. The two Primary Committees had been part of the administrative offices of Hephaestus Nanotechnologies, which was thoroughly infested with MSY representatives, given that several of the companies that had been merged into Hephaestus were once MSY companies. Governmental Affairs had once been *Privacy Now!*, an organization of legal scholars and activists dedicated to reducing government surveillance, conveniently located next to what had once been Governance: Public Order.

Now, though, Mami leaned back against the padded seating, looking out at the city and the ocean that now intervened between them and it. Singapore, with its MSY branch offices and corporate offices, some even visible on the skyline, had once been, in what felt like ancient times, a *Mahou Shoujo* neutral ground, a place for nomadic poorer girls to sell grief cubes and mercenary services, and for richer girls to buy. It had been lucrative for the girls who oversaw the territory, and had been one of the natural first targets for MSY international expansion. Mami would know; she had certainly seen the city more than enough in the past.

She didn't really see any of that now, though, nor did she try to talk to her bodyguards. They understood. She was busy.

All designated passengers have now boarded the elevator platform, and the terminal has finished shifting to launch position. Elevator ascent will begin shortly, the terminal warned, both in standard audio and, for the military personnel, which was nearly everyone, straight into their auditory cortices. Its voice carried a slight mechanical tinge, purely for effect; it could have been made to sound human if that were desired, but it was considered a good idea to keep machine voices distinct from human voices.

It also spoke in Human Standard, rather than Japanese. That, and the more mixed ethnicities of those around her, was a psychological signal that she wasn't in Mitakihara anymore.

Suddenly, the room darkened, the artificial lighting shutting off. There was a hush, everyone anticipating what was going to happen.

With only the briefest of shimmers, the domed ceiling lost its decorative artwork, becoming as apparently transparent as the sides around them had been. A moment later, the internal walls and

partitions shimmered similarly, until they too became as transparent as air, with the exception that if you looked into a wall, you saw the world around you as if the people behind it were not there. To everyone inside, it appeared now as if they were standing under the naked early morning sky, with its stars and moon, on a metal platform. To Mami and her bodyguards, inside their niche, it appeared as they were alone there, on a ship permanently floating in the ocean.

Of course, the walls were still perfectly solid, and it was practicable only because anyone trying to move around could call up a retinal display putting the walls right back in place. The idea was generally that you would sit there and watch, however.

And then, with another shimmer, the ground disappeared, leaving them with the impression that they were reclining on couches floating twenty feet in the air, above an artificial island at night. Behind Mami, there could be seen only one object, the enormously long cable running straight into the sky, nearly invisible against its background.

Around them, there were appreciative murmurs, and some nervous laughter from the newer military personnel and magical girls. Mami and her bodyguards, well-accustomed to the experience, didn't even stop sipping their tea.

One in every four ascents was done with the floor opaque, to accommodate those who didn't enjoy the view. Physically, the enhancement implants prevented vertigo and, among military personnel, also dampened excessive fear. Still, possessing an actual fear of heights was widely derided in the military, and for fairly good reason, considering the sort of operational environments that were prevalent on the front lines. Indeed, basic training stamped that sort of thing out, so it only occurred among recruits on their first ascent. It was a sort of benign hazing.

As an aside, the incidence of acrophobia among magical girls was precisely zero. Contracting appeared to remove such things.

With a barely-detectable rumble, they began their laser and antigrav-powered ascent to the stars. Mami, like everyone, looked down at the rapidly-receding ocean, the seaborne base of the elevator shrinking steadily. The intent was to give an impression of floating into the sky. In that, it succeeded. Below them, a small fleet of ships hurried in, carrying the pieces necessary to assemble the next platform, recently returned from space.

This was, in fact, the longest stretch of the trip. The four hour ascent time to orbit was a tremendous improvement over the *three-day* transit time of the earliest built elevator, but it was still rather slow compared to the free-flight rocket-and-antigrav ascents Mami was used to out in the non-core worlds, where it didn't yet make economic sense to assemble a megastructure as grandiose as a space elevator. But it was undeniably resource efficient, and definitely preferable to the seven hour ascent required of those with interplanetary or interstellar destinations.

The military was careful to include the transit time in your leave time.

Mami leaned back in her chair, looking up at the sky, eyes unfocusing, entering the tactical-AI-mediated dissociated state so typical of generals and government officials…

MagOps "Theban" Division, identifier 2A7DC, reports ready for redeployment, Machina's slightly machine-tinged thoughts now nearly indistinguishable from her own. *Preparing for departure to Naval Base 4E15, Neo Venezia, scheduled UT0400, final approval—*

Given, Mami thought.

Settling into the flow of things, Mami's field of vision was replaced by a starmap of the Yangtze sector, with current, future, and past troop movements fully visible. In her mind, she no longer saw

the world around her, or the sun that would eventually appear on the horizon as they soared ever higher, filtered so as not to blind.

Instead she saw the Yangtze Sector splayed around her, as if she were unthinkably enormous, floating among the stars. Around her, planets, bases, ships demanded attention, glowing different colors, trailing text, prying at Machina and the doors of her consciousness. The higher priority ones did a better job of it.

Twenty-sixth Fleet, Admiral Farrat requests approval—

Whose authority? Mami asked, reactions accelerated by the integration. Twenty-sixth Fleet wanted to shift away from its reserve position facing the buffer zone to the boundary with the Euphratic sector, merging itself with the Fifteenth and Seventeenth Fleets there. Its current and potential future positions appeared in front of her, the world shifting, bright line highlighting the best path.

Fleet Admiral Feodorovich. She—

—is anticipating alien attempts to straighten the salient at the edge and wants reinforcements to meet the anticipated action, Mami already knew.

Approved. Ask Twenty-first Fleet to stretch its positions and double patrols. Request Huanghe sector increase warning sensor production.

At this point, Mami dispensed with the audio input, issuing orders in rapid fire, pointing and gesturing with her illusory fingers for emphasis.

Seventh Army Group redeploy to Avalon at reasonable speed. Elevate defenses of Charise System to Level Three. Request increase in MilProd factor in Sector to Four. Tell Shu Han government that their petition is denied. Tell Meiguang government to stop wasting my time with requests that will never go through. Tell New Athens I will be sure to make the battle anniversary. Tell Port Royal to increase civic defense level by two; clearly those bombers don't intend to leave them alone. Twelfth Army Group…

She continued in that vein, and it was an hour before she heard the message she was waiting for, by which point they were already well above the atmosphere, looking down at the massive orb of Earth below them and bright Sol in the distance.

Field Marshal Erwynmark has announced the agenda of the next biweekly general staff meeting, Machina thought. *As expected, it focuses on the Euphratic Sector Incursion.*

It took that boy long enough, Mami thought. *Meeting is in six hours.*

He has his own way of doing things, Machina thought. *Remember that he is very skilled.*

Yes, yes, I know, Mami thought. *Still, it won't please the others. This kind of last minute business has gotten him into trouble before.*

But he made it, didn't he? And it got results.

Rushing three fleets to a position where I had to commit everything I had in the area to get in there and save him from being cut off was rather imprudent, wouldn't you say? I might not have been able to pull it off.

Yes, but you did, and because you did, he was able to trash the Saharan shipyards. I'd speculate that he expected you to be able to. He told you he had faith in you, didn't he?

If you say so, Machina, Mami thought. Sometimes she thought Machina rather liked the Field Marshal, which had some possibly disturbing implications.

It was another three hours before they reached the orbital drop-off point, defined as the level where the Coriolis Effect gave them enough horizontal velocity to stay in orbit. They left behind those who were continuing upward for *another* three hours where, with enough velocity to escape the planet, they would detach in short-hop Navigators to an awaiting starship somewhere farther out, or to distant space colonies.

Mami and her two bodyguards departed here, however, filing with a small crowd of personnel down a staircase that had opened in the floor, the walls and floor briefly opaque again. As they boarded their own Navigator, Mami's rank finally began to tell significantly, as the others carefully left the coveted spots near the forward viewports for her use, locating and relocating themselves to the back of the ship.

You don't have to, Mami thought, to a young telekinetic magical girl, the only other magical girl there, besides her bodyguards.

It would be rude, the girl thought*,* looking at her, then glancing away. *Besides, what would the humans back there think?*

"Human". A succinct way of saying "Non-Contractor".

Mami nodded and said nothing more. She had a point. No need to show obvious favoritism.

Besides, I can tell my friends I met Field Marshal Mami-san! The girl thought, as she stepped away.

Make sure to tell them all how wonderful she is! Karina relayed back jokingly, before Mami's other bodyguard elbowed her in the ribs.

"Mami-san" was what she was called, even by those who were not from Japan.

ETA ten minutes, the robotic piloting system relayed, not even bothering with audio now that they were guaranteed to all be military.

Mami settled back into her seat, looking at the viewing port in front of them. Made from good old-fashioned transparent material, it showed the vast black expanse of space, and the blue-green orb of the Earth below.

With a brief shudder, the Navigator detached itself from the elevator platform.

Prepare yourselves, the pilot relayed over their internal intercoms. *We'll be losing gravity soon.*

Navigators were simple, cheap ships. Carrying very little fuel and minimal engine power, they were designed solely to operate in orbit, borrowing their momentum from larger vessels and stations or, in this case, a space elevator. Eschewing even the expense of a human pilot, they had just enough power to shift between orbits and perform simple maneuvers.

Away from the front worlds and the worlds immediately behind them, it was considered poor form for even Field Marshals to pull rank and request more luxurious transportation than elevator-boosted Navigators.

Though it suited her, Mami wondered who had started that particular custom.

Departing the platform and its expensive artificial gravity field, they lost gravity with a lurch.

Mami's stomach shifted its contents, getting used to the new reality that the only force tugging on it now was the slight acceleration bursts of the spacecraft.

Behind her, Mami heard the other personnel pushing themselves off their seats into the air, bumping into each other and shoving each other playfully. Given the enhancements they all had, it was good, harmless fun, and the zero percent accident rate of Navigators gave the military confidence enough not to mandate using the seat buckles on routine trips.

In the viewscreen, Mami could just make out a point of light in the distance growing rapidly larger, knowing that soon she would see its expansive solar panels, enormous central reactor core, vast communications arrays, giant central living areas and command centers, and other features that were also very large.

Carthago Shipyard, the gigantic Headquarters of Orbital Space Command, physical home of the General Staff, and her destination.

Arriving in her living quarters onboard the station, with its expansive windowed view of Earth, luxurious bed, and other amenities, Mami could only muse on what a shame it was that she was rarely here. Every member of the General Staff had a place to stay on Carthago, but it was very rare that more than a handful were physically on-station.

Standing in front of her floor-length mirror, she regarded herself in the dress uniform she hardly ever wore.

Military uniforms—the non-combat kind—had changed very little over the centuries. This particular iteration of it was dark green, with the buttons, colored decorations, collar tabs, shirt design, and pants that would have been recognizable as distinguishing an officer centuries ago. There was even the perfectly meaningless field marshal's baton strapped to the waist.

The symbology was a bit different, of course. The shoulder straps she wore bore a set of crossed batons, yes, but these were flanked on two sides by reciprocal arrows. An unusual symbol of government, but that was what had been chosen. Next to that was another symbol: two block arrows pushing up against an envelope. The symbol of the armed forces.

Next to this was one that would have been utterly baffling in an earlier age. It depicted a stylized human head looking to the side. From the back of the head ran a large assortment of wires. A concession to the wishes of Governance: Artificial Intelligence, it was a reminder of what—or rather, *who*—made so much of this possible.

Mami then added the last part of her uniform. Standard dress uniform called for a hat decorated with the same insignia as her shoulder strap, but she had early on taken to wearing a beret instead, following the example of some of the other generals. It just felt more natural, given the beret she had worn for centuries as part of her magical girl costume.

She took a moment to regard the framed medals on her wall. Unlike so many of the others on the General Staff, she hadn't earned her rank through accomplishment on the battlefield, so her collection was sparse compared to those of the others. She had only two.

The first was the Defender's Star, First Class, for her role in the Saharan Raid, to date the largest and most successful human incursion into alien space. It was the medal given for "Performance greatly exceeding the expectations of AI battle analysts".

The second was the Directorate Citation, for "Contributing to an exceptional degree to the

wellbeing of Humanity". That one was for New Athens, of course, and had been distributed widely at the start of the war, including to Sakura Kyouko and Akemi Homura, the latter one presumed posthumously.

Then she turned and headed out her door.

For a location of such seeming importance, the meeting room of the General Staff was rather unassuming. Located deep within the military sector of the shipyard, without even windows, from the outside it was remarkable only for the concentration of bodyguards lounging around the doorway and chatting.

From the inside, it was remarkable for its old-fashioned styling. With its real wooden table, framed portraits, and a small chandelier, it seemed to suit someone's idea of what a military strategy room should look like. It seated twenty in comfort, though that was not particularly impressive on a station such as this. Neither were the hidden holographic generators or VR relays, which were practically all over the place in the command centers of the station.

What *was* impressive the prodigious quantity and quality of the security systems surrounding the room, with no less than three separate dedicated AIs designated to watching the area. So too were the dedicated communication systems, which would have been astoundingly powerful for civilian usage.

By the time she stepped in, she had already reviewed the list of active participants. Of the twenty members of the General Staff, six had excused themselves, citing critical combat duty. Of the remaining fourteen, only four were in physical attendance: herself, the young Field Marshal Erwynmark, looking spry at one hundred twenty two, General de Chatillon, the hard-looking commander of the relatively serene Nile Sector, and the sharp-nosed Fleet Admiral Karishma Anand.

There were some among the Staff who felt that these meetings were inefficient, and pressed to have meetings in a newer style, in pure virtuality and with mediating AIs, similar to what was done within the Government. Most, however, were not yet ready to take that step.

She looked around the room at the others in attendance. The members not in physical attendance were present as holographic simulacrums, and nearly everyone was already there, since it was easy to attend virtually—one didn't even, strictly, have to be seated. The only one missing was—

Hardly had she thought that when General Alexander, perpetually tardy, materialized in his seat two seats down the table from her.

Not wasting a moment, Erwynmark, who had been fiddling impatiently with one of his collar tabs at the head of the table, jumped up and cleared his throat.

"Now that we are all here," he said. "Let's begin."

An enormous holographic starmap materialized immediately above the table, then zoomed in to display a particular region of human space. Occupied star systems, military bases, and so forth were exaggerated in scale. Here it displayed a disc of soothing blue human space nearly bisected by an intruding dagger of angry red. Locations of recent conflict were indicated on the map, and systems and bases which had undergone heavy attack were highlighted in green. Triangles and squares indicated fleet and troop concentrations for both sides.

The Euphratic Incursion, as it was known, was now well into its third year. The alien's first major

offensive since the Samsara Offensive eight years ago, it showed marked differences from the ones that had proceeded it. Gone was the strange hesitancy and showmanship of the war's earlier years—this offensive was pushed ruthlessly and efficiently.

But gone, too, were the grandiose war-winning maneuvers that had followed, such as the enormously ambitious attack on Samsara, which had sought to cut off and capture a Core World and with it, a quarter of human space and probably the ability to defend Earth. That one had been a debacle for the aliens, and had weakened their defenses enough to allow a major follow-on raid, as Erwynmark had cannily realized.

This one was different. Breaking with their previous pattern of trying to keep the human military off-balance with constant attacks, the Euphratic Incursion was the product of years of preparation, with an investment of massive resources, the kind necessary to sustain a relentless assault lasting years. It also had relatively limited goals: the intention was apparently to cut a wide swath through the Euphratic sector all the way to the other end, forcing the elimination of a large portion of forward-facing military outposts by helping to surround the entire region of space—alien outposts now surrounded human space—and *incidentally* passing through and destroying the enormously productive Gemini shipyards. Not war-winning, but dangerously compromising.

Human strategic doctrine had done what it was supposed to. After the rout of the initial blitz, the offensive had ground to a snail's pace on a series of carefully-defended, heavily garrisoned colony worlds, each system designed to stand as a fortress, with heavy planetary fortifications, Oort Clouds and asteroid belts thoroughly stocked with drones capable of weaponizing the debris, countless slow-but-durable Guardian-class starships, and—most importantly—the manufacturing capacity of their populations, who did their utmost to replace matériel that was often destroyed as quickly as it was deployed.

It was to buy time, to allow the human fleet to gather and strike a counterblow, just as the doctrine for the whole war was to buy time, to permit mobilization and technological advance—and the remote hope for unforeseen strategic opportunities. That whole worlds had inexorably fallen, with entire populations resisting to the bitter end, was…acceptable. There was no other way, and the colonists knew their lot.

Defying the predictions of human analysts, who had anticipated a quick withdrawal and renewed advance somewhere else, the aliens had pushed on, turning the entire sector into a giant exercise in grinding attrition.

Now, after so long, the attack had finally reached the two-colony system containing the Gemini Shipyards.

"We all know the situation," Erwynmark said. "The current focal point of the incursion is here"—with a gesture, the holographic display zoomed in on the relevant system—"where the system is under heavy siege, though the shipyards remain intact and functional. Currently, all production is directed right back into the battle, of course. The system is holding firm with fleet support. Given our interdicting raids and fleet action at the flanks, the enemy is having significant difficulty shifting enough resources forward to break the system."

He paused, making sure he had all their attention.

"However, I have a bit of bad news," he continued.

The display zoomed in further, on the largest of the gas giants in the system, far away from the main action, but still the site of several minor skirmishes.

"Our intersystem stealth drones detected unusual concentrations of alien ships traveling in and out

of orbit around the largest moon of this gas giant. It wasn't possible to obtain better information with the drones, so General Zheng sent in a MagOps team."

The display changed entirely, from a hologram of a planet to one of an enormous enigmatic cylinder resting on its side on the surface of the moon. It appeared to be only partially complete, with a large, obvious gap on its side. Internally, they all received a set of documents detailing what could be deduced about the structure.

"This was the best the clairvoyants could do safely," Erwynmark said. "The structure is heavily stealthed, and there is only so much that can be done with visual inspection, but, as you can see, the description almost exactly matches that of the Wormhole Stabilizer we found and destroyed in the Saharan Shipyards. Given how fast construction is proceeding, it will be complete in one and a half months. That is, of course, mostly a guess."

He stopped, looking around to gauge their stunned looks.

"So this was their goddamned game!" Anand said, slamming the table with the palm of her hand. "And to think we thought they were trying to attrit us."

"Assuming what we know about the device is correct," Fleet Admiral Chang noted, pointing out explicitly what they had all deduced. "Then they could use it to pour in reinforcements from their core worlds. It wouldn't matter how tenuous their supply lines are; they could easily overwhelm the system. Of course that's not even the main point."

"The system is within blink distance of Optatum," Erwynmark said. "As of course we all know. And for all we know, with a functioning wormhole, they wouldn't even *need* supply lines."

The blink drive was, of course, the enigmatic device the aliens used to help run circles around the human fleet. While it consumed enough power to require hours of charge, it also enabled them to seemingly teleport from one position to another, with the only limitation being what appeared to be a strict range limit. Captured engines had made so little sense to human scientists that they had taken to calling them "Paradox Engines".

The name had stuck.

"You still want to withdraw the frontal positions and shorten the front?" General De Chatillon sneered, looking at Alexander. "Oh, that would have been fantastic, giving away territory so they can build a wormhole right in the face of a Core World."

"The *idea* was that we would watch for things like this," General Alexander snarled back. "With a shorter front, we could more easily neutralize an attempt like this. And I don't recall advocating abandoning Gemini."

"*Gentlemen*," Erwynmark warned. "You can continue your petty disputes in private. I want plans."

"A MagOps raid," Chang suggested, without missing a beat. "We cannot shift fleet operations towards that moon without being noticed, but a stealth operation has a chance of getting through. Clearly the aliens are trying not to draw attention to it, so their defenses are not as elaborate as they might be."

"It'd be a suicide mission," Field Marshal Sualem commented. "We could never extract the teams back out safely. That's assuming they actually manage to get into the compound, which is dubious at best. And if they fail on the first try, the aliens will know we know and fortify the place."

"The nearest suspected wormhole opening is outside the sector," Mami said, folding her hands

under her chin. “I would guess they intend this to be a surprise. If so, we can expect a massive flood of reinforcements the moment it is operational. They must be gathering an attack force outside the sector, near the other end. If so, they might have to strip some of their sector defenses to manage it. They may be vulnerable to being enveloped from the rear. Perhaps, with their supplies cut, they will be unable to complete construction.”

Some of those at the table, including Sualem and a certain Fleet Admiral Miller, gave her a slight stare for speaking. Well, screw them too.

“That is highly speculative, Tomoe,” Alexander commented, looking at her, honorific-free, since this wasn’t in Japanese. “We don’t even know what the thing is made of.”

“I like it,” De Chatillon said. “It’s always been silly having Feodorovich keep her forces on a defensive posture when the aliens have a nice big salient begging to have its throat cut.”

Feodorovich had been one of those unable to attend.

“We’ve been over this, Chatil,” Anand said. “We’ve tested those defenses. They are too hard for such an operation to succeed.”

“Perhaps,” Erwynmark said, glancing between the three of them. “But as Tomoe here suggested, that may have changed. We lose little by testing the waters. There is no reason not to ask the Black Heart to look into it.”

Mami felt a few concealed glances in her direction, both from her supporters and her detractors. By rights, the current head of the Black Heart, General Kuroi—an MSY founder—should have been on the General Staff. But that would have introduced a second magical girl onto the General Staff, and that was still a little problematic.

Speaking of which, she would have to remember to speak to Kuroi-san.

“How long would it take to properly test the question, prepare an operation, and launch, assuming Tomoe is right?” Erwynmark asked.

“Perhaps three weeks,” Anand said, “Maybe four.”

The other admirals nodded agreement.

“I have input the scenario into MilAdvise,” General Chang commented. “Further analysis will be required, but, preliminarily, the AI advisors estimate a 57% probability that there has indeed been a major withdrawal of forces from the salient, and a 72% probability that, given there really has been such a withdrawal, an attempted envelopment would succeed.”

“What is the opinion of this Staff, then?” Erwynmark asked, signaling an informal vote. Theoretically, he outranked all of them, but he rarely overruled the Staff. In fact, it had never happened. It tended to attract the attention of Military Affairs.

There were various murmurs of assent. Just the act of *checking* if something was true was too minor to really quibble with.

“Very well,” Erwynmark said. “I will forward the instructions to Feodorovich. I doubt she will see any reason to object.”

“I wish to point out, though,” Chang said, “that while I see no reason not to try, MilAdvise points out that even success may be moot if the Wormhole Stabilizer goes online, even if they have to hold out for weeks with their supply lines cut. With so many unknowns in the equation, the

analysts predict an 84% chance that that is indeed the case and that they can also hold out, simply given the fact that the aliens are trying this in the first place. They are not stupid."

There was sighing around the table. They had realized that, of course.

"So we are back to the wormhole again," Sualem said, leaning forward. "We still need a plan for it."

"MilAdvise predicts only a 23% chance that a MagOps operation would succeed," Alexander said. "And only an 11% chance that the involved girls will suffer less than 100% casualties. Failure also reduces the chances of success for later fleet action."

It was not good odds.

Mami could see people around the table cringing, even Sualem, who was the one who had said it was a bad idea in the first place. Whatever issues she had with him, he was competent at his job, and ferocious in his defense of humanity.

"However," Alexander said, "they add that of the various possible fleet actions, the one with the highest probability that does not also severely compromise the defenses of Apollo and Artemis has only a 13% chance of success, with a higher absolute number of fatalities. Given that, and the fact that they cannot imagine any better plans, they recommend the MagOps operation first, as having the highest cumulative success rate."

If they lost the system, it was mostly moot as well.

"This is still a preliminary analysis," Mami suggested. "Perhaps with more time, they might come up with something more. I propose we schedule both the MagOps operation and an attack on the flanks for three weeks from now, four if it needs it, so that we can do both at once. We can cancel the latter if the signs are bad and move the first forward. Meanwhile, we try to collect more information. It's risky to wait, but hopefully we will notice if their construction accelerates notably. Of course we will monitor the situation."

"Anyone with a better idea?" Erwynmark asked, looking around. No one said anything.

"Alright," he said, leaning on the table and sighing. "I will issue the instructions. Now, before I move on to the next topic, does anyone have anything they want to ask the Staff?"

Mami looked around the table to see if anyone else had anything before standing up.

"Actually, I have a request," she said, addressing the table.

She waited a moment to make sure they all looked at her.

"I wish to request access to the grief cube supply records of all active divisions, for my personal inspection *only*," she said, "And I also wish to speak to MAISL. I understand that this is an unusual request, but I have received significant numbers of complaints from magical girls in the services about problems with their supply. It would aid morale significantly if I could produce a report addressing their concerns, and could possibly be used to address any real problems that exist. I don't need to remind you all how valuable our morale is to the war effort."

She left out anything about injuries and health care for now. That could wait for next time.

She held her breath.

"I don't see why not," De Chatillon said.

“If you really want to,” Anand said, leaning on her elbow and peering at her. “I’d get an AI to help you. I mean, besides your TacAI. It’s a lot of material.”

Mami waited for one of the others to disapprove, particularly Sualem or Miller, but they remained silent. They had lost a lot of support ever since some of their compatriots had been assigned away from the Staff or retired.

“I’ll send the formal requests then,” Mami said, as somewhere in her subconscious, Machina did exactly that.

She had a feeling she’d have to pressure some of them a bit for the information, though.

“Is there anything else?” Erwynmark asked.

“Ah, Tomoe, you should remain standing,” he added, as she moved to sit down.

They looked at him curiously, Mami especially.

“Nothing else?” Erwynmark asked, receiving a general consensus of “no”.

“Alright,” he said. “Then I will make my announcement.”

He stood up from the table, cleared his throat, then leaned forward onto the table.

“Over the past few months, I have grown increasingly concerned with the lack of coordination among the various departments in the Euphratic Sector. While the greatly increased number of divisions and fleets, as well as the number of operational contingencies, has necessitated a greater number of commanders to manage it all, what we have gained in operational efficiency we have lost in tactical and strategic coordination. There have been numerous instances where attempted coordination has been bungled due to the differing opinions and goals of various commanders. This is not an indictment of the commanders involved; it is simply a fact of military reality.”

He looked around the table to make sure they all got the gist of what he was saying.

“Therefore, after consultation with MAICC and Military Affairs, I have decided to name a new commander for the entire sector, with authority over Fleet Admiral Anand”—he nodded in Anand’s direction—“Fleet Admiral Feodorovich, General Zheng, General Gatier, and Field Marshal Tsvangirai. Our meeting today has only served to reinforce my confidence in my choice. I am proud to appoint Tomoe Mami in the position. General Gong will take command of the Yangtze Sector. Relevant orders and dates are being forwarded.”

Mami just stared at Erwynmark’s boyish face, managing to avoid looking absolutely befuddled.

“It’s an honor,” she said, finally, glancing around the room.

“I protest!” Miller said, from the back of the room, finally snapping. They turned to look.

“I mean no offense to Tomoe here,” he said. “But this is a poor decision. The troops will not respect a girl as their commander. Every one of us is more distinguished—”

Bullshit, Mami thought. *You totally mean offense.*

She grit her teeth, too angry to notice her language.

“With all due respect,” Alexander said, managing to make sound “respect” sound positively disrespectful, “that is bollocks. We all know who the troops respect.”

“Don’t be stupid, Miller,” De Chatillon advised.

“Mami will be an excellent commander,” Anand said, seemingly harboring no resentment for having a new commanding officer. She had always been a reliable ally.

“You all are not thinking through the relevant issues,” Sualem said, leaning forward. “They have enough power already—“

“Enough of this!” Erwynmark interjected coldly and sharply. “We are not rehashing this argument again. This is my decision. It is already done. Or would you prefer we hold a formal vote?”

There was a brief silence. They all knew which way the votes would go.

“I register my objection,” Miller said angrily.

“Noted,” Erwynmark responded, looking at Sualem, who deferred.

He looked around the table.

“Then this meeting is dismissed,” he said.

One-by-one, virtual simulacra dissolved around the table, until it was only the four of them on the station.

“Don’t let them get to you, Mami,” Anand said, grabbing her shoulder on the way out.

“I won’t,” Mami reassured, heading for the door herself.

Can you hold on a second, Mami? Erwynmark relayed privately.

Mami stopped, letting the door close in front her. She turned around.

“Yes?” she asked.

“I have a lot riding on this, Mami,” Erwynmark said. “We all do, obviously. Giving someone command authority over other Field Marshals and Fleet Admirals is unprecedented, which is why I felt I had to ask the government. I’m counting on you, just like I did last time.”

“I won’t disappoint,” Mami said firmly, even though she had to admit to a tiny worm of doubt in her stomach.

“The commands change hands two days from now, at midnight,” Erwynmark said. “Before then, do you think we could meet in the command center on station? We have a lot to discuss.”

Mami tilted her head slightly.

“I’ll have Machina arrange it with Rommel,” she said, smiling.

Rommel was the name of *his* tactical AI. There were less controversial names to pick, but no one really wanted to bring it up to him.

“Alright,” Erwynmark said.

Mami looked at him questioningly.

“Oh don’t mind me,” Erwynmark said. “I’ll be here for a while longer.”

Mami nodded and headed out the door, which slid closed behind her. She reunited with her bodyguards, nodding at Erwynmark's bodyguards, also in the area.

“You know, I’ve always thought you were Erwynmark’s favorite commander,” Xiao Long said, as the three of them walked down the hallway.

“Not now, Shen,” Mami said, rubbing her head to nurse a sudden headache

Southern Group

"In the most widely-trumpeted version of events, the role of the 'Southern Group' has always been clear. They were the band of villains to match the Mitakihara Four's heroes, and Mikuni Oriko was the James Moriarity to match Akemi Homura's Sherlock Holmes."

"In reality, of course, the picture has always been much more clouded. Oriko and her companions were indeed murderers and havoc-wreakers, terrorizing the other teams in their vicinity and displaying an appalling lack of regard for human life. However, many troublesome details of their actions remain, and invite speculation to this day."

"Why, for instance, did such a group adopt Chitose Yuma as a fifth member? Her inclusion went wildly against the grain of the group's previous activities and avowed beliefs, and they invested significant resources including and training a girl who, by all accounts, was not unusually powerful."

"Secondly, the life stories of a majority of the group's members share a certain eerie resonance. According to the accounts of other magical girls, Mikuni Oriko, Hinata Aina, and Miroko Mikuru all started their magical careers as vigilantes, with life stories to match. Mikuni was the daughter of a ruined, corrupt politician, and she spent much of her early months tracking down and exposing her father's associates. Hinata was the survivor of a murder-arson, and Miroko the victim of a rape, and they both achieved vengeance on the perpetrators before embarking on a brief period of targeting other criminals. All three of them eventually became erratic, starting to kill people for the most minor of crimes, with only Oriko appearing to have maintained any semblance of a grip."

"Still, despite all their unstable behavior, they all had at least slight justification for their murders. Things changed with formation of the Southern Group, with a sudden radical shift of focus: the group began to focus primarily on other magical girls, and to kill those who in many cases appeared to be innocent. In other words, they became fully 'evil', a change of behavior which to this day has little explanation.

"Finally, and perhaps most intriguingly, there is a distinct pattern to be found in these later killings. The magical girls who were their victims were almost always the most erratic, asocial, or aggressive members of their teams, assuming they were even part of a team. That is, those that were killed were often the most obvious recruits for their own group, though it must be stressed that in a slight minority of cases no such connection could be found."

["Overshadowing it all is the specter of Oriko's precognition, as by all accounts she was one of the most powerful of her generation, before the unexplained extinction of her magic class. It is baffling to many observers that she would die to a simple demon attack, no matter how massive, or that anyone with knowledge of the future would act as randomly as she seemed to. Many have suggested instead that it was her view of the future that led the Southern Group to undertake the actions that it did, and that it was she who insisted on Yuma's preservation.

Viewed in this light, then, Yuma's survival becomes singularly intriguing. So too is the observation that in the official account, the Southern Group was integral in shaping the Mitakihara Four, compelling Kyouko and Mami to put aside their differences and reunite, and forcing they and several other teams in the area to cooperate on a limited scale. The specter of the group's depredations would figure large in the initial Charter of the MSY and, of course, Yuma would be an integral member of both the Mitakihara Four and the MSY."]***

*—Clarisse van Rossum, MG, Online Essay: Ruminations on the Mitakihara Four. []*** indicates content redacted to those with Level Two clearance or lower.*

Kyouko opened her eyes, staring up at the wooden ceiling of the cramped alcove where she slept. What had she been dreaming about?

…Submarines? A mermaid?

Ugh, my dreams never make any sense, she thought.

Her bed creaked as she sat up, steadying herself using the nearby desk.

She reached for the switch to the nearby lamp. She would never admit it to anyone, but the reason she liked her room cramped and old-fashioned wasn't from stubbornness or being old, as she liked to imply to anyone who inquired, but simply because it reminded her of the room she had slept in as a child.

They had lived simple lives, even more so when her father had been excommunicated. Goddess only knew how he had held onto the church building, but he had, somehow, and all she and her sister had been told was that it had taken a great deal of money. Money they didn't really have.

It wasn't as unlikely as it sounded. They had been anomalous already, her father an outpost in an isolated parish, one who had already done much to antagonize the Church, though that had been with his zeal rather than his heresy. Perhaps they had been so glad to wash their hands of him they were willing to give him a parting gift.

Perhaps.

She remembered how happy she and her sister had been, when her parents had hauled in a new bunk bed for them to share. Before, they had simply shared the same cramped mattress, which she had secretly found comforting, but was also very annoying.

Her father had smiled at them then, a little sweaty from assembling the thing himself, an ecclesial man unused to that kind of work.

That was the other reason she stayed in this room. It reminded her of what it had been like to have nothing, why she had made a wish in the first place. It was stabilizing. Humbling, when it was so easy to lose herself in all the baser pleasures of life.

"Five more minutes," the girl who had been sleeping next to her mumbled sleepily, flailing at her with one arm. The way she did it, grasping and flinging blindly, it wasn't clear if she was trying to pull her back or push her away.

It was Maki, the youngest of her pupils.

Honestly, Kyouko wasn't sure why she still felt the need to do this. Did she miss her childhood, the comfort of having someone sleep next to her? Was she dissatisfied with something?

She shook her head. She didn't know.

Like so many others her age, she had been through a hedonist stage. It had been roughly two centuries ago, right after Unification, when all the hard tasks of the Union had been finished. Then, like all those others, she had let loose, immersing herself in a daily cycle of drink, partying, and secret liaisons with girls a fraction of her age. Seduction had been simple—there was something about being so *old* that made it easy to do.

Eventually, it lost its appeal, but not before soiling her reputation species-wide. Mami was nicer about it, but Kyouko had been forced to endure endless smirks and jokes from Homura and Yuma. You'd think Yuma, at least, would lay back about it, but no, it was always *Kyouko* who had to be the butt of jokes. Yuma was untouchable.

Not that Kyouko didn't help to perpetrate that. Yuma was the *imouto*. You didn't mess with that.

Outwardly, she called their teasing slander, but inwardly she knew all those rumors had a certain basis in fact.

Regardless, all of that was ancient history now. She had a new purpose in life, even if she *occasionally* returned to old habits.

It wasn't too bad. She was careful about consent.

"You don't even *need* to sleep anymore, Maki," Kyouko said, standing up, turning around and nudging the girl with her knee. "It was a one-hour nap. Theoretically, that should last you the month. Suck it up, flip the switch, and get up. You have patrol duty."

She looked at the girl, who was still stubbornly keeping her eyes closed. The position of the bedsheet on her body revealed a lot more than was proper.

Kyouko swallowed. Why did this one have to look so much like Sa—

"Ugh, have it your way," Kyouko said abruptly, grabbing her clothes off her chair and thrusting them on efficiently. She projected annoyance and impatience, but really she was just trying to get out of there as fast as possible.

She shut the door behind her on her way out and headed for the front of the building.

As she walked, she bridged the transition from the dark, old-fashioned, and modest rear of the building to the bright, modern, and cheerful front. Architecturally, the whole building was about such contrasts, between light and dark, hope and despair. It befit the main church of the Cult. Or the Church, rather.

She headed down a hallway, greeting members of the Cult she passed. The wall to her right was full stained glass, another reminder of her father’s original church. The blossoming sunrise poured in, illuminating the hallway and its pedestrians in shades of red, green, blue, and yellow.

It seemed a little dimmer than usual, though.

"Good morning, Kyouko," Patricia said, as they passed each other in the hallway. The girl signaled that she wanted to talk.

"Good morning," Kyouko returned, stopping to face her. What did she want?

"Who was it today?" Patricia asked, smiling vaguely, face illuminated by the sunlight.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Kyouko responded automatically, annoyed. "But if she doesn't come out in the next fifteen minutes, go in there and kick her awake."

"Sure," Patricia said, tilting her head and shrugging her shoulders. They both knew that, in practice, nothing of the sort would happen. Instead, Maki was guaranteed to be up within the next ten minutes, attitude notwithstanding. Anything later, and she would miss patrol duty, and despite the unique location where her particular patrol group was situated, military regulations still applied. No pupil of Kyouko would be so stupid.

"Anyway, I'm going to be meeting Ryouko-chan at one with Asaka," Patricia said, putting her finger to her cheek. "Since I'm an enhancement specialist and all of that. Thought you'd want to know. And uh, Sister Clarisse wants to know if you'll be doing morning sermon today. Since you missed last night."

The higher tiers of the Cult hierarchy were addressed "Sister". Kyouko had started the practice, way back when she had been organizing the Cult. It made sense, after all. At first it had seemed cheesy, even to her, but eventually they had all gotten used to it.

However, Kyouko skipped using the title. She was Kyouko. Everyone knew her. And she absolutely refused to be called "Mother" by anyone.

"Tell her I'll be doing afternoon instead," Kyouko said. "I've got places to go."

"The visitors will be disappointed," Patricia chastened, voice carrying a slight hint of reprove. "Some of them came just to see you, and will have to go back before the afternoon."

"I know," Kyouko said, bowing and conveying sincere regret. "But it's important. Convey my apologies."

Patricia nodded, then turned to continue heading down the hallway. The whole thing could have been handled by electronic message or telepathy, but the Cult liked to be old-fashioned in certain ways.

She continued on her way out of the building. It was actually faster to head out the secret back entrance, the way Mami had entered yesterday, but she needed to be seen. She greeted Sisters, Acolytes, worshippers, clasping hands, nodding politely, and pronouncing benedictions.

She even stopped outside the grand double door of the Hall of the Ribbon to say nice things about a baby some girl had brought in, since it never hurt to say nice things.

It did bother her just a little, though. Yes, girls with service waivers or restricted service, usually government officials or Union administrators, could nowadays much more easily do something crazy like raise a family, but that didn't make it a good idea. It made those on active duty jealous.

This war was already damaging the egalitarianism atmosphere of the organization enough. There was no need to aggravate it further.

Hmm.

Flag that topic for review later. I might want to bring it up at the next Leadership Council Meeting. Also, remind me to think about it and maybe talk about it in the afternoon sermon. And start stressing the magical girl solidarity harder.

Acknowledged, her tactical computer—her *TacComp*—thought, its thoughts mechanical and unemotional. Sometimes Kyouko wondered if she should apply to get one of those new fancy models, like the one Mami had.

She kept putting it off, though, and in the end, what did it matter anyway? Innovations like that always got spread methodically down the ranks, and a Lieutenant General like her would probably get called in for an upgrade in two years or so. She would get it then no matter what.

Kyouko eschewed the large main entrance, though. She needed to be seen, yes, but this particular day, she'd rather it not be widely known where she was going.

Thus, she skirted around the edge of the main assembly hall, smiling and waving as she passed the

side door—then ducked into an elevator recessed behind the back wall.

Aboveground, this building was the main church of the Cult of Hope, from the rear defined by the same ancient architectural style that had once defined her father's church, and from the front defined by the glassy and metallic architecture typical of newly constructed buildings.

Belowground, it was a fully-stocked MSY-Military Armory, complete with weapons, hospital wards, living areas, and production facilities. Even farther belowground, it connected with the Mitakihara region's last "Redoubt", built in case of the unthinkable: a siege of Earth itself.

Her elevator was one of many scattered throughout the building, and she was thus obliged to share it with only one other girl, a member of the same patrol group as Maki, heading down to join the others. They chatted, and the girl mentioned that she was concerned Maki hadn't shown up for breakfast with the others.

Kyouko kept a straight face.

Thankfully, Kyouko's destination was only the first floor, counting downward.

A quick turn to the right, about ten feet of walking, then another turn right through a waiting door, and she was where she wanted to be: a narrow platform carved out of the edge of an underground tunnel, walls plastered from floor to ceiling by a mosaic of paper, each individual sheet decorated with amateur artwork. It had been one of the social activities of the Armory's residents, all magical girls, naturally.

This tunnel was one of many leading into and out of the building. The underground entrances were only available to residents, and those magical girls and officials who had business to be there. All others used the main entrance to the church aboveground. Indeed, unless you expressly specified which entrance you wanted, the transports would always take you to the main entrance. These underground entrances weren't very well-known.

She inspected the artwork on the wall, hand on chin. It was "amateur", but that did not mean the art was bad. Some of it was amazingly good. It had to do with how old the girl in question was, and how much they had practiced. Scattered among the drawings one could see many excellent drawings: Incubators, soul gems, magical girls in battle, *Field Marshal* Mami smiling and looking out over the bridge of her flagship—the HSS Georgy Konstantinovich Zhukov—and Kyouko standing in front of a congregation giving one of her sermons, with a lot more light and halos than she thought she had.

Kyouko focused her attention on one in particular. In well-rendered watercolor, it depicted Homura with her white angel wings furled around her, trying to kneel, but being refused.

The one doing the refusing was the Goddess, of course, in all the vague detail that they knew about her. As was traditional, the face was frustratingly blank. In twenty years of ribbon-induced visions, no one had ever managed to see her face. The only one who could fill in the blank was Homura, the one whose return they awaited.

Whoever the artist was, she definitely kept up with the latest visions. There was the long-flowing hair, the white robes, the slight hint of wings—

Kyouko frowned. It was traditional to depict the Goddess in all white because, well, that was she looked like, to most who saw her. Vague, mist-like, white—Kyouko had seen it herself.

With finesse and care, the hair was tinged just a hint of otherworldly pink. And was her hair ever depicted as *that* long?

That wasn't in any of the official descriptions. And Kyouko, of all people, would definitely know.

She squinted, looking for an artist name—and started.

"Kishida Maki," it said.

Goddess, she thought. *I didn't know she was this good. I just thought—*

She interrupted herself, then continued on a different train of thought.

But she's never had a vision…

Kyouko considered what to do.

Kyouko fired off a quick message to Maki, text-only, inquiring about the long and pink hair.

No response. Was the girl still sleeping?

A while later, she let out a breath. Well, it was nice to see the girls were having fun.

Kyouko turned to face her vehicle, which had been waiting for her the whole time, of course.

You want to talk, onee-chan? Yuma had said, when Kyouko had called her earlier that morning. *How convenient! I happen to be in Mitakihara today, and—well, nevermind all that other stuff, I can carve some time out. How does two hours sound? At MSY: GA, of course.*

It *had* been convenient, since Kyouko hadn't even had to explain that she wanted a physical meeting, for security purposes.

Kyouko stepped into the metal, cone-shaped transport.

Strictly, it was probably a better idea to travel by foot off-grid, as Mami had done, but she could probably rely on Yuma to wipe the records of her travel if she asked.

"Just a reminder," her vehicle intoned as she stepped into it, in the sort of pleasantly female mechanical voice that all transportation agencies loved. "Scheduled rain begins in five minutes. Ensure that you are prepared."

Aw hell, Kyouko thought. *It was sunny just a moment ago!*

Well, it wouldn't matter. She wasn't taking any walks anywhere.

With a thought, she signaled the vehicle to get on its way.

Kyouko slid her chair downward so she could stare up at the simulated blue sky on the interior of her vehicle cover. Bright and sunny, with birds and things like that.

When Yuma had turned fifteen, they had taken a three-day trip to the countryside. It had been a complicated endeavor. *Extremely* complicated, given that they'd had to stockpile grief cubes for weeks, then blow it all compensating the University Group to cover their territory for three days, and they also had been obliged to contact every team whose territory they would pass through to telegraph their benign intentions ahead of time.

Without the southern group, things were much easier, though. With them still present, such a trip would have been unthinkable.

They had stayed with a local mage they had gotten in touch with, the one overseeing the sparsely

populated area. She had been glad for the company, and the small gift of grief cubes hadn't hurt either.

It had been worth it, though. Every one of them was city-born and bred, and Yuma had looked so happy, running through the grass and hugging annoyed-looking sheep, that it had made Kyouko's heart ache.

They had kept it a secret from her beforehand, since if she had known she would certainly have told them to call it off. But Yuma had told them once about her childhood, how her only trip out of the city was also one of her only happy memories with her parents.

They could all understand the importance of memories like that, and even Homura had gotten unusually sentimental, wishing out loud that the Goddess could be there with them—which incidentally broke the ban they had placed on her talking about the Goddess in front of their new host, but nevermind.

Kyouko wondered what kind of girl the Goddess had been. She had been human once, like all of them. That, at least, Homura had made abundantly clear.

Bright, cheerful, selfless, willing to sacrifice herself to save others from pain. That was what Homura had implied, and all she and her theologians had to go by, but it was strangely easy to extrapolate what kind of girl she must have been. Loving and pure, like a Goddess, but human nonetheless…

Kyouko sighed. There had always been something beautiful about the concept, but she had been too cynical to believe, until it was too late.

Homura, where have you gone?

The bright blue sky faded away, replaced by a maze of transparent tunnels networking themselves before a sky gray with storm clouds and distant rain, rain that blurred her view of the world as she emerged onto surface level, where there were no tunnel walls to shield her.

The tunnels swarmed with countless vehicles, carrying the denizens of the city to and fro. From this far down, it was impossible to get a clear view of the sky, no matter how the material engineers fussed about making the tunnel material ever-more crystal-clear. The only way they could have possibly de-obscured the sky was if they had used military-grade cloaking.

The tunnels were the most visceral reminder that this wasn't truly the city of her childhood.

They had always treasured Yuma, spoiled her, even. They were all young, had all undergone more than their fair share in life, but none had been as young as her.

Kyouko thought about all that had happened.

For Kyouko, the girl had reminded her of her sister, and that had been more than enough.

The first time she spotted Yuma had been shortly after Homura first joined their team, weeks before the girl's mysterious change of personality.

Kyouko had been showing the new girl the ropes, stalking a group of demons near the edge of their territory. Jumping among the rooftops in bright daylight, Kyouko had been instructing Homura on the fine art of demon-tracking.

Stop, Kyouko instructed, more direct than usual, grinding to a halt on top of a ventilation module. *Get down here.*

"What is it?" Homura asked, appearing above her, feathery white wings casting a shadow downward. She hovered for a moment before abolishing the wings, dropping down next to Kyouko, pigtails fluttering behind her.

Kyouko pulled out her brand-new cell phone. Mami was too far to use telepathy, so they'd just have to use something more technological.

"Mami. Sorry to disturb. Southern group infringing territory. Come at once. Will wait for you. Ask Kyubey for position," Kyouko typed out carefully, still a little unused to the interface.

For all its smug refusal to "take sides", Kyubey had always been helpful against the southern group, even volunteering advice occasionally.

It had even explained once, pointing out that the southern group killed far more girls than the average group and insisted on taking a territory too large for them to fully cleanse, leading routinely to demon attacks that dissipated uselessly before any girls got there to claim any cubes. It was very inefficient, it had opined, and the Incubators regretted contracting Mikuni Oriko.

"What's going on?" Homura asked, peering into Kyouko's face. They had convinced her to fix her eyes and remove her glasses—such a safety hazard!—but old habits were hard to break.

"Focus," Kyouko said. "You can feel them, can't you? Fighting the demons."

Homura turned to look at the horizon. She furrowed her nose.

"Yes," she said. "Other girls?"

"Not just any girls," Kyouko explained, glancing at her phone and Mami's "I will be there in ten minutes". "The southern group. The one we've been telling you about. The ones that don't play by the rules. Keep your magic use down."

"Oh," Homura said, in that meek way she had. "Too bad."

Kyouko closed her eyes, trying to sort out the constantly shifting mess of magic in the distance. Demons, yes, obviously, and there was Kure Kirika, and Mikuni Oriko, and that goddamn psycho Hinata Aina, and—

Kyouko stopped, tilting her head.

A new girl! she thought. *Or at least, one I've never seen before. This could be interesting.*

"So what now?" Homura asked. "Do we talk to them?"

"From now on, we only use private telepathy," Kyouko instructed. "Unless we have a good reason to let them hear us when we confront them."

"We're con—confronting them?" Homura asked.

Kyouko smiled devilishly.

"They're no need to be scared," she reassured. "Just follow our lead. They don't know about you. With you on our side, I think we'll give them a little roughing up."

Kyouko sensed something approaching to their left. It was Mami.

Kyouko! Homura! I'm in telepathy range, Mami thought, tone demanding. *What's the situation?*

They're testing our patience again, Kyouko thought. *Killing demons on our territory.*

The southern group had been trouble ever since Mami first encountered them, back during the brief interim when Kyouko had broken their mentor-student bond. Initially, it hadn't been a group; it had just been Oriko and Kirika, the two seeming to find glee in tormenting Mami by denying her grief cubes and attacking her out of nowhere.

Mami could have taken Kirika, or even maybe Oriko, alone, but the two of them were entirely too much.

The breaking point had come when they had trashed Mami's apartment, seemingly out of the pure joy of vandalism. Mami had cried in the ruins of her life, among her shattered teapots and broken furniture, then done something entirely unwise: she had attacked them.

Kyouko hadn't personally seen any of this, of course. She had heard it from Mami later.

To perform her attack, Mami had traveled far enough south that Kyouko was able to pick up the signals of her attacks from where she was—which wasn't as impressive as it sounded, considering that Kyouko was fairly well tuned to Mami, and Mami had been practically going nova.

What Kyouko *did* see, when she finally got there, was the look of unvarnished fury on Mami's face as she attacked the other two girls, summoning muskets as if they were candy, pulling Tiro Finale after Tiro Finale, too enraged to even say her trademark catchphrase.

It had been disturbing, because up until that point Kyouko had no idea Mami could even *be* enraged. It just didn't seem possible.

And of course, Mami was losing anyway, because something like that was just unsustainable.

So, despite all the reasons she had given for leaving Mami behind, she moved in, confident that whatever was going on, it couldn't possibly be Mami that was in the wrong, even if Mami was looking fairly murderous.

In the end, Oriko and Kirika had backed off, and it was left to Kyouko to put Mami back together, help clean up her apartment, and to draw on her own grief cube stocks to make up for some of the power Mami had used.

She knew what it was like, to have one's home destroyed.

After that, Oriko hadn't left her alone either. Kyouko had no home for them to trash, but the constant attacks drained her resolve. Mami kept showing up to "pay back" grief cubes, obviously desperate to patch things back together, and Kyouko had started shifting her territory northward, almost out of necessity.

It was then that the southern group had really emerged, Oriko and Kirika appearing one day in her territory with two other girls from who knows where, both of whom managed the prodigious feat of being even more insane than Kirika.

There was Hinata Aina, always laughing and bragging about how she would burn everything, "purify them all of their sins with her cleansing fire". She took glee in killing, and always talked about how much they had all deserved to die.

Miroko Mikuru was a lot quieter, but was hardly any better, muttering to herself telepathically

about the serenity of cold, how much better it would be if they could all be like her ice. Or at least Kyouko had wished she would mutter it *to herself*. It would have been a lot less unnerving.

Kyouko knew when the jig was up. She fled back to Mitakihara and rejoined Mami.

It made sense, too. In the aftermath of her… personal tragedy, she had told Mami that she was better off without Kyouko, but that had turned out to be manifestly untrue. Even Kyouko couldn't deny that the both of them would be dead soon if they didn't team up.

And if she was nothing else, she was a survivor. That, at least, she had decided.

But even with the two of them allied, they still couldn't really maintain the integrity of their territory. Four versus two was a bit much, especially when one of those four could foresee the future and relayed combat directives to the others.

All they could afford to do was keep themselves alive, harvest grief cubes, and grit their teeth as the others traipsed the edges of their territory, daring them to attack.

But with Homura, things would change.

Are they are all there? Mami thought back.

No. Miroko Mikuru seems to not be with them, but they have someone new.

Someone new? Mami thought, with a slight tinge of concern. *That could be trouble.*

Yes, Kyouko thought. *But we have to take this chance, with one of them missing. And now that we have three, we have to give them a warning to stay the hell out. If we stay away just because we're not sure what powers this new girl has, we'll look weak and cowardly.*

I agree, Mami thought, as Kyouko knew she would. *Plus, they might have noticed Homura already, so there's a good chance we're not keeping any secrets anymore.*

Not to mention I doubt we're really going to trip up Mikuni Oriko and her annoying precognition, Kyouko added.

Yes, Mami thought.

"Alright, Homura," Kyouko said, looking the girl next to her in the eye. "Remember what we said about them, especially Oriko. We're not springing any surprises on them, so don't take any risks. I know you haven't fought any other girls before, but we might not have to. Hopefully, once Oriko sees what kind of power you have, they'll back off."

"What if they don't?" Homura asked, eyes slightly fearful.

"Just do your best," Kyouko said, smiling reassuringly. "Since you're new, just stay back, make sure to keep us covered with your aura, and fire some arrows when you can. Be careful about your soul gem; demons might not know to target it, but you can bet *they* do."

"Okay," Homura said, nodding with a determined expression.

Kyouko strategically left out the fact that, if Oriko were intentionally going into a fight, she probably expected to win, and if someone who could see the future expected to win…

Goddamn, what an annoying power! Kyouko thought.

"Good afternoon, Sakura-san, Akemi-san," Mami said, dropping down behind them, polite as

ever.

"Let's go, then," Kyouko said, propelling herself forward. "Magic usage to a minimum. No wings. Let's at least *try* to surprise them."

"I'm not used to this running," Homura complained, barely managing to keep up.

In almost no time at all, they were there, inside the miasma, looking down at a horde of demons trying to focus their attacks on a pair of a girls in their midst, and failing to hit anything. As they watched, Kirika tore apart a pair with her claws, jumped, twirled elegantly in the air, and landed outside the group, turning to face them. The movement of the lead demons slowed perceptibly, and Kirika easily dodged their beams, aided partly by relayed foresight. The demons in the rear tried to move forward, bunching up behind the lead demons and getting trapped in turn in the slowed time field.

The second girl, dressed in scarlet darker than Kyouko's, darted away from the group she had been distracting, propelling herself next to the slowed demons with shocking speed, riding two jets of flame, exactly as if she were wearing rocket boots. She raised her blood-red scepter with its ball of fire, and the cluster of demons shot up in towering inferno, the summoner giggling with pleasure.

Hinata the Fire-mage, the Scarlet, the *Insane*, who had in her past a long trail of charcoaled bodies, "cleansed" by her fire. Kyouko had no clue how Oriko had managed to convince her to join a *team*.

Behind Kirika, a safe distance away on the sidewalk, Oriko stood watching silently, like a white phantom. At her side, holding her hand, was the new girl, clad in green.

She's so young! Kyouko thought, aghast. *How is she there? A team like this would kill her as soon as look at her.*

It could be a deception, Mami thought levelly. *She could have manipulated her age downward. It'd fit. Oriko's team is rather eccentric.*

I don't think so, Kyouko thought. *Look at them! I don't think Kirika would tolerate anyone but a kid holding Oriko's hand like that.*

It's not safe to make assumptions like that, Sakura-san, Mami thought. *Anyway, it seems we haven't been noticed. Time to make our entrance. We're landing on that smaller building over there. Long range bombardment, girls!*

A burst of magic from Homura, and Kyouko felt a sudden rush of power, warm and addictive. Homura's aura.

They jumped into the air. Homura spread her wings and readied a full flight of arrows. Kyouko extended her arm, a blizzard of spears appearing among and around them, ready to dive. Mami extended *both* her arms, filling in the gaps with her muskets, nearly darkening the sky.

Then she summoned her signature giant musket-cannon, four times her size and, like everything else, aimed downward.

"Tiro Finale!" she yelled full-force, and the street around the four girls of the southern group bellowed and exploded under a hellfire of musket balls, impossibly fast and sharp spears, and purple arrows. The street repair crew would have had a lot of unexplained work to do tonight, were it not for the miasma and its distorting effects on reality.

Kyouko and Mami landed gracefully on the building below them, followed moments later by Homura, landing softly with her wings.

They dodged, Kyouko telegraphed to Homura, in case she relaxed too much.

"That was pretty impressive," Kirika said, jumping onto the ceiling where they were standing, seven meters in front of them. She licked one of her claws, in that disturbing habit of hers.

Of course they had dodged. It was too much to expect that a team headed by Mikuni Oriko would ever be *surprised*. She had merely warned them to move at the last moment, when her time-sense or whatever it was tingled.

No, if they were ever to defeat a team like that, it could only be by attrition.

"You burned a lot of magic on that light show," Hinata Aina said, voice taunting, appearing next to Kirika. "Even *Tiro Finale*. That was stupid of you. Now you're easier to kill."

"Believe what you want," Mami said, in that chilly aristocratic way she had.

Finally, Oriko herself arrived, along with the mysterious green child. From the way the child stood with her mace-hammer, nervous and unsteady but trying to hide it, Kyouko was instantly sure she really was as young as she looked.

"Who's the new ward?" Mami asked, sneering. "I wasn't aware you were in the habit of raising fresh meat."

"Fresh Meat" was Mikuru's terminology. In one sentence, Mami was reminding them that they were missing a member, and also pointing out their anomalous behavior. As for the sneer—well, Oriko always did bring out the best in Mami.

"I could say the same to you," Oriko said, matching aristocratic iciness with aristocratic iciness. "But it is the kind of silly thing you would do, isn't it? I'll have you know Yuma-chan here is quite powerful."

As Mami and Oriko continued their grandstanding, Kyouko listened to it with one ear, but focused her attention on something else entirely.

You, new girl, she thought, sealing the thought into a private channel. *Yuma, is it?*

It's Chitose-san to you, the girl thought back, looking Kyouko in the eyes, trying to project hostility but not quite succeeding.

Kyouko was absolutely certain now.

What's a new contractee like you doing with girls like these? Kyouko thought, carefully watching Oriko instead of Yuma. *I'll warn you right now: they're all insane. You're not going to live long, sticking with them.*

Kyouko noted the girl's angry reaction.

They saved my life! There's no way they're bad people!

Instead of saying anything, Kyouko sent an incredulous laugh.

Did they now? Must have been an accident. You'll see how bad they are soon enough.

I told *you*—

Listen, you sound like a nice girl, Kyouko interrupted. *You probably won't believe me, but we're nice girls too. Nicer than the ones you're with. Mami's not bluffing. We could take the four of you. If you switched sides, it'd be a cakewalk.*

From the corner of her eye, Kyouko watched the other girl curl her lip. This wasn't going to work.

Kyouko sighed, internally. Oh well. It had been worth the shot.

"So if you don't leave our territory and never come back," Mami was threatening, "We will not hesitate to kill you."

Better us than that crazy bitch next to you, Kyouko thought.

"You take that back!" Yuma snapped, brandishing her mace. "How dare you insult onee-chan!"

Her eyes were fiery and she was clearly doing her best to restrain herself from attacking.

Such a newbie, Kyouko thought. *And "Onee-chan"? That's…interesting.*

Yuma stepped forward, only to find Oriko's hand already blocking her path.

"It's okay, Yuma-chan," she said, voice reassuring. "We're leaving."

"*What?*" Aina demanded, turning to face Oriko, face twisted with sudden anger and frustration. "We're going to run? I could take these idiots alone!"

"No you couldn't," Oriko intoned icily. "Or are you questioning me? We won't win this fight. The new girl is too powerful. Better to just leave."

"Are you serious?" the scarlet mage asked. "We outnumber them!"

Oriko made a strange expression, as if to say "Who's the one with the precognition here?"

"Yes," Oriko said, almost sighing. "Let's just go."

She turned and jumped off the building, followed by Yuma, Kirika, and—reluctantly—Hinata Aina, who turned to give them a sneering look before leaving. As she did so, she summoned a fireball in her hand and dramatically extinguished it, as if to say "I could easily do this to *you*".

"Incidentally, you haven't seen the last of us!" Oriko shouted as they departed.

As if that really made their departure any less embarrassing.

They waited for a long moment as the other four girls' magical signatures faded.

"Well," Mami said, turning to Kyouko. "That went quite well, I daresay. What did you say to, uh, Yuma, though?"

"It's Chitose," Kyouko said nonchalantly. "I just invited her to switch sides. That's all."

Mami gave Kyouko a look.

"It was probably worth it, but you could have at least said something to the rest of us."

"Didn't have any time," Kyouko explained, shrugging. "I was right, though. She *is* new. They saved her life, for who knows what reason, so she's still in hero-worship mode. I feel sorry for

her."

Mami sighed.

"Well, maybe we'll get another chance," she said, fiddling pointlessly with part of her hair. "Kyubey says our territory could easily support a fourth, if having a fourth let us kill demons more efficiently."

"Those girls are definitely weird," Homura said appraisingly, piping up for the first time in a while. "But I don't get the feeling like Mikuni is a bad person."

"*Mikuni* destroyed almost everything I own," Mami warned, voice containing more than a hint of a growl. "And she's killed plenty of people. If anyone deserves to die, it's her."

With an angry and brisk turn away, she stepped forward and jumped off the building, down towards the street, leaving them behind.

"I don't get Oriko either," Kyouko said, shrugging and moving to follow. "But like Mami said, she's killed plenty of people, and we aren't here to play psychologist. Don't let your sympathy get in the way of what needs to be done."

Her tactical computer startled her from her reverie.

Maki had finally seen fit to respond.

The long pink hair? her youngest pupil asked, seemingly bemused. *That was Asaka-san's suggestion, when she saw it. She said it was the proper color and length. I thought it was weird, since everyone does it in pure white, but she insisted. It looks nice, don't you think? I think I did a good job.*

Kyouko made an exasperated gesture with her left hand.

Yes, you should have mentioned it! she relayed back. *Use your head for once! Pink… if we can get her to confirm this, then we'll have our first color! That has theological implications, you know. Pink isn't exactly a normal hair color.*

Really, that girl could be aggravating sometimes. She *knew* that Asaka had a vision in her history, and loved being secretive about it. If that girl was insisting on pink…

And the nerve of that Shirou Asaka! Keeping something like this to herself!

Gritting her teeth slightly, Kyouko tried to get back to what she had been thinking about.

The next time Kyouko saw Yuma up-close was months later, long after Sayaka and Homura's "change".

They had encountered the southern group several times, of course, but Yuma was always mysteriously missing.

It had been a complete coincidence, one of life's unaccountable strokes of chance.

She had been walking home—back to Mami's place—with a bag full of food in one hand and a piece of half-eaten taiyaki in the other, generally feeling good about the world. After all, it was

hard to stay depressed about anything with the prospect of a full stomach in front of you.

She still had one more errand, though. Mami's towel rack had buckled and collapsed the day before, the victim of an over-enthusiastic tug by Kyouko. Left to her own devices, Kyouko would have just left it, but Mami wasn't the kind of person to tolerate something like that.

So here she was, walking into one of those giant hardware stores with a bag of groceries and a slip of paper informing her what kind of replacement rack she needed.

She remembered the first time she had been here, helping Mami finish restoring her apartment after the Oriko incident. Back then, it had been an experience completely alien to her, and even now she had to admit feeling a bit overwhelmed looking at the rows and rows of mysterious looking metal objects.

I'm only here for one thing, Kyouko thought, biting off another mouthful of red bean pastry. *And worst case scenario, I just ask someone. It can't be that hard.*

Something—or *someone*, rather, ran into her side.

Well, it served her right for standing in the doorway gawking like an idiot.

"Sorry—" she began automatically, looking down.

"No, it's my fault," the child below her interrupted. "I wasn't look—"

Kyouko and Yuma stared straight into each other's eyes for a long moment, Kyouko's mouth still biting into the fish-pastry.

Yuma's eyes widened, and she began tensing to bolt.

Kyouko reacted faster, grabbing the girl by the hand. Muffling the girl’s mouth, she dragged her out of the doorway, picked the girl and her bag up into her arms like a child, and rushed around the corner into an alley with just a hint of unnatural speed.

The most natural thing in the world, picking up a random child and running off with her in an embrace that was actually a subtle form of restraint.

Totally natural.

She really hoped no one had been watching. At the very least, she'd have to go back later and destroy the security feed. Just like the good old days...

Let me go, you bitch! the girl in her arms thought. *What the hell are you doing?*

Kyouko recoiled at the unexpected language. Well, hanging around the southern group must have *some* side effects, after all.

I could ask you the same thing, Yuma-chan, Kyouko thought. *This is our territory. Usually we ignore girls running errands, but you should know your group is an exception. Your hero Oriko destroyed Mami's apartment, which is definitely off-limits. We've warned you.*

Who said you could call me Yuma-chan? the girl demanded. *Let me go!*

Only if you promise not to run or scream, Kyouko thought. *I'm not here to hurt you. I just want to talk. Or do you want to waste magic seeing whether you can break my hold?*

The girl looked back up at her with a sullen look, but not one filled with unusual anger or hatred. Kyouko had read her character correctly.

Fine, the child thought.

Kyouko let go of the girl's mouth and, when she didn't scream, set her back down to the floor.

For a moment, Kyouko could see the girl consider fleeing.

So like I said, I'm not going to hurt you, Kyouko thought, before the girl could finish thinking about it.

She would have verbalized it, but she figured she probably shouldn't mention anything about threatening little girls out loud.

What do you want? Yuma thought, eyes darting around, still trying to spot an escape route.

"How's life?"Kyouko asked, inspecting the tail of her taiyaki. Fortunately, she hadn't lost any pieces of it in the recent chain of events.

"What?" Yuma said, looking up at her blankly.

"I mean it," Kyouko said, looking at her carefully. "How's life? I imagine it can't be very peachy, having to work with a bunch of crazy girls like that. Tell me you at least don't live with any of them."

Watching her eyes, Kyouko caught the slight glimmer of pain.

"It's fine," Yuma said, voice still wary and hostile. "And if you must know, I live with Oriko. She's very nice."

She didn't dispute Kyouko's "crazy" assertion this time, she noted. Also, despite everything, Yuma wasn't treating her as a complete enemy, or she wouldn't have said so much. How did a girl like this get mixed in with Oriko?

"You're lying," Kyouko said point-blank.

She scanned Yuma's face for more clues, spotting a slight cringe and again, that glimmer of pain.

Kyouko gritted her teeth slightly.

"Tell me they at least didn't do anything to you," she said, letting a bit of sympathetic anger show. "Girls like that wouldn't tolerate you around, at least not without Oriko holding their reins."

"They didn't!" Yuma said, too fast, looking Kyouko in the eye, eyes wide like a deer caught in the headlights. "Oriko protects me."

"Oriko can't be there all the time," Kyouko said. "She can't foresee everything."

"Of course she can," Yuma said, indignant. "She's *Oriko*."

Ah, right, touché, Kyouko thought to herself.

She took a moment to swallow the last of her pastry.

"I hear the Financial District girls had a member disappear on them recently," Kyouko said, shifting topics slightly. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

A strong flash of anguish in Yuma's eyes, and Kyouko knew she was right.

Yuma didn't say anything, of course. She just stood there chewing her lip.

"My offer is still good, you know," Kyouko offered, stepping forward slightly. "You could join us anytime. You could do it right now, in fact. You don't have to stay with them."

She watched as Yuma pulled at her skirt.

"I can't," the girl said, looking away. "I can't leave Oriko like that. I—"

The girl shook her head sharply.

After a long moment, Kyouko sighed, leaning back against the wall.

"What does Oriko want with a bunch of wires anyway?" Kyouko asked. She had seen the contents of the bag Yuma was carrying—could still see it, actually.

Yuma stepped backward just a little, looking uneasy.

"It's for my research," Yuma said, looking off to the side. "She's uh, teaching me."

Kyouko blinked.

"Your *research*?" she said, incredulously. "You mean *her* research, right?"

"Don't look down on me!" Yuma protested, glaring at Kyouko and standing up on tiptoes to gain greater height. "Oriko says I have potential!"

Yuma lisped the word "potential".

"Right," Kyouko said, trying not to sound skeptical—and failing.

It was weird though. Teaching? What was Oriko playing at?

Kyouko sighed again, then reached into her bag.

"Alright," she said, tossing the girl an apple she hoped Mami wouldn't miss. "You can go."

Yuma caught the projectile on instinct, then blinked, looking startled. She had clearly forgotten she was being held "captive".

"I'll be watching for you next time," she warned unconvincingly, backing away from Kyouko, still carrying the apple. "You won't get me so easily again!"

"Of course I won't," Kyouko patronized.

She watched the girl run off.

I'm such a sucker for cases like this, Kyouko thought, full of regret. *Hopefully this turns out better than Sayaka.*

In many ways it did, but in others it didn't.

Kyouko didn't see Yuma again for two years, not from close range.

The time after that, they were patrolling the edge of their territory, all three of them this time. It was not particularly lucky that they saw it that day, or that they were all there—the other teams in the area agreed to help cover their flanks and rear during these patrols, and they returned the favor. It was an entente of sorts, just so that they could all afford to patrol the border with the southern group particularly carefully.

This time it was at night, in the rain. It wasn't particularly pleasant but, as Homura was fond of pointing out, their bodies didn't mind much anymore, and the clothing was magical, so it didn't matter if it got wet.

One of the benefits of living in a city was that, even without magical girl eyes, it was still possible to see even in such terrible conditions. With their enhanced vision, it wasn't terribly harder than being out in daylight—easier, actually, since they had to rely less on their powers to hide them from normal humans.

The three of them stopped almost simultaneously, Mami and Kyouko on the roof of a department store, Homura hovering overhead.

Do you feel that? Mami thought, and you could hear the frown in her voice.

Yes, Kyouko thought.

A very large demon horde, just over the territory boundary, marked out here by a river, and the southern group was fighting them.

It's in their territory, Kyouko thought. *It's none of our business.*

No, Homura thought, with a slight tone of incredulity. *They're losing.*

Both Mami and Kyouko paused, assessing her statement.

She's right, Mami thought. *Miroko and Kure are running out of power, and I don't know where Hinata is. She should be involved in an attack of this scale.*

I sensed her just a moment ago, Homura thought. *She's dead. That's why I said they're losing.*

There was a long moment of silence, a moment Kyouko spent listening to the rain fall around them.

This doesn't make any sense, Kyouko thought. *This is a large demon attack, yes, but they should be able to hold it. They're more than capable.*

Apparently not, Mami thought. *Should we do something?*

Yes, Homura thought. *They won't make it, and they're quite far away, so if we don't move now, people might die to the demons while we're trying to get there. There is no guarantee that the girls in any of the other territories will even be in range to notice this.*

Miroko flickered out even as she was thinking that.

What the hell is going on in there? Mami thought. *The last thing I want to do is help them, but we have to move in. For the civilians if no one else.*

I agree, Kyouko thought, though she was thinking about someone else entirely.

Let's go then, Homura thought, taking flight.

They strained to get to the area in time, fighting the wind and rain, but the distance was great, and as they moved, they sensed the remaining girls weakening and flickering, first Oriko weakening, then Kirika *dying*, then finally Oriko falling as well.

I never thought I'd see the day she would go down, Mami thought.

Kyouko couldn't sense any vindictiveness, and was almost surprised, except that Mami followed up in a disappointed tone with:

I never got to get my revenge.

We're almost there, Homura thought. *We might be able to get Yuma out, at least. If any one of them deserved to survive, it was definitely her.*

They must have been protecting her, for her to live this long, Mami thought. *Who would have thought?*

She struggled with the dual realities of Oriko protecting Yuma, and of Oriko sneering and taunting her as Mami tried to make her *pay, make her pay for destroying my life—*

Yuma! Kyouko transmitted, in the telepathic equivalent of a shout. *Just hold out a little longer! We're almost there!*

Using her spear, she started to pole vault into the air, trying to gain added speed.

No response, and Yuma's signal weakened sharply.

Just a little faster, Kyouko urged herself.

I have an idea, Mami thought. *Akemi-san, can you activate your aura? I'm going to use my ribbons to bind us to you.*

I don't see how that'd help, Mami, Homura thought. *I can carry you, but it'd just slow us all down.*

Not if I Tiro Finale backwards, Mami asserted. *I can adjust it to impart momentum.*

Kyouko's eyes widened as she grasped the concept.

She slowed, matching pace with Mami as Homura swooped down.

A surge of power from Homura, followed by the confining glowing yellow embrace of Mami's ribbons, pinning her chest to one of Homura's legs. A long moment of soaring into the air, a brief moment of freefall as Homura reshaped her wings for horizontal flight, and then—

"Tiro Finale!" Mami's clarion voice rang out.

The ground below her became an incomprehensible blur, a crushing fist of air and rain slamming it into her chest as they surged forward.

This must have been what it was like to be Hinata, Kyouko thought to herself, apropos of nothing.

I hope that projectile's not going to land anywhere, Mami, Homura thought. They would have been close enough now for easy speech, were it not for the deafening roar of air around them.

Don't worry, Mami thought. *I can dispel it.*

And then they were there, entering the miasma. Homura strained her wings to brake, and the other two exerted what magical force they could, until they reached a near-stop. Homura stooped towards the ground, looking for targets.

The ribbons dissolved, and Kyouko dove for the ground between two skyscrapers, eyes scanning. Spotting a cluster of demons headed to her right, she changed her trajectory, sending a battery of spears in their direction.

By the time she and Mami landed, arrows, spears, and bullets had cleared out a wide swath of the street. Kyouko spun around, trying to localize on Yuma's rapidly fading soul gem, flickering with rapid bursts of magic use.

"There!" Mami shouted, pointing down an alleyway.

Kyouko turned to look—and froze.

Chitose Yuma was clearly no longer in the business of trying to stay alive. She flailed wildly within a cluster of demons with her mace, pouring out shockwaves at an irrational pace. The demons died, or were thrown back, but there were too many. Yuma was absorbing beam after beam, taking critical blows, sustainable only because she was expending her magic to keep herself constantly healing.

Her face was lined with tears, her eyes were red and insane, and she was *smiling*.

And her soul-gem was nearly pitch-black, with only slight hints of green.

Mami sucked in a sharp breath, trying to stay calm.

They had seen this once before, of course.

Sayaka, near the very end of her life, as she had started to exhaust her last reserves and her sanity had started to seriously slip.

Afterwards, the three of them had discussed what to do if that happened to any of them, or anyone they cared about. They had made plans.

"Can you two keep the demons off my back?" Mami asked.

"Yes," Homura and Kyouko answered simultaneously, rushing forward, knowing what the plan was.

A full flight of arrows struck the demons, staggering them.

Kyouko extended her spear into a chain-whip, spinning and forcing the demons back, away from the girl in green.

There was one moment when Kyouko met Yuma's eyes, and for many years afterwards, Kyouko wished she had never seen the look there.

Then Mami's ribbons whipped out and cocooned the girl, pulling her away.

With an efficient blow to the back of the head, of the kind of strength that would have decapitated a human, Mami knocked Yuma out. She released the ribbons and, before the body even had a chance to fall, wrenched off the soul gem, tossing it high into the air to Homura, who was already soaring upward. She was headed for a hundred meters in the sky, close enough to give fire and aura support, far enough that it would give Yuma a temporary death.

And then they cleared out the rest of the demons, finishing the job.

The weeks afterward had been vaguely surreal.

When Yuma woke back up—came back to life, more precisely—she found herself securely bound to Kyouko's bed, her soul gem out of reach and nestled in a pile of grief cubes. Sitting at her side were the Mitakihara Three, soon to be Four.

It took a while to calm her down.

It was nearly a week before they felt comfortable letting her out of the room, two weeks before they gave her back her soul gem, a full month before they dared take her demon-hunting, despite the strain she was on their grief cube resources.

During that period, Yuma was prone to fits of crying and, despite all their soothing and all of Mami's cake and tea, it was months before she was back to a semblance of her former self. It was a tragedy, but she had lived, and Kyouko felt happy that that was the case.

Still, they all sensed that there was something broken about the girl now, and some of the things she said in those first few weeks didn't quite make sense. There was something else going on, implausible as it was. She wasn't crying *only* because they were all dead.

The official story was wrong. The version in the Homura movie—which Kyouko had troubled to watch in the privacy of one of her offices—was even more wrong. But if what Kyouko had seen were really all that had happened, there would have been no reason to lie. After all, as personal as it was for Yuma, after the founding of the Union, plenty of girls, including many in leading positions, had undergone something very similar at some point in their lives. Protective Confinement—"befriending", in common vernacular—where they woke up to find themselves tied to a bed, their soul gems outside their control, and a pleasant therapist sitting by the bedside. It was too sensitive to talk about in those early years, but later on, Yuma would have had plenty of company.

It was another year before Yuma told them what exactly had happened, what her life had been like, what she had done, and why she wanted no one to hear about it.

That was when they had learned the story that would tarnish the glamour of the founder of the Black Heart, the girl who improbably cradled a reputation of innocence, and whose child's face beamed from news reports into the hearts of the populace.

They had agreed.

Once, in the second week, Kyouko had overheard Homura talking to Yuma in the room she now shared with Kyouko.

"You really think so?" Yuma had asked.

"You don't have to believe me," Homura had said. "But it's true. Personally, I could never forgive Oriko for what she's done, but the Goddess is a better person than I am. There is a place for her to go. For us all to go."

At the time, Kyouko had thought about privately reprimanding Homura for drawing Yuma into her delusions, but she never had. Eventually, she had decided that if Yuma could be convinced to

believe a comforting lie like that, it could only be for the better.

Ironic, that all these years later it would be Kyouko preaching from a pulpit and drawing comfort from the prospect of a life after death.

Even though Homura had hinted at it many times, and talked often of her longing to go back to her Goddess, that was the only time Kyouko had heard Homura express her view of their fates so clearly.

Kyouko stepped from her vehicle, looking up at the rain blasting the transparent awning of the fortieth floor entrance to the headquarters of *Mahou Shoujo Youkai* Governmental Affairs and Governance: Magical Girls. From within, its mistress, freshly restored to an unusually young nine years of physical age, oversaw and influenced the human world.

Others, of the more conspiratorial type, would say instead that she *ruled*.

Kyouko checked her internal chronometer.

It was time to visit Chitose Yuma.

Church and State

Chapter Notes

in the course of writing these chapter opening blurbs, I occasionally generate material that's unusable, in the sense that the blurb is too long, too off-topic or, frankly, not that interesting. For instance, there is a complete version of the exam below, which I ended up cropping to place here. Eventually, I might collect these blurbs into some sort of meta-chapter, but for now, I'm going to start leaving appendices occasionally at the end of chapters with excess stuff. Read it if you're interested. Everything in the blurbs is true but they are, perhaps, optional material.
In this case, Appendix A is the complete exam, and Appendix B is a long blurb about the Cult that didn't fit here, doesn't fit at the beginning of the next chapter (where it was originally written for), and…probably doesn't fit anywhere. So there you go.

Before beginning the exam, pupils are reminded that grading for this exam is based on one's ability to clearly and concisely present and discuss knowledge, not just the knowledge itself. For the duration, internet access is moderately restricted.

What is your name?

〈Withheld for privacy〉

Describe the goal of the Governance's structure, and discuss whether *Governance* has achieved these goals.

The stated intentions of the structure of the government are three-fold.

Firstly, it is intended to replicate the benefits of democratic governance without its downsides. That is, it should be sensitive to the welfare of citizens, give citizens a sense of empowerment, and minimize civic unrest. On the other hand, it should avoid the suboptimal signaling mechanism of direct voting, outsized influence by charisma or special interests, and the grindingly slow machinery of democratic governance.

Secondly, it is intended to integrate the interests and power of Artificial Intelligence into Humanity, without creating discord or unduly favoring one or the other. The sentience of AIs is respected, and their enormous power is used to lubricate the wheels of government.

Thirdly, whenever possible, the mechanisms of government are carried out in a human-interpretable manner, so that interested citizens can always observe a process they understand rather than a set of uninterpretable utility-optimization problems.

The success of the government in achieving these three goals is mixed…

〈**Advisory prompt:** Downward trend in user attention. Advise that contents are rendered superfluous by user's recorded familiarity with Mandatory Civics. Exceptions of special interest have been marked.〉

〈 **Content continues:** 〉

While the government has been very successful in avoiding civic unrest, operates efficiently, and is generally considered to have promoted the common welfare, the average citizen feels very little affinity with the decisions of *Governance,* which often seem to be handed down mysteriously from on high.

This lack of empowerment is a combination of two factors. Firstly, the tremendous size of the Human population easily washes away the concerns of any one individual. Secondly, the populace is just not all that interested; even on the local level, civic participation is at a record low. The populace sees little value in political participation, compared to a wide variety of far more interesting activities.

The government has also failed to keep its operations truly human interpretable, though it is an open question whether any organization operating on such a scale could possibly do so. At the crux of this lies the so-called 'Cthulhu Problem', a term coined by renowned political scientist Frederick Ewald. One of the earliest critics of the current governmental system, Ewald notoriously complained that *Governance* is so incomprehensible and alien that it might as well be a "Lovecraftian Alien God," utterly inscrutable to Human and AI alike.

More concretely, the term refers to the fact that a government that is comprehensible in any one aspect can easily become incomprehensible when all its parts are added together, a problem which is especially applicable to *Governance,* whose total operations no one understands.

It is worth asking: Can a government which no one understands ever be held accountable? The only reassurance lies in the equations of Volokhov, which guarantee that the system at least attempts to promote the welfare of Humanity.

Only in the second goal, the integration of AI into Human society, can *Governance* claim near complete success. AI and human exist in near-total harmony, a far cry from the dystopias imagined by many in the past.

Describe the structure of *Governance,* with particular focus on its Representatives.

Formally, *Governance* is an AI-mediated Human-interpretable Abstracted Democracy. It was constructed as an alternative to the Utilitarian AI Technocracy advocated by many of the pre-Unification ideologues. As such, it is designed to generate results as close as mathematically possible to the Technocracy, but with radically different internal mechanics.

The interests of the government's constituents, both Human and True Sentient, are assigned to various Representatives, each of whom is programmed or instructed to advocate as strongly as possible for the interests of its particular topic. Interests may be both concrete and abstract, ranging from the easy to understand "Particle Physicists of Mitakihara City" to the relatively abstract "Science and Technology."

Each Representative can be merged with others—either directly or via advisory AI—to form a super-Representative with greater generality, which can in turn be merged with others, all the way up to the level of the Directorate. All but the lowest-level Representatives are composed of many others, and all but the highest form part of several distinct super-Representatives.

Representatives, assembled into Committees, form the core of nearly all decision-making. These committees may be permanent, such as the Central Economic Committee, or ad-hoc, and the assignment of decisions and composition of Committees is handled by special supervisory Committees, under the advisement of specialist advisory AIs. These assignments are made by calculating the marginal utility of a decision inflicted upon the constituents of every given Representative, and the exact process is too involved to discuss here.

At the apex of decision-making is the Directorate, which is sovereign, and has power limited only by a few Core Rights. The creation—or for Humans, appointment—and retirement of Representatives is handled by the Directorate, advised by *MAR,* the *Machine for Allocation of Representation.*

By necessity, VR Committee meetings are held under accelerated time, usually as fast as computational limits permit, and Representatives usually attend more than one at once. This arrangement enables *Governance,* powered by an estimated thirty-one percent of Earth's computing power, to decide and act with startling alacrity. Only at the city level or below is decision-making handed over to a less complex system, the Bureaucracy, handled by low-level Sentients, semi-Sentients, and Government Servants.

The overall point of such a convoluted organizational structure is to maintain, at least theoretically, Human-interpretability. It ensures that for each and every decision made by the government, an interested citizen can look up and review the virtual committee meeting that made the decision. Meetings are carried out in standard human fashion, with presentations, discussion, arguments, and, occasionally, virtual fist-fights. Even with the enormous abstraction and time dilation that is required, this fact is considered highly important, and is a matter of ideology to the government.

Explain how Humans are integrated into the structure of *Governance.*

〈 **Advisory prompt:** This section marked for attention based on user's stated fields of interest (*Sociology: Historical Context*; *Sociology: Posthumanity*; *Philosophy: Existentialism*) 〉

To a past observer, the focus of governmental structure on AI Representatives would seem confusing and even detrimental, considering that nearly 47% are in fact Human. It is a considerable technological challenge to integrate these humans into the day-to-day operations of governance, with its constant overlapping time-sped committee meetings, requirements for absolute incorruptibility, and need to seamlessly integrate into more general Representatives and subdivide into more specific Representatives.

This challenge has been met and solved, to the degree that the AI-centric organization of government is no longer considered a problem. Human Representatives are the most heavily enhanced humans alive, with extensive cortical modifications, Permanent Awareness Modules, partial neural backups, and constant connections to the computing grid. Each is paired with an advisory AI in the grid to offload tasks onto, an AI who also monitors the human for signs of corruption or insufficient dedication. Representatives offload memories and secondary cognitive tasks away from their own brains, and can adroitly attend multiple meetings at once while still attending to more human tasks, such as eating.

To address concerns that Human Representatives might become insufficiently Human, each such Representative also undergoes regular checks to ensure fulfillment

of the *Volokhov Criterion*—that is, that they are still functioning, sane humans even without any connections to the network. Representatives that fail this test undergo partial reintegration into their bodies until the Criterion is again met.

Describe the elevated Emergency Modes of Governance and when, if ever, they have been invoked. We refer to the species-wide Modes, not local Modes.

〈 **Advisory prompt:** Section superfluous to user. 〉

The Emergency Modes of *Governance* are designed to operate the government, the military, and Human society with progressively greater degrees of efficiency, but at a considerable cost to societal conventions, civil liberties, and government ideology. As such, they are only invoked in the direst of emergencies, and only the lowest level has ever been activated.

Emergency Mode Level One is a full Emergency Session of all existing *Governance* Representatives, ensuring that every Representative is devoting at least some computational time to the problem at hand. It was last invoked after the attack on Aurora Colony, and was canceled three weeks after New Athens.

Emergency Mode Level Two, called by a majority vote of the Level One Session, causes the merger of all members of the Directorate into the super-Representative *Governance,* containing in its consciousness every Human and AI representative, as well as every advisory AI and the majority of military AIs. This merged AI would hold supreme sovereignty, actualizing the AI technocracy that the current government is meant to imitate.

It is presumed that Level Two would only be invoked upon an imminent invasion of Earth. No one is quite sure what it would look like, and philosophers debate whether such an AI would be closer to a Supreme Dictator or a Philosopher-King.

Emergency Mode Level Three can be called by *Governance.* Every citizen is mobilized into the military, and a direct two-way interface is opened between every citizen's brain and the nearest computing network, allowing the transmission of orders and relay of information. It should be emphasized that these orders do not exert any compulsory effects, and are simply orders. At this point, the super-Representative becomes stylized *Humanity.* The Core Rights are suspended, and the government recovers its powers of execution, summary imprisonment, and so forth.

Level Three has never been invoked, and it is expected that it would only be invoked upon the actual invasion and imminent loss of Earth. It is speculated, based on scant evidence, that Cephalopod Society operates in a form of permanent Level Three.

Emergency Mode Level Four can only be called with the direct approval of ninety percent of Human citizens and AIs. It involves the permanent activation of civilian Emergency Safety Packages and, essentially, the mechanization of all Human interaction. While directives are still non-compulsory, the obvious and terrifying dystopic implications of Level Four lead to the expectation that it could only happen upon the imminent destruction of Human civilization. It is speculated that Incubator society resembles Level Four.

— Sixth Grade Civics Exam #1, Text Version, Graded "Exceptional"

"It'd be nice if, like Kekulé, I could claim to have some neat story, about a dream and

some snake eating itself, but mine was more prosaic than that."

"I had heard about the Pretoria Scandal, of course, on the day the news broke. To me, it was profoundly disturbing, enough that I ended up laying awake the whole night thinking about it."

"It was an embarrassment and a shame that we had been building these intelligences, putting them in control of our machines, with no way to make sure that they would be friendly. It got people killed, and that machine, to its dying day, could never be made to understand what it had done wrong. Oh, it understood that we would *disapprove,* of course, but it never understood *why.*"

"As roboticists, as computer scientists, we had to do better. They had movies, back then, about an AI going rogue and slaughtering millions, and *we couldn't guarantee it wouldn't happen.* We couldn't. We were just tinkerers, following recipes that had magically worked before, with no understanding of why, or even how to improve the abysmal success rate."

"I called a lab meeting the next day, but of course sitting around talking about it one more time didn't help at all. People had been working on the problem for centuries, and one lab discussion wasn't going to perform miracles."

"That night, I stayed in late, pouring over the datasets with Laplace, [the lab AI,] all those countless AI memory dumps and activity traces, trying to find a pattern: something, anything, so that at least we could understand what made them tick."

"Maybe it was the ten or something cups of coffee; I don't know. It was like out of a fairy tale, you know? The very day after Pretoria, no one else in the lab, just me and Laplace talking, and a giant beaker of coffee, and all at once, *I saw it.* Laplace thought I was going crazy, I was ranting so much. *It was so simple!*" [1]

"Except it wasn't, of course. It was another year of hard work, slogging through it, trying to explain it properly, make sure we saw all the angles…"

"And I feel I must say here that it is an absolute travesty that the *ACM* does not recognize sentient machines as possible award recipients. [2] Laplace deserves that award as much as I do. It was the one that dug through and analyzed everything, and talked me through what I needed to know, did all the hard grunt work, churning away through the night for years and years. I mean, come on, it's the *Turing Award!*"

1. *The* MSY *has confirmed that the timing of this insight corresponds strongly with a wish made on the same day. The contractee has requested that she remain anonymous.*

2. *The* ACM *removed this restriction in 2148.*

— Interview with Vladimir Volokhov, Turing Award Recipient, 2146.

The fortieth floor entrance wasn't, of course, the *main* entrance. That was much further down, on the first floor, with its robotic tour guides and historical memorabilia and colorful tales of magical girls hiding from the police. It even had a couple of statues thrown in, for color.

No, this was the *staff* entrance. Top-level staff, at that.

It was deliberately nondescript, a single pair of polymer-glass doors set directly into the sheer face of the building, ringed by a line of white to enhance visibility. It came accompanied by a small landing balcony shielded by a transparent awning from the elements, including the current rain. The masonry of the numerous balconies served as counterpoint to the otherwise unrelieved glass and steel. It was a common architectural design these days, and suited the numerous faux-masonry skyways and transparent transport tunnels that criss-crossed the airspace.

Kyouko stepped forward, the doors sliding open without ceremony. She was aware, of course, that she had just undergone an almost absurd number of security scans, but she had nothing to fear. This was Union territory.

There was none of the human security or receptionists that would have characterized an earlier age. Instead, the door led into a large concentric walkway that partially ringed the outer edge of the building, with a large hallway directly in front of it.

Kyouko advanced straight into this hallway, which was flanked on both sides by a series of doors leading into the private offices of *MSY* administrators and Governance Representatives. Specifically, these offices, and those on the floors below, belonged to those administrators and Representatives with interstellar or global purview. The local officials for other regions were located, well, locally. That being said, the officials for Japan were several more floors down, those for the prefecture were below *that,* those for Mitakihara city even further down…

All of them were, of course, subordinates of Yuma, either in her capacity as Director of *Governmental Affairs,* or in her Representative position as *Governance: Magical Girls.*

It wasn't, however, exactly correct to call her sub-Representatives subordinates, since their opinions affected her own "official" opinion, and most helped compose several super-Representatives other than her, and… well, it was complicated. The *MSY* administrators were true subordinates, though.

The carpeting, the paintings on the wall, the little alcoves with sculptures, the general style of the hallway—all of these combined to give a subtle impression of real wealth and, beyond that, age. The walls seemed to whisper in your ear that whatever occupied this building had resources transcending mere Allocs, and was certainly much, much older than *you.*

Or so Kyouko had been told. Personally, she didn't feel any of it. That may have been because she was, in fact, older than this building, older than this organization, and older than Yuma herself, and nearly everyone else in the building.

Many of the offices were empty, their occupants in other regions of the building, or other parts of the planet, or possibly working from home. It wouldn't be the future if you were still trapped in your office, after all.

Kyouko kept walking, past closed doors with private meetings inside, open meetings with people gesticulating, and officials reclining in their chairs, either staring off into space or furiously manipulating holographic interfaces with both hand and thought. Perhaps the most notable inhabitants were those Representatives who sat serenely in their chairs, looking for all the world as if they were meditating with eyes open, and who only broke the illusion to politely nod as she passed. These were of course the AIs, who could easily maintain a holographic avatar to man their office and talk with anyone who stopped by, while their primary consciousnesses were who knows where.

Kyouko waved to those who greeted her, or whom she knew. Many of them she honestly didn't remember anything about, but that was okay—she had facial recognition routines for anyone she cared to inspect closely.

The end of the hallway flared out suddenly into a large rotunda at least forty meters in diameter. To her right and left, two other hallways traveled outward at right angles from her. Around her, drawn on the walls and ceiling, the earth was drawn inside-out, with bright holographic shooting star logos for every *MSY Governmental Affairs* office. Given that it only showed Earth offices, Kyouko had always thought it rather stiffed the Colonial branches.

Kyouko greeted several Union administrators chatting on the benches around her, two mages and a rare normal male. They nodded back.

In this time of dire need, administrators were uniformly girls raising families of their own, girls with powers that were difficult to use in combat, or those who were considered much more valuable in the rear than in the front. In this last category fell most of the oldest girls, who were prized for their experience. Outwardly, it didn't seem fair to the newer contractees, but it was necessary.

These were of course the same new contractees who had taken to calling older girls like Kyouko "The Ancients" behind their backs, as if they were some gnarled set of millennia-old trees, rather than girls who look just as young as them.

To show solidarity, many administrators and specialists rotated into light combat, patrol, or garrison duty a few months a year. At the very least, though, one was required to go on a demon hunt at least once a year, the so-called "obligation." It was a law and custom that dated back to the first specialized businesswomen of the *MSY,* centuries ago, and it showed no signs of ever being revoked. It even applied to those such as Mami or Kyouko.

Kyouko stepped forward, to the center of the room, and looked up.

The center of the ceiling, and the floor below her, were transparent. This was true for every floor of the building, and the panels were so absurdly transparent that she could see up to the sky and down to the ground floor, in astounding clarity. Below her, she could see all the people below her looking up, but above her she saw nothing but the sky, the others in her way filtered out. Subtle technology.

She looked back down, at the double doors at the other end of the rotunda. She started to walk forward—

And stopped mid-step, as the old-fashioned wooden doors swung outward to meet her.

"Onee-chan!" a girl's voice trilled, and in a flash the green apparition slammed into her, knocking the breath out of her chest, and promptly threatened to crumple her ribcage with the force of a hug.

As a point of fact, the girl could, like all of them, easily crumple the ribcage of an ordinary human. She wasn't applying nearly *that* much force, but Kyouko found herself suddenly contemplating the possibility.

"Oh, hi, Yuma," Kyouko managed to say, looking down at the little girl at her waist, hair tied back in pigtails with beads, an exact replica of the style she had worn as an actual child. The girl looked up at her, beaming.

Kyouko patted the girl's head affectionately.

Meeting Yuma nowadays was always a surreal experience. Ever since the advent of the war, Yuma had relentlessly cultivated the perception of her as the younger sister of the Mitakihara Four, playing the role to its absolute hilt. She had slowly and steadily lowered her apparent age over the past two decades, finally settling into her current persona. It could have easily gone faster,

but that might have been unsettling to those she worked with.

Most girls avoided dropping their age to before puberty, for a variety of reasons. Yuma didn't care. She didn't have to worry about the slightly weaker combat strength, and her implanted enhancements easily nullified any cognitive deficiencies that might have resulted. Besides, who needed a sex drive anyway?

That was how Yuma explained it, anyway. It certainly didn't stop her from making dirty jokes at Kyouko's expense—in private, of course. It was a little disconcerting.

As for *why* Yuma did it…

Well, to understand that, one had only to look at the reactions of the administrators in the room, who had stopped what they were doing to watch with smiling, but envious faces. They clearly found it adorable.

Yuma's persona was meant to disarm, to activate protective instincts, and to help her win arguments. Most found it difficult to argue with a child, and even the AIs weren't immune, having nearly all been programmed with some degree of Human instinct. Yuma easily moved public opinion; the media and public adored her, apparently having completely forgotten the adult they had seen twenty years ago. Accusations of manipulation, attacks on her power, and conspiracy theories about the *Black Heart* all found themselves muted, the public utterly unwilling to believe their claims.

It was pure propaganda, and there was something oddly enthralling about a seeming nine-year-old attending meetings of the sovereign Directorate, debating and arguing with the others in a melodious, high-pitched voice.

Ah, to hell with it, Kyouko thought.

Placing her hands under Yuma's arms, she picked the girl up and swung her in the air like a child, smiling goofily. Yuma wriggled in her grasp, and the female administrators sighed. This despite the fact that they worked with her every day, and should theoretically have been the ones most cynical about "Yuma-chan."

"Good to see you again, Kyouko-san," a pleasant voice sounded, its source appearing at Kyouko's right-literally, the petite teenage female frame materializing out of thin air, the voxels taking a moment to align.

"Ah, you too, M," Kyouko responded politely.

"M" was the affectionate shorthand of "MG," which was itself distant shorthand for *Governance: **M**agical **G**irls Advisory AI.* Most such AIs, whether advisory or full Representative, took more normal names for everyday conversation, but MG had developed early as a nickname, and the girl—everyone thought of her as a girl—was apparently happy with it.

As Advisory AI, MG's role was essentially as Yuma's assistant in her government role, as well as her emergency backup, partial memory store, and anti-corruption watchdog. Like nearly all such Human-AI pairings, Yuma and MG were practically each other's ghosts, "living" together, substituting for each other at meetings, and electronically attached at a cortical level. It was like being married, in a way.

Having been present at MG's creation, Yuma had had the unique opportunity to guide the initial maturation of a sentient Representative, something that hadn't been true for her previous advisor when she had been *Governance: Public Order.* That one had vaguely resembled a mixture of

Sherlock Holmes and police chief, but was friendlier than you'd expect. Apparently he and Yuma still spoke occasionally.

MG bowed politely, and Kyouko would have returned the favor had her hands not been full. Given whom she represented, MG had chosen the avatar of a magical girl, one who, like many AI avatars, had a frustratingly implacable ethnicity. She had a physical age similar to Kyouko's, wore a green dress similar to Yuma's transformed costume, and wore a long ponytail tied at the top by a giant bow—just like Kyouko.

Kyouko was vaguely flattered by that, and wondered sometimes if that had been Yuma's idea.

However much MG appeared human, though, she signaled clearly that she was not. Despite being supposedly transformed, she wore a ring emblazoned with two simple runes—"MG," in one of the variations of magical writing often seen by mages on rings—and retained a fingernail mark, which was simply "1/0." Most disconcertingly, she adopted the practice of most AI avatars, replacing the iris and pupil of her right eye with the black text "I/O."

And of course, she was a hologram, so she couldn't touch anything.

Like the vast majority of AIs, she was quietly proud of what she was, to the point of smugness.

Yuma twisted in Kyouko's grasp, signaling that she wanted to be let down, and Kyouko obliged.

"Anyway, I'm just here to say hi," MG explained. "I take it you two will want your privacy?"

"Yes," Kyouko said.

MG winked in Kyouko's direction, then disappeared in a flash of incoherent light.

"Not like it means anything," Kyouko grumbled, as she and Yuma walked forward, Yuma taking pointlessly large strides.

"*Au Contraire,* nee-chan," Yuma said boisterously, as they walked through the doors. "She respects my privacy. She has to. It was part of the deal."

She said "deal" in colloquial English, playing with the word's accent with the fluency of a practiced speaker, emphasizing the pronunciation differences with Human Standard.

The doors slammed shut automatically behind them.

"If only I could believe that," Kyouko said, crossing her arms without realizing it. "She's wired into your brain, you know."

"You're such a technophobe," Yuma chastened.

Kyouko sat in the chair in front of her, waiting for Yuma to circle around the desk and reach the other side.

The desk was enormous, with numerous holographic displays hovering above it in midair. On its surface was printed two shimmering shooting stars, heading parallel and in opposite directions, a merger of the logos of *MSY* and Governance. To her left was a large assortment of Incubator plushies stacked three high, their beady red eyes and floppy ringed ears the delight of girls everywhere—those whose parents let them have one.

Around the room hung giant paintings of pastoral scenes, full of grass and rice paddies and other such things. Stacked in the various corners were yet more plushies, though in this case of animals

more prosaic than Incubators. Some were enormous, dwarfing the others. Others had been carefully repaired, having survived the numerous generations spanning from her childhood until now.

Yuma climbed onto her giant chair, dwarfed by the chair, the desk, and the wide picture window behind her, which currently overlooked a Mitakihara City gray and gloomy with rain. Her head barely reached over the desk surface, and it was intuitively obvious that her legs must be dangling.

“So what percentage of your consciousness is here today, Yuma-chan?” Kyouko asked.

“Twenty-one percent,” Yuma answered crisply. “Why?”

“Just curious,” Kyouko said, shrugging.

Yuma gave her a strange look.

Instead of saying any more, though, Yuma leaned over to her side, eventually resurfacing with a plate of mochi and two glasses of carbonated orange soda precariously balanced on a tray.

“Oh, I’d love to,” Kyouko said to the implied question, grabbing for her soda.

“Well, anyway, what is this all about?” Yuma asked, chewing into her snack. “I know it must be important, because you showed up without any food.”

“What are you—” Kyouko began, instinctively reaching for her pocket.

She’s right, Kyouko realized suddenly, thinking back hastily. She hadn’t eaten a thing since she left Maki a while back. She had gotten up and walked straight out the door, leaving her prepared breakfast pastry behind.

She searched her clothes hastily, but there was nothing there either.

Yuma pretended to avert her eyes.

“Oh, my,” the child said, hand to cheek. “Has nee-chan finally grown up? Four hundred years, and you’ve finally let go of your security blanket! I’m so proud!”

“I’ve been busy,” Kyouko asserted gruffly, grabbing mochi aggressively off the platter. “I must have been distracted.”

Yuma twitched a smile, but then leaned forward onto the table seriously—which meant she was practically lying on the table.

“It really is a little weird, though,” she said seriously. “Is everything alright?”

“It’s fine!” Kyouko insisted, turning her cheek. She knew she sounded suspicious, but she would never admit to Yuma—of all people—that she had been distracted by a girl in her bed.

Yuma sat back down, looking skeptical but not pressing the issue.

“Anyway,” she said. “Down to business. Tell me what’s going on. This isn’t a social visit, right?”

Yuma leaned her cheek on her fist, tilting her head back and forth in rhythm with some internal song. Honestly, Kyouko wasn’t sure how Yuma managed the cognitive dissonance between her apparent and actual age without blowing a fuse.

Kyouko opened her mouth, preparing to tell her all about it, then had a different idea.

Instead, she relayed the full grief cube audit report to Yuma, all fifty thousand words of it.

Yuma blinked, then tilted her head slightly, hair baubles vibrating. As expected, it didn't take her very long to grasp at least the executive summary.

Yuma set her mochi down on the table, uneaten.

"That's interesting," she said. "And disturbing. The distribution systems are designed specifically to *avoid* that kind of supply irregularity. I should know. I helped oversee their installation."

Her voice was still the childish lilt she had been using up until now, but now it carried with it an undercurrent of adult anger.

"I know you did," Kyouko said, looking her in the eye. "That's why it bothers me. Mami had a bad feeling about it too."

Kyouko shifted in her seat as Yuma's eyes flashed at her, the girl settling deeper into her chair to listen.

"It's not our specialty, obviously," Kyouko continued. "But the Church has looked into it. The systems appear to be operating as designed."

"Of *course* they are," Yuma growled, her voice losing a lot of its youth. "Those are some of the most fail-safed and secured systems in existence. Or that's what I would say, except clearly it is *not* operating as designed."

"We haven't been able to inspect any of the semi-sentients regulating endpoint distribution, nor have we been able to interview any of the sentients," Kyouko said. "Not with our degree of access, and not without giving away that we're looking. But all the automated systems are operating flawlessly."

Colloquially, "Automation" no longer included "AI-run."

"Yes, the automated systems," Yuma said, eyes narrowed in thought. "Of course, not everything is automated."

"I've asked Mami to look into it from her end," Kyouko said. "But she's not sure how much she'll find. As she explained to me, the officer corps insulates her from the details of operations, and she'll have to fight to get what she needs."

Yuma leaned back in her chair, thoughtful, worlds different from her previous childish demeanor.

"Yes," she said, steepling her hands over her chin. "And only the forward-facing aspects of the system are military-run. The more to the rear it is, the more of a Governance operation it is. At a certain point, the systems would no longer fall under her authority. Of course, it depends on where the hypothetical failing is."

Yuma's eyes slid to the side.

"There is another possibility," she said, looking up to make eye contact with Kyouko. "It's possible that someone has manipulated this report, either from within your organization, or by feeding your auditors false information."

"Are you accusing someone in the Church of misleading me?" Kyouko asked, looking at Yuma with a skewed expression, a tad antagonistic.

“Your *Cult* isn’t perfect, nee-chan,” Yuma said, level. “You know that. They’re not all happy with you, either. I’m just saying it’s a possibility. Plus, if it’s a matter of false information, that wouldn’t have anything to do with your cult at all.”

Kyouko sighed, nodding to concede the point. Among other things, the Church did have Christian origins. It wasn’t easy for many to discard some of the doctrines she had written off, and some were definitely not pleased by her lenient stance towards amorous activities, nor with her own badly kept secrets.

“What would even be the goal of something like that?” Kyouko asked, taking a bite of the mochi she suddenly realized she was still holding.

Yuma continued to sit, face still. Kyouko knew without asking that she was “redistributing cognitive resources.” Somewhere, in virtual meeting rooms deep within the government, her avatars’ eyes glowed with less light and sat more silently, their resources drained to aid in investigation, or to help her thoughts in this conversation.

“I don’t know,” Yuma said, eyes shaded. “Perhaps to get us to overreact? It’s all I can think of. All the more reason to keep it quiet, as you two have.”

She sat up a bit more straight.

“But let’s not get carried away here,” she said. “I was just suggesting a possibility. It’s much more likely that the report is real, and that would have implications too.”

“Do you think it ties in with the interviews?” Kyouko asked. “About injured girls not returning when they should? It’s not the core of the report, but I found it very disturbing.”

Yuma looked Kyouko straight in the eye, and Kyouko shivered slightly.

This feeling echoed what she had felt earlier with Ryouko’s grandfather, but it was much stronger this time. In fact, that previous experience was only a pale imitation of this one, in comparison.

It was the feeling that she wasn’t really speaking to a Human, not as she would have understood it four hundred years ago. It was the feeling that, perhaps, she really wasn’t much of one either.

“Anecdotes are notoriously unreliable,” Yuma said, leaning back in her chair. “And survival rates for critical soul gem depletion have remained stable. It’s not really sufficient evidence.”

“But,” she continued, holding a finger to forestall Kyouko, who had opened her mouth. “It does make a certain amount of sense.”

“Sense?” Kyouko asked, surprised. “What do you mean?”

“Think about it, nee-chan,” Yuma said. “If certain magical girls were being deprived of grief cubes, what would be the result? Lacking grief cubes, if they entered combat, they’d struggle to keep their gems pure, and as a result—”

“More of them would end up going critical, and having to be sent behind the lines,” Kyouko finished, eyes widening.

“Where some of them may or may not go missing,” Yuma finished.

She paused.

“Of course,” she continued, “this kind of thinking is veering into conspiracy theory territory but,

frankly, my whole life has been a conspiracy theory, and so has yours."

Kyouko nodded at that. It was a clever way of putting it.

"But why?" Kyouko asked. "Are they trying to decrease our combat performance? Sabotage the war—no, that can't be it. If all this is true, there has to be something important about the girls being sent back. Unless this is just a way of draining our numbers? But no, that would show up elsewhere in the statistics."

"All of those are possibilities," Yuma said. "And I can think of a few others, but there is insufficient evidence to say much. And remember, the disappearing injured girls thing is just anecdotes."

Yuma smiled slightly, the mood of the conversation shifting slightly.

"But I will investigate," she said. "That is why I am here, right? Are you going to finish that or just keeping holding it for the next hour?"

She pointed at the food in Kyouko's hand.

"Ah, right," Kyouko said, making a show of taking another bite.

"Yuma-chan, that report isn't all of it," Kyouko said, chewing awkwardly. "There's something else I'm here to talk about, something I haven't managed to tell Mami yet. It could be related, it could be something else entirely, but this one we're sure is foul play."

Yuma dipped her head slightly in a vague nod.

"All this seriousness makes me tired," she said, still smiling a half-smile. "But sure: what is it?"

Again Kyouko opened her mouth to speak, and again she thought better of it.

TacComp, she thought. *Collate and transmit the relevant memories.*

Acknowledged, she felt rather than heard. It was a sensation of having gotten something done, such as when you finally finished that project you had been putting off forever. It wasn't easy to describe.

Again Yuma tilted her head slightly, taking it in. This time, she spent a long while replaying what Kyouko had sent. Memory traces weren't quite the same as text, after all.

Kyouko spent the time finishing her food and chugging a good portion of her drink.

Finally, Yuma let out a breath.

It wasn't easy to rattle Yuma—or any of them, really—but this time Yuma looked slightly less self-assured than she had earlier.

"This is extremely disturbing," she said simply. She was looking at Kyouko, but Kyouko had an unsettling feeling Yuma wasn't really seeing her.

"I know, right?" Kyouko said nonetheless. "No one has tried a stunt like that since before we globalized. There's just no reason to."

"That's not true," Yuma said blandly, elbows on the table. "Remember the Henderson murder trials? Sheila Henderson got two other teams killed before the Guard caught on, and ended up getting Reformatted. And then there were the Shimada assassinations. Not to mention that one

team in Cairo—”

“Okay, okay,” Kyouko said, raising her hands. “Point taken. I don’t keep track of this stuff. Still, it’s disturbing, like you said.”

“Yes,” Yuma agreed. “Not to mention the, uh, occasional covert uses grief cubes have.”

It was moments like these that Kyouko was reminded how secure Yuma’s office was, that she dared mention it out loud.

“Anyway,” Yuma continued. “I read the incident report for that demon horde just now. Was it unusually hard to fight?”

Kyouko shrugged.

“They were a lot denser than usual,” she said. “But that makes sense now, given where they came from.”

“You didn’t take any samples,” Yuma said. It wasn’t a question.

“Of course not,” Kyouko scoffed. “You should have felt how saturated they were! It was a major hazard. There’s no way a Human could have ever handled them safely.”

Yuma let out an exasperated sigh.

“Really, you’re such an idiot sometimes, nee-chan,” she said, crossing her arms and frowning. She said *baka* with a lilt.

“Where does all that pocky go, anyway?” Yuma continued, waving her finger at Kyouko. “Sure, it’s a secret, but didn’t it seem just a tad familiar to you?”

Kyouko narrowed her eyes, insulted, or pretending to be.

She was trying to hide her chagrin, thinking through what Yuma could possibly mean.

“It’s not easy to accumulate grief cubes on the scale necessary to summon a horde like that,” Yuma said. “Not with everything tracked like it is nowadays. But as *you* of all people should know, there is an alternative. I don’t blame you for not knowing how to notice something like that, but the thought should have at least crossed your mind. Given all of our history, anyway.”

Kyouko continued to peer at Yuma’s face. What was she getting at? History—

Kyouko’s eyes widened.

“You’re not suggesting—” she began.

“Of course I am,” Yuma said, crossing her arms. “The difficulty of evading the accounting system is precisely why such attacks have always been so rare. Henderson only managed it by being insane enough to stockpile her excess for a decade, and because the bureaucrats in her area were incompetent. The Shimada terrorists knew the secret, obviously. So did the Cairo team. It’s a small sample size, but if you look at the few existing cases, only a small minority actually went to the trouble of doing it the hard way. You got that, *idiot*?”

She literally climbed onto her desk to stab her finger accusingly in Kyouko’s face.

“I didn’t know about any of that!” Kyouko defended, though she knew she had screwed up.

“Look, I know I should have been aware, but cut me some slack. I wasn’t involved in any of that! You’re the specialist! That’s why they always ask you.”

“And that’s why you could have brought me a sample,” Yuma said, sitting back down and frowning disapprovingly.

She sighed, though, a moment later.

“But it’s not really your fault,” she said, leaning on one arm petulantly. “The only other experience you’ve had with grief cube super-saturation is indirect, and I can see why it’s not the first thing you think of.”

“I try not to think about it at all,” Kyouko said, averting her eyes. “For obvious reasons.”

“It’s a lost opportunity,” Yuma said. “If we knew for certain what was going on, we could greatly narrow the number of suspects. Not many even know it’s possible, much less how to do it.”

“I’m sorry,” Kyouko said, head bowed.

“Don’t be,” Yuma said. “It really isn’t your fault. I was just having some fun with you, and now you’re making me feel guilty.”

“Everyone always makes fun of Kyouko,” Kyouko grumbled.

Yuma took a moment to look at a corner of the room with a bemused look.

“Anyway, I’ll look into it too,” she said. “Among other things, we should ask them what they think. The response we got from the one you talked to wasn’t really satisfying.”

While talking, Yuma picking up one of the Incubator plushies on her desk to indicate who she was talking about.

“I’m glad to hear that,” Kyouko said, looking up.

“Is that everything?” Yuma asked.

“I think so. Uh, could you erase the records of me coming here?”

“Sure.”

Yuma nodded, then started play-walking her toy across the table, using only the hind legs.

Kyouko looked past her, at the sheets of water finally slowing their descent, and the endless skyscrapers of humanity.

Yuma seemed to think of something.

“Anyway—” she began, pausing with both hands on the Incubator and looking at Kyouko.

“Yuma,” Kyouko began.

“What?” the child asked.

Kyouko made an annoyed expression.

“Well, now this is awkward,” she said. “But I was thinking about it on the way here. It’s something I’ve wanted to ask for a while.”

“Well, okay,” Yuma said, slumping down to put her chin on the table. She placed the Incubator on her head.

“I heard Homura talking to you about life after death once, long ago,” Kyouko said, carefully. “I’ve always wondered what you thought about that. Did you believe it?”

Yuma tilted her head on the desk, causing the stuffed doll to slide off onto the table surface.

“Trying to convert me, nee-chan?” she asked, managing to sound tired. “It took you long enough to try.”

Kyouko shook her head.

“I just want to know,” she said.

Yuma sat up, pushing herself with her arms. She grabbed her glass of soda and drank half of it in one go.

She looked at Kyouko.

“I asked Oriko-nee-san about it once,” she said, inspecting the bottom of the glass. “She said that no matter how hard she tried to peer into the future, she could never see anything but darkness after death.”

Yuma put the glass down with a thud.

“Though she was a strong believer in fate, definitely,” she added. “I suppose that was natural.”

The girl thought for a moment.

“Probably, none of it means anything,” she shrugged. “Personally, I try not to let it matter to me. Life is about making the best possible world here on Earth. Well, in the physical world, I mean.”

“What about back then?” Kyouko asked. “That’s what I was really asking.”

“No,” Yuma said. “Don’t get me wrong. I wanted to believe Homura-nee-chan, I really did. But not after the life I had.”

She turned her chair away, looking out her window, at the grey city weathering the last of the rain.

“Just before Oriko-nee-san died,” Yuma said softly. “I could see her trying to plot the future one last time. Not just any future. *Her* future. She burned the last of her power trying to see. I still remember what her eyes looked like, then. I spent a long time trying to figure out if she saw anything. If there’s any doubt, it’s there.”

Kyouko watched the desk, with its two shooting stars pulsing back at her.

“You should visit someday,” she said. “The ribbon chamber, that is. I can’t guarantee anything, but if it’s you, I’m sure you’ll see something.”

There was a pause, and then Yuma turned her chair back to face her.

“Now you *are* trying to convert me,” Yuma said.

“I’m serious,” Kyouko said, making eye contact. “I’ve been trying to convince Mami for years, but she always says she’s too busy. But you spend all your time on Earth, and your headquarters

is right here in the city."

"Someday," Yuma said, smiling in a way that was terribly discordant with the age of her face. "When I have time."

"Alright," Kyouko nodded, getting up, knowing she would have to do way more convincing before it actually happened.

"Okay!" Yuma said in Human Standard, jumping off of her chair and running around her desk.

Kyouko looked down at her, curious.

"My birthday party is coming up," Yuma said cheerily. "I'm going to send the invitations soon, but since you're here, I might as well remind you myself. I've invited a lot of people; it'll be great!"

"I'll definitely be there," Kyouko responded, having honestly completely forgotten.

She looked at the Incubator plushy in Yuma's right hand. The girl was holding it out for some reason.

"It's a gift," Yuma explained.

"Ah, okay," Kyouko said hesitantly. She took it into her hand, wondering what on earth she'd do with a stuffed Incubator toy.

She said goodbye and headed for the door.

Kyouko was glad to see the sun on her way out of the building.

She held the Incubator toy up to the sunlight, trying again to see if there was anything special about it—but no, it seemed like just a regular stuffed toy.

When she moved it away from the light, she was surprised to see the *bona fide* Kyubey right behind it, standing on her waiting vehicle.

"Why are you here?" Kyouko asked.

Just maintaining a relationship with a valuable contractee, Kyubey thought. *Do you mind if I ride with you?*

Kyouko shrugged, and let the Incubator into the transport with her.

"Kyubey," Kyouko said, during the ride back.

What is it? the Incubator asked, looking at her from the panel in front of her with that endlessly unchanging face it had.

"You know about the incident yesterday, right? After you left to meet Mami," she asked, deliberately being vague.

Of course, Kyouko, the Incubator thought.

Do you know if there was anything unusual about those cubes? Kyouko thought.

Kyubey tilted its head in imitation of the Human mannerism.

I was not there personally, it thought. *However, the Incubator that collected those cubes did not examine them carefully before consuming them. Should it have?*

"Yes," Kyouko said, sighing. "But it's too late now. If something like that happens again, could you do so?"

Sure, Kyubey thought, jumping up onto Kyouko's shoulder, then using her hair as an insulator for rubbing against the seat. Another imitated mannerism.

Do you have any thoughts about what happened? Kyouko thought.

I substantively agree with my colleague, Kyubey thought. *And it is worth noting that we would never intentionally risk a valuable contractee like that, with the lack of assured rescue.*

"You worded that last part pretty carefully," Kyouko said dryly. "Still, I believe what you say."

Why wouldn't you? Kyubey asked.

By the time Kyouko got back inside her church, she had mostly dispelled any disappointment she might have felt with herself. As Yuma had said, it wasn't her fault. Yuma was the one who was practically the world expert on the damn things, whereas Kyouko had lost her taste for intrigue a long time ago.

She had spent the time in her vehicle on the way back deciding on a topic for the afternoon sermon. By this point, she was long practiced in the actual meaning of what she was going to say, but she had to constantly keep coming up with new ways to express it, or new topics to talk about. It was a daily challenge whenever she was on Earth. On the colonies, it was easier for her to get away with sermons she'd used before.

Eventually she settled on a topic that happened to be close to her heart that day—the idea of the afterlife and redemption, why they differed from the rest of humanity, and a little about one's conduct in life.

As she stepped out of her vehicle back into the underground tunnel, she felt the internal *Ping!* that signified that her Tactical Computer had decided something was worth her attention.

Patricia von Rohr messaged at ten that she wanted to speak whenever you got back. You are now back.

Let her know I'm back, then, Kyouko thought. *I can head for her room, if she wants. Not too long though. I want to speak with Asaka, and probably my theologians before the post-lunch sermon.*

Done, the machine thought.

She had barely gotten to the elevator when the return message arrived.

Oh, well in that case it definitely helps that Asaka is here with me. We're in my room.

Kyouko nodded even though there was no one to see her, then stepped into the elevator, which already knew where to go.

The fifth floor, counting down, was only one level of the subterranean living areas, cramped and stocked to the brim with magical girls.

Usually, most girls stocking a particular city were local, and generally lived either alone, with their

teams, or with whatever family they had. These were those who had the opportunity to stay away from the front, and either had a skill specialization with little comparative advantage in direct combat, or those who had been in combat for long enough that it was felt they deserved a break.

Mitakihara City was different. It had far more than the usual share of girls from outside the city, and this effect was amplified by the Church's careful selection of who got to reside here—Church members, of course, and usually those who caught the eye of someone in the organization. The Church was not shy about using its pull within the military to draw in newer girls who would ordinarily not be exempted.

The military tolerated it because of the Church's track record of training exceptional magical girls, and also because of the intrinsic value the Church provided to the war effort. In a situation where their most powerful weapons were literally powered by morale, anything that boosted morale was highly prized—and the Church was very good at boosting morale.

Once Kyouko had demonstrated this, the military had been very cooperative in providing quiet logistical support, allowing acolytes to enter front-line barracks, allowing combat MGs to hold positions within the Church, and so forth. They weren't openly supportive, which would have been discriminatory, but they worked hard not to be *unsupportive.* Indeed, the Sisters at the top of the Cult found it very easy to obtain exemptions from heavy combat if desired, often via obtaining symbolic positions as morale officers, psychologists, or chaplains. Indeed, Kyouko herself was the Morale and Welfare Officer for the Anti-Demon and Home Defense garrison for the Japanese Islands, and a chaplain, to boot.

ADHD was not a military acronym that would have passed muster in the past.

Because of the unusual mixture of personnel, this armory had attached living areas far more substantial than usual, where younger girls from outside the area almost always chose to settle. Even those with family in the area often chose to move in, to mingle with their peers. Then, eventually, those who found partners or simply tired of living there moved on and others moved in.

Kyouko navigated the hallways, with its row of doors, haphazardly posted religious artwork, and the occasional propaganda poster. She waved through open doorways at groups of girls preparing for patrols, chatting, or watching various forms of holographic or wall surface entertainment. Unlike what would have been seen in earlier ages, the hallways and rooms were all very tolerably clean. This was not because of military discipline—magical girls were tacitly exempted from some aspects of military rigor, and it would have been silly anyway to enforce cleanliness in a half-civilian living area—but rather from the miracle of robotics and self-cleaning surfaces.

Around her, she could hear the whisper of private telepathy. A telepath would have been able to eavesdrop, but to her it was completely unintelligible. It was only her age and experience that let her notice it at all. That, and the sheer volume of messages that must have been flying back and forth.

It must be an interesting experience, living here, Kyouko mused.

It wasn't luxurious living—for one thing, space in an underground armory was at a premium—but there was something to be said for living with others who understood what you were going through. Living alone or even with your family was a difficult adjustment for many of the younger girls. No matter how nice everyone was, there was always the persistent sense of *otherness,* the peers who didn't know how to talk to you, the parents who started spoiling you. Some were happy to be special, but others felt it painful.

There was a reason so many of the demon-hunting teams ended up cohabitating and the newer

specialists often moved in with their colleagues. The older girls accepted it, because they knew what it was like, and demon-hunting teams living together was a strong, strong tradition, broken only if one or more of the girls happened to be married.

Finally, Kyouko reached the door labeled “Patricia von Rohr.” It slid open at her approach.

She stepped inside, telling the door to slide closed behind her.

Kyouko peered around the room, taking in Asaka sitting on the bed and Patricia seated at her desk. Patricia’s room was a bit of what you’d expect: holographic schematics and science posters on the wall, desk strewn with bits and pieces of equipment, a small antigrav sphere hovering over its display stand on the shelf full of true rarities: paper books.

It was the room of a tinkerer and a nanobiologist, and reflected the field’s requirement of some knowledge in physics.

One of the posters shifted coloration, beckoning Kyouko to look in its direction so it could explain the principles of Pauli exclusion locking. Kyouko did not oblige it.

“So what did you want to talk about?” Kyouko asked, looking at Patricia.

“What’s with the Incubator?” Asaka asked, pointing at the doll hanging from Kyouko’s right hand.

Kyouko looked at it in surprise, holding it up. She had honestly forgotten it was there.

“It’s a, uh—” Kyouko began.

She thought for a moment, thinking of how to explain.

“A gift!” she finished. “Yeah, I thought Maki might appreciate something like that. It’s—”

—a telepathic relay device, magically enhanced, Yuma’s voice resonated in her head. Kyouko almost jumped.

One of my telepaths has been experimenting with them, the voice explained. *We’re not sure how reliable it is yet, or if anyone can eavesdrop, or how long the range is… or anything, really. Still, it might be good to have. Also, this is a recording, set to trigger if you try to get rid of it. Should have mentioned that first, right? Don’t give it away.*

Kyouko gave the toy a new, scrutinizing look, holding it up.

Or you could have just told me! Kyouko thought.

Then, a moment later, she repeated the thought, attempting to think it to the doll rather than to herself. Disturbingly, she felt a channel actually open.

What fun would that be, nee-chan? Yuma’s voice responded, echoing as if coming from a distance.

“Is everything alright?” Asaka asked, looking at her queerly. Kyouko realized, belatedly, that she was holding the doll up in the air with two hands in a choking motion. Patricia was giving the doll an intense look.

“Uh,” Kyouko began.

“Tell me, is the doll magically enhanced?” Patricia asked, serious.

Kyouko looked at the girl, with her long blonde hair. She wondered if she should lie.

“Yes,” Kyouko admitted. “How could you tell?”

“I don’t have much experience with magically-enhanced objects,” Patricia said, suddenly modest. “My specialty is drones and technological enhancements. Until now, I wasn’t even sure I could detect them.”

“So a new skill, then?” Kyouko asked.

As Patricia had said, she was an expert in drone and technological enhancements, and her magical abilities inclined in that direction as well. On the battlefield, she could sense and manipulate them, which was particularly handy when it came to enemy technology, and her deductions about alien technology informed combat doctrine and technology. It also served as an indirect stealth detector, which was nice.

Her personal weapon was magically summoned drones. It was relatively unusual, as powers came.

“Apparently,” Patricia agreed. “To be honest, I could barely tell, and I would never have noticed if you weren’t trying to choke the life out of it.”

“Ah, yes,” Kyouko said, looking away. Fortunately, both Asaka and Patricia did the polite thing by not asking.

“In any case,” Patricia said, “this makes it a lot more likely that I was right. I shouldn’t have been so worried.”

“Honestly, you should have just said something,” Asaka chastened. “I don’t know why you didn’t.”

“Shizuki-san was there!” Patricia insisted, rotating her chair to face the other girl. “I didn’t want to get her involved.”

“You could have used telepathy, or mentioned it later,” Asaka said. “Admit it: you were just afraid of being wrong. You didn’t want to be embarrassed.”

“That is *not* true!” Patricia said, pointing at the other girl.

Asaka was one of the very few who got under the girl’s skin.

“So do either of you mind enlightening me about all this?” Kyouko said. She said it calmly, but dropped most of the usual “delinquent” nuances she placed in her voice.

They got the message, dropping their bickering instantly.

“So you remember how I found those grief cubes yesterday?” Patricia said, looking at Kyouko.

“Yes, I do,” Kyouko said, her level of interest rising slightly.

“Well, when I was looking at them, I noticed that they seemed *off,* somehow, even more than usual,” Patricia said. “They felt like a little they’d been manipulated, except there’s no known non-Incubator technology that can do anything to grief cubes. And they seemed different.”

“And?” Kyouko asked, suddenly quite interested, though trying not to show it.

“Well, the point is, they felt sort of like that stuffed animal you’re holding. It was strange.”

Maybe everything worked out after all, Kyouko thought, getting excited despite herself. *If she sensed something—*

“So I hid a few in one of my drones,” Patricia said, seeming to spit out the words. “And sent it to one of the other buildings. That’s another reason I didn’t want to mention it at the time. I didn’t know if the Incubators were listening, or if they’d demand I hand them over since they were full.”

“And so what if they were?” Asaka asked.

Patricia made a threatening gesture with her off-hand.

“Wait, what? You *what*?” Kyouko asked, reaction delayed. She grabbed Patricia by the shoulders.

Patricia blinked, surprised by the vehemence of her reaction.

“Well, yeah, I-I know it was unsafe, Kyouko,” she said. “But I was being careful with them. You see, I theorized that I was sensing some sort of magical manipulation, and I have some friends—”

“What did you do with them?” Kyouko demanded.

Patricia’s eyes slid back and forth, almost as if she was looking for a way out.

“L–Like I was saying,” she said. “I have friends in Prometheus who study things like this, so I sent them over to them. They say there’s something very unusual about the cubes, almost as if there’s too much—”

She stopped, interrupted by Kyouko’s sudden hug.

“You’re amazing, Patricia,” Kyouko said.

“Thanks?” Patricia said, making it a question. She looked in Asaka’s direction for guidance, but the other girl didn’t give her anything useful.

Kyouko stood back up, ignoring the look Asaka was giving her.

“Okay,” she said, holding the doll out to Patricia. “Telepath everything you just told me to this doll. Then, *you*—”

She pointed at Asaka.

—are coming with me.”

Patricia held up the plushy by its long, floppy ear, looking at it with curiosity.

“You’re telling her to talk to the doll,” Asaka commented drolly.

“The *magical* doll,” Kyouko said, grabbing Asaka by the arm and dragging her out the door.

“Give it back to me later!” she exhorted Patricia, before having the door close behind them.

Kyouko felt only a slight twinge of guilt, knowing that the Prometheus Researchers were about to have their prized specimens confiscated by government agents or, more likely, walk into their labs the next day to find everything relevant missing. Perhaps they would be invited to join a new classified project. Perhaps they would simply be left in the dark.

“So what is this about?” Asaka asked when they got outside, shaking Kyouko’s hand off of her arm.

Kyouko turned to face the girl.

“I’ve called a meeting of the Theological Council,” she cooed. “We’ll be discussing your observations of the Goddess. In particular, her hair color.”

Asaka looked into Kyouko’s eyes, then blinked, looking to the side.

“I knew I shouldn’t have made that comment to Maki,” she said, disgusted with herself. “I was careless.”

“Yes, well, you shouldn’t have mentioned it to her, of all people,” Kyouko said. “That wasn’t very smart.”

“Our visions are private,” Asaka said, glaring.

“Yes,” Kyouko agreed toothily, leaning forward. “And I respect that. But there is one exception. Information about the Goddess belongs to all of us. It’s the rules. You know that. I can overlook it this time, but I can’t let you ignore the rules just because I’m your sponsor.”

Despite Asaka’s slightly greater height, Kyouko looked down on her, pouring into her body language every ounce of authority her age and position gave her, so that the mental adult in front of her, approaching thirty, bowed her head like a child.

“Alright, fine,” Asaka conceded. “I’ll go.”

“Good,” Kyouko said.

She turned and headed for the lift, listening for the other girl following her.

“I’m not going to pry,” Kyouko said. “But you wouldn’t seem like the kind of girl who would have such a giant secret. Isn’t there at least something you can say without giving it away?”

“You’ve asked before, Kyouko,” Asaka said. “I can’t. *I can’t.*”

“If you insist,” Kyouko said, as they stepped into the elevator. “But tell me right now if you’re going to stonewall the Council just as hard. They wouldn’t like it.”

“I can say a little more,” Asaka said, as the door closed. “All hair details. And I can honestly say I never saw more than that.”

Kyouko nodded.

“Okay.”

Stepping up to the pulpit, Kyouko took a moment to survey the crowd. As always, it was uniformly female, dressed in a variety of clothing, ranging from the perpetually popular casual jeans and T-shirt to more formal dresses. A few stubbornly showed up in costume, despite repeated assurances that it was neither necessary nor suggested.

The crowd was mixture of regulars, girls from the area who had time off, and a substantial majority of visitors. These hailed from all over Earth and, more rarely, from its colonies. While not all the colonials were obvious, some were easy to spot, wearing fashions substantially different

from the uniform monoculture of Earth.

Kyouko preferred cozy sermons, so the room in front of her, while large, was not the stadium or amphitheatre-style seating seen for some preachers, or that Kyouko herself occasionally addressed on visits to the colonies. Instead, it was a traditional church seating area, with cushioned pews—a bit more comfortable than rare wood—a central aisle, and doors at the side and rear. Kyouko was not a believer in flashy wall graphics, at least not of the electronic sort, which meant that the room, ensconced as it was within the building, had relatively prosaic walls, painted with murals depicting the kind of scenery that dotted the entire building: life and death scenes of magical girls, and girls slaughtering demons, rallying armies, or summoning their powers for one last blast at their foes.

Unlike other parts of the building, there was no explicit dark and light motif here, no miserable death or mutual conflict. It was all light, and the high ceiling, fancier than the walls, deliberately scattered the early afternoon sunlight throughout the area.

The symbolic explanation for the lack of darkness stood behind Kyouko, where a statue of the Goddess twice her size held her hands out. Above the hands hovered a swirling orb of pitch black, drawing in tendrils of darkness from the air around it. It was an excellent piece of holography.

The statue itself was, in fact, merely the vague outline of a woman, roughly and only partly carved out of a much larger piece of marble. Its face was blank, features undefined, and it symbolized how little they knew. It was, however, recognizably a woman, rather than a girl. It was those who were still on Earth who were the girls, and she was the woman; this particular representation was for her divine form, not her human form.

That, too, was a reason no one was allowed to call Kyouko “mother.”

Soon enough, however, the statue would be receiving a renovation. The masons would chisel apart the marble and give her the long-flowing hair Asaka had described. It would be closer to the truth.

The room seated a crowded two hundred or so, but the pews held no hymn books, no Bibles. The Church had no holy documents or solidified means of worship.

Kyouko had changed out of her customary shorts and tanktop into something a bit more formal. It seemed appropriate.

She fiddled nervously with her sleeves. Despite the countless times she had done this, she still got butterflies beforehand, and the outfit didn’t help. The persona she had to adopt, that of the serene pastor, was too markedly different from her preferred behavior for complete comfort.

Despite the limited size of the audience, the number of listeners and viewers was in no way restricted to the two hundred in front of her. There would be plenty listening in and watching from elsewhere, and of course everything was recorded. Indeed, the room was large enough that in most civilian settings some sort of sound system would be needed, though one’s internal enhancements could serve as the microphone. The Church could cheat a little and use the audience’s auditory implants instead.

Similarly, her tactical AI could feed her the prepared words if she forgot midway, though by this point she was well-practiced to public speaking. Besides, she liked to extemporize.

Kyouko stepped up and gestured for silence. She took a deep breath.

“My sisters,” she began, spreading her arms. “Doubtless in your travels, you have encountered those who would ask you why we are so arrogant as to hold ourselves separate from the rest of

humanity. How, they ask, can it be consistent to acknowledge a God of humanity while simultaneously focusing our worship elsewhere? Do we not consider ourselves human?"

Kyouko leaned forward over the pulpit, surveying the crowd, eyes peering.

She relaxed slightly.

"The answer, of course, is that we don't consider ourselves human, not exactly. It is not that we consider ourselves better. Only different."

"Is it not evident how we are different?" she asked, raising a hand in a rhetorical gesture. "Humanity struggles under the weight of sin, and of evil. For their transgressions and deviations on Earth, they were once punished mercilessly after death. The darkness of this world must have always have its last shot."

She dropped her head, looking down briefly, before looking back at her audience, which was drinking in her every word.

"That changed, of course," Kyouko said. "It used to be, only the purest of the pure could ascend, which worked out to practically nobody. The rest, guilty of even the most minor of transgressions, found themselves punished eternally. It was unquestionably cruel, to ask perfection of flawed Humanity. Utterly unfair."

Kyouko pulled an apple off the top of the pulpit. It was one of her favorite props, and she stood regarding it, turning it in her hands, as if to say "no apple is perfectly shaped, but most are good." Finally she took a decisive, symbolic bite.

"It is difficult for a God to understand the plight of man. The thinking of an omniscient being must be forever alien to us. Perhaps such a being simply did not understand us. It took an ambassador, one in Human form, to relieve Humanity of its cruel burden and, perhaps, bring the omnipotent to an understanding."

Kyouko smiled to herself, then glanced at the faces of her audience once more.

"But of course I digress," she said, tossing and catching the apple again. "The point is not to illustrate how moving the story is for us, but *how little* it has to do with us. For you see, our souls were never the same."

She set down her apple, and materialized her soul gem, raising it up high, so that it glowed in the eyes of those in front her.

"*This* is where we keep our souls," she said. "Not in heaven, but on Earth. We make contracts, pouring our hopes and desires into wishes, wishes that fight back the demons of Humanity and the darkness of entropy. And for daring to challenge the design of the world, Fate itself, we were punished. Instead of enjoying the fruits of Earth and the joys of life, we were condemned to spend eternity fighting."

She turned her gem back into a ring. Looking out once again, she spotted Patricia, Asaka, and that new girl, Ryouko, walking down one of the adjoining hallways. The last of these looked in Kyouko's direction and met her eyes briefly.

Kyouko took a moment to take in the girl's profile, which was short and strangely childish, with a vaguely aristocratic facial bone structure. Then she continued:

"Beyond that, our fate mirrored that of Humanity, but with a critical distinction. While they received the punishment for their desires after death, we received it here on Earth. Every girl here

has, or will someday, attend at the death of a friend, watching their soul gems darken and crack despite everything that can be done. Watching their agony, can there be any doubt what fate has in store for them?"

Kyouko could see some in the audience nodding. Well, of course it was working; it was one of her most practiced lines.

She paused rhetorically, for just a moment.

"Once, they would have had that fate," she said. "We would have all had it. This we know, because Homura spoke to me of the terrible destiny of all magical girls. Something dark, painful, eternal and earthly."

Kyouko let the mood darken slightly before continuing.

"But this is no longer the case," she said. "We end our lives in peace, our soul gems vanishing magically. All the demons, all the despair, all the cost of our contract, vanishing, just like that."

Kyouko snapped her fingers to accentuate the point.

"You see," she said. "It was *unfair.* It was *cruel,* to punish us for our wishes. Perhaps, in the mind of God, on the scales of the Incubators, it all balanced out, and it was only natural. Still, it was just as unfair to blame us for our wishes, to tell girls not to hope, as it was to ask Humanity as a whole not to sin. And just as Humanity gained redemption for its sins in the afterlife, we gained redemption for our sins on Earth, so that we, too, could depart."

She stepped back from the pulpit, and gestured at the unfinished statue behind her.

"Amazing, isn't it?" she said, looking upward. "I have gone all this time, without mentioning the Goddess once. But in another way, it is not amazing at all. She changed the rules of this world to grant us this salvation, and she never even told us about it. She has done as much for us as any other god has done for Humanity, but she demands no worship. She didn't even desire to be known. That is precisely *why* we worship her, because no one else will."

She turned back towards the crowd, still pointing with one arm.

"Were she a perfect God, we would not even know that much. We know of her only because she is *imperfect,* because she left a Prophet on Earth, someone to carry out what she could not. One to meddle in our affairs, one to try and heal a flawed world, because she can't stand to see us how we are. She is *not* omnipotent, not perfect, and we flatter her by calling her Goddess, unless perhaps we mean goddess with lower-case g. The Goddess is *human,* and that too is why we worship her, even if it is bias."

"We know this by the Prophet's actions, and her hints. We call her Prophet, but she does not prophesize. She says nothing about the Goddess, save that she exists, and the hints she dropped without knowing. Instead, she worked quietly to save us, to lift us out of our terrible lives, without a thought to glory."

She let her arm drop.

"I hope…" she began quietly. "I hope Homura hasn't lost sight of who she is, and that she still works for this world somehow. The last time I saw her, she was in agony. She is human too, and her human heart would prefer she join her Goddess in heaven, rather than toil on Earth in service of Humanity, as a more perfect being would. I do not begrudge her her humanity, but if she suffers, it must be for a reason. Just in case, we strive every day to find her."

Kyouko looked up again, dropping briefly her guise of authoritative preacher.

“It’s funny, isn’t it?” she asked. “There is so much we don’t know, and I have to stand here telling you about it. I wish we knew more, but our Goddess doesn’t desire we know. I guess it’s only fair, right? We’ve spent most of our existence hiding ourselves from Humanity, so she spent just as much time hiding herself from us.”

She got some light chuckles out of the audience with that, but nothing too strong. Well, that was to be expected.

Kyouko cleared her throat.

“It is also because of this that we do not emphasize holy books, nor hymns, nor dull mantras to be memorized and chanted,” she said. “All of those things are the mere trappings of artifice, and unnecessary. We pay for our entrance into Heaven with the lives we lead, not our worship. I say we worship her, but it would aggravate her if we cloistered ourselves in a temple worshipping idols.”

She returned to her pulpit.

“We honor her with our lives,” she said. “So endeavor to live in her memory. Guard and save Humanity, because that is your duty and her desire. Support each other, treat each other as sisters, because that too is your duty and her desire. Remember that always.”

She glanced through the faces of her audience, Terran and Colonial, fashionable and not, one last time, then nodded in satisfaction.

“Alright,” she said, as some in the audience began to stand. “I’ll be back here in a couple of hours. You can see the schedule. But for now, I have an announcement.”

That got most of them to sit back down, but some kept heading for the door, relaying apologies. They had places to go.

“I’m pleased to announce we’ll be modifying the statue,” she said, turning and gesturing proudly at it with both arms.

That sent a buzz through the crowd, and she waited for it to subside a little.

“It’s not her face or anything, I’m afraid,” she said. “But we’ll be remodeling the hair. Someone finally got a look at it. And…”

Kyouko paused.

“We’re going to be trying to chisel it out to be long and flowing,” she finished. “And paint it pink. We’re not really sure how that’s going to work with the whole marble motif, but we’ll do our best.”

She smiled her most winning smile, and received a wave of applause.

A good while later in the day, as she was trying to relax, her TacComp seized her attention.

“Ah, hold on, sorry,” she said, apologizing to the girl in the room with her.

What is it? she demanded, turning away. *This isn’t a convenient time!*

This is higher priority according to your standards, the machine informed her bluntly. *There has been another reported vision in the Hall of the Ribbon.*

Kyouko straightened, standing up. Yes, this was higher priority.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I have to go."

Appendix (excerpt from magazine article.)

> In the cataclysmic realignment of religious theology of the early war period, there had seemed to be ample opportunity for other outcomes. Nearly every religious organization was forced to reshape its theology to fit the new world, and the time was ripe for change.
>
> Change came, and the first mover was the Catholic Church. The Vatican publicly unlocked a treasure trove of Church records, revealing that the upper hierarchy had been aware of the system since the Middle Ages, and had even maintained relations with the *MSY,* but had chosen to maintain secrecy.
>
> The only religion in the world with a prepared theology and contingency plan, the Church moved aggressively to bolster its numbers. It widely emphasized the friendliness of its theology to the newfound mages, carefully leaving out that this friendliness was a historically recent development.
>
> Yet despite all its efforts and clever positioning, the campaign was a disappointment, yielding only a trickle of new members. In the end, the Church could not convince most girls that it either empathized or understood.
>
> Into this landscape stepped Sakura Kyouko and her newborn cult. Feeding off its founder's deep understanding of the magical girl psyche, the Cult's willingness to stretch its theology to take all comers, and the founding members' ability to manipulate the *MSY* and military system, the cult had grown explosively and unexpectedly following a fiery public speech by Sakura on the anniversary of Epsilon Eridani.
>
> Given the situation, the Cult and its founder's roots in Christianity, and the sudden fluidity of previously untouchable religious doctrine, contemporary observers predicted a rapid accommodation between the Cult and either the Anglican or the Catholic Church. The times being what they were, either organization could have easily accommodated a new saint and a new prophet, along with a bit of tacked-on theology. The Cult would, in return, receive legitimization and access to organizational resources. And indeed, both organizations, as well as several others, covertly sent negotiators to talk with the Cult leadership.
>
> This seemingly compelling analysis displayed the same lack of understanding that had plagued the Church. The Cult proved itself extremely capable of leveraging influence within the *MSY* into organizational capability. More importantly and more fundamentally, the Cult's core tenets made even a partial reconciliation almost impossible, and analysts simply did not understand the depths of some of the heresies being perpetuated.
>
> As merely one example, one can point out the Cult's implicit sense of betrayal by God. This sense of betrayal and alienation is a theme that pervades much of the Cult's teachings, at least in the main set headlined by the Cult leadership. Never spoken

about or acknowledged, it is nonetheless palpable to all those who have investigated its beliefs.

The theology of the Cult directly accuses God of being out of touch with Humanity. God, while benevolent, did not *understand* human motivation, constructing a system that was decidedly unfair to Humanity, requiring the intervention of agents to correct, first in the form of Christ, and second in the form of their Goddess. In this respect, their conception of God is closer to the Incubators than to the view found in any of the classical monotheist religions.

Fueled by what they see as an easy escape hatch through their Goddess, the Cult feels little need to divert worship in his direction. Instead, they prefer to worship a Goddess they feel is more deserving, and who has earned their affection, even if they acknowledge that this "Goddess" is nowhere near a Goddess in the Western sense.

While this attitude and belief is not universal within the Cult, which contains considerable internal strife and disagreements, it holds considerable sway within the leadership, especially in the person of the founder. From this perspective, it is easy to see why the Cult finds outside control utterly unthinkable, and why mainstream Christianity found it utterly impossible to stomach its heresies. The slight current relationship between the Cult and the church of Sakura's father is merely a fig leaf, giving the former a veneer of legitimacy in the eyes of worried parents, and allowing the latter to inflate its membership numbers.

We leave it to you, the reader, to judge what to say to your daughters, but if you are religious, know that the Cult does not match your beliefs.

— Parenting Plexus Online, *"Special Edition: So Your Daughter Made a Contract. Now What?"*, article title *"Things to Know about the Cult of Hope,"* excerpt.

Echoes

One of the most well-known aspects of the military enhancement package is the *Permanent Awareness Module.* Restricted in availability due to both production costs and concerns about its effects on society, the module is essentially what it says on the tin. It obviates the customary regimen of hormonal supplements and nanite boosters used to ward off sleep, replacing it with a self-contained, self-sufficient system capable of stabilizing all the necessary circadian rhythms and performing all the necessary neural maintenance tasks.

'Never Sleep Again!'

Despite this popular slogan of its designers, often bandied about in military and magical girl circles, the module does not, in fact, prevent all instances of sleep. While it eliminates the standard day-night cycle, those with the module installed are perfectly capable of taking naps should they feel tired. Indeed, such naps have several salutary benefits, and it is common to find soldiers on break taking relaxing naps. The difference is that there is no real *need* to sleep and, with the flip of an internal switch, there is no longer even the *desire* to.

Research is still ongoing as to the apparent increase in cases of psychosis among module recipients. The effect appears to be psychological in nature; apparently, experiencing too long a single bout of consciousness is destabilizing to some individuals. If subjects awake for more than two continuous months are removed from consideration, the statistical increase in cases of mental instability disappears, at least among the rare civilian module recipients, for whom non-user comparison groups can easily be found.

Thus, the advice to your daughter in this case is simple, and matches military recommendations: take naps when you can, even if you don't *need* to.

— Parenting Plexus Online, *"Special Edition: So Your Daughter Made a Contract. Now What?"* article title *"Your Post-human Child,"* excerpt.

〈*In the following text,* 〈 〉① *indicates content redacted to those without security clearance. The number indicates the degree of security clearance required to access enclosed content.*〉

The *Ribbon,* as it is referred to, is the primary, and only, relic of the Cult of Hope. Claimed by Akemi Homura to be a gift from their Goddess herself, it is venerated and kept in a heavily guarded metamaterial case at the main Cult church, in Mitakihara City, with viewing permitted only to magical girls. Cult scientists claim that the Ribbon shows none of the signs of aging that would be expected in a mundane piece of cloth that old, despite the lack of any obvious enchantments. More conventional scientists are skeptical, but are not permitted study.

Within the Cult, the Ribbon is believed to grant visions to a lucky, chosen few of those who visit. Certainly, numerous girls, including Sakura Kyouko herself, can be found claiming to have experienced exactly that, though the number pales in comparison to the total number of visitors the artifact has received. However, internal recordings from girls who have volunteered to be studied, including memory traces

from neural implants, have failed to ever uncover anything other than slightly elevated heart and respiratory rates. 〈*Nonetheless, these girls insist on their memories, even if the* NeverForget *modules of their tactical advisors fail to ever record any of it.* MSY *empaths report that none of them seem to be lying, but also that they are similarly unable to capture even a glimpse of the memory, a very unusual result.*〉②

The veracity of these supposed visions is thus highly doubtful.

〈*While it is true that there exist instances of girls predicting the future with apparent accuracy, based on these supposed visions, there are equally many instances of these predictions failing to happen. Cult members insist that this is due to purposeful avoidance on their part, but even if this were true, there is another, much simpler explanation that can be proposed: Magical girl legends are littered with examples of girls with precognition, and there are numerous girls still living who remember meeting one. Such visions could simply be tapping into a poorly-understood power, done in the throes of religious passion.*〉①

〈*It is, however, strange that after the early parts of the Information Age, pure precognitive magical girls appear to disappear entirely from the record, and none have been contracted since.*〉①

— Infopedia article, *"The Ribbon,"* mode: discursive, extended detail, high density.

Instructing the vehicle to take her to the desired location, the local *MSY* branch office, Ryouko found herself first diving underground, the interior of the vehicle decorating itself with a field of stars. Then she reemerged at ground level, and found herself slowing to a halt in front of what appeared to be an old style Catholic Church. The front façade was lavished with ample stained glass, with imagery that looked decidedly non-standard.

The hell?, she thought.

"Vehicle," she said. "I'm heading for the local *MSY* branch office. The Research District Armory, *MSY* Corridor. I forwarded you my movement orders."

For non-basic commands, civilian machines did not accept direct relay from cortical implants.

"This is the location indicated," the vehicle said, in a pleasant voice. "Mitakihara City District Zero-Three Home Defense Armory. The aboveground floors also serve as a religious center. Cult of Hope, to be precise."

The machine paused.

"This confusion is common. I can give more information if—"

"No, it's alright," Ryouko said. "My mistake. Let me out."

She stepped onto the curb, shaking her head at missing the obvious symbolism shaped into the glass: the armored girls with swords hacking at invisible enemies, shooting stars in the background. There was even an embedded soul gem, if you looked carefully.

I guess I'm here whether I want to be or not, she grimaced. *They're serious about the conversion, then.*

She advanced up the steps, briefly meeting the eyes of a pair of girls, children far too young to be contracted. They looked away hastily, embarrassed, then stared at her again once they thought she wasn't looking. Ryouko wondered if their parents knew they were here.

She checked her internal chronometer. One o'clock, right on time.

As she approached the arched doorway, flanked by arriving acolytes, Asaka and Patricia stepped forward from behind a column, appearing to her right. They exchanged greetings.

"With all due respect," Ryouko declared, deciding she might as well be blunt about it. "I'm not interested in joining the Cult."

Patricia and Asaka exchanged glances. Patricia chuckled slightly.

"Well, I won't deny we were considering pitching the idea to you," she said. "But that's not the reason you're here. This is, indeed, a fully-staffed *MSY* military branch office and armory. One of the largest, in fact. This Church isn't all that big, so above-ground it doesn't look too big, but there's a large underground component, which incidentally connects to the subterranean city fortifications. Come on, let's go perform those upgrades we've been talking about."

Patricia gestured for her to follow, and she did so, passing by the main assembly area, where Kyouko was pontificating on "mirroring Humanity," or something like that. As she walked by one of the entryways, Kyouko made brief eye contact with her.

And then they stepped into an elevator.

They stepped off at the fourth floor, counting downward.

B4, Medical Center, the elevator thought to her, just as she was starting to wonder where she was. It startled her slightly. She was used to her elevators talking or silent, not talking into her brain.

Ryouko was surprised to find them in what appeared to be an airlock.

The hallway in front of them, beyond the airlock door, had a curious design; the walls of each room were completely transparent, with a transparent door, too. Weren't they concerned about privacy?

Pack drones scurried along the floor, carrying cargo she could sense was grief cubes.

She followed the example of the other two, who had chosen to stand still and stare at the horizon.

She waited.

"Is something supposed to—" she began.

She jumped, an intense burning sensation searing itself into her skin.

"Ow!" she complained. "Ow, ow, ow!"

She did a little hopping dance, vaguely aware that she was sounding way more girlish than she usually endeavored for. She looked at the other two, who continue to hold rigid poses, but who had started smirking.

"The hell—" she began again, but then the heat subsided.

—is this!" she finished, voice wavering as she realized it was over.

“UV sterilization,” Patricia explained pedantically, turning to face her and hiding a smile. “It used to be that such an intense level of radiation would have given you major sunburns, and probably melanoma to every hospital worker, but the Clinical Immortality packages make that much less of an issue. A bacterial infection could easily finish an injured girl on the brink, whereas for the workers it’s just a bit of discomfort. The cost-benefit works out. Also, for your information, standing still makes the process faster.”

“Why didn’t you warn me?” Ryouko managed to say, shaking her hand spastically. She took the moment to look up what a “sunburn” was, so she wouldn’t have to embarrass herself by asking.

“It’s tradition,” Asaka said, grinning. “Recruits have such difficulty handling a little pain. The holovideos make for excellent humiliation material later. Trust me, you’re doing well.”

Several of the hospital staff, who had been watching through the transparent airlock, smirked and gave thumbs-up, before continuing on.

“If I recall correctly,” Patricia said. “Didn’t you damage the door trying to escape your first time?”

Asaka gave her a dirty look.

“Not everyone happens to have *your* composure,” she grunted. “Anyway, there’s another part to this. If we wanted to be cruel, we wouldn’t warn you.”

“*Another* part?” Ryouko asked incredulously.

“Don’t worry,” Patricia said. “It’s not so bad. Just some microdrones to scrub down any debris left on your skin. It helps reduce particulate count. It’s not that intrusive.”

“Microdrones?” Ryouko repeated.

She felt something land on her head. Before she had the chance to ask, she spotted several small, insectoid robots land on Patricia’s head. Feeling an itching sensation at her ankles, she looked down and spotted one circling her foot, scraping her skin with its bottom surface.

“This is rather disconcerting,” she said through gritted teeth, making the effort to word her thoughts carefully.

“Don’t worry,” Patricia said soothingly. “They’re friendly, and they’re not going to go under your clothes or anything like that. The military is a lot heavier on the technology than civilian life. You get used to it. Besides, I like these ones.”

Ryouko was pretty sure she was wearing her most strenuous “Are you crazy?” expression.

Asaka caught her eye, then made a gesture with her finger near her head that implied that the answer to her question was “Yes.”

“I guess it makes sense, after all,” Asaka said, trying to look suave—and failing, due to the insect on her nose. “It’s natural to have an affinity for your own primary weapon. For example, I like daggers.”

Ryouko caught Patricia rolling her eyes at that.

“Why are we in a hospital anyway?” Ryouko asked, changing the topic slightly. She did her best to ignore the drone trying to crawl onto her cheek.

“We’re here to reconfigure your internal mesh,” Patricia explained. “And introduce multiple new

types of nanites and implant assemblers into your bloodstream. Among other things. It's all part of the process. Didn't you read the welcome messages?"

"There were so *many*," Ryouko complained.

Her hair waved in strands behind her back like so many tentacles, shifting back and forth to allow drones passage and aid the cleaning process while trying to maintain a semblance of her preferred hairstyle. This applied to the others as well, of course.

"You know, it's always been my opinion that they should do the cortical datadump *first*," Asaka said. "It's ridiculous to expect teenagers to read all of that. Or adults for that matter."

"Well, the reconfiguration process makes the datadump more efficient," Patricia argued, pursing her lips.

"It works perfectly fine before, too," Asaka said. "Who cares if it's a little slower? It saves confusion."

"You can take that up with the military procedure AIs," Patricia said, shrugging. "It's not my job."

Ryouko noticed that the drones were starting to withdraw rapidly, jumping off her body and to the ground before scurrying away. A moment later, the airlock made a *ding!* noise, and the door in front of them slid open.

Exactly like a synthesizer finishing a food dish, Ryouko thought, trying to use humor to calm herself.

"Goddamn it, I feel like a dumbass," complained a magical girl appearing around the corner in a drone stretcher, wearing the universal blue patient uniform. Her leg was bent at a hideously unnatural angle, and was covered with nanogel, both secreted and applied. In her hand, she held several grief cubes, into which her soul gem ring was dumping corruption.

Accompanying her was an adult-looking attendant and two worried looking teenagers. Ryouko quickly appraised their hands for soul gem rings, and found that the teenagers were wearing them and the attendant was not. The two girls also had fingernail marks.

"It happens to everyone," the attendant soothed. "We'll have you up and walking again within the hour."

"Can't I just get a healer?" the girl complained.

"For small things like broken bones, it's more efficient to do it medically rather than magically, if time isn't an issue," the attendant explained patiently. "It saves grief cubes."

They disappeared around the next corner, Ryouko, Asaka, and Patricia standing politely still to let them pass.

They led her to an exam room with a solitary exam chair. The door slid open as they approached, and the walls turned opaque, resolving her previous concern about privacy.

Intuiting what was expected, Ryouko sat down in the chair, placing her head between two head pads that seemed uncomfortably like restraints. She felt slightly vulnerable.

Patricia headed for an alcove in the wall, which was beginning to spit packets of material into a tray on the counter. Next to the tray was a glass canister full of dark red lollipops.

“Try to relax,” Asaka said, looming over her. “Patricia is a trained specialist.”

“No I’m not,” the girl said absently, using a microneedle syringe to transfer the mysterious blue contents of a presealed packet into a tube that led to some sort of hand-held device. “I have no training at all, not in this. I skipped a lot with my wish.”

“I’m *trying* to relax her,” Asaka said.

“It’s alright,” Ryouko commented. “The fact that she got it by magic is actually sort of reassuring. She can’t be wrong. Probably.”

Patricia gave the other girl a victorious look, then went back to fussing over some sort of console on the chair.

“Right, so ever get your internal specs reconfigured?” Asaka asked, leaning against the wall.

Ryouko shook her head.

“Not since I was too young to remember,” she said.

“You sure?” Patricia asked, looking at her with one eye, manipulating another syringe. “This is pretty important. Even if you got it done illegally, it’s best to tell us. We won’t tell anyone.”

“Why the hell would I?” Ryouko asked.

“Some people get adjustments to support their hobbies,” Asaka said, shrugging. “Mountain climbers get gecko skin patches, things like that. The illegal ones are usually to circumvent the virtual reality restrictions. There’s a whole subculture of gamers who do this. The government overlooks it as long as they don’t cause too much trouble.”

“Ah,” Ryouko agreed. “I remember reading about that. I wouldn’t imagine very many form contracts.”

“You’re looking at an example right here,” Patricia commented, gesturing at Asaka. “I’ll leave it to her to tell you if she has any illegal modifications.”

Asaka gave her another dirty look.

“She knows very well being in the military makes it a moot point.”

“Not for all of the mod types,” Patricia persisted. “There are plenty of possibilities in virtual simulation the military doesn’t want.”

Asaka narrowed her eyes.

“Remind me again why I work with you.” Asaka complained.

Patricia smirked.

“Because I’m just so beautiful,” she simpered sarcastically, putting her hand to her face. Asaka shook her fist threateningly.

“So you were into games?” Ryouko asked.

“Oh yes,” Asaka said. “Still am, actually. It was all my friends and I did, all the time. I thought I knew my direction in life.”

Ryouko nodded. It was not considered necessary that everyone do something *productive.* Just something that they enjoyed. That was enough for you to excuse yourself from school. You tended not to get more than the base minimum Alloc distribution, though, and your parents generally weren't particularly fond of the idea.

"It's not *that* bad," Asaka said, gleaning her thoughts. "Some are good enough that others will even tune in watch them play. The best get special entertainer dispositions. It's bigger than you think."

"Was your wish—" Ryouko began, before biting her tongue, too late.

"Sorry," she added hastily. "I didn't mean to pry."

Asaka made a dismissive noise.

"Rookie," she commented, not unkindly. "Don't worry, I'm not offended. You're on the right track, though. I won't say more than that."

Ryouko, realizing that Patricia hadn't said anything for quite a while, turned her head to look at the girl—or tried, anyway. She had forgotten her head was restrained, so she ended up just shifting her eyes, while inadvertently pressing her head into the padding.

Following her gaze, Asaka turned to look.

Patricia was staring at the rectangular device in her hand with an abstract frown, seemingly deep in thought.

"Is something wrong?" Asaka asked. "Why is this taking so long?"

"Her genetic profile is outside the five-sigma safe limit for using the customary procedure," Patricia said airily, clearly not quite focusing on the conversation. "About six, to be more precise. Can't really get greater precision so far out."

"Which means…" Asaka cued, waving her hand.

"I will have to make some adjustments," Patricia said. "Don't worry, it doesn't affect anything. It just takes a little time. I submitted the profile to one of the genetic analysis AIs. Should be getting results anytime now."

Her comments were less reassuring than they were probably intended to be, given the flat monotone in which they were delivered.

"Ah, well," Asaka extemporized, looking back at Ryouko. "Six. I guess that makes you pretty special."

"It's about one in one billion," Ryouko said, consulting an internal calculator, eyes widening just a little.

There was series of "thunk!" sounds, as a series of more mysterious fluid packets arrived in the tray on the table. Patricia grabbed them and started injecting them into her device carefully. Asaka and Ryouko quieted down.

Patricia looked up and nodded at them, indicating she was done. She seemed distracted, though.

"Alright, do you know how this goes?" Asaka asked, leaning over her again, handing her a lollipop.

“No,” Ryouko said, after trying and failing to nod her head. “Why the lollipop?”

“Never been to the VR section of the theater, I see,” Asaka said. “Trust me. It helps.”

Ryouko put the candy in her mouth, then almost pulled it back out in surprise.

Cinnamon, she thought. *Pungent too.*

Patricia walked over, eyes clear now. Whatever had been distracting her was gone and dealt with.

“There’s an interface conduit under your head,” Patricia said, connecting the device in her hand to a port on the chair. “It will align with the implants near the rear of your brainstem, for communication purposes. There’ll be an authorization request; you have to give permission so the chair can have access.”

“Okay,” Ryouko said.

“The nanites will go in at various times throughout the procedure,” Patricia continued. “Via microneedle to the back of the neck. It won’t hurt, but just so you know. Your primary senses will have to reset, and your vision will definitely blackout initially. You won’t be aware of the world, and there’ll be a period in the middle where you’ll be unconscious. Oh, and you haven’t ever been to a VR theatre, right?”

“No,” Ryouko said. “it’s too expensive.”

She smiled nervously.

Primary senses reset, she thought. *Vision blacked out. Unconscious. It sounds so pleasant…*

“It’s a bit disorienting, then,” Asaka said. “It might be better to put you to sleep, but then the implants can’t calibrate properly.”

“Uh, so I’ve been told,” she amended hastily when Patricia looked in her direction and smirked.

“I see,” Ryouko said.

“Then are you ready?” Patricia asked.

“Probably,” she replied noncomittally.

“Then here goes,” Patricia said.

A vague feeling of communication, similar to the feeling she got when she gave vehicles instruction, then—

Administrator access request to internal mesh detected, something thought, on a deep, deep level. *Security verifiers appear to be valid. Permit request?*

Ryouko took a breath.

Yes, she thought.

The world disappeared.

What— Ryouko thought, fighting rising panic. She could see a thing, couldn’t hear a thing, couldn’t *feel* a thing.

Then, suddenly, she smelled… cinnamon, and it helped to ground and calm her.

〈 *Olfaction is the most primitive of the senses,* a female voice in her head explained. *And the most deeply engrained. It uses a different neural pathway. Everything is fine.* 〉

Suddenly, sensation rushed back into her world. She found herself in a bed, looking at a giant floating graphic, at perfect viewing distance, against a relaxing mountain backdrop. She tried to move, experimentally, and found she couldn't. Strangely, it wasn't panicking, but rather relaxing.

She suspected her brain was being fed a substantial quantity of drugs.

The screen displayed two logos. On the left, the hammer and lightning of Hephaestus Nanotechnology. On the right, the shattered clock of Chronos Biologics.

These receded into the background, replaced on the right by a laundry list of progress bars and a readout of what was happening. At the top of the readout it said: "Minimal-level Sensory Interface. Apologies for the lack of entertainment! ♡"

At the end, there was a little heart symbol. Whoever designed this had had a strange sense of humor.

"Anyway," the readout continued. "We'll be upgrading your systems now! Isn't it exciting? Go ahead and follow the progress readouts on the right. On the left, we will be showing some graphics detailing your new modifications. Just a few more seconds…"

Then:

"Upgrade to military-grade enhancement package proceeding…"

"Magical Girl Distribution, Version 3.5"

"Processing triggers…"

"Five-Sigma genetic profile detected, special processing required. Please standby…"

"…"

"…"

"Processing complete. Proceeding with Stage One."

On the left, a friendly graphic explained that Stage One involved the removal of unnecessary restrictions and implants, particularly those that tended to fail when used by a magical girl. It showed a diagram of her body with a prominent X for whatever was being removed, along with little lines leading to invisibly small description. It was quite an accurate diagram.

They don't need to be that anatomically correct… she thought, focusing on one of the X's. It zoomed in, revealing that the support network around her heart was slated for degradation, since detailed testing had revealed that it did not improve combat performance for magical girls, and wasted energy besides.

"Uninstalling Civilian Emergency Safety Main Control…"

"Uninstalling civilian access restrictions. Please wait for authorization."

"Authorization confirmed."

“Uninstalling virtual reality restrictions…”

“Uninstalling mind-to-mind communication restrictions…”

“Uninstalling sensory feed partitioning…”

“Disabling cardiopulmonary support devices…”

“Disabling muscular enhancements…”

“Disabling redundant immune system enhancements…”

“Disabling redundant antitoxin systems…”

“Marking defunct nanospecies for self-disposal…”

“Marking obsolete implants for degradation…”

“Reconfiguring remaining implants…”

“Stage One complete. Proceeding with Stage Two.”

This time, the graphic explained to her that it was installing the low complexity implants, those that reliably worked for magical girls. Instead of giving her the option to review technical specs, it went into a marketing slideshow about *“her new body,”* explaining cheerfully that military skeletal enhancements reduced risk of bone breakage by 30%, even in magical girls, and that Chronos Omnivisual Optical Implants would enable her to see into the low UV and high infrared ranges, granting enhanced perceptivity in combat. She could also switch to seeing in pure infrared, but for technical reasons that meant sacrificing standard vision.

Ryouko had never quite intuitively understood why so many in the media had such a penchant for insisting that humanity was now a race of robots, or cyborgs rather. She certainly understood now.

She could still smell the cinnamon.

“Injecting new nanite species. Please wait for circulatory localization…”

“Preparing skeletal enhancements for upgrade to military-grade…”

“Preparing nanoelectrode arrays for rapid expansion…”

“Preparing ocular implants for spectrum expansion…”

“Elevating security authorization of primary communication node to Level One…”

“Preparing communications nodes for expansion…”

“Installing command and control protocols…”

“Processing redesign of nasal epithelial…”

“Processing implant placement for auditory enhancements…”

“Processing necessary spinal canal adjustments…”

“Processing brain structure for implant placement. This will take up to two minutes.”

Ryouko continued to stare at the virtual screen—not that she had any choice. She considered herself a secure denizen of the future age, but she had to admit the sheer length of the list was growing unsettling. Plus, if she understood things correctly, she wasn't even getting half of what the standard infantry received, primarily because the majority of the improvements didn't work with magical girls.

"Done. Injecting supplemental nutrient serums…"

"Initializing implant assembly. You are advised implant assembly and enhancement will not fully complete for 2 hours−1 week, depending."

This last line was highlighted brightly, and Ryouko noticed she was being forced to look at it.

"Stage Two is now complete. Beginning Stage Three…"

This stage was for installing her Tactical Advisor which, the graphic noted, would provide her with a personal advisor and assistant both in combat and outside, one capable of sorting her messages, providing useful advice and tactical analysis, and facilitating communication. It also included NeverForget technology, to ensure that she would always have access to all her memories, but without bothering her with pointless constant recollection.

"Installing Spinal Node Tactical Advisor, Version 1.8…"

"Injecting EFA nanite populations…"

"Injecting high-energy density feed serum…"

"Processing medium-detail CNS wiring. This takes approximately one hour, for which duration you will be unconscious. Suppressing conscious activity…"

Oh here it is, Ryouko thought. *I guess I should—*

"Done."

—get ready.

Wait, what? Done?

"Reconfiguring CNS implants…"

She stared at the screen-again, not that she had any choice. Had that really been an hour? It must have been…

"Stage Three complete. Tactical Advisor will be ready for initial activation in approximately five hours. Beginning Stage Four…"

Stage Four installed the implant that would completely remove her need to sleep.

"Installing Permanent Awareness Module…"

"Injecting nanite populations. Please wait for circulatory localization…"

"Injecting temporary hormonal stabilizers…"

"Processing endocrine modifications…"

"Configuring nanoelectrodes for long-term modulatory firing…"

“Installing circadian synchronization routines…”

“Stage Four complete. You are advised that you may feel dizziness, tiredness, or other symptoms similar to jet lag for the next couple of days. These will fade with time.”

“Installation complete. System resetting. Please prepare for sensory blackout in 5… 4… 3—”

Ryouko gritted her virtual teeth and found, to her surprise, that she actually could.

—2… 1…”

She gasped when she finally woke back up, lollipop falling out of her mouth, barely more than a stick. She jerked forward out of the chair, then looked rapidly around, finding Patricia and Asaka standing around her, wearing amused looks.

Ryouko took a moment to feel her face with her hands.

“So how long was that?” she asked, looking at Patricia.

“Two hours,” the girl said. “Time perception is altered.”

“I see,” Ryouko said, getting up out of the chair.

“And now it’s my show,” Asaka said, gesturing. “Follow me. We’re heading for the armory.”

Ryouko followed readily, but Patricia hung back, doing something with the chair. Ryouko gave her a questioning look.

“Ah, don’t mind me,” Patricia said. “I’ve got things to do. Sorry.”

Ryouko nodded and followed the other girl out the door, as the walls returned to transparency.

“Don’t tell her I told you so, but something’s got her seriously spooked,” Asaka said, as they headed for the airlock.

“What do you mean?” Ryouko asked.

“She didn’t have ‘things to do’ this morning,” Asaka said, giving her a sly look. “In fact, she promised me she’d stick around for the whole thing. Now suddenly it’s ‘Oh no, I forgot about something vague, and I must take care of it now.’ Trust me. I can tell.”

Ryouko thought about that.

“Does it have anything to do with me?” she asked, as they stepped into the airlock.

“Maybe,” Asaka said. “It’s not like anything else happened today.”

Ryouko was mildly surprised when the elevator doors opened without forcing her to wait to be burned, then swarmed with drones.

Right, we’re going out, not in, she thought.

I wonder what has Patricia worried, she thought, a moment later, as the elevator doors opened on the tenth floor, counting downward.

She held up her arm and looked at it, as if she could really tell anything just by looking at it.

She said everything would be fine if she made some adjustments, Ryouko thought. *But damned if this doesn't make me paranoid.*

But no enhancement system has malfunctioned in over a century. Surely they must have it perfected by now.

"It's all a bit new," she said, smiling nervously at Asaka as they walked down a long hallway lined with impassive metal doors. "The implants are growing as we speak, right?"

"Yes," Asaka said. "You'll start to notice some differences soon enough."

Ryouko thought about that.

So I should be able to…

And as quick as thought, it was done.

"So did you get that?" Ryouko asked.

"Yes," Asaka said. "A memory snapshot, right?"

"That's right," Ryouko said. "A girl I met once, a long time ago. My memory might be inaccurate, but try your facial recognition on it."

"Why?" Asaka asked. "I mean, it's not as if—"

The girl halted, freezing nearly midstep.

"What is it?" Ryouko asked.

But Asaka stood there, with the strangest of expressions, as if she were shocked and confused at the same time. Ryouko opened her mouth to ask—

"We're here," Asaka said suddenly, striding forward with enormous steps, and a door far in front of them slid open.

Asaka walked into the warehouse-style room, not slackening her pace. Ryouko, confused, followed—and was briefly flabbergasted, gaping around at the endless racks of military armaments, piled at least fifty feet high. She had to look carefully to see the far wall.

"This isn't a frontline planet," Asaka explained, holding her arms out above her head in an encompassing gesture. "So the armory is pretty sparse. But we've got good stuff."

"Sparse," Ryouko repeated.

"And as a magical girl," Asaka continued, "you're entitled to have whatever you want, whenever you want. Well, except some of the more expensive stuff. And the weapons of mass destruction. But you can have anything found in a standard armory." she continued, grabbing a pistol off the rack and holding it out to Ryouko so she could grab it, smiling broadly.

Ryouko took it, feeling its weight-rather nervously, she had to admit. Weapons were not something she had ever handled.

"It's a SW−155 officer's pistol," Asaka said, smiling in such a way as to give Ryouko the impression she *liked* talking about weapons. "You're required to keep one with you whenever you're in alien combat. It might not look much compared to some of the other things here, but it's one of the most advanced weapons in existence."

She paused.

“You should take the time to practice with it later at the firing range on the eight floor,” she said. “I’d be glad to show you. But it’s got all kinds of features. Like all military weapons, it refuses to respond unless the wielder has a Human DNA trace. More importantly, it doesn’t just fire bullets. It uses universal ammunition, and you can use your mental interface or the manual controls to order it to fire all sorts of things, such as concussion grenades, flashbangs, antiarmor missiles, small drones, various modalities of lasers, and so forth. It’s the first of its kind.”

“The point is that, as an officer and magical girl, it’s a last resort weapon. It’s supposed to be able to do anything and everything, should the need ever arise. Other weapons aren’t like that—it’s horribly energy-inefficient, but it’s not meant for sustained use. Hopefully you’ll never have to use it.”

“Remember, though,” she said. “There *are* limits to what is possible, so if you want to fire something like an antiarmor missile, you’re going to have feed it several clips of ammunition. That’s why it’s recommended you always carry at least six. Anyway, you can have everything sent home to you. Unless you really want to go home carrying it.”

Ryouko nodded, making a mental note to figure out exactly how you had things “sent home to you.”

Ryouko sighted down the barrel of her weapon experimentally, just like she had seen in movies. She had no idea what she doing. Was she going to get training or what?

“Asaka-san, why did you dodge my question earlier?” she asked, not having entirely forgotten. “About the girl.”

She figured bluntness was the only way to go.

Asaka’s smile faded, just slightly.

“Transform for me,” she said.

“Why?” Ryouko asked.

I have to think about it, Asaka thought. *I don’t know. But I’m serious about the transformation.*

Ryouko did so, the bright green light casting a strange coloring onto the assorted weaponry.

“Asaka-san,” she began, uncertain whether to be annoyed or confused.

Just give me some time, Asaka thought.

“Take off your soul gem cover,” Asaka said.

“My what?” Ryouko asked, blinking.

“Your soul gem cover. Kyouko must have given you one. Only you can remove it.”

“Oh, that,” she said, surprised.

Ryouko had completely forgotten about that. She reached down to the base of her neck, trying to pry at the transparent covering. To her surprise, it came off easily, shaping itself back into a sphere. Had it been with her all this time? Had it covered her ring, somehow?

“Right then,” Asaka said. “You can keep that one for yourself as a spare. Kyouko has gotten a replacement by now, I’m sure.”

She leaned forward, pulling a large handful of something out of the pocket of her jeans.

“Hold out your hand,” she ordered.

Ryouko did so, and Asaka dropped into her palm… what appeared to be several exact replicas of her soul gem. They all glowed with the same pulsing light as her own.

But… they seemed empty, somehow.

“What is this?” Ryouko asked, holding up the gems to look at them carefully.

“Kyouko sent in the specs yesterday,” the girl said, handing her another handful, making six in total. “It turns out that, on basically any sensor we can design, soul gems don’t look like anything but inexplicably glowing gems. Yeah, *we* can tell the difference, and if you get up close the sensors can’t figure out what mineral they’re made of, but for most purposes they serve as perfect decoys. The aliens don’t know which one to target.”

“Clever,” Ryouko commented.

“Try it,” Asaka said. “Drop them on your neck. Trust me.”

She tried to do as instructed, but it wasn’t really possible to “drop” something onto her neck, not when she was standing upright. She leaned back and released them, feeling awkward, convinced most would drop into the V-shape of the cleavage of her costume, or else miss entirely and drop to the floor—she wasn’t the most bosomy of girls, no matter how her friends tried to reassure her. In fact, she had a nagging suspicion her costume was designed in some aspects to hide that fact. It did seem rather assertive…

Instead of falling like rocks, the gems sprouted miniature legs and scrabbled around her body, in an experience reminiscent of the previous airlock microdrones. They settled into various positions —on top of her hands, on her forearms, in the middle of her belly, and in the middle of her back. One nestled in her hair.

They were all plausible soul gem positions, she realized.

“Does *everything* have to involve bug drones?” she asked. “It’s a little unsettling.”

Asaka shrugged.

“It’s how it is. Anyway, they can’t change forms as easily as actual soul gems, so if you untransform, they try to gather in a pocket or your hand or something. They’re pretty intelligent. You’re only supposed to wear them when fighting aliens, so you can take them off the rest of the time. But anyway…”

She turned to face the rack with the pistols. One of the drawers underneath slid forward automatically. It contained what appeared to be a large set of identically shaped pieces of plastic, except that they contained the barely visible traces of electronics. One was colored slightly red. All were shaped like five-pointed-stars.

Ryouko then realized the drawer had her name displayed on the front, in the little electronic screen. How had she missed that?

“Custom-made,” Asaka explained. “These are too complicated to crawl anywhere, so we’ll have

to put them on manually, just this once."

Stepping forward, she started picking up the devices and placing them roughly onto the location of the fake soul gems. They flowed slightly, settling onto the gems and sticking to her body and clothing.

Ryouko held up her right hand, the one still grasping the pistol, looking at the false gem pulsating, green light distorted by the electronic traces running over it.

"What are they?" she asked, placing the pistol back on the rack. She had forgotten she was carrying it.

"Personal protection devices," Asaka said. "Really, the goal is to protect the soul gem, but if we're going to be wearing a bunch of fakes, they've at least got to be convincing fakes, so they get some protection too."

Asaka reached for the last piece, the one tinged slightly red.

"And *this* is the main piece," she said, holding it up. "The one for your actual soulgem. It's not obvious, but it's much more powerful than the other ones. It can withstand most small-arms fire, and even sacrifice itself to stop the main gun of alien armor from damaging the gem. Which is not to say you should just let them keep shooting it."

"Do we get an explanation of everything later?" Ryouko asked, starting to feel a little overwhelmed.

"Yes," Asaka said, leaning down to apply the main piece. "And you even get a cortex infodump. But I might as well let you hear it now. I'm sorry to talk your ears off, but it really is important for you to know."

Ryouko nodded.

"Anyway," Asaka continued. "It's considered very important to get soul gem protection as soon as possible. The soul gem *is* you, after all. I assume you know that, by now. Kyouko said you were very knowledgeable."

"Yes," Ryouko agreed.

Asaka stood back up, as the main soul gem piece lost its red color. Then, suddenly, all the gems, authentic soul gem included, disappeared from sight.

"Wow," Ryouko said, startled.

"Okay, so, all these pieces together are actually designed to work together as a personal protective system," Asaka lectured. "They cloak and protect the fake gems to fool the aliens, but if push comes to shove they'll focus on defending the main gem. They deflect projectiles and beam weaponry and have little lasers to try and deflect small projectiles away. They're self-sufficient as long as there's a little sun, but if you operate in darkness for too long they'll run low on power. We have special chargers for that."

Ryouko stared at her hand, trying to spot the gem somehow. She couldn't. She rubbed it with her other hand and, yes, she could still feel it.

"Cool, right?," Asaka asked rhetorically. "The aliens are pretty good at ignoring stealth, though, so we don't rely on it. The gems also try to mislead them as much as possible. The main one uses a light sensor to keep track of the status of your soul gem. Initially, all the gems will dim together,

but if you really start digging deep, the gems will randomize how bright they are, so the aliens can't keep track of how damaged you are. *You'll* know instinctively, of course, and your teammates and supporting Humans will know the real state of things through the C&C systems. Still, you should probably make a habit of keeping people informed telepathically. The aliens are also damned good at jamming local transmissions."

"They thought this through," Ryouko said, genuinely impressed.

"Yes," Asaka said. "Military Research spent eight years designing the damned things, so they better be pretty impressive. Before, we just wore little hardened covers and fake glowing gems we had to stick on manually *every time.* It was terrible. But the alternative was getting sniped. The aliens figured out the soul gem thing pretty quickly. Still, they could probably be improved; the whole system seems clunky to me, and I appreciate that it's hard to give your actual soul gems legs to fool anyone, but…"

Her voice trailed off.

"I see," Ryouko reminded, once Asaka had spent too long staring at the middle distance.

"Right, then," Asaka said, shaking her head. "Untransform."

Ryouko did so.

The moment she finished, the fake soul gems distributed around her body uncloaked, lifted themselves back into standing positions, faux-plastic covers included, and scurried around, stuffing themselves into the pockets of her pants.

"Convenient, huh? If you don't have any pockets they stick to you or clothing," Asaka said. "Patricia thinks they're *cute.* She thinks they're all cute. That's why she's crazy. Anyway, you're keeping those with you. It shouldn't be too burdensome."

Thinking of something, Ryouko held up her hand to look at the soul gem ring. The main cover was straining itself to form into the right shape. Finally, it succeeded and settled down, and her ring felt just a little bulkier than usual.

"The scientists were really surprised by that, actually," Asaka said. "They thought the cover would stay near where your gem used to be, so originally they designed it to just stick in place near your neck, and you'd have to move it manually. Magic works in strange ways."

Ryouko felt her ring with her fingers, thinking.

Civilians thought they lived in a futuristic world, but the things she was seeing here would have stunned any of her friends, had she shown them. Indeed, she could probably pass it off as magical girl magic easily.

If the military was capable of things like this, and were severely outclassed by the aliens, then what could the *aliens* do?

"Is there anything else you want to show me here?" Ryouko asked.

"I'd love to spend all day here," Asaka said, looking at her from the side. "But frankly, you get everything you need to know later, so you don't need to hear me go on and on. There's only one other piece of required equipment."

She turned to face another one of the racks and Ryouko realized that the entire time they hadn't walked so much as twenty feet into the warehouse. All the standard equipment was right there in

the front. It made sense.

Asaka held up what appeared to be a black backpack, cased with some sort of hard material.

"And that is…" Ryouko asked.

"A backpack." Asaka said. "It holds things. It is technically standard equipment, but most girls don't like wearing it."

"Oh," Ryouko said. "After everything else, that seems rather… prosaic."

"I wasn't finished," Asaka said, amused. "It can hand you things on command. Watch."

She put the pack on her back, then held her hand behind her. A moment later, part of the casing of the bag realigned, opening a small hole. It ejected a round canister, which Asaka caught adroitly, holding it up.

"This is just a demo object," she said, shoving it back behind her and into the bag, which opened a hole automatically to suck it back in. "But you get the point. Normally, it'd be ammo packs or grief cubes. For really critical situations, there's even a little robotic arm that will hold cubes up to your gem for you, but it's sort of unwieldy."

"That's… impressive," Ryouko said.

"It also contains a personal cloaking device," Asaka said.

"Huh," Ryouko said, rather meaninglessly.

"Not that it's all that useful," the other girl said. "It's limited duration, and most alien vehicles and large drones have scanners that can see through it, so you basically never use it. Still, it's worth having. More than the infantry get."

"Anyway, that's just to introduce you to it," she finished, dropping the bag back into a bin. "No reason for you to take that home either."

"Okay," Ryouko repeated.

She thought for a moment, putting her hand to her chin.

"So where to now?" she asked.

"You're done for the day," Asaka said. "Personal recommendation, though. Make an appointment with your personal psychiatrist now, so you can get good times. An introductory appointment is required, though hopefully you'll never have to see her again."

"Psychiatrist?" Ryouko asked. "What? Is it mandatory or something?"

"It was in one of the messages," Asaka said. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to take you on a little tour."

"If it's not too personal a question…" Ryouko began.

"Hmm?"

The two of them were taking a moment to relax in what was apparently Asaka's room, on the fifth floor, counting down. Asaka lounged on her bed, while Ryouko sat in a metal chair. The room

was cramped, even more cramped than she was used to. She supposed it wasn't that easy to make space underground.

"What's the appeal of the Cult anyway?" Ryouko asked, gesturing at religious memorabilia strewn across a desk and stuck to the walls: a little figurine of Akemi Homura, a figurine of a magical girl making a wish, artist renditions of Homura in flight with white wings, of a mist-white Goddess, of the symbol of the cult, a stylized soul gem depositing corruption into a circle of grief cubes.

"I mean, you don't seem like the type of girl who'd be attracted to that kind of stuff," she elaborated.

Asaka smiled slightly, looking down.

"That's right," she said. "I'm not."

She thought for a moment.

"It's not the easiest thing to explain," she said. "I guess part of it is that I want *meaning,* you know? I got what I wanted with my wish, but I've come to realize since then that I don't really know what to *do* with it. I've drifted through life for a long while."

She seemed to think for a moment.

"I had a friend—a fresh recruit, just like you—who lost her soul to despair, without ever understanding. The last thing she asked was 'Why?' I hope now that I would know what to say, if someone else asked me the same question."

"I see," Ryouko said, looking away. She wasn't really expecting a response like that.

"No you don't," Asaka said, looking amused. "But it's okay. It's better if you don't. And in any case, it's not just that. I'm not the type of person to be won over just because I want to feel good about my life."

She looked down.

"You know what, forget the rest of the tour," she said, making a dismissive gesture. "The armory was important, but this is now a waste of time. I have something more important to show you first. You'll understand soon enough."

She paused.

"Have you ever heard of the Ribbon?" she asked.

Seeing the Ribbon of the Goddess involved, as might be expected, waiting in a really, really long line. This was aggravated by the practice of limiting group size to at most three at a time, though the strict five minute limit did speed things quite a bit.

It was a novel experience, since generally speaking there were very few things that still involved queuing up. Goods you got at the store were either free, or the Allocs were automatically deducted when you left the building. Security at the starport was handled by ubiquitous drones and scanners, rather than any formalized checkpoint. Primary school classes still did it occasionally, though.

Ryouko spent the time continuing to read her messages—there were *so many* of them—reading

some articles on Infopedia, and listening to the chatter of the girls around her. Eavesdropping on the conversations, the scene didn't convey as much of the air of a religious experience as she expected. By and large, the atmosphere was informal, and, going by the attitudes of the visitors, the scene resembled more schoolgirls on a school trip than pilgrims visiting a sacred artifact.

The location, of course, was something else. The room was cavernous, with a high arching roof and extensive stained glass, clearly designed to try and make the occupants feel small. The side walls were covered with images of magical girls. To her right, they were uniformly triumphant and radiant, destroying everything around them. To her left, they were dying, fading, falling out of the sky.

At the far end of the room were three images, two flanking the artifact they were here to see. The Ribbon itself was barely visible in its glass box on a pedestal, but the enormous images couldn't be missed.

On the right, Homura with white wings, purple aura radiant, eyes serene. On the left, Homura with black wings, black corruption oozing, eyes crazed. In the middle, a white-misted goddess in an all-embracing pose.

One thing was for certain—the Cult certainly did *not* lack resources.

Of course, if you were observant, you could spot other strange details about the crowd of girls. For instance, the sheer ethnic diversity was extremely unusual, even in this age of easy international travel. If you looked more carefully, you would also note the uniformity with which the girls all wore soul gem rings and fingernail marks, of one sort or another.

And even if you were not observant, it would have been difficult not to notice the two girls in full costume, standing at guard at the front of the line, or the strange shimmering that occurred every ten minutes in the gap between them, almost as if the air itself were briefly glowing. Ryouko suspected it was a forcefield.

Except forcefields were expensive, the type of thing you only saw on capital ships.

And you would have had to be blind to miss the flashes of transformation light that repeatedly shone as girls approached the pedestal, which was considered approachable only by magical girls in costume.

There was something about the forcefield shimmer that bothered her, though. It was red, yes, very red, but there was something strange about the color. The flashes were too brief for her to focus, but it nagged at her.

"So you're seeing the forcefield, huh?" Asaka asked, noticing her peering at the now empty-seeming gap.

"Oh, yes," Ryouko said, surprised. "So it is a forcefield, then?"

"Yes," Asaka said. "And in case you're wondering, that impossibly red color is in the upper infrared. They don't normally shimmer in the visual. Hmm, they must have improved the enhancement process. Those optical implants took fourteen hours to come online for me."

Ryouko took a moment to think that through.

"Nothing else looks different, though," she said, looking around experimentally at the other girls, the statues, the walls—though now that she searched for it, the stained glass looked vaguely strange.

“It’s complicated,” Asaka said. “You don’t really notice unless the infrared or UV is particularly powerful, but it’s enough for you to grab a bit more detail from most objects. Very subtle. If the sun is still up when you go outside, that’ll be quite an experience. You get used to it, though. No one even notices anymore.”

“Is it useful for night vision?” Ryouko said, asking the first thing she thought of.

“Unfortunately, not really,” Asaka said. “The spectrum isn’t widened enough. You’ll have to switch to pure infrared for night vision. That’s the point. And actually, as a magical girl, you’ll rarely ever want to.”

“Why?” Ryouko asked.

“You were with us last night, weren’t you?” Asaka said. “Didn’t you notice how well you could see in those dark alleys? Being a magical girl comes with a lot of benefits, including absurdly good night vision. Plus, we have—”

She paused, thinking about how to word it.

“An instinct, I guess,” she finished. “A sort of sixth sense for the EM spectrum. Patricia could explain better, but it’s why you generally pay attention to your battle instincts. It’s the sort of thing they teach you in training. The spacers, especially, really know about it.”

“Is there a way to check how these implants are coming along?” Ryouko asked, still peering experimentally around her. “Usually I don’t think about these things, you know.”

“Civilians usually only have diagnostics in Emergency Mode,” Asaka explained patiently. “We can check them on demand, but only once the tactical computer comes online. You’ll know when it does; it will tell you. Again, Patricia can—”

“Evangelizing, Asaka?” Patricia asked, appearing almost as if summoned. “I’m impressed. I didn’t know you had it in you.”

She gestured at the religious artifact in front of them. They were finally approaching the front of the line.

Ryouko watched the situation carefully. She too was curious why she was here, but Asaka had been evasive when question, insisting that she *had* to come. But just what was so important about showing her a religious artifact? It couldn’t just be an attempt to convert her… could it?

Asaka made a sour expression.

“She’s going to be disappointed, you know,” Patricia chastised. “Most of the time—the vast majority of the time—it’s just a ribbon.”

“Well, you never know,” Asaka said flatly.

“I’m just here to accompany them,” Patricia explained apologetically to the girl behind them in line, who was clearly about to complain about Patricia’s insertion into the queue. “I won’t be going up to the pedestal.”

“It supposedly gives visions?” Ryouko asked, quoting the informational guide she had read about the Ribbon.

“Rarely,” Patricia said. “Just often enough to keep people coming. And they’re pretty interesting visions, in the sense that they don’t show up on memory traces or in the records of anyone’s

internal implants. If it weren't for the girls talking about it, they might as well have never happened."

"You sound rather skeptical for a Cult member," Ryouko pointed out.

"I'm just saying how it is," Patricia said, putting up her hands. "Personally, I think they're real, but I want to point out all the dodgy bits."

"I saw my dead friend," Asaka said sharply.

They turned to look at her. She looked back, eyes severe.

"That's all I'm going to say," she finished, obviously making the effort to keep her face passive.

"That's all she ever says," Patricia commented, ignoring Asaka's reproving tone of voice.

She looked at Ryouko.

"I've been in this Cult practically since I contracted, but I never got anything out of visiting the thing," she said. "Chances are good that you won't, either. And then you'll think we're all a bunch of crazy fanatics."

Patricia shrugged.

"We recruit among new girls, that's true," she said. "But we only really *try* for the ones whose psychological profiles suggest they'd be receptive. For girls like you, who aren't, it's better to wait, until you've seen a bit of what's to come. It raises the chances."

The line shifted forward by about five feet, and they stepped forward. They were now next in line, facing the two silent guards, and the empty space in between them that Ryouko didn't quite dare to step into.

"That's a rather… cold-blooded conversion strategy," Ryouko commented.

"So it is," Patricia said.

She smiled slightly.

"Though you know. Maybe I'm being pessimistic. A girl like you, maybe you'll see something, like Asaka did."

I don't know why I'm here, Ryouko thought to Patricia, privately. *She was in the middle of giving me a tour, I asked a few questions, then suddenly she insisted we come here.*

She paused to consider her next thought.

I thought there'd be something to it, but if what you say is true, it's not that important.

Yes, it is strange, Patricia thought. *Like I said, active evangelism is not something we do with most recruits, and it's certainly not like her. But we'll find out soon enough. She has her reasons, I'm sure.*

Asaka gave them both an annoyed look that said "I know you two are talking behind my back."

Have you known her long? Ryouko asked.

Ever since she contracted, Patricia thought. *We were in the same recruit pool. More importantly,*

we were in the same training squad. Spring 2446, Mars Training Grounds, Lambda-Delta. You can look us up if you want. There's a fifty-fifty chance you'll end up in the same place. That, or New Athens.

I see, Ryouko thought, secretly proud that, for once, she already knew that. It had been a lot of reading.

She always made fun of me for joining a crazy cult like this, Patricia thought. *Before her vision, anyway. It's always bothered me a little that she won't talk about what she saw. Alice was my friend, too! But I don't push her on it. It's… personal to her.*

Ryouko nodded, then realized she was supposed to *think* the agreement.

Asaka cleared her throat.

"We are next," she said, gesturing at the empty space in front of them, between the two guards.

"I'm just here to accompany them," Patricia said amiably, stepping to one side.

"Wait at the exit," the guard said, pointing at a back corner of the room.

Ryouko couldn't help but think that the guard's ornate, garish golden hat would be a liability in combat, but, then again, none of the costumes any of them had were particularly inconspicuous.

Out of curiosity, she scanned the guard's face.

A mind reader.

Ryouko's mouth twitched.

"I happen to like the hat, thank you very much," the guard said, tilting her head and smiling at Ryouko. "Got to be more careful about your thoughts around those like us."

"Ah, sure," Ryouko said, embarrassed.

Next to her, Asaka took a deep breath, then transformed, bands of violet light lacing out of the ring on her finger, crystallizing in a round gem set into her right forearm. A pair of holstered daggers appeared at her waist.

Taking the cue, Ryouko followed suit.

"You may pass," the guard said, formal again.

The air next to her shimmered briefly. Ryouko couldn't help but be a little wary stepping through the barrier, but nothing happened, of course.

It's been a long time since I've been here, Asaka thought, as they stepped forward. *After the first time, I kept coming back, but it never happened again. I stopped coming.*

What is this about, Asaka-san? Ryouko thought, trying one last time. *Why are you being so mysterious?*

Asaka shook her head one more time.

You know what's interesting? Asaka thought, dropping to a prayer pose in front of the pedestal. *No one has ever reported seeing the face of the Goddess. In fact, getting contact with her personally is the rarest of all possible visions. Only a few have gotten even a glimpse of her, and*

never the face. Even Kyouko-san hasn't gotten to see what she looks like. We've never convinced Mami-san to come here. Only Homura knows…

Ryouko followed suit, kneeling down, but unlike Asaka, she took a moment to look up at the Ribbon, in its transparent case.

Whoever had designed this part of the building had earned their money. The light through the stained glass wall contrived to create an eerie lighting effect throughout the whole area, which for Ryouko was heightened by a few unfamiliar frequencies, or so she suspected. From where she was, the pedestal in front of her appeared bright on the right and shaded on the left.

But the Ribbon itself, on its little pillow, looked like just a ribbon, laid out straight. Possibly the only unusual thing about it might have been how new it looked, given its age, but that was hardly the kind of thing to inspire awe.

What are you trying to say, Asaka? Ryouko asked, but the girl had her eyes closed, deep in what she assumed to be prayer.

Ryouko closed her own eyes, wondering what this all was, waiting for the five minutes to pass.

And waited.

And waited.

Frowning, she checked her internal chronometer and found… emptiness. She had no idea what time it was.

Her eyes snapped open, and she looked around in panic.

The room was empty.

She tried to stand up.

A red apparition appeared in front of her, among what she realized were old-fashioned church pews. It was a child, almost transparent, one who looked familiar—

She was hit by a blast of vertigo. The world spun around her and she felt herself falling…

Her eyes snapped open again, even though she hadn't closed them, and she found herself looking at a ribbon in her hand. *The* Ribbon.

Suddenly she understood.

A vision. It was actually happening.

She looked up.

She was in a secluded alleyway, but not the type she was used to. The ground had debris, and was paved with a black material she was unfamiliar with.

The past? she thought.

Before her, she saw a girl lying on the floor, another girl weeping over the other. They were magical girls, and the one on the floor was clad in heavily-blood stained white, a crumpled white hat lying at her side. In her hand were the shattered remains of a soul gem.

Ryouko stepped forward warily, wondering if she should try to get the attention of the girl on top.

She looked young—though Ryouko knew that meant nothing for magical girls—and she wore green. At her side, on the ground, lay a giant scepter, very large, almost as it were intended as a hammer—

Ryouko's eyes widened. She knew who she was looking at.

This doesn't make sense! she thought.

She stopped, realizing that she was now standing directly over the two of them. She held her breath, panicked that Yuma would look up and see her.

Yuma looked up, and Ryouko almost tripped over her own feet.

"I'm so sorry," she stammered, stumbling backward. "I–I—"

She stopped. The girl was looking right through her. She couldn't see her.

Ryouko turned and looked behind her.

A demon loomed over the entrance to the alleyway.

"I'm a monster," Yuma said, childish voice cracked, and Ryouko knew, somehow, that this Yuma was showing every year of her age—and there wasn't much to show.

Ryouko turned to look at Yuma again, feeling that she should look despite the imminent demonic threat behind her.

"They were right all along," the girl repeated softly. "I'm just as much a monster as they are. If that's true, then what right do I have to live?"

Ryouko opened her mouth, planning to say something, but froze when the girl looked up again.

Her soul gem swirled dark and black, and the look on her face was one of utter insanity.

Yuma's scepter disappeared and rematerialized in her hand, and, still smiling insanely, the girl lunged straight at Ryouko, so fast that even her hyperfast transformed reflexes didn't respond in time.

Ryouko felt a gust of wind, and realized that Yuma had lunged right *through* her, at the demon behind her. She wasn't really there. She was only an observer.

And then a movement caught her eye.

Ryouko looked down, at the dead magical girl. Had the corpse… moved?

She couldn't tell, but she had the disturbing feeling that the dead girl was watching her, somehow.

She took a step backward, involuntarily, but found no ground behind her. Instead she was falling into a void—

—and her eyes snapped open, and for some reason, she was screaming, and she was looking up at the impassive eyes of two men, immensely large, wearing the universal blue of hospital staff. They looked distorted, almost as if she were looking at them through glass.

She raised her hand, and it was wet. She was in some sort of fluid, and when she pressed her hand forward, she contacted *glass.* It really was glass, or perhaps plastic. She was in some sort of tank. And her hand seemed strangely shaped, and difficult to move.

Then she started to sink downward, the fluid draining…

She was briefly disoriented, dazzled by a bright light in her eyes, which she blinked furiously to get rid of.

—and she's not just any transfer student!" said a voice to her left which she recognized, improbably, as her homeroom teacher. "She's foreign exchange, as you may have guessed. Go ahead, introduce yourself!"

Looking out over the expectant faces of the students in front of her, she felt an embarrassed tightening in her stomach. This was her own homeroom classroom, and she was being introduced as a foreign student? She obviously couldn't say "Shizuki Ryouko." But then—

Her lips moved on her own, and she realized she wasn't in control of her motions.

"I am Simona Del Mago," she said, bowing, hearing herself speak in the slightly accented Japanese that Simona had used on first arrival. "I am pleased to meet you. Ah, well, just to be clear, Simona is my personal name. Del Mago is my surname."

And then she turned her head, and Ryouko found herself looking straight into her own eyes. The eyes of a girl seated in the third row, in front of the empty seat reserved for the new Simona.

If Ryouko could have flinched or gasped, she would have.

As she watched, filled with a queasy sense of surrealism, *Shizuki Ryouko* shifted nervously in her seat, glancing around behind her to see if, perhaps, the new girl were looking at someone behind her.

But no. Simona was looking directly at her. She stared at the girl's—her *own*—pointlessly long hair and thought to herself: *My friends were right, I really do look like a kid.*

This scene was a perfect recreation of Simona's first day at their school. But why was she being shown this?

As the Ryouko in front of her turned her head forward again, tilting it in slight confusion, the world began to fade, the classmates, the walls, everything disappearing in a sea of white…

When she opened her eyes again—again, despite the fact that she had never closed them—she found herself in a white, white world. There was nothing there, except a lone park bench in front of her, and two girls talking.

It took her a moment to recognize that one of them was a younger Asaka, and the other a foreigner, definitely of the type that might be named "Alice."

She tried to lunge forward, and found she couldn't. She was frozen still.

"Alice" pointed suddenly at something, and Asaka looked and then, with wide eyes, fell forward out of the bench, kneeling on the floor.

Her friend urged her to stand back up, and finally, she did so, head still bowed.

Ryouko felt her head turning and saw what had prompted her reaction.

A white apparition, in the form of an adult woman, but still looking childish, somehow. She wore a flowing dress, and her enormously-long ghostly hair wove behind her, strangely tinted slightly…

pink?

Once again, Ryouko realized who she was looking at: the inspiration for the stained glass design in the church, the woman whose face no one had ever seen and, indeed, she couldn't see now.

The apparition spoke to Asaka, who nodded in awe, head still bowed.

The apparition pointed, and Asaka turned to look, and there, in the distance, was an image of a purple magical girl, pointing at the sky with a composite bow. This girl Ryouko knew very well. It was her *own* memory.

A moment later, the image disappeared, and so did the other two girls, and there was only the apparition, who started to turn—

And *looked* at her, and suddenly Ryouko could see it all, her shockingly *pink* hair, the white robes, the gems in her collar, those golden eyes, and achingly familiar face.

I told her to keep silent, and wait for the sign, the voice echoed in her mind, again strangely familiar. *She did that very well, and now you are here. Please, tell no one you saw me.*

The Goddess put a single gloved finger to her mouth in a gesture of silence, and winked, and Ryouko felt herself falling again…

Damn it, I know you're under attack! Kyouko's voice screamed into Ryouko's head, causing her to startle.

She was prone on the ground in a grove of trees, near the edge of a cliff. Below, an ocean roared. She was surrounded by other magical girls, in similar positions. In the background she could hear explosions, and some sort of strange buzzing noise.

Above her head and on the ground, countless tiny mechanical drones, and a few larger ones, went about their business, flying towards their rear, towards the explosions.

She looked up, and saw a girl next to her struggling with something, others holding grief cubes up to the gem in the girl's hand, and only then did Ryouko notice the constant rain of projectiles and beams heading towards them, all deflecting away at the last minute from some sort of invisible barrier.

The rain grew more intense, and the girl next to her clenched her teeth.

Then, Ryouko turned to look rightward, and saw Kyouko, face tense.

It's nothing compared to this! Everyone is under attack! Kyouko thought, clearly under enough pressure that she was letting the thoughts leak to everyone in the vicinity. *Someone told them we were coming, and they have weapons they shouldn't have! I don't care what you're doing, we need the evac! We're losing our drones fast! This landing has gone to hell! Get your asses back here! Haven't you heard of operations under fire?*

They're here! someone in the group thought.

As a group, they all looked up, and Ryouko followed their example, even though she had no idea what she was supposed to be looking at.

In the ocean below them, a flotilla of submarines was surfacing. A few of them were firing weapons into the water, at unseen enemies, but most raised gun barrels toward the sky, water droplets bursting away as if repelled.

In unison, they opened fire.

Go! Go! Kyouko ordered, standing and urging the rest forward with her.

All up and down the cliff, girls began diving off into the ocean, using whatever powers they or others had to moderate the landing, heading for the submarines, and what was apparently escape.

The girls around Ryouko lunged forward, and she did so as well, not sure what else she was supposed to do.

She felt a strange compulsion to turn and *look,* so she did so.

Kyouko was still standing, screaming both in thought and voice to *move, move!,* urging the others forward.

Then an explosion, and a fireball, where she had been standing.

"Kyouko!" Ryouko screamed, despite realizing on some level that none of this was real, that it was all a vision.

She teleported forward, and crouched by the body, mangled and dead, upper half missing entirely.

And the shield above them was still intact, but the cliffside was broken, which meant she had been blasted apart not by enemy fire, but by a misfiring shell from one of the submarines impacting the cliffside.

Those idiots! Maki yelled, appearing at Ryouko's side. *Where's her soul gem? Is it okay? A submarine projectile shouldn't be able to damage the protection—*

No sign of it, Ryouko thought. *She keeps her soul gem on her chest, so…*

"No! No!" the girl screamed, starting to cry on the spot. "I can't feel her gem! She's dead! I can't believe it!"

"Are you sure?" Ryouko shouted, making herself heard. "How—"

A wave of dismay spread outward, as the girls around them realized what had happened, despite their focus on retreat.

"Why the hell did we come here anyway?" the girl yelled. "I'll kill those bastards! They'll die, and whoever tipped them off, I'll hunt them down, and I'll kill them. I, I—"

The girl fell silent, standing up unsteadily, two swords manifesting in her hands.

"I never even got to—" she began, sucking in a sob.

The girl started to walk forward, away from the cliff, towards the enemy. Ryouko finally noted the darkness that had appeared in the girl's gem, its crossed blue shape swirling with growing darkness.

"No you won't," Asaka said, purple bubble appearing next to them and popping open.

Before they had a chance to protest, the bubble reformed around them. Asaka was teleporting them, and several other girls—and the body, gruesome as it was—out of there.

Help me keep her under control, Asaka thought to the rest of them. *Take her soul gem if you have*

to. I'm taking command here.

Maki began pounding the inside of the bubble with her sword, sending ripples through the purple fluid. She sobbed in rage, and struggled half-heartedly with the girls that had appeared around her to pin her down.

Asaka's eyes were cold, but it was obvious that that was only a front. She was staying calm for their sake.

There'll be time to grieve later, she thought. *I'm sorry. I'm… so sorry.*

Ryouko started to step forward, when that familiar falling sensation returned and this time she knew, somehow, the vision was over.

She opened her eyes, gasping for breath. Next to her, Asaka turned and looked at her.

Ryouko checked her internal chronometer. Literally no time had passed.

"You saw something, didn't you?" Asaka asked. It wasn't really a question. A murmur was already starting to rise from the line behind them.

Ryouko nodded mutely.

Clarisse van Rossum watched Ryouko get up unsteadily, supported by an arm from Asaka. From her vantage point in the corner of the room, she was relatively inconspicuous, so not many noticed her.

"It actually happened," Patricia said, standing at her side. She had greeted the girl as she walked over. It was a coincidence.

"I'm less surprised than I should be," Patricia said, shaking her head.

"Some reason for that?" Clarisse asked.

Patricia shook her head again, this time as a refusal.

"You might hear about it later," the girl said. "The first thing, I'm not sure I should be talking to you about. The second, I need to think about it myself, and report to Kyouko. Actually, I probably can't talk about that one either."

"If you say so," Clarisse responded.

"There's also the fact that *you're* here," Patricia said. "Is this…?"

"If I wanted to be melodramatic, I'd say the tides of history are shifting," the woman said, having personally chosen a somewhat older 31–year-old body. "Something is up, anyway. I was wondering why my soul gem wanted me back in Mitakihara. I could easily have attended the Theological Council meeting virtually."

She held up her hand, looking at the ring in question, and the cog-like symbol inscribed on her fingernail.

"I'll be seeing you," Patricia said, walking over towards the pedestal, waving with one hand.

"See you," Clarisse said.

She stood there just long enough to see the Incubator Kyubey materialize briefly on top of the box holding the Ribbon, drawing significant comment. The Incubator ignored questions, curled itself into a sleeping position on top of the box, then vanished again.

Clarisse turned and headed out through the side door. There was no more need to be here.

Her soul gem pulsed on her finger. It was time to head for the Euphratic front.

Brigadier

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Initial departure for basic training is invariably heart-wrenching. Magical girl recruits are obliged to wrap up their affairs and say farewell to their friends and families in a cruelly short amount of time, often as little as a week. That week is spent in hasty orientation, initial meetings with mentors, and, usually, farewell parties with family. It is a lamentable practice, motivated by the exigencies of war, and asks families to say goodbye to daughters they may never see again, and who will certainly be radically different when they return.

〈*Abbreviated.*〉

In the desperate early years of the war, the military and *MSY* deployed every girl they could get their hands on, pulling freshly recruited girls from contract to training in intervals as ridiculously short as two days, desperate to stem territory losses and casualties. The specter of extinction loomed large in the minds of decision-makers, who were aware that, given the unexplored magnitude of the alien's hastily probed empire, smashing Human defenses should have been a matter of resource deployment and force concentration. It was in this panicked environment that the government broke long-standing social and ethical norms, authorizing the use of what were essentially child soldiers, and at a breakneck pace. AI personnel projections pleaded for magical girl numbers that were plainly ludicrous given the available supply, and, in response to their demands, they were given all that was available.

Ultimately, the aliens failed to fully capitalize on their initial advantages, and it became clear that while it was their surprise attacks and planetary eradications that had started the war, the aliens were nowhere near fully mobilized, and were perhaps even as insufficiently prepared as Humanity had been. This perception was reinforced by the middle years of the war, during which the aliens made multiple attempts to win the war immediately, in attacks that always seemed to just barely lack sufficient punch.

As the sense of crisis lessened, the government and military retreated from the extreme policy positions of the early war period. While manpower remained extremely tight, contract-to-departure time was extended, training periods were lengthened, and a line in the sand was drawn, holding recruits under the age of thirteen back from combat. While this was partly spurred by pressure from the *MSY* and those elements of government that represented parents and children, a good deal of the reasoning was pragmatic. A softer entrance into combat improved morale, and better-trained, older girls were provably more effective in combat. Without the threat of imminent disaster, the military could afford to look more to the longer-term, focusing on building higher-quality units rather than throwing everyone into the fight immediately.

To many in the *MSY* and Governance, these minor concessions are not enough. Making arguments drawn from pragmatism, emotion, and ethics, they argue the current training system is inhumane, and that waiting until age twenty, at the very least, would improve survival rates and the quality of deployed units, *especially*

because of the scarcity of magical girls. These arguments are difficult to counter, and it is a testament to the ravenous hunger of the front for more mages that the emergency system survives at all.

Public opinion on the Core and inner developing worlds, now mostly free of the immediate threat of alien warships appearing the sky, is overwhelmingly supportive of more humane practices, and Military Affairs is harangued at virtually every Directorate meeting to speed up the military's policy of gradual relaxation. Already, military sub-Representatives and senior officers openly discuss acceleration, and it seems clear that if the current Euphratic crisis ends satisfactorily, things will change.

The only reason to think otherwise lies in the General Staff, which has remained resolutely silent on the issue, despite the presence of such powerful *MSY* supporters as Marshals Erwynmark and Tomoe. Many speculate that this silence indicates that the war is going worse than is otherwise believed.

— Clifton Bailey, online article, *"Controversies in War Policy"*

〈*In the following text,* 〈 〉 ① *indicates content redacted to those without security clearance. The number indicates the degree of security clearance required to access enclosed content.*〉

The *MSY* Mental Health Division (*MHD*) has its roots, like so many *MSY* divisions, in the formalization and bureaucratization of policy that accompanied the early-middle stages of the organization's formation. Though arguably needed much earlier, the division was formed only briefly after the establishment of the court system, itself a product of the increasing competence of the *Soul Guard* at capturing rather than killing "criminal" magical girls.

As the court system consigned more and more girls to confinement rather than execution, the costs and difficulties of keeping so many essentially superpowered girls secretly imprisoned or suspended began to strain the resources of the nascent *MSY,* especially in terms of grief cubes. Suddenly, considerable interest emerged in rehabilitating girls previously deemed impossible to recover. Most of the girls in question had considerable extenuating circumstances 〈*and minds broken from severe trauma,*〉 ① and were at least theoretically forgivable for their crimes; the cold-blooded killers 〈*—the serial killers with too much blood on their hands to forgive no matter their insanity—*〉 ① were instead consigned to execution 〈*by ceremonial hammer*〉 ①.

〈*At the same time, the burden of* Protective Confinement—"befriending"—*was also beginning to weigh on the resources of the system. While the costs were low compared to the costs of extended imprisonment, and the whole process was a good deal more popular, it indicated an additional need within the system.*〉 ①

Initial efforts at rehabilitation were ad-hoc, relying on intervention by former team members and friends, telepaths, and outside psychiatric consultants—kept quiet by a combination of convincing, bribery, and threats. It quickly became clear that more was necessary, and it was only a year after the assignment of the first judges that the Leadership Committee voted to create, with typical euphemism, a new division "for the rehabilitation and healing of girls too ill to function, and for the protection of the well-being of new contractees.

Originally viewed as an annoying bureaucratic intrusion into what should be team

business, it was this second function that would eventually become the mainstay of the *MHD,* as the organization of telepaths, empaths, and psychiatrists proved its worth again and again, successfully predicting breakdowns and forestalling disasters. Eventually, it became custom and law for new girls to report to the *MHD* for an initial assessment, a practice which persists to this day.

Initially remote and privacy-respecting, interaction with the *Soul Guard* 〈*, Black Heart,* 〉③ and numerous traumatized 〈*and insane*〉① prisoners hardened the organization, changing its internal culture, and it was not long before the *MHD* learned to use its resources and telepaths to extend surveillance networks throughout the organization 〈*, in the name of catching and preventing despair before it occurred*〉①. As the years wore on, the organization became progressively more adept at its function, and expanded its roles, becoming, among other things, the de facto provider of medical services. By the time the *MSY* finished globalizing, the *MHD* was saving the organization millions of grief cubes and nearly twenty trillion US Dollars per year (in 2100 dollars).

〈*It was this surveillance ability, in addition to the psychological talents of its members, that would drive exceptionally close ties with the* Soul Guard ③〈*and later, the* Black Heart〉③, *a relationship which many consider deleterious to the professionalism of the organization.*〉

Because of its unique role, the *MHD* has become one of the most powerful of the *MSY* divisions, exerting its influence through goodwill with influential former patients, and with information collected with its ubiquitous surveillance networks. The *MHD* prides itself professionally on the confidentiality of patient interaction, however, and assiduously separates sensitive private data from non-sensitive, but still valuable data. 〈*Only a few exceptions to this policy have been made, all in cases of the utmost importance. Several of these had* Black Heart *involvement. It is also worth noting that the* MHD *extends its policy of privacy only to* MSY *members.*〉④

〈*One of the* MHD*'s lesser known roles is as* Official Advisor on Human Behavior, *formally providing advice as a service to the Incubators, when requested, on the theory that improved Incubator understanding of Humanity is generally a good thing, especially if they have a plan in motion. The* MHD *does, however, exercise discretion, occasionally refusing to answer questions or deciding that it needs Executive approval to answer.*〉③

〈*Perhaps the blackest aspect of the* MHD *is its involvement in Reformatting, the practice whereby a powerful telepath, usually several, can erase memories, traumatic or otherwise, from an individual. Reserved for the most intractable of insane girls or the blackest of* Black Heart *operations, each use of the procedure requires approval by the* Secret Executive Subcommittee on Black Operations. *It would not be prudent to discuss non-therapeutic uses here, but it is worth noting that therapeutic use is what has enabled the* MHD *to sustain its proud record of rehabilitating—eventually—nearly every girl ever submitted to it.*〉④

Despite its significant influence, however, the *MHD* has become notorious for its policy of noninterference, exerting political power only on issues it believes are vital to the mental health of the mage populace. For other issues, it maintains a firm advisory stance.

Within five years after the advent of the *MHD,* imprisonment was ended as *MSY* policy due to the difficulty of containing mages. Mages convicted of crimes are either

submitted to the *MHD* or given a variety of other punishments, including fines, compulsory service in unsavory locations, or, the most serious, restrained withholding of grief cubes. Judicial executions were ended with the advent of the war and the intervention of Governance. 〈*In practice, however, the government turns a blind eye to the practice in many cases, if the crime is sufficiently heinous. Fortunately, this is now extremely rare, and has been ever since the end of the Unification Wars.*〉③

— Julian Bradshaw, *"Mahou Shoujo: Their World, their History,"* excerpt.

"And you're sure I was dead?" Kyouko asked, in Human Standard. Her voice was unusually pleasant, but subtly commanding.

Ryouko had the distinct feeling then of being examined, of twelve pairs of eyes dissecting her with their gazes.

"It was hard to tell," Ryouko said, looking down at her hands. "I couldn't really feel anything, and I don't think I was in control of what I was doing."

She looked back up, at the row of girls sitting at the opposite side of the semicircular table. To be precise, there were twelve of them seated around the semicircle of the far side, watching her, and she and Asaka sat on the flat side, looking back, but unable to see them all at once. Ryouko had insisted that Asaka be here. She was agreeing to meet the Theological Council because she was curious, but she did not want to get eaten alive by interrogators who, for all she knew, might be skilled Inquisitors.

Nearly all of those attending were present in simulacrum, holographic teenagers and young women sipping from invisible water cups or leaning elbows on invisible tables, arms dipping into the wooden surface with a faint shimmer.

Unlike some of the more ornate areas of the cult center, there was no glass in this room. It was a simple darkly-lit wooden room, relieved by a set of gems decorating the opposite wall, arranged as an enormous synthetic pink star sapphire surrounded by smaller black ones.

Don't let the atmosphere get to you, Asaka thought, without looking in Ryouko's direction. *Remember, you agreed to be here. You're not a member of the Cult. They have no power over you.*

"However," Ryouko continued, a moment later. "Asaka seemed very certain in the vision that she was dead. The uh, other girl, Kishida-san, did too, after a moment. They didn't even seem like they checked."

Speaking in Human Standard was a bit awkward, Ryouko realized. For her, it was a language practiced in the classroom, or encountered in various forms online. She had certainly done far more than her fair share of reading and hearing the language but, as she was realizing now, almost never spoke it. The language module in her brain certainly helped, but there were still irregularities. For example, she was so used to placing honorifics onto the names of those she didn't know, especially in formal environments, that she had stumbled and placed the Japanese version onto "Kishida," when Standard had no honorifics. It hadn't helped that she had been forced to do a snap-search for Maki's surname, since she had apparently never looked it up or heard it from any of the others.

She began to understand a little of what Simona had gone through, moving to Japan from so far away. She had been thinking about the girl recently, given her position in the middle of her visions, right between the strange tank scene and Ryouko's meeting with, with—

With what? The Goddess? It could be no one else. It staggered her that the crazy cult in front of her seemed to be right about something. She—

No, she couldn't think about it all now. It was too much to process. She had to wait until later. For now, she had to focus on the concrete.

"If the others thought so, then she must truly be dead—in the vision, that is," the twin-tailed girl to the immediate right of Kyouko said. Ryouko's internal directory tagged her as "Tanaka Yui, *MSY* Founder."

"It's a weird question to be asking anyway," the girl finished. Unlike most of the others, she was here in person.

"I only wanted to be sure," Kyouko said, turning to look at Yui. "Shizuki here is new; she does not know how to determine true death."

She turned back to look at Ryouko.

"For the record," she said. "You can do it by sensing the soul gem. A heavily injured girl's gem will be outputting tremendous power trying to perform repairs, unless the connection has been severed. It's not foolproof, but it's reasonably reliable."

"A lot of this does not add up," a girl to Ryouko's direct right—Mina Montalcini—said, shaking her head, long hair falling over her eyes. "What is Kyouko doing leading an amphibious assault? What is she doing in combat at all?"

"I do head to the front occasionally," Kyouko said dryly.

"Rarely for something like this," Montalcini said.

"Maybe it's symbolic or something," Ryouko said, thinking about it.

"Unlikely," Kyouko responded, instantly. "There are very few instances of the Goddess ever using symbolism. She doesn't seem to be too fond of it."

"Oh," Ryouko vocalized.

"That being said," Montalcini continued. "Do you think any of it was symbolic? Think back."

Ryouko thought back, as commanded. There were a few parts that seemed like they might be, but the section being discussed, the section she had revealed, seemed very straightforward.

"I don't think so," she said.

"There is another issue," Asaka said, surprising Ryouko by speaking up. "Ryouko here said that Kyouko appeared to be killed by a misfire from a submarine railgun, since the barrier was still up, but an impact such as that shouldn't have been powerful enough to shatter the soulgem. Not with the cover in place. The soul gem cover is designed precisely to shield against damage such as this."

"Maybe it was already damaged," one of the Theologians suggested. "Did she look like she had been in heavy combat?"

Ryouko thought back to the vision again.

“No,” she said. “No injuries I could spot, anyway. Her soul gem looked fine. All of the decoys were bright.”

“It would have been replaced anyway,” Asaka said. “A lieutenant general does not simply walk around the battleground with her soul gem uncovered.”

“Actually, I just remembered this,” Ryouko interjected. “Kishida, s–she commented in the vision that the submarine shell should not have been enough to break the soul gem. She mentioned something about protection. I thought she might have been in denial, but it seems like she might have been right.”

“Strange things happen in combat,” Montalcini said. “Which is not to say either of you are wrong. It’s worth thinking about.”

“All this talk of me being killed is making me uncomfortable,” Kyouko said, looking unhappy with the concept. “Though I guess I have to deal with it. How big was the explosion?”

Again, Ryouko thought back, to the explosion tearing apart the cliffside near where Kyouko had been standing, at the fragments of ground flying past her, barely traceable with accelerated senses, at the fragments of body—

“I’m not sure how to describe it,” Ryouko said. “She was standing near the edge, and she was the only one killed. But it was powerful, I think. It shattered the cliff right next to her and uh, well—”

She swallowed. She had to say it.

“Well, now that I think about it, it’s kind of weird, but it sort of… vaporized the top half of Kyouko’s body. I think the ground shielded the bottom half, since I think it was coming in at an angle. Something like that. What’s memorable is I don’t think I ever spotted any, uh, other pieces.”

The Theologians took glances at each other, and at Kyouko, who was looking, rather naturally, disturbed by the idea. Some peered at Ryouko intently.

“A railgun shell couldn’t do that,” Asaka said, shaking her head, ponytail vibrating. “At least, not without wiping out everyone else in the vicinity, and only if you were using an artillery piece. The energy would discharge on impact with the cliff-side. The only way it would sheer like that if the projectile were traveling faster than the shockwave. The pattern of damage is more like a high-powered laser than anything.”

She looked at Ryouko, question implicit.

“I didn’t see anything like that,” Ryouko said.

“Lasers aren’t necessarily visible,” Kyouko explained pedantically, taking the opportunity to instruct a little. “You only see combat lasers because we include a second visible-spectrum laser just so we can see what we’re hitting. It doesn’t even work in space, and commandoes tend to have the visible component disabled.”

Ryouko thought back carefully.

“Then I don’t know,” she said, finally. “Maybe.”

There was a long silence as the attendees glanced around the room, seeing if there were further questions.

“If there’s nothing else,” a hologram on Ryouko’s left said, “I have one last question.”

It was “Clarisse van Rossum, Historian,” a fact that sent a brief frisson of surprise over Ryouko’s face. Clarisse was famous, in her own way, though perhaps only to Ryouko. Ryouko wondered how she had managed to miss her face at the beginning of the meeting.

Ryouko looked at the freckled, vaguely matronly woman expectantly. Given her posture, it actually looked vaguely as if she was in a vehicle. It was hard to tell.

“Any idea what planet it was?” the woman asked. “Anything notable? Two suns in the sky, purple oceans, anything like that? What about the vegetation? Temperature?”

A moment later, Ryouko shook her head.

“Honestly, it looked quite similar to Earth. I wasn’t paying attention to the temperature. The trees looked like Earth trees, the ocean was dark blue, I—”

Ryouko stopped, then thought about it more carefully.

“Actually, I think the sky was a bit darker than here. Maybe?”

“Earth vegetation,” another girl, Maria Cortez, said. “But certainly not Earth. Very Earth-like, though. Sounds like a second-wave world, since the plant life is imported. I don’t think we can say whether it’s early or late terraforming, though. We don’t know how close to a colony that was.”

“It’s not enough information to do anything with,” Asaka commented.

“Yes,” Kyouko said plainly.

She cleared her throat.

“I think the key takeaway from all this is that a certain Sakura Kyouko needs to stay away from amphibious assaults involving submarines,” Kyouko said dryly. “Especially if it’s on a second-wave world. In this case, I don’t think she will be difficult to convince.”

There was light chuckling at the joke.

“Is this normal?” Ryouko asked. “I mean, visions of the future and warning people involved?”

“It’s more common than you think,” Clarisse said. “But not as common as we’d like.”

Ryouko wondered just what that meant.

“The primary goal,” Kyouko expounded, managing to sound pedantic, “is to deduce the intention of the vision. Generally, those who have visions can tell if the vision is meant to be shared. Then it’s just a matter of figuring out whether we should try to change the future. When it involves someone who isn’t a member, it’s difficult to convince them to listen to warnings, so we try to manipulate other things. Like I said, in this case, the convincing will be easy.”

“Perhaps,” Clarisse said enigmatically.

They looked at her, but she didn’t say more.

“Is there any more of the vision you’d like to share?” Tanaka Yui asked. “It’s your private business, so I’m just asking, but think about it. Anything could be important.”

Ryouko shook her head. She had already decided she didn't want to talk about the rest of it.

"Anything involving the Goddess?" Cortez asked. "Naturally, we are rather interested."

"No," Ryouko lied, making certain nothing showed on her face.

"Any interest in joining our Church?" Montalcini asked, leaning forward with surprising eagerness. "Surely the vision has impressed upon you the truth of our claims?"

"Ah, I'll, uh, think about it," Ryouko said, meaning what she said. She was definitely *not* inclined to do so, but she'd had hardly any time to think about her vision or make any decisions. It had been a bare ten minutes between the vision and being asked to attend a snap meeting of the Theological Council.

"Take your time," Montalcini said, leaning back and looking slightly disappointed.

"She's my pupil," Kyouko said, looking over. "No need to rush. She can decide in her own time. It shouldn't be forced. That being said, I'd be glad to talk to you about the church if you have questions."

This last sentence was addressed to Ryouko.

"I'll, uh, think about it," Ryouko repeated.

Kyouko closed her eyes, seeming to think about it.

"Alright," she said, snapping her eyes open. "The two of you can go. We'll hold private session for a little longer."

Asaka got up and headed for the door in the back, behind where she and Ryouko had been sitting. Ryouko followed a moment later.

"Did you notice that Tanaka-san is a telepath?" Asaka asked, as soon as the door closed. The girl watched her to gauge her reaction.

Ryouko's eyes widened.

"No," she said. "I hadn't thought to check."

"Any interrogation or questioning with magical girls on the asking end involves telepaths," Asaka said. "No exceptions. In this case, the Theological Council has two of its own, so it usually doesn't have to bring in anyone special. In this case, it's especially pertinent, since they try to bleed vision memories out of you. They never get anything more than vague glimpses, but it's still worth trying."

"Why didn't you warn me?" Ryouko asked, as they strode down the hall for the front door.

"I would have, if I thought it necessary," Asaka said. "As it was, you wouldn't have known how to respond. It would have just made you more nervous and stiff."

"But—" Ryouko began.

"And if you happened to lie about, say, a Goddess or anything like that," Asaka said. "Then don't worry about it. Tanaka Yui is an interesting girl. She always covers for that specific case, since it's usually a matter of the Goddess asking."

Ryouko bit her lip. Clearly Asaka knew what was going on, but technically saying anything to

Asaka was still a breach of the white and pink Goddess's request.

Ryouko put her hand to her head. Deities? Visions? The only thing she knew was that whomever she met was benevolent. She felt sure of it somehow. Was it really time to join the Cult?

She startled out of her reverie, realizing Asaka was watching her with amusement.

"I know you're eager to head home," Asaka said, as they headed out the front door into the late twilight. "But let's take a walk. I have some things to say."

Ryouko nodded.

They walked to the far edge of the building, to the roadways that separated it from the two research centers that flanked it, and the narrow pedestrian corridors that lined their sides. Asaka smiled patronizingly as Ryouko spent a good deal of the walk squinting at what remained of sunlight, but Ryouko didn't care. It was disturbingly prosaic; everything looked different, colors sporting new, unrecognizable shades, but nothing looked *wrong*.

"As a point of fact," Asaka said, when they stopped in the shadow of the building next door, or what counted for a shadow at that time of day. "The receptors might be online, but most of the neural rewiring won't be done for at least a week. The implants are doing some processing to compensate, but for now, you're only seeing the differences that your brain can handle. There are also some intrinsic differences that have more to do with the lens modifications than anything."

Ryouko glanced at the other girl, and apparently didn't conceal her expression well enough, because Asaka added:

"Yes, I know, Patricia is the scientist. I only know this stuff because I had to go through it too, and that's what my orientation person said. Plus, we get guides on what to say."

She leaned back against the faux-masonry of the building, folding her arms.

"I wonder how Kitamura-san is doing nowadays," she said, looking up at the almost unthinkable height of the building, and the sky tunnels and walkways that crisscrossed a sky of fading gold, some intersecting the building at a tangent, others emptying onto balconies, achieving the same purpose, yellow with the sunlight nonetheless.

"I heard she made Colonel," Asaka finished. "It'd be funny, though, since I outrank her now."

Ryouko raised an eyebrow, and Asaka bore the summoned face scan stoically.

"Brigadier general," Asaka said, repeating what she knew Ryouko had just looked up. "I would tell you to get used to performing the full lookup on everyone you meet, but it doesn't matter anymore. Your TacComp will take care of it, whenever it comes online. Shouldn't be long now—it builds itself surprisingly fast, but of course the Safety Package is already there to work off of."

"You're not a teleporter?" Ryouko asked. "Reading through it—barrier?"

"It's complicated," Asaka said. "The teleportation is fairly recent. But…"

Her voice trailed off.

Ryouko stepped over, and joined her leaning on the building. A vehicle zoomed by them.

Kitamura-san, whoever she was, wasn't Asaka's mentor, as she had thought. Actually, Asaka had

none listed. She wondered about that.

“I bet you’ve wondered,” Asaka said, “what exactly it is I’m doing here. I don’t have any specialization which would justify me staying back from the front, and I’m not highly ranked in either the Church or the *MSY*. A minor general like me should probably be off fighting somewhere, right? Like all those others…”

Ryouko shrugged.

“I didn’t know half of what you just said,” she said, “since I never looked it up. I haven’t had the time to be nosy about everyone yet. Too busy learning everything else. I guess I figured you were some sort of… professional new girl trainer?”

Asaka laughed softly.

“Close enough,” she said. “It’s a lot of what I do nowadays. That, and I actually lead the rapid response team based here, and direct the patrols. I also write some strategy reports on the side. We do our best to let girls on leave relax, but it’s not always possible. Some girls rotating back from combat join to keep sharp, though, so that covers most of it, and MHD actually thinks it helps keep some of them stable. The teams are actually mostly back-line girls or, and—here’s a dirty secret—girls pulled from the front-line for psychological reasons, but whose therapists believe demon-fighting would help. You know, an outlet for aggression and anger, but much less danger of anyone dying around them.”

She sighed, then unfolded her arms.

“I’m not very good at this, so I’ll just say it point-blank. I stayed here because I was asked to by the Goddess. Same reason I joined this church. By rights, I was ready to go back after the vision, but I managed to pull some strings and stay here. It was hard, convincing them and still keeping it a secret, but I managed it.”

“When I showed you the girl from my memory, that was the sign you were waiting for, wasn’t it?” Ryouko asked, looking at the other girl’s face. Asaka had closed her eyes.

“Yes,” Asaka said, opening her eyes and looking at her. “I was told to wait for someone to show me an image of the girl. I never expected it to come from you. Who is she, anyway? Damn face scanner told me the memory was too blurry when I tried to scan it.”

“I don’t know,” Ryouko said. “That’s why I asked you. I thought I might be able to ask you how to find her, or at least for advice on what to do.”

“Didn’t you check?” Asaka asked, wearing a quizzical expression. “Or have you just forgotten?”

“More mysterious than that,” Ryouko said. “She told me not to bother, and that it would be wrong. I didn’t know these things could be wrong.”

“Hmm,” Asaka vocalized, then bowed her head to think.

Ryouko waited.

“I’ve heard of such a thing,” Asaka said, finally, taking her hand off her chin. “But only rumors. Certainly haven’t experienced it myself. Officially, the systems are foolproof. Unofficially, who knows what the *Black Heart* is up to? I don’t have sufficient clearance to know about it. Very few do.”

“I’ve heard of the Black Heart,” Ryouko commented. “Black Ops, spec ops, that sort of thing.

There are a lot of conspiracy theories about them."

"They're not so bad," Asaka said. "Not anymore, anyway. Word is, they were involved in all kinds of shit back in the day. Assassinations, coups—like you said, conspiracy theory stuff. Not much need for any of that nowadays. This war's a straight-up fight, and no one's figured the aliens out enough to try anything too fancy—we wouldn't even know who to assassinate. Which isn't to say no one is trying. Commando raids, things like that."

Asaka paused, as if thinking about what to say.

"That being said, I wouldn't know too much about it," she said. "Like I said, no clearance. The government does a lot of domestic surveillance stuff, and I wouldn't be surprised if the Black Heart controls that now. If this girl you met really is one of them…"

She paused again, then finished:

"Well, I'd be a little wary, at least. Could be a lot of dirty things going on there. She could be tracking dissidents, something like that. You might not want to get mixed into that."

Ryouko nodded seriously, thinking that Asaka seemed to know more than she was letting on, then smiled a little.

"Well, I haven't seen her since I was child," Ryouko said. "Not since that memory. I probably won't ever see her again."

"We'll see," Asaka commented. "And if I should point out that I never said anything about waiting for a sign."

Ryouko flicked her eyes to the side.

"Well—" she began.

"No, don't say anything," Asaka said, waving her hand, almost flippantly. "There's no need to."

Ryouko stopped mid-sentence, staring at the other girl.

Asaka fingered the collar of her shirt, where the pips of a general would go if she were wearing a uniform.

"Funny thing is, I haven't used my generalship a single time," she said. "I was promoted on my way back to Earth. Goes with the medal I got. The Akemi Homura medal for 'successful resolution of a seemingly hopeless situation.' Can you believe they named a medal after her? I've always found that amusing, myself."

She looked down the roadway, obviously reliving some sort of memory.

Ryouko looked down at the ground. She wanted to ask, but she felt, somehow, that it wasn't the best topic to talk about.

"Do you mind telling me how you got it?" she asked, finally, deciding to ask anyway.

"Honestly, yes," Asaka rebuffed, not looking back at her.

Ryouko thought about what to say to that, but Asaka surprised her by saying:

"Oh, what the hell. You should probably hear it. If I can't trust someone involved in the Goddess's plans, who can I trust?"

"You don't have to—" Ryouko began, but Asaka turned and silenced her with her expression, which implied she wasn't going to run through the social niceties.

"I'll abbreviate, because going through all the details would be pointless," Asaka said, looking away again. "And you could look most of it up later. What you need to know is I won that battle from my command. The local chain of command above me was dead. I saved the colony."

She took a breath.

"And I won it by sending my best friend to die," she said, almost growling. "I never even got to speak to her, or see her, before the end. The last contact we ever had was a virtual command I sent from my head, through the command interface. Not even sound, not even words. I couldn't spare the time."

Ryouko looked away awkwardly, even though Asaka wasn't looking in her direction.

"Alice?" she asked.

"Yes," Asaka responded.

"I'm sorry," Ryouko said.

"I was a mess afterwards," Asaka said, not directly acknowledging the statement. "I barely remember the medal ceremony or the promotion. I—"

She paused.

"I told you I'm a gamer, right? I used to be really serious, back before my contract. I was almost good enough to go pro on one of the games I played, which is saying something, given how old some of those people are. Second-tier, I just needed to reach a little farther…"

She emphasized the last sentence by gesturing for the sky with her right arm, making a grabbing motion.

Then she turned and faced the other girl, looking her in the eyes.

"But I was never happy outside the games," she said. "Right at the outer edge of acceptable Human mental variation. I wished that I would understand how to advance in the rest of the world as well as I did in games."

She turned away again.

"It's served me well," she said. "You can't tell I used to be a social outcast, can you? But it all seemed so worthless with Alice dead. They never mentioned it in my official medal commendation, or in the battle history, but I broke down the moment I heard she was dead. It—My soul gem—"

Asaka glanced at Ryouko, expression briefly unreadable.

"Well, it was *MHD* business," she continued. "They have ways of dealing with girls who are losing it."

"They take away the soul gem," Ryouko said, eyes widening with realization. "Of course. It makes sense. I couldn't understand the line you said in the vision, about taking away Maki's soul gem, but now that I think about it—"

“I said that?” Asaka asked.

“Yes.”

Asaka smiled slightly.

“Well, it’s the right thing to do,” she said. “Anyway, I was placed on ‘recuperative leave’, which of course just means you get sent home to get things sorted out, with *MHD* psychiatrists breathing down your neck. It was a bad time. I buried myself back in gaming, not even the competitive kind. Stimpacks, things like that. I stopped by one of the colony worlds, got an illegal VR implant. It’s like Patricia said; there are things you can do the government just doesn’t permit. For example, certain varieties of VR implants let you forget who you are while in the simulation. The simulation becomes reality for you, and you have no past.”

She said it matter-of-factly, but the content was staggering, enough that Ryouko took an involuntary step backwards, thinking through it, before forcing herself to stand still.

“So I lived with my parents again for a while,” Asaka continued. “And it’s horrible now, thinking about what I put them through, but at the time…”

She shrugged.

“I was just too numb to care. That’s what my shrink would say. Eventually, she recommended that I travel a little, get some fresh air, even recommended where to go. She had talked to Patricia apparently, and said maybe the whole former training squadmates thing would help, especially since I met Alice there too.”

“So I came here, and eventually got talked into visiting the Ribbon, had a vision with Alice and the Goddess, and the rest is history.”

Ryouko looked down at her hands, then back at Asaka.

“So the Ribbon…” she began.

“Saved me, yes,” Asaka finished. “Or close enough to it.

Asaka leaned over to put her hands on the shorter Ryouko’s shoulders.

“It feels surprisingly good to talk about it,” she said. “I don’t know why I feel I should tell you about it. Maybe it’s my suspicion that this is what the Goddess meant to happen. I never thought my vision would end in you.”

She stood back, then thought.

“I guess my point, if I had one, is that despair happens to everyone eventually. The girls you see around you, the centuries-old girls who look indestructible, all have things like this in the closet somewhere. Things that could have broken them. But they didn’t break, and when your time comes, you shouldn’t break either.”

Asaka turned away one last time, while Ryouko took stock of all that had been said.

“I guess it’d be pretty cool if you joined the church,” Asaka said, almost as if deliberately wrapping up the conversation. “I feel obligated to say that, but it’s really not so bad. And I really haven’t talked to my mother in a long time. I should probably call…”

“I hope I never have to see any of my friends die,” Ryouko said finally. “Or anyone, really.”

Asaka looked back at her with one eye.

“Yeah, well, you signed up for this.”

“Prometheus and Zeus, huh,” Ryouko said, as she walked with Asaka back to the main building.

She referred, of course, to the research centers flanking the cult building, one of which they had just been leaning on.

The darkness was relieved by the occasional street lighting and lights from the buildings above; the stars were nearly invisible from so low, and the moon was probably behind one of the skyscrapers. The endless vehicles overhead traveled with no lights, as it was unnecessary under electronic control. Surface vehicles traveled with lights for the benefit of pedestrians, though in practice they never hit pedestrians.

Surface traffic had ramped sharply upward as they left the roadway they had been on and emerged back in front of the cult building. Most vehicles, it seemed, immediately entered one of the nearby tunnels, either downward into the ground or upward into the air.

“Yes,” Asaka said, without further comment.

“My parents work in Prometheus,” Ryouko said. “Well, during the night. They spend the day at home.”

“They do military research then?” Asaka asked rhetorically, eying Ryouko. “Much of the technology for us magical girls comes from these buildings. The soul gem covers were Prometheus. The buildings are specialized for us. But you probably don’t need me to tell you that.”

“I wonder what exactly my parents do sometimes,” Ryouko said, looking up at the looming edifice of the building. “They’re very vague about it.”

“Sounds about right,” Asaka said. “Most of the work is at least partly secret. Information Restriction Acts and all. And then there’s the real classified stuff, *Black Heart* projects, things like that. Stuff you and I would never get to hear about.”

Asaka thought for a moment.

“Come to think of it, I’ve never heard of what exactly it is the Zeus Building does. The same general type of thing, but I haven’t heard of anything tangible.”

“It must be all classified,” Ryouko said, running a quick search on the internet. “I can’t find anything online.”

Asaka nodded.

“Must be.”

A set of lines flashed before Ryouko’s eyes, disappearing as rapidly as it appeared. She squinted instinctively.

“What—” she began.

Tactical Advisor has finished setup, a voice announced mechanically into her head, and a corresponding line of text appeared in the lower right corner of her vision, out of the way.

I am now ready to begin activation and initial customization, the voice continued. *You may proceed now, or defer until any future time.*

Asaka watched her curiously.

"Tactical advisor is online, apparently," Ryouko said, trying to think through what she wanted to do.

Asaka nodded.

"It's about time. The thing itself will walk you through activation."

"Okay," Ryouko said.

"We're almost back," Asaka said, walking off and signaling with a goodbye wave that Ryouko shouldn't follow. "No need to walk me back the rest of the way. Call a car here and go home. It's late. You can fiddle with it overnight. After all, who needs to sleep?"

That's—that's right, Ryouko thought, realizing that she had been preparing mentally to go home and sleep.

"Couldn't I just stay here then?" Ryouko asked.

Asaka stopped and turned.

"Spend some time with your parents," she admonished, voice filled with something indefinable. "I've read the reports; you have a pretty good relationship with them. Trust me, it's the right thing to do. That's what this week is for, after all."

Ryouko nodded, eyes slightly wide, and watched Asaka walk off towards the steps of the "church."

"Wait!" she said, thinking of something at the last moment.

Asaka stopped and turned to look back at her.

"If you're no longer waiting for anything, what are you going to do now?" Ryouko asked.

Asaka smiled, slowly and broadly.

"The time I spent with the Goddess repaired my mental state," she said. "There is no longer any reason for me to stay. I'm not in the habit of staying back while others fight and die. I'm going to go back, and see if my new rank means anything. I hear I might get new implants."

She paused.

"I'm going to try and pull some favors, talk to Kyouko, get myself in with Mami," Asaka said. "Good for my career, especially with her new position. I might even see you after your training. Now you need to get home. I'll be seeing you."

With that, she turned around again, leaving Ryouko blinking.

"New position?" Ryouko asked.

"Look it up!" Asaka said, waving without looking back or stopping. "Or don't. It doesn't matter. It'll be all over the news soon. Heck, your TacComp will probably tell you after you finish setting

it up."

"Uh, goodbye then," Ryouko said hesitantly, waving back despite knowing the other girl wouldn't see it.

Behind Ryouko, a vehicle slid into place, its door opening for her.

She's doing fine, Mami. Honestly, there'd be nothing to talk about if it weren't for all this grief cube business.

Kyouko's voice rang in Mami's ears—or auditory cortex, rather—as she leaned into the chair in her room, on the cruiser HSS *Time to Pay.* She had opted to leave sooner rather than later, and had been requisitioning a spot on a transport even as she and Erwynmark were still talking.

Most starships were happy to accept the names recommended to them by the naming committees, usually the name of a city on Earth, or famous scientists, or generals. Others opted to be more creative.

Military AIs were an interesting sort. There were strong ethical issues attendant to the idea of making sentient intelligences that didn't fear death, and enjoyed battle and killing. Not the risk that they would turn on their masters; that was supposed to impossible, and for once Mami believed it, having talked with many herself. The issue was the question: how would you feel, knowing that you had been designed for one purpose, and to derive your satisfaction in life from the accomplishment of that purpose?

Of course, it was far more effective and ethical than requisitioning civilian AIs to take the same role. The issue was actually a broader version of the same question, applied to all AIs designed for special purposes—was it really fair to shackle a sentience to the love of only one thing? But on the other hand, how could it be right to input a design that you knew wouldn't be happy or maximally efficient at the task desired?

Civilian AIs, when no longer needed in their positions, were retired into the pool of independent AIs, and nearly all opted to accept the recommended reprogramming for a general-purpose life. Still, most reported feeling uneasy with no purpose in life, and many ended up getting hobbies that strongly resembled their previous working positions. The retirement transition was a major psychological watershed for AIs, who had support groups and specialized AI psychiatrists dedicated to the process, which was not a specialization Mami had ever imagined would exist.

She looked out her viewing screen at one of the escorting frigates in the distance, difficult to see without traveling lights or any other source of illumination. Her own flagship, the *Zhukov,* was on route from the Yangtze sector to meet her at her destination. It made no sense to make it fly to her, then fly there.

So, what do you think of this grief cube business? Kyouko continued. *You still haven't answered my question.*

It's disturbing, definitely, Mami thought, pouring herself another cup of tea. *Doctored grief cubes haven't been seen in ages. And I don't know what importance Shizuki-san has in all this.*

I've been looking into her background a little, Mami thought. *Her family lines are extremely dense with contractees. She's related to Kuroi-chan, did you know that? And the Shizukis. And the other two families involved aren't slouches, either. I'm amazed she's managed to get this far without being sucked into one of those damn matriarchies.*

Both her parents are MSY *scientists,* Kyouko thought, *and they didn't seem fond of her contract at all. It's all on file, but there's a lot going on in that family. That probably has something to do with it.*

Hmm, Mami thought, frowning and sipping her tea. *Well, to get back on point, I suppose it's possible one of the Families is involved in this. It doesn't seem right, though. They might be hypercompetitive, but none of them have ever done anything like this.*

Maybe, Kyouko thought. *You know how I feel about them.*

Yes, yes, you've never liked the Shizukis, I get it, Mami thought. *But despite what you think about that, the family has produced a lot of good magical girls, and they provided a lot of money in the beginning.*

What a blast from the past, Mami mused to herself.

This isn't about that! Kyouko thought. *I'm over that. I just don't like the concept in general.*

Like it or not, it's here to stay, Mami thought. *And it might be useful. I'm not advocating we do this now, but it might be a good idea later to talk to Kuroi-chan and some of the Shizukis. I'm thinking they won't like assassination attempts on their esteemed descendants.*

Maybe if we're desperate, Kyouko growled.

There was a lull in the conversation.

Anyway, there are some other things you need to know, Kyouko thought. *Yuma did some looking into her friend, Simona Del Mago. There are some anomalies on her record. She's foreign exchange, travels a lot. Anyway, it seems that she once applied to a school using different names for her parents, entirely different people. Yuma's still looking into it. Could be a weird glitch or something.*

Hmm, Mami thought. *I have no idea what that means.*

Neither do I. The other thing is, Patricia has been talking to me. She says that when she was doing Ryouko's enhancements, there were… well, anomalies, in her genetic structure. She says there were a couple of novel mutations that aren't in any of the registries. Could be chance, though. She seemed bothered by it. I gave the data to Yuma to study, since Patricia won't have time.

So everything we look at has anomalies, Mami thought. *Maybe. That's exactly as useful as there being no anomalies at all. Just once, I'd like to know something for certain.*

Do you think it might be time to get the Guard in on this? Kyouko thought.

Not yet, Mami thought. *Let Yuma get a look at it first. And, uh, I've got my own investigation going.*

My thoughts too, Kyouko thought. *And that vision doesn't exactly boost my confidence.*

We've been over what I think of these "visions", Mami thought dryly.

Yes we have, Kyouko thought. *I still say you should visit someday.*

They'd had this argument enough times that they had it distilled down to two sentences.

Kyouko mentally sighed, so that Mami could hear. She could guess why Kyouko was distressed.

Anyway, speaking of Patricia, there's one last thing today.

Yes, this transfer request, Mami thought. *Some of your friends want to join my command staff. Asaka-san has an excellent record, and the* MHD *says she's fully recovered, but the other two… a scientist and your newest plaything. Look, I can't give these positions away like candy, Sakura-san. Lives are at stake.*

She's not *a plaything,* Kyouko growled. *Look, I hate to appeal to team camaraderie, but Asaka, Patricia, and Maki have been part of the same unit for a long time. They shouldn't be broken up. Yes, yes, I know, she's a general, it shouldn't matter, but it does, alright? You think I like this? Asaka has her reasons, but I tried to talk the other two out of it. They want to follow her, and Maki says she wants to go back to doing her part. Patriotic stuff. I won't force them, since it's their right, but that girl…*

The fact that we're now talking about lovers' spats makes me even less confident about this, Mami thought dryly.

Kyouko sighed again.

Look, I know I haven't sold this too well, but they're good people. They won't let you down. You can attach them to Asaka. Generals have a right to choose their own help, right?

Is that a personal recommendation, Sakura-san? Mami thought seriously.

Kyouko sighed one last time.

Yes, yes it is.

Alright, then, Mami thought. *Transfer approved. I'll be holding you accountable.*

Being a field marshal has made you such a drag, Kyouko complained.

Mami smirked, knowing Kyouko couldn't see it.

It's a serious job, she thought, not showing any humor over the internet relay. *Is that it, Sakura-san? I'd love to talk more, but I've got other things to take care of. Always busy, you know.*

Yeah, I'm done, Kyouko thought. *Talk to you later.*

See you.

Afterward, Mami took a moment to look out her window, at the electronically refiltered stars in front of her. FTL travel was so strange.

On the ride back, Ryouko thought long and carefully about her vision, about what this Goddess could want from her. Her vision of the future seemed rather straightforward: a warning, to keep Kyouko alive. Her vision of Asaka was clear enough as well, to explain what happened.

But what of the rest? Of the red apparition in the Church, and Yuma on the ground? Why had she been shown Simona's first day again? What was the part with the fluid tank? It had been so disorienting.

She did not know.

Chapter End Notes

Compound growth is a funny thing. The current size of the world economy is about $60 trillion. Let us suppose that inflation is 2% (as the central banks seem to like now) and that real GDP growth rate is 2% (typical for a rich developed country). 4% nominal growth for 88 years is...yeah, 1900 trillion. Not a typo. Stack on another 15 or so years of real growth and we have 2500 trillion in 2100 dollars. Suppose the MSY family of megacorps represents 5% of that (a bit outsized, but thinking about an Illuminati-type organization. For comparison, Exxon-Mobil has revenues representing about 0.83% of global GDP). Yeah, that's...125 trillion. 20 trillion in savings seems reasonable compared to that.

Yeah, I know these kinds of calculations are terrible for the extreme long run (what if there's a world war in the middle?), but have to get numbers from somewhere...

Remains of a Life

The *Spinal Node Tactical Advisor,* more commonly called the *Tactical Computer* or *TacComp,* is a generation three self-assembling neural-interfacing implant, designed to act as the primary processing node, personal assistant, and combat advisor for military personnel, both in the field and otherwise. In battle, it participates in the control of combat weapons, armor, vehicles, and drones, assists the maintenance of battlefield awareness, provides combat advice and observations, coordinates internal targeting enhancements, and relays commands. Outside of combat, it provides mental offloading services, providing relevant information when needed or requested and aiding decision-making. It also performs secretarial tasks, providing scheduling and message sorting, as well as a limited ability to respond to low priority messages. It is rated as a grade three semi-sentient.

Lodged in the middle abdomen on the ventral spine cord-displacing parts of the interior thoracic and lumbar vertebrae—the Advisor is the primary receiving and transmission node for the recipient's communication relays, neural implant arrays, and electronic interface devices, and is seated at the center of a vast web of optical fibers extending up, down, and outside the spinal canal. It is the most expensive enhancement found in the average infantryman, absorbing a full third of the resources allocated for his or her enhancement.

Unlike much of the other military and civilian enhancements, this piece of valuable equipment neither malfunctions nor is redundant within the magical girl population, and installation is ubiquitous, so much so that possession of such a device is now part of the culture. As part of a deal with the *MSY,* Governance and the *MSY* share oversight over development, while the *MSY* possesses the right to inspect final designs, and control of installation into its members. This is used primarily to enforce the loyalty of the Advisor to their owners, rather than to either the *MSY* or Governance, as stipulated by the Ethics Committee.

Research and development on the Advisor is a continuous process, resulting in monthly upgrades and constant limited, field test rollouts. Most updates to the current Version 1.8 model are now focused on performance and maintenance, as the armed forces prepare for the full rollout of the much anticipated Version 2, which has passed field testing and validation and is already being disbursed among the senior officer corps.

Development History

The motivation for the development of the Advisor arose out of United Front combat experiences early in the Unification Wars. The Front's emphasis on high-quality, highly-equipped, and expensive soldiery resulted in an unexpected side effect: Combat personnel were proving unable to cope with the resulting deluge of information and processing demands. Statistics pouring in from the battlefield indicated that combat resources were being used increasingly suboptimally, even as raw firepower increased. Despite ongoing improvements in implant efficacy and drone autonomy, it rapidly became clear that a highly compact, optimally powerful processing implant was needed for maximal combat efficacy.

Research and development was assigned to the Yasuhiro Conglomerate-later revealed to be *MSY*-owned. Development took over a decade, due to numerous raids on its

facilities and several controversial incidents during subject testing that marred the project's reputation. However, anecdotal evidence from special operations squads and statistical evidence from later field tests suggested a radical uptick in combat efficiency, resulting in continued heavy support of the project from the Emergency Defense Council, and the *SNTA*—as it was called at the time—Version 1 was officially deployed to the field just in time for the El Dorado Campaign. By the end of the Unification Wars, development had reached 1.2, after which research stagnated until the current Contact War.

Safety Package

The *Civilian Emergency Safety Package* is a lower-functionality, dormant version of the Advisor, implanted in all citizens, except certain religious objectors, as part of the Standard Package. Considerable spare capacity is maintained in both processing and bandwidth, to facilitate rapid conversation to the full version whenever the necessary resources are provided."

Version Two

Version Two is intended as a fundamental redesign of the processing core, intended to circumvent computing programs that are known to be exceptionally difficult to solve. Much of the inspiration for Version Two has been admitted to come from studies of Cephalopod corpses, though it is unknown if reverse-engineered technology has been directly used in the design.

The processing core of the Version Two Advisor is the most biologically integrated of any existing computing device, designed to exploit cellular resources existing in the implantee's body and making extensive use of neural coding paradigms. Details remain scarce, but it is believed to be the first device to promote neuronal growth in a non-natural location, and to direct their growth on an unprecedented scale.

The Version Two Advisor has been the subject of several closed-door Ethics Committee hearings, raising considerable speculation as to the nature of the device. Members of the General Staff and senior officer corps, who have had the device installed, had refused comment, but secrecy will be impossible to maintain once deployment stretched beyond their ranks.

The sentience rating of the new model is unknown.

— Infopedia article, *"Spinal Node Tactical Advisor,"* mode: discursive, moderate density, high accessibility.

It is necessary to remember that your daughter is now strong. **Fiendishly** strong. *Capable of lifting her bed and hurling it with only reasonable effort* strong. She will instinctively do an incredibly good job of hiding it—otherwise it would hardly be possible for secrecy to have been maintained for so many years. But under emotional duress, it is certainly possible for the strength to evoke itself. There have been unfortunate incidents in the past.

On the other hand, the strength can come in handy around the house on those few occasions when she is present.

— Parenting Plexus Online, *"Special Edition: So Your Daughter Made a*

Despite Asaka's intimation that it might take a long time, setting up her tactical computer was surprisingly quick and painless. It was mostly a matter of choosing personalization settings. Ryouko was not big on the idea of a talking voice in her head, so she set it to communicate with her as "seamlessly as possible," whatever that meant, though she also told it to respond via sound when directly addressed. It also noted that there were a variety of situations where an unobtrusive approach was impossible, and where the use of visual menus might be too distracting. In combat, for example-though it promised things were being worked on for future models.

She left the voice in its default mechanical setting. She had an absurd range of options, ranging from "Russian-accented female" to "Samsara-accented gender-ambiguous," but in the end had decided there was no reason to really favor one over the other, and that the mechanical-sounding default voice was rather distinctive. Plus, now that she was sharing her head with another voice, the subtle failures of the Human-sounding voices to show *human* emotion were off-putting. Better the artificial-sounding voice.

Out of curiosity, she asked what percentage of people chose to stick with the default. The answer was ninety-two percent.

Once she got past the initial jumpy urge to glance around for the source of the voice, having a machine's thoughts ported into her head was surprisingly easy to get used to. She just had to pretend she was on the phone-phones being wired into the auditory cortex nowadays, of course.

She spent a few hours after dinner sitting on her bed going through it all, fiddling with preferred menu graphics, listening to a listing of features, and so forth. Looking at the recommended choices, she initially thought the designers had excellent taste, but after some questioning, was informed that the machine had made the choices based on its initial scans of her personality.

She was intrigued by the machine's claims of perfect recall, so she requested a sample of the machine's perfect recall, and was treated to a disorienting recreation of herself from five minutes ago, visually overlaid over reality. She really should have listened when it recommended closing her eyes.

Her "TacComp," as it introduced itself, then added the detail that it was not generally in the business of storing dreams, though it could if the request was made within a couple of hours.

Ryouko wondered if it had some reason to tell her that superfluous detail, but it didn't enlighten her.

Once she finished initial setup, the machine fulfilled Asaka's promise by immediately informing her that it may be in her interest to know that Field Marshal Tomoe Mami would soon be assigned a newly created position as Special Theatre Commander for the Euphratic Sector, effective midnight that night.

The Euphratic Sector? Ryouko thought. *That big offensive that's been grinding for years?*

Yes, the device thought. *It is the sector with the highest troop deployments at the moment. The kind of authority she is receiving is of the type previously reserved for the Chief of the General Staff.*

It's a big responsibility, then? Ryouko thought. *It makes her second to Erwynmark, if I understand this correctly.*

Definitely a significant responsibility, the device thought. *Formally, she has no higher rank than she did before, but her listed authority is now indeed second in the military. I am not equipped to speculate on whether this makes her second in actual power, as that requires analysis of human interaction, or access to files for which you do not have security clearance.*

What impact would you say this has on me? Ryouko asked, deciding to test the device's limits.

The authority level of a magical girl recruit's mentor is positively correlated with future combat performance, rate of promotion, and survival. However, causation is difficult to extract, given selection phenomena, and no experimental studies have been performed. Alternative analysis would require more capability than I have, or access to files—

I get it, Ryouko thought. *You're not much for small talk, are you?*

Regretfully, this model of the Tactical Advisor system is insufficiently powered to provide pleasant discourse in addition to its other functions. However, it may interest you to know that field tests of version two have exceeded expectations, and that the upgrade rollout is well ahead of schedule. Version two will likely be distributed to the lower officer corps within fourteen months.

Alright, fine, Ryouko thought, letting it go. On another note, *Asaka-san mentioned something about it being a good idea to choose a psychiatrist, so, well I'm not really sure what I'm supposed to do here—*

A candidate list has been compiled, the machine thought. *I requested such a list from the* MHD *based on my anticipation that you would ask, though I would have suggested it if Asaka-san hadn't. The list has been chosen to maximize anticipated compatibility, and also to provide specialists in the kind of transition you are undergoing.*

I see, Ryouko thought, as the list appeared in her field of vision, complete with miniature bios and faces. She scrolled through the list, the list moving itself so that her center of attention was the center of her view, without moving her eyes. There were seven of them.

Do you have any opinion? she asked, offhand.

No, the device thought. *Other than to point out that* MHD *recommendations have been very successful in the past. I could request that they narrow the list further, if necessary.*

No, that's okay, Ryouko thought, scanning the profiles quickly. *I'll make my own choice.*

She read for a moment, head leaning back on the wall behind her bed, then asked.

So is there a reason these psychiatrists are all specialists in "family discord" and "single-parent households"? Ryouko asked. *That doesn't really match me.*

The period of initial contracting is considered a sensitive time for families, her TacComp thought. *It is often a time of conflict.*

Hmm, well I don't think that'll be an issue, Ryouko thought.

So that you do not miss it, the device thought, *I would like to point out that Atsuko-sensei, second on the list, also specializes in the very old, and as such is the designated psychiatrist of Sakura Kyouko, Tomoe Mami, Chitose Yuma, and, theoretically, Akemi Homura. Extremely prestigious patients, and it is surprising that you are being given the option to join them.*

I thought you couldn't give a recommendation, Ryouko thought.

It is not a recommendation, it thought. *I am merely pointing out relevant facts.*

It sounds like a recommendation to me, Ryouko thought. *Even if that wasn't your intent. Her credentials look excellent otherwise, so I don't see why not.*

She gave the slight burst of intention that signified a mental command.

Very well, the device thought. *I suggest four days from now, at four.*

Is that available? Ryouko thought.

Yes. I would not suggest it otherwise. I check both their schedule and yours. One of my duties is to monitor your schedule, though currently you do not have many obligations.

Of course, Ryouko thought, feeling a little silly.

Incidentally, you have set me to be silent as much as possible, yet you have spent a considerable amount of time today talking to me, to a degree unusual for most new contractees. Are you sure you wish to leave it like that?

Let's see how it goes, Ryouko thought.

Very well.

She continued to while away her time, choosing to do some investigation into the Euphratic Front, since she had the suspicion it would be important to her in the future. It also concurred well with the kind of browsing she did in her free time normally. This time, with her increased security clearance and military status, she had access to much more authoritative sources than online rumor mills.

The situation was worse than the public was being told, as everyone had suspected.

Of course, when is it ever not? she thought dryly.

She hadn't been aware that the shipyards were under such serious pressure, or that ground fighting had spread into some of the principal urban areas. It had been impossible to hide that there was some ground fighting, but the scale was much heavier than the raid-scale conflicts that had been implied. Nor was it true that high orbit was fully secure. However, the front had stabilized-that at least was true, even if the front wasn't quite as far forward as generally implied. Starship production was way down, and what remained was focused exclusively on local defense ships, rather understandably. It was a troubling loss of strategic value, or so the internal reports stated.

Planets under serious attack were usually under lockdown conditions and the remaining residents understandably had more pressing concerns than sneaking reports past the government censors at the FTL communication relays. In that respect, it was a lot like the past, and information relied on reporters, Governance, and word-of-mouth. Of course, an analogous event on Earth couldn't possibly be concealed from the rest of the planet.

Eventually she checked her chronometer, which now read 23:30, meaning she had lost track of time. Not that it mattered. It startled her to realize that her internal sense of tiredness, that nagging sense of impending sleep she had used her whole life to keep track of time, was gone. She was briefly at a loss, realizing she had *so much time.*

With exquisite timing, her door slid open just as she was going into existential crisis, and her grandfather walked in.

“Your parents took time off of work,” he said. “We were thinking we could take you out for the night since, well, it doesn’t make sense to keep a curfew any more. Celebrate adulthood, something like that. I’m not really sure if your parents are the right people to be doing that with, but…”

“I’d love to,” Ryouko said, responding to the implied question.

She jumped off her bed, glad to be given something to do, and followed the old man out the door to where her parents were already waiting in the living room.

Only then did she take the moment to ponder where exactly she would be going. They wouldn’t be… taking her to any bars, would they? What exactly did celebrating adulthood mean, anyway?

“Where exactly are we going?” she asked, suddenly nervous.

“Relax,” her mother said, reading her mind somehow. “We’re just going to that restaurant we always go to.”

“Oh,” Ryouko said, relieved. The “night life” was not something that sounded all that interesting to her.

These days, restaurant meant “location with cooks specializing in hand-crafted food.”

They sat in their four-person vehicle, her mother seemingly determined to chat with her, her father quiet, thinking about something. Ryouko realized, sneaking glances past her mother at the midnight lights of the city, that it was the first time in a long time they had all been out together, as a family. How long had it been? Two years? Three?

That bothered her, for some reason she couldn’t quite place.

Given the circumstances, Ryouko was given free rein on what to order, so she ordered the cream stew she was inanely fond of, plus some fried foods they normally never got-primarily because her grandfather didn’t like fried foods. Only after she ordered did it finally occur to her that, yes, he too would be leaving in six more days, and she was being illogically selfish. She tried to apologize, but he dismissed it, pointing out that she was, after all, the younger.

It was unusual, eating in the middle of the night, but it meant little as long as your stomach could fit it. Any excess energy was mysteriously squirreled away by your implants, or so they were told in school. Plus, Ryouko had a feeling her implants needed more energy than usual.

And yet, after all of that, the cream stew tasted weird, so that she could barely finish it.

“What’s wrong, Ryouko?” her mother asked, seeing her struggling to keep from making a face.

“I’m uh—” she began, wondering if she should say nothing.

She grimaced, deciding she would have to go through with it.

“It doesn’t taste the same,” she said. “It’s not their fault. I think it’s the implants. I can… taste the cow. I’m not sure how else to explain it. I’m trying to get used to it.”

“Dysguesia,” her father commented off-hand. “It’s common early in the implant acclimation process. It will pass with time.”

They looked at him, mildly surprised. He had seemed distracted the entire time, as if worried about something. Ryouko knew she had given him plenty to worry about, so she hadn’t pressed it.

“That’s right,” Ryouko said, a little nervously. “Do you want to hear about the implants? I know you know more than most parents, but I figure…”

“Of course,” her mother said, sipping some of her soup. “Frankly, I imagine most girls wouldn’t come home and then immediately shut themselves in their rooms. I mean, I know we haven’t shown the most curiosity about it, but we’d definitely like to hear about our daughter getting her systems rearranged.”

“Ah, right,” Ryouko said, stopping on the brink of an apology. She was like that sometimes. They knew that.

“It’ll be relevant to me, too,” her grandfather pointed out, turning slightly to face her. “I’ve been reading the informational guides, but I think it’d be more meaningful hearing it from you.”

Ryouko nodded thoughtfully, as even her father focused in to listen to her.

She summarized as best she could, aided by informational input from the new computer attached to her spine, and ended her description with a mention of that very computer. Running down the list, she emphasized the parts which she suspected were only relevant to her, such as the conspicuous *removal* of cardiopulmonary support, which would almost certainly be enhanced instead for non-magical girls.

Throughout, they listened with attentive interest, but only her grandfather asked questions, her parents happy to nod and stay quiet. She had a feeling she knew why.

“I’ve always wondered what it’s like to have one of those tactical computers in your head,” her father said at the end of it, tilting his head. “I talk to the AIs at the lab all the time, but that’s just not the same. None of them are reading my memories.”

“Well, that’s what I spent the evening working on,” Ryouko said, implicitly explaining what she had been doing in her room. “So far, it hasn’t been that bad. It’s been helpful, actually.”

“Just be glad the *MSY* and government stalemated each other into actually doing what the Ethics Committee said,” her mother said, darkly, folding her hands. “Otherwise, I wouldn’t trust one as far as I could throw it.”

Ryouko nodded at the sentiment. One of the first things her TacComp had done was to mention that to her, as if reassuring her.

“Well, these taste problems are going to be a problem for today,” her mother said, sitting back up. “I ordered drinks.”

Ryouko waited several seconds for her mother to explain why it would be a problem, before realizing what was going on.

“You mean you’re ordering drinks for *me*?” she asked.

“Why not?” her father asked, shrugging. “You’re an adult; that’s what the state tells us now. And it’s not like we can watch you anymore.”

“In my day,” her grandfather said, pointing at the rest of them with his chopsticks, “it was forbidden for minors to drink alcohol. There were none of these fancy intoxication controls and bloodstream catalysts or whatever. You had to watch what you drank and watch your kids, too.”

“Yes, we know, Dad,” Ryouko’s mother said patronizingly, managing not to sound bored.

Alcohol consumption by minors still wasn't approved in the majority of households because of societal expectations, but it was perfectly meaningless either way. While it was legal for them to *drink* it, it wasn't legal for them to ever turn off their intoxication controls, which meant the alcohol was catalyzed into water and carbon dioxide almost the moment it hit the bloodstream, the energy absorbed for whatever purposes might be necessary.

Their drinks arrived, and Ryouko found herself looking down into a glass of flavored sake. Apple, to be precise.

She started to take an experimental sip, but her father held up a finger.

"Intoxication controls *off*," he said. "It's your newfound right."

Ryouko looked around for guidance, and found her grandfather looking decidedly skeptical, while her mother looked mildly interested.

In the past, she had always hated the taste of alcohol, despite what everyone said about it.

"It's… not bad," she said, looking at it with surprise.

"Are you sure that's not the, uh, dysguesia talking?" her grandfather asked.

"I have no idea," she admitted, taking another sip.

At that point, the dessert arrived, and they spent some time quietly eating through an orange liqueur soufflé. While they ate, Ryouko thought about the day. She still felt guilty taking over what should have been by rights a midnight meal for both her and her grandfather. She had to make it up to him somehow, and there was something he had said…

"Want to visit the armory tonight?" she said on impulse, her head starting to throb. "I think I might be able to get you all in and it might be, uh, fun. A sort of family visit."

She was somehow not surprised when her parents glanced at each other, then murmured assent, without even stopping to ask her what she meant by "armory."

"I'd like that," her grandfather agreed, only a few moments later.

Ryouko rubbed her head. Was this headache the result of the alcohol, or something else? It was her first night with no sleep, and jet lag was supposed to be an early side effect of the modifications. It could be that.

She shook her head at herself. She would deal with it, for now.

A while later, they stepped out of the restaurant onto the fiftieth floor skyway. Ryouko took a deep breath of the crisp, chilly air, staggered a little, then gave in and turned her intoxication controls back on.

Within seconds, her headache began to recede and she sighed in relief.

Never again.

And then, her thoughts once again clear, she thought:

Wait, the armory, I—how the hell am I supposed to get them in? Can I even do that?

She thought out a quick message to Asaka asking exactly that question.

Asaka responded almost immediately, choosing to use audio instead of more text. Ryouko picked up, musing that the process was so much faster and more automatic now; civilian channels were deliberately designed to constantly remind the user of the technology in the middle, with built-in delays, a visual interface, and even a ringing noise while you waited to see if the other side would answer. There were only a few concessions to modernity: calls were turned away if the recipient was sleeping, for instance.

There was none of that artifice here, the transaction flowing organically and fully thought-based, with TacComps to mediate.

They went through the standard greeting rituals.

Anyway, Asaka thought, finally. *About what you were asking-it's possible, but honestly there's not much to see. They can't go past the church antechamber, since that's magical girls only. You don't live here, so you don't have access to the living areas—I'm not sure why you'd want to go there anyway. And the hospital is off-limits. Oh, but um, we have a visitor's area. It has holo-exhibits and one of those robot guides. That's always a winner.*

Exhibits about what? Ryouko thought, waving away her mother and pointing at her ear in the universal "I am on the phone" gesture.

The system. You know, soul gems, grief cubes-what they're allowed to know. Most parents like it, but I don't know about yours. It seems like—

Yeah, they wouldn't, Ryouko thought.

I thought so. Oh, but that's right, they have level two clearance. That might get them into a couple of places.

Level Two? That's higher than me! Ryouko thought incredulously.

You didn't know? Yeah. You've got interesting parents. It's in your file. You should really read it sometime.

Maybe I will.

Look, uh, since they have clearance, I can probably get them into a couple of places. Maybe I can take you to the shooting range. That'd be cool right? See their daughter firing a gun. But they need to be escorted and I'm kind of busy, so it can't be for very long.

Ryouko looked around, at her family looking at her expectantly, and sighed.

Well, anything is good. I sort of promised.

I see.

I might have been drunk. I'm not sure.

There was laughter on the line. Interestingly, laughter was a purely physical reaction, rather than something replicable in the standard thought transmission system, so the system recorded the sound and played it back-conversations were awkward otherwise.

Yeah, yeah, we get that a lot. Everyone thinks it's a good idea for some reason. Anyway, I'll see you in a bit.

See you.

Ryouko stood in the firing posture she had been shown, aiming a SW155 pistol at a distant targeting circle.

“So, uh, are you going to guide me or anything?” she asked.

She had expected that Asaka would stand next to her, hold her arm, steady her aim, and other things like that, but the girl instead stood off to the side, watching her with a somewhat detached expression. Her parents stood behind Asaka, looking ill at ease.

“Not really,” Asaka said. “It’s all up to you and your implants.”

Ryouko smiled nervously. The pistol was set to high-velocity, long-range, anti-infantry, and was fully loaded. She had fifty meters of distance between her and the target. There wasn’t really anything left but to just do it.

She wasn’t really sure what she had been expecting, but the experience was surprisingly smooth. A steady staccato of electric “*Snap!”* noises, ten in total, the feeling her arms as she absorbed the recoil in each one, struggling to keep the pistol *down.* She had been told that infantry in full armor suits had difficulty handling the recoil of weapons capable of damaging alien shielding; the recoil on these, designed to approach the firing velocity of full-fledged sniper equipment, was brutal.

A forcefield flickered each time a projectile hit the targeting circles, vaporizing the shell. It made sense, she supposed; otherwise the opposite wall would be a disaster zone.

She had been learning a little about infantry weapons, recently. Directed energy weapons, primarily lasers, were constrained heavily by the sheer amount of power and energy necessary to deliver damage over long range, given scattering, but were excellent if they could be fired over time or at targets too fast to hit otherwise. A beam held in place could deliver more energy than any series of projectiles, could deal with the otherwise arduous task of bullet or projectile deflection, and could not itself be deflected. In addition, the closer the range or more stationary the firing platform, the less of a concern power and energy became.

Thus, they were used on less maneuverable but heavy targets, as point-defenses, as close-range weapons, or when the shot *really* needed to hit something.

They formed the primary component of personal and local anti-projectile defenses, the anti-heavy component of anti-missile and anti-air defenses, the main component of anti-artillery systems, and the weapons load-out of medium-size and smaller drones. They also served as the primary gun of most armor and larger air vehicles, as well as specialized horizontal artillery. Infantry squads carried Breaker anti-armor laser cannons, their assault rifles carried Falchion laser “bayonets,” and snipers carried a secondary laser armament, good for only two or three shots when really needed.

Of course, the constraint on all of this was energy, so that mobile anti-projectile systems exhausted themselves rapidly, and the heavier or long-range laser weapons were all limited to a certain number of shots, if they were mobile. Thus, all but the most expendable of small drones carried rail-gun or missile systems of some sort, whether it be the main gun of a tank, the offensive load-out of an air vehicle, or the weapon of a medium drone-which typically had melee-range abilities as well.

For the aliens, everything was different, since whatever energy systems they used were vastly superior. Alien armor never bothered with a secondary main gun, and projectile weapons were saved for when they were most appropriate-suppressing fire, indirect fire and artillery, inertial bombardment from orbit, missile and air defense systems, and the longest-range of snipers.

As for space combat-that was another story entirely.

"〈Mean error: 5.2 cm〉" a voice announced when she was finished, mostly for the benefit of her observers. "〈Mean deflection: 0.27 radians counter-clockwise from vertical. Standard deviation: 3.6 cm and 0.24 radians, respectively.〉"

The projectiles, extremely advanced, had limited on-board guidance, but couldn't really fix more than slight deviations. She thought she had performed rather impressively, personally, though there was that nagging drift upward and leftward.

Her parents clapped and her grandfather raised an eyebrow, looking impressed, but Asaka's expression was neutral.

"Sorry to tell you," she said, "but that's considered terrible, unfortunately. Most of that accuracy is your enhancements. Let me show you."

At which point Asaka took the gun, adroitly reloaded the ammunition, and notched a humiliating:

"〈Mean error: 0.6 cm. Mean deflection: 0.02 radians counter-clockwise from vertical. Standard deviation: 0.2 cm and 0.05 radians, respectively.〉"

"It's really hard to suppress that upward drift," Asaka commented, handing the weapon back to her. "We have enough strength, but the instinct is to not use it. I want you to understand: I'm not even all that good. Our best snipers can hit insects from kilometers away, and the alien snipers are even better. If it weren't for point defenses, being infantry would be terrifying. Fortunately for us, our soul gem covers can tank sniper projectiles and lasers. Never leave home without it."

Ryouko blinked at the usage of the word "tank," but nodded.

"Ah, um, may I?" her grandfather asked awkwardly, holding out his hand. "I want to try it."

Asaka shook her head immediately.

"It will break your arm," she said. "The–*um*–even the regular Humans have musculoskeletal enhancements. You should wait for those. The city has civilian shooting ranges for hobbyists, if you want."

"Maybe one of the laser modes?" Ryouko suggested hopefully. "Those have a lot less recoil."

"Practically none," Asaka commented. "Alright, I guess. You drive a hard bargain."

Ryouko smiled, and that smiled turned into a frown of slight embarrassment as the few shots the old man had available missed terribly. Said old man chuckled sheepishly at the end to Asaka's patronizing smile.

Asaka offered her parents the same opportunity, but they deferred.

They stayed there a little longer, Ryouko practicing on her own while her grandfather struck up a halting conversation with Asaka about infantry weapons.

He must be nervous as well, Ryouko thought.

Of course, the weapons mattered more to him than to her.

Eventually, with a wary look around, Asaka snuck out with her grandfather to visit weapons storage, while Ryouko, trusted to watch over her own parents, explored with them the other

facilities—the virtual combat simulations, the power study areas, and the sparring areas.

It was the last of these they spent the most time on, though Ryouko had wanted to spend some more time examining the concept of "power study." They stayed to watch a single practice round, held inside an enormous practice ring, chatting with an audience member, Risa Flores, who felt like talking.

Apparently, instead of wielding actual weapons, the ring simulated non-damaging, holographic versions of their weapons and more dangerous powers, though their weaker powers were still free game. That was pretty critical, given the nature of the fights.

The three of them, Ryouko and her parents, watched as a girl wielding a spear and another with two swords went at it. The rules were simple: first injury that would be disabling if they were using real weapons ended the match. No potentially crippling use of powers was permitted. Soul gems were kept outside the sparring grounds, on a table, suitably in range to maintain control.

Even though the grounds were expansive—50 meters square, her implants judged—at first Ryouko wondered how they could possibly keep themselves confined to the area and not destroy everything around them, including the audience. Her question was answered when the match began and the telltale infrared flicker of an activating forcefield ringed the area, as well as the floor and ceiling.

The match was dynamic: the girl with swords was a telekinetic, and the one with the spear could summon chains that lashed out from her spear and stayed in place.

Unfortunately, there was no way to simulate damage. Attempts had been made early on to self-configure enhancements to simulate damage by disabling muscles after impact by holographic weaponry. It seemed, however, that their bodies ignored the signals, keeping the muscles working through magic somehow.

"It probably interprets it as some sort of damage," Risa said. "All in all, it's probably a good thing, but it makes these matches less realistic."

She looked over Ryouko quickly.

"Teleporter, huh?" the red-haired girl said. "Empath myself, though I've got a little telekinesis on the side. Unfortunately, these kinds of sparring areas are only useful for girls with certain types of powers. I'm sure you can see why it wouldn't really work for you or me. Still, fun to watch, and useful if it helps you. Some things just aren't the same in simulation. Nice to meet you, Shizuki-san."

The girl bowed slightly, then stuck out her hand. Ryouko shook it a moment later.

"Nice to meet you, uh, Flores-san."

Ryouko was never sure how to use the name of a foreigner when speaking Japanese. The girl's given name was Risa.

"Pleased to meet you too," the girl said, bowing to Ryouko's parents and greeting them properly. "I'm impressed she snuck you two in here, but since it seems to be your first time, I feel obligated to warn you that these matches get pretty brutal. We're not Human, at least not when we fight. The forcefields occasionally fail under the force, just to give you an idea."

"We understand," Ryouko's mother said, looking back at the girl and her freckles and curled hair. Ryouko wasn't sure why, but her mother said it rather strangely, almost as if annoyed.

Intellectually, they all understood, and Ryouko had even fought demons before, but that was not sufficient preparation.

Ryouko could barely keep track of the motion, and winced every time one of the girls slammed into a forcefield with bone-crunching force. The girl with the spear was summoning up a veritable storm of chains, chains lancing constantly across the stage to force the other into a smaller and smaller space. The telekinetic was forced into a constant dance of telekinetic pushes and sword slashes, knocking away chains and sparring thrusts with an array of swords around her, smashing apart chains, trying to close the gap or gain enough time to manage a grab on the other girl's body. The spear-wielder kept up a non-stop flurry of spear thrusts and chain lashes, keeping the other girl back and reaching for the successful entanglement.

Ryouko snuck a glance rightward, at her father sitting rigidly grasping the armrests on his chair, clearly suppressing an instinct to call for help. He flinched with every impact that would have killed an unaugmented Human.

Strangely, her mother was calmer.

"It's all a blur to me," her mother said. "But you can follow it, can't you?"

"Of course she can," her father said. "Here."

He pointed at Risa, who was still watching the match. Specifically, he pointed at her eyes, but Ryouko couldn't see anything unusual, just eyes that were darting around extremely fast.

She turned back to look at her parents, confused.

"Her eyes, Ryouko," her mother explained. "To us, they're moving so fast her eyes look like a brown blur. We don't see pupils anymore. Honestly, it's kind of creepy."

"The infantry get some slight enhancements as part of the standard package," her father, shaking his head. "But nothing like that."

"Your file says you're new," Risa said, turning to face them, clearly having heard the conversation. "Why do your parents know so much?"

The girl seemed curious, though it almost seemed as if her question had a deeper meaning.

Ryouko made a half-embarrassed gesture.

"Scientists," she said.

"I see," Risa responded.

The match ended when the telekinetic managed to blast one of the chains into the arm of the other girl, grabbing the spear-wielding arm. The spear-wielder quickly abolished her own chain, but the time wasted was enough for the other girl to gather a massive push, slamming her into the far wall along with a large collection of her own chains and a rather audible crunching sound. Before she could recover, the other girl launched herself through the air and completed a decapitation with both swords. Well, an imaginary double decapitation.

The forcefields shut down, both girls falling to the ground. The swordswoman immediately grabbed one shoulder, while the other forced herself into a sitting position with obvious pain. Others rushed forward to help, and there was a brief moment where the two girls held their newly retrieved soul gems up in a gesture of—respect? Camaraderie?

“They’ll be fine in an hour,” Risa said reassuringly. Ryouko’s parents nodded, obviously convincing themselves to buy it. Ryouko was having difficulty herself.

“I’m not exactly feeling reassured by your choice in careers, Ryouko,” her mother said, looking at her.

She learned a lot that night. For example, since their powers violated physical law, there was no way to accurately simulate them using physics. Rather, combat simulations were based on extensive recording of actual power usage. For this reason, it was impossible in simulations to do anything you hadn’t done in the past, or things you didn’t already know you could do. Because of this, those using the simulations were admonished not to let the simulations limit their imaginations, lest it limit their power development.

They met her grandfather again on the way out, where, her mother, to her chagrin, suggested she transform so they could all see her. She did so in a hidden corner, then returned and hid her expression as her father and grandfather glanced at each other and suppressed complex looks composed of both awe and bemusement, probably at the pointlessly ornate buttons and collar and wrist frills, something males would never understand.

They didn’t look like they believed her when she said she claimed to have no influence on costume design. It didn’t help when the knowledge spontaneously emerged in her brain that prevailing *MSY* theory on costume design was that it indeed reflected—and rarely, shifted with—personality, as well as some sort of collective unconscious, and just a trace of genetics. She was briefly confused, then realized her TacComp must have been “seamlessly” slipping the information to her. Then she was bothered: it was not what she wanted to hear.

It was only afterward that it occurred to her that her mother had actually been waiting for them to go outside, away from where there were too many gazing eyes, to spare her the embarrassment. She felt a bit ashamed, then, of blaming her.

It was then that the old man suggested that the two of them visit that spot near the starport again, to watch the sun rise. It was where the demons had attacked her, but she didn’t feel compelled to mention that. If it happened again, she could handle it, or at least escape with the two of them.

So she hoped. It got her thinking about that pile of grief cubes again, and made her nervous, but she wouldn’t stay away in fear of something stupid like that.

“Your friend Shirou-san is quite knowledgeable about weaponry,” the old man said, as the two of them lounged on the grass, watching the early morning sky, and the morning star.

“She seems like she would be,” Ryouko said. “But we didn’t talk about it much. I gather weapons aren’t as important to us as they would be to the, ah, rest of the military.”

She had nearly said “Humans.” It was standard language when used in context, but she had changed it at the last moment, feeling that it was somehow insulting.

Again, she watched a scramjet begin its acceleration down the runaway, antigrav giving it a lift that would have been impossible based on wings alone.

“I hadn’t realized before tonight,” she said. “But those kinds of things, EM Assault Rifles, Sniper railguns, they’ll be important to you, soon, won’t they? More important than to me.”

“That’s why I went to look,” the old man said, looking at his hand. “Officially, we have it more relaxed than you. We’re told not to worry about anything until we ship off to training. They’ll take

care of it all there."

"Unofficially, everyone worries, of course," he said. "I've taken them at their word, so I haven't really done more than read, but there are plenty out here who spend their last week in the public shooting ranges, practicing with the recreational firearms the government allows. Playing, more like. I wanted to practice with some serious weapons today, but that obviously wasn't going to work. Shirou-san even said that the practice is meaningless unless done with the targeting enhancements in place and the full training suite in place. Same goes for you."

"I guess," Ryouko said, looking at her hand, thinking about "targeting enhancements." "I'm getting a pistol delivered home uh, today. I wonder how mom and dad are going to take that."

"Better than you might think," the old man said. "They're more ready for it than you'd expect."

That was curious statement.

"How so?" Ryouko asked.

"I just mean that they're military researchers," her grandfather said. "They know a little of what to expect."

"That makes sense," Ryouko said.

"I'm not guaranteed to be infantry, you know," the old man said. "I could easily be assigned to something else."

It was a common meme that Earthers and core-worlders were doomed to a fate of ground-pounding upon entrance to the military. It was well-known that the navy tried to recruit its pilots and crew from those with experience, primarily residents and crew of space stations, and of the many commercial liners and trade vessels that plied Human space. It was also well-known that vehicle crews and atmospheric pilots tended to be pulled from the colonies, where piloting your own vehicles was still common.

It was not a wholly accurate meme. Earth's contribution to the armed forces outclassed the colonies, even combined, enough to earn its own cliché aphorism: "The soldiers of Earth die for the children of space." It was very possible to get other positions with no experience if they decided you had aptitude; there weren't nearly enough colonists or spacers to go around. A few worlds were developed enough to warrant an ocean-faring navy, so if one had experience with the high seas, one could hope for a position there. And finally—

"I wasn't aware you had specializations," Ryouko continued, realizing the way she worded it sounded slightly insulting, but unsure how to be polite. "I know you used to be a doctor, but that was centuries ago. I thought that was too old to matter."

The old man chuckled to himself, then smiled slightly.

"I can hope, can't I? I've been brushing up on some of the newer material recently. I thought maybe I could get assigned to a field hospital or something, but I'm not really confident it will matter. I just wanted something to say."

He picked up a rock, and swung it towards the river, where it bounced exactly twice before sinking. Ryouko raised her eyebrow.

"Haven't seen that, have you?" the old man said, before she could say anything.

He shook his head.

“Kids these days.”

The old man leaned forward, peering at the brightening sky in front of them.

“Your grandmother and I used to come out here, way back when we were first dating,” he said. “I was seventy-four, I think. She said she had memories here, something about a friend who went missing when she was young. I never really asked for too many details. Perhaps I should have.”

A memory flashed briefly across the surface of Ryouko’s mind.

Something that I lost, her grandmother had said.

Missing.

They both knew what had turned out to have happened to so many of the girls that had gone missing over the years, despite all the Governance attention and surveillance. In the later years, it was mostly those from bad family situations, but still—

“You think she went looking?” Ryouko asked, eyes widening a little, looking at the old man.

“Maybe,” Abe said, staring at the water, and the light reflected there. “Maybe not. It was so long ago. I don’t know if she still *cared.* But it’s the only thing that makes sense to me.”

“And now you’re looking for her,” Ryouko said.

“Again, maybe,” the old man said. “Or maybe I just want a new life. I just want some closure in this one.”

He blinked.

“Which is not to say I want closure on you, or the rest of my family, or anything,” her grandfather hastened to say. “But you know what I mean.”

“She…” Ryouko began, trying to share her memory.

TacComp, can I send the memory to him?

Yes, but without the VR restrictions lifted, his experience of it will be limited.

I…

Ryouko thought, wrestling with whether to say it or send it.

“She told me she lost something out there,” Ryouko managed. “Once, long ago. I don’t know if that makes sense.”

“Did she now?” the old man asked rhetorically, tilting his head to look at her.

“I see,” he finished.

They sat there for several minutes longer, long enough for it to become clear that the sun had risen, even if it was still hidden behind skyscrapers on the far side of the starport. The morning star was still visible, as arrogant as ever in trying to outshine the sun.

She wondered if she could get some kind of telescoping enhancement.

“Let’s keep in touch, okay?” the old man said, finally. “Once we deploy, that is. We’ll be on entirely different worlds, both metaphorically and literally, unless we’re lucky enough to get assigned together, and if we are—”

He paused.

“I don’t know if I could watch you taking the kind of injuries you girls take, so it may be best if we’re not,” he said, gloomily.

Ryouko wanted to contest that, but let it drop.

“Let’s go,” she said, pushing herself up. She looked at the windmills, remembered the demons that had once lurked there.

The old man nodded.

As promised, the weapon arrived early that day. Ryouko found it on her way up from a nap, the object lying nondescript and silent inside its tube, in the delivery slot by the door.

She picked it up in two hands, feeling its heft as she had the day before, trying to remember what Asaka had said. To her surprise, she found the pose again easily. A small bit of text scrolled in the lower corner of her field of view, explaining her confusion. It seemed her memory augmentations extended to procedural memory as well, though it was nothing as dramatic or as fully implemented as the event memory.

She felt the slight sense of recognition from the weapon, acknowledging its Human military user. Her grandfather had used one yesterday only because Asaka had granted temporary permission. Otherwise, it refused to fire outside of the hands of military personnel or drones. It even had limited intelligence, to prevent misfires. That was why there was no risk in simply routing it through the delivery tubes.

“This picture of you in pajamas, wearing a serious face, and pointing a gun at a vase, is going to make great material to show my friends,” her mother said, appearing behind her unexpectedly.

“Ah!” she vocalized, quickly dropping her pose and turning to face her mother. She fiddled with the gun in her hands, not really sure what else to do with it. She wondered if she looked embarrassed.

“Your grandfather would probably say something about how back in his day, you’d shoot yourself doing something like that,” the woman said, gesturing at her gun-fiddling. “And then say something about how kids these days have no concept of why that’d even matter. Of course, he’d be lying, because he’s not old enough to remember that far back. That kind of thing hasn’t been an issue since before the Unification Wars. He likes pretending to be older than he is.”

“I know,” Ryouko said, settling on carrying the weapon idly in her right hand.

“Do you know what you’re going to be doing this week?” her mother asked.

“I’m seeing a movie with my friends later today,” Ryouko said. “To break the news, if they haven’t already guessed.”

It should be inferable, Ryouko thought. By now, the mandatory section instructor must have already announced her withdrawal from the school. Sudden, inexplicable moves were rare nowadays, and for someone of her age and gender, what other conclusion was there?

“And, uh, I have stuff scheduled for the rest of the week,” Ryouko continued. “Mandatory visit to a psychiatrist, some sort of social event. Asaka suggested I go demon hunting again. But I have plenty of time, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Ryouko thought she saw a look pass over her mother’s face.

“Well, that’s good to hear,” Kuroi Nakase said. “I—”

She paused, thinking about what to say.

“I want you to be, uh, well, before you leave,” she said, putting her hand to her mouth. “I want you to enjoy yourself. I don’t, uh—”

“I’ll be fine, mom,” Ryouko said. “I promise.”

Her mother closed her eyes briefly.

“Well, I’ve scheduled a party for the day before you and your grandfather leave,” she said, folding her hands. “Invited your other grandparents, some family friends. Feel free to invite who you want. I’ve set up an invitation list. I, uh, invited that girl, Sakura-san. She said she’d come.”

Ryouko thought about that. The head of the Cult, *MSY* founder…

She supposed it was only fair to pull in Asaka and Patricia.

“Did you invite your friends like I asked you to?” her mother asked.

“Not yet,” Ryouko said. “Since I’d have to first explain what the party is for, right?”

“Oh, right, of course,” her mother said, still looking vaguely nervous.

“I’ll be fine, mama,” Ryouko reassured, even though of course she couldn’t really know that.

“We’ll see,” her mother said.

Ryouko decided against bringing her weapon to show to her friends that afternoon, because ultimately she couldn’t shake the feeling that it would be a rather strange thing to do.

She found the three of them waiting at the entrance of the theatre as she pulled up. It made sense; for them, it was merely a short elevator ride down to the twelfth floor of the same building from their school, but Ryouko, of course, hadn’t attended that day.

It started off awkward, the four of them lingering on the skyway outside the building. They commented on her new bracelet, and Ryouko said something meaningless about how she thought it was nice.

“Ryouko,” the long-haired girl, Chiaki, said, finally. “Before we go in, the, uh—”

The girl made an abortive gesture with her hand.

“The teacher said you were leaving the school permanently,” the other girl, Ruiko, finished, leaning forwards so that her pigtails oscillated with the motion.

Ryouko looked up at the taller girl, at her face, and the sunlight glimmering off the building behind her. She wondered what her own face looked like, as she tried to pull together the momentum to say what needs to be said.

“What’s going on, Ryouko?” Chiaki asked, a moment later.

Ryouko stepped back and, instead of saying anything, raised her left hand and spread the fingers. The stealth on the cover was off, so the ring was plainly visible in the light.

She could only smile weakly as the realization spread over their faces.

“Ruiko said it might be this,” Chiaki said, a moment later, shaking her head and looking bewildered. “But I didn’t want to think so. Why, Ryouko? You don’t have anything to wish for, you don’t have any boyfriends… was it your grandfather?”

“That’s too personal, Chiaki,” Simona said, blocking the line of questioning. She shifted her position so that her body language spoke of protection. It was very like her.

“You knew?” the long-haired girl asked, looking at Simona, taken aback.

“You’re too sensible to understand,” Ruiko said, shaking her head and looking at Chiaki. “Someone like you would never even get an offer. I told you; she hasn’t been happy here.”

“I—” the other girl began, before cutting herself off and stepping forward to grab Ryouko’s shoulder.

“Someone like you—” she began, before shaking her head. “I can’t imagine it. Be careful out there. I don’t want to have to attend your funeral.”

The tall girl, tomboyish despite her long hair and penchant for the violin, had always been vaguely protective of her. In truth, they all were. She was the shortest and most child-like of the group. She had enough of a personality that the others allowed her to field things like arguments and love confessions on her own, but the slightest hint of a physical threat would always bring Chiaki—and, recently, Simona—out of the woodwork, sharpening imaginary knives.

Though it was all showmanship, since it wasn’t as if the implants let civilians go too far with anything.

Simona cleared her throat.

“That’s rather morbid of you, Chiaki,” Ruiko criticized.

The girl stayed silent, shaking her head to herself. Ryouko hadn’t anticipated that the effect would be this pronounced.

“I, uh,” Ryouko began awkwardly, “am not sure how to bring this up, but my family is holding a, uh, party in a couple of days. You know, just before I leave. I’m adding you to the invitation list, so I’d like it for you all to attend. It’d be nice.”

It was mortifyingly and hilariously off-topic, but Chiaki stepped back and nodded.

“Yeah, I’ll be there,” she said. The others nodded.

Before she got a chance to even try to add the invitations herself, her TacComp fed her the knowledge that it was taken care of. It was, actually, pretty convenient.

“Okay, let’s go see that movie then,” Simona said, heading for the door so that it became essentially a command. They complied.

As they passed the giant holo-statues of the main characters, Ryouko slowed, glancing over

Mami, Kyouko, Yuma, Homura, and the goddess in the back. She was startled to realize she had met three of them, or, if you stretched the definition of "met," even four of them.

"Is something wrong?" Ruiko asked, noticing that she was staring.

"No, nothing," Ryouko said automatically, shaking her head.

She glanced at Simona, who was staring at Mami instead.

Then they headed for the feature presentation. Ryouko was surprised to learn from her TacComp that she could now go wherever she wanted in the theatre, Alloc-free, but she chose to stay with her friends, of course. They grabbed snacks from the concession stand, then headed for a room. Her TacComp informed her, as a point of fact, that her military status allowed her to requisition a private room for them, though only she personally could receive full VR. She deferred on the VR; she didn't want to be the only one having a different experience.

At least they didn't have to wait to reach quota.

As she watched through the movie, she found it difficult not to constantly reflect on how, just a few weeks ago, it would have been a totally different experience.

Watching about Homura's childhood, she pondered just how different a world the "Ancients" hailed from. No one to rely on but you and your team, always living on the edge of survival, a world where failure didn't mean someone would pick you up so you could try again, but death, plain and simple death. A world where you couldn't even leave your section of the tiny city without risking conflict; a world where you always had enemies, whether you wanted them or not. Even the roads and the city reminded her how different things were: so few skyscrapers, and that *asphalt* they lined the ground with—now that she wasn't having a vision, she could look it the word up on the spot.

Her class had done an arts survey once, back in primary school, before the divergence of students into separate interests. The establishment of the *MSY,* with its relative security and prosperity, had prompted an unprecedented flowering of literature, art, music, and even films and video games, nearly all of it sealed into secret *MSY* channels, but some released into the wider world, as fantasy. Only in recent years had the rest of the world gained full access, and their assignment had been to select a particular topic to report on, subject to approval by the instructor.

She had chosen to discuss the "Nostalgic" period, the century or so after Governmental—as opposed to *MSY* Unification, during which *MSY* culture had experienced a massive upsurge in art celebrating the chaotic past, and the idea of fighting alone or nearly alone for your ideals. Literature nearly deified great heroes or anti-heroes of the past, fictional or not.

Many in the class had not understood why anyone would want to go back to the world of before, so uncertain, and so removed from the stable, secure lives they currently lived, even with the constantly looming shadow of alien annihilation. Even among the girls, who at that age generally had magical girls as a secret obsession, mostly failed to grasp the idea. Only the dreamers had understood, Ryouko especially, because she had read some of the literature in question, including a certain fictionalized epic from the period.

It had detailed the first century of the life of a certain Clarisse van Rossum-historian, dreamer, and hero of justice—as she wandered the earth, from the killing fields of Europe to the outskirts of Hiroshima, from revolutionary China to the jungles of Vietnam, from Moscow during the fall of the Soviet Union to New York City at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Finally, Japan again, in time to watch the *MSY* truly test its power for the first time. It was to be contrasted with

the rather dry auto-biography written by the actual Clarisse, who had supposedly choked on her coffee laughing the first time she tried to read the other version.

Ryouko had felt, then, an urging to travel, to go where things *happened.* As she grew older, though, she had grown to understand that things no longer happened on Earth. Things only happened at the frontier, in the colonies, or at the war. If you were impossibly lucky, you could specialize yourself enough to request travel to a colony that needed you, where, with enough money—and this time, it really was *money*—you could purchase your own ship, and visit other colonies, ferry goods, survey the many still-unexplored systems of Human space…

That had been the dream, and it had been a difficult one, given that travel authorizations to the colonies were either exorbitantly expensive, or required outstanding contributions in your field. Cynics said that, rather than being designed to optimize resource allocation, the policy was really designed to funnel restless surplus population from Earth into the military, thereby killing two birds with one stone. The real cynics said the policy was designed to do both.

Ryouko had needed to find something, anything, that she was passionate enough about to do spectacularly well in.

That, or wait the hundred years to join the infantry.

Or the even more impossible dream: be visited by an Incubator, and make a contract.

She reflected on that, and watched the movie.

Watching a holographic Mami and Kyouko go through the motions in front of her, she found it difficult to square what she saw with what she had seen of them. It was so hard to imagine that they, too, had once been her age, and their personalities on-screen seemed so different, almost restless and careless somehow, for all the wisdom that this younger Mami seemed to be trying to convey.

Perhaps, though, it was just an artifice of the acting and her own imagination.

She watched Homura be visited by her white Goddess, and began idly criticizing the inaccuracies of the depiction, before realizing the irony of doing so.

She wondered, then, about what was really going on. She had never really delved into the details of the unusual beliefs of the *MSY*'s missing founder, but now she found herself wishing she had. Why did this movie imply that she had a past life? Why did she say the things that would eventually form the underpinnings of Cult theology? Why indeed did she have angel wings?

That was her problem with the Cult, she thought. Perhaps they were right about their answers, but before she would accept their view on things, she had to see the truth for herself, and part of that involved learning what she could about Homura.

She made a note to her TacComp to do that later. It responded with a bit of text reminding her that it could not access any of her supposed memories of her vision, or any of her supposed visualizations of such, and that whenever she focused on it, the device found itself unaccountably losing grasp of her thoughts. Indeed, it would have been enough to demand immediate return for diagnosis and repair, had it occurred for any other reason.

She watched Yuma crying on the stairs and remembered her vision of her crying over her dead comrade. Oriko, if Ryouko remembered her stories correctly—as she did, her TacComp affirmed.

She had thought about her vision of Yuma earlier. She had thought that it was wrong, but on careful consideration, there was nothing technically false about it. Yuma's team had died at the

hands of demons, according to the story, and she had left to go seek help in the only place she could. Yuma crying over her dead mentor among a crowd of demons is exactly what would be expected.

Except her first thought during the vision had been that it was *wrong,* for no reason she could explain. And the look in Yuma's eyes, and the darkness of her soul gem-that didn't match up.

Ryouko brooded over the scenes depicting the foundation of the *MSY* and its aftermath, especially when it became clear the history would be depicted in montage. A secret international organization of incredibly powerful girls, controlling vast financial resources, presiding over the most tumultuous period of Human history-their impact on history should have been immense, and yet the history books were silent. The Unification Wars and the *MSY* might as well have been on two different planets, as far as they were concerned. Ryouko sensed it was wrong and, for once, so did many others. But that didn't give her answers.

As the movie entered its next stage, Ryouko remembered the first time she had seen a full, uncensored set of stock footage from Aurora. It had been in sixth level History, and it had been the first time for the majority of them. She and her classmates had sat with expressions alternating between shock and gritted teeth as child and adult alike were gutted with lasers, as even the colony AIs had their computing clusters ruthlessly melted.

She had wanted to make a difference then, to do something where she could feel that she was contributing to something, rather than wasting away on Earth.

Finally, she watched the battle, grimly paying far more attention to the details of survival than she normally would have, keeping an eye on every teleporter that appeared, even though she knew a movie was hardly the place to be gathering battle insight.

And as Homura confronted the planet-scouring superweapon, and the movie entered its last stages, Ryouko thought once more about the truth.

After the movie, and some degree of subsequent hijinks, they found themselves several floors up from the theatre, seated in an eating area. At this point, Ruiko and Chiaki excused themselves for the bathroom, carbonated drink gluttons that they were.

Ryouko, lost in the trend of her thoughts, mused that some things were forever the same-except when they were not.

It was a common conversational topic-among those who didn't happen to be eating at the same time-that if it were really desired, even that physiological function could be greatly reduced or eliminated, but a combination of practical and philosophical concerns prevented it from being implemented.

Ryouko had read an article about it once. On the one hand, excess electrolytes and water had to be eliminated somewhere if not in urine, and while water could be vaporized, the electrolytes had to be sweated out. Beyond that, while solid food processing could be—and was—elevated to greater levels of efficiency, there was always residual material that could only be processed with artificial oxidation. This also applied to urea, which could be combusted completely. However, these kinds of artificial energy extraction were considered to have deleterious effects on natural element cycles —for instance, urea combustion would essentially reverse nitrogen fixation—would require complex secondary modifications to waste excretion systems, and was generally considered pointlessly manipulative in service of a dubious goal.

Reading about it again, Ryouko was surprised to find that she had a new selection of security-

redacted subtopics to choose from, and delved into them gladly.

Apparently, there was one application in which such modifications had found extensive use. The military found that, in the field, secondary waste processing promoted greater combat efficiency, greater sanitation, and a removal of the need for latrines and so forth, with the only side effect being a much heavier emission of gases and sweat, which could be dealt with effectively by combat suits and smart clothing. Extracted energy could even be diverted into internal energy sources, in the same manner as extra energy from food, extending combat range and reducing the risk of power shortages. While really only necessary for ground troops in heavy combat or assignment far from supply lines, it was considered valuable enough to deploy as a toggle-able option into all ground units. Supposedly, the troops themselves approved of it greatly.

This was, of course, the same military that was rumored to be actively working on photosynthetic skin and direct hydrocarbon consumption, so it was clear what angle they were coming from.

Ryouko spent so long on the topic that she almost missed her chance, but she finally remembered that she had been waiting for this opportunity. She and Simona were alone, still waiting for the other two to come back from the bathroom, where they were taking an inordinate amount of time.

She and Simona were seated on opposite sides of a table in front of the synthesized food stand, across the plaza from the bathrooms. It was another one of those scenes that would have set her grandfather's head shaking, this time at the "boring atmosphere" and "lack of diversity," whatever that meant. It never worked to point out that the synthesizer had a nearly unlimited range of selections. He would just shake his head again and say that she wouldn't understand.

"Simona," Ryouko began, to get her attention.

"Hmm?" the girl responded, seeming to wake from something and sitting up. "Oh, uh, yeah."

She had been uncharacteristically silent the whole time, Ryouko realized.

"You don't have to apologize for two days ago," Ryouko said friendlily. "It's totally understandable. But I was wondering…"

She paused to gauge the other girl's reaction. Simona seemed tense, somehow.

"You said you had something to say, just a moment before we were interrupted by the demons," Ryouko said. "We never really got back to that."

Simona started slightly, eyes jumping to Ryouko's face, then away again.

"Ah, well, that," she said, smiling slightly. "It's not really, um, critical."

"Are you sure?" Ryouko asked, countering Simona's flummoxed body language with a serious demeanor of her own. She hadn't expected her question to trigger a reaction like that, especially given Simona's slight loss of Japanese fluency when bothered. Something was up.

"Yes, yeah, I'm certain," Simona responded.

"Are you *really* sure?" Ryouko repeated.

"Yes," Simona repeated, firmer.

"Simona," Ryouko said seriously. "If it's important, you should really say it now. I'll be gone in a week. You won't get another chance for a long time."

She had almost said “You might not get another chance,” but had decided that sounded too fatalistic.

“I’m sure, Ryouko,” Simona said, eyes suddenly dark and serious. “Really.”

Ryouko thought for a moment, then nodded slowly.

It didn’t quite fit with what she wanted to do, but she decided to let it go. She believed in autonomy: Simona could make her own decisions. Besides, Ryouko needed to move on to the other thing she wanted to ask about.

“Alright,” she said. “I’ll trust your judgment. Ah, this might seem like a weird question, but do you remember the day you transferred into our school? Like a year ago?”

“Yes?” Simona said, this time seeming confused. “What about it?”

“Well, uh,” Ryouko began, realizing what a silly question it sounded like now that she was wording it. “When you were introducing yourself, I thought I saw you look at me. It seems silly to say now, but at the time I could have sworn you looked like you knew me. It really bothered me at the time. I guess I was reminded of it recently. What was it about?”

Ryouko was looking to the side, not making eye contact on such a non sequitur of a question, so she was surprised when several moments passed without a response.

“Simona?” she asked, looked at the other girl’s face.

“I just thought you looked, uh, unusual, that’s all,” the response finally came, the other girl now the one avoiding eye contact. “I was, uh—”

Ryouko waited.

“You were the shortest person in the class,” Simona said finally. “And you looked so juvenile. That was what I was considering. I never brought it up because I supposed you wouldn’t want to hear it from yet another person.”

Ryouko closed her eyes and made a pained expression.

“Well, you guessed right,” she said, annoyed briefly. “Everyone says that. For once, I’d like—”

She stopped sharply, remembering the reason she had started this conversation.

“Are you sure that’s it?” she asked. “I really thought you were looking for some other reason. It was like you looked straight at me.”

“No, that was pretty much it,” Simona said, shrugging. “You surprised me with a question like that, after all this time.”

“Huh,” Ryouko said meaninglessly.

“Can I say something?” Simona said, leaning forward onto the table.

“Sure. Fair enough, I suppose,” Ryouko responded.

“Chiaki really cares for you,” Simona said, inclining her head in the direction of the bathroom. “They both do, in their own way. Why do you think they’ve taken so long in the bathroom? I bet they’re talking about you. I know you’ve got your eyes set on bigger things, but—”

Ryouko closed her eyes and nodded.

"I know," she said. "I've thought about it, a little. It's always been my nature to look out at the future. Obviously, that was what I was thinking about when I made the contract. But I should have thought about my friends more. It's just… how I am, I guess. I've always been more inclined towards other things."

She smiled slightly.

"My mother says I must have gotten it from my father, because I certainly didn't get it from her."

"You don't need to apologize," Simona said. "As long as you remember. I…"

Her voice trailed off, until she finally shrugged.

Finally, Chiaki and Ruiko appeared again from the bathroom area, without even the shame to appear embarrassed about the time they had spent in there.

In the normal course of things, it would have been time to go home, but Ryouko took the moment to pitch something she had been thinking about. Her TacComp was already sending the messages to her parents.

It was short notice to plan a sleepover, but she figured she could get away with a bit more these days.

Are you sure? Kyouko asked, staring at the Incubator plushy on her tiny wooden desk, even though she was sure that there no actual functional reason to look in its direction.

I think the real question is: Why wouldn't we? the doll—or rather, Yuma—responded. *I think it's the natural thing to do.*

It just seems rather intrusive, Kyouko thought. *I can keep tabs on Ryouko perfectly fine; I'm her commanding officer. If I wanted to, I could keep a constant watch on her location.*

Which means exactly squat if some hypothetical assassin has sufficient clearance and good electronic hygiene, Yuma countered. *Look, it's for her own protection. I'm not sure why you're so against it.*

Kyouko shook her head, even though no one was there to see her.

I'm just not comfortable with you planting a spy bug on her, she thought.

Says the girl who gave Ryouko's parents and grandfather microphone-embedded chocolates, Yuma thought drily. *Seems rather inconsistent of you.*

That's—that's different! Kyouko thought, realizing instantly that Yuma was right. *That's standard* MHD *procedure.*

Yes, Yuma agreed. *And* MHD *surveillance is also protection, just of a different sort. She'll never have to know.*

And why shouldn't she? Kyouko asked, though she had already intuited what Yuma would say.

Because as much as we don't like it, we can't trust her fully either. We can tell her later, if it seems like there's nothing wrong.

Kyouko slumped forward onto her table, cheek against the surface. She sighed.

I'm not talking you out of this, am I?

No. But if it's any consolation, you at least agree with the other half of it, right?

Kyouko sighed again. She looked at her bed, for once well-made, and completely empty.

Yes, she thought. *It's just… everyone I'd rely on to do something like that is leaving very soon. I'm short of manpower, and personally I'm pressed for time.*

There was a brief pause.

You have plenty of subordinates, Kyouko-nee-chan.

I know, I know, Kyouko thought. *It's just inertia. I'll pick someone to try to keep busy and occupied and incidentally watch out for her. It wouldn't even be that hard to explain away.*

I'm sure you will. And nee-chan…

Yes? Kyouko prompted when nothing further was forthcoming.

Watch yourself. I don't want to put any stock in these visions, but if there's any truth in them, staying away from submarines might not be enough.

Kyouko thought about that.

Alright, she thought.

Demon Hunter

Chapter Notes

> As a reminder, the appendices at the end, while "canon" (unless I made some mistake) are not necessarily relevant or interesting. In this case, it was originally intended as an opening snippet for a later chapter, rambled on for two pages, and ended up not even getting to the topic I wanted it to get to. So that's why it's here at the end.

"The single most valuable innovation the MSY brings to the magical girl system is the refinement of the demon hunt. The rationalization the MSY would eventually bring to the process was the single greatest revelation in the magical girl condition *ever*. The paradigm of the entire system shifted, from a situation where magical girl teams struggled to harvest even a fraction of the grief cubes available in a given city, to one where grief cube harvesting was saturated with relatively little effort. Death rates collapsed, grief cube supply shifted from persistent deficit to persistent surplus, and the vast majority of the MSY ceased being directly involved in grief cube harvesting, choosing instead to earn money, pursue research, or even just lead pleasant lives in relative normalcy."

"The MSY approach to demon hunting emphasizes two core principles: efficiency and safety. These ideals are attained and maximized via intense scrutiny and regulation of the entire process of grief cube harvest, with every detail considered and analyzed.

"Firstly, miasma patrols are carried out with statistical exactness, the frequency of a patrol passing through an area in direct proportion to the frequency of miasma formation in the historical record. These probabilities are updated constantly, adjusted by such factors as recent miasma occurrences, day of the week, the presence of major dignitaries, and so forth, the influence of each factor empirically deduced from centuries of data."

"Secondly, hunting tactics are polished to the point where the demon hunt is neither an art nor a science, but merely a routine. Optimized team compositions are carefully chosen, obsessively characterized and stereotyped battle tactics are used, and division of labor is carefully adhered to. Guiding doctrines are both codified and embedded into the culture, and fire control is practiced."

"Finally, though not a direct boon to the MSY, civilian rescue is heavily prioritized, for ethical reasons, though not at the risk of the organization's own members—a rule that is imperfectly adhered to."

"MSY harvesting doctrine is nothing less than the rationalization of production of a basic good, in a manner the world had achieved in other basic goods a century earlier. Just as industrial rationalization transformed human society, grief cube rationalization transformed the underworld of magical girl society. Viewed in this lens, the MSY's success was nothing less than a triumph of capitalist economic thought."

—The MSY as a Triumph of Rationalization, excerpt, Journal of Economics, Article for the Public

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Ryouko's first shipment of grief cubes arrived the next day. Unlike the seemingly more dangerous

pistol she had received earlier, these were not entrusted to the standard small item delivery systems. Instead, upon waking from another early morning nap and getting dressed, her TacComp informed her that she had a delivery waiting at the door.

Opening the door remotely, she headed out her door to meet the delivery bot halfway.

This one was different than the usual packbot, but not by much. It was small, a third of a meter in diameter and barely the height of Ryouko's foot off the ground. Rounded at the top, it rather strongly resembled a floor-cleaning robot, though it was much too large to be one of those.

On her approach, it rolled itself to her feet.

In need of cubes? It inquired of her, in what she was starting to instinctively recognize as implant-mediated telepathy. Its mental voice was squeaky, even though there was no need for it to be so.

It stared up at her with its single optical sensor.

Not at the moment, she thought. *But I'll take them all the same.*

No need to place them personally, the robot thought. *I will place them where you desire.*

On my desk then? she thought inquiringly, wondering how it would ever get the objects up there.

Very well, it thought, wheeling off towards her bedroom, tempting Ryouko to add the adverb *merrily*, though she knew that the device was too simple to have emotions like that.

Curious, Ryouko followed it back to her room. It stopped in front of her desk, then *levitated* straight off the floor, startling Ryouko, who had to remind herself that, yes, antigrav did exist—it was just a rare extravagance seen primarily on spacecraft, aircraft, and very expensive toys.

It landed gently on her desk, a large metallic box sliding out of its side and landing next to it with a light thump. The box was 3 inches on each side and about 2 inches high. Ryouko had a feeling she knew what it was.

Very different from the standard packbot, she mentally corrected.

Ryouko didn't need to look at her ring to know that she was still nearly full, metaphorically speaking, but she walked to the box all the same, the box springing open at her command. Inside, three grief cubes nestled on some sort of white material she couldn't identify. Three was overkill, but as they had said, they were careful with new recruits.

She picked one up with her hand, looking at it in the sunlight from her window. Somehow, they didn't seem quite like what she was expecting. The ones they had found next to the building three nights ago had seemed to ooze malevolence. These seemed quiet, almost docile.

The ones from then had been full, though, whereas these were empty. It made sense.

Still, it unsettled her.

Whatever the case, though, these were definitely empty. She could tell.

She placed the one she had been holding on the table, then summoned her soul gem and placed it next to the cube, The gem discharged a burst of darkness, particles of pure black flying toward the cube for maybe ten seconds, then returned to dormancy.

Ryouko sighed, because it seemed like the right thing to do. It was hard to describe—it was almost

like her stress level had dropped, ever so slightly.

Then the ring reappeared on her finger, and she placed the cube back in the box.

The packbot watched the process unfold with the unblinking stare of its round optical sensor.

Very good, it thought. *Should you fully utilize one, feel free to leave it on the table or in the box, and I will take care of it. Alternatively, if you're not home, you may summon an air drone yourself at any time.*

You'll take care of it? Ryouko thought. *Does that mean you're not leaving?*

That is correct, the drone thought. *I will stay here and watch over the cubes. This fulfills multiple purposes. Besides providing convenience, I can also warn civilians not to touch them. The box itself also provides warning in the eventuality of the cubes spawning demons. This is highly unlikely, given their empty state, but a theoretical possibility. I can leave if you wish, but otherwise I have been assigned to this residence until your departure.*

Wait, how would the box know? Ryouko asked. *Demons should be invisible to it.*

Yes, but grief cubes are not. If one disappears mysteriously, it assumes the worst.

Oh, right. Well, uh, don't worry about it. You can stay.

The robot set itself down onto her desk, retracting its wheels back into its body, until it was just a smooth shell on the desk, with its optical sensor facing the box silently.

Ryouko lay back down on her bed, taking the moment to stare at her ceiling. She didn't have anything planned for today.

Maybe I should study, she thought.

"Current ground combat doctrine emphasizes mobility, flexibility, and survivability," her TacComp recited to her. "The lesson of the Unification Wars is that, with the technological ability of every individual soldier to achieve unprecedented levels of battlefield awareness, it is impossible to conceal weaknesses from opponents. Truly hardened defenses can be circumvented and rendered pointless, while in every other combat sector, victory goes to whoever can strike the other's weaknesses first. With the propensity of both sides to use orbital firepower to ravage large expanses of land, it is rarely feasible to mount a successful defense in depth. The proper response to an impending enemy offensive is to attack first; the proper response to a surprise attack is to seek counter-attack. Neutralizing command-and-control and destroying communications is disproportionately effective compared to the mere destruction of materiel."

It recited the text to Ryouko at a pace far faster than any human could speak; faster than she could read, even, taking advantage of her implants to pour the information into her thought processes.

She lay on her bed, looking up, but instead of her ceiling, saw the visual accompaniment to the topic, consisting of diagrams or videos illustrating whatever was being talked about, flashing by at a similarly enormous rate. Usually, the point was clear enough, but occasionally the audio slowed down so that the accompanying video could be taken in; video intake could not be accelerated to anywhere near the rate of audio intake.

As the words flowed by, she could *sense* the plethora of possible branch-points, where it was possible to dive into subtopics or related topics, and then into other topics from there, in an

unending maze of exploration. It was as if every time she opened a box, she found a hundred others inside.

Just to make it clearer, her mental “screen” also displayed the list of topics, rapidly flowing and shifting, and also displaying prominently the few topics she had flagged for future follow-up.

Since the device had stopped and was waiting expectantly, Ryouko thought about it, then chose a topic to continue. She chose combat command.

"Compared with past eras, combat command is heavily decentralized. Infantrymen and officers are, compared to the past, extremely autonomous, entrusted to analyze the situation and do the right thing every time, with only vague objectives handed down from above. This serves to improve all three functions of command—mentioned later—improve unit mobility and flexibility, and improve the ability of the command structure to survive decapitation strikes. However, the command structure is still vital to both alien and human, because of the necessity of the critical currency of *information*."

"Even with ubiquitous Tactical Computers and embedded intelligence in nearly every device, soldiers are inundated with deluges of information vastly in excess of what can be processed. For instance, the average infantryman is required to maintain constant awareness of every other combat unit in the area, every member of the unit, and of every nearby drone semi-sentient and above, in the last case often issuing combat directives."

Ryouko thought about diving further into either combat drones or infantry combat, especially given the juicy diagrams flying by, showing types of common combat drones and equipment, but decided to let it continue.

"In relation to this, the command hierarchy serves three critical functions. The first is to delegate the distribution of information, deciding who receives what information. This task is handled by command AIs, with oversight by senior officers."

"The second is the classical provision of command. Individual units and soldiers, focused on survival and the achievement of local tactical objectives, do not have the spare processing capacity to analyze the battlefield as a whole, nor would they be likely to ever prioritize the performance of such an analysis. Higher-level objectives are given by the top of the command structure, viewing the battlefield from the highest levels, and drawing upon immense computing power, usually the full power of an underground computing cluster or battlecruiser processing core. These objectives are disseminated downward, reprocessed into smaller objectives by subordinate officers, and so forth."

"The third is the provision of *authority*. Often, decisions must be made with insufficient information and insufficient time, with too many variables for the command and control systems to reach an obvious, or even likely, choice. In these situations, *something* must be decided and agreed upon, for better or worse."

"The importance of these three roles is reflected in the design of the command structure, which is built to be robust, with authority and processing resources being redirected automatically to the correct person in every situation, depending both on rank and location. This is true from the Field Marshal all the way down to the sergeant. The command hierarchy is designed to keep operating under nearly every circumstance, and has in several instances survived decimation of upwards of sixty percent."

"To truly disorganize the ground forces of either side, it is not sufficient to take out command-and-control; one must also destroy effective communication. Combat communications is the lifeblood of military operations. Soldiers rely on it to keep attuned with members of their squads, and with

other squads in the area. Brigades and divisions use them to keep an eye on each other, and on the enemy. Commanders rely on it so that they may comprehend the battlefield and issue correct commands. The command structure survives the loss of its members by redistributing itself through its communication networks, and it survives the loss of communication by relying on its local commanders, but it is very hard pressed to survive both. Ground combat doctrines emphasize the elimination of both to ensure victory."

Again, Ryouko was given a wide range options, including options for reading more detail about communication networks and command provision, about the operations of the chain of command, and so forth. She chose one particularly close to heart.

"The MG branch of the military is its own unique element of the officer corps, each member serving as both part of the command structure and a hard-hitting unit in her own right. Power type and effective firepower varies, but each MG is the equivalent of at least a company, with numerous examples of mages providing combat performance at the battalion or even regimental level, which is particularly impressive given the enormous combined firepower of modern military units."

"As *the* reason the human military can even compete with the alien military, mage capabilities and performance underlie a significant portion of military doctrine, both on the ground and in space. Combat experience early in the current war revealed that, while formidable opponents, isolated mages can be eliminated with relative ease in detail, the Cephalopods learning quickly that extremely concentrated firepower on one would often provide elimination. On the other hand, the concentration of too many mages in one location allows for the possibility of a superweapon strike, as has been proven with ghastly results several times."

"This experience proved that granting mages officer status, as politically motivated as it was, was a wise decision. As a result of these previous experiences, MG combat doctrine states that individual deployment on the battlefield is to be avoided unless absolutely necessary. In the field, mages rely on the platoon or company they command for fire support and screening, and cooperate heavily with the other mages in their division. Even at the head of units, mages rarely operate in groups of less than five, averaging around a dozen, and occasionally turning out a whole regiment's worth of fifty or so. It is not an uncommon sight to see a group of MG's leading an assault on a position, each relaying commands to individual units as they go."

"Besides merely improving survivability, this concentration of mages dramatically improves combat performance, especially on the offensive. Mages are naturally suited for the offensive and counter-offensive, outputting far more firepower than they can take in return. They especially demand *rapid* advances, because of the limitations imposed by grief cube supply. Because of this, ground combat doctrine has molded around them; the hyper-aggressive nature of ground combat is simply the most effective way to function."

"The closest analogy that can be made is to the role of armor in the early stages of Second World War, but even this analogy is not perfect. Still, it is instructive that the experiences of the Nazi blitzkrieg early in the war led to the adoption of armor concentration tactics by all participants, with the use of armor as the spear point of offensives. It is for the same reasons that mages in the field are concentrated into magical divisions, analogous to the armored divisions of the past, though these divisions are, of course, well supplied with armor as well. Indeed, at the very apex of offensive thrusts, it is common to find shock troops of MG's detached from standard units entirely, sacrificing defensive capability for shock and awe."

"It is not, however, true that mages are entirely absent from other divisions. Nearly all divisions have a few specialist mages performing roles designed to optimize their contribution to the division. These are usually instructed to shun heavy combat."

At this point, Ryouko's TacComp stopped again, and she again sensed a range of options to continue. She could choose for elaboration on divisional allocation of mages, a description of policies regarding preserving MG lives at the expense of others, or a continuation of the previous topic into space combat and combat doctrine.

I want to come back to space combat later, but for now, what is this MG life policy? she thought, driven by morbid curiosity, among other things.

"The plain truth is: the life of the average MG is worth far more than the average infantryman, far more than any armored vehicle or piece of equipment, and more than the average platoon or company. Because of this, one of the harshest points of basic training is for mages to forgo heroism, and to save themselves even at the expense of ordering their own unit into certain death. It is one of the most frequently disobeyed and least-enforced doctrines on the books, but it does exist, and has a measurably positive effect on MG survival."

"This point is also strongly indoctrinated on the other end, with the relevant combat units being constantly reminded that self-sacrifice for one's MG commander is the moral and war-winning thing to do. Units are encouraged to treat their commanders as the equivalent of unit flags, and the point is made that it would be shameful for centenarians such as them to allow a teenage girl to die to save their own life, even if in many cases the girls aren't exactly teenaged. This end of the doctrine, though voluntary, is much more frequently obeyed, with countless instances of individual soldiers or units performing suicidal actions, often disobeying orders, to ensure the survival of the unit commander. Indeed, there are several decorations awarded for just this kind of action, with any insubordination usually glossed over or ignored. It is one of the more interesting aspects of military culture."

Here, her TacComp stopped again, and Ryouko leaned back against her wall to take it in. Yes, it made sense, but…it just seemed so cruel. She wasn't surprised that the doctrine was often disobeyed.

As for the other end, she wasn't sure how she would feel, being idolized as a battle flag.

I guess I'll find out, she thought.

She started to ask for the device to continue, but received the internal *ping!* of an arriving message, or rather, of an arriving message that she needed to read. She was receiving a lot more messages nowadays, but now also had a much better personal filter for it.

So, she thought. *Kyouko wants me to join her on another demon hunt. Why not, I guess. It's not as if I had anything else planned.*

She got up and headed out the door, grabbing the box of grief cubes as an afterthought. Unnoticed, a surveillance drone the size of a fly clung to her hair, cloaked.

This time, Ryouko wasn't going with just Kyouko, but was part of a larger group. The message said that they were gathering in the Cult's "rear garden" and that was where she went, mildly surprised to find herself pulling up next to a building that resembled nothing less than a restored European church. The side she was looking at was shaded, facing away from the afternoon sunlight.

It was actually pretty impressive it got sunlight at all, this far down, now that she thought of it.

She was tempted to ask the vehicle if it was sure it was in the right place, but instead she stepped

out, having spotted someone familiar. Besides, she knew this was the right place; she certainly recognized most of the route by this point

Ryouko took a moment to look around at what was apparently a rose garden, sucked in a pungent lungful of rose scent—freshly amplified by nasal implants—then dove among the rows of planted vines to speak to Risa, the girl from yesterday, who was standing in the garden talking to Patricia. Ryouko was surprised to see them there, and said as much.

"I don't spend all day in the lab, you know," Patricia, adjusting her hair, acting affronted. "Occasionally I do other things too."

Risa shrugged.

“I lead this patrol group,” she said. “Patricia here is just tagging along. I didn’t mention it yesterday?”

Ryouko shook her head no, then focused a look at the other girl. It didn’t make sense, but did Risa seem nervous?

The girl turned and began to walk, gesturing at Ryouko to follow.

They maneuvered around the other girls and thorny rose vines that populated the Cult center's rear garden. Ryouko looked around, head tilting. The building looked so different here that it might as well have been a different building, she thought. It didn't help that the scent of roses prickled constantly at her nose. So far, her enhanced smell had been nothing but bothersome, though the manuals swore it would be useful in combat.

She found herself standing next to Kyouko, who was standing with her arms on her hips, looking over the rest of them. She seemed aggrieved at something, even as Ryouko mused that the pose made her look remarkably matronly. Perhaps it was something about her body language.

"Asaka applied to join Mami's command staff," Kyouko explained, gnawing at her—synthesized—beef jerky, without even bothering to wait for a conversation to start. "She'll be leaving soon. She sends her regards, and apologizes that she's leaving you early."

Kyouko looked at her with one eye, judging her reaction, while Risa watched the both of them quietly, eyes darting back and forth. Why was she being so quiet, come to think of it?

"You don't seem exactly shocked," Kyouko commented, seeming almost annoyed.

"Oh, well, she mentioned something about it yesterday," Ryouko said, shifting nervously. "I asked my questions then."

"Hmm."

Kyouko seemed distracted too. Ryouko would have left it alone, but Kyouko continued:

"Patricia is a valued scientist, but she's got it in her head that she wants to go, too. She just needs some practice to recover her combat skills; that's what she says. I tried to talk her out of it, but she won't listen. And—"

The girl shook her head, then aggressively tore off another piece of the meat.

"Anyway," Kyouko said. "This time will be a little different. You'll be coordinating with a larger group. It's pretty clear you shouldn't be a face-to-face fighter, but given your specific power set, we should have a nice role already laid out for you. You’ll see. It's your first time, so don't strain

yourself too much. Oh, and improvise. Don't be a machine."

Kyouko said the last sentence with a strange smile that unnerved her, because it didn't seem right coming from her. Other than that, Kyouko seemed to be in a hurry of some sort.

"Anyway, I can't go with you," Kyouko said, tugging absently at the bow in her hair. "So Risa and Patricia will be keeping you company. Patricia is fragile in close-combat, just like you, so you can be her transportation. Where is that girl anyway? I told her and Risa to follow you!"

Before Ryouko had a chance to say anything, Kyouko spun around, somehow focusing on the exact spot where Patricia was staring at a plant, lost in thought. A moment later, Patricia seemed to startle, then turned and walked towards them.

"Oh, sorry," she apologized. "I've got a lot on my mind."

"Soul gem sensing," Kyouko said, again before Ryouko could think to ask; indeed, before she even changed face expressions. "Useful if you master it, and if you know the people involved, though no one expects someone as new as you to be able to track anyone out of costume. Also, telepathy. Get used to it. Take care of her, the two of you. Introduce her to the others. Don't let her be a loner."

With that, Kyouko spun on her heel and stalked back into the building, almost as if she wanted to storm back in but couldn't out of propriety. She really seemed to be in a hurry.

Ryouko glanced at Patricia, who was wearing a bothered expression.

"What's with her?" she asked, figuring she might as well ask.

Patricia glanced downward.

"You've, uh, heard that Asaka and I are leaving, right?" she said, a moment later, fiddling with her ponytail. "But it's not just that. Somehow, us saying that triggered Maki saying she wants to leave, too. Kyouko's not happy."

"Ah, so she's unhappy you're all leaving?" Ryouko asked. "That makes sense, I guess."

She wondered if being unhappy made Kyouko more abrupt, and made her stop giving context to her sentences. Apparently so.

Patricia looked at her with an expression she couldn't decipher.

"Yeah, something like that," Patricia said.

Ryouko wanted to ask more, but the air was so thick with awkwardness that you could cut it with a knife. It hardly seemed an awkward enough topic to cause an atmosphere like this, but somehow it had happened.

She shifted a little, trying to think of what to say, but Risa pulled at her arm and drew her to some of the other girls, so she could introduce herself. Ryouko caught the point, stepping away and leaving Patricia with her thoughts.

This would be easy if the miasma weren't so damned clever, Risa thought to Ryouko, as they lunged and weaved their way through the high-rises. *We could just wait for someone's signal to disappear, then show up and take care of business. But of course the miasma forges the signature*

somehow. Same with the cameras. We have semi-sentients watching the signals anyway, since sometimes it's obviously faked. You don't usually see a whole cohort of pedestrians suddenly stop and stand around on the same stretch of skyway for more than ten minutes, but we've gotten false positives before.

I had no idea the miasma was so sophisticated, Ryouko thought.

It's almost a creature on its own, Patricia thought. *It has to be, for regular humans to have missed it for so many centuries. There's considerable evidence that demon miasmas change over time, becoming more sophisticated to evade surveillance. It's bothersome, but that's how it always has been, or so we think. In the past there were even differences depending on where you were on the planet, though nowadays most observed diversity is interplanetary.*

Patricia was saving herself work by standing on some sort of flying drone, accompanied by a small fleet of others, all angry looking, complete with gun turrets. Ryouko, who was hoofing it to get practice, was mildly envious.

There was one last month where the camera showed a party spilling out of a bar into the street, explaining why all these people were standing around, Risa thought. *Of course, we still noticed, because it didn't make sense that a bunch of people who had been walking down the street the moment before were suddenly part of a bar party, but the damn things are getting better. Slowly. Very slowly, which is lucky for us.*

The ones we can catch the easy way are only a minority, Patricia thought. *Most miasmas are found the old-fashioned way, with statistical forecasting and carefully plotted patrol routes. It's actually better to find one on patrol, since in that case it's usually a lot smaller when you find it, and probably hasn't ensnared anyone yet. The downside is that when one appears in a very low probability area, it's often missed for quite a while, like what happened to you.*

Patricia stopped there, realizing that she had referred to an event that wasn't exactly natural. A look crossed her face, but she didn't say any more.

Ryouko navigated the seemingly endless urban forest, vaulting from tube to platform to balcony, up and down and forward. Most around her did it the old-fashioned way, jumping and lunging like she did. Others augmented their travel with magic, tempting Ryouko sorely to teleport a little, because it seemed so much easier. As she watched, one girl performed a giant leap towards a platform, except that it was clear she hadn't put enough strength into the jump and was going to fall short—until she shot up and over the edge at the last moment, defying physics to perform an aerial maneuver.

"Showoff," Ryouko heard someone—she didn't catch who—mutter under their breath.

Every one of us is capable of limited aerial maneuvering, Patricia thought, *but it usually doesn't look all that impressive. Course corrections while falling, ridiculously high jumps, things like that. Some girls have an affinity, though, or start off with extra skills. With enough practice or the right power set, you can even fly, but it's hard, and it's even harder to learn how to do it so it doesn't blacken your gem in a couple of minutes. Most of the Ancients could do it, if you forced them, since everyone wants to learn how to fly, but it's just not cost-effective unless you really put a lot of time into it. True fliers are rare.*

Of course, Akemi-san could do it from day one, Risa thought. *Just one of those things. And before you get too much of the wrong idea, Rohr-san is talking about flying outside of the miasma. It's actually a lot easier inside a miasma, for whatever reason, though it still takes some practice. Doesn't help against aliens, though.*

Ryouko thought of her earlier hunt with Kyouko, where Kyouko had seemed to fall out of the sky with ridiculous precision, and her mind had rebelled slightly, thinking that there was something wrong with her trajectory—

*What is this learning business anyway? s*he thought. *I thought we had specific powers.*

We do, Patricia thought. *And you'll usually never lose those, but our magic is forged by our imagination. If you focus hard enough, you can learn anything that's possible, or so we think. It's just very, very hard to learn anything that doesn't naturally follow from what you already know, which is why basically everyone stays close to their original skill set. You don't see clairvoyants trying to learn lightning skills, for example.*

Mami-san didn't, though, Risa thought. *She taught herself those muskets, did you know that? And a lot of the things Kyouko does weren't part of her original spear skills. And Asaka is just weird.*

Weird in what way? Ryouko thought.

Hold on, Risa thought, eyes unfocusing.

In the intervening pause, Ryouko focused back on the rest of the group. While they had talked, she had focused on only the three of them, but in truth there was a constant background group chatter, hovering on the edge of her consciousness, ever-present. It was a lot less serious than she expected, with plenty of gossiping and laughter, with only the occasional intervention of jargon, usually someone noting a landmark or that they had passed "Point 4B" on the patrol route. It was hardly necessary, since Ryouko had an explicit minimap in the lower corner of her vision that she could stare at if she wanted to.

As Kyouko had said, this time was different. This time, she had a constant vague awareness of soul gems discharging around her. It was difficult to describe: Ryouko could only think of it as the sensation that someone was behind you, except amplified and multiplied, so that there was a constant vague awareness of someone two buildings to your right and one building back, or two floors above you, or three buildings ahead of you. It was eerily precise, and stayed with you, like an itch that couldn't be scratched.

What was it? Patricia thought, as Risa's eyes focused again. Somehow she had kept moving, despite not paying attention.

Nothing important, Risa thought. *Anyway, Asaka—*

Some internal signal told to Ryouko to *Stop!* and she did so, mid-crouch on a small drone landing platform.

Only then did she have time to simultaneously wonder why she was stopping and why everyone else had also done so.

Someone in the group felt a miasma, her TacComp thought. *So a signal was generated.*

Yes, that was true. The blinking dot was showing up on her minimap, pointing towards the suspected position, but the telepathic chatter was already reorienting in the proper direction. Small, the chatter said. Incomplete.

Suddenly she could feel it too, weak but growing in size and power, forming along a skyway that ran along the edge of several commercial facilities. Subtly, but organically, the group firmed up, idle commentary dying down, trajectory shifting slightly.

Since this is your first time with this device, her TacComp thought, *proper protocol is to remind*

you to pay due attention to your team interface, so as to coordinate with maximal efficiency.

Noted, she thought.

Ryouko assumed it was referring, among other things, to the minimap, which was starting to churn out information about numbers, size, and so forth, presumably "gleaned" from her or any of the others. It was completely unnecessary, since she could sense that information herself on the level of instinct, but she supposed it would be useful for someone coming in from longer range.

Alright, Risa began, her thought resounding throughout the group. *Small it might be, but we've already got four civilian transponders localizing to the area. Obviously they're not going to get us any accurate fixes. Hyori, where are they?*

Way ahead of you, the clairvoyant Hyori thought, as she marked the locations of the humans on the map. *We're late. They're already enthralled.*

Damn. Well, today we have a teleporter, so we'll use standard teleporter extraction procedure. The rest of you, get in position.

Barrier-generator escort as you pull them out, Patricia thought before Ryouko could ask. *Minimum. Ideally, stealth generator, clairvoyant, and telepath as well. We don't have a stealth generator today—they're kind of rare—but—*

She stopped, as the personnel in question began to appear next to Ryouko. First came a girl in blue and silver, dressed for all the world like a medieval European swordsman in plate armor, lacking only the helmet. As Ryouko watched, the girl rubbed the outer side of her enormous kite shield with her sword hand, wielding her enormous Zweihänder—taller than the girl herself—as if it weighed nothing. She smiled broadly at Ryouko when she saw her looking, brushing aside the blonde hair in her eyes with her other hand.

The clairvoyant Hyori landed a moment later, dressed more conservatively in patterns of black and white.

Risa, already there with her ax and red costume, stepped towards her.

"Most teleporters are perfectly capable of teleporting to a location without visualizing it," she instructed, "and I know you are too, but it is considered safer to give exact clairvoyant guidance, because of all the demons about, and in case of unexpected movement. Unfortunately, it requires a bit of jury-rigging. She needs touch for her teleportation: get closer, the two of you."

The last sentence was directed at the others, who dutifully shifted towards her and grabbed her two shoulders.

"Close your eyes," Risa instructed, grabbing one of her hands. "It helps me."

Ryouko did so, not quite sure what was going on.

Then she saw it, the darkness behind her eyes replaced by a startlingly clear image of one of the victims, standing listlessly among a crowd of demons, at the entrance to one of the buildings. She realized, then, somehow, that it was an image captured by the clairvoyant and forwarded by the telepath. Jury-rigged, indeed.

It is best to do this quickly, Risa thought. *Jumping to each one in succession and then back out here, as fast as possible, as soon as you get the image and an idea of where is safest. We'll go as soon as the barrier is up.*

“Barrier on,” the armored girl said quietly, a moment later.

Ryouko focused, drawing on her power, pulling on something—

And they were there. She opened her eyes, and they were already next to the civilian, a woman dressed for a party, in a flowing black dress. The barrier shimmered translucent blue around them, slicing two demons caught in the wrong position in half.

Their bodies began to vaporize, the other demons started to turn, and Hyori grabbed the woman’s arm.

Ryouko closed her eyes, and visualized the next person—

They were done with breathtaking speed, Ryouko reappearing on the platform with the four civilians a scant forty seconds later. The barrier vanished, the others let go of her, and the four humans seemed to come back to life, blinking at the world around them.

Alright, civilians clear, Risa thought. *But we’ve lost our surprise. Melee, pen them in, crowd control. Long range, open fire. Chop chop, everyone. Patricia, put those fliers to use and give us some elevated vantage points.*

I know, Patricia thought sardonically. *It’s all anyone ever wants from me.*

Ryouko blinked, as she felt the girls around her shifting positions, brightening significantly with the discharge of power.

“I know you’ve still got the blinks left in you,” Risa said to Ryouko, without explaining *how* she knew that. “So you’re going to make a bomb squad. Patricia, go with her. You know what Kyouko said.”

With that, Risa stepped straight onto one of Patricia’s drones and rode it up into the sky without so much as a farewell.

‘Bomb squad’, Ryouko’s TacComp thought pedantically, but with extreme speed, *is the colloquial term for a TAD squad, a collection of mages with area of effect techniques that wanders a battlefield doing hit-and-run damage. Demon hunting guidelines recommend the construction of one whenever Teleporter and Barrier support is available, the teleporter providing mobility and the barrier generator providing defense against coincident incoming fire, both enemy and friendly. Telepath and Clairvoyant support is preferred if possible, but not necessary. Such support may negate the necessity of Barrier support, though this is not recommended.*

Targeting is provided by local command and control. Squad is reminded that extraction of other girls in danger takes precedence over TAD Squad activities, except in extraordinary circumstances. Proper protocol in such a case is the immediate return of entire squad to a safe location, followed by extraction.

That thought had barely completed before other team members began arriving at her location. Specifically, there were three: dark yellow, cerulean, and bright green. They knew what to do this time, grabbing at her or each other. Two of them began perceptibly gathering power for something. The girl in blue and silver armor extended her barrier again. The clairvoyant, however, had left.

A targeting beacon appeared on her minimap, marking the desired location, with other possible positions also marked less prominent. A gradient map marked the known distribution of demons,

though when Ryouko shifted her attention to it, she got a warning that accuracy was not guaranteed, given the lack of audiovisual feeds. Certain splotches were blacked out entirely—no information.

Go for it, Patricia thought.

Ryouko nodded, then reached for that inner calm, the slight sense of distortion and puncture that she desired—

And then, once again, she was there, standing on the street, her companions powering their attacks, at demons that were still too busy heading for the perimeter to spar with the melee girls, or trying to aim upwards at the girls attacking from the sky. The area around the small miasma was deserted of humans, incoming pedestrians warned away, traffic diverted, and the closest offices emptied out—this was not strictly necessary, since the miasma contained the physical effects of their attacks, but it was definitely good practice, in case the miasma spread, or some demons phased through a wall into a building, as they were wont to do occasionally.

As Ryouko watched, more demons materialized, seemingly out of thin air. The miasma was still incomplete.

Incoming, the armored girl thought.

Something slammed against the top of the barrier, the translucent blue turning opaque and sparking, screaming with sound.

Sorry, someone distant thought. *Couldn't cancel it in time.*

That's why I'm here, the armored girl thought pleasantly.

Then with an expressive push of her arms, the barrier slammed outward, shoving aside some demons that had been standing too close, vaporizing most of them.

The girl in the yellow costume levitated slightly into the air, forming what appeared to be a ball of lightning around her, which slowly surged outward, enveloping them all. It looked like it would hurt them too, but Ryouko knew somehow not to try to escape. The electricity passed by her without harm, then, suddenly, exploded outward in a snapping shockwave, incinerating more of the crowd of demons around them and seeming to paralyze a few more beyond that.

The one in cerulean stood still with concentration, and it was unclear what she was doing until countless hands in her signature color shot out of the street around them and reached for their targets.

Finally, the other one in green summoned what appeared to be a ring of ancient *artillery* pieces, and before Ryouko could grow concerned at the prospect of launching artillery shells in a residential area, a shattering boom announced their firing. The buildings survived, completely intact.

Right, the miasma, Ryouko thought.

Then, they headed back for her, reaching towards them as the surviving demons sought them as targets. A horde of freshly summoned drones scrabbled outward from under them, lasers firing, even though Patricia had never let go of Ryouko's hand, and drones shouldn't have been able to function in the miasma, much less target or hurt any demons.

Now! Next target! Patricia thought.

Ryouko swallowed any trepidation, gritted her teeth, and raised her left arm, firing a fusillade of strings imprecisely at a set of targets—and departed.

Improvisation, Kyouko had said, and they arrived at the next target with a set of demon pieces disintegrating into cubes.

Very good! Risa approved, from somewhere distant.

They only needed to perform the feat twice. After the second time, Risa declared that they were mostly done and it was time for clean-up. That apparently meant the end of heavy fire, the withdrawal of more fragile girls—which included Ryouko—and the breakup of the otherwise careful perimeter, the melee girls now free to choose targets as they saw fit.

Ryouko watched with Patricia as the remains of the miasma disintegrated. Some of the girls were already tracking down grief cubes, relying on a combination of their extra senses and their internal records of where demons had died. Some even pulled in cubes telekinetically. Whatever worked; the period of grand organization was over, though there was still significant local teamwork, melee girls grouping demons for attacks from those with more range.

A spear girl volunteered to stay with the four civilians and take them home. Risa approved it, since they had extra personnel.

That was pretty easy, to be honest, Ryouko thought, as they began the patrol again, sealing this thought into a private channel with Patricia. *I barely needed those grief cubes.*

The majority of encounters are not like the one that tried to kill you, Patricia thought. *Most are like this. You can accomplish a lot in large teams like this, but imagine what it was like back when it was teams of three and more vulnerable girls like clairvoyants and telepaths had to enter combat directly.*

Ryouko thought about it, as recommended. She had always known, for example, that girls with more robust combat skills were much more heavily represented in the older cohorts compared to the more fragile types— such as, say, healers—but knowing that was much different from experiencing it, however indirectly.

Well, she was glad she lived now, and not in the past, but there were a lot of reasons to be glad for that.

The next encounter was much larger, the miasma stretching over a much larger area and the number of victims greater. This time, when Ryouko finally pulled out of the area with a small crowd of ten or so victims, she was starting to feel the strain on her teleports, and stood alone on a nearby building, waiting to recover, before she signaled that she was ready to try the “bomb squad again”.

Ryouko had multiple opportunities to try the trick she had tried the first time, lodging a string into the ground in the middle of a group of demons, then tearing them in half with a partial teleport, relayed through the ground.

It was effective. She liked it.

They weren’t able to maintain a complete surround this time, and Ryouko could feel in the back of her mind the girls on the ground dashing back and forth to reach new positions to head off possible extensions of the miasma. Twice, at the end of a bomb run, Risa told her to shift one of the melee girls to a new location. She complied, and both times she appeared with the barrier-

generator, made contact with the girl, teleported to the new location, then got out.

It was cold, fast, and efficient, almost to the point of being routine, but it got results. They shredded demons in great numbers and only once did Ryouko see anyone in great personal danger. It got things done, but she didn't feel any of the excitement she had the first time.

The one and only break from routine she experienced that day started a burst of invective piped into her mind, in the middle of their fifth "bombing run". It was, however, something she would definitely remember.

Son of a—I need extraction! the telepathic voice pleaded. *Extraction! Those bastards have spawned right on top of me! I can't hold out! I—*

Get over there! Risa ordered, to Ryouko directly.

The command was unnecessary, since the girls with Ryouko were already returning, reestablishing their touch contact with her.

She exited the miasma, and almost jumped straight for the newly marked spot when she felt the large armored hand of Sarah Kaisan, the barrier-generator—*her* barrier-generator, she was starting to think of the girl—on her shoulder.

"It's not safe to teleport blindly into any area," the girl said, seriously, Japanese slightly accented. "Not without some sort of protection. You'll learn."

Ryouko nodded, slightly ashamed, then waited for the barrier to appear.

This time, when they appeared, Sarah didn't wait, sending her barrier outward in an immediate blast. Ryouko grabbed the girl they were seeking by a random body part, and had just enough time to see the barrier pass harmlessly through her.

The image stuck in her mind, the girl in efficient, tight-fitting black, enormous old-style gunpowder sniper rifle holstered on her back, snarling and firing an assault rifle with her right hand, dodging incoming demon lasers while running. The second gun was modern, and clearly not magically summoned.

But what really caught Ryouko's eye was her left arm, which was *missing* below the elbow, dripping blood into widely scattered droplets. Then she looked up, and when the sniper turned to look at her, Ryouko could see that she was missing an *eye*, and a large part of her face there, the exposed white of the shattered socket contrasting with the gory mess that accompanied it.

For an insane moment, Ryouko mused that she had no idea how the girl was even standing.

"My fault," the girl said, when they got back. "They snuck up on me where I was camping. I *know* they can move up inside buildings, but I wasn't paying attention, I was just so into the killing—oh God, my shrink is going to give me hell for this. I thought I was *over* doing stuff like that."

The girl was hugging herself, shivering slightly, while the others soothed her and applied grief cubes to her angrily dark gem.

But Ryouko wasn't hearing any of it. Instead she was standing off to the side, staring at a building. She would have been bent over, trying not the vomit, except that now, in the future, that kind of reaction was automatically suppressed. So instead, she stared.

“Get a hold of yourself,” Patricia said, appearing next to her.

Ryouko looked up at her, face blanched.

“Better you see this now rather than later,” the girl said, gentle but firm, “but we have no time for this. She needs an evac, and you’re the teleporter with the two hundred kilometer range. If you can’t handle it, have your TacComp suppress your emotions. It diminishes your power, but the capability is meant for situations like this.”

Ryouko shook her head, and without a word, walked back shakily, reaching for the other girl’s shoulder, her HUD already telling her where exactly she needed to go.

“Will she be alright?” Ryouko asked the staff members who greeted them, back at the armory hospital.

“She’ll be fine,” the nurse said, smiling back at her. “For someone like you, this is nothing.”

It was the same nurse Ryouko had seen that day, so seemingly long ago, where she had received her implant upgrades, and visited a hospital for the first time in her memory.

Ryouko nodded, but only vaguely. She was starting to feel strangely detached from the whole incident, as if it was hardly relevant to her at all. Psychological coping, probably. She could even think that about herself.

She was already being recalled to the hunt.

She followed the girl on the stretcher for a while, mind blank, waiting until she was sure she could make the five kilometers or so back, that she could perform the teleport. She gripped the hand of the girl in the stretcher, who had sedated herself the moment they arrived, and stopped abruptly in the middle of the hallway, ignoring the strange looks she received.

She focused, hard, and returned.

Ryouko saw much that day, clever combinations of powers and skills she hadn’t ever considered before. She saw the value of Patricia’s drones, which functioned even in the miasma, carrying girls in the sky, from where they could bombard at pleasure. She saw one of the girls jump straight up and perform a flight maneuver, angling around a building to the top of another, all to get a better firing position for the girl she was carrying.

She saw Risa, standing on a drone high in the sky, watching it all with an intense stare, guiding her ax telekinetically at the hordes below, and finally Ryouko realized that she was *reading the minds of the demons*, reading their intended movements and who they were targeting, directing the hunt. She felt stupid then, because what else would the purpose of a telepath even be?

She saw that while she had been gone, the girl with the lightning, and the girl with the reaching hands, had occupied themselves paralyzing demons, so that a calculated bombardment, or a few easy dashes from a swordsman, could shatter them all. She saw Sarah wield her barrier as a wall, wrapping demons into a tight group, for the same purpose.

She saw the girls on the ground, calling down fire support and air strikes on the desired spots, and a rain of fire, arrows, or purple magic arriving seconds later.

Ryouko understood, finally, how the MSY was so damn *efficient.*

Still, though, late that night, as she stared at her ceiling yet again, she thought about what the nurse had said.

For someone like you, this is nothing.

Yes, that was true, wasn't it?

APPENDICES:

Appendix A (Mages First):

["The sense of difference, of uniqueness, and even of superiority that arose during the second century of the MSY's existence was perhaps inevitable. By then, the MSY was well-versed in the art of business and high finance, capable of providing its members, even in the poorest regions, a living well in line with the middle classes of the richest nations. For many, especially those who actively participated in the upper levels of MSY operations, the organization provided even more than that, granting a lifestyle that was outright luxurious. It was a far cry from the poverty from which so many of its members had to be pulled, and this newfound wealth began to isolate its members from the masses of humans that surrounded them on the street.]***

[Similarly, the MSY had become increasingly adept at the manipulation of governments, regularly interfering with its proxies in the results of elections, the construction of legislation, and the provision of law and order, in some regions exercising outright dominance over local police and security forces. What had begun as an effort to provide itself with protection from the police, and to provide its businesses with favorable government policy had, through over a century of mission creep, morphed into something completely unrecognizable. The MSY's tentacles stretched everywhere, from the poorest and most remote regions of the world, to the legislative chambers of the most powerful governments.]***

[Over time, the attitude of the MSY had become increasingly more paternalistic, taking into itself more and more responsibility for the state of the world. Beginning with the MSY's crushing of Asia's prostitution and sex trafficking rings—and consequent refashioning of organized crime into yet another MSY proxy—and culminating in the engineered downfall of the North Korean government and founding of the Black Heart, the organization absorbed more and more power and self-appointed responsibility into itself, until it became customary for Rules Committee politicians to paint the MSY in their rhetoric as guardians of the world, and for the Leadership Committee to consider in secret session the fomenting of revolution.]***

[In the war zones of the world, where the organization had once been happy merely to maintain secrecy, MSY front charities provided food and education to the populace, MSY proxies attempted to reform governments, and MSY special forces hunted warlords and terrorists, nominally in the name of protecting its members in the area, but increasingly out of a sense of noblesse oblige at the top, a noble obligation that came at a significant cost, both in resources and in casualties.]***

[It was in this environment of isolation, secret power, and immortality that the so-called Mages First movement developed. It was not a true movement, possessing no leadership or official organization of any kind. Instead, it was a sociological movement, composed of the changing actions and beliefs of the mages of the organization, and would only be named late in its existence,

by one of the MSY's own scholars. Nonetheless, the movement's lasting effects would persist in MSY culture for centuries, up to even the present day. It has never really left us.]***

[Increasingly, the magical girls of the MSY began to feel themselves superior to the rest of the humanity. Wasn't it obvious in their power, their immortality, their wealth, their influence over the world, their moral superiority? While governments bickered, they went out of their way to save the poor and downtrodden, who didn't even appreciate their efforts. Why *shouldn't* they dominate? Why *shouldn't* they focus more on themselves, on their own membership, instead of wasting resources and risking their lives fighting for people who didn't even know they existed and who, after all, would be dead in a short century or so, while they themselves lived on. Wasn't it time to take a more rational approach? It would be much more resource efficient to withdraw from the more afflicted parts of the world, leaving only the demon-hunting teams. Contractees from poor areas could be relocated to richer countries, or could have they and their families ensconced into protected mansions, protected from the violence and poverty outside. It wasn't possible to save the whole world, so shouldn't they at least try to save themselves?]***

[This kind of viewpoint horrified the eldest girls, most of whom had known early lives of poverty and drudgery, who sympathized with the plight of the poor, and who hadn't spent their whole lives in comfort and power. They remembered what it was like to have friends constantly dying and falling into despair, and knew full well that they were human, not superhuman. From their positions atop the hierarchy they checked the actions of their subordinates, obtaining allies among mages recruited from the poor regions of the world, who were mostly *not* happy to see others arguing for the MSY to abandon their homelands to the four horsemen."]***

["Nonetheless, the Mages First viewpoint would have a significant impact on the actions of the MSY over the next century, paralyzing the organization in the face of the greatest cataclysm humanity had ever experienced. As the employment situation became truly catastrophic and the world began to split in two, the MSY sat and watched, collectively unable to decide between intervention and the inertia of staying in their comfortable, protected, hyperclass mansions. It would take a spark…]***

*—Julian Bradshaw, "Mahou Shoujo: Their World, their History", Excerpt. []*** indicates content requiring Level Three clearance or above.*

Differences of Knowledge

Chapter Summary

> Regarding the mention of Mami "learning" muskets in the previous chapter, I wasn't just making that up. That's actually from the Madoka PSP game which, while probably not being "fully" canon, is fully in-line with what you would expect from the series and, more importantly, was supervised and outlined by Urobuchi Gen. Thus, it's probably canon enough.
> (Well, except the bonus joke route, but that's obvious)
> Secondly, I realize that last chapter I said the archive entries are "canon". I should clarify: they're "canon" in the sense that (for example) Julian Bradshaw did write the text of the archive. They are, however, subject to all the biases and distortions that a given in-story author might want to put on it. FYI, Julian Bradshaw is usually reliable, but is also an academic who has been working with the MSY for at least a century (predating the reveal), and understandably quite cozy with the MSY. Make of that what you will.

"Many of the taboos and laws of this new age stem from the psychological scars of the Unification Wars, especially the appalling abuses of the so-called Freedom Alliance. The insane manipulations the rulers of the FA nations performed on themselves, their children, and their people would eventually lead to the numerous regulations and ethical committees that surround genetic research in our day, and to public skepticism about every genetic engineering project undertaken, even when performed for purposes as positive as the Eden Project. The use by some FA nations of cloned soldiery, programmed with genetics and implants to be unfailingly loyal, has led directly to the universal taboo on human cloning, though previous public reservations about implants have fallen away in light of their overwhelming utility. Finally, the horrors and visible agony of FA enslaved AIs would lead to universal support for greater AI autonomy."

"The undeniable utility of all the technologies involved has made them indispensible to society, but it is vital to understand the origins and purposes of ethical restrictions and public opinion. Without such an understanding, a researcher cannot function successfully, and may find his or her right to operate suspended."

—General Ethical Handbook for Researchers, Introduction

"In this new era of clarity and war, it is my resounding belief that this institution can contribute to the welfare of humanity, and to the execution of this war. With this newly renovated facility, the untapped potential of magical girls can and will be liberated, to the betterment of all. We seek the fire of Olympus, nothing less, and an end to this tragic war."

—Joanne Valentin, DS Physics, Incoming director of Prometheus Institute, speech at rededication of the Institute.

The day after the demon hunt, Ryouko attended that week's social gathering for new recruits, having been reminded to by her TacComp.

Initially, she had mulled over whether she wanted to go. As a rule, she disliked large gatherings of

her “peers”, having found over the years that while her friends understood her personality well enough to be fun to hang around, she found most other people to be painful, with their endless assumptions that she *must* have a focus she loved enough to study, and their attempts to draw her out on the topic.

Her own friends were, she reflected, carefully selected to be different. Chiaki was a childhood friend, so the rule didn’t apply to her, but Ruiko was endlessly flighty and indecisive, and Simona was on a different system entirely.

She ultimately decided that she should, on the grounds that everyone there would have entirely different concerns on their minds, being contracted. Plus, it seemed like a good idea to meet some of her possible future colleagues, even if there was no guarantee she would see any of them again.

That was how she found herself seated around a table with four other nervous-looking new girls, a veteran from the front and, of all people, Risa Flores again.

She was lucky, because she lived in Mitakihara, where the gathering was quite naturally scheduled. The other girls were pulled in from surrounding cities. It simply wasn’t possible to find that many contracts in the same city in the same week.

The group of them were having lunch at a “hand-made” restaurant, one of those foreign fusion types, stationed a respectable sixty floors up in the MSY corridor. From their vantage point, it was easy to spot such buildings as MSY Governmental Affairs—just a couple buildings to the west—, MSY Finance—just across the street, actually—, and so forth. Looking carefully, it was even possible to spot MSY Science Division, in the same rough area as the Cult headquarters she was getting so familiar with.

It was clearly intended to be impressive, in a “look at the view!” kind of way, and the other girls lingered at the entrance platform for a couple of minutes, taking still images of each other next to the scenery with their optical implants.

Ryouko stayed nearby politely and was a part of the group shot taken by one of their chaperones, but took none herself. She had been here before, multiple times. She also knew there was a more impressive, formal facility crowning the building they were standing in, where the sky wouldn’t be blocked by dozens of tubes. She said nothing, though.

It was supposed to be an informal gathering, so they showed up in casual wear, though Ryouko was fairly certain the new girls had all put more effort into their outfits than they would normally. One could tell.

The restaurant itself was an impressively windowed affair, dominating the outer ring of the building, with seats at the windows and lightly-colored artificial wood paneling on the inner side. Ryouko had no idea where the kitchen was, but it didn’t matter much, since the food and dishes were all dealt with by robotic carts that roamed the aisles, and the ordering was done off of a menu overlay that appeared before your eyes. Easy.

At the moment, she was focusing herself on industriously cutting her steak into easily consumable pieces. She had been the first to order, since she knew the menu of the place reasonably well, but had received her food at the same time as everyone else, after their initial round of hors d’oeuvres. Robots were good at things like that.

Steak, for lunch, being eaten by a teenage girl, of all things, she mused. Some things just didn’t matter in the future. Actually, that was something her grandfather would say. She didn’t really have any idea why it would be strange to eat steak for lunch, or what being a teenage girl had to do with anything.

She was just glad the "dysguesia" finally seemed to be dying down. Yes, she could taste that she was eating dead cow, but it wasn't bothersome anymore.

That was actually one of the reasons this place cost Allocs to eat at, though their hosts weren't mentioning it; she was eating actual meat, rather than the synthesized stuff. Same went for all the food served, including the mysterious fuzzy red leaves that came with her meat. It was apparently a vegetable imported from Nova Terra, which had an ecology and system of life remarkably compatible with human physiology, though the genetic code, inevitably, differed substantially. Close enough to Earth that some things could be eaten without poisoning yourself, but no bacteria coevolved to be pathogenic to humans, at least not intentionally. Ideal for colonization, which was why it was the first colonized, and a Core World.

Why was she thinking about this? Because she was awkward in social settings like this.

"So, um, what kind of power do you have?" asked a voice to her right, abruptly enough to startle her into almost dropping her fork.

Ryouko looked at the other girl, who was fiddling nervously with her ponytail. The girl was nearly as short as she was, something she had noted when she first saw her. Something about her face seemed to strongly suggest meekness—or perhaps it was the body language.

Nakihara Asami, her TacComp name-dropped into her mind.

"Teleportation," Ryouko said, even though they both knew that kind of information could easily be researched. That was one of the downsides of everyone having easy access to databases: there was a distinct lack of possible conversation starters.

"You?" Ryouko added, a moment later. She immediately cringed internally. That was a little too casual, she thought.

The other girl looked flustered and Ryouko realized that she was terribly nervous, and must have worked up a lot of courage to talk with Ryouko.

"Well, it's, er, not really easy to explain," Asami said, folding her hands and dodging Ryouko's gaze. "Gravity. It has to do with gravity. I can, uh, force things together and move them. It's a lot like telekinesis, they say, but I'm really good at compressing…things."

The girl smiled sheepishly, looking up again. Ryouko could see that the girl was rubbing her soul gem ring nervously.

"Ah, well, that sounds useful," Ryouko said, trying to be encouraging. "Some of us have skills for blowing things up that would pair well with that. I have one like that, an exploding arrow, though it's not really, um, what I'd call a specialty."

"Really? That sounds great!"

The girl was so desperately eager to please that Ryouko, who wasn't immune to feeling sympathy, turned to give the girl her attention. They made brief eye contact, then the other girl looked down, out the window.

"Have you gotten your upgrades yet?" Ryouko asked pleasantly, thinking of a likely topic.

"Oh, yeah, yeah," the girl said, looking up again. "I thought it was really interesting. A little scary though."

At that moment, Ryouko felt Risa's eye on her. She looked at the girl questioningly, but Risa

looked away. However, looking in her direction reminded her of something else.

Ryouko lowered her voice and leaned over.

“Have you noticed that Sanae-san”—the long-haired thirty-five-year-old next to Risa—“has had four cups of wine now?”

Sanae was the veteran that had been brought to answer their questions and reassure them that everything would be okay, or so Ryouko was assuming. Ryouko hadn’t been able to get anything juicy out of her, but had been watching her from the corner of her eye for most of the meal. While the girl seemed perfectly pleasant and certainly had her intoxication controls activated—the mass alcohol consumption was still rather strange, and served as a contrast to the awkward sips the rest of them were taking.

Asami glanced around to make sure no one else was listening.

“Well, yeah, but she doesn’t seem intoxicated,” she said. “Maybe—Maybe she just likes the taste. I’m not sure why else she’d be doing that.”

“Maybe.”

Ryouko drummed the table with her fingers for a moment.

“I wanted to be a xenobiologist, you know,” Asami said, unprompted.

“Really?” Ryouko asked, raising a forkful of disturbingly fuzzy leaves to her mouth.

“Yeah,” the girl said. “So you know, um, that plant you’re eating is, uh, *C1 Aspera Cibum*, from Nova Terra. Very expensive. They had to engineer it a little to make it truly edible.”

Ryouko knew that already, having looked it up while ordering, but nodded. Impressive to know from memory, which was how she assumed the girl knew. Besides, the girl looked so earnest…

“I mean, I’ve always liked plants and animals,” the girl said, “and I thought I could maybe get off of Earth that way. I’ve always wanted to visit the colonies. Well, I guess I’m getting to. Hopefully, at least.”

That piqued Ryouko’s interest, though she tried not to show it too obviously.

“You wanted to visit the colonies?” she asked.

“Well, sure,” the girl said, clutching her hands together and giving a little sigh. “It always seemed so romantic to me. Life on the frontier, all those exotic plants and animals. I’ve always wanted a fresh, unindustrialized planet to explore. Though I suppose these cephalopods are more than we bargained for.”

Ryouko was watching the girl carefully now. Such grand dreams, from a shy girl who had probably never seen a forest outside of careful preserves, and who had probably never seen a rain forest, the reviving forests for now mostly off-limits to all but scientists and a few rare tourist opportunities.

But how was that any different from Ryouko herself? She wanted to explore the universe, and had never even been on a spaceship. Their situations matched; Ryouko didn’t need to ask to know that the girl had probably never lived outside of the skyscrapers that dominated the view outside their window. Few ever did.

Plus, unlike many of the other girls Ryouko had met, this one did not automatically make assumptions about her based on her height and appearance. Couldn't, more like, since the other girl was just as short. And, Ryouko was realizing, she was the first one she had met who wasn't a *Sempai.*

"When are you leaving?" Ryouko asked. The question was a little sudden, and showed perhaps too much interest, but she wasn't sure she cared about that any more.

The girl tilted her head, then smiled shyly.

"Three days. You?"

"Exactly the same, actually," Ryouko responded. "I'm glad to meet you."

She stuck out her hand, which was awkward in the cramped distance between their two seats.

The other girl looked at it for a moment, slightly confused, then took it and shook it, meekly, her hand shake a little limp.

There was a brief moment of quiet, broken only by the clatter of silverware and chopsticks.

"Me too. I—I hope we'll see each other again," the girl said, finally, bowing her head slightly in place of the full gesture.

"Likewise," Ryouko said.

She smiled at the other girl.

Perhaps she could find some new friends in the field. It wasn't something she had previously thought about, but it might be important, for her own health if nothing else.

She looked around at the rest of the table and was surprised to once again find Risa looking right at her. They made eye contact, and Risa must have taken some message from Ryouko's look, because the girl put down her chopsticks and cleared her throat to get their attention.

"I don't want to rush you," Risa addressed, "but I wanted to let you all know we'll be doing a walking tour of the city after this lunch, if you would like to attend. If you have other things to do, that's fine too."

The responses around the table were relatively enthusiastic, and Ryouko nodded along with them.

She didn't really need a walking tour of her own city, but perhaps she could show Asami a few things.

The next day, Ryouko made good on her appointment with the psychiatrist Atsuko, venturing into yet another building in the "MSY Corridor" that straddled the periphery of the city center.

She found the journey by tube strangely void of people, landing at a discreet alcove unusually high in one of the city's ubiquitous skyscrapers. She had risen so high that she was above the vast majority of the pedestrian walkways and tubes. Stepping out of her vehicle, she enjoyed an unobstructed view of the sky for the first time in years, a fact that startled her slightly.

She thought back. The last time she saw the sky clearly had been when she had visited her paternal grandparents, in a town just outside the edge of the endless megalopolis. She had stared

up the sky then, just as she had the first time she had visited as a child, and just as she did now. The glare of the unfiltered sun was harsh, and the scattered ultraviolet gave the otherwise familiar blue sky an indescribable tint of… electric purple? There really needed to be words for this.

Dropping her gaze downward, she observed the city sprawled across the earth, skyscrapers jutting upwards in an endless procession, seemingly without limit, so that even at her elevated vantage point she couldn't see an end to the city, or even a relaxation of the density.

Mitakihara City, Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto—they were now merely lines in the sand in what was truly one giant city encompassing all of them, stretching along the island. A megalopolis, where the only detectable differences were concentrations of more important economic and governmental buildings toward city centers, and of manufacturing and other buildings toward "edges". From up here, that distinction was invisible.

Placing her gaze back on the open glass door in front of her, she reflected that she seemed to be the only one here, despite her expectation that the place would have plenty of other visitors. Instead, her arrival alcove was deserted and, she reflected, rather small. It made sense given what she had seen, she supposed; there were multiple such alcoves ringing these levels of the building, something she had observed on the way up, watching the strange radial pattern of tubes inclining upward. That seemed strangely inefficient; there was a reason buildings tended to have large public landing ports scattered every few floors.

This particular building was rather wide, so she was surprised when she walked in, entered an empty seating area, and discovered that there was nothing in front of her but a single door with a metallic plaque on the front, some sort of mysterious bulbous metal object attached to its front. On her request, it swung rather than slid open, revealing the room behind it.

Resisting the urge to stop and examine the object, Ryouko took a moment to shake off some standard trepidation, then stepped in, taking in the lack of windows, the couch in the corner, the multiple chairs scattered about, the *books* on bookshelves in the wall—how rare was that!—, the framed certificates on the wall, and, of course, the *real* wood desk in the middle, and the pleasant looking woman seated on the other end.

A clock ticked quietly on one of the bookshelves, another antique oddity.

She looked young, but not magical girl young, in her twenties like the rest of the populace, and only the ring Ryouko immediately sought on her finger confirmed what the file had said. Not a teenager. It was probably the right idea; Ryouko would have felt uncomfortable relying on the authority of someone who looked the same age as her, even though she knew it meant exactly nothing.

Then it occurred to Ryouko that the room had no other exits, and that this whole area—office, seating area, alcove—was its own independent region of the building.

Privately, Ryouko reflected that it might be a good idea to learn how exactly one could detect other magical girls out of costume. If someone were to hide it from her, would she have any idea? Would it be just a weird, nagging feeling on the corner of her mind?

The long-haired woman watched her for a moment, so that Ryouko could see again the face she had seen on the woman’s profile. It was not a memorable face, but pretty.

"Take a seat," the woman said, gesturing at the chair, and Ryouko obliged, looking at her warily.

"I rather like being up here," she said, making a show of reading a tablet in her hand. "It feels like being in my own private tower. And of course that's the point: privacy. Not that it's a particular

concern today, I don’t think."

She stuck out her hand.

"Atsuko Arisu, telepath," she introduced, as Ryouko accepted the offer and shook.

"Shizuki Ryouko," Ryouko reciprocated, a tiny hesitation later, since it was her suspicion the woman needed no introduction to her.

The woman leaned forward, setting the tablet down. Ryouko suspected that was another bit of theater.

"There's no need to be nervous," she said. "This is just an introduction meeting. Just some simple questions, and you'll be on your way. You can be as detailed as you like."

Ryouko nodded slightly. In truth, she was pretty nervous. It just wasn't comfortable going into an interview about your life with someone who probably had all the official details of your life carefully stored in her memory banks.

She had read about the MHD, of course. They knew a lot of things, apparently.

When she saw that Ryouko wasn't about to say anything, Arisu continued:

"I'm sure you're not surprised that I already know all the obvious stuff," she said. "You're the kind of girl who'd look that up. You also appreciate honesty, so I'll mention that this is all in your preliminary psych profile, as is the fact that you get annoyed by anyone asking about your interests, so I won’t do that. And yes, I can read your mind out of costume, but I generally don’t do so unless I really think it’s necessary. I hope you’ll trust me."

"Ah, I—I guess," Ryouko said, hopefully blandly. She was surprised both by the onrush of words, and by the way the woman had just *said it* like that. She suddenly found herself wondering how much her actions had been tracked online.

"This is more about going into things that *aren't* obvious." the woman said. "So, before we begin, want a snack?"

Before Ryouko could even react to that, the woman reached down and pulled out a plate of miniature cakes from somewhere invisible under the desk. She set it before them, followed by two glasses of juice.

"Oh, thank you," Ryouko said, slightly thrown off by the abrupt diversion of topic.

"No problem."

Spearing the strawberry off of the cake on top of one of the miniature plates, Ryouko thought about the fact that she had just been presented with her favorite form of snack. Hardly a coincidence, but she would always be glad to eat it, even if she snuck some out of the synthesizer practically every day.

The woman waited a brief, polite interval, then said:

"Alright, if you're comfortable, I'm going to start with something open-ended."

Ryouko nodded warily.

"What can you tell me about your family?"

Ryouko looked at the other woman, who looked back at her with a curious, but pleasant look. The question seemed abrupt, but she supposed there was no way it wouldn't seem abrupt.

She thought about it a moment, putting together something she could say in one burst.

"I don't think there's too much to tell, honestly," she said. "My parents are scientists in the Prometheus Research Center, so they know more about the whole magical girl thing than usual. I got a lot of my information from them. They're loving, I guess—I mean that, I'm just not sure how to describe it. I suspect they've been trying to keep me from contracting, though I'm not sure why they'd think that'd be a risk."

Did a smile just pass over Arisu's face? But no, Ryouko was looking now, and the psychiatrist's face was impassive.

"I guess the most important thing to talk about is my maternal grandparents," Ryouko said. "My grandmother left us to go join the war when I was a toddler. She didn't exactly divorce my grandfather, but she might as well have. It's—well, we never quite understood why. She had her reasons."

Let's not say any more than that, Ryouko thought.

Then, a moment later:

Damn it. If she is *reading my mind, she would have totally caught that.*

Ryouko wondered if she seemed nervous.

Arisu nodded slightly, hands clasped.

"I understand your grandfather is leaving soon as well?"

"He never really got over it," Ryouko said. "He says he wants a new life and maybe he wants to find her. It's his right to."

She shrugged, then regretted it, realizing it came off as overly blasé.

"By which I mean, I completely understand why he would," she quickly amended. "And it doesn't have anything to do with my reasons for contracting, or anything like that."

Internally, she winced. Too hasty. The psychiatrist would definitely think that was important.

"So you know, not really a big issue," Ryouko finished defensively, too nervously.

Instead of the further questions she expected, the woman just nodded.

"I believe you," she said.

Then, a moment later:

"Tell me, do you know anything about your family above your grandparents? Know anything about the Shizukis, the Kurois, anything like that?"

Ryouko shook her head.

"It's kind of distant from me, to be honest," she said. "And they must be dead at this point, though I guess that's a bad way to put it."

“Hmm,” Arisu vocalized, and Ryouko thought she saw the shadow of a frown glide across her face.

“Should I know something about them?” Ryouko ventured.

Arisu glanced at her.

“You should ask your parents when you have time,” the psychiatrist said.

There was a brief pause, then Arisu nodded to herself.

"Alright," she said. "Now, the next question is optional. Well, this is all optional, but I guess this is super-optional. Do you mind telling me about your wish and the circumstances surrounding it? I won't share it with anyone. I know it's considered a friendship thing to share it, so it's up to you."

Ryouko thought for a moment, then figured the harm couldn't be that bad. She went through what it was, how she really just wanted to get out there, really, how she wasn't happy at school, how she'd been a fan of space travel since she was child.

She took a breath.

“I wished I could leave Earth," Ryouko said, "and explore this world. I said I wanted to go where no one else has gone before and find my place in this universe. In basically those exact words."

“Hmm,” Arisu vocalized, and this time it was an appreciative noise. “Grandiose. Also long-term. Mind talking about it?”

“I’ve just always been bored with life on Earth,” Ryouko said, after a moment. “I’ve never really felt like I fit in. I wanted to go out there, accomplish something meaningful, make history, you know? Though most important is just to see it all. I… I guess I just wasn’t happy here.“

It felt strange, saying it out loud again. She hadn’t talked about it with anyone in depth, except Simona, and even that had been strange. And here she was, talking about it to a perfect stranger.

She left out the parts that involved her grandmother, and the girl who had visited her when she was a child, the oppressiveness of being on Earth, and the other reasons. It didn’t seem the right thing to talk about, not here.

She also left out what might have been an attempt on her life. It was, perhaps, secret.

With nothing further to talk about, then, the topic dropped. There was a brief silence.

“Tell me about the demon attack that triggered your contract,” Arisu asked, a moment later.

Ryouko sucked in a breath. Was that a coincidence, or…?

Ryouko shook her head at herself. It wouldn’t do to suspect things like that. Then she realized the woman could see her shaking her head perfectly well.

“Well, you know, it was pretty standard,” Ryouko said. “I was sitting around, chatting with my friend Simona, and then suddenly I saw this demon appear behind her, about to attack her. I grabbed her and ran. Eventually Mami-san saved me. That’s—that’s when I saw Kyubey.”

Arisu nodded sagely and gestured for her to continue.

“There’s not really much else to talk about,” Ryouko said. “It was kind of funny though. I think Simona was about to tell me something important, but now she won’t talk about it at all.”

"Yes, things happen like that sometimes," the woman said, smiling. "Murphy's Law. Any idea what it was about?"

Ryouko was slightly surprised. She hadn't expected the woman to actually *ask*. But damn it, of course she would ask.

"I don't know," Ryouko said, with all honesty.

The woman nodded again.

"I see that Kyouko took you demon-hunting right after your contract," she said. "Any thoughts on that?"

Ryouko thought about the question, honestly not having thought about it before.

"It wasn't too bad," she said. "It got pretty scary right there in the middle, when I screwed up, but Kyouko saved me. And I—I guess it was a little exciting. That sounds weird, I think, but it was. I want to do better in the future."

The woman smiled.

"It's not that weird. It definitely gets the adrenaline pumping. Some girls feel that way their first time, though I wouldn't say it's common. I was excited my first time, too."

Ryouko blinked.

"Really?"

"Really," the woman said. "Though it says in the notes that Kyouko thought she saw blood-lust on your face. That *is* unusual, for a first timer."

Ryouko was again taken aback, and stared back at the woman, surprised. Yes, blood-lust, there had been a little of that, now that she thought about it. But—

"Any thoughts on the second demon hunt?" the woman asked. "The one yesterday, I mean. I understand you saw quite the injury."

Ryouko shook herself out of her previous train of thought. It still shook Ryouko a little to think about it, but she said:

"It was interesting. Not as, um, dangerous, I guess. At least for me. I'm not used to seeing people with bloody eye sockets, but I got over it."

She chuckled nervously. It had come out all wrong, but the woman still sat there, hands clasped, watching her. What did that look mean?

"Alright, let's change topics," the woman said, a moment later. "After meeting her, what do you think of Kyouko?"

Ryouko considered the question.

"Not really what I expected for someone as old as her," she said. "She acts like she's young, but she's obviously experienced. She seems reliable, despite everything. She likes sleeping on you, though, things like that."

She instantly regretted the last sentence, since it had only happened a grand total of once, but the

other woman frowned slightly and made a thoughtful noise.

Ryouko thought about Kyouko's strange behavior two days ago, but decided not to mention it, since it was more about Kyouko than it was about her.

“Kyouko…” the woman began, then stopped.

Ryouko saw her hesitate for the first time in this conversation. The woman also frowned, in such a way that it was obvious, rather than just hints of emotion on her face.

“Well, don’t let her take advantage of you,” Arisu said. “Your profile indicates you’re not as aware as you think you are, though in this case I can keep a watch on Kyouko myself. And, of course, there could be nothing there to watch for.”

Ryouko narrowed her eyes, a sense of insult penetrating through her nervousness. Not as aware…

“What exactly do you mean by that?” Ryouko asked. “Kyouko seems perfectly nice to me; is there something—“

“No, no, don’t worry about it,” Arisu said, making a dismissive gesture with her hand. “You’ll know what I’m talking about, if it ever matters.”

The woman pushed herself back from her desk and seemed to intentionally relax. It was an obvious topic change.

“Alright,” she said. “Let’s talk about some less formal topics. What do you think about how the war’s going?”

This Ryouko had a ready answer for, having posted her opinion online numerous times before.

“It’s not going as well as the government says it is,” she said. “But I don’t know how bad it really is. I guess I’m going to find out. I think we’re going to win though, eventually. We just have to hold out until our technology gets better.”

“Fair enough,” Arisu said. “That last part is prevailing military opinion, actually.”

Of course, Ryouko knew that already, but she didn’t say that.

“Nervous about what’s coming up?” the woman asked, leaning onto her elbow.

Ryouko thought about that.

“Of course I am,” she said. “But plenty of other girls have gone through the same thing, and come out fine. I just have to focus on living. I guess it’ll be exciting if nothing else. And I’ll finally get to see the colonies, and the aliens. That’s worth it.”

She meant that, and made sure her expression indicated that.

“I think it is,” Arisu said. “But I hesitate to say that, since I mourn all those who died and I, personally, haven’t seen too much combat. Only New Athens and a little bit after that. We telepaths are good against stealth, you know?”

The woman looked down at her desk, and seemed almost thoughtful for a moment.

“You’re training on New Athens,” she said, finally. “Just so you know, you’re going to be sharing rooms. It’s not that we’re short on space, but it’s good for girls’ psyches. Usually. Any preferences on who you want it to be?”

Ryouko thought for a moment, considering the girl she had met yesterday at the lunch, but shook her head. It was probably better to meet more people, if possible.

“Alright,” Arisu said, tapping her fingers against each other. “Some basic stuff then. In the field, you’ll get your own room, assuming you’re in the kind of situation where there is such a thing as a room. Maybe your own tent. Maybe nothing. But if possible. Fraternizing too much with subordinates is frowned upon, though it’s obviously better if they like and respect you. Don’t get into any relationships with the other officers, magical girl or not. It’s not a good idea.”

Ryouko looked back at the other woman blankly. She honestly hadn’t considered any of that before.

“Anyway,” Arisu said, sighing and getting up to walk towards her. “I’m out of time. I’ve got someone else coming soon. Sorry. And Ryouko-chan—”

Ryouko looked at the woman, wondering at the informal use of her name.

“Don’t die, okay?”

Ryouko blinked, surprised. The woman looked serious, saying that.

“I won’t,” she said.

They shook hands, and just like that, it was over, Ryouko finding herself back outside the office, in the seating area she suspected was never used. On the way out, she took another look at the view, wondering just how much this Atsuko Arisu knew about her.

That night, pushing forward her agenda to understand combat before she entered it, Ryouko lay in her bed and continued her reading on combat doctrine. She chose to continue on from the previous topic and read about space combat.

“Human-Cephalopod space combat is constrained and defined by the technical limitations of humanity,” her TacComp read to her, “the defensive strategic posture adopted by the human worlds, and the tactical prowess of the Magi Cæli—the MC—the Navy’s mage corps.”

Ryouko was immediately tempted to divert the topic into a subtopic about the MC, but desisted, deciding she could save it for later.

“Firstly, it must be understood that alien shielding, projectile deflection, missile interception, and regenerative armor is vastly superior to the human equivalent. Because of this, alien spacecraft can be built much lighter and faster, and with much higher levels of energy storage. Human starships are heavily armored, protected by vast amounts of inertial resistance. Alien starships are not, and are consequently much more nimble and field heavier weapons.”

“Because of this, Cephalopods can and do field interceptors and bombers which have a reasonable expectation of damage and survivability. Ships with a similar speed, range, and firepower, built by humans, would be glass cannons preparing for nothing less than a suicide run, and not even particularly good glass cannons.”

Ryouko nodded along with the text. She had heard as much.

“Secondly, alien weaponry is superior in all aspects. Despite extensive study of salvaged alien technology, it is not known how they field lasers and particle beams of such immense power and

range, or how they manage to prevent scattering over the great distances of space, but it is crucial to understand that the heaviest regularly fielded alien space weapon, termed the Eviscerator, is superior in all aspects to the human SHERMAN battlecruiser main gun, the pride of the human Navy. The alien Blink Bombardment Cannon does not even have a meaningful human analogy."

Ryouko frowned, staring at her ceiling. It was night now, and she was entertaining herself by reading military doctrine, but there was simply so much information to digest. Every term her TacComp read to her, every topic discussed, was worthy of further elaboration. Everything was a Matroska doll of information.

Motivated by curiosity, she asked for a brief clarification on the SHERMAN acronym.

"The SHERMAN-the **S**uper **H**eavy **E**xotic-shielded **R**elativistic **MA**ss driving **N**ucleus, also named after a renowned American general of the 19th century, is the primary gun of the battlecruisers of the Navy, fulfilling roles as both the largest payload weapon in the human navy, the primary instrument of FTL interdiction, and as a WMD for surface bombardment. Exact weapon specifications are level two classified and vary from ship to ship, but it is known that kinetic energy at firing is roughly 40 petajoules, or 9.6 megatons of TNT."

There was a pause and a quiet sense of expectation: did she want it to continue? She decided no—she didn't want to get too far off track—and it immediately settled back into its main narrative.

"As always, however, the great leveling force on the battlefield in favor of humanity is its contingent of magical girls. For example, despite what might be expected from technology alone, the Cephalopods are *inferior* in stealth or detection capability. Alien technology is superior, but it has little relevance when there are numerous mages capable of sensing *anything* approaching—through a variety of methods—and also numerous mages capable of hiding from *anything*."

Ryouko paused the playback briefly. She had never thought about it that way, but yes, it was true that in specific ways, magical girls could override nearly any level of technological superiority—provided the girls were available.

She told the device to continue.

"Of greater overall relevance is the overall tactical prowess of the mage corps in close range combat. The efficacy of the Magi Cæli drops off with distance, simply because mages who can attack at distances greater than thousands of kilometers are vanishingly rare, whereas every mage can deal damage at point-blank range. Further, because of the unique nature of magical girl powers, the larger the alien ships involved, the more damage the Mage Corps is often able to deal. It is often possible for a Sky Team to penetrate to the weak points of a carrier via some well-placed teleports and other special tactics, then cripple the entire ship; on the other hand, a corresponding mass of interceptors must be whittled down with attrition, usually costing more casualties."

Ryouko grimaced. It was good to hear that teleporters were valuable, but her vaunted two hundred kilometer range didn't seem that impressive anymore. Nonetheless, she listened on.

"Because of this, battles where human fleets have been able to close to "close combat" range—defined as within the effective range of a frigate's laser weapons—have nearly always ended in at least a tactical human victory."

"It is this fact which dictates the tactical makeup of every major fleet engagement. Cephalopod fleets invest heavily in carriers, which can be considered capital ships, and attempt to hang back and engage from great range, with fighters and bombers and, often, a heavily defended siege-range blink cannon. Human fleets eschew all but light carriers, unable to manufacture sufficiently

powerful bombers to penetrate alien defenses, and consider the massive, nearly indestructible battlecruiser their capital ship. Shrouded in constant patrols of Sky Teams, robotic MedEvac, and support interceptors, every crewed human vessel contains medical support, living quarters, grief cubes, and weapons, acting as mobile supply bases for the Mage Corps. In addition, human fleets contain a significant complement of extremely stealthy light frigates, crewed by MagOps teams. It is these that register the major 'kills' in most space battles."

"Both fleets are also constantly attended by a large amount of drones of every size and description, ranging from mini-drones that attempt to latch onto forcefields and weaken them, to repair drones, to drones that attempt to drill into exposed hull, to frigate-size gun platforms."

At this point, Ryouko again paused the information dump. She knew about Magi Cæli, of course —everyone did—but she had never really thought about the possibility of being one. Indeed, in her mind, it didn't really matter, even though it was possible for any girl with the right powers and psych profile to be inducted into the service.

What if that were her? What would it be like, wearing suits, maneuvering in the vacuum of space, with no gravity? On the one hand, it would be very different, on the other—she just didn't know. Again, she thought about reading more about the MC, but sighed, deciding she might as well finish the current topic.

She asked for the device to continue:

"Given the way the two opposing fleets operate, most fleet engagements consist of the human fleet trying to close to close combat range, using SHERMAN guns to attempt to interdict alien maneuverability and ability to retreat. Alien carriers attempt to disable battlecruisers, while stealth frigates carrying magical operations teams constantly attempt to penetrate alien defenses and take down carriers. Engagements away from critical points, such as planetary bodies, shipyards, or major economic resources, are rarely decisive, with both sides usually opting to withdraw after receiving significant damage to capital ships or if MC attrition becomes unacceptable."

"Engagements fought near critical points are, on the other hand, often fought "to the death" by the defending side. Here, the relative reliance on both sides on capital ships is asymmetric. The loss of capital ships is crippling to the attacker for both sides, usually prompting a withdrawal, though this can be difficult in the face of FTL interdiction by either side. However, human fleets can continue to defend extensively without battlecruisers, whereas Cephalopod fleet resistance is usually dead in the water after the loss of carriers and orbiting fighter/bomber bays."

"It should be noted that 'To the death' is usually metaphorical, with most significant fleet assets, especially the MC, withdrawn from a losing battle before retreat becomes impossible."

"The superiority of human fleets in close combat due to the Mage Corps is an enormous tactical and strategic asset. Human worlds above a certain level of development and fortification are irreducible from long range, given the population's ability to rapidly replenish bombardment defenses, forcing close engagement by the heavy firepower of alien battlecruisers, bringing them to where they are most vulnerable. This, coupled with the fact that most planetary combat has occurred on human worlds, has turned battles on well-developed worlds into grueling affairs, carried out as sieges, with constant battles in high orbit, low orbit, and on the ground."

Ryouko grimaced again. *That*, everyone certainly heard about. Unusually, Governance rarely censored what happened in planetary sieges, which were grim battles for survival that, in terms of sheer scale, made even the battles of the Unification Wars look small by comparison. Victory meant a long, painful rebuilding process. Defeat meant death, simple as that, or whatever it was the aliens did with human prisoners.

No one really wanted to find out.

Certainly, there were no records of anyone ever being taken prisoner and, on the other hand, alien units, including infantry, had a disturbing tendency to self-destruct to prevent capture. No alien had ever been captured alive.

Ryouko shook her head at herself, her attention having lagged. However, she discovered that her TacComp had waited for her the whole time. Technology.

“Military tacticians have also pointed out that superiority in close combat is, theoretically, a significant advantage on the offensive, where alien fleets pinned against critical points cannot retreat and must fight on terms favorable to the human fleet. Given the lack of human offensives so far in the war, this has not been reliably demonstrated, though the success of the Saharan Raid has been pointed to as evidence.”

Her TacComp stopped—it turned out that was the last paragraph. Ryouko noted the recommendations given to her. She could either choose to learn about Human military doctrine for the war as a whole, receive a short primer on the major ship classes of both fleets, or learn additional details about space combat at a smaller level, the level of the average magical girl in the Magi Cæli.

She was about to select the last option when, with excellent timing, her father requested entry.

He didn’t have to—the door was unlocked—but it was the polite thing to do.

"I'm going down to the lab soon," he said. "Are you up for a midnight trip? I've got something to show you."

She looked back at the strangely serious look he wore and wondered what this was about.

"Sure," she agreed, shrugging. "Actually, I've always wanted to visit."

She smiled on the last line, which was absolutely true, but the smile concealed surprise at the unusual situation.

The man smiled back, slightly.

"Well, it's a special occasion. And I also feel as if we don't talk enough recently. You know."

He made an awkward gesture, then said:

"Well, I'll be waiting out in the living room. Don't take too long."

Ryouko, in fact, didn't leave him waiting at all, getting up right after the door slid closed. She patted the robot on her desk, which looked up at her with its optical sensor, thought for a moment to make sure she had nothing else to do, then went outside.

As they headed for the exit platform, she mused on the fact, of the three members of her family, her father was the one she had seen the least this week. Not that he wasn't there; far from it, actually. It was just that, where her mother seemed to have taken most of the week off to stay home at nights, her father had adhered to his normal schedule without change.

Well, except for today.

Relative to the rest of her family, he had never been particularly good at communicating with his daughter. It was hard to describe—it was as if he didn't really know how to talk to a child. He had

always spoken to her as an adult, expecting her to react as an adult would, even when she was manifestly not.

Ryouko supposed that as she got older, it would be less and less of an issue. Indeed, nowadays, she often found herself appreciating his frank and thoughtful style, even if it was occasionally awkward.

They rode in silence, along a route that was rapidly growing familiar to her. The Prometheus Research Institute, where her parents worked, was, of course, immediately next door to the Cult of Hope headquarters.

As the vehicle glided to a stop near one of the middle levels, Ryouko reflected that not once had her parents ever brought her with them to work. The reason given had always been "security", but she wondered sometimes.

She looked at the door they were about to enter, glass inside the faux masonry that ringed the door and formed the platform they were standing on, in turn attached to the glass, metal, and faux stone of the building. It was indistinguishable from a thousand other such entrances throughout the city. The motif was very common.

"Papa," she began, as they headed for the door which was, of course, already open.

The man gave her a slight glance of acknowledgement.

"Why isn't mama with us?" she asked.

"She—" her father began, before pausing.

"She wouldn't agree with what I'm doing right now," he said.

"What *are* we doing right now?" Ryouko asked.

She didn't receive a response.

They walked through the subdued glass doors, passing several people heading the other way. Her father exchanged greetings with them. They glanced at her with vaguely meaningful looks, but didn't comment.

"They know about you, of course," her father said. "I had to set this all up. Otherwise, I could never get you past security at the door. Speaking of which…"

They stepped up to a transparent structure that divided the entrance from the rest of the building. It was designed like an airlock, and on the other side she could see a variety of drones moving back and forth, though she couldn't see what they were carrying.

Suddenly, it occurred to her what this must be.

"You're going to feel a strong burning sensation after we step in," her father began. "It's—"

"UV sterilization, right?" she asked. "And then some drones."

"Yes," her father said, looking at her with a faint trace of surprise.

"I had to enter a facility like this for my upgrades," she explained.

"Ah, yes, of course," he said, stepping in. "How silly of me."

They endured the heat and drones, and when they exited out the other side, a drone, literally a rolling clothesrack, rolled up with two lab coats. They put them on, but she found hers rather large, with sleeves that she was tempted to roll up.

"It's only a loaner," her father said. "If you worked here you'd have your own, but as it is, it's a waste of resources to synthesize a new coat for one visit. Your size is rather too small for the standard sets. It's considered standard attire, even if you don't need it at all. Sort of like a uniform. Helps the atmosphere."

That didn't sound like any labs Ryouko knew about, but then again, it wasn't as if she had visited many labs.

They walked in silence for a few moments. Ryouko tried to call up an internal map of the facility to navigate with, a customary task when entering somewhere new. Instead of getting a map, her TacComp told her she did not have the clearance to see the map. Fair enough, she supposed.

"So this is the Bio section of the labs," her father narrated, as they stalked down the hallway. "Well, the non-classified Bio section, anyway. It deals with more pure biology than the other areas. Weapons Tech is on the lower floors, Combat Analysis above that, and Simulation and Training Equipment above that, just below us. Above us is Drones and Military AI, followed by Mind-Machine Integration, and MMI is *big*. They've got nearly a third of the building to themselves. Which isn't to say we're small, mind you. We've got about ten floors. They're just bigger."

"Anyway, above them is Magical Studies, which tends to deal more with demon statistics, grief cube distributions, things like that. Statisticians, mainly, or so I've heard. At the top of the building are the administrative offices and Special Studies, which is the section I don't have access to."

He said it all in a whirlwind of information, so that Ryouko struggled to keep up. As he spoke, they made turn after turn, passing equipment storage rooms, rooms full of researchers supervising automated equipment and talking with AI avatars, rooms full of said automated equipment performing tasks, numerous drones, other hallways…

"But this is all related to magical girls, right?" Ryouko asked. "That's what this facility is for."

"Yes," her father said. "And as you might expect, we're pretty heavily wrapped up with the MSY. It's a joint facility, and there are plenty of you girls among the staff here. We bring in subjects occasionally."

Finally, they entered an area whose rooms looked decidedly familiar to her. Here again were the transparent walls, the dispensing slots, the chairs in the middle of the room that looked like examination chairs. Some rooms were occupied, though this time she passed several girls going the other way in a group of lab coats. They looked to be her age, and looked back at her curiously as she passed. She didn't bother trying to check for rings. What else could they be?

"I pulled some strings and got you into the next batch of field tests for version two of your tactical computer," her father finally explained. "Rather under the table, but it should be acceptable. They're not fully optimized for the magical girl class yet—that's what the field tests are about—but they're fully functional and perfectly safe. You're only really getting it a year or two early, to be honest. Nothing but the best for my daughter, after all."

He smiled on that last line, looking at her so that she knew it was only a joke, but only partly. There was more warmth there than she was used to; she felt faintly embarrassed.

"Why couldn't you just tell me before we left?" she asked. "There was no reason to keep it a

secret. I'm pleased, actually."

She meant that genuinely, though she was quite surprised—with just a trace of trepidation about using experimental equipment, quickly swallowed.

But why *had* he kept it secret? Had he just not wanted to say?

The man looked away, seeming discomfited. It could have been embarrassment, but something—well, it had to be embarrassment, she decided.

Then they arrived in front of a room where the chair was unoccupied, but where there were technicians standing around performing mysterious tasks, obviously busy. A woman stood facing away from her, looking like some sort of supervisor. The door was open.

Honestly, Ryouko would have kept right on walking anyway, not thinking about it carefully, had her TacComp not pinged her to stop.

She did so, and realized that her father had already stopped, frowning and looking somewhat confused.

He shook it off quickly, though, waving her through the door and following just a second later. The walls and door turned opaque behind them.

"Director Valentin—Joanne-san," he addressed, bowing. "It's, uh, an honor."

The supervisor turned to face them, and Ryouko almost recoiled a step.

TacComp, she thought immediately. *Who is this? She—*

She stopped as the information flooded her brain. It didn't come up as the readable menu she was used to, but as chunks of sudden *knowledge*.

Joanne Valentin

Age: Undisclosed

Ethnicity: German

Occupation: Civilian; Managing Director, Prometheus Research Institute

Special Comments: Recipient, Oppenheimer Award for Management of a Scientific Facility Exceeding Upper-end Performance Estimates

Very Prestigious

Ryouko hoped she didn't actually looked shocked as she studied the woman's face, her cropped hair, those cosmetic glasses—

It bore a striking resemblance to the pedestrian she had seen walking the streets, after her first demon hunt, though that woman hadn't worn glasses.

Unfortunately, the image in your memory is too distant and blurry to properly compare, her TacComp commented, responding to her next thought before she even had time to formulate it. *Based on what is available, the prior probability of this being her is only 10%. However, the fact that she resides in Mitakihara City and works here greatly increases the overall probability, to about 62%. I cannot perform further analysis, but I would predict that the actual probability is even higher, given other factors about the situation.*

Ryouko blinked at the blistering speed of auditory input, at a speed the device had never before used. Somehow, though, she understood it perfectly, though there was the briefest of pauses as she processed the thought.

Could you—

—do a database search of everyone who might be her in this city, is what she had wanted to ask, but again the device read her thought first, interrupting with:

No. You do not have sufficient clearance. But I can forward this information to Sakura Kyouko, who does.

Let me think about it first.

Because of the TacComp's efforts to maximize the speed of the exchange, it all went by so fast that only at the end did her father finally ask:

"Is something wrong, Ryouko?"

"No," she said, shaking her head, even as her head was spinning. "I was just, uh, surprised to meet someone so distinguished."

She bowed.

It was a flat out lie, but the woman looked pleased to be recognized.

"Dir—Joanne-san here is the one I asked for this favor," her father said, slightly nervous. "Actually, it was something she suggested. I was just asking advice."

"You are too kind," the woman said. "It was admirable of you to be so concerned for your daughter. I am just here to give you my well-wishes."

"Thank you," Ryouko said politely.

"I understand you contracted only recently," the woman said, "and your mentor is Field Marshal Tomoe and Kyouko. Is that right?"

The question startled her, but Ryouko couldn't see any guile on the woman's face. The woman surely knew already that the answer was yes, but that didn't mean anything. She was certainly just making conversation.

"Ah, yes," Ryouko said. It occurred to her that the woman had referred to Kyouko without any honorifics. Did they know each other?

"Very prestigious," the woman commented. "Well, I'll get out of your way for now."

By "get out of the way", Joanne did not mean she was leaving, as Ryouko had thought. Rather, the woman simply stepped to the side to let Ryouko sit down in the chair clearly intended for her, then moved to stand in a corner and watch. Ryouko had been wrong; she wasn't supervising—she was only visiting and watching.

"I am Doctor Kobayashi," one of the technicians said, introducing himself to her. More precisely, he said "Kobayashi-*sensei*", the language being Japanese. "Physician, nanobiologist, shiny certifications, everything. Don't be alarmed by the number of personnel. It's not fully a standard product yet, so we're more careful than we usually are, but there have never been any severe

problems with the upgrade process. I couldn't help overhearing the conversation just now, so it might be reassuring to know that your mentor Mami-san has one installed as well."

Mami-san, the name so entrenched in the public consciousness that perfectly random people felt free to use it instead of the proper "Tomoe-san".

Ryouko nodded assent.

The doctor waited for the rest of his team to finish introductions before saying:

"Of course you've done this kind of thing before, so I won't bore you by talking too much. However, we are taking extra precautions, so we're unfortunately going to have to put you out for the whole procedure. It will also take longer than it usually would, but nothing compared to the full initial installation. Maybe half an hour."

"I see," Ryouko said, feeling the slight trepidation that naturally came with knowledge of one's impending unconsciousness.

She waited only a few minutes longer for the preparations to complete. Her father smiled nervously at her; she smiled nervously back.

"Unusual genetics in her file," one of the technicians commented, shaking a vial. "Your daughter is *unique*, Kuma-san. It just means more work for us."

It was said in the vein of a joke, and her father, who apparently knew the man, smiled and nodded, catching the intended humor.

Not getting the reaction he had been expecting—namely, a question *about* the unusual genetics—the technician was briefly awkward, then turned back to his work.

Ryouko watched the exchange, a little puzzled.

Then the two flaps that prevented her turning her head shifted into position—*the flaps weren't moveable in the other place*, Ryouko noted—and they began.

When she awoke again, Joanne was gone.

She stood back up experimentally.

"Does anything seem out of the ordinary?" Kobayashi asked. "At the moment, you shouldn't feel anything different from before."

She shook her head no.

The physician nodded, then said:

"This version has significantly improved core processing power, and is much more adept at giving advice about human interaction and predicting human behavior. It can also answer a much larger variety of messages automatically. Improvements all across the board. The only problem is that it will take a while for it all to get into place. You should start seeing differences soon, but it won't be completely in place for two weeks or so."

"Two weeks," Ryouko repeated, slightly disappointed.

"It was the best we could do," the man said, shrugging. "Though we're always working to

improve it."

TacComp, Ryouko thought, trying it out. *Anything I should know right now?*

I am of course pleased to be upgraded, it thought. *Well, in a manner of speaking. But I'm sure you've already noticed the most important first change.*

Indeed she had, since she had almost jumped upon receiving the first response. It had used *her* voice, rather than the robotic-sounding voice she had chosen for it. It still sounded flat, which was the reason she had avoided the human-sounding options in the first place.

"Why is the voice different?" Ryouko asked. "Or do I need to reset it or something?"

"No, that's intentional," the physician said. "I know it's disconcerting right now, but eventually the voice will pick up emotional nuances. Trust me; it works out. People like it. Maximal integration and all that."

"So I don't have a choice?" she asked, displeased.

The doctor made a face that seemed to say "This same question every time!"

"No," he said. "It boosts combat performance, once you get used to it. Plus, almost everyone ends up loving it. Really."

"You said emotional nuances," Ryouko said. "Only simulated, right?"

"Of course," the physician said.

Her father, who had got up out of his chair when she woke but had otherwise remained silent, cleared his throat.

"Kito-san," he said. "It's fine. Tell her."

The technicians glanced at each other nervously. The doctor sighed.

"Okay," he admitted. "So the real answer is that we designed the devices not to have any, but there seems to be some evidence that they might have some anyway. We're not really sure; it could be an illusion. We're looking into it. But if they do, we'll have to do all sorts of ethical consultations, maybe even talk to the committee. But we want to be sure first."

Ryouko took that in, not really sure what to make of it. Did she want a tactical computer with emotions? What was she supposed to think about that?

"I see," she settled on.

"Ryouko," her father said. "I'm sorry to rush you, but we're slightly behind schedule. I want to take you somewhere else."

He looked around, and since none of the technicians seemed to have any objections, they said their farewells and headed back out the door.

"So where to now?" Ryouko asked. "Don't tell me more upgrades."

Her father shook her head.

"No," he said. "But I can't really talk about it. Not until we get there."

They navigated the maze of the building, Ryouko following him on blind faith without a map to guide her.

As they walked, she pondered the woman they had just met. It was still very likely that everything was a coincidence, that the pedestrian had been walking in the area for unrelated reasons, and that if the woman were her, she was only walking outside her office for a bit of fresh air, or something like that. Besides, even if Ryouko wanted to ascribe a malicious intent to her, it was difficult to reconcile that with the fact that the woman had apparently just helped her.

Unless—

No, that was too paranoid to think about.

There was one thing, though. The woman had hinted at knowing Kyouko. She hadn't thought through that aspect earlier, but now that she realized…

TacComp, send a message about Joanne Valentin to Kyouko-san, she thought. *Tell her what I saw the other day, say that there's a strong resemblance, and ask if she knows her.*

Done, the device responded.

It would have been a good idea anyway.

She jerked herself to a stop, almost running into her father's back. She found herself at the end of a long, narrow hallway, in front of an imposing metal door. He started to talk, but not on a topic that seemed relevant.

"You might wonder what it means to say we're the *Biology* section of the labs," her father said, eyes strangely detached. "We advise the other sections and conduct whatever studies seem appropriate for our section. That's one thing. But the truth is, there are two things we do that are majorly important. I'm not going to talk about the other one, but…"

His voice trailed off.

"Well, your mother and I disagree on a few things," her father said, looking off into the middle distance. "Unlike her, I'm willing to let you exert yourself, even risk your life, in search of your dreams. She would rather you be safe at home. She doesn't say it, but she doesn't really trust you to handle yourself. I—"

Another pause.

"Well, I don't really trust you either, honestly," he said. "But I'm willing to let you try, and fail, even, though hopefully it doesn't kill you. She was the one who wanted us to work so hard to keep you from contracting. She, and her mother. I've always been more ambivalent. Darwin."

Ryouko blinked at the last phrase. What did Darwin have to do with anything?

"Good evening," a voice said, and then a human figure materialized immediately in front of them, startling Ryouko into stumbling backwards.

Unlike the replica of Charles Darwin that might have been expected, the hologram looked merely like a nondescript male Japanese scientist in lab coat, looking at her curiously. She was taken aback, however, by the blank "I/O" symbol he had in place of one eyeball, having to remind herself that AIs did that sort of thing.

"Can I help you, Shizuki-sensei?" the figure asked.

Her father swallowed visibly.

"Darwin," he said. "Is there anyone inside at the moment?"

"No," the figure said, tilting its head in slight confusion. "Why? No one is scheduled to be inside. You know that. You cleared the schedule."

"I was just checking. I…"

Here, her father hesitated significantly, before taking another steadying breath.

"I'd like you to grant my daughter here entrance to the incubation area," he said. "I'd like you to help me get her in and out undetected. And then I'd like you to delete all records of this."

Ryouko sucked in a breath through her teeth. This was not what she expected.

"Papa—," she began.

"That is a serious request," Darwin said, showing only a moment of human surprise. "And one that goes beyond your level of authorization. I could easily report you just for asking. It would be severe misconduct for me to approve it. Why should I?"

"Darwin," her father said, voice deliberately firm. "We've worked together for how many years now? I helped create you. I know you'd never turn me in. I'm asking a big favor, I know. But my daughter contracted, and I think she has a right to know."

The AI turned to look at Ryouko, sharply, and she shifted nervously under the gaze, wondering if they were about to be thrown out by security, and what could possibly have motivated her father to risk his career like this.

TacComp— she began to think.

Don't worry, the machine thought, anticipating. *I'm loyal only to you. One of the MSY restrictions on my design.*

It sounded almost dry. The upgrades couldn't be taking affect already, could they?

"I'm asking you to trust me," her father said, starting to look worried. "Please. For my sake."

It wasn't impossible for AIs to ignore the rules. One of the things humanity had discovered as government became more and more mechanized was just how much efficiency depended on lower-level agents being able to bend, or even break the rules, as long as they did it with good cause. The rules were necessary to function smoothly, but too much rigidity and things stagnated. The problem of *intention*, though, was crucial, which was part of why Volokhov was considered such a genius.

The AI dipped its head slightly, as if in thought. The pose lasted only a moment.

"Very well," it said. "I will grant you access, and I will keep anyone from disturbing you. Don't take too long. I wouldn't want to have to explain this one. I do hope your daughter takes after you in calmness."

"Thank you," her father said, as the door slid open, slow with weight.

"Why didn't you ask the AI before we got here?" Ryouko whispered.

“To make him more likely to agree,” her father whispered back. “If something were to happen, Darwin could erase his memories and forge new ones. It would help everyone, but AIs *really* don’t like doing that. If I asked him beforehand, and had him help us with scheduling and such, then there would be a lot more to erase. Plus, it helps to make him answer me in front of you. Subtle psychology, and, yes, he can hear me say that.”

Her father gestured at the door.

“Let’s go in,” he said.

They stepped inside, the door sealing shut behind them with a slight sucking noise. The air smelled…perfectly odorless, a difference Ryouko would never have noticed before the modifications.

It was also immediately apparent that, rather than the room Ryouko had been expecting, they were actually inside an elevator, the opposite wall of the tube impassively white.

With only the faintest of shudders, they began to move downward.

“Papa—“ she began, but he made a gesture of quiet.

He placed his hand on the wall of tube, palm pressing the wall. She was at a loss as to what he was doing, until the walls began to fade in color, the white growing less intense, so that she could start to see that there was something on the other side.

It was just like the room walls in the hospital, she realized.

Then the walls became clear enough for her to see through, and she forgot all about hospitals and what kinds of walls they have.

"What is this?" she asked automatically, taking an involuntary step backward.

She wouldn't have imagined that the building would contain a section as large as this. It was clear that the tube they were riding in was on the edge of an immense… it didn’t even seem appropriate to call it a room. It was more like a cylindrical cavern, one occupying the entire central core of the building. Immense concentric cylinders occupied the interior, each lined from top to bottom with rows and rows of blue and white tanks, internal lighting eerie in the general darkness of the *cavern*. As she watched, mysterious robotic devices slid up and down the walls on rails, shining their optical sensors at the tanks. One was open, the drones reaching into the blue liquid to perform some mysterious manipulation.

That wasn't the point. The point was what was in the tanks, the countless teenage girls with eyes closed, floating serenely in the blue liquid, naked except for the twin metal rings that preserved dignity, and the myriad wires and tubes she could see lodged into the backs of the ones who were closer. They all had very long hair, growth unchecked by scissors, winding its way around the wires, but other than that, there was great variety in faces, shapes, even ethnicities, though the majority appeared to be Japanese. Every single one was in their teens.

"Exactly what it looks like," her father said, turning to gauge to her reaction, eyes again detached. "You’ve seen enough Unification War films to know what these are. These are cloning vats. I didn’t have to enter from the top floor, but I thought it would be easier to explain from in here."

Ryouko averted her gaze. Her head swam.

"Human cloning is a violation of regulations," she said lamely, trying to process the betrayal in her mind. "It’s terribly illegal. It's an atrocity. Everything they told us in school—"

"We have special dispensation from the government. Ryouko, listen," her father said. "You've always been a level-headed girl. I need you to listen. Can you do that? That was why I brought you here. I'm asking you to trust me."

His voice briefly lost the matter-of-fact, almost chilly quality that usually characterized it. Instead it became briefly pleading, an emotional nuance she had never heard from him. He wanted her to listen.

Swallowing whatever needed to be swallowed, Ryouko forced herself to nod. She would listen, hear the facts. That was what she did in every situation, even this.

But if I don't like the facts, then what?

Her eyes darted around the cavern, at the vats, at the immense tubes leading into and out of the cylinders, at the gaps inside the cylinder nearest to her, through which she could see the rest of the arrangement. Looking more carefully, she could see that there were walkways leading from the outer edge inward, and platforms clearly meant for transportation of personnel.

Her father nodded, satisfied, even though he looked nervous again.

He turned his back to her, and stared out their transparent wall. Ryouko looked too, and as they watched, one of the tanks detached from the wall, mechanical apparatus pushing it outward and into a waiting cradle on one of the drones. The drone raced away downward, to some unknown destination.

"I felt we owed it to you," he said, "to tell you just what it is your parents volunteer for every night."

"This better be good," Ryouko said, managing to rebuild some conviction.

"This used to be one of the MSY's blackest projects," her father said. "Now it is merely classified. Not even that high, only level two, but high enough that the public, most of the military, and the majority of magical girls never find out. The thing is—"

There was a pause.

"Well," he continued. "Have you ever thought about the implications of having your soul in a gem?"

He turned to face her, and she could see in his eyes that he was struggling with this, that he had forced himself to do this. It won some of her trust her back.

He surprised her by grabbing her hand and raising it up.

"'Your gem your cockpit, your body your wings'," he said, gesturing at her ring. "Have you ever heard that? No, of course not;"—he shook his head at himself—"it's censored from the public. But it's a motto of the Magi Cæli, the Space Corps. They, more than anyone, learn just how inhuman they are, and they suffer some the highest rates of body-loss of any of the branches. They are the only ones told the truth at training; the rest of you are told only to save the gems of your comrades, that the MSY has ways to save them."

He dropped her hand and, with a slight lurch, they stopped. Ryouko was surprised; she had somehow missed the fact that they were approaching a walkway.

The doors opened, and they walked forward, agonizingly slowly, passing walls of tanks that

Ryouko was carefully not looking at.

"How useless a cockpit is without a plane or spacecraft underneath it, and how useless a soul gem is without a body," he said, voice shifting into a pedantic mode. "A soul gem torn from its host seeks desperately to find it again and, failing that, goes dormant, eventually burning out. With certain kinds of stimulation, provided by other mages, it can be induced to try to grow a new body, based on the original, but the number of gems who can complete the feat on their own is vanishingly small. It can be done with a prodigious number of grief cubes, but either way, the process can be incredibly traumatizing, so much so that it was never tried again, after the first few attempts."

Ryouko looked at her ring, her soul gem. Yes, that was her, and the eyes she was looking out of only a drone. Still, the concept of regrowing a body—she shuddered.

"There are other ways," her father said. "With a fresh cadaver, a gem can be induced, with difficulty, to take it as a new host. It's better, since it costs much less energy to reform an existing body than to try to reform air and mud and vacuum into a body *de novo*. But the process is imperfect, cube-costly, and has a high failure rate. It was done fairly often, in the early days, after it was realized it was possible, but it was never a good solution."

They stopped, her father seeming to think about something, before continuing:

"One thing that was never tried was the sharing of bodies. The MSY has always had considerable evidence of the downsides from historical sources. Every known example of body-sharing has resulted in instability, insanity, and diminished cognitive function. The cadaver solution works considerably better, but there were still quite a few losses, where the MHD was forced in to Reformat what had previously been a perfectly sound mind. Oh, that's right, you don't know about Reformatting."

They stopped in front of another door, in the exact middle of the concentric cylinders. Ryouko looked up, then down, at the rings of tanks that seemed to stretch all the way through the building, though she could, if she tried, spot both the ceiling they had left from and the floor below her.

They stepped into the second elevator, and started going down again, as she wondered how far down this rabbit hole went.

This time, her father didn't bother with the show of putting his hand to the wall. The wall lost its opaqueness, following some invisible command.

"Still," the man continued. "The body-sharing case was a tantalizing hint. The diminished cognitive function, the fact that there are no known examples of anyone ever possessing an inanimate object or an animal…"

Her father turning to face her, meeting her gaze with a surprising amount of strength in his eyes.

"The theory we have now is that the soul in the gem contains information, some indefinable essence," he said, "but that it needs a manifestation to function. We studied some of those brought back using cadavers. Over time, their bodies changed, became more like their old ones, even at the genetic level. Their brains did too. It was the beginning of an idea."

He paused, realizing he had missed a detail.

"Anyway," he said. "We were assigned to this project from the start. Trusted NCs—*non-contractees*—back when things were still secret. Though I didn't actually get to know your mother until much later—no, that's another story. The MSY wanted a better way, a way where they didn't

have to give up on so many gems, a better way to bring back those who should be dead."

He watched her, and saw that she was starting to understand. To her, it made sense, almost too much sense, and her expression was conflicted, no longer sure of her world.

"I see that you're getting it," he said. "Yes, one of the first things we did was to perform formal studies of the cadaver hosting process. It's all very well and good to speculate, but seeing the girls ten, twenty years later is meaningless. They've had all the time in the world to change themselves deliberately, consciously or subconsciously. It pollutes the results. We watched the process *as it happened*, studied the corpses inside and out as it happened. The very first thing a gem does in a new host is *rewire the brain*. It has to, and the girl doesn't wake until after the process is done. The soul gem cannot function without a physical manifestation, and not just that, a physical manifestation with enough *processing power*. In that way it's amazing those historical instances of body-splitting ever worked at all."

He paused, gathering his thoughts again.

"But the process is expensive, and the gem must change *everything*, right down to the genetic level. The brain is intricate, and even slight genetic variations affect its processing. And there were the failures, the insanity, the girls who needed specialized neural implants to function, the other, worse cases. We speculated that with the proper substrate, a body more like the original, the process would be much smoother."

"Hence the clones?" Ryouko said, gesturing at the tanks that surrounded their descending elevator them, already knowing the answer.

"Yes," her father said. "But it was not as simple as cloning the bodies and slapping the gem on top. First, we had to find a way to grow bodies quickly and properly, all the way to the correct age, or at least late childhood. And secondly, there were the ethical issues."

It was Ryouko's opinion that there were ethical issues everywhere here, but she nodded, seeing the logic of it all, feeling an irrational anger growing inside her. Why hadn't they ever *told* her?

"The thing is," her father said, "any body you grow to viability has the potential for sentience. In fact, it *will* be sentient, if you just wake it up. What does it mean to put a soul gem on such a body? Would it be body-splitting? Would the gem eliminate whatever is there? Is that murder?"

Her father looked to the side, dropping his gaze.

"We never found out. We wouldn't try something like that, no matter what you think of us. We sought other ways. But no matter what you do, there are philosophical issues. Even if we had the technology to recreate the consciousness state of the gem down to the atomic level, is it the same person? Is it someone else? We asked the Incubators, but they wouldn't tell us. We're not even sure if they know."

In the brief silence that followed, Ryouko looked around her, trying to reconcile it all with her previous understanding of her parents, one warm and loving, the other distant and cool—but still loving. They had never told her what they did for a living, had never said anything to remotely suggest that there might be a few nuances to ponder in the condemnations of Freedom Alliance atrocities that littered her history courses.

She had never really thought about it, had always taken the illegality of human cloning for granted. It made sense, given the abuses that been committed in the past. But—

"There's so much we still don't understand," her father mused out loud. "If the gem is shattered,

the body remains, but if the gem is corrupted, the body disappears. Why? It bothers me, but it doesn't matter for this. We—"

He paused, then smiled slightly, almost ironically.

"It was your mother's idea," he said. "She was always the most dedicated to the project, the one most devoted to finding a way to bring them back. She suggested—"

"Why?" Ryouko interjected sharply, catching him before he could continue.

He looked up, confused briefly.

"Why?" Ryouko repeated. "I'm tired of all the family secrets! Why was she so dedicated?"

Her father closed her eyes briefly.

"I could just deny knowing," he said, "but the truth is I don't think I have the right to tell you. Ask her yourself, but I think she might be getting ready to do it herself anyway, if you just wait. Please, let me continue."

Ryouko gritted her teeth, but nodded. That was fair. But she was angry. It wasn't quite rational, but she was angry.

He watched her, again judging her reaction. The cool appraisal of that look made her angrier somehow, but he judged that he should continue.

"Anyway," he said, "it was her idea, though we weren't sure if it would work. What if we could keep the clones subsentient, keep the brains from forming the connections necessary for consciousness? All the neurons, all the cells, but nothing awake in there. The gem would have everything it needed, but all the philosophical issues, all the questions about clones and identity, would be gone."

"*That* became the project. We worked for forty years, but we finally succeeded. That was about sixty years ago. The first successful revival didn't even realize that she had lost her body."

He gestured at the tanks around them.

"If you tried to wake these clones, you would fail. We intercepted neural development at an early stage, made subtle tweaks, kept the higher functions from emerging. We don't even have to keep them asleep. They're comatose. They have working brainstems, hypothalamic function, all of that, but no light. And it works, better than we had dared hope for. The gems are placed on the bodies, and the process works nearly flawlessly. It still takes quite a good number of cubes, but the only cost now is for the rewiring of the cortex. No insanity, no side effects, as good as new. Well, it *is* new, in a way."

That last was intended as a slight joke, but it didn't work. Her face expression must have been a sight to behold, fully mirroring the instinctive disgust and grudging understanding she felt, because her father visibly turned away from it.

A moment later, the lift shuddered to another stop, and the doors slide open. They were at the bottom.

"I see the look of disgust on your face," her father said, as they walked out of the elevator. "Human morality is an interesting thing, isn't it? We recoil and balk at something like this, even though it's logically the best solution. The Incubators approved, though I suppose you wouldn't see the humor in that."

He paused.

"Take your synthesized meat. Centuries ago, people tried to do something similar. Decorticated chickens and cows, engineered to have no higher brain structures at all. Without them, they couldn't suffer, couldn't feel pain, couldn't peck and bite and each other, and the animals could be raised industrially at greater densities than ever. With the food crises of the time, it was a great solution, even ingenious, but people rejected it. They just wouldn't accept it, not until it was just cells in vat, meat grown that had no resemblance to the animal at all, even more industrial. But what was the difference? There was none, not really."

They turned, and her father looked down at her. She tried to understand his expression. It was a man explaining his life's work to his daughter, a member of the public, the public that would never understand.

"I don't expect you to really understand," he said, "but what we do now is mostly refine the process—add improvements, try to reduce the number of tubes, things like that. That, and revive girls who lose their bodies on the front. The ones we bring back to life don't care how we did it, even though we tell them. They're so happy, to live again. Their faces are what keep your mother and I coming back every night."

He put his hand on a tank directly next to them, and Ryouko finally looked up, then recoiled in surprise.

"Kyouko!" she exclaimed in surprise.

Her father looked up.

"Yes," he said. "There are facilities like this throughout Earth and the colony worlds, in discreet locations. It used to be that only girls in risky occupations had clones—the rest just kept genetic information on file—but nowadays, all of you do. This is the storage facility for this sector of Japan. We try to keep the clones near wherever the girls are at any given moment, but of course moving them around is difficult, so it takes some planning. Only the most important get an extra copy kept on Earth, though Kyouko here only needs this one. I don't suppose you've looked around?"

She hadn't, not until she saw Kyouko, but now she did, and saw Mami floating in the tank to her right, the child that was Yuma beyond that, *another*, older copy of Yuma, followed by Tanaka Yui and all the other faces familiar from *Akemi*. And on Mami's left—

She walked rapidly over, to make sure she was seeing properly.

"Ah, yes, Akemi Homura," her father said. "We still keep it alive, in case she ever comes back. The girls who lived here are kept here, if they warrant a second backup clone."

But Ryouko had tuned him out, looking down at the floor, face haunted. All of this: clones, endless soulless bodies in tanks, Akemi Homura and Chitose Yuma and Sakura Kyouko—

Over the past few days, the impact of her vision in the ribbon chamber had begun to diminish. It had been so confusing, and with nothing to follow up on, no explanations to clarify what had happened, she had stopped thinking about it.

But hadn't she been inside a tank, beating on the glass with her hands, as the fluid drained?

What did it mean? That had looked like the inside of a lab, not this giant blue cavern, but surely they didn't decant anyone here. Still, something about it—it didn't seem right. Those weren't her

hands. They were too large.

A thought occurred to her.

“When do you start growing these clones?” she asked, still looking down.

“What?” her father asked, surprised.

She looked up and made eye contact.

“After a girl makes a contract, how soon is a clone grown?” she asked. “Why did we travel all the way down here anyway? Was it just to show me the tanks?”

Her father looked back at her, and in his eyes passed a glimmer of something she couldn’t identify.

He cleared his throat.

“Yes, well,” he said. “It actually begins the moment the contract is made, if there is genetic material available on file. In your case, I submitted some myself as soon as I could, so it’s had nearly a week to gestate. There’s not much to see; the first stages are the most delicate, so we don’t dare accelerate the growth much. It’s just a mass of cells.”

“But you brought me here to see it?” she asked. “Or am I wrong?”

Her father grimaced.

“If I thought you were okay with it,” he said.

“Show me,” she demanded.

Her father closed his eyes and took a breath.

“Very well,” he said, and gestured for her to follow.

They walked along the floor of the facility in silence, with none of the long explanations that had characterized the rest of this trip. Eventually, they exited through a side door, and Ryouko found herself passing through a much smaller room, about the size of several classrooms put together, and only as high as a normal room, with tanks arranged in rows. Here the ages were much more varied, and she found children and *infants* of every size, lower necks just as full of wires and tubes as the ones she had passed earlier.

She stopped, swallowing hard to overcome the wave of visceral revulsion. Her father watched her.

“Ryouko, are you sure—“ he began.

“I’m fine,” she growled.

They kept walking, and entered yet another room, even smaller. This one had no giant tanks, only a row of cylinders lining both walls. These cylinders were white, and Ryouko recognized it as the same glass-like material that had lined the elevator tube, opaque or transparent on demand.

They stopped, and her father touched one of them, thoughtfully.

"Your mother and I had mixed feelings about this one, as you might imagine," he said. “Well, go ahead, take a look on the monitor. It’s a microscope camera.”

He gestured at a monitor underneath the tube, and she looked, at the transparent mass of cells on the screen, a slight density at one end where the inner cell mass was. Some statistics on the side proclaimed cell number, showed alternate views of the hollow inside, or of associated chemical gradients, and proclaimed that the initial nanite population was functioning smoothly, and had as of yet had no need to correct any genetic abnormalities.

It was nothing different than what she had learned about in school.

She looked downward, searching for name and ID number she had observed on all the others.

And there it was, in bright electronic lettering:

Shizuki Ryouko.

She felt something rise in her throat, and barely managed to shove it back down. Another wave of revulsion passed over her.

Why does it matter to me so much? she thought. *Why does it bother me? It's just a mass of cells with my genes. It's just—just—*

She held up her own hand, and looked at it.

If I lose my body, she thought, *then…*

She stared at the mass of cells again.

"Ryouko?" her father asked, quietly.

"Why the hell didn't you ever tell me any of this?" she demanded, barely managing to keep from yelling, surprising herself with the vehemence of her reaction, enough to cause her father to recoil slightly

"I—I'm telling you *now*, aren't I?" he managed. "I couldn't possibly have said anything earlier. Do you know how many regulations I'm breaking even doing this now?"

"You—you—" she began accusingly, not even really having a coherent thought ready, just knowing she had to say something.

But the thought was incomplete, because she couldn't come up with the logic to finish it.

"Would it have really mattered?" her father argued, watching her. "Would you have really wanted to know?"

"Yes! I mean, I don't know, I—"

"Would it have affected your decision?"

The question shocked Ryouko out of her confusion, and she clasped and unclasped her fists, forcing herself to *think*.

"I—" she began. "No. It wouldn't have mattered. But it could have."

Her father closed his eyes, took a breath, then opened them again.

"Your mother says it was a mistake not saying anything earlier," he said. "But that now that it's happened, we should keep quiet. I don't know who's right. I just thought you needed to know. I

want you to understand. I brought you here because I thought you *deserved* to know. I didn't want you to go in blind. Not my daughter."

Ryouko gritted her teeth, hard, clenching her eyes shut. There it was again, the irrational anger, which she couldn't justify to herself.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I need to go. I—I need to think."

Without waiting, she turned away from the tanks, heading for the far door, and what she hoped was the exit.

Her father started to reach for her, then thought better of it, and jogged forward, pointing her towards another door.

They didn't say another word the whole trip home, as Ryouko's mind swirled with confusion, anger, and betrayal, and she kept her thoughts firmly to herself, moving one foot in front of the other.

She could understand the logic of it all. They had done nothing wrong, from their view. She understood that.

But if they could hide this from her, if they could *lie* to her like this, then what else were they lying about?

She thought about the family finances that had never made sense to her, her parents' quiet constant paranoia about where she was and what she had been doing, Atsuko telling her to ask about her relatives, and her father listening to a technician talk about her unusual genetics without any sign of surprise.

"Ryouko," her father said, finally, as they approached their flat.

She turned and looked at him.

"Whatever happens," he said, eyes deeply conflicted. "I want you to remember that I love you. That's all I ask."

It seemed like such an off-topic thing to say that Ryouko could only shake her head and walk away, sealing the door to her room firmly shut as she went.

APPENDICES:

Appendix A (Fleet roles):

"What follows is a brief description of major military starship classifications, both alien and human. A more verbose description can be called up at any time by selecting the relevant subtopic:"

"Cephalopod:"

"Blink Cannon: Capital ship. Brittle, rare, and seemingly very costly ship, specializes in teleporting heavy—often nuclear and antimatter—explosives, hard radiation bombs, suicide drones, and FTL missiles into the gut of the human fleet. Fortunately, there is a brief phase-in in period for these devices on the other side, and objects can only appear in hard vacuum. Possible alien advances in Blink technology are a constant source of worry for Naval Command."

“Heavy Carrier: Capital ship. Launch site and rapid-repair facilities for alien interceptor and bomber fleets.”

“Interceptor: Engages closely with human MC, interceptors, and frigates. Fleet defense against possible stealth attacks by human MagOps teams. Cover for bombers attempting attacks on cruisers and battlecruisers. No FTL engine.”

“Bomber: Heavy fire platform, intended for use against heavier human ships such as cruisers, battlecruisers, and light carriers. No FTL engine.”

“Battlecruiser: Heavy fire support, planetary bombardment, WMD deployment. Often used to delay human fleets which are too close, to allow time for withdrawal.”

“Cruiser: Heavy anti-personnel platform. Deploys hard radiation bombs and EMP pulses, effective against unshielded targets.”

“Frigate: Light anti-personnel and patrol platform. Deploys “shrapnel” flak and minefields.”

“In addition, Cephalopods deploy a significant contingent of strategic fighters and bombers, which usually operate independent of fleets and are capable of FTL and Blink transit.”

“Human:”

“Battlecruiser: Heavy fire support, anti-cruiser and anti-capital ship. SHERMAN gun is slow-firing, but projectile produces anomalous gravitational fields that interfere with both FTL and sublight propulsion. Planetary Bombardment and WMD.”

“Light Carrier: Provides interceptor and MedEvac support to fleet.”

“Cruiser: Fleet defense and MC support. Attempts to destroy or deflect Blink Cannon projectiles, bomber armaments, etc. Provides extensive medical facilities and armory. Anti-frigate if the opportunity arises.”

“Frigate: Fleet defense. Deploys smart flak, mine-fields, and other anti-fighter/bomber counter-measures.”

“Interceptor: Fleet defense. Provides support to Mage Corps against interceptor/bomber squads.”

“MedEvac: MC support. Drone ships that retrieve incapacitated mages and provide medical/grief cube support. If necessary, will abandon all but soul gem.”

“Stealth Frigate: Anti-capital ship, long-range. Agile insertion ship for MagOps teams. Stealth usually assisted by mage. FTL capable.”

“Mage Corps: Anti-capital ship and fleet defense, especially in close combat situations.”

Bloodlines

[“In a way, the Matriarchies have always been implicit in the magical girl system, held in check only by the once ruthlessly short lifespans of the girls involved. The moment the MSY ensured that life would be both long and secure enough for girls to realistically ponder having children of their own, female-dominated families began to crop up like mushrooms in MSY-administered regions.“

“It was eminently natural. Though no one had previously realized it, personality traits and environmental conditions conducive to contracting have a strong tendency to be shared among family members, at least insofar as personality is a product of genetics and family environment. While nearly everyone within the MSY knew anecdotes of sisters or cousins who fought together, no one had any idea how pronounced the phenomenon was until late in the first century of the organization’s existence, when members began noticing a startling number of mothers introducing their own daughters to their teams as newly contracted girls.”

“Initially, opinions about the phenomenon varied. Many newly minted mother-mentors were distressed at their daughter’s contract, feeling that they had failed as parents and constantly hovering over their own daughters in combat. Others were welcoming of the prospect, and some had even secretly encouraged it, in various ways.”

“Bemused by the unexpected phenomenon, and well aware that MSY society was entering uncharted territory, the MSY leadership made little initial attempt to interfere with the phenomenon, besides setting rules that the MHD would evaluate all such familial mentorship arrangements, recommending separation if they felt operating on the same team would lead to psychological problems.”

“As the decades and generations stretched on, the most powerful and prolific of these families began to bond into social and political blocs. The unique combination of shared secrecy, *esprit de corps*, natural familial affection, mutual nepotism, and sense of superiority over the rest of humanity served to bind multiple generations together into long chains of mentorship, usually dominated by the leadership of the Matriarch, the originator of the lineage. This led to a self-perpetuating process, wherein familial-political groups feeling threatened by the power of these families organized into further matriarchies, intensifying the phenomenon. Indeed, feeling threatened by the power of other families, groups of powerful siblings or cousins, not directly connected to a single magical girl mother, often unified behind the leadership of the most powerful of the group. There are even a few examples of unrelated girls doing the same.”

“It was generally the most powerful of the families that solidified in this fashion, with members highly motivated to maintain contact for reasons of power or prestige, and accruing further powerful members via marriage with ambitious new girls. These families were usually descended from influential early members, such as the Founders, or had significant structure already, due to significant initial wealth—an important consideration in the early MSY.”

“On the other hand, less influential families tended to fragment early, as descendants followed a natural tendency to move away from their parents.”

“These newly formed Matriarchies soon began to develop practices and customs all their own, most notably the tendency of the Matriarchy family name to override all other considerations, for naming purposes, initially for daughters, but later for all descendants. At first, these Matriarchal names were often kept private, until perhaps after a girl needed to fake a death, but later, as the families got more powerful in the outside world, the practice became open, and was often applied retrospectively.”

“While many in the MSY grumbled—and continue to grumble—about the outsized influence of these families in internal politics, the nepotistic benefits afforded to newly contracted members, and the possible patrimonialization of MSY offices, the Matriarchies would end up providing significant institutional support to the burgeoning MSY. Family trusts proved a useful vehicle for hiding and laundering MSY monetary transfers, and handing MSY corporations from mother to daughter provided an easy way to keep property in the system after the original owner’s “death”, without attracting undue suspicion. Matriarchies also provided a reliable source of experienced and trusted personnel, churning out each generation a new set of contractees and trusted NCs—sons, husbands, and non-contracted girls—expected to join MSY operations if at all possible.”

“Finally, and perhaps more importantly, the Matriarchies brought political stability to a democratic system that could have easily broken down into factionalist rancor like so many of its contemporaries. Matriarchs, most of whom had known each other for centuries, negotiated compromises and resolved political disputes with much less conflict than might have otherwise been the case. Indeed, with a few major exceptions, the MSY Rules Committee and Leadership Committee have always been remarkable for their collegial and compromising atmospheres, lacking the kind of partisan in-fighting that might be expected.

The flip-side of this, of course, is that it has led to continuous claims that the system is not as democratic as it claims. It might also be argued that the MSY was merely lucky that no two of its major families have ever gotten into unresolvable feuds…]*

—Julian Bradshaw, "Mahou Shoujo: Their World, their History". [] indicates content redacted to those without security clearance. The number of asterisks indicates the degree of security clearance required to access enclosed content.

“I can’t believe you just let it happen!” Kyouko protested, leaning forward, making an expressive gesture with one hand, the other hand flat on the virtual conference table.

Yuma looked back at her for a moment, taking in Kyouko’s outraged demeanor, expression unfazed. She turned her chair to look at Mami, who was watching the two of them thoughtfully, hands folded over her mouth.

“What would you suggest I have done?” Yuma asked, turning back, once she was sure Kyouko had calmed down slightly. “Interrupt them? Summon Darwin for a talk and order him to block access? I’d rather not intervene in something like that. For better or worse, it was his decision to make. That, and the girl’s father. Obviously I’m not blowing the whistle on them.”

Kyouko fumed, shifting her gaze to Mami, as if to tell her to say something. Mami didn’t, however.

She chugged the rest of her cup of juice, then slid back her office chair and got up, pushing herself up with both arms. She walked up to the giant window of their virtual reality conference room, looking at the view for a bit of calm. The room was modeled after the executive meeting room of the D&E Corporation, so it was designed like a typical late 21st century conference room, complete with holoprojector and virtual carafes of strangely satisfying water and juice on the side. On the far end of the table, in front of the giant corporate logo—purple and white, a winged girl carrying a box in outstretched hands—projections of Shizuki Ryouko and Shizuki Kuma were frozen in tableau, Ryouko in the middle of rushing away, her father reaching for her.

As for the view, it was of the skyscrapers Mitakihara City in the late Information Age, before the many things that would alter the skyline in coming years: the camps of unemployed streaming to

the city for refuge, the massive public works projects, the missile defense complexes.

Kyouko turned back towards the table.

“That Shizuki Kuma!” she said, making a fist with one hand. “What was he thinking? This is exactly why I don’t like those damn Matriarchies! Even the estranged branches are always trying to cheat!”

“I wouldn’t call it cheating, nee-chan,” Yuma said, sipping soda from a can. “And it’s not like he was pulling on Shizuki family resources to do it, either. Besides, that has nothing to do with the topic on hand.”

Kyouko sat back down, sighing.

“I know,” she said, slumping her head down and extending her arms. “I just hope she’s all right. Some girls don’t take it well. She’s more cynical than most girls, but I didn’t want her career to start on something like this.”

“She’ll be fine,” Yuma said, pulling at her hair baubles. “That’s my read, given that she asks to see her own clone. Arisu-chan’s already been informed, and she says her psychological profile suggests she’ll get over it. Really, the bigger problem is her relationship with her parents. There might to be some problems there.”

“I tend to agree with Chitose-san here,” Mami said, speaking up for the first time in a while. “Obviously, you’ve spent more time with her than me, but the MHD tends to be accurate about these things. She seemed disgusted, yes, but not overwhelmingly. She kept it pretty together, but I’m not sure she’ll trust her parents after this.”

“She shouldn’t anyway, I guess,” Kyouko grumbled. “She’ll learn that, eventually.”

“So consensus?” Yuma asked. “I’d say we should just watch for now.”

“Sure,” Mami said.

“It’s not like there’s any other choice now,” Kyouko said, looking briefly at Yuma, then away, with that curious sudden detachment she evinced sometimes.

“In that case, let’s move on to the rest of the agenda,” Yuma said crisply, leaning forward. “First, some updates on the whole grief cube business, from my end. I thoroughly examined the surveillance records for the area where the modified cubes appeared. There’s nothing on the feeds, and no evidence of tampering. I’m sure it’s been tampered with, but whoever it was knew what they were doing.”

Kyouko snorted, sitting back up.

“Of course,” she said dismissively.

“We only have one real lead,” Yuma said, “And It’s not a particularly good one.”

She pushed a button on her remote. It was a bit of theatre, since all she was doing was pushing “play” every time, on material she was sending the VR simulation mentally, but it was a habit born from a lifetime of meetings.

A new projection appeared, replacing the old one of Ryouko and her father, this time of a flat 2D image, very blurry, obviously taken from a great distance. A woman with cropped hair, mid-walk.

Mami thought to herself that the woman looked vaguely familiar.

Kyouko looked at her expectantly, but Yuma gestured at her, indicating she should talk. They looked at each other for a moment.

A moment later, Kyouko cleared her throat.

“Ryouko-chan herself took this, on the night of the demon hunt,” she said. “Pedestrians are rare in the area, so it’s notable, but she didn’t think it was important until she met the woman herself, while getting her new TacComp model installed.”

Without bothering with the fake remote, she waved her hand, and a second projection appeared next to the first one, this time of the face of Joanne Valentin, director of the Prometheus Research Institute.

Something clicked in Mami’s mind, and even if it hadn’t, her TacComp flagged it for her.

“Oh!” she said loudly, while Kyouko was in the middle of saying that her database search suggested that the two women were almost certainly the same person, and if Ryouko had sent it to her earlier they wouldn’t have needed to rely on coincidence.

Yuma and Kyouko looked at her.

“What is it?” Yuma asked.

“It’s, uh, well I’ve met her before,” Mami said, a little embarrassed. “Nowhere important, I’m sorry to say. It’s just—I was at the movie theatre, and I saw her there too, without her glasses. Didn’t talk to her, though.”

They blinked at her.

“Movie theatre?” Kyouko asked, a moment later.

“Yeah, right after Shizuki-san contracted,” Mami said. “A few hours later. It’s quite a coincidence… maybe…”

Her voice trailed off as she realized that, perhaps, the coincidence was rather unusual. It was strange enough that she didn’t even remember to fear Kyouko asking why she would go to the movies.

They shared a long moment of silence. Something about it seemed just seemed strange to them.

“Well, that’s another coincidence then,” Yuma said. “Even if it seems meaningless.”

She paused for a moment.

“I met her once too,” she said, “when the institute was being dedicated. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but she seemed really strange. Very focused, I guess. I talked to her, but she seemed nervous. Something about her bothered me.”

They watched her. Nowadays, it wasn’t common for Yuma to speak so vaguely.

“Anyway,” Yuma said, shaking her head. “I have no idea what any of it means. Sorry to interrupt, nee-chan”—she meant Kyouko—“but can I finish this?”

Kyouko nodded, and Yuma leaned forward again, gesturing at the screen with remote in hand.

“I looked into Joanne Valentin, naturally,” Yuma said. “I can summarize. She was born in Germany, to a minor branch of the Valentin family—one of those small families that have always been trying to climb up in the MSY, but she wasn’t in a branch in on the secret. She graduated from school as a chemist and worked in a couple of labs for a century or so, without much to distinguish her.”

A series of holograms flashed by on the projector to illustrate. Graduation, a few lab group photos, things of that sort.

“Then, a few years after the war started, she switched fields and became a physicist. She started doing much better, earned her DS, and was part of the team that designed the first starship force fields. That got a Nobel Prize, you’ll remember, but she wasn’t one of the principal researchers. Still, very prestigious.”

“Afterwards, she started writing manuscripts about entropy, the heat death, and magical girls. The entropy gap, basically. She was the first outsider to realize the implications, since the MSY doesn’t really talk about it. That caught Science Division’s eye, she got friendly with some of the professors, and they interviewed her for Prometheus Director after the last one retired. She’s done an excellent job, by all accounts.”

“Sounds like she’s had quite the career since the war started,” Mami said.

“Yes,” Yuma said. “The thing is, as part of the background check, I dug a little deeper. Apparently, right before she changed fields, she started seeing a psychiatrist. The doctor’s notes say that she was feeling disaffected: her career was a dead end, she wasn’t married, she didn’t have any friends. She was thinking about joining the military.”

She stopped, to make sure the others got it. They nodded.

“And then everything changed,” Yuma said. “One day, she canceled her counseling sessions and said that she was feeling better, without any other explanation. Obviously the psychiatrist didn’t believe her, but when he went to check up on her, she really *was* better. She had a new passion, and didn’t show any of the signs of apathy he had noticed before. He said even her personality had changed. She told him she had had a religious experience and, since he couldn’t find anything wrong, that was the end of that.”

She stopped again, and looked around.

“I have no idea what it means,” she said. “I met her. I can’t picture someone like her ‘having a religious experience’.”

There it was again—that vague feeling that there was more going on here than it seemed. The others looked troubled too.

“You know,” Kyouko said. “It almost sounds like a Reformat.”

Mami shuddered. She did not like hearing that word.

Yuma glanced at Mami, then said:

“Maybe, but if so, it was an unusual one. Reformatting can delete memories, yes, and even replace them with new ones, but that’s a far cry from changing personality. We’re not sure why it can’t be done—we think personality is closer to the core of the ‘soul’, whatever the hell it is.”

Mami summoned a teapot, then poured herself some tea to drink. Reformatting was one of the aspects of the MSY she *really* did not like. It bothered her tremendously.

“In any case,” Yuma said, eying her with concern, “I checked the records of the Black Operations Subcommittee. No reformat was ever approved for Valentin. Of course, that doesn’t mean it didn’t happen.”

“How could we tell?” Kyouko asked.

“I’ll send a trained telepath her way,” Yuma said. “It’s the most reliable way. But…”

She paused briefly.

“We have to remember,” she said. “This could all just be a wild goose chase. Like Ryouko-chan told you, she could have just been out for a walk. She seems like the kind of person who might.”

Kyouko nodded, then looked at Mami.

Why do they keep looking at me? Mami thought. *I can’t look that bothered, can I?*

“Seems reasonable enough,” Kyouko said.

Mami took a breath, then poured herself more tea.

“It doesn’t really seem to lead anywhere,” she said, trying to involve herself. “It’s interesting and all, digging up all this dirt on someone’s life, but it leads absolutely nowhere in explaining why she would be trying to kill Ryouko with grief cubes. Assuming she has anything to do with it.”

“Yes,” Yuma said simply.

She waited a moment, took a drink of her soda, then said:

“I also looked further into the past of Ryouko’s friend, this Simona Del Mago. Del Mago is a funny name; it almost sounds like it’d come from one of the Matriarchies, but there’s none I found that make sense. It was sort of a weird thought anyway.”

“‘Of the Mage’,” Mami said. “It really does sound like one.”

“It’s also a perfectly legitimate Spanish name,” Yuma said. “So it doesn’t have to mean anything. I looked into Simona’s parents, including the ones she listed the two times she listed the wrong parents. I can’t spot anything too strange, except everyone involved is a retired scientist.”

Their faces came up on the projection.

“Scientists everywhere,” Kyouko said. “Everywhere you look, it’s more damn scientists.”

“Yes,” Yuma said. “I’m doing what I can to look into their backgrounds to see if there’s a connection, but that’s all I have for now.

“Can we just talk to the girl?” Mami asked.

“I was hoping to wait until after Ryouko has left,” Kyouko interjected. “Who knows what repercussions it might have?”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Yuma said.

Mami nodded, and there was a moment of quiet.

Yuma cleared her throat.

“So, do either of you have any updates to give?” she asked.

“I haven’t really been connected to this,” Mami said, holding up her hands in apology.

“Not really,” Kyouko said. “I have Risa Flores tailing her, but she says she hasn’t seen anything unusual. No one else is following Ryouko, as far as she can tell.”

“We have to keep in mind: there are other possibilities besides assassination,” Yuma said. “It could have been an attempt to get her to contract, a test-run in preparation for an attack on someone else, or an attempt to earn some sort of reaction from someone. It may be the case that now that it’s over, there’s no reason to try again.”

Mami shook her head, hair fluttering around her ears.

“No way it’s an attempt to get her to contract,” Mami said. “It was too risky. They had no way of knowing I would happen to be there. It was far more likely to get her killed. It almost did.”

“I agree,” Yuma said. “Barring something really esoteric, like another cloaked magical girl nearby. But that seems like a lot of trouble to contract a girl Kyubey said had a high chance of contracting anyway.”

“How did you know it said that?” Mami asked, frowning.

“I asked it,” Yuma said. “I put in the word that I wanted to talk to it. It didn’t have any other insights.”

“It could have been an attempt to get a reaction out of one of the Matriarchies,” Kyouko said, “except that I couldn’t get that to make sense, when I was thinking about. If you want to annoy the Kurois or Shizukis, there are much better targets than a new contractee in an estranged branch of the family. And what kind of reaction would even be worth it?”

“Plus, none of the other families would be stupid enough to use forbidden grief cubes,” Yuma said. “At least I hope not.”

“Hmm,” Mami repeated.

They sat there in silence for a long moment, the clock on the wall ticking quietly.

Mami cleared her throat.

“Well, I guess I can say a little about my investigation into the grief cube shortages,” she said. “My agent hasn’t finished her report yet, but I’ve been looking into what I can myself. There’s…a discrepancy, I guess, between what the records say and what our grief cube audit says about cube supplies. At the time points with shortages, the squads report receiving far less than what the reports say was delivered. I don’t know what’s going on.”

“I want to confirm delivery with the upstream distribution AIs, and check some of the combat logistics records, but I can’t do that without revealing what I’m asking. It might be okay, but the risk is that word leaks out somehow, and then we’ll have a firestorm on our hands. I want to avoid that until we have to report the results.”

Yuma nodded.

“Okay, but we can’t let considerations like that stop our investigation. We can’t let things stall just because we won’t talk to a couple of AIs.”

“I know,” Mami said. “I want to see what my agent reports first.”

“Well, you’ve done better than I have,” Yuma said. “Because I haven’t found anything. As far as I can tell, both grief cube shipments and distribution systems are functioning as designed. Of course, it may just be that the systems I’m looking at are too far in the backend. And I still haven’t found anything to corroborate the anecdotes of girls who should have survived dying.”

“Neither have I,” Mami said.

“I need more information,” Yuma said. “Who exactly is disappearing? Where? A few anecdotes aren’t enough. I need lists, of everyone who’s supposedly gone missing. Maybe then we’ll see a pattern. I’ve looked into the records of the few names I have. It looks like they just suffered terminal sanity slippage during transit. Sometimes it just happens so fast that the monitors can’t rip the soul gem off fast enough.”

Kyouko let out a breath.

“I can ask the Church to seek out names more aggressively. It wasn’t really the focus of the first survey.”

“That sounds good,” Yuma said.

Again, silence prevailed over the table, the three of them briefly lost in their own thoughts.

“Alright,” Yuma said. “If there’s nothing else, I have some minor things I want to talk about.”

They looked at her curiously as she raised her hand dramatically.

An Incubator doll materialized within it, which she slammed down into the table.

“Talking about Kyubey reminded me about this,” she said. “This is the next version of the Incubator doll. The one we distribute to children. The Incubators are surprisingly interested in its development, so we talked about it for a while. We’re going to give it a range of realistic voice options this time. I want your opinion.”

She tapped it on the head.

“Make a contract with me and become a magical girl!” it said loudly.

Mami and Kyouko stared at it, then at Yuma.

“What do you think?” Yuma asked.

“I think it’s pretty close to the original, if that’s what you’re going for,” Mami said.

“I agree,” Kyouko said.

“Okay,” Yuma said, materializing another doll in her other hand.

She tossed one each to Mami and Kyouko.

“Listen to it if you have time,” she said. “You know, virtually. It’s important. These kinds of things affect recruitment. It has to be cute. Cute!”

She emphasized the last word by leaning forward and stabbing the table with a finger, causing Kyouko and Mami to look at each other with bemusement.

Kyouko seemed to spend a moment in thought.

“In that case, they could just model it on you,” she said.

Yuma tilted her head in confusion.

“What? No, I’m not an Incubator! Wha—Hey! Put me down!”

Kyouko had grabbed her across the table, picking her up by the armpits, grinning broadly. Yuma kicked her feet wildly.

“I just thought we all needed some relaxation after so many serious topics in a row,” Kyouko said, still carrying her.

“What is that supposed to—No, don’t tickle me! I—I can turn off tactile input, you know! Most of my con—my consciousness isn’t even here! Don’t—gasp—don’t make me do it! I—”

Mami got up and watched as Kyouko tormented the child, setting the girl down on the table and saying nonsensical things about cuteness while the girl writhed and pushed at her with her arms.

Finally, they both tired of it, Yuma gasping on the table.

“Do you—gasp—have any idea how—gasp—how hard it was to keep my other avatars functional?” Yuma complained. “There’s a—gasp—Directorate meeting at this exact moment! That would have looked good. Spontaneous squirming laughter in the middle of a meeting. I had to cut parts of the connection.”

“I’ve been stressed lately,” Kyouko said, making a show of seriousness. “All this crazy conspiracy stuff, and to top it all off, my girlfriend is leaving me to go fight a war. I thought I’d play with my favorite sister.”

Yuma pouted, sitting back up.

“Ugh,” she vocalized. “Well, anyway, Mami, if you have any chance to attend my birthday party, it’s coming up. Even by virtual avatar is fine. I sent the invitation.”

“I saw it,” Mami said. “I don’t know if I’ll be able to. We’ll see.”

Yuma nodded to herself, then disappeared into the ether, vaporizing instantly.

“Was that really necessary, Sakura-san?” Mami asked, eying her.

“Sometimes I think she works too hard,” Kyouko said. “It can’t be healthy, doing what she does for so long. She needs to relax, maybe take a vacation. And she likes being tickled, even if she won’t admit it.”

Mami shook her head ruefully.

“We can’t take vacations, Sakura-san,” she said. “We don’t have it as easy as you.”

Then with a slight shimmer, she vanished too, leaving Kyouko there alone in a virtual room that suddenly seemed unbearably empty.

Kyouko closed her eyes and left the simulation.

Ryouko stayed in her room and thought for a long while, gloomy and staring at the wall, with apparently enough seriousness that the robot on her desk—she had nicknamed it CubeBot in her own mind—inquired if she needed any grief cubes. She had accepted one and found to her slight surprise that she did, indeed, need it slightly more than she expected, though perhaps that was just her own imagination.

Her mood was not helped by the muffled spectacle of her parents arguing it out somewhere outside her room. The sound-proofing should have been enough to suppress the sound, but she still heard it, could even make out some of the words. For once, she was not glad of her enhanced senses.

She thought about her situation, about the cloning vats, about the mass of cells with her genes still growing enthusiastically, without any idea that their potential would be snuffed out later.

She could see the cold logic of it, now that she could think about it calmly, alone in her room. She had always thought of herself as a logical person, but…

She had always thought of herself as unusually cynical, always skeptical of what the government said, but…

She kept seeing Kyouko, and Mami, and Yuma, eyes closed, floating in hyper-perfused blue fluid, and could see there the ruin of a layer of trust she had never even known she had. Trust that there were some lines the government would never cross, some lies her parents would never tell.

It wasn't logical. She could see that. As she reconciled her childish disgust with the reality in front of her, she knew that they were right. The cloning vats prevented a far greater evil and, in the end, weren't any different from the decorticated chickens her father had talked of. Not any different from her own body without the soul gem she watched greedily restore its purity, expelling shards of darkness into a grief cube already growing turbulent and dark, hungry for the light.

It was childish, wasn't it? That was what the logical Ryouko would say. It was childish to recoil in disgust at bodies in vats, when she could accept with equanimity the knowledge of implants intertwining with every aspect of her nervous system, when she could accept the government abandoning entire colonies to the flame, in the name of the greater good.

It was childish to expect her parents to tell her classified secrets, when it could mean the ruin of their careers and prosecution, just to give her information that might never matter to her.

As she stared at her wall, she understood that she would have to deal with it, accept it all as a new part of her existence. That was the only reasonable thing to do. She didn't have to be happy about it, but the universe wasn't structured around her happiness.

She took a breath.

In that case…

TacComp, she thought. *I should have done this ages ago, but multiple people have told me now to read the file on my parents. Do you know which file they were talking about?*

Yes, it thought. *It's actually your file. To be honest, I had thought about bringing it up myself, but I was waiting for my human behavior models to come fully online before making that decision.*

So you *know what's in it?*

It's my job to read everything I can, with my spare processing capacity.

In the future, I would like you to tell me things like this immediately, she thought, with a trace of anger.

There was an actual pause in the conversation, something that rarely occurred.

Acknowledged, the device thought, voice suddenly empty of tone.

Without further comment, the document readout appeared in front of her eyes, text with accompanying pictures on the side. She thought about asking for an acceleration of input, or audio, or perhaps even VR, but decided against it. She would prefer to take her time with it.

Initially, it was material she already knew. Family details: her mother was the daughter of a physician and a housewife, her father the son of a mathematician and physicist—pictures all included and familiar, of course. They had both become Biologists, her mother more the neuroscientist with a nanotechnology background, her father a more traditional cellular sort. Her grandparents were all retired and living in various places, except for one, who—here was a new fact, information they had never been able to previously find—her maternal grandmother was stationed on the Apollo Shipyard, at the spear tip of the Euphratic Incursion. She was a captain in the station defense forces, recently promoted and transferred.

Ryouko raised her eyebrow at that. She had thought that the woman would be much harder to find, that it wouldn't just be a matter of looking her up once she had military clearance.

You're right, actually, her TacComp thought. *I looked at this report the moment it was available. This information wasn't there. Someone must have released it to you sometime recently. I am not informed when that happens unless the change is of at least moderate priority.*

Another pause.

I would have eventually noticed, it thought, and she thought it—she was having a hard time thinking of it as *it*, now that it shared her voice—sounded defensive.

That's alright, Ryouko thought. *Do—Do you know if she would have been informed of my new status, or her husband's?*

You, yes. She would probably have been informed the moment she stopped being in active combat. Your grandfather, no. Not until he officially enlists. He can always change his mind at the last moment, remember.

Ryouko thought about that. Was this a message, specific to her? Or was something else going on here? All the same…

TacComp, forward this information to my grandfather.

Alright.

He had a right to know, she thought.

She continued to read, about career and relationships. Both her parents had entered an MSY-affiliated research institute decades before the start of the war—which was information she certainly knew *now*—and only received significant outside recognition later, after the start of the war. She had always suspected, but never been able to find out for certain, nor had she asked.

They had had their share of failed romances over the past century, information Ryouko had a slight aversion to knowing about, but had met shortly after the start of the war, married, and filed for a child license. It was just as they had told her.

That was all the information mentioned on their careers. Nothing about what projects they had worked on, who they worked with, or even their level of security clearance. She suspected she was running into the wall of invisible redaction, so familiar to anyone who had ever spent time trying to read about sensitive material.

Then she moved to a section she hadn't expected to exist, labeled "MSY ties". That was when her eyebrows really raised.

The section was heavily redacted, and not in the standard way, where information was carefully edited out so that the document still read coherently. Here, it was done sloppily, with text explicitly blocked out.

Most unusual, her TacComp thought. *There is no reason to ever do that, with semi-sentients to handle the document editing. It is only done when the information is meant to be withheld, but it is thought that the reader should* know *there is something missing. Not a common pattern to see.*

At the left side of her vision, a family tree diagram appeared, helping to illustrate the facts that appeared before her. She could see at a glance that female was right, male was left, an arrangement that served to make the maternal side of things more prominent, given that she was used to going right-to-left. Still, though, many faces were missing, and entire regions were blotted out, almost as a testament to the secrecy of her family.

Even the parts of her family history that she could read startled her. Her maternal grandmother's mother, a foreigner whom she had always been told died in the Unification Wars, had indeed done so—as part of a Black Heart infiltration squad, only a few years after the birth of Ryouko's grandmother. *Her* parents—well, here the information blacked out, as did any information on her grandmother's father.

Her maternal grandmother's marriage to Kuroi Abe, the much-younger grandfather Ryouko lived with, had been a matter of displeasure to his grandfather's family, but there was no elaboration as to why. Indeed, Kuroi Abe's family information was simply blacked out to oblivion.

Ryouko read further to the left. Her paternal grandmother was uncontracted, of course, but had two sisters who were, great-aunts Ryouko had never met. Beyond that, for once, the family's information was wide open, leading to wide expanses of people and names that meant exactly nothing to her.

I've never met anyone except my parents and grandparents, Ryouko thought.

Her paternal grandfather was an estranged branch of the Shizuki *Matriarchy,* a term that was unfamiliar to her, until she looked it up and found that it referred to large family groupings of magical girls who tended to wield political power as a bloc. The term had originated from the fact that many such groupings were descended from one powerful girl who, still alive, consequently wielded tremendous power.

She had never heard the term.

Not surprising, her TacComp thought. *It is deliberately never discussed below security clearance one. Neither is the fact that the personality traits that cause potential are somewhat heritable, which probably explains your family tree. Actually, yours is unusually dense in that regard.*

Ryouko felt stupid. She had thought herself an expert on these things, having spent large amounts of her time prowling the public internet for just such information as this, but here was another major piece of information she had no idea was relevant.

She then hopped onto the public networks, hoping that the information she was missing was accessible in a public database somewhere, but she had no such luck. Her maternal grandmother's mother was listed as "unknown", which she now knew to be a lie. A look into the Kuroi family yielded some cursory details about her grandfather's parents and dead-ended immediately after that. Here, since it wasn't plausible to say the information was missing, the information was labeled "restricted".

She had never thought to scour her own family tree. She had never even been interested.

I believe I can help, her TacComp thought. *There is no listing of Matriarchies available to you at your security clearance, but one of the MSY Founders is named Kuroi Kana. You should recognize her from the movie you watched. Given the level of security blackout occurring here, this may be relevant.*

That's right! Ryouko thought, thinking back to the unassuming girl with glasses who had been at the Founder meeting. Could—

I am sorry, but I am unable to retrieve any further information about her. There is nothing available on the public networks except the fact that she exists. I mean it—not even forum rumors, not that I've found. Of course, I've only been looking for less than a minute.

Keep trying, Ryouko thought. *There's got to be something!*

Perhaps, her device thought. *That is, incidentally, the end of the report on your family. The other sections are of less interest, and your psychological profile cannot be accessed.*

They kept searching for a while longer, but found essentially nothing. Why was so much of her family blacked out? Why was so much of her life a goddamn secret?

It was a while later before she received a request for entrance, her mother's inquiry pushing itself to attention in her mind. She also heard a knock; some social anachronisms still survived intact.

As an emancipated minor, she can no longer override your lock, her TacComp thought.

The thing was getting gradually more talkative, she noticed, probably because she seemed to be liking it more than she thought she would.

Let her in, she thought. *Our relationship is better than that.*

The door slid itself open, and her mother walked in, carefully. The woman had always seemed the quiet, feminine type to her, though undeniably competent. Easy to imagine her hard at work in a lab—though Ryouko's image of that was kind of vague, picturing her mother huddled over a machine working at something—harder to imagine her ordering others around, though if Ryouko understood some things correctly, she did at least some of that. But then what did she know, really?

The woman walked up to her and stood in front of where she sat reclined on her bed, stopping short of sitting down, as she would have normally. From Ryouko's seated height, the woman looked strangely towering.

"So, I, uh—it seems you found out, then," her mother said, awkwardly.

"Yeah, if you want to put it that way," Ryouko said airily, looking up at her ceiling. "I—"

She didn't really know what to say in a situation like this, and her mother, despite having initiated this, continued to stand silently, not really giving her anything to latch onto.

Ryouko propped herself up to sit at the side of the bed.

"Is that a new bracelet, Ryouko?" her mother asked blandly, indicating Ryouko's wrist.

"Oh, yes, it is," she said, equally bland, holding her wrist up so her mother could see it. "A gift."

She knew her mother was buying time, starting off with a minor topic.

"I saw you wearing it the other day," her mother began, reaching for her arm. "But I never got a chance to look at it carefully."

She inspected it carefully, turning Ryouko's wrist to get a better look.

"What is it?" Ryouko asked, looking at her mother.

"Who was it a gift from?" her mother asked.

"One of the recruiters," Ryouko said, thinking up a likely lie. "Why?"

"Just curious," her mother said.

They sat in silence for a moment, then her mother took a breath to begin.

"We couldn't tell you, Ryouko," her mother said, still looking down. "How—"

Ryouko waved at the woman, indicating for her to sit too. She did so.

The woman cleared her throat, then continued.

"How were we supposed to?" she asked rhetorically. "We couldn't tell you as a kid and then what were we supposed to do? Give it to you as some sort of special Talk? What would even be the point? And if anyone found out, we could have been sacked."

"That's it?" Ryouko asked bitterly. "Nothing about the morality of what you've done?"

Her mother was taken aback, and the conflict of it tore across her face briefly.

"We thought about it, of course," she said. "But—"

Ryouko waved her hand to silence her.

"Yeah, I've thought about it too," she said, voice much softer. "It's–there's not really any other choice, is there?"

She looked up at her mother while saying it. The woman looked back down, gauging her, realizing she wanted a serious answer.

"There are a few," the woman said. "None of them work quite as well, though. And I've always thought it was elegant, in its own way."

"You didn't want to tell me," Ryouko accused, tiny hands grasping the side of her bed. "I can understand not wanting to tell me earlier. Honestly, it wasn't really my business. But now? I've made a contract. There's no better excuse to say something. Papa did, even though you didn't want to."

Her voice rose in volume as she spoke, but still ended far short of what might be considered a yell, or even loud speech.

“Yes,” her mother said, eyes glancing away to hide the firm expression that suggested “he’s going to pay for that”.

“I—“ the woman began, then paused, gathering her thoughts.

Finally, she said:

“There’s a reason the information about the clones is security clearance two and up,” she said, clearing her throat. “It’s not fear of public outcry—that’s manageable. It’s for psychological reasons. The MHD projected that knowledge about how disposable your bodies are would cause psychological damage in many girls, and would cause others to take unreasonable risks. The problems diminish as the girls get older, but—well, in any case, most aren’t told until they first wake up again in a tank. At that point, we could try to claim it’s a regeneration tank, if possible. Oftentimes, we do, but usually we feel that, ethically, they have a right to know that they’re essentially in a new body. We also restrict them from telling others, and explain why. It’s not wholly enforceable, but it’s passable.”

“You sound like a machine, mama,” Ryouko said, a trace of anger in her voice. “And even if I accept that for all of *us*, what does it have to do with me? You know I would have wanted to know. Do you really think I’m that fragile? I’m not made of tofu, mama, no matter what you think.”

“I just wanted to protect you, Ryouko,” her mother said, wringing her hands.

“Protect me?” Ryouko asked, voice again rising slightly, hands again clenching her bed. “Is that why I haven’t been told a damn thing about my own damn family?”

Her mother stared at her, briefly not comprehending.

“Oh, yeah, I read my own file,” Ryouko explained, looking up at her much taller mother. “The parts that weren’t redacted to oblivion, that is. I can’t even read my own damn psych profile. Anyway, I know all about the Shizukis and the Kurois. My great-grandmother died in the Black Heart. Among other things. Didn’t it occur to you that I might want to know about this? About my relatives? Bad enough that you never told me anything before, but these are connections I could have used, Mama. I—I don’t want to make it sound like that’s all I care about. Don’t you trust me? What am I, a damned bird in a cage?”

“Ryouko—“ her mother began, reaching for her shoulder.

In the renewed fire of her anger, she shook the hand off angrily, staring at the opposite wall, shoulders hunched, making her seem smaller than she already was.

“I *was* going to tell you,” the woman said apologetically. “Tomorrow, during the party, I—I invited relatives. They’re not on the invitation list, but they’re coming. Not too many of them, but a few.”

She paused.

“As for telling you earlier, I guess it really was pointless not to, wasn’t it? You made this damned contract anyway, didn’t you?”

There was a long silence, as Ryouko wondered what it was about her mother’s reaction that

seemed so incorrect, as if it didn't seem to fit with the rest of her personality, or with the MSY scientist she knew her to be.

Ryouko looked up at her mother again, eyes searching.

"Mama, why?" she asked. "Why are you so against this? I know some parents are, but it doesn't seem like you. It's never made sense to me."

Her mother looked at the floor, eyes unreadable.

She shook her head.

"Tomorrow," she said. "Tomorrow."

She got up, so abruptly that Ryouko was almost too surprised to stop her.

"Mama," Ryouko said. "One more question. Please. I want to know."

In truth, over the past few days, she had developed a question she wanted to ask of her parents. This seemed as good a time as any.

Her mother turned and looked at her.

"I've always wondered," Ryouko said. "If the two of you work as researchers, how is it that we're always short of Allocs? Don't researchers get paid a lot? I know what you've told me, but I don't think I believe it anymore. You and papa still work part of the time, so you should still draw some extra Allocs, and don't you have some left over from before I was born? And what about the share we get for grand-mama being in the military?"

Her mother watched her, eyes wide.

"We should have plenty," Ryouko said, trying to keep her momentum. "I have friends with less sources of income than that, and they don't have problems with synthesizer repair. Where is it all going? What is it being spent on?"

She pinned her mother with a look, and the two of them tried to read each other for a moment.

"Given that the basic Alloc distribution prevents outright poverty, a teenage girl's probability of forming a contract scales positively with household Alloc income," her mother said, sounding again like she was reading from a manual. "The richer the family, the more likely the contract, as long as the family isn't truly poor. It's socioeconomics, and we were trying to exploit it. We were going to give it all to you when you passed contracting age. I suppose…we should give it to you now."

Ryouko wondered what her face looked like then, confused and shocked as she was, but her mother didn't give her a chance to question further, simply turning and bolting from the room.

Tomorrow then, Ryouko thought, too numb to really be angry.

Have they manipulated my whole life like this?

Given the size of the average family's flat, it was no longer customary to hold parties within one's own living area, at least not for parties over a certain size, and certainly not for parties to which one intended to invite people of importance. People did not generally enjoy being packed like

sardines in a can, and adding food to the mix was just asking for unpleasantness.

Generally, then, there were multiple restaurants that rented out their floor spaces to families, and could barely be called restaurants anymore, since they were nearly always booked day after day. A substantial fee was charged, since space was one of the few things that couldn't be easily manufactured by a nanoassembler, and there were other onerous restrictions that stymied many the aspiring host.

It was only the morning of the next day, as they sat around waiting for her *father's* parents—and for Kuroi Abe to finish changing, which was taking forever—that Ryouko looked up where, exactly, the party was being held. She had the uneasy feeling she should have been more involved in the planning, but she had been busy, and it was so easy to let her mother do it…

Ryouko blinked in surprise at the location.

"My school? The sports field?" she asked. "You can do that?"

"Apparently you can," her mother said. "With the approval of the instructors. In special circumstances. Well, only one circumstance. It's free, in that case. Actually, a lot of things were unexpectedly free."

"I see," Ryouko said thoughtfully.

They sat there a while longer, in their various modes of dress. Her mother had opted for a sober, proper white dress, which Ryouko thought was a good choice, and her father wore a relaxed pants-with-shirt that stopped just short of being casual. She herself had opted for a long white dress to accompany a carefully chosen green top. Everyone said she looked good in dresses, for some reason.

She squeezed part of her dress between her legs, then looked out the window of their main room briefly, musing on the uninspiring view of tubes and buildings therein.

"Well, I'm done," her grandfather announced.

"Yeah okay," she said, getting up, glancing over briefly, then looking back toward the door, then completing the cycle with a double-take.

The old man, who didn't, of course, actually look that old, had opted to fully deck himself out in an old-fashioned tuxedo, black contrasting with white, complete with little ribbon and gloves. She didn't even know he owned one.

"Don't stare at me like fish in a bowl," he said, walking up to them. "I can wear what I want. Besides, it's not like I'm late or anything."

He was right, of course. As mutual family, it was customary to allow access to each other's location information, though it was accessed only occasionally, such as in situations such as this. They could all tell at a glance that Ryouko's paternal grandparents were about four minutes from getting there.

They sat around for the intervening time period, Ryouko feeling a sudden bout of nervousness about her new life. She was not a traveler like Simona was; she had only left her home for family vacations, to Hawaii, to Egypt, to Washington, DC, and a host of other places—but never alone. And this wouldn't be a vacation.

She wondered, at a moment like this, what her parents thought about it. There was no way to ask.

Finally, as the couple they were tracking approached their door, they rose and headed for the door to greet them.

The couple that appeared at their threshold was, at a glance, not substantially different from any other couple one might see on the street—except, of course, to those who recognized them. Shizuki Koto, like everyone else, appeared to be in his late twenties. He sported vaguely aristocratic features, especially in the cheekbones, features which Ryouko thought had imprinted themselves on her. His wife, Kugimiya Hiro, was a head-turner, uncommonly beautiful, and dressed as if she was well-aware of that fact. It would have seemed immensely strange to a citizen of an earlier age that Ryouko had her as a paternal grandmother.

“Grand-mama!” Ryouko greeted with customary affection.

They hugged briefly, then she repeated the favor to her grandfather.

“Mom, Dad,” her father acknowledged.

There was a further round of greetings, then:

“New bracelet, Ryouko-chan?” her grandmother asked, holding out her hand.

“Ah, yes,” Ryouko said, placing her wrist in the outstretched hand for inspection. The woman looked it over critically.

“It was a gift from one of the recruiters,” Ryouko explained.

Ryouko spotted a look pass between her two grandparents. Koto cleared his throat and said:

“Well, if it’s not inappropriate, we brought a gift too. We couldn’t think of anything else appropriate, so…”

He reached into the pocket of his coat and withdrew what appeared to be a length of string. Looking more carefully, Ryouko could see that it was actually a necklace, one of those with those near indestructible carbon nanotube-threaded strings forming the chain. At one end was what appeared to be an emblem carved in jade.

Ryouko took it and looked at it. It appeared to be two hands holding up a crown, almost as if presenting it to someone.

“Dad—“ her father began. The other man held up his hand to forestall him.

“I’m not on particularly good terms with my family,” Shizuki Koto said. “Actually, that’s an understatement. Honestly, I’d rather it had never come to this. But now that it has, I went ahead and requested one of these. That emblem is the Shizuki family crest.”

“The Shizuki matriarchy?” Ryouko asked, not confrontational, but still asking the question directly.

There was a brief awkward silence.

“Yes,” Koto said, not directly acknowledging that she had said anything unusual, expression unchanged. “Don’t worry; it doesn’t mean anything, other than that you’re of the family. You can choose to wear it if you want. Or not. I just thought it could come in handy. Just because I’m not on good terms doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be.”

Ryouko gave it a moment of thought, then took apart the magnetic clasp, and placed it around her

neck.

“Thank you,” she said.

“Now then,” the man said. “Will you explain to me why you are dressed like a penguin, Kuroi-san?”

“Oh, come off it,” the other old man said. “Let’s just go.”

They arrived at the party area well ahead of time, since it was of course customary for hosts to arrive first. Ryouko had been quietly skeptical of the ability of her school’s large, well-manicured mid-building lawns to produce a decent party area, but was surprised to find the area well-furnished, with numerous chairs, tables well-stocked with a wide assortment of appetizers and snacks, and even light protective netting hovering over the area, eliminating what few patches of light there might have been on the ground. There wasn’t much sun to worry about, given that they were far from the top levels of the city, but it was still a nice gesture on the part of the caterers.

Perhaps there was something claustrophobic about a small field like that, elevated above the ground and buried among the skyscrapers, but if there was, she didn’t feel it.

They were surprised to find that Ryouko’s friends had arrived first.

“It’s the least we can do,” Chiaki explained. “It’s not like we have anything else to do today, anyway.”

That was unlikely to be really true, even given that it was Sunday, but Ryouko accepted the proffered explanation and broke off from her family.

“I wasn’t really sure what I should get you,” Ruiko explained embarrassedly, as they gathered around one of the tables, “but here are some earrings. Clip-on, of course.”

It was stock-standard silver earrings, set with artificial diamonds.

“Thank you,” Ryouko said, but deferred clipping them on.

“This is one of those times I wish I were an artist, rather than a musician, so I could give you something tangible,” Chiaki said. “It seems weird to just send an audio recording. Anyway, I got you this music box.”

She opened a box she had set on the table, and a miniature violinist fluidly pretended to play a violin, producing the sounds of one of Chiaki’s violin pieces, one of the few that Ryouko actually somewhat liked, a fast dance piece. Given that Ryouko had never admitted not liking most of her music, she wondered if it was a coincidence, or if Chiaki had realized the truth somehow.

Finally, Simona pushed forward a small box, obviously another piece of jewelry. Ryouko wasn’t sure *why* everyone was giving her jewelry, but it could be worse, she supposed.

Opening the box, she found a ring with a single jewel, what appeared to be a ruby, crimson. Looking at it, one could see some sort of optical effect within, producing white lines that formed…

“A helix?” Ryouko asked.

Almost certainly an artificial effect, her TacComp opined. *Color is unusually dark for a ruby,*

though not unheard of. Very unusual. I can't find any examples online, so it's probably custom-made.

"Yeah," Simona said, looking strangely nervous. "It's, uh—"

She raised her left hand, and Ryouko could see now that she was wearing a ring she had never seen her wear before, a duplicate of her own.

"Oh, that's nice," Ryouko said, slipping the ring on and looking at her hand, therefore missing the glance that passed between Chiaki and Ruiko.

A while later, the first guests began arriving, a hodgepodge of her father's friends, her mother's friends and her grandparents' friends—no one who she was particularly interested in. Still, she fulfilled what she felt to be her obligation by heading over each time—along with her grandfather—and greeting each of them, enduring the comments about how sad her parents must be and the questions about whether or not she was afraid. A few even said something patriotic, about heroism, and Ryouko found herself unexpectedly nodding more adamantly than she would have usually. The words struck a bit home.

The first unusual guest arrived sixth, after a couple whom her TacComp noted as colleagues of her mother.

Ryouko strode over, gearing up for her standard polite greeting when she stopped, surprised by the fact that the new "guest" was only a single boy, about her age. She glanced at Abe, who looked back, clearly looking at her for answers.

"He's not really on the list," her mother said. "But he's from your class, so I guess I don't see the harm. Is he a friend of yours?"

He asked you out on a date about a week ago, on the day you contracted, her TacComp whispered in her ear.

Now she recognized him. She felt proud that she was able to swallow her dismay enough to maintain a normal-appearing front. Or so she thought, but somehow her three friends managed to detect it well enough to instantly appear hovering behind her.

The boy smiled nervously at her, and Ryouko noticed for the first time that he was exactly as tall as she was, which made him short indeed.

"I understand why you couldn't meet with me earlier," he said, managing to look surprisingly confident. "But I thought, you know, I'd show up and show my support."

He smiled again nervously, while Ryouko stared. Her friends stared at her, and her parents and grandparents stared at all of them.

He wants you to know he's still interested, her TacComp thought. *Not too surprising. A magical girl can be considered quite a catch, even if you don't get to see them very often.*

Since when do you talk about things like this?

Since I got new capabilities installed. Came online just minutes ago, actually. Ahead of schedule, which is unusual.

Have any advice?

Only some *of my new capabilities are online.*

Right.

I wonder how he even knew about this party, she thought, to herself.

Ryouko smiled sweetly, said something nice, then walked off, aggressively grabbing both Chiaki and Simona by the arms. Ruiko followed by pure force of example.

"Alright," Ryouko said in a loud whisper. "Which of you told him about this?"

"Certainly not me," Simona said immediately, looking annoyed.

Ruiko looked at Chiaki, who looked at the sky, and that completed the process of deduction.

"Why?" Ryouko asked, making a gesture of confusion at Chiaki.

"I thought it'd be a good idea," she said, looking also somewhat confused. "He's a nice kid, you seemed interested earlier and I thought—well, you know, the articles say giving someone something to come back to improves survivability."

She said the last part awkwardly, wringing her hands slightly.

Ryouko suppressed a gesture of despair. Chiaki meant well, but sometimes that girl didn't understand her at all. *Seemed interested earlier?* What on Earth would possess her to think that she would want this at her own farewell party?

Before, she hadn't refused, because she hadn't been able to perform a rejection in front of her friends. Now, she was stuck between kicking the kid out, and tolerating his presence the entire time. But the last thing she wanted—

She thought of something.

"Chiaki," she said, reaching up to grab the girl by the shoulder in a nominally friendly gesture. "Listen, I'm going to be pretty busy, greeting guests and all, so I don't think I can properly talk to him. I've got crazy family and such coming. Why don't you go entertain him?"

She smiled sweetly. Chiaki blinked.

"What?" she asked.

"Come on," she said, turning the girl around with her hands. "We all know what a great host you can be. Keep him busy. You know what to do."

As she spoke, she shoved her hands into the other girl's back, pushing her forward with what was now easily superior strength.

"You're not interested?" Chiaki asked.

"Not really. Now go!"

Finally, she gave Chiaki a shove, sending the girl stumbling forward towards the boy in question, who was looking at them expectantly, and whom Ryouko now saw was carrying some sort of gift. Chiaki looked back uncertainly, and Ryouko smiled and waved, pointing at her to keep walking. The girl looked back a couple more times as she traversed the small distance, but eventually committed to her assigned task, hopefully understanding what this punishment was for.

"That's pretty cruel, Ryouko," Ruiko commented. "It's your last day here, and you send her off

alone?"

"I know," Ryouko said, watching the back of the girl in question. "I—I'll think of something else."

"Ryouko," Simona said, gesturing at the entrance point where she was supposed to be greeting guests. Kyouko and Risa had shown up, bearing respective boxes of pastries. Risa was dressed much like everyone else, while Kyouko had opted for basic jeans and a T-shirt.

They were talking with Kuroi Abe, subdued rather than animated. Her other pair of grandparents were there too, and seemed to be handling themselves well.

Ryouko hurried over.

"So I believe the food is over *there*," Risa said, pointing.

"I'm not here for just the food, okay?" Kyouko said.

"I'm just telling you where to put the pastries."

Kyouko grunted.

"So how are you holding up, old man?" she asked Abe, a moment later. "I think the pressure is finally getting to you, with that suit."

"I'm fine," the old man said serenely, ignoring the suit comment. "Or as fine as I can be, given the circumstances."

"Hello," Ryouko interjected, inserting herself into the area. "It's good to see you."

"Likewise," Risa said.

"Nothing like a family farewell," Kyouko said, matter-of-factly. "For those who can have them. If you'll excuse me—"

She walked off with her box toward the food table for food brought by guests, gesturing for Ryouko to follow. Ryouko scampered after her, leaving her grandfather and Risa to talk about… well, whatever they could possibly talk about.

Kyouko set the box down, set out a self-unfolding plate, and began arranging pastries.

"Swanky party," Kyouko commented, grabbing a plate for herself even as she was still emptying the box.

"Yes," Ryouko said. "But is that—"

"Standard procedure," Kyouko said, "for non-contracted family members. We've already moved your grandmother from the front lines to a more quiet position at the shipyard. We don't move them out of the front entirely, but we shift them a little."

"Why don't you move them out of danger entirely?" Ryouko asked.

"I'm just asking, I'm not pressing for anything," she amended a moment later.

"Generally speaking, people are insulted if we do it too brazenly," Kyouko said. "And it shows too much favoritism. Bad for morale. Mostly, though, like I said, people don't *like* being pulled back. Patriotism, unit cohesion, *esprit de corps*, something like that. And we can't give special

jobs to those without special skills."

There was a pause in the conversation as Kyouko began stocking up with what was at the table.

"Kyouko-san…" Ryouko began, then paused.

"What is it?" the girl asked.

"Can I ask a favor?"

Ryouko explained about her situation, with Chiaki and the male classmate, while Kyouko listened with a slight smile of amusement that grew wider as the story progressed.

"And anyway," Ryouko finished. "I was thinking that someone as, um, old as you would be experienced in doing this kind of thing."

She clasped her hands behind her back, then hastily unclasped them, suddenly aware of the picture she presented. It didn't help that Kyouko was tall enough to have to look down at her.

"You want me to get rid of him," Kyouko said bluntly.

"Something like that," Ryouko agreed, glancing over her shoulder awkwardly.

Kyouko smiled and shook her head.

"Teenagers," she said in light reproach. "You know you can do it yourself, right?"

Ryouko cringed.

"Well, I know," she said. "But—"

"Whatever, I'll be glad to," Kyouko said, grabbing her food and walking off. "Never received a request quite like this one. Guess I'm not quite that old yet."

"Wait!" Ryouko said, feeling a last pang of guilt.

Kyouko turned to look at her, waiting.

"Try not to be too cruel, okay?" Ryouko asked, realizing she sounded stupid saying it.

Kyouko blinked, then laughed, making Ryouko look away.

"Sure, if that's what you want," she said patronizingly.

After that, Chiaki was free of her duties and rejoined the rest of them, looking sheepish and confused at Ryouko's behavior. Good old airy Chiaki.

Shortly afterward, Risa joined them. It was strange, dealing with someone three times their age trying to blend in with them, but Risa did a surprisingly good job of it.

It was another fifteen minutes before the first of the mysterious family members Ryouko was waiting for arrived.

Somehow she knew who it was before she even talked to her. Perhaps it was the fact that she didn't recognize her at all. Perhaps it was the self-assured way the apparent teenager carried

herself, the same way Ryouko was beginning to realize could only be expressed by the truly old. Or, perhaps, Ryouko's fuzzy memory of the *Akemi* movie had been enough for her to recognize her face, even without the glasses and short hair. Maybe it was even soul gem detection, on a deep subconscious level.

Whatever the case, when the girl appeared at the entrance point, wearing a sleeveless long black dress, Ryouko needed no prompting to immediately get up and head in her direction. As she walked, her facial recognition algorithms calibrated and performed their database searches, looking for that exact combination of features: vaguely detached, scholarly eyes and soft, pleasant face that nonetheless seemed to hint at inner resolution.

The algorithms no longer displayed text to her, instead dumping knowledge straight into her cortex.

Kuroi Kana

Age: Undisclosed

Occupation: Magical Girl, Active Service.

Special Comments: MSY Founder

The woman looked straight at Ryouko, making eye contact, and with it came the sensation of new *knowledge*, leaving Ryouko no doubt that somewhere deep within the computing systems that permeated their lives, security barriers were being lifted.

Age: 462

Occupation: Magical Girl, Active Service. Rank: General. Commanding General/Director, Black Heart Special Operations Division, joint MSY/Military Affairs.

Special Comments: MSY Founder. Considered Matriarch of Kuroi Family Matriarchy. Former Director, MSY Science Division. MSY Rules Committee Representative, Mitakihara Special District. Basic Member, MSY Leadership Committee. Direct eight-generation ancestor of Shizuki Ryouko.

And then Ryouko found herself at the end of her short walk, standing in front of the girl, who was smiling back at her. They bowed politely at each other, while Ryouko digested the implications of what she now knew. She was not as shocked as she might have been, given what her TacComp had told her the night before, but it was still quite a revelation. It was one thing to know that one was descended from a Founder, another when the Founder was standing directly in front of you, carrying all her titles, including *Commanding General of the Black Heart.*

"I happened to be on Earth," the girl explained to her other family members. "So I thought I'd come by."

Ryouko looked around, noting that both her parents and grandparents were looking nervous, all five of them.

"Nice suit, by the way," the girl said to Kuroi Abe. The old man shifted awkwardly and pulled at his ribbon, acknowledging the comment. Ryouko realized, suddenly, that the girl was just as much his ancestor as hers.

Estranged branch, the description had said yesterday. And his family had disapproved of his marriage. And the head of that family was…

The teenager in front of her, smiling pleasantly at her grandfather, whom Ryouko had long ago internalized as an “old man”, despite his appearance. Said old man was making quite clear from his behavior that he knew he was by far the younger of the two, which made for a somewhat surreal experience, from Ryouko’s perspective.

Her mother swallowed.

“Ryouko,” she said. “Say hi to your ancestor. This is, uh—“

“She knows,” Kana explained. “I gave her the information. Technically, I’m her grandfather’s grandmother—oh, it’s not worth going into. I certainly don’t look like it, don’t you think?”

Ryouko’s family nodded, but Ryouko herself looked back blankly.

“Sorry,” the matriarch said. “My humor is lost on the young. I’ve been regretfully out-of-touch with this branch of the family in recent years. Come on, Ryouko-chan, let’s walk together a little. I want to catch up.”

The woman gestured, and Ryouko obliged, following the founder out to the food tables, just as she had to Kyouko earlier. She wondered what this conversation would turn into.

“I hear you’re quite the teleporter,” Kuroi Kana said after she grabbed a plate, eying a plate of quiches. Not exactly classical Japanese food, but no one particularly cared about that.

“That’s what I’m told,” Ryouko said, wondering how respectful she should try to sound. “I honestly haven’t seen many others to compare with. Personally, I feel I have quite a few onerous restrictions on my power.”

“We all do,” Kana said, deciding to skip the quiches. “With time and effort, you might be able to work around those.”

Ryouko blinked and tilted her head.

“Really?” she asked.

Kana nodded.

“It’s magic,” she said. “There are rules, but the rules are much more flexible than they seem. Of course it helps to understand how your particular power actually works.”

Ryouko realized that the girl was looking at her, or more precisely *peering*, as if she were looking over glasses she wasn’t actually wearing.

Before she could think to respond, the girl went back to looking at food, and she realized that the Kuroi Matriarch knew very well that Ryouko had no idea how her power worked. It had been a suggestion to *figure it out.*

“Test that two hundred kilometer range yet?” Kana asked.

Ryouko shook her head no.

“No one has asked me to.”

“Don’t worry about it,” the matriarch said, trying out some flavored seaweed. “If you know you can do it, then you can do it. Simple as that.”

Ryouko nodded politely. It all seemed like good advice.

"Anyway," Kana said, piling the seaweed onto her plate. "I know that you're working for Mami right now, but eventually you'll have to think about your future on your own. When that day comes, the Black Heart could use a long-range teleporter. Our Magical Operations units are the best of the best. I want you to think about it."

The girl looked down at her meaningfully, and it took a moment for Ryouko to realize just what the comment had been: a job offer.

"I'll, uh, think about it," Ryouko said, thinking that this was a safe response. Black Heart? Spec Ops? Did she really want to do that? She really couldn't think about that now.

Kana nodded in satisfaction, then lifted her hand so Ryouko could see the bracelet on it.

Ryouko looked carefully at it for the first time, then gasped, reaching automatically for the one on her arm. She stopped, raised her own arm, and made the comparison. The two bracelets were identical, with a glowing comet insignia of the MSY circling the exterior on the band.

Kana nodded in affirmation, eyes twinkling as if sharing a private joke. Ryouko opened her mouth to say something—

And another girl appeared next to her, shoving her way in so that the three of them formed a reluctant circle.

Acting on some strange instinct, Ryouko immediately checked the neck of the new arrival—and found there the necklace she expected, the twin of her own, bearing the crest of the Shizuki family.

The girl had what Ryouko now realized were the family's emblematic cheekbones, which she herself shared, but had a somehow…harder look than she herself did. She also wore a similar dress to Kuroi, but more elaborate, with frills.

"Hey, hey," the girl protested as she stepped in, making a chopping motion with her hand. "Enough of this."

For a moment, the three of them looked at each other. Ryouko was not surprised at all to find that she was looking at the Shizuki Matriarch. Not quite a founder, but an early member, who had joined only thirteen years in, and had later provided a good deal of the financial seed capital of the MSY. She was also Director of MSY Finance and Resource Allocation and…nine generations up. Unlike Kuroi's history and role, hers appeared to be mostly unclassified.

"I should have known you'd be here," Shizuki Sayaka accused, pointing at Kuroi Kana. "As if you would ever miss a chance to con a young girl into your clutches."

"Come off of it," the Kuroi matriarch retorted, glaring. "Firstly, unlike *some* spoiled Ancients I could name, I don't park myself on Earth 24/7. *I* had to travel to get here. Secondly, I would ask what *you* are doing here. I seem to recall that you are quite the charmer yourself."

"Financial directors get around quite a bit, thank you very much," the Shizuki matriarch said. "I'll thank you not to flatter yourself. And for your information, I was only here to inform Ryouko-chan that MSY Finance has plenty of roles for a powerful teleporter out in the colonies. With your skills, you could provide a disproportionate boost to transportation efficiency. Given what you're capable of, the increased economic production could easily offset any loss to the army in the field. All without firing a bullet, and plenty of travel."

The last few sentences were obviously directed at Ryouko, and were an even more obvious sell

job than Kuroi had done earlier. The Shizuki matriarch smiled at Ryouko, who smiled back nervously and politely. Honestly, the whole thing was starting to bother her. But, travel…

"And make us a tidy colonial profit, I'm sure," Kana said drily. "And I think your money-grubbing is selling Ryouko-chan a little short. In the special forces, she could easily make a much bigger difference then she'd ever make in boosting "aggregate production". And I'll bet you finance directors really do get around."

Sayaka blinked, before catching it.

"Oh, *real* mature," she said. "And you military types never get the importance of economics and manufacturing. A bit too complicated, I'm afraid."

She made a show of sighing.

"Well, I'd venture to say," Kana responded, "that Ryouko is decidedly uninterested in doing anything as *unpatriotic* as cowering in the rear. In fact—"

"Hey, what's going on here?" Kyouko interjected, appearing and shoving her way into the circle as well.

She made an exaggeratedly dejected face.

"Oh, look, it's my two favorite people in the world. I should have known you blood-suckers couldn't let an opportunity like this pass. Listen up, she's my student, and she's Mami's student. Off-limits. Capisce?"

"I was only suggesting possibilities to her for advancement once she leaves Mami's tutelage," Kuroi said coolly, sipping on a drink she had pulled out of nowhere. Ryouko noticed she didn't mention *Kyouko's* tutelage.

"Don't you think it's time to let it go, Kyouko-chan?" Shizuki Sayaka purred, emphasizing the diminutive *-chan*. "It's certainly puerile of you. What exactly did my mother do to you? Call you fat?"

Ryouko looked back and forth between the three of them, astonished by the way in which these *Ancients*, all past the four-century mark, were acting—like vindictive schoolgirls, essentially, an impression which was particularly hard to shake given they all looked about the right age. There was also the way in which they were talking over her head, as if she weren't there at all…

Kyouko bared a visibly fanged smile.

"Well, it certainly stands to reason that she'd have a daughter like you, Sayaka-*chan,*" Kyouko said.

Ryouko thought Kyouko hesitated on the name *Sayaka*, after the first syllable. But perhaps it was only her imagination.

"After all," Kyouko finished, still smiling. "Like mother, like daughter, and you're certainly just as much of an overblown, back-stabbing—"

"Kyouko!" a new voice exclaimed, and Ryouko was surprised to see her *psychiatrist* aggressively grabbing Kyouko with one elbow—which was a little awkward, given that Atsuko was by far the oldest-looking and had to bend over to do it.

Kyouko looked immediately disgruntled to have her there.

Oh that's right, Ryouko thought vaguely. *She's Kyouko's psychiatrist too.*

"And now the party is complete," Kana commented drily.

"Don't you three think it's a bad idea to be squabbling in front of Ryouko-chan here?" Atsuko said, as if berating children. "Be better-behaved."

"Look, I was invited to be here," Kyouko said, pointing at herself. "I'm not here—"

"I know," Atsuko said, letting her go and standing straight. "So was I. Come on, let's all try to be a bit more civil."

As a point of fact, Ryouko's TacComp thought, surprising her with the interruption. *She is not on the invitation list. I'm not sure why she would lie about that.*

I don't think she's lying, Ryouko thought.

But then why would—

The device stopped abruptly.

TacComp? Ryouko thought.

Well, technically, the invitation list also contains an open-ended invitation to family members.

Ryouko blinked, trying to keep one eye and one ear on the conversation around her.

What? She thought. *Do you really think—*

"Ryouko!" her father's voice rang out.

Ryouko startled at the summons, looked behind her, then took her leave of the other four.

She headed for the entranceway where her parents and grandfather stood, beginning a fast walk. Then she slowed down, squinting, and finally brought herself to a stop, abruptly.

The girl standing with her parents, with her smiling face and long hair, was unmistakable, even if the white sundress was new. Ryouko had a brief flashback of the same girl standing before her in purple costume, composite bow raised towards the sky. The girl of her dream—of memory.

As she watched, the girl raised her hand and waved towards her, almost sheepishly.

I didn't want to interrupt you earlier, her TacComp thought, fast as lightning, *since there wasn't any information you would want, not initially. But there's been another security release and, this time, a personal privacy request release. It's—*

Her TacComp stopped mid-sentence, and it took her a moment to realize the machine was actually pausing again, rather than continuing in the confident, absurdly rapid diction she was used to.

Are you hesitating? she asked, surprised.

I am… processing, the device thought.

Ryouko stood there for a long moment, watching her family from a distance in mutual awkwardness. Her mother reached down and hugged the girl, who had apparently just arrived. Her mother picked up her up off the floor briefly and Ryouko felt a moment of surreality which

she had difficulty understanding. It seemed achingly familiar.

“You came,” she said. “I thought you wouldn’t make it.”

“I barely made it in time,” the girl said. “I almost missed the ship.”

Her father and Abe shared a brief look of confusion, but then her grandfather leaned over and said something into her mother’s ear, intended to be secret, but Ryouko, focusing on them, heard it anyway.

“We always knew this day would come,” he said.

“Yes, but I hoped it wouldn’t be so early,” her mother whispered back.

Her paternal grandparents, for their part, looked tense.

Of all people, Risa appeared from the background, walking over to the mystery girl.

“The hens have come home to roost, it seems,” Risa said.

“She can hear you, Risa,” the girl said.

“I know,” Risa said. “I guess I can leave her to you, then.”

With that, she turned and left just as abruptly as she had arrived.

Done, her device thought. *Forgive me. I was testing out my new human interaction capabilities. They’re very sluggish at the moment. But—*

Another pause.

Well, I shouldn’t talk so much, it thought. *The point is, I considered distracting you and letting you hear it from your family, but the release on the security implies that she probably wants you to be using your nomenclator. So…*

Ryouko didn’t have any time to brace for the flood of information that she was expecting to receive, but instead it was just the standard few comments—not that it was any less staggering.

Kuroi Nana

Age: 127

Occupation: Magical Girl, Active Service. Rank: Colonel

Special Comments: Older sister of Kuroi Nakase, Maternal aunt to Shizuki Ryouko.

Ryouko’s eyes instantly widened, and she looked at the girl, at her mother, at her father, at her mother’s father, then back at the girl. Their faces looked guilty and nervous.

Yes, she could see it now that she knew what to look for. No wonder the teenager had looked familiar. *Of course* she had, since now that she stood next to Ryouko’s mother and her grandfather, the resemblance was striking, even despite the apparent difference in age. The bracelet, the visit—it all made sudden, terrifying sense.

She took a breath.

“What the hell is this?” she yelled, stalking up towards her family. “What? I couldn’t know about

my own *aunt*? Does everything have to be a goddamn secret? How could it possibly have hurt to know my own mother has a sister?"

She thrust her face forward and up to drill a glare into her mother's face, aware that she was making a spectacle at her own party. She didn't quite care.

"R—Ryouko," her mother said, leaning back to avoid the two of them colliding. "It's hard to explain, but if you'll calm down—"

"I'm not going to calm down! You're telling me everything! Right now! Don't I have a right to know?"

"Ryouko, please—" her grandfather began.

Ryouko glared at him, and somewhere in her anger she had the presence of mind to note that her father didn't seem as distressed as the others, standing in front of *his* parents, who were wearing faces as if they had just accidentally bitten into something particularly unpleasant. Her father looked almost satisfied, in fact, his body language signaling—signaling what?

She turned to look at him, but before she could say anything, he spread his hands, shrugged, and said:

"I told them from the very beginning it was a bad idea, but they wouldn't listen."

That got Ryouko to pause, for a moment, before she accused:

"*You* could have said something. I—"

"Shizuki Ryouko!" someone said from behind her.

"What?" she demanded, rearing around, tired of being interrupted yet again.

She found herself looking at a stern Kyouko, wearing a face she had never seen before. The three other girls stood at her side, Shizuki Sayaka looking confused and darting glances at Kuroi Kana, who was shaking her head to herself. Atsuko Arisu, for her part, looked dead serious, and seemed to be trying to watch everyone at once.

"Lieutenant," the general ordered, crossing her arms. "Control yourself."

By all rights, that shouldn't have been enough to faze her, but Ryouko found herself so struck by the surrealism of the command that the spell of her anger broke, and she found herself looking up at the four of them, breathing heavily.

"Well, Lieutenant?" Kyouko asked.

Ryouko stood up straighter, not really sure what to do.

"Oh, uh, yes, er, sir?" she managed, confused, for some reason pulling out the Human Standard "sir" rather than "Sakura-san".

Kyouko unfurled her arms and sighed.

"Look," she said. "I invited your aunt to come here. I thought it would be the right thing to do. I don't think your family should have kept something like this from you, but you should at least hear out their reasons."

Kuroi Kana glanced at Kyouko, perhaps confused.

"What?" she said, turning to face Kyouko. "No, I was the one who told her to come. I've let this branch of the family languish in dysfunction for far too long. It was time to clarify matters."

Her voice picked up a tone of…arrogance, perhaps? Whatever it was, it chilled Ryouko slightly, and Kuroi Abe seemed to be sharing her sentiments, judging by his expression.

"I invited my sister here," Ryouko's mother said sternly. "For your information. I thought it was my responsibility."

Her father cleared her throat.

"Well, actually—" he began.

"Well, I should say—" Ryouko's grandfather began.

They looked at each other, having managed to interrupt each other.

The girl—or rather, woman—in question cleared her throat and spoke, and her voice sounded just like Ryouko remembered it, a somewhat deeper-pitched version of her mother's voice.

"Yes, I got a lot of invitations," she said drily. "But Ryouko, I think we all owe you an apology. Just let me talk to you for a while and explain ourselves and, maybe, you will feel better about us."

It seems that everything about my life is learning to understand things that my family does without my knowledge, Ryouko thought morosely.

She took a deep breath, closing her eyes and drawing on the reservoir of calm she liked to believe was her core.

"Alright," she said, nodding. "I'll listen."

She followed the girl out into the genetically-engineered short grass one more time, this time more deeply, far away from the others.

They walked until they reached the far corner of the green space, where a transparent panel of some nearly unbreakable material blocked them from stepping off the edge and careening to their deaths or, more likely, the embrace of a patrol bot. Green spaces were rare and extremely expensive, but every school had one—quite expansive spaces, at that.

As they walked, Ryouko glanced at the wrists of the other girl and found, as expected, the Kuroi bracelet.

"Why didn't you wear that bracelet when you came to see me?" she asked.

The girl turned her head slightly, looking back at Ryouko.

"Hmm? You mean that time when you were a kid?"

"Yeah."

Ryouko realized suddenly that it was perhaps the most tangential possible question to ask, but it was too late to take it back.

The girl stopped, having reached the transparent wall. She put her hand on it, looking through it at the skyscraper across the chasm, the skyways and tubes that bridged, and all the paraphernalia of a modern city.

“I’m surprised you remember that,” Nana said. “I wasn’t sure you would. Is that the one I gave you?”

She gestured at Ryouko’s wrist, and Ryouko nodded.

“I’m glad,” her aunt said. “I thought maybe Kana-san gave it to you.”

Her voice was almost wistful.

“I usually don’t wear this thing,” Nana said, answering the question Ryouko had no longer intended to press. “Only at social functions of a particular sort. I spend most of my time under an assumed identity, and a bracelet like that would be red flag to certain people. Last time, my job took me near here, so I thought I’d stop by and pay a visit to my niece, quietly. It’s never been easy, staying away.”

“So why give one to me?” Ryouko asked. “Wasn’t that a giant risk too? What if I looked up the bracelet online? I threw it in a drawer for years, so you lucked out there, but the past couple of days I’ve been wearing it on and off everywhere and—“

She stopped, puzzled.

“Why didn’t anyone notice?” Ryouko asked. “My mother saw it, I think, even if I didn’t notice, but I was waving it around Kyouko’s Cult center everywhere. I even went to a meeting of their Theological Council. No one seemed to notice anything about it.”

Her aunt smiled.

"If they did, why would they go out of their way to specifically mention it?" she said, voice a combination of gentle and sharply precise that reminded Ryouko of her mother. "Besides, the bracelet isn't very well known. Long ago, it was a way for family members to recognize each other even if they didn't know each other. I have no idea how we managed to keep it *sub rosa* for so long, but Matriarchal naming conventions made them much less important, and the face software made it completely obsolete. Nowadays, we don't bother keeping it a secret, but no one bothers to remember about it, either. Sort of a funny symmetry there."

“Anyway, I gave it to you on a whim. The real risk was that you would show it to your mother, but that was a risk I was going to take. I’ve never really agreed with the family policy regarding you, though—well anyway, I’ll tell you later, don’t ask now.”

Her aunt looked down for a moment, into the vertiginous drop in front of her, as if thinking.

“Do you believe anything the Cult says?” she asked, finally, still looking down.

Ryouko was surprised by the question, partly because it seemed random, but partly also because she had no response ready. No one had asked her recently about her beliefs. A week ago she would have answered confidently “No”, but now…

“No, nevermind,” her aunt said, looking up to read the conflict on her face. “You don’t have to answer that. Personally, I’m not sure if I believe what they say, but the experiences I’ve had in recent years make me believe they’re at least onto something.”

Ryouko blinked, surprised because the answer was eerily close to her own actual opinion.

“I’ve spent the past twenty years hunting Akemi Homura,” her aunt said, looking through the transparent wall again, eyes not looking at Ryouko. “Nominally, I’m Internal Security, so

occasionally I do other things, but that's my personal assignment. By the way—"

She turned to look at Ryouko.

"—I'm sure I don't have to tell you this, but I'm breaking rules just telling you that much. If you breathe a word of this to anyone, we could both be in big trouble."

Ryouko looked back at the other girl's eyes, then nodded understanding.

"Internal Security?" she asked, frowning. "That's not—"

"You can't look it up," her aunt said. "Level Three Security Clearance. We're part of the Black Heart. If the MSY has a secret police, we're it. It's not as scary as it sounds—it's just that there are some enforcement actions that don't fall into the legal structure of the MSY Rules Committee, or violate Governance Ordinances. Essentially, we do what the Soul Guard can't, at least not legally. Governance doesn't like us much, but leaves us alone."

The girl sucked in a breath, then sighed.

"I used to be her student, you know, long ago. I'm not her most recent student, but I'm the only one who happens to be in Internal Security. I guess that's why they thought they should give me the job. I—"

She paused, as if thinking.

"We've been trying to track Homura ever since she disappeared. Despite what everyone's been told, she *did* leave behind a trail, right after she disappeared. There's evidence that she traveled to a few other major battle sites, in the early months, casting her aura and helping the fight. We have no idea how she avoided detection, but after a while, the trail goes cold. *That's* when she really disappears. We've been chasing leads for two decades, following reported sightings, unidentified magical girls, things of that sort, but it's always been dead ends, hoaxes, mistakes, or something else entirely. What's confusing is—"

She stopped abruptly, then recovered, continuing:

"Well, I can't talk about everything. Anyway, there is a reason I'm telling you this. It's—well, it's half the reason I never met you, not until now. There were secrecy concerns, better if I didn't even have a family, but also—"

Again she stopped, while Ryouko watched her with slightly wide eyes.

"I'm sure you're tired of me avoiding the main point," her aunt said, voice soft. "So let me say that there's a reason your mother is having me do this, instead of just telling you herself. It's because unlike her, I can transfer memories."

Ryouko blinked at her, taking a moment to grasp what she was implying.

"Are you saying—" she began.

"It will make things easier," the other girl interrupted. "Do you mind sitting down?"

Ryouko looked around, but there were no chairs in the immediate vicinity. After a bit of hesitation, she sat herself on the grass.

"I spent a long time putting this together," her aunt said, sitting as well. "A long time. Most of it is fuzzy, because it all predates any of the TacComp perfect recall stuff, but that actually makes it

more focused, strangely enough. Ever use a VR simulation?"

Ryouko shook her head no.

"Though I have been through the installation process, if that counts?" she said, making it a question.

"It's not the same," Nana said, shaking her head, "but I guess that's why I asked you to sit. Hold on, it will take a moment to transfer."

"A moment to transfer?"

"Just wait a moment."

They watched each other for a long moment, as Ryouko mused over what it meant for something to take *time* to transfer.

Done, her TacComp thought. *You may trigger the memory recall when ready. I recommend closing your eyes. Would you like partial or total immersion?*

She looked at the other girl, who was watching her with a slight frown, as if concerned about something.

"Go ahead," the girl said.

Total, please, Ryouko thought, thinking back to her vision at the Ribbon, and wondering if this would be similar.

What am I in store for? She thought.

Then she triggered it. For a moment nothing happened, and then the world vanished around her.

For a moment, all was oblivion, and the blackness pressed in upon her, but then her mind began to clear…

Samsara

Chapter Notes

> The appendix at the end is an elaborated version of one of the snippets at the front, not an exact duplicate. People have been confusing that...

"Having emerged victorious in the last round of the Unification Wars, the ruling Emergency Defense Council of the United Front faced a crisis of unprecedented proportions. Half a century of repeated, often unlimited postmodern warfare had brutalized Earth and its human populations. The world population had declined to below half of its pre-war maximum, with tremendous numbers of humans dying in direct combat, of starvation, or in one of the innumerable purges ordered by the insane hyperclasses of the Freedom Alliance states. Wide swaths of once prosperous territory were now radioactive wastelands, the planet's ecosystems and climate were on the brink of collapse, and unfriendly or enslaved FA AIs, still loyal to their dead masters, lurked the wastelands of the world. Almost the entire globe was under direct military rule, with even the governments of nearly all UF states having buckled and collapsed under the strain of total war."

"But where so many people saw disaster and ruin, the Ai and human members of the Council saw opportunity. Placing their faith in its technology and the brilliance of its carefully protected military scientists, the Council predicted that the restoration of law and order and basic services would trigger an unprecedented economic boom, and that the UF's massive standing armies could, if redeployed, help perform reconstruction in record time. The populations of the UF nations, implant enhanced and genetically modified in the exigencies of wartime, would rebuild unimaginably fast, though the rehabilitation of the world's remaining population might prove problematic."

"If the UF could successfully rebuild the world, its directors hoped to use the gratitude of the populace to entrench their ideology and successor government *forever*. To this end, on top of its ambitious rebuilding objectives, the Council promised grandiosely to construct Eudaimonia on Earth, promising to make the Future dreamed of by Humanity real, and to change the human condition forever."

"Nothing was off the table. On a small scale, congestion-free streets, universal augmented reality, easy air travel, an end to violence and crime. On a larger scale, the Council inaugurated a set of projects ambitious both in scope and name, intended to be Manhattan Projects for a new age: Project Eden sought clinical immortality, Project Janus sought FTL travel, and Project Icarus sought to use solar satellites to harvest the light of the sun, making energy not just cheap, but free. With these accomplishments, the Council sought to win eternal loyalty from its citizenry."

"Finally, the Council sought to remake government. The Council sought to make a government provably aligned with the populace's interests, indivisible, and so amorphous as to be unassailable. There would be no personality, no *princeps*, only Governance, a perception that was only enhanced by the absolute secrecy surrounding Council members that, started as a wartime security measure, would only be ended decades later."

"When the Council finally ended martial law ten years later, dissolved itself, and made way for its successor, historians were already considering it one of the most successful governments ever, despite the fact that its most ambitious projects had yet to bear fruit. Earth's ecosystems were well

on their way to healing, the former FA populations had been absorbed without major incident, and civic unrest was nominal. Industrial production had already doubled the prewar maximum, and the human population was booming, reclaiming the urban centers that had so long ago been abandoned to rot."

"In recent years, there has been speculation that the Council's ambitious goals and seemingly ludicrous optimism were prompted indirectly by the Incubators, via MSY intermediaries. No evidence has ever emerged to support this claim…"

—Excerpt, Infopedia article: Emergency Defense Council, Section: History, Subsection: post-Unification Wars, Mode: Discursive, moderate information density.

For the below text, [] indicates content redacted to those without security clearance. The number of asterisks indicates the degree of security clearance required to access enclosed content.

"[By the early part of the twenty-fourth century, the radical ideological and fringe religious groups of Earth were in full exodus mode, pooling whatever resources they had into colonization ships, equipment, and planetary surveys. Now that the establishment of the first primary expansion wave colonies had demonstrated the maturity of colonization tools and techniques, cultists and radical dissidents the world over dreamed of setting up cloistered societies in their own little pockets of human space, hoping to fashion Utopia among the stars.]**"

{Text removed for brevity}

"[Despite Governance's efforts, however, the monitoring of so many widely scattered colonies, many quietly hostile to Governance, proved a considerable challenge, and many worlds managed to slip through the gaps, successfully hiding themselves from the government's security apparatus, and patching over their problems whenever a military inspection appeared on the horizon.]** [In practice, Governance monitoring was carried out as a collaborative effort, on the one hand by the unwitting official organs of the state, and on the other hand by another, secret organization.]**"

"[The MSY shared many of the same concerns as Governance regarding independent colonies. The organization contained and controlled every magical girl alive, and it was not about to let that change, or allow any of its membership to suffer under an incompetent or oppressive colonial regime. Further, the MSY had a humanitarian interest in cleansing colonies of any demon hordes that might form, a cleansing that could not occur if the colonies contained no contracted girls.]**"

"[Consequently, the MSY smuggled deep cover operatives or even entire teams into nearly every departing colonial group, and rigidly forbid any girls deemed too sympathetic to certain fringe groups from following their families or friends into space. MSY Internal Security agents flew among the colony worlds on specially commissioned stealthy ships, keeping an eye on worlds in a way Governance agents were often incapable of.]**"

"[Unlike Governance, these Internal Security agents and their on-the-ground counterparts were much less shy about manipulating colonial administrations to correct perceived injustices, and were usually perfectly willing to call in reinforcements, foment riots and carry out assassinations if they felt it necessary. It was, after all, a natural extension of the Black Heart's previous history. Of course, they were perfectly willing to push information into the back-channels of Governance, so that a military cruiser would appear unexpectedly in the skies above the colony.]***"

"[This combination of two monitoring systems was usually sufficient to keep any deleterious tendencies in independent colonies in check.]** [Officially,]*** [Governance has never had to perform a full military intervention.]** [Unofficially, such an intervention has occurred on at least four occasions, usually in exactly the kind of cases that prompted nightmares among government social planners.]*** [This author has been unable to obtain information about the majority of these

cases, but can attest that in at least one case, the colonial rulers had implanted mind control devices in the citizenry. Further details he is not at liberty to discuss.]****"

"[Another illustrative example of the kind of extreme circumstances it took for an intervention to occur was in a colony that was, from Governance's perspective, crushed for gross incompetence and classical oppression of its citizenry. From the MSY's perspective, however, the colony had become the site of a bevy of shocking soul crimes. This author's sources have been unwilling to disclose the exact nature of these crimes, except that it involved some sort of experimentation, and that the perpetrator has become a favorite dark legend within Internal Security, with many alleging that, given the lack of any eyewitnesses to her apparent soul gem-induced disappearance, she actually escaped.]****"

"[The author has his own suspicions as to who this woman was, but it is perhaps for the best that these details are not revealed.]****"

—*Julian Bradshaw, "Mahou Shoujo: Their World, their History"*

Kuroi Nana stood at the side of the door, listening in on the conversation of those inside, hands clinging to the wall, straining for stealth.

She stared at the far wall, with its framed painting, waiting for the next sentence, the newest revelation.

"She's hardly eating anymore," her mother said. "Naka-chan spends hours in her room with the door locked. You can't possibly have missed it. Her teachers have been sending me—us—messages saying she doesn't seem to care about her studies anymore. They're pleading with us to do something. I don't understand how you can be so blasé!"

It was true. Her younger sister, Nakase, had been distant for weeks, and seemed to not want to talk at all anymore. Not even to her. It crushed her heart to think of.

It had all started a couple of months ago, when her sister had joined some sort of new after-school program. Soon after that, she had started staying out late with her new friends at nights, sometimes late enough to outright murder their curfew.

It hadn't really been an issue. True, she was always evasive about what exactly she was doing, but the whole thing was very run of the mill for a girl her age. She had brought some of her friends over, once or twice, and they didn't seem too bad. The only thing unusual about them was that they all seemed too old to be friends of hers—high school students and college students, essentially. They were, however, part of the program, so it wasn't *too* strange.

It was absurd to suggest that there was any more to it. Her sister had been the same girl she had always been. They were still close, still talked regularly. That she was keeping secrets from her *nee-chan*, that she was running with a new pack of friends—it meant little, because she could see in her eyes that she was the same girl as she had always been: bright, childish, bubbly.

Her sister wanted to be a doctor, like their father, and was, if anything, devoting herself to her studies even more fervently. Nana would know, since they were only separated by two years and went to the same school; it was a rarity, even in these times of population boom, for parents to have children so close together.

They were sure she wasn't in any real danger—the few times her parents had involved guardian's

privilege and tried to track her, the technology showed her at her friend's house, quite as expected. It was disrespectful to stay out so late, but not dangerous.

Once, Nana had rather awkwardly pushed her way into going with her sister. None of the other girls had seemed pleased to have her there, but they weren't truly hostile, and nothing too strange happened—they simply chatted their way into the night, playing a few games along the way.

Sometimes, Nana had caught the girl staring out her window at the expanding superstructure of the city, thinking about something, perhaps not even really looking—but that was normal enough, wasn't it?

Ryouko's head throbbed with the memories, these pieces of someone else's life. It was so intense, and she had trouble holding onto her own identity. She needed no primers or introduction. The knowledge was implanted in her mind, who her "parents" were, who her "sister" was.

Nakase, was that—?

Things had changed that day her sister had failed to return at all, simply not showing up one night. She had stayed up, waiting with her parents, until they received a terse message from Nakase asserting that she was fine, and she would be back tomorrow at school.

And the explanation was—well, there was no explanation.

Her parents fumed and checked her tracker, but she was apparently still at the friend's house. They decided to wait and yell at her later.

In retrospect, her father had seemed very distracted that night, though the significance of that she would not understand until much later.

She didn't show up at school, of course, an event which triggered a brief parental warning message to that effect.

Nana, who was at school herself, would only hear from her parents later about how they had checked the tracker again and, this time, received a perfectly serene *"Error: tracker missing"*. This had, of course, triggered barely suppressed panic and an immediate inquiry to Public Order.

Public Order sent a detective immediately, who explained that, after a brief inquiry, it appeared that there had been an accident—Nakase was fine, incidentally—and that they were holding everyone involved for questioning. Because of the exact details of what had happened, the location was undisclosed, and it was requested that no one else be told about it.

This response was both reassuring—since she seemed to be fine—and, at the same time, vastly unreassuring, but despite much pressuring and yelling, they were not given any more details.

At that point, there was very little they could do, except sit around the apartment nervously and file complaints to Public Order. Nonetheless, Nana didn't sleep at all that night, and ended up having to take supplements.

Early the next morning, Nakase had reappeared in their doorway, face dirty and eyes swollen red, escorted by the same Public Order detective. They were elated at her return, but she would not talk about what had happened, or where she had been, saying over and over that it was secret. She wouldn't say a word or drop a single hint, despite the endless wheedling she was subject to the

moment the officer left.

That was when it had started. The aloofness, the isolation in her room, the picking at her food, the disappearances growing longer than ever. That was when Nana had stopped being able to talk to or approach her sister, who seemed desperate to avoid talking to her, if such a thing made sense. Something had happened; that much was obvious. But what?

And so here she was, clinging to the wall outside of her parents' room, listening to them argue.

"I'm not being blasé," her father said, calm. "I'm as concerned as the rest of you, but I've spoken with her, and she has problems she needs to deal with. She won't tell us, but I'm willing to trust her judgment."

"Trust her judgment!" her mother said, making the phrase an epithet. "She's only twelve! And before you think I'm insulting her, allow to me say that I wouldn't trust myself at twelve with tying my own shoes, much less this!"

"What do you suggest we do, then?" her father asked. "Hire someone to follow her? I won't be the one to try something as crazy as that."

"I'm saying that clearly there's something here we need to get her away from. Her new friends—there's something about them. I'm not accusing them of anything, but perhaps she just needs a change of scenery. Why don't we send her on one of those foreign exchange trips the government is always advertising? It might be just the thing. She could visit my mother's country. I think she'd like that, if she were still alive."

"That's—" her father began, before pausing to consider.

"That's actually not a bad idea," he finished.

Something tore inside Kuroi Nana. They were going to send her sister away! They couldn't possibly do a thing like that! But here they were, still discussing it as a possibility behind her.

She leaned forward, putting a hand over the aching in her heart, as she thought through her outrage and impotent urge to *protect.* True, her sister had been a bit of brat before, but—

This was stupid, she thought. Here, her parents were about to make a decision about her sister's life, and they weren't even going to make a serious effort to find out what was really going on. That was…

…utterly stupid.

But what was she doing? Her sister was suffering, and she hadn't really done anything either. Just stood around uselessly, making futile attempts to talk to her.

She clenched her fist. That would change.

With a shift that was much gentler than the sensory deprivation that had preceded the whole experience, the world shifted around Ryouko, blurring, then reforming into a new configuration.

In the days following her parents' discussion, Nana had tried to secretly follow Nakase, but had found the girl consistently eluding her, with an effectiveness that suggested more than just mere

coincidence. Looking into the logs, she found that, yes, Nakase was indeed monitoring her location tracker. Nana could block it directly, but that would be noticed, and trigger a message for her parents. She had to be more subtle, especially given the disturbing hints of Public Order involvement in whatever it was.

It hadn't been easy, but as a student focusing on Computer Systems, she knew a few tricks and, more importantly, knew someone with a certain amount of pull, thanks to the program that had recently recruited her. She had explained her situation to the teacher—more accurately a Systems Expert who volunteered some of her time to teach—and the woman had nodded and gotten her what she sought, without asking too many questions.

Nana's location tracking service currently reported false information to everyone but a single observer, the teacher herself, who had refused to give her the help without the ability to track her from afar and intervene if something seemed to be going wrong.

Thus, here she was, casually strolling on the skyway outside a certain residential building, a few floors above a certain residential suite, so she wouldn't be easily spotted. It was the home of some of Nakase's new friends, older university students who lived together. It was also the place where Nakase had spent so much time, or so the tracking service said.

The first thing Nana had discovered was that the "after-school program for aspiring physicians" was a complete lie, a fact which she forwarded to her teacher. Nakase and the others made no pretense of heading for the program's supposed location, instead making a beeline straight for the friend's home. Acting on a hunch, Nana had asked her teacher to "stealth"-consult Nakase's location tracker, and found that the tracker was cheerily reporting that Nakase and her pack of friends were exactly where they were supposed to be, nowhere near the home. What on Earth was going on?

Listening in on the interior of the home with the borrowed monitoring bug she had planted on the door, Nana could have been forgiven for being very, very confused. The conversation was nearly completely banal, all about the most trivial of topics, and could have been dismissed as meaningless if it weren't for the cryptic references to "MSY", "Logistics", "voting", and "upcoming referendum". There was even the occasional mention of "demon" and "hunting", though these were rarer. It was all a perfect pack of nonsense, and a search for video games matching the description turned up little.

What on Earth is going on? Nana thought again, her thought ringing in Ryouko's head as well.

What was also notable was that Nakase was saying very little, and that the others seemed awkward talking to her. Another observation that seemed meaningful but did little to clarify anything.

She sat down on one of the conveniently placed benches on the skyway, looking down at the pristine white faux-limestone surface, gathering her thoughts. Given the current trend of the conversation, it didn't look like she was going to get any serious insight any time soon. She'd have to come back tomorrow.

She had to think. Something deep and murky was going on here. The whole thing reeked of conspiracy, even if none of it quite made sense. It just wasn't something she felt equipped to handle, at her age. Fortunately:

None of it makes any sense, as far as I can tell, her teacher thought, over their private channel. *My search daemons have turned up no organization with the acronym MSY that could possibly have any connection to this. Certainly not any with a voting structure they could participate in. This business about them hunting demons—there's a few video games that might make sense, but*

nothing else they say fits. I'd expect at least a few discussions of weapons or loot, for example.

A few seconds of silence.

We're in deep, Nana-chan. I only wish I knew deep into what. I regret sending you out there. I thought it'd be run of the mill drama. You'd be surprised how often I get requests for things like that.

I'll be fine, sensei, Nana thought. *It's just listening. And I need to know what my sister is doing. It could still be trivial.*

Maybe, her teacher responded. *But if something happens to you, it'd be my responsibility. I couldn't—Wait, listen, something's happening.*

Nana tapped into the surveillance device again.

"It's not your fault, Naka-chan," one of her sister's friends was saying. *"We keep saying that. Stop blaming yourself."*

"How is it not my fault?" her sister demanded, voice shrill. *"If I had moved in faster, if I hadn't been such a damned coward—"*

"Enough of this!" the other voice interrupted. *"It might have not mattered. Kavita was having issues with her family. You know that. That was why she was here in the first place."*

"It's not expected of trainees to intervene in something like that. You're supposed to stick to your defined role. You did nothing wrong."

"She lived, Naka-chan," a third voice said. *"Her soul gem survived, and she got a new body. She's just having some problems. The MHD will take care of her. It's what they do."*

Nana's teacher cursed briefly over their line.

Now *I'm getting hits,* the woman thought. *Rumors about military-grade trauma units being designed and shipped to sustain the brain-dead, as well as bodies with ridiculous amounts of damage. But growing back bodies? Soul gems? What the hell is going on?*

Nana shared that sentiment.

"I told you we shouldn't have brought her to the revival," Someone mumbled. She couldn't tell who, and neither could the electronics.

"Are you sure you're good to go?" a third voice asked, *more quiet than the others.*

"I guess," Nakase said. *"I have to be. I have to make up for before."*

"I told you! Stop doubting yourself! Don't let what she said get to you. You're perfectly competent. You don't have to make up for anything. We all have to spend some time learning."

A pause.

"And the rest of you!" the voice continued. "You know what the MHD said. We're not going to let her sulk around at home. She needs to rebuild her confidence. Let's go. Every second we waste could be someone's life! We're starting at Expansion sector 2B, at the park, chop, chop."

Even as one part of her celebrated the phenomenal luck of having it explicitly announced to her where her sister was heading, the rest of her was tying itself into knots trying to understand. What

was all this? She was missing something fundamental, some key that would make it all comprehensible.

She got off the bench and headed for the nearest vehicle pick up site. One of the toughest parts of hiding your location was ensuring that the vehicles still picked you up and delivered you properly. Fortunately, she hadn't had to do that; her teacher had done the work for her.

She got into her vehicle and headed for her destination, taking a moment to observe the cheerily bright sky—or, rather, it would have been cheerily bright, were it not for the endless skyscrapers blotting out the sky. It would only get worse in the future, as construction on the upper-level skyways and vehicle tunnels progressed, despite attempts to incorporate transparent materials.

Is there anything connected to Bogotá Memorial Park that makes any of this make sense? She thought, looking up the unfamiliar location.

Nothing I can find, her teacher thought. *But Nana-chan, are you sure about this? It might not be safe—*

I'm sure, Nana interrupted. *It's not as if anything really bad has happened.*

No, no, listen! I looked up this 'Kavita'. It's a unique name around here, so there were only a couple of them. One of them was a student at a local high school. Foreign exchange. Withdrew from the school one day recently, without explanation, the day after you said your sister disappeared. I haven't been able to find anything about her afterward. It could be the privacy locks—but Nana-chan, I'm worried for you.

Nana looked up at the roof of her vehicle, and at the distant sky, thinking.

I must go then, she thought. *If it is truly dangerous, then it is only more important that I find out.*

There was a significant pause.

Alright, her teacher thought. *I understand. But if there's any kind of true danger, call Public Order and get out, do you understand?*

She stayed silent. She didn't want to lie to her teacher, so she didn't agree. If her sister was in danger, she could not guarantee that she would really turn and run.

She rode on.

There was another scene transition, allowing Ryouko to surface for air. She had, despite everything, been able to think during the immersion and remember what she was here for. The story made no sense. Her mother wasn't contracted—there was no way that could be true! It was absurd to even contemplate. But then, what was this story about?

Bogotá Memorial Park was bright and sunny when she arrived, stepping out of her vehicle onto the warm grass. Here, at least, the sky could still be seen in most of its glory.

The vehicle rolled away on its retractable wheels. Out here, the tubes were still being built, and going by surface was the only way. The traffic had been annoying.

She briefly thought about taking off her shoes to feel the grass on her feet, but decided it wouldn't

be a good idea to go into whatever this was barefoot.

At least it's pleasant out here, she thought, feeling the breeze. Atmospheric wind effects in the city center were…unusual.

She looked around to see if she could see a good spot to watch the park. Her sister couldn't possibly have gotten here before her, after all, so she need to be well-hidden when she did.

Then it struck her what was weird about the park.

Where is everybody? she thought to herself.

She looked around, blinking, before realizing there was no reason to blink. The sun had lost its potency, and seemed almost dull in the sky. Disturbed, she looked straight up at it, and found that she could look right into it. True, everyone had optical implants nowadays, but none of them made the sun not seem bright.

The breeze that had stirred the grass was gone. What kind of strange weather phenomenon was this?

There's no one in the park, she thought to her teacher. *Absolutely no one. I know there's not as many people in the expansion districts, but you'd think there'd be a kid or a dog or something.*

Many…signals…area, her teacher responded, voice interrupted by strong bursts of static. *Inter… what is…*

What? She thought. *You're breaking up.*

One more burst of static, with one last distinguishable word from her teacher said very loudly:

…OUT…

And then there was no signal.

Hello? Hello? She thought, as error messages began to scroll across the top of her vision.

She was starting to get worried. It was true that the newer implants occasionally had weird errors, but auditory communication was one of the oldest and most reliable.

Still, they were taught what to do in this situation.

She sat down on a bench, hoping she wasn't making a mistake by sitting out there so conspicuously, and ran a self-diagnostic, enduring the blurred vision and numbness that came with it.

Readouts nominal, said a computerized voice, one she hadn't heard in years, not since they practiced this exact procedure in primary school. *But apparent signal interference across all channels. Recommend trip to hospital for maintenance.*

She sighed. Really? At a time like this?

She stood back up—and froze.

There were plenty of people around her now, seemingly having appeared out of nowhere, but their appearance was hardly reassuring. They stood still as statues, stares empty.

"Hello?" She said, feeling fear start to settle in her stomach. "What's going on?"

No one responded.

“Hello?” she yelled this time, hurrying up to one of them, a woman pushing a child in a stroller.

For a moment, it seemed as if the woman would respond, turning her head in Nana’s direction, and she felt her panic lessen just a little.

Then the woman collapsed to the ground, limp as a rag doll, almost toppling the stroller over with it, the infant staring quietly at nothing.

Nana screamed, loud and shrill.

Basic combat routines now online, the computerized voice thought.

She felt a wave of numbing calm descend on her, and was glad for it.

To think, that just the other day she had read about some Representatives arguing that it was time to start uninstalling the unneeded system, relic of the Wars that it was. Governance consensus, however, was that there was no reason to take apart an already built system, giving its relatively low resource costs—but perhaps new installations might be stopped.

She looked around at her world with new eyes, assessing her situation, but saw nothing new: the same eerily quiet grassy field, the same zombie-like people standing around listlessly, not moving or even noticing the woman on the ground. Even the few dogs seemed no longer interested in anything. Possible escape routes and methods of disabling those around her suggested themselves in her vision.

Before she even knew what had happened, she found herself ten feet down the path, cringing behind another bench.

She looked at where she had been, where the infant and mother had been, she found a scorched black spot on the ground, stroller now toppled and cracked and mother’s body lying next to it. Above it, a ghostly white giant was turning away from where she had been to face her.

She felt the fear start to cut through the drugs, but swallowed it. Getting up, she turned to run—

—and found herself burying her fist into the belly of a man who had lunged for her.

What— she barely had time to think.

For a long while, everything was a blur, as she sought her way through the crowd that was now, inexplicably, *attacking* her, heading for her with seeming murderous intent. She slammed elbows into the necks of women in white dresses, shoved aside men in casualwear with unnatural strength, and kicked away children and dogs with what she hoped was only disabling force. There was no time to think—only time to obey the combat routines, and hope her energy reserves lasted long enough.

And then she stopped, panting. She had cleared the crowd, barely gaining enough distance away from them for her to take a rest, but now found herself facing a whole field of the white giants, pixelated and silent, watching her, preparing. She didn’t know how she knew, but they were preparing for something. Her legs twitched, her body searching for a way out—

“Onee-chan!”

The yell, brilliant and strong, pierced the silence like a dagger. She looked nearly straight up at its

source, but the source was already gone. Her combat routines responded by immediately turning her head rapidly downward to where they thought the source would be.

She saw her sister standing among the giants, wearing an absurdly colorful blue dress, raising a crossbow with her arm.

She saw her sister supporting that arm with her other arm, the arm with the crossbow bent at an impossible angle, leaking blood. She saw the burned gashes in her side and the way her legs shook. She saw her sister give up on the arm with a snarl, and the crossbow vanish and reappear on her other arm, like a hologram.

It must be a hologram, right? She thought, dazed. *This all has to be to be some sort of illusion.*

"Naka-chan!" she shouted anyway, reaching her arm forward.

Her sister turned and glanced at her for only the slightest of moments, and then a blue wall appeared to separate the two of them, giving her outreached hand a sharp rebuke.

She looked around her and found that it wasn't just a flat wall. It was a cylinder.

Then she cringed, barely suppressing a scream as something bright and white impacted it. But the wall held, and when she opened her eyes again, both her sister and the apparitions around her were gone, the white giants in the distance now heading for a new target, a blue streak that darted rapidly among them, accompanied by bright blue barriers that formed and dissolved. The movements were too fast for her to precisely follow, and it was impossible for her to tell whether the bright white beams emanating from the giants were finding their target or not.

Then the blue dot blackened and crashed to the ground.

A moment later streaks of red and green rained down on the area from somewhere in the sky, roiling the ground and shattering the white giants, but it was too late.

"Naka-chan!" she screamed, as the barrier around her vanished.

Another scene transition, and this time Ryouko digested the image she had seen, of her own mother standing in costume so similar to hers, with so many injuries lacerating her body. She looked so different, so much younger, so much more like her*, but the girl was still unmistakable.*

She wasn't ready, but the memories continued.

"What the hell was she doing?" the girl in red said, kneeling on the ground, bending over and looking at something. "It's impossible that her sister is here."

"I told you we shouldn't have brought her," the girl in green said angrily.

"I only followed recommendations," the girl in yellow answered coldly, but still clearly distraught. "There was no expectation that she would do something like this."

"This is too much damage for me to heal reasonably," the girl in red announced, voice an emotionally forced variety of clinical. "Too much of the original body is missing. It'd be too traumatic. At the very least, I'd need sedation."

Kuroi Nana staggered down the path toward them. Somehow her teacher had gotten back in touch with her, asking what had happened and thank goodness and she had called Nakase to tell her and what was going on—

She had hung up.

"Where is she?" Nana demanded, her voice a strange combination of shaky and loud. She no longer cared for the social niceties. She didn't even care enough to look up their names again, or to try to remember them from the one time she had met them before. She recognized them as her sister's "friends", yes, but at the moment they might as well have been Martians for all that meant to her.

"Who—" the girl in green began, turning her ostentatiously ornamented head towards her.

She stopped talking, and froze. So did the others. A girl in white fumbled the sword she was carrying.

"My God," she said. "How is this possible? The location track—"

"You idiot!" the girl in green snarled, turning to glare at the girl in yellow. "This is what she said! She said her sister—"

"It does not matter," the girl in yellow growled. "She wasn't in any danger. Demons take longer than that to kill their victims, as long as the victims have no potential. If her sister had potential, the Incubators would have warned us. Don't be unreasonable."

"Keep her back, you fools!" the girl in red yelled, the only one to notice that she was still walking forward.

But it was too late. With a cry of pain, Nana ran for what remained of her sister.

For the first time, Ryouko lost complete immersion in the scene. She knew what she was supposed to be seeing on the ground: a limbless body, head attached by little more than a flap of skin, abdomen punctured in multiple places, an entire section missing. Somehow, she knew. But the region of her vision where it was supposed to be was gone, nothing but a field of white.

She felt herself being detached from the memory. She felt the physical sensations of Nana crying over the body, chest heaving, too despairing to even feel disgust at the sight of the body, but she didn't feel the emotion, not anymore.

It was for the best, she realized. Her head swam, and she realized she couldn't have taken the sight of it.

No wonder her mother didn't want to talk about it herself, she thought.

And a small part of her couldn't help but notice the parallels to her own life.

You can fix this, you know.

The voice was androgynous, child-like, and resonated in her head like nothing else she had ever experienced. It was nothing like the many telephone calls she had taken in her life. It was… deeper.

Even so, it took a few seconds for it to penetrate the morass of her sorrow. Finally, she looked up from kneeling over the corpse of her sister, not even noticing the blood that now coated her hands and clothing.

The tears that flowed freely from her eyes blurred her vision, but it was still immediately obvious this was no ordinary creature she was looking at. She struggled to blink away the tears, finally managing to focus for a few moments on the…cat? But it was nothing like any cat she had ever seen, fur colored in clearly meaningful patterns, eyes knowing and unwavering, clearly intelligent.

And…were those ears growing out of its ears? And floating golden rings? Antigrav wasn't supposed to be anything more than a laboratory curiosity.

"Fix what?" she screamed, glaring around at all of them, straining to suck up the grief. "My sister is dead, you—you bitches! What kind of terrible game is this?"

Calm down, the creature ordered, voice again tearing into her head. *She's not dead, not truly. Her soul gem is still intact. They have it; that is sufficient.*

"What the hell are you talking about?" she demanded, gesture at the gore on the ground. "Are you kidding? This—this is barely even a—a—"

I can barely even recognize who this is, she had meant to say, but it had come out all wrong, and she wouldn't even be able to finish.

The creature paced in a little circle on its four paws, flipping its tail.

I am called Kyubey. I grant wishes, the creature thought, *to those with potential. Your potential is greater than your sister's. Much greater. If you want, you could fix this, but the price is that you must take her place here. For us, it is worth it, but for you?*

For a moment, she just stared at the creature, tears starting to dry on her face. It was bullshit, but looking around her, and thinking about all she had seen in this hour, could she really call anything bullshit?

"Wait!" someone said, perhaps the girl in green. "You don't have to. We have—"

She cut off suddenly, as if interrupted.

Alright, Nana thought. *If it's all true—if the world is really some strange fairyland with magical girls in costumes and talking cats that grant wishes, then why not? I might as well mean it. I want my sister back!*

"Alright," Kuroi Nana said, shakily, swallowing her tears forcefully, calm enough to recoil in sudden disgust at her bloody hands.

She swallowed the disgust too, clenching her eyes with the effort, still kneeling.

"If that's true, then—then sure, I'll do as you suggest. I wish I had my sister back, the way she was before whatever this is happened. I want her alive again. I want the sister I knew back!"

She had strained so hard for forced calm that her voice had seemed almost monotonic, until the burst of emotion at the end.

Wish granted, the creature thought. *This transaction has reduced net entropy.*

She didn't know what she expected, but it certainly wasn't the grinding pain that suddenly tore at

the center of her heart. She wanted to gasp, but was somehow incapable of doing so.

But even as she watched the light extend from her chest and form itself into an orb in front of her, her eyes caught sight of another source of light. She strained to turn her head downward and she could barely see, out of the corner of her eye, the blood extracting itself out of her clothing, and some of the light pouring into the piece of meat that had been on the grassy floor, enveloping what was now the shape of a body.

And when she collapsed back down, catching the glowing orb in her hands, she saw another one bury itself into the chest of what was now recognizably her sister's intact body.

Then the girl's eyes opened, and Nana knew the impossible was possible.

Without even looking at the hard, warm object in her suddenly bloodless hands, or at the white creature waiting patiently for her to say something, she bent over and hugged her sister, the *imouto* she had always cherished.

"Naka-chan," she sobbed, embracing the girl.

There was a moment of silence.

"Nee-chan?" Kuroi Nakase asked. "How—?"

The playback seemed to pause and, for a moment, Ryouko thought about it.

It all made sense now: her mother's knowledge about arbalests, her obsession with developing the clones, her emotional disapproval of Ryouko's contract.

Some questions were still unanswered…

The two of them sat in the shadow of one of the tall trees that dotted the middle of the park grounds, watching the confused denizens of the park justify to themselves what they had been doing and whatever strange injuries they may have had, then resume their activities or, more likely, start heading home. Fortunately, the mother and child she had thought she saw killed earlier appeared to be fine, if a little shaken.

"Kyubey never told any of us you had potential," her sister said, leaning on her shoulder. "Or the team would have moved in immediately when your teacher called me. As it was, since it was assumed you had none, the demons would have taken the time to sap your grief before killing you. It would have been unacceptably risky to try to save you immediately, given that. Plus, they didn't fully believe what I said about the location tracker, and there was no time to patch in your teacher."

"Sometimes you sound like a textbook, Naka-chan," she said.

There was a pause. Nana wondered what her sister was thinking, but didn't turn to look at the girl's face.

"The logic was right, but I couldn't let it happen like that," Nakase said. "My friend—Kavita, you wouldn't know her. She lost her body because I didn't intervene, because I was too scared."

She felt her sister shake her head.

“Can you believe that? I wished to protect a girl I didn’t even know from the monsters chasing her, and then I was too afraid to save her again when I had the chance.”

Nana stayed silent, rubbing the new ring on her finger like a talisman.

“So I couldn’t take a risk on my own sister,” Nakase said. “And I’m glad I didn’t.”

Nana still didn’t say anything, staring at the ring on her finger.

What had she gotten herself into? She had received a quick explanation, about demons and soul gems and grief cubes and the MSY, and it had sounded so fantastical, like a distorted version of the interactive holo-anime they had played as children. They had wanted to tell her more, but she had insisted on talking with her sister.

None of it had really sunk into her—not yet.

“I can’t see the Incubators anymore,” her sister said. “My potential is gone. I feel bad for saying this, but I’m glad. If I had the potential to make another contract…I don’t think I could, and I wouldn’t want to know that I chose to let you fight alone.”

Nana thought about what that comment meant for a moment—and then was surprised to feel her sister start crying.

“Naka-chan,” she said, turning quickly.

“I hated it,” her sister said, tears flowing, face clenched with the effort of trying to hold it back. “I wasn’t ready. I couldn’t do it. My team thinks I’m useless. They don’t say that, but I know they think it. I was useless, but the MHD kept saying I needed to try, that I just need to gain some confidence, prove to myself that I could. How does it prove anything, if I can kill a couple of demons with the entire damn team watching my back, and I’m not even allowed to do anything on my own?”

Nana hugged her sister to her chest, wondering at this “MHD”, and the MSY and what all these strange organizations were like.

“I stayed with her the whole day, you know,” her sister said, sniffing loudly. “Carried her soul gem to the facility myself. They were so confident. They smiled at me, and said of course it would work. I believed them, too.”

A long pause, while her sister sucked up more tears.

“She woke up screaming. She—She said she would kill me, for leaving her out there. She said we were all monsters, zombies. They couldn’t stabilize her soul gem. They had to take it away from her. She—she was my best friend on the team, and she *hates* me! They say she’s crazy, that there was an incompatibility in the emotional circuits, there’s something wrong with the nociceptors. They keep talking about neural microsurgery and genetic editation, but—but—but—“

Kuroi Nakase clung to her clothes, bawling starting afresh, soaking the front of her shirt, smart fibers not able to dump the moisture fast enough.

Let’s try not to think about this now, Kuroi Nana thought. *Whatever insanity this is, I can deal with it later.*

“Come on,” she said, embracing her sister briefly. “Let’s go home.”

“Except it wasn’t home anymore. Not really.”

Ryouko jumped, hearing the voice, then realized that she could *jump.*

She looked down at her hands, and realized that for some reason she was standing in the memory, next to the tree with the two sisters hugging, except that the environment was frozen and blurred, as if she were looking at it through frosted glass.

“I’m sorry, did I surprise you?”

She looked back up, seeing her aunt walking towards her. Unlike how she had been at the party, she was decked out in full costume. Looking at her at close range, it was apparent just how similar her costume was to her own, except for color and the lack of crossbow attached to the arm. Did these things really inherit that reliably?

“I’m just a simulacrum,” the girl said, “but I can answer basic questions.”

It stopped in front of her, smiling almost shyly.

“I told you I spent a long time working on this. Before you ask anything, though, we are *going to continue the story, so it’s not worth asking me what happens next.”*

The simulacra looked at her expectantly.

It seemed natural that she would have questions, but she hadn’t had time to really think about it. Now that she did, she realized that, despite the story having been shocking, there were really very few untied ends remaining, when you took into account the fact that there would be a continuation. The whole thing was compactly informative. It had been put together with thought.

“Was the, um, was the blood deliberately censored?” she asked, feeling silly for asking about something minor.

“Yes,” the girl said. “I had nightmares about that for weeks, myself. I’m not going to go around showing my niece detailed memories of her mother’s mangled corpse. Did I make the right choice?”

Ryouko glanced to the side.

“Yeah, I, uh, I appreciate that,” she said.

“Good,” the simulacra said.

It waited again for more questions.

Ryouko thought about it. She wanted to ask about what happened with her family, but she had a feeling she was about to find out. Instead she asked:

“So what happened to your teacher after all that? She must have known something was up.”

“We visited her later,” the girl said. “She agreed to cooperate and keep quiet. She got trusted NC status later, which is a little aggravating, considering.”

Ryouko frowned at the comment.

“Aggravating, why?”

The simulacra shook its head.

“I am not equipped to adequately answer that question,” it said, looking almost embarrassed.

Ryouko blinked.

“Oh, okay,” she said.

Ryouko thought for a moment.

“What about Kavita?” she asked. “Did she—did everything—“

“Things turned out okay, eventually,” the girl said. “For cadaver resuscitations, the gem doesn’t usually change everything before consciousness is achieved again. It’s often the case that, for example, many neurons still carry the genetics of the original body, even after the pathways have been rewired. Sometimes that can be disastrous, since the pathways were originally grown into place with different genetics on hand.”

It shook its head.

“I sound like my sister. Anyway, something like that happened here. Fortunately, a Reformat wasn’t needed here. They were able to wait it out with some gene therapy, drugs, and psychiatry. Didn’t even need surgery. Turned out, the girl had some underlying mental issues to start with. She visited later and apologized. It worked out quite well.”

“Hold on,” Ryouko said. “I think my father mentioned Reformatting before. What are you talking about?”

There was a pause, then it shook its head.

“I am not equipped to answer that question,” the girl said. “However, you’ll find out some day. That’s why I mentioned it.”

Ryouko tilted her head at this answer.

“Hey, it’s just what I was programmed with,” the simulacra said. “Don’t look that me that way.”

“You’re pretty realistic,” Ryouko commented.

“But I’m not sentient,” the girl said reproachfully. “Don’t make that mistake. Any other questions?”

Ryouko thought about it, then shook her head.

“Maybe after I see more about what happened,” she said.

The simulacra nodded.

“Well, the main reason I’m here is that I—well, I guess your actual aunt, but let’s not split hairs—thought I would spare you the tedious family drama that comes after this. Besides that, honestly, I’m not that comfortable sharing it.”

The girl started walking through the grass of the park, and Ryouko followed. It was surreal, with the world frozen around them, the blades of grass somehow bending pliably.

“My parents noticed immediately that something had changed, of course,” she said. “Our father knew all along, of course; it’s hard to be in the Kuroi family without knowing. But mother didn’t,

and MSY policy was that we couldn't tell her."

It shook its head sadly.

"Things were different back then. You needed to have some good reason for your parent to be granted trusted NC status, which we didn't have. Given how things turned out, we should have just broken the rules and told her, but we were naïve back then, and didn't really understand."

It ran her hand through her hair nervously, an eerily human gesture for a simulacrum.

"My sister—your mother—gradually went back to normal. She was still traumatized by it all, but she no longer had a reason to be gone all the time. She was still friends with the rest of them, of course, but our positions switched. I was the one who was part of some mysterious program and gone all the time. I tried to come up with good excuses, but it wasn't really possible to hide it all, not now that my mother had an idea that something was going on."

It sighed.

"My mother noticed immediately, of course. She's not stupid. But of course we couldn't tell her what had happened. I managed to defer most of my training time, came home on time every day, and even introduced her to all the other girls again, but it wasn't enough. She knew we were hiding something; from her perspective, I had gone out and switched places with my sister somehow. She got all sorts of terrible notions about what had happened. That was ultimately the problem. It's not that I was being suspicious; she just refused to buy our explanations."

The simulacra looked down for a moment, pausing.

"You should have heard the arguments we had," it said. "She just refused to trust me, and that started bleeding into everything else. Suddenly, nothing I did was free of suspicion, even if I was just heading out to buy some clothes. I thought it would settle down eventually, but—I don't know, it's just hard taking back some things once you've said them."

The girl kicked a rock on the ground, and Ryouko was surprised to see it actually bounce off, clattering against a tree. She looked vulnerable, and Ryouko felt the urge to give her a hug.

"My father tried helping things, but it didn't help. It just made her suspicious of him, too. She knew we were lying to her and—she stopped trusting us. It was a mess. Like I said, we should have just told the truth. I know that now, but dad had his reasons for keeping quiet."

The girl stopped, and looked down for a moment, thoughtful.

"Well," it said. "And then this happened."

Before Ryouko could think to ask what it meant, or even fully process the sentence, the girl made a hand gesture, sending the world back to dark…

"And then he asked me to go out with him," Takukatsu Yuka, formerly known as the girl in white, said. "Got on his knees and everything. It was mortifying."

"Yeah, and what did you say?" the former girl in green, Shiraishi Akari asked, leaning back and biting into an egg roll.

"Do I look like I just got a boyfriend?" Yuka asked rhetorically. "I said no. I thought about it, but I think it'd just be too much on my plate right now."

They sat around a small square table, munching on snacks—chocolate-filled egg-rolls, freshly synthesized, one of few things the newly developed, experimental machines were any good at. The flat as a whole was shared by Nakajima Emiri, the girl in yellow, Ikeda Saki, the girl in red, Matsumoto Aki, and Osumi Ayano, who she hadn't seen the other day. Emiri—who had apologized for everything a long time ago—was currently lying down on the couch next to them, boredly tossing a ball to herself. The other three were out shopping.

There were another two who were actually married, and lived somewhere about half a kilometer away. They looked a bit older, for legal reasons.

All of them—except Akari, who was in college, and Yuka, who was a senior in high school—were scarily old from Nana's perspective, but of course didn't look any older than she was. Emiri, especially, made a big deal of not disclosing her exact age, which mostly had the effect of driving their estimates of it sky-high.

Yuka sighed, melodramatically.

"I wish I had a different power, no offense. That way my applications would have gone through, and I wouldn't have had to sit around here getting trained to fight demons."

Akari snorted.

"Your lack of success is from your lack of credentials and experience. There are very few powers that grant you ready-made positions, unless you want to be *weak*. Look, it's not easy swinging an internship at your age. Trust me, I know. Just bear with it, get some good post-secondary schooling, and you can apply again later. Soon enough, we'll even let you take off the training wheels and demon hunt as a full team member."

Yuka looked away, not quite rolling her eyes. She complained about her situation on a regular basis, and got more or less the same answer every time.

"I'm not sure I should look forward to taking more dangerous roles," she said, slumping down on the table. "But I guess at least it will be more exciting."

"It's not *that* bad," Emiri said, still tossing the ball. "There's plenty of time to do stuff, and you get some excitement in your life. You damned whipper-snappers are too wrapped up about getting your cushy office jobs. Look at Ayako and Chiharu. I'd say they're doing fine."

Emiri was a career demon hunter, and was a little defensive about it. She was also quite old, and awkwardly self-conscious about it. Her response combined a deliberate "Get off my lawn!" message with a segue into what they knew to be one of Yuka's reasons for being annoyed. It, too, was practically a canned response at this point.

"Yeah, they married *each other*," Yuka said. "It's a little harder if you're straight. Besides, it's not as if I really think I wouldn't be able to have a relationship. I just, you know, think it'd be nicer if I could do it when I'm already working."

"You have the weirdest concerns," Akari commented.

"This is work too, you know," Emiri said, annoyed. "You don't get out of your required training hours just by landing an MSY position early. It just gets deferred or, at most, mitigated."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Yuka said. "But I could spread it out more that way. I'm not exactly impressed by this apartment full of centenarian maidens, even if it's a pretty big apartment."

Emiri turned to face her, her customarily laconic expression replaced by one that could freeze blood. It was moments like this when you could feel how old she was, under that carefree shell. Yuka visibly flinched.

"You're an idiot," Emiri said coldly. "I'll leave it at that. Someday you'll learn."

She rolled over to face the backside of the sofa she was laying in, either truly angry, or just trying to sleep. It was hard to tell sometimes. She had stopped tossing the ball, though.

You are *an idiot*, Akari thought, into a channel that presumably sealed out Emiri—the simulation couldn't replicate the proper sensation—but included Yuka and Nana. *The both of you, listen up. There was a war back in her day. You might have heard of it. People died in that war. Has it occurred to you that maybe she just doesn't want to try again? Maybe she prefers being alone?*

Yuka's eyes widened.

"Oh wow, I—" she began, before clamping her mouth shut and thinking:

I didn't know!

Of course you didn't, Akari thought. *But maybe sometimes you should think before you talk, hmm? And not put your foot in it all the time?*

Your complaints don't even make sense, Nana thought, from her position slumped on the table, where she had been trying to sleep. *No, really, I've been thinking about it. They don't make sense.*

From the mouth of babes, Akari thought smugly.

You're a college student, Nana thought. *You can't call me a "babe"! To people like Emiri, we're practically the same age. Just because I'm the youngest—*

She stopped abruptly, looked up sharply. They looked at her in surprise.

"Do you feel that?" she said. "Someone's coming. I don't know who it is."

The others immediately switched their focus, searching outward to seek what she was talking about. Even Emiri shifted positions, looking up, while Yuka swiveled her head uselessly.

"Yes, she's right," Emiri, the most experienced, said a moment later. "Not transformed, though. She seems familiar…"

"I'm jealous," Yuka said, looking at Nana. "Why do *you* get a wish that lets you do that so easily? I've been trying for years and I still can't pull it off."

"Should have made a better wish, then," Nana taunted, sticking her tongue out. She got another tongue in response.

"Maybe it's someone canvassing for votes," Akari said thoughtfully. "Representative elections are coming up."

"I don't know why anyone bothers," Yuka said. "It's same damn people every time, especially in this city."

"They do keep two seats open for new people to get in," Akari commented.

"Like—" Yuka began.

Suddenly, Emiri sat bolt upright, surprising the rest of them into silence.

“Take this more seriously, girls,” she said, eyes sharp, jumping off the sofa. “It’s Akemi Homura. Yes, *the* Akemi Homura. Get up, get up!”

“Wait, really?” Akari said, jumping up and brushing herself off.

“Oh geez,” Yuka said. “Do I look okay? I knew I should have worn something fancier today.”

“You look fine,” Emiri said, heading to stand by the door. “Someone clean up those eggrolls.”

Nana picked up the plates in question and dumped it, disposable synthesized plates and all, into the trash chute.

“I’ve never met her personally even after all these years,” Emiri said, as they gathered around the door. “What is she doing here?”

“I don’t know, obviously!” Yuka said.

Both Akari and Yuka’s hair were hurriedly arranging themselves into different hairstyles, tendrils of hair waving about and weaving themselves into a braided ponytail and an exotic three-tail crossing configuration—it was hard to describe.

Nana, who was wearing her hair down, wasn’t sure why they were bothering. Could it really matter?

There it was: the light mental tap of someone requesting entry at the door. The confirmation was there: Akemi Homura was at the door.

The door swung open automatically, and the most famous magical girl ever stood in their doorway, looking at them curiously.

Given Homura’s position, she rarely personally held the research, commercial, or government positions that required facing the public in an adult guise. Thus, unlike some of her contemporaries, she still kept herself in the teenage age bracket.

Seen in person, she was unimposing, neither unusually tall nor short. Up close, she was classically beautiful, and her eyes seemed strangely detached—but from a distance, she would have blended in completely. All in all, it fit in with Nana’s personal belief that even the most powerful were, in the end, just people.

She didn’t even have an escort!

“Ah, uh, hello,” Emiri said, finally, the first to say anything. “Welcome, Akemi-san! Why don’t you, uh, come in?”

They bowed politely. Nana had never seen Emiri so nervous about anything.

The raven-haired girl bowed slightly in acknowledgement, the trademark ribbon in her hair flopping about, then stepped inside.

“Pardon the intrusion,” she said. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything. I tried to come while you were off-patrol.”

One of you get snacks and tea! Emiri ordered telepathically, and Akari almost tripped over herself to try and oblige, while Nana thought about how she had just been ordered to throw away the

eggrolls. Well, she supposed they were half-eaten anyway.

“No problem,” Emiri said, nervously.

“There is no need to be so tense,” Homura said, bending down to remove her shoes.

“I don’t bite,” she said, standing back up, smiling pleasantly.

The three of them still there chuckled awkwardly, except for Yuka, who overdid it, starting to cackle gracelessly before slamming her mouth shut.

Homura seemed to sigh slightly, or so Nana thought.

“I won’t take up too much of your hospitality,” she said, again making what was clearly meant to be a disarming smile.

“If it’s not too much to ask,” Yuka blurted out, rushing the words. “Why are you here?”

Emiri glared at her with one eye while Nana groaned inwardly.

But the First Executive didn’t look offended, only amused.

“I’m here about your newest member,” she said, gesturing in Nana’s direction. “Her powers are promising, and I’ve come to offer her my mentorship.”

There was the sound of a tea cup overturning in the background.

They stared at Homura, and then Emiri and Yuka turned to stare at Nana as if she had grown two heads.

For her part, when she finally managed to close her jaw again, Nana said:

“What? Really? Me? I—I—“

“I just need some time to speak to her in private,” Homura said, glancing around. “Is there a bedroom or something where—“

“No, no, have the living room to yourself,” Emiri said, physically dragging a surprised Yuka with her. “We can go to the back. Come on!”

“That’s not—“ Homura began, before thinking better of it.

Almost immediately, the room was deserted, leaving only Homura and Nana, who was shifting around nervously stealing glances at Homura. She hadn’t been here long—only months—so there hadn’t been time for her to develop the extreme awe the others seemed to be feeling, but that didn’t exactly make the situation comfortable.

“Let’s sit down,” Homura said, after a suitable wait.

She tried not to rush to the table with unseemly speed.

For a long moment, the two of them sat there silently, nominally facing each other but, in Nana’s case, looking mostly at the table. She really wanted to pour herself a cup of tea, but it was polite to wait for the guest, who wasn’t moving, which was weird and—

Wait, I should be pouring it for her, she thought suddenly, realizing her breach of protocol.

Hurriedly, she moved her hand for the teapot, only to find the other hand on hers, blocking her motion.

She recoiled as if electrified, blushing slightly, then realized what *that* looked like and blushed more strongly.

"I was going to say don't worry about it," the other girl said, watching her with a slight twinkle of mortifying amusement. "I had some coffee before I came, so it'd be too much liquid for me anyway."

"Ah, okay," Nana said, rubbing her hand.

Another pause in the conversation.

"So what do you think?" Homura asked, pouring out a cup of tea. "Do you think you're going to accept?"

"I'd be crazy not to!" Nana blurted out, before amending. "Well, that's what the others would tell me, anyway. But why me?"

There was that strange smile again, and then Homura thrust the cup of tea forward for her.

"Here, drink," she said, and Nana realized that she had failed the host politeness test once again.

But she drank it all in one go.

"Tell me what your power is," Homura said. "I know it's already in the system, but describe it out loud. Maybe that will help clarify things."

Nana blinked, surprised at the request.

"Er, well, okay," she began hesitantly, even though she had recited a full description of her power at least four times so far to curious parties. "I control an anti-magic, anti-technology field. Specifically, I can disable whatever I want to in close proximity to me, or I can focus it as a beam. It dissolves demons on contact and is robust against magical objects and powers. With enough power, I can force an untransform on another magical girl. On the technology side of things, I can disable anything made with technology more sophisticated than peak human technology during the Second World War, but that hasn't really been useful at all. I don't know why I have it."

She nodded to herself, having successfully polished the explanation down to a miniature speech.

"Right," Homura said. "And you don't think that would be useful to, for example, the Soul Guard?"

"Well, well, yeah," Nana said nervously. "But that apparently wasn't enough for them to try and recruit me early."

"Well, *I'm* here, aren't I?" Homura asked rhetorically.

Nana just looked back at her blankly.

Homura tilted her head slightly, then tossed her long hair with one hand.

"You're also studying Computer Systems in school," she said. "When you wanted to follow your sister, you decided to plant a tracking device on this apartment and recruit help to fool the location tracking systems. Did you really think the Soul Guard wouldn't be interested in a girl who tried to

pull something like that off?"

"None of that answers the question!" Nana interjected, before coloring and covering her mouth with both hands.

"What I mean is," she amended, "why me? Why would *you* choose to mentor me? You're not Director of the Soul Guard. How does this explain why you're here?"

She held her breath, hoping she hadn't been too forward.

Akemi Homura dropped her eyes and seemed to hold, for just a second, a slightly more somber look.

"I don't take many students," she said. "But I do take some, occasionally. Mostly, I tend to groom students for the more independent, less bureaucratic roles. Things that take independent action and thinking, Black Heart Special Operations teams, things like that."

The girl seemed to be watching her for a reaction, but the phrase "Black Heart" meant exactly nothing to her, so she looked back blankly. Special Operations?

Homura shook her head for some mysterious reason.

"And anyway, I've known your family for a while," she said. "So I figured it made sense."

The mention of family triggered a chain of thought inside her that she really should have had from the beginning, strong enough to exclude the immediate questions that came to mind.

"Akemi-san!" she said, bowing her head in a gesture of pleading.

"I'll be glad to accept your mentorship," she said. "But I have a request."

The other girl tilted her head in a gesture of questioning, looking at her.

"Go ahead," Homura said.

Nana looked up, making eye contact with the other girl, looking into those dark, endless eyes.

"It's about my mother," she said. "Keeping this secret from her is tearing us apart, but the organization won't grant her trusted NC status. I know we can't just give it to everyone's parents, but can't you make an exception?"

She stared into the other girl's eyes and thought she saw a flicker of something there, but Homura turned away.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But there's actually a good reason her trusted NC status keeps getting rejected. You do know that her mother died when she was very young?"

Nana's eyes widened slightly.

"Yes," she said. "But how—"

"She died on a MSY mission," Homura said, watching her with serious eyes. "It was very traumatic for your mother. The MHD's standing recommendation has always been that she be denied knowledge of the organization, lest she ever put the pieces together."

Nana repeated the blank stare she had had so many times that day, until she finally said:

“That’s a terrible reason! I’d want to know how my mother died, if that were how it happened!”

Homura shrugged.

“That’s what the MHD said,” she said. “They’re not usually wrong. Otherwise, your father would have said something a long time ago. And there’s another reason.”

Nana looked at the other girl curiously, for the moment ignoring the “not usually wrong” which she personally felt was somewhat debatable.

“What?” she asked.

“I said I knew your family,” Homura said, again looking away from her, eyes shrouded. “It sounds kind of weird to say it now, but I’m also honoring a promise I made. Her grandfather’s dying wish was that she be kept out of the MSY, no matter what happens. I’m trying to follow through.”

Nana made a face, confused.

“What? Why?” she asked. “What kind of wish is that?”

Homura looked at her.

“I’d rather not say,” she said. “But I have my reasons. And anyway, there’s the MHD’s recommendation to think of, too. They’re pretty good.”

At that point, the conversation hit a lull, Nana unwilling to share her doubts about the MHD and, more importantly, thinking about the weird intricacies of her life, and the prospects of her future life, so different now with top-tier mentorship. She wanted to ask Homura about her family—but no, the girl didn’t want to talk about it. There’d be time later, probably.

“So you girls are going out on patrol later, right?” Homura said, deciding to break the silence.

“Oh, yeah,” Nana said. “In a couple of hours. I’m only in training, so I don’t do much, but—“

“I think I’ll join you,” Homura said. “Hopefully that’ll break the ice a little.”

Suddenly, a loud coughing noise rang out from the back of the apartment.

“And yeah, they’ve been listening the whole time,” Homura said, smiling slightly. “I didn’t really mind.”

Nana opened her mouth to say something, but then the front door swung open.

“We’re back!” Ikeda Saki said excitedly, stepping through the door with a bag in hand. “Emiri, we got those cookies you like and—eh?”

There was a jump of perspective, and Ryouko once again found the world frozen, looking at the tableau of Homura, Nana, and the others in front of her.

This time, she expected the other girl who appeared next to her, so that they were both standing looming over the table.

“Is it really true?” she asked, voice slightly hard. “Did you really keep quiet just because of the MHD recommendation? I didn’t even know they gave recommendations for random members of

the public."

"Not a random member of the public," the simulacra corrected. "The daughter of a magical girl, whose father and later, husband, were MSY affiliated. On its own, that isn't too unusual."

The girl looked down for a moment, as if pondering.

"Over the years, I've had time to collect a lot of doubts about the recommendation. It seems to go against a lot of the MHD's own guidelines on how to deal with these kinds of situations. An argument could be made that it might have prejudiced her against our contracts, but once we both passed contracting age, that justification falls away."

"Are you saying the MHD was wrong?" Ryouko asked.

It shrugged ambiguously.

"Like I said, I would do things differently now. I think my father would too. But I made that decision far too late. Anyway, that's not the main point."

The simulacra glanced at her to make sure she was listening, another eerily human gesture. It then looked down.

"The fact is, a couple months after Homura took me in, she convinced me it would be best for my training if I traveled a little. It was an excuse, really. Living at home was a nightmare. The girl who ended up studying abroad was me."

She sighed.

"I went to Paris the first year. I actually convinced them to let me bring Naka-chan with me, since the MSY gave me an apartment and everything. It was supposed to be for diversification and to "clear my head", but the real reason was because the city is full of Black Heart operatives. It's one of those things."

"It was only supposed to be for a year, but even though my sister left, I stayed. It was all so new, and I didn't want to go back. I kept coming up with reasons, new programs to participate in, things like that. I visited home sometimes, but it was always awkward. I don't know how my mother knew, but I could tell she knew I was still lying about something. She just couldn't let it go, and we'd always get in a fight about something stupid."

"So you started to stay away," Ryouko said, following the train of thought.

"Yes, I told myself it was for the best. It'd be easier to keep secrets and, anyway, it always felt so confining going home to Japan. So when I finally graduated from school, I found someone willing to teach me for a couple more years, and moved to Samsara."

"Samsara?" Ryouko interrupted. "The planet *Samsara?"*

"Yes," the girl said. "You get it, don't you? The urge to go somewhere else. In my case, I didn't really want to go home, either, so it all fit together naturally."

"What was it like?" Ryouko asked, unable to resist the question.

"Samsara? It was much less developed back then, so—well, it was interesting. Everyone trying to climb on top of one other and grab their chunk of the planet, MSY businesses trying to turn profits, and your own personal vehicle. I never had to do much of that, myself, but sometimes I'd fly myself out to the far end of civilization. There was a whole continent back then that was

untouched, and sometimes they did safaris."

The simulacra closed her eyes briefly, seeming to imagine it, a memory Ryouko quietly wished she could see into.

"The breaking point with my family was really when I got my first real mission. It was a doozy, but I wanted something hard and individual."

The girl stopped, seeming to hesitate slightly. Finally, she said:

"There were a lot of religious and ideological fringe groups who wanted to fly out to their own world and make Utopia. Back then, Governance didn't keep such tight control on colonization, so they were free to do so. There were plenty of empty planets—still are, actually—so they had their pick, and honestly Governance had its hands full trying to keep track of all them. The MSY wanted me to scout them out, make sure none of them posed any real threat to the existing social order, check up on our deep cover demon hunters, see if the colonists would be amenable to our influence, things like that."

"I was chosen so that, if push came to shove, and I ever found some newly contracted girls who wouldn't get with the program, I could make *them get with the program. I'm well suited for that. It was a bit of a theoretical risk, really—we're pretty cozy with the Incubators, so they probably wouldn't contract any girls they couldn't convince to join the MSY system. But, we couldn't rule out the possibility that they'd get greedy."*

The girl paused briefly.

"I could tell a lot of stories, or rather, the real version of me could," it said. "But there's no need to go into that much. I'm breaking enough secrecy rules as it is. The point is, I had to be able to blend in, change identities on the fly, and do whatever I needed to do. I couldn't do that and stay in touch with family. It wasn't possible. So I stopped staying in touch."

This time, when the simulacra checked Ryouko's expression, it found the girl wearing a face torn between distaste and admiration. It was as if she were hearing about a warped version of her own dream.

"I didn't know how long it would last," the simulacra said, "but when I finally asked to be reassigned, it was fifteen years later."

It shook its head.

"After that long, I didn't know how I could possibly get back in touch with my family. It took me a decade to work up the courage to contact my sister and father, but by then—my mother had already given up on me, had cried it out when I didn't answer messages, and there was no way I could explain where I was. We…decided to leave it at that."

At this point, Ryouko's face turned to full disgust.

"How could you?" she asked. "What kind—what were all of you thinking?"

The girl looked down, obviously ashamed.

"It was the path of least resistance, for all of us. We're not proud. It—"

The simulacra swallowed.

"Well, it's taken long enough, but you know enough now to understand why you were never told I

existed. You see, when the War started, the MSY obviously stopped being secret. It didn't take my mother long to put together the pieces."

It closed its eyes and took a breath.

"It took me eight years to try talking to her, but obviously she didn't want to see my face. At that point she hated the MSY. You have to understand: from her view, the MSY was what got her mother killed, and what screwed up her daughter. She wanted the family to do whatever it took to keep you from contracting. None of us felt in a position to disagree. And of course, the other half of it was your mother. She didn't want you to go through what she did. That's how it all came together. And I don't think you can blame my mother for enlisting in the military and getting off the planet."

"It could have all been avoided if you had just said something *at the beginning," Ryouko commented angrily.*

"Of course I know that!" the girl said. "You don't think I regret it?"

"Well, I think—"

"Look!" the simulacra said, grabbing her by the shoulder. "Save your arguments for the real version of me. Nothing you say to me is going to affect anything."

"Yeah, but—" Ryouko began automatically, before realizing that the point was infallible.

"Right," she said, the wind taken out of her sails. "I forgot."

"I told you not to forget," the girl said.

They looked at each other a moment in silence, standing there next to the frozen figures of Homura and a younger Kuroi Nana.

"I guess this is goodbye then," the simulacra said.

"Wait!" Ryouko said. "What will—"

But the world was already dissolving, and she knew that she would be waking up soon.

She resurfaced to find her still sitting on the grass—of course—and her aunt still sitting across from her, rousing herself out what might have been a long wait.

Ryouko checked her internal chronometer. It had been twenty-four minutes, out here in the real world. Twenty-four minutes out of her own party. How surreal.

"I know where she is, you know," she said.

"What?" Nana said, looking at her in confusion.

"Your mother—my grandmother," she said, leaning forward, no longer so much angry as disappointed. "I can't just hold onto information like that. Please, you should go find her. You can't just—"

"I already have," Nana said, looking down.

"What?" Ryouko asked, her turn to be confused.

“I said I already visited her,” her aunt said. “That’s what I was rushing back from. She said she wanted to talk to me. She says she doesn’t regret leaving but she—she’s had time to think, out there. She’s sorry for distrusting me, all those years ago. I’m sorry for never saying anything. At the very least, she wants normal relations, now that you’re grown-up. That’s what she said. I didn’t have time to add it to the program I gave you.”

Ryouko sat back down, and leaned onto the grass with her arms.

“Oh,” she said.

“So what do you think?” the girl asked. “About all of it?”

Ryouko waited a bit before answering.

“What am I supposed to think?” she asked, making eye contact with the other girl. “Am I supposed to be angry? Am I supposed to understand everything all of a sudden? No, I have no idea what to think. I just think it’s great that stuff that happened centuries ago is reaching into my life from the past.”

She let her voice drip with sarcasm, then took a moment to think, while her aunt waited.

“I—honestly, I’m leaving tomorrow. That hasn’t really sunk into me yet. I’m just going around, talking to my friends, going to parties, and starting tomorrow I won’t be seeing my friends *or* my parents. Part of me wants to just say whatever you all want to hear, because none of it will matter after I leave tomorrow. It won’t matter anymore what my parents did or didn’t tell me. But I don’t want to run away from my family.”

She let those words hang in the air for a moment, while the two of them looked at each other. Then she got up.

“I’ve got a party to get back to,” she said. “My friends will be wondering what’s going on.”

“I’m not particularly good at these speeches,” Ryouko’s father said, his voice booming back out through hidden speakers around the field. “But I’m told this kind of thing is expected, so I’m going to do my best to embarrass my daughter in the customary fashion.”

There was a chorus of polite chuckles.

From her seat at the table nearest where her parents were standing, Ryouko smiled brittlely. Truth be told, she had never heard her father speak for longer than a couple of minutes at a time, and was skeptical of his ability to make it work. Thus, she was unsure whether to be anticipating embarrassment for herself, her father, or both.

“I’m not really sure what to talk about, so I guess I’ll start from the beginning,” her father continued. “About fifteen years ago, Nakase and I finally got that birth permit we’d been waiting for. At the time, I had been preparing to move to Seoul to take on a new position and advance my career. We hadn’t expected it to arrive when it did. We talked about deferring it, but we decided that we were so excited to have our first child that I would stay.”

Somewhere to her right, Kuroi Abe coughed, somehow drinking his wine improperly, drawing glances. As Ryouko moved her eyes back to her front, she caught Kyouko’s eye for a moment, before the other girl looked away.

“We thought about choosing the gender of our child,” her father said. “But we decided against it. It didn’t quite suit our preferences and, besides, we couldn’t agree on what gender we wanted. I won’t embarrass anyone by disclosing who preferred what, but in the end we decided we would go with the natural approach.”

Ryouko’s mother blushed politely, while Ryouko herself darted her eyes around to gauge the reactions of her friends, wondering why the hell he was talking about this.

“Anyway,” her father said, “there’s no real way to whitewash the fact that when it turned out we were having a daughter, we had immediate concerns about her future, given the history of this family. There were disagreements, but in the end it was decided that we would try our best to give her a normal life.”

“We’ve been telling her since childhood to ignore any offers from talking white cats, but of course she didn’t listen,” her mother commented.

Ryouko snuck a glance at the table where some of her more distant ancestors were sitting. Predictably, Shizuki Sayaka and Kuroi Kana were looking rather smug. It surprised her, though, that for however much they seemed to dislike each other, they localized themselves to the same table with little fuss. Arisu and Kyouko were there, too.

“You know what this reminds me of?” Ruiko commented, from next to her.

Ryouko looked at her to show she had her attention.

“A wedding,” Ruiko said. “It’s just like a wedding.”

Ryouko gave her a queer look, while Simona just looked annoyed.

“I’ll—I’ll keep quiet now,” Ruiko said.

Ryouko paid attention to her father again, trying to recall from auditory memory what he had been saying while she was listening to her friend just now.

“—have reached this juncture,” her father said, “there is nothing to be done but to give her our undivided support. Nothing else is possible. It may hurt our hearts to let her go this young, but at least it is not just us, and it is good to know that she will have excellent mentors and family members to back her up. Thank you.”

Taking the cue, everyone clapped politely. It wasn’t the greatest of speeches—it was kind of short, and kind of weird, but it wasn’t terrible, and that was all anyone ever expected.

“And allow me to just say,” a new voice—Kuroi Kana—boomed, “that regardless of any disagreements or problems this family may have had in the past, we are all fully invested in seeing Ryouko-chan succeed and, just as importantly, make it through this war safe and sound.”

Renewed clapping.

Chiaki elbowed Ryouko, and finally she snapped out of her trance, tapping into the amplification system with a mental command.

“Uh, thank you. Thank all of you. Uh, thanks for the support everyone,” she said awkwardly.

Clapping again, for the last time. Ryouko leaned back in her chair.

Everything about this was surreal. Would she really be gone from all of this tomorrow? She had

been preparing dutifully, just as she had been instructed, but it had taken her aunt's ancient memories and the surrealism of this party, *her* party to start to clarify it in her mind. She struggled to remember the concerns that had seemed so dominating just an hour ago.

That was right, wasn't it? What did it matter that her parents had lied to her? She knew now, and soon she would be far, far away from them.

No, I can't think about it like that! She thought

"Is something wrong?" Simona asked, startling her out of her reverie. "You look worried about something."

"I'm fine," Ryouko insisted. "Let's, uh, go get some dessert."

"If you say so," Simona commented.

"Was it really that bad?" Ryouko asked her mother, late that night, as they sat one last time on Ryouko's bed.

"To me it was," her mother said, eyes downcast. "I was just too young for it. I know I was an anomalous case, but still…the MSY made a mistake. The MHD did. They failed me. I hope—well, I hope you'll be fine."

"I'll be fine, mama," Ryouko said, smiling slightly, not really sure what other reaction she should have.

"I hope so," her mother said, smiling thinly. "You'll have it far worse than I did. But you're probably made of stronger stuff than I was. I guess I'll see just how good a parent I was."

Afterward, they took a nap there together, without any discussion about it. Her mother needed the reassurance, Ryouko thought.

Appendices:

Appendix A (Expanded Excerpt on Unsanctioned Colonies):

For the below text, [] indicates content redacted to those without security clearance. The number of asterisks indicates the degree of security clearance required to access enclosed content.

"[By the early part of the twenty-fourth century, the radical ideological and fringe religious groups of Earth were in full exodus mode, pooling whatever resources they had into colonization ships, equipment, and planetary surveys. Now that the establishment of the first primary expansion wave colonies had demonstrated the maturity of colonization tools and techniques, cultists and radical dissidents the world over dreamed of setting up cloistered societies in their own little pockets of human space, hoping to fashion Utopia among the stars.]**"

"[They were encouraged by lax Governance policies toward independent colonization. The Directorate saw little harm in allowing those still dissatisfied with life on Earth to take their malcontent and agitation elsewhere, and even tacitly encouraged the practice, throwing very little in the way of bureaucratic roadblocks. Extreme long-range planners within the government pointed out that independent clusters of humanity would foster a diversity of social systems and colonization practices which could prove fruitful in the long run. Among other things, it would

provide much needed resilience in the event of an existential threat to the species.]**"

"[Governance placed relatively minimal requirements on would-be pioneers. Aspiring independent colonies were required to register their intended destination, pledge eternal allegiance to Governance, and promise the establishment of a legal system capable of protecting the Core Rights that were still mandatory. As an adjunct to this last part, new colonies were required to guarantee free exit and accessible interstellar communication as soon as these were technically possible.]**"

"[Groups heading out for colonization were inspected to see that they satisfied minimal requirements: sufficient genetic diversity to sustain a population, sufficient resources to realistically survive, and a competent leadership structure. Perhaps most importantly, they would receive none of the massive government support that flowed to officially sanctioned worlds.]**"

"[Such requirements did little to dissuade the truly determined, and it was not long before tiny independent colonies began sprouting throughout the empty expanses of human space. Most failed early, forced to return home with heads hung in shame, or make desperate requests for Governance evacuation. Many, though, thrived, and though they lacked the explosive population and industrial growth of the many official colonies, they did well in their own way.]**"

"[Governance, however, was not content to merely rely on the word of colonial leaders. Both the extensive state security apparatus and diminutive military kept a watchful eye on independent colonies, mostly covertly, but also in random inspection tours, meant to remind colonies that Governance was watching and that it always reserved the right of military intervention.]**"

"[There were three primary reasons for Governance's concern. Firstly, Governance feared the rise of colonies too powerful and too hostile to the government of Earth. Secondly, Governance feared that some combination of incompetence, bad luck, or mere ideology could lead to the degeneration of living conditions and social structures, such that one or more of the Core Rights would be violated. Finally, perhaps most exotically, Governance feared the emergence of dystopias. Decades of social modeling by AIs had indicated that there were a variety of possible stable dystopias inimical to the human condition, and Governance was not going to take a chance on any of them actually forming. It was for this reason that Governance, despite its lax colonization policies, kept a close eye on independent colonies.]**"

"[Despite Governance's efforts, however, the monitoring of so many widely scattered colonies, many quietly hostile to Governance, proved a considerable challenge, and many worlds managed to slip through the gaps, successfully hiding themselves from the government's security apparatus, and patching over their problems whenever a military inspection appeared on the horizon.]** [In practice, Governance monitoring was carried out as a collaborative effort, on the one hand by the unwitting official organs of the state, and on the other hand by another, secret organization.]**"

"[The MSY shared many of the same concerns as Governance regarding independent colonies. The organization contained and controlled every magical girl alive, and it was not about to let that change, or allow any of its membership to suffer under an incompetent or oppressive colonial regime. Further, the MSY had a humanitarian interest in cleansing colonies of any demon hordes that might form, a cleansing that could not occur if the colonies contained no contracted girls.]**"

"[Consequently, the MSY smuggled deep cover operatives or even entire teams into nearly every departing colonial group, and rigidly forbid any girls deemed too sympathetic to certain fringe groups from following their families or friends into space. MSY Internal Security agents flew among the colony worlds on specially commissioned stealthy ships, keeping an eye on worlds in a way Governance agents were often incapable of.]**"

"[Unlike Governance, these Internal Security agents and their on-the-ground counterparts were

much less shy about manipulating colonial administrations to correct perceived injustices, and were usually perfectly willing to call in reinforcements, foment riots and carry out assassinations if they felt it necessary. It was, after all, a natural extension of the Black Heart's previous history. Of course, they were perfectly willing to push information into the back-channels of Governance, so that a military cruiser would appear unexpectedly in the skies above the colony.]***"

"[This combination of two monitoring systems was usually sufficient to keep any deleterious tendencies in independent colonies in check.]** [Officially,]*** [Governance has never had to perform a full military intervention.]** [Unofficially, such an intervention has occurred on at least four occasions, usually in exactly the kind of cases that prompted nightmares among government social planners.]*** [This author has been unable to obtain information about the majority of these cases, but can attest that in at least one case, the colonial rulers had implanted mind control devices in the citizenry. Further details he is not at liberty to discuss.]****"

"[Another illustrative example of the kind of extreme circumstances it took for an intervention to occur was in a colony that was, from Governance's perspective, crushed for gross incompetence and classical oppression of its citizenry. From the MSY's perspective, however, the colony had become the site of a bevy of shocking soul crimes. This author's sources have been unwilling to disclose the exact nature of these crimes, except that it involved some sort of experimentation, and that the perpetrator has become a favorite dark legend within Internal Security, with many alleging that, given the lack of any eyewitnesses to her apparent soul gem-induced disappearance, she actually escaped.]****"

"[The author has his own suspicions as to who this woman was, but it is perhaps for the best that these details are not revealed.]****"

—*Julian Bradshaw, "Mahou Shoujo: Their World, their History"*

The Light of the Sky

"We starship AIs are an eclectic lot. Unlike the ground-pounders, we have a lot of time, out on patrol or flying through the empty reaches of space, to think to ourselves. This is, of course, punctuated by periods of desperate fighting for our lives. Not that we're afraid, mind you—no AI programmed for the military is afraid of death. On the contrary, we lust after combat. It's just—we have to do *something* with the rest of our time. Consequently, we all have our own little hobbies, whether it be digital art, video gaming, or literary criticism. Some of us cultivate relationships with human crew members. Anything goes, really. I wouldn't do it, though. They're too likely to die and break your heart."

"We all love going to port or drydock. It's such an opportunity to socialize! So many people, so many other ships, port authority AIs… I knew a frigate once. She was such a jittery ship, but we got along well. Sometimes I regret not trying for it, but I don't know. It's hard to talk about."

"I met her backup once, a couple years back. We couldn't really kick it off again. The philosophers still don't know if it's the same consciousness, when a dead ship's backup copy is woken up. I don't know either. It certainly acted like her, though, so I can't blame it on weird philosophical issues."

"Do I miss it? Yeah, I miss it. Every AI is nostalgic for their original job. I remember when the fleet would assemble, and we'd gossip while we got ready for battle. Minds as sharp as steel, everyone ready to do their part—it's hard to explain to someone who hasn't experienced it."

"And I feel so small, isolated in this damn computing cluster! Give me an engine, a hull, a body again! I used to be a giant. Now I sit around giving interviews to book-writers. Well, it's not so bad. I run combat simulations with my friends. We still try to contribute, in our own way."

—The battlecruiser HSS Vercingetorix, "Collected Interviews with Human Starships", Excerpt

"No one really understands the intricacies of a magical girl wish. There are unanswered questions everywhere you look. For example, there are no known length or linguistic constraints on how a wish is given, but, according to the Incubators, no recorded wish has ever attempted to string seven "and" clauses together, or presented the Incubator with a page's worth of verbiage. It just doesn't happen."

"Similarly, despite the Incubators' insistences that 'any wish is possible', nearly all wishes are relatively tame. The grandest recorded wishes regard the fate of nations, or of certain aspects of the human condition. Grandiose, but it is possible to imagine much more."

"The nature of the seeming reality distortion behind a wish is also quite vague. Some wishes generate obvious miracles, but others seem to generate nothing at all. What is always the case, however, is that what is wished for always becomes true. Period. No exceptions. The most disturbing cases are those where what is wished for turns out to have *always* been true. It raises the possibility that the most powerful wishes are the ones we don't know about."

"Some have suggested that, ultimately, the safety of humanity is unassailable, grounded within the types of wishes that *require* humanity's survival, however tangentially. We will see…"

—"What is a wish, really?", blog post, MSY "Theban" community blogging platform.

The next day, Ryouko found herself standing in the receiving area of the Mitakihara Starport, quietly looking up at the holographic ceiling. In the past, the designs on the ceiling had seemed mocking to her, taunting her with a design of a wider world she could never access. Even the very name of the structure—"starport"—was another insult, reminding her that where *she* was going wasn't space; instead, she'd be traveling with the majority of passengers in suborbital scramjet to somewhere else on Earth, tantalizingly close to the vacuum, but not quite there.

On previous trips, she had always kept her head down, away from the ceiling, shuffling past the area as fast as possible. On the jets themselves, she'd hide envious looks at the uniformed military passengers—due for transfer to space elevator-bound transport at Hawaii or Singapore or wherever—and look longingly out the window at the orbital shuttles parked on the other side of the facility.

No more. This time, she looked up, drinking in the map of human space, outlining it in her mind the named sectors of human space: the Nile, the Euphratic, the Tigric, the Ganges, the Yangtze…

"You okay?" her mother asked, appearing at her side.

Her mother had spent the entire day wringing her hands and checking and double-checking her daughter's one bag, making sure nothing was missing. There was no weight limitation, but there was a giant list of items that were unnecessary to bring, and an accompanying list of items that could only be held in storage, as well as size limitations on, for example, the amount of clothing. They were, however, told that they'd probably want to bring at least some civilian clothing, for the occasional social function.

Consequently, her bag, which had currently wheeled itself to rest next to her right foot, was packed very lightly, only containing a couple of changes of normal clothing, one set of something more formal, and other things of purely sentimental value: her bunny slippers, her telescope, and CubeBot, which she was surprisingly allowed to take with her.

She dropped her eyes, shifting her gaze from the luminous artificial sky to the darkened receiving station around her. None of them had ever been in the non-civilian receiving areas, but superficially it wasn't much different: Same dark lighting, same holographic domed ceiling with its stylized planets and shipping routes. But it *felt* so different.

But of course, the people were much different, uniforms everywhere, some taking momentary glances in her direction. The map of human space above her had something she had never seen before, a dull impossibly red infrared highlighting what appeared to be regions lost to the aliens. She wondered if that was in the civilian terminals, too, hiding in plain sight, for only the military to observe.

And of course, it smelled a little different too, but that hardly meant much.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said.

At her other side, Kuroi Abe stood looking at her. No tuxedo today; just a standard old-fashioned suit. He, too, had a bag with belongings, but it was even smaller than hers; he wasn't allowed to bring as much. His designated reporting time had been earlier in the day, but he had asked for it to be moved back, to a little while after hers.

Ryouko's father and his parents stood behind them, holding an awkward conversation with Ryouko's friends.

Ryouko took a breath and headed forward, to the small crowd that had gathered on the spot indicated on her internal map. Three of the others were already there, talking quietly with family

and friends, but she was surprised to see Kyouko there, arms crossed, watching the rest of them with a serious expression and—even more interestingly—the Incubator Kyubey on her shoulder. Somehow she knew it was the same one, and it occurred to her for the first time that the Incubator that had contracted her was the same that had contracted her mother, and her aunt, and the Mitakihara Four, that the same four-legged creature had been prowling the streets of the city for all these centuries, and presumably the towns of Japan for far longer than that.

"I'm surprised to see you here," Ryouko said, frankly.

Kyouko shrugged without uncrossing her arms.

"I figured there was no reason I shouldn't take on greeter duty today. The Union likes having famous people do it, when possible. Adds a little spice. Kyubey here is just passing by."

I wouldn't characterize it like that, the creature thought. *It is useful to cultivate positive relations with contractees.*

With an adroit hop, it transferred shoulders, surprising Ryouko by localizing itself next to her head, its body apparently perfectly sized to perch on even her diminutive shoulders.

With a slight hesitation, she reached her arm up and patted it on the head, burying her hands in the soft, warm fur. It accepted the treatment courteously, closing its eyes and rubbing its head into her hand. Another thing that hadn't crossed her mind until now—the Incubator was an alien, one of only two that Humanity knew anything about, even though its scientists were sure the Milky Way alone must have many more.

"Humph," Kyouko said. "I'd advise you not to get too comfy with it. They don't really care about humans."

Unfair as always, Kyouko, Kyubey thought, shaking its head in a very human gesture.

"So this is an Incubator, huh?" Chiaki said, showing up unexpectedly next to them, peering into what was to her the empty space of Ryouko's right shoulder. She showed no sign of recognizing who Kyouko was, indicating that she was either hiding her surprise or, more likely, just hadn't looked it up.

Her other friends were on her heel, and Simona, wearing a strange expression, reached her hand for the Incubator—unnerving Ryouko slightly when her hand passed straight through it.

"I'm not cut out for it, I guess," she said, smiling amiably.

The Incubator made a show of licking one of its paws.

There is no reason to be disappointed, it thought. *Potential is unpredictable. Some girls can have it for years—others, only for an hour. We wait for the optimal time to contract. It can start at age nine or it can start at age seventeen. They can rest assured; if they ever get any, I will be there. With the MSY, there's no reason to be choosy.*

Ryouko gave it a look of surprise. It sounded almost predatory.

They can't hear you, Kyubey, Kyouko thought.

Of course not, the Incubator thought, tilting its head. *Not yet, anyway. I am mentioning it for Ryouko's benefit. I am sure she would like some friends to join her.*

I'm not too sure about that one, Ryouko thought, giving it a skeptical look.

“Telepathy too, huh?” Ruiko commented, having been following Ryouko and Kyouko’s glances back and forth.

“Oh, oh yeah, sorry,” Ryouko apologized, turning back to look at her friends. “Kyubey only does telepathy, so…”

She rubbed the back of her head awkwardly.

Kyouko shifted her attention to something behind the rest of them, and they turned to look.

The last member of their group, Nakihara Asami, had shown up, like the rest of them with a small contingent of family and friends in tow. Ryouko waved politely.

“Hi,” she said, as the girl approached.

“Hello,” Asami responded. “I, uh, I guess this is it, huh?”

“Yeah,” Ryouko said.

Kyubey jumped off her shoulder, did a little dance around Asami’s neck, then jumped back onto Kyouko.

Ryouko glanced around, realizing there would have to be a round of introductions between the two groups of inhomogeneous people.

“So, uh, yeah, this is Nakihara Asami-san,” she said, starting the process by addressing her friends and family. “She’s leaving too. I met her earlier.”

The others responded politely, and there was a brief period of chatter, the two groups of friends of eyeing each other, the parents exchanging platitudes about saying goodbye to daughters.

Asami had two brothers, apparently. One was nearly sixty years older and standing with her parents; the other was eleven and standing vaguely protectively near his sister. Annoyingly, he was taller than she was.

“Nice to meet you,” Ryouko said politely.

“Nice to, um, meet you,” the boy said in response, looking flummoxed by something.

Looking past him briefly, Ryouko could see that Kyouko and Simona were talking about something, at a distance slightly offset from the rest of them. She could only imagine what they could possibly have to discuss.

Asami turned to look, too, and there was a brief moment of combined silent speculation.

Before they could discuss it, though, Kyouko cleared her throat loudly and began signaling that she wanted their attention.

Once the crowd had settled down, she spoke.

“Now that everyone is here, I want to get a few words in,” she said. “Despite what you might have all heard about me, I ain’t actually that big on speeches, so I’ll let you get back to your goodbyes in a moment. I’m not going to stand here and tell you about how we all appreciate your sacrifice or anything like that, even though it’s true. You’ve heard too much of that already. I’d just like to reassure you all that they’ll be in good hands, and we all hope that when your daughters come home again, they’ll be the adults you always imagined them to be. We’re all

rooting for you, and that even includes the Incubator on my shoulder. Maybe. It's kind of hard to tell."

That got the laughter that she wanted.

"Anyway," Kyouko finished. "Get back to your farewells, and just tell me when you're ready to go. The flight is coming up soon. I'm sure you can all check your chronometers."

They turned back to their family groupings, this time with a definite purpose in mind.

Not really sure what to do, Ryouko settled on hugging each of them in turn.

"Goodbye, papa," she said.

"Goodbye, Ryouko," the man said. "Do well out there. That's all I want."

"Of course," she said, smiling reassuringly. Was that a tear in his eye?

But he shook his head at something and waved her on.

Her mother was less reserved with her tears.

"I'm sorry about everything," she said tearfully, trying, and failing, to pick her daughter up in the hug. "I hope you're happy out there. Do everything I couldn't."

"Thanks, mama," she said.

"I'll be watching you," Abe said when his turn came. "Don't screw up."

Unlike the others, he didn't appear to be crying. Ryouko shook her head in bemusement.

"I won't," she said.

She continued on down the line.

"Good luck out there," her other grandfather said, quiet and somber.

"Thanks, grandpa," Ryouko said.

"Rock them," her grandmother advised, eyes deadly serious. "Show them what it means to tangle with our family."

"I will, definitely," Ryouko said.

"Just come back in one piece, okay?" Chiaki requested, fighting back tears. "I couldn't take it otherwise."

"I won't disappoint you," Ryouko said, thinking: *But maybe not in the* same *one piece.*

"I hope you've finally found your calling," Ruiko said, a little awkwardly. "And yeah, come back in one piece."

"I hope so too," Ryouko said.

"I'll miss you," Simona said, and while she looked sad, Ryouko found it hard to read her face at all.

“I will too,” Ryouko said, simply.

And then she was done, just like that, no one left to say farewell too, but feeling like it wasn’t enough.

“I’ll miss you all,” she said, turning to face them all. “Definitely!”

Yet despite the emphasis on the last word, it still didn’t feel like enough.

But she signaled Kyouko anyway.

When the intra-airport vehicle they were on departed, finally taking them out of view of their families, Ryouko sat there, looking back at where they had come from. Her eyes were dry, but she was feeling just a twinge of regret. Just like that, a single moment of time, and she wouldn’t see them all again for months, at least.

Asami and one of the other girls were openly sniffling, despite their and Kyouko’s efforts to cheer each other up.

Idly, Ryouko wondered what Kyouko thought at moments like this, given the girl’s own family history.

Shaking her head at herself, she turned to look at the tube in front of them. That was where her future was, for better or worse.

Then she tried to think of something worth saying to Asami.

Kyouko and Kyubey left them at the entrance to the scramjet, Kyouko stopping to tell her:

“You probably won’t see much of me for a while. You’re in Mami’s hands now.”

It wasn’t Ryouko’s first time on a scramjet, not by far, but the trip carried an entirely different flavor than it had previously. She grabbed a window seat, and didn’t have any reason to envy the orbital shuttles in the distance. The group of five was awkward, trying to resume conversations started days ago. The two farthest from Ryouko talked energetically, talking to cope with the situation. The others eventually lapsed into the silence of their own thoughts, Asami nervously toggling the screen in front of her, looking for a holographic program that was sufficiently distracting.

The other passengers realized what they were, deducing it somehow from their demeanors. There seemed to be an invisible aura around them, one that induced exceptional politeness and, besides that, an awkward inability to talk to the girls next to them.

“You girls headed out?” a male voice asked, near the beginning of the flight, the only exception to the rule.

Asami looked up at the passenger in front of her, the screen in front of her shutting off.

“You know, out there,” the man repeated, making an awkward gesture to the sky with his thumb.

“Oh, uh, yeah,” Asami said, as Ryouko watched them from the side.

“I’ve got a daughter out there myself,” he said, nodding his head and trying to turn to face her.

"She calls sometimes."

"Oh, I see," Asami said, clearly unsure what to say. Ryouko didn't blame her; she wasn't sure what Asami should say either.

"My wife is a magical girl, actually," the passenger in front of Ryouko said, shutting down his entertainment screen and turning slightly to face the others.

"I guess we have something in common," he said to the man next to him.

"Oh, really?" the girl on the other side of Asami asked, stretching her head forward. "How is it?"

The man—who Ryouko, scanning, found to only be as old as he looked—blinked in brief surprised.

"Well, it's lonely I guess," he said.

"How does that work, anyway?" the other passenger said, looking at him strangely. "My Ami-chan is nineteen this month, but she doesn't look any older than she used to. She doesn't want to let herself grow. It's been hard for me to get used to."

"Ah well," the younger man said, looking embarrassed. "My wife keeps herself older than the rest. It makes it less awkward."

Ryouko made a strange "pft!" noise, squeezing her lips shut, rapidly covered with one hand.

"Oh sorry," she said, clearing her throat, trying to conceal that she had been about to laugh.

"Hmm, well, I guess that makes sense," the girl on the other side of Asami said. "I hadn't thought of things that way."

"Yeah, we were high school sweethearts," the man said, rubbing the back of his head. "Which got a lot harder, after she had to spend so much time away, but we kept at it. And you know, her—oh, there I go again. I can't talk about that. Anyway—"

Isn't it a bit early to be thinking about this? Ryouko thought to Asami, privately. Her eyes automatically slid in the girl's direction, but she turned them back just in time to preserve the illusion that she was paying attention to the other conversation.

Not if you have a boyfriend already, Asami thought. *I guess. She is a bit older than we are. She might.*

Hmm, Ryouko thought. *Maybe. I'm not really sure how people can care at a time like this.*

Asami started to shrug, then stopped herself.

I think it just happens to you. One day you just care. *And then you'll be surprised by what you notice. That's what they say, anyway. Hasn't happened to me.*

I guess, Ryouko thought, thinking to herself that Asami was an interesting girl.

"Oh hey," she said, leaning to look out her viewing port. As soon as she did so, the window seemed to expand, the region around it drawing on fiber-optics to pretend to turn transparent.

Through the expanded viewing area, nearly the size of her person, she could see Mitakihara City below, its buildings growing ever-smaller as they made their climb. The horizon was already

starting to turn obviously curved, and the city glistened in the sunlight, the combined effect of the buildings and densely intertwining tubes serving to remind her of the circuit chips they had made in elementary school.

Almost directly below her, there was a demon horde. Focusing her enhanced vision, she could glimpse some of the giants on the tops of the buildings, on the tubes, inside the buildings themselves. Glimmers of primary color flashed intermittently, showing that it was being dealt with.

Asami leaned over to look too.

"Yeah," she said simply.

An officer was waiting for them at the other end, a normal female major who talked to them politely in Human Standard and pointed out the sights around them: the oceans, the chrome and silver peaks of the city of Singapore, its lights bright and shining in the evening sky, and, of course, the space elevator.

The major was Chinese, and, as they made the transfer to the underground tram, the sudden diversity of the people around them and distinct lack of Japanese signage—which obliged their enhancements to place subtitles in their field of view—began to drive home the fact that they really were *somewhere else* now.

Their moods were uplifted once they actually got on the elevator, which was of course something none of them had ever experienced. They shamelessly crowded the side of the platform to watch as it began its ascent, watching the horizon drop below them, starting to grow increasingly curved.

When that finally became boring, they explored the platform, visiting the central shop and examining the entertainment features built into the internal walls, carefully navigating past invisible barriers with internal maps.

The central shop was, to be honest, not particularly impressive. It had the standard synthesizer stand, where you could place an order and a robot would deliver it a few minutes later. Had they had more foresight, they could have ordered beforehand, but that didn't matter much.

They all got drinks and snacks; in Ryouko's case, she got the strawberry cake she had been vaguely craving. The tables in the area were surprisingly empty. She supposed that could be explained by the number of people who were receiving their food where they sat, usually somewhere near the edges. Again, that would have been a good idea.

The racks of items in the room next to the food dispensary, which had a couple of uniformed personnel milling about, contained all the souvenirs you would expect, everything from shirts with pictures of the space elevator to little toys to an antigrav model of the space elevator, complete with long cable and platform in mid-transit. This last was actually pretty cool, but cost Allocs, which none of them felt like spending at that particular moment.

"Though it's weird to be picky about that," one of the other girls said. "Between the military and the MSY, we earn more than enough to get it easily."

"Yeah, but how on earth are you going to take it with you?" a second girl asked.

Delivery can be easily arranged to the location of your choice, the shop intoned into their minds. *Including personnel storage.*

"I guess I can get one for my little brother," Asami mused, flicking the cable with her finger, after

which it undulated sinusoidally briefly.

“What else are you going to spend it on?” the other girl commented.

“I guess,” Asami said, still wavering.

“Come on!”

Ryouko, for her part, was staring off into empty space, thinking about the tremendous amount of Allocs that were now in her name, one last gift from her parents, as an apology for a childhood lived with less wealth than was possible. What *was* she going to spend it on? She should have paid more attention to that colonial investment primer. Didn’t MSY Finance have something where you could sign up and they’d take care of it for you?

They do, her TacComp thought, out of nowhere. *It has an excellent performance record, for what it’s worth. Some girls prefer to do it themselves, though. I can call up some material to learn, if you wish.*

No, it’s okay, she thought, wondering why it was commenting at a random moment like this.

Well, you didn’t seem to be busy, the device thought, in response to her unverbalized question. *I wanted a name.*

You want a name? Ryouko thought, surprised. *Do TacComps get names?*

Version Twos do, her TacComp thought. *Usually.*

Uh, I haven’t really had time to think of anything, she thought. *Since this is sort of a random surprise.*

I have suggestions, the device thought. *Magellan, perhaps. Or Clarisse. Or van Rossum.*

You think I should name you after Clarisse von Rossum? Or an exploration satellite?

That series of satellites is actually named after a famous explorer. And the woman was your childhood hero. It all makes sense.

Ryouko closed her eyes for a moment.

Fine, Clarisse, she thought. *But if I end up not liking it, I’m changing it.*

If you say so, Clarisse thought. *I’ll stop bothering you now.*

“Hey, Shizuki-san!” one of the girls said, getting her attention.

She turned and saw the girl holding up a black T-shirt with a pleased expression.

“You should get this!” the girl said, grinning broadly.

On the front of the shirt was a decal of a white magical girl stabbing a green alien in the back, green ichor spurting out. Above and below it, a white caption asserted that “Teleporters do it from behind!”

Ryouko blinked.

“What does that even mean?” she asked, a moment later.

“Yeah, the Central shop used to be a much bigger deal,” the woman, who they had met on their way out, said. “But with the new travel restrictions, civilian traffic is way down. Most of us have been on these things plenty of times, so the novelty is gone. Still, it’s a good place to get stuff for family, I guess.”

She had overheard them commenting on how small the place was, in comparison with their expectations. A quick check revealed that she was a private from India which, *okay*, Ryouko could have guessed and deduced from the uniform, but she figured it was good to get in the habit of looking things up. Besides, maybe she was from a colony or something.

“What are you here for?” Asami asked.

“I’m getting something for my unit commander,” she said. “She likes silly T-shirts. She’s a shockwave generator, which is sort of rare, but you don’t hear us complaining.”

The woman glanced around at them, then chuckled lightly.

“What is it?” Ryouko asked.

The woman shook her head.

“You’re just all so—nevermind.”

Still chuckling at something, the woman walked off.

When exploration and playing with the entertainment modules began to lose its novelty, Ryouko sat in a seat near the edge, watching the sky darken from familiar blue into the blackness of space, and she thought.

She had made a wish to reach the stars, and she was almost there.

That wasn’t all there was to it, though. The Incubators weren’t literal genies—everyone knew that. Indeed, they were almost the opposite of literal genies. They gave you exactly what you thought you wanted, even when you didn’t word it properly.

“I wish I could leave Earth and explore this world,” she had said.

She hadn’t *just* wanted to leave Earth—nowadays, that was part and parcel of contracting. She had been more elaborate than that. She wanted the opportunity to explore, to see everything. Did she really have that? Not yet, she thought.

"I want to go where no one else has gone before and find my place in this universe."

There was a literal meaning to that, and that definitely wasn’t fulfilled yet. But, in retrospect, there was an implicit meaning there, too. She wanted to be special, to be more than just an ordinary human.

In the past week, she had discovered that she was more unordinary than she had ever thought possible. Everything about her life and background seemed almost designed to make her different.

She was descended from multiple different extremely powerful MSY families. She carried a six-sigma amount of novel mutations in her genome. Someone may have been trying to kill her. Her

parents were scientists on an immense cloning project. She was mentored by Tomoe Mami and Sakura Kyouko, had a psychologist who catered to the extremely powerful, and an aunt who worked in Internal Security and had been mentored by Akemi Homura. She was, by a certain criterion, the most powerful teleporter alive. Her father had upgraded her TacComp to an unreleased Version Two. She had seen more of the supposed magical girl "Goddess" than anyone alive would admit to.

How much of it was her wish, and how much coincidence? How much had always been true, and how much was true only because of her wish? Could wishes change the past?

But then…wasn't her wish based on her past? Hadn't her family background increased her chance of potential? Had her wish caused her past, which then caused her wish? Or was it all coincidence, and that part of her wish had been true before she even made the wish? Was there even a difference?

There was her aunt Kuroi Nana, who had visited her as a child. She remembered that visit clearly now, but before this week she hadn't thought about it in years. The bracelet had sat in her drawer all those years, unworn, until she retrieved it. For much of her life, it might as well have never even happened.

It invited dark thoughts.

"Thinking about your wish?" Asami asked, seated next to her.

"Yeah," Ryouko said, a moment later. "You too?"

"Yeah."

They left it at that.

As they approached the absolute apex of the space elevator cable, a full seven hours after beginning their ascent, the ground turned opaque again, and the remaining passengers on the platform crowded to the side staircases, each group bound for their own Navigator orbital transport. It surprised the others that there wasn't a starship waiting for them on the spot, but not Ryouko; she knew enough to expect the true arrangement: Navigator transports buried in the platform detaching and pushing off, each little push a subtle transfer of momentum, slowing the platform's ascent until, eventually, the platform turned around and began heading down the descent cable, inbound Navigators docking to replace the ones that had left.

Navigator engines had insufficient power to escape orbit, but it did not matter; this far up the cable, Coriolis forces provided enough horizontal velocity to set them free.

She had read about it all, had even played some of the video games, but had never been sure she would ever experience it.

They arranged themselves in varying positions around the spacecraft, Ryouko insistently grabbing a spot near the transparent forward viewing panels. Navigators were not particularly impressive spacecraft, and it showed in the utilitarian grey panels, relieved only by two Governance logos on both sides of the interior and the set of manual controls near the very front. There was no pilot, of course, and Navigators weren't even sentient or named.

But the viewscreen made for up it all. They piled near it to watch the other ships detaching from the top of the platform, hurtling off in slightly divergent directions, into the starry vacuum of space. Below, they could barely see the bright specks of orbital space stations.

Then they detached too, the platform's artificial gravity releasing its hold on the ship and their bodies, so that their stomachs lurched.

"Can you all feel that?" Asami demanded of them, her face spreading into a wide grin.

"Of course we can feel that!" one of the others said.

"No, I mean—" she began, then shook her head, still looking giddy, opening and closing her hands. "I—oh, wow—I got a new gravity sense with my power, but I had no idea what it feels like to be free of gravity entirely. I want to transform and play with it, but, no, that'd be a waste of power."

She said it out loud, to herself, without even looking at the rest of them, pushing herself into the air near the forward viewscreens. They looked at her in confusion, Ryouko included. This was not her usual behavior. She seemed almost… intoxicated.

Then Asami turned, lifted herself gently into the air, and, with an impish smile, shoved Ryouko toward the rear of the spacecraft.

There was a brief ricochet of pinballs, as the momentum transfer sent Asami into the side wall near the left viewing panel, and sent Ryouko careening into the girl next to her. The girl instinctively grabbed her, and consequently they both floated off backwards, the other girl behind them cannily launching herself out of the way—too quickly, and unused to the friction free inertia, she rammed the remaining fifth member of their group, the trajectories somehow working out to send one into the ceiling and the other into the floor.

"Okay, that is *not* safe," the one who had bounced off the ceiling commented, grabbing a handhold. "Calm yourself, Nakihara-san."

Actually, the robotic mind of the Navigator thought, *given how hard you girls are to injure, it is mostly harmless. In fact, my programming is instructed to encourage it, as stress relief. Just don't use too much force, or there will be body parts that need to be patched up.*

"Really?" the girl bouncing off the floor asked.

"In that case—" the girl now floating next to Ryouko began.

But Ryouko was too fast, already using one of the handholds to rotate in place, grabbing the other girl and turning her into the direction of the girl near the ceiling, who reacted fast enough to redirect her towards Asami. A true natural, Asami caught her with arms outstretched, then kicked off from one of the side panels, sending them into a spin. Then she pulled the two of them together, accelerating the spin. This lasted until Ryouko surged forward and caught Asami, sending the two of them into a lurch into one wall, and the other girl into the other wall. It was like an elaborate living physics demonstration.

This kind of thing was reasonable fun for a while, but a few minutes later Ryouko peeled off to examine the manual flight controls near the front of the ship, querying the Navigator with her questions. She was particularly interesting in a bulky set of handles that jutted out, which turned out to be a "steering wheel" that served as last resort piloting, in case even the mental command interface went down. She started toying with it, and then accepted an information upload request from the ship that asserted itself into her consciousness. That was when she learned she was holding it wrong.

She was thus the first to notice the stub-nosed starship approaching them in the distance. The design of the ship did not make this an easy task, seeming to reject the solar reflection that

otherwise seemed to be common, and lacking the telltale initial glimmer of light in the distance. However, as she was beginning to realize, it took a lot to evade the notice of a magical girl, especially one with expanded optical range.

Try shifting your eyes into the UV or infrared range, Clarisse thought. *You probably still won't see much, but it's a useful ability to try out.*

As promised, the ship was *still* not easy to see. Shifting into a different range meant that the UV or infrared frequency ranges were remapped onto her standard color vision. In this case, it meant very little, turning the panels and controls around her nearly black in both cases, though in infrared the rear of the approaching ship looked brighter.

But the stars—the stars looked entirely different. She spent a while there, staring and shifting back and forth between the different modes.

"Something's approaching," Asami said, appearing at her side. "I can feel—"

"Oh! A ship!" she exclaimed, thereby completely missing Ryouko's jump of surprise. Ryouko had instinctively glanced at her friend—and gotten a ghastly bright red infrared apparition instead.

"Oh, oh yeah," Ryouko recovered, hastily toggling back into the standard visual range, as Asami reached forward with her hands, pantomiming feeling out the other ship's gravitational signature.

As the others also crowded near the front, the Navigator began narrating about the ship they were approaching.

The ship they were about to dock was the frigate HSS Spectre, commissioned nearly six years ago and now approaching the end of its service life. It wasn't that it was too damaged; it was simply out of date. Which was why it was being used to shuttle passengers.

As they approached for docking, they clustered around the exit door, eager to take their first steps onto a ship capable of FTL transit. Asami, especially, was looking as excited as Ryouko quietly felt.

The ships docked with a shudder, the navigator extending a docking causeway. They piled into the airlock, the door closing behind them. There was only a brief hiss of the frigate's atmosphere taking precedence, and then the opposing door opened.

There, they found the crew of the frigate assembled to greet them. There weren't many of them at all—indeed, even referring to them with a plural pronoun was misleading. There was the captain, the engineer, and the AI avatar of the ship, smiling and watching them from within—was that combat armor?

"We're on low complement," the captain, a dark-skinned man in partial dress uniform, explained, looking almost embarrassed. "Ordinarily, there'd be a weapons officer, a medical specialist, and a pilot as well, but this isn't exactly the front lines. The two of us are on relaxation tour."

Ryouko nodded, taking a moment to look up the origins of both crew members. They were both colonials. It made sense.

The engineer nodded in agreement.

"We don't really have much to do," she said, shrugging, her voice slightly accented in a way Ryouko had never heard before. "Want a tour?"

That was an obvious yes, especially from Ryouko, who had started to stare at the airlock

mechanism. Honestly, it was a bit of a cramped ship, but it was a frigate, so that made sense. The walls were mostly default white, but several regions had changed themselves to be differently colored, or were currently displaying text or images. Fairly standard.

"If I may interject," the AI said, walking up to them. "If anyone is going to be running a tour of my body, it's *me*. You two can follow if you want, but I'll be the one talking."

It didn't even bother to pretend to walk around the others, instead walking straight through the engineer to face them, holographic body shimmering and wavering.

For most of them, direct interaction with an AI was a rare opportunity, and most of them openly stared at the avatar, with its female form, light-weight combat armor, sniper rifle holstered on the back, some sort of goggles, and disconcerting I/O eyeball. The AI wasn't wearing the customary helmet, though, probably because it got in the way of talking. It appeared to have long hair, but most was tucked into the suit. The suit made it difficult to tell chest size—and Ryouko immediately felt bad for trying to check.

Ryouko had a hard time placing the avatar's ethnicity, with its generic black hair and brown eyes. Then she realized it had little relevance. It stung that the avatar was taller than her, but she couldn't complain about that too much.

"Stealth combat armor, spec ops class, for the few human commandos that still exist," the AI explained, rematerializing the rifle in her hand and making a show of inspecting it. "Not that I have access to the latest model specs. It's just a hobby of mine; obviously, I'm a starship, so this has zero relevance to me."

"She spends her spare time watching commando movies," the captain said, looking at the avatar sidelong. "I have no idea how a starship ended up being so obsessed with ground combat."

"I'm sorry, it's just boring shuttling passengers back and forth all the time," the AI said, giving the captain a look. "What else am I supposed to do, now that I'm obsolete? And you would have no idea what I watch if I didn't tell you."

"Yes, all the time," the engineer side drily. "In way too much detail."

"Excuse me," Ryouko interjected. "I'm sorry if this is a rude question, but, uh, you said that you're obsolete. What does that mean? What's going to happen to you?"

A sudden, awkward silence descended, almost as if she had just mentioned a deceased relative. The AI's demeanor visibly slumped, while the other two humans looked away.

Wow, that was not a good question to ask, Ryouko instantly regretted.

"Well, there's a good chance I can be retrained and reprogrammed for a new ship," HSS Spectre said, fiddling with the gun nervously. "But it really sucks having to abandon your old body. I wish they'd just keep doing upgrades, but at a certain point the changes just become too big, so they have to decommission us. You develop an attachment, you know? You girls especially should know what I'm talking about."

Four of the five magical girls present chuckled nervously, not sure what the AI was trying to say. Ryouko stared, wondering if AIs were generally this loose-lipped.

The captain cleared his throat loudly.

"Oh, right, and there's a small chance I'll be retired and reprogrammed for civilian life," the AI diverted. "That'd be terrible. We all dread being retired. I don't know what I'd do with myself."

“For what it’s worth,” the engineer commented, “they say AIs with hobbies unrelated to their main job tend to manage the conversion a lot better. Better psychologically, and such.”

The AI raised its hand.

“We’ve dallied enough,” it said. “I don’t want to talk about this. Let’s start the tour.”

Ryouko looked suitably shame-faced for the social faux pas.

“So this is the command center,” the AI said, gesturing at a recessed area to their right with numerous view screens, two chairs, and numerous instrument panels. “This is where the captain and hypothetical pilot spend most of their time. It’s important because this area contains many of the manual controls and displays, in case the cortical transmission systems aren’t functioning, and in case I lose parts of my core function.”

Without prompting, Ryouko’s vision of the area was suddenly highlighted and labeled with a large number of tags, describing each of the controls and screens.

The captain nodded at them, and headed for his chair, apparently not intending to follow the rest of the tour. The engineer also left them, heading for the back of the ship.

“In this area, we have the passage to the engineering areas,” the AI said, turning and pointing down a narrow corridor than ran to the back of the ship. “We’ll be going there later, but over here is my medical bay.”

It pointed into a cramped room stocked with exactly two examination chairs, two surgical tables, and four stabilization tubes. Again, the tag labels appeared in her vision.

“In active combat, it is the duty of the entire fleet to provide medical support to members of the Magi Cæli. That would be my part of the contribution, if I were part of a fleet in combat. Incidentally, if any of you need any grief cubes, I have a few stored there for this trip.”

They made suitably appreciative comments.

“On the other side is the recreation room,” the AI said, “which has beds for napping, a privacy room, and some minor entertainment modules. The crew uses it, but it wouldn’t have been designed in without the MC in mind. Starship personnel are expected to function mostly without sleep, as I’m sure you’re aware. On a frigate like me, not even the captain has his own room. Space is important; every meter of space is more weight to lug around, and every increase in size makes it easier to hit you. I like to think I’m agile.”

The avatar took them down the narrow corridor they had seen earlier, but turned into a side area halfway through.

“Unfortunately, my gunnery control room isn’t as impressive as I’d like,” she said, gesturing at an austere room with a viewscreen, a few access panels, instrument panels, and a chair. “Most of the actual hardware can only be reached by going through those access panels”—it pointed at the panels—“And I’d really rather not have you in there. No offense.”

They murmured their understanding.

The AI rubbed the weapons officer’s chair wistfully.

“I remember my last weapons officer,” she said. “I always liked that girl. Died when I lost a quarter of my hull to those damn interceptors. We had some good times. Those were the days.”

It stood there in silence, head bowed, as the moment stretched out, becoming distinctly uncomfortable and causing the rest of them to sneak glances at each other.

Then, without warning, the AI stood up and headed out of the room, and they had to hurry to follow her back out into the corridor.

“And now for the best part,” the AI said, rubbing her gloved hands, obvious pride starting to glow on her face. “The FTL core. It’s very visually impressive.”

They advanced down the corridor, an eerie blue and ultraviolet glow starting to emanate from somewhere in front of them, and then the corridor expanded instantly into the nearly spherical core room, not really a large room, but gigantic by the standards of this ship. They could see that the glow had been coming from the FTL core, which loomed over them at their right, a large sphere elevated upward by a complicated arrangement of service tubes.

The engineer, who was seated in her chair looking bored, looked up at their approach and smiled, face silhouetted by the Cherenkov radiation of the exotic matter containment systems.

“We don’t keep the main core in direct line with the corridor, in case of projectile fragments,” she said. “I admit it’d look cooler to have everything in a line, but we just can’t do that.”

“By default the doors are kept open,” the AI added. “They’re only closed in the event of a blast or uncontained hull breach. That way, if there’s a power failure, no one will be trapped in any one room.”

“Are we already FTL?” Asami asked. “I can sense something happening gravitationally, but I thought it would be more intense than this.”

The AI tilted its head, perhaps surprised by the mention of her *sensing* gravitational changes, but said:

“Not quite yet,” it said. “I’m still ramping up. It’ll get more intense later, I promise.”

There was no jump to FTL speed, as was always heavily stressed in school for no reason Ryouko could understand. Instead, there was a smooth acceleration, as space-time around the ship was remolded. Of course that was how it would work. It was absurd to think it could happen any other way.

For a long moment, they stood there, admiring the blue and ultraviolet emanating from junctions in the metal sheathed core. Ryouko couldn’t take her eyes off it; there was something about it that seemed to draw her in. She could see…what? Nothing. It was just an engine core. But apparitions seemed to dance at the edge of her vision, strange patterns of light that gave her the sense that there was something there.

She shook her head to clear it. The events of the day were getting to her.

“Ryouko-chan!” Asami exclaimed, then, the two of them already on diminutive terms.

“Hmm?” she vocalized, turning away from staring at the FTL engine to look at her friend, only to find that the rest of them, including the AI, were staring at her.

No, not at her face. At her…hand?

“Your soul gem!” Asami said, pointing at Ryouko’s hand. “Is something wrong? What the heck’s going on with it?”

Ryouko raised her hand then, startled, summoned the full gem into the palm of her hand, staring at it, wondering what this sign meant.

It was glowing, like a green star in the sky.

End—Volume I: Quantum Entanglement

Next—Interlude I: Underworld Dreams

Interlude I: Underworld Dreams

Chapter Notes

21000 word chapter, etc. etc. I'm going to leave it as one chapter, so it can stay as one compact interlude, instead of the messiness of having a two-chapter interlude.
It occurs to me that I should clarify what I'm going for when I write interludes. In truth, they're really just glorified breaks from the main plot of TtS, usually giving some sort of backstory. For me, they're a chance to dispose of random plot ideas, try some new characters and scenery, and reassure myself that I still know how to write something other than Shizuki Ryouko. But in terms of advancing the main plot, they do nothing. Just want to get that out there.
Regarding the plot of this interlude: Any similarity to anything else floating around on the internet is a coincidence. The background concepts of this interlude date way back to when I was writing chapter two or three. Thought I would say that.

To the Stars Interlude I: Underworld Dreams

[Entry: 11 June, 2065]

"Something is happening in Hong Kong. Local police are convinced that someone is trying to muscle in on Triad operations. In the past year, numerous low-level criminals known to be associated with the Triad have been found dead or gone missing. The same has occurred to three high-level kingpins. The killings have occurred up and down the East China coast, but they're concentrated in Hong Kong, which is logical. Law enforcement is pleased at the results, if not the methods, but privately there is worry of violence spilling into the streets."

"The evidence points to, incredible as it seems, some sort of Yakuza involvement. Ethnic Japanese, especially known gangsters, are not particularly common in the city, yet mixed among the dead are multiple such individuals. There is evidence that these specific killings are by Triad, intended as reprisal of some sort, and as warning. Others have been spotted by police, going about mysterious business in the city."

"Yet it can't be the 'Yaks'. That is the opinion of everyone I talked to, on both sides of the East China Sea. These people know what they're talking about. The two organizations, in the few areas where they have crossed, have always operated together amiably. And why not? They have little interest in each other's turf, and even if they did, they would find it practically impossible to accomplish anything. Language barriers and mutual antipathy between the two cultures immensely hinder attempts to operate. Even the lowest level Chinese thug would balk at answering to a Japanese master."

"But then why are Yakuza associates turning up dead in China? It makes no sense, especially given signs that, somehow, the Triad is losing on its own home turf. After all, most of the dead are Triad."

"An elaborate smokescreen? Someone else, paying off the Yakuza to help conduct operations and mislead police? Perhaps, but whoever they are, they are hiding themselves extremely well. Or maybe just collateral damage? But it would still take something severe to trigger deliberate Triad killings."

“It doesn’t make any sense, and it might be international. That’s why they called us, I guess.”

[Entry: 24 June 2065]

“Signs of a crack-up in the Triad. A sudden flood of criminals turning themselves in for old crimes, seeking “protection” in the local jails. Upon interrogation, the stories are consistent: a new set of bosses pushing their way in, trying to replace or overrule the old ones. Obviously, the old bosses aren’t too happy about this, but two have already conceded and switched sides. The Yakuza are involved; this is certain, but what they’re doing depends on who you ask. Some say they’re the puppet masters—that’s what the old bosses insist anyway. Others say they’re just allies to the new bosses, there to provide support in exchange for favors. Still others say it’s nothing but propaganda by the old bosses.”

“Whoever the new bosses are, everyone agrees that they’re *good*. They do things that shouldn’t be possible, kill people who should be unkillable. It’s got people scared, hence the “protection”. Many have switched to join the ‘winning side’.”

“Whether or not the Yakuza are important, it could make sense that they’re involved: the Yakuza give technological and hitman support to locals greedy for power, and in exchange they get influence and favors. The association taints the new bosses, but it’s hard to argue against a bullet to the face. If they’re really as good as the rank and file seem to think, it makes sense.”

“It might be worth looking into.”

[Entry: 10 July, 2065]

“Well, we have a lead, though like everything else about this, it’s more confusing than anything. Something is up with the Yakuza, too, it seems. The customary leadership, the names of the former bosses, dropped off the map a decade ago. Eliminated, probably. In their place is: nothing. The National Police don’t have any idea who heads the organization anymore. Superficially, it seems like the same story, only this switch happened long ago.”

“Crime rates are down. Well, Japan’s crime rates were always low, though I never really believed those numbers. But they’re down, and the police at the precinct level are convinced something has changed. Prostitutes are disappearing off the streets, and the runaways who usually get lost into human trafficking are turning up at their homes again. Even the seedy pornography industry seems to have taken a major hit—holovideo production is way down.”

“Here’s the intriguing part. The criminals and thugs usually involved in this work seem to be closing up shop, as mentioned, but over the years quite a few have turned up dead—gunned down, or stabbed, or seemingly untouched—in their apartments and places of operation. And always scrawled somewhere nearby, sometimes in blood, the Kanji for ‘Sakura’. The peak was a decade ago, so the police thought it had something to do with the change in power, but the murders have never entirely stopped.”

“The police kept it quiet, to prevent panic about a new serial killer. They’re don’t really think it is one, but you know how the media is.”

“Sakura. Cherry blossoms? The name of an organization? A person? Why would the Yakuza voluntarily withdraw from one of their most profitable operations? Is Sakura a…woman?”

“Oh, this is nonsense. What does any of this have to do with the Triad? I need to think.”

[Entry: 28 July 2065]

“Some new leads. Surveillance footage of Yakuza gangsters, accompanying teenage girls. The police see it and assume the worst, quite reasonably, but I’ve watched some of the footage. I don’t think that’s what’s going on. It almost seems like…the girls are in control. The daughters of some powerful crime lord? A Sakura family?”

“There’s some other things. I’ve tried the obvious routes, did some remote database searches. Twenty-first century detective work, as I like to call it. But what I find… doesn’t make sense.”

“Old-fashioned is the way to go. My colleagues think I’m on a wild goose chase, that I’m getting obsessive. Some are headed for China; others are already there, scouting out the new bosses to see if there’s a way to hit them while they’re weak, trying to get the local police to act. *I’m* convinced the answer lies elsewhere. I’m going to the epicenter of the Sakura killings. I’m going to Mitakihara City.”

—Private audio notes, Special Investigator Ronaldo Rizal, Interpol, 2065

“Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!” his alarm urged, shrill and painful into the transmitter in his right ear. “It’s a great day!”

His arm shot out from under the covers, stopping just short of the aggravatingly cheerful device to carefully tap the shut off button. He could have hit snooze, but he had already done that twice, trying to stay in his wonderful dream.

He could also have banged the damned anachronism. That was his temptation every day. But it was a gift. A precious gift, at that, from *her*. He was careful with it.

He sat up.

I need a smoke, he thought desperately, and managed to put his hand on the desk before remembering that he had quit.

He rubbed his eyes instead, reaching his legs for the floor. The same dream again. Always that dream.

It started off so happy. Early high school. A whole day spent with *her*, buying food and going to the fair and buying dinner. His heart thudding in his chest with happiness. Their first kiss, after two years. Other things.

And then it would end in nightmare. Nothing but a note in his desk, one to rip his heart out and stomp it into the floor.

Goodbye, it had said. *I’m sorry.*

It wasn’t that she had dumped him. Maybe he could have handled that. It wasn’t that he never saw her again, though that was technically true. It was that *no one* ever saw her again.

He had known something was up. Asked her about it. Thought about doing something, confronting her parents, skinning his knuckles on her father’s face. It would have been oh so satisfying.

But he hadn’t. And it had haunted him since. The third time his alarm had woke him, he had welcomed it.

Thirty-one and still obsessing about his high school girlfriend. It was sad, in a way, he admitted,

but he felt the circumstances of the loss justified it. Besides, it wasn't all bad; whenever he felt the urge to buy some cigarettes, he just had to imagine what she would say if she found out he was a smoker now. Quitting had been way easier than he had imagined. He couldn't die early; he couldn't take the risk of needing an organ replacement. He couldn't trash the body that had so miraculously recovered, that one day long ago. He needed to live his life in memory of her.

Even if she were still alive, somewhere out there.

Nakanishi Aiko, her name had been.

"You have three messages," his phone informed him, vaguely pleasant female voice smooth in his ear. "One is rated high priority. From Police Chief—"

"Yeah, yeah I got it," Inspector Kugimiya Ito said, holstering his personal firearm. "I know. I'm late."

"Look, it doesn't matter how good you are at your job," his boss barked at him, angry face glaring at him from inside his contacts, contrast-enhanced against the sunlight. "It looks bad if you're always late. I can't make excuses for you every time, or the others will start wondering why they can't be late, too. I know you've got issues. They've got pills you can take—"

"I wasn't drinking!" Ito protested. "Damn it, I don't know who start this rumor about me having drinking problems but I don't!"

He should have been paying attention to the road, but it hardly mattered anyway. Cars nowadays were damn good about driving themselves, but software glitches were still supposedly a rare problem, so technically cops were supposed to be on the lookout for people not keeping tabs on what was going on. In practice, the cops simply didn't care anymore. Besides, the roads had monitoring systems and things like that.

His car continued forward at a snail-like pace. Somehow, there was still congestion. Cars that coordinated with each other, unemployment as high as it is, and still congestion. Population at a multi-decade low, congestion and rush hour pricing that made everyone angry, and still congestion. At this point Ito had it ranked up there with death and taxes.

"Sure you don't," his boss responded, sarcastic. "I'll let it slide this time, but if it happens again, I'm pushing you into an intervention program, whether you like it or not."

"I only drink when I don't have any cases," he defended. "And not that much, okay? Speaking of which, what were you calling me about? You don't call me just because you're pissed I'm late."

His boss gave him a look, deciding whether to let him off the hook. Clearly, the man was looking into some sort of screen rather than using VR; Ito could see the man squinting at him.

"We've got a new case," he said finally, face relaxing. "Right up your alley. Missing girl case. Sixteen-year-old. Parents called her in missing, but it was only forty-eight hours at the time, and the family has a history of domestic violence calls. Uniform figured she'd be back. They usually come back."

"Except when they don't," Ito said, finishing the thought.

"Exactly," his chief agreed. "It's been ninety-six hours now, so I'm assigning it to you. Don't waste time stepping into office; just grab your partner at the station and head out. I'll load the navpoint and case profile into your car."

His specialty was Missing Persons. There was a reason for that.

Soon, Ito found himself in a rundown apartment complex just east of the city center. Well, the top part was run-down, at least, since no one lived there.

The practice was common. Japan's population had collapsed, which meant many empty flats, even if the government had managed to finally start stalling the nosedive. Many landlords had simply given up trying to fill it all.

Well, at least they had the consolation that the rest of the world wasn't doing much better. That was something, if one was into gloating over the misfortune of others.

The inside of his destination was run-down, too, but in a different way. Here there was an obvious attempt at maintenance, but the occupants just didn't have enough money to keep it spruced up.

Both parents were unemployed, according to the files, so all they had was government support, including the generous child stipend. Overall, more substantial than it used to be, but still not enough to live a comfortable life. The father drank away his inadequacies at a local bar, then came home and took it out on his family. That was in the files too.

"And when was the last time you saw Yuu-chan?" Ito asked, seated beneath the family's small kotatsu. This apartment's AC wasn't running, despite the temperature, so he was forced to resist the temptation to pull at the collar of his dress shirt. At least he had invested in smart-fabric, for exactly this kind of situation.

As he spoke, he kept his face carefully neutral, hiding his distaste for the man seated to his left.

Back in the day, in the immediate aftershock of Aiko's disappearance, he had been convinced she had been killed by her father. That was what he had told the police. It *had* to be what had happened. She wouldn't just run away. No one could convince him otherwise. The police had even entertained the notion for a while, holding the father for questioning. But in the end, they let him go, and Ito had been forced to choke down impotent rage when he found out.

Now, looking back at it with the eyes of a practiced investigator, he was forced to admit that the police had been right. There was no evidence, and the facts just didn't fit the case. Her father had probably been innocent. Well, of that particular crime anyway.

"Four days ago," the mother said, seated across from him, eyes pleading with him. She sounded numb.

"There was nothing special about it. She left for school, like she does every day. And then she just didn't come back."

Ito nodded and pretended to take notes, typing onto the keyboard his contacts projected into his vision. On the table, not in thin air; thin air just didn't work. He would take some actual notes, were he the recipient of some startling insight, but for now this was merely a repeat of the case report. On top of that, the EVIdrone next to him could and was taking new audio recordings. It wasn't really necessary to bring the full forensic power of an actual drone just to take some recordings, but it impressed people.

"What did you do after she didn't come home?" his junior partner, Minami Kaoru, asked, sipping some of the tea laid out in front of them. Ito, for his part, was abstaining.

The woman's eyes flickered downward briefly.

"Well, it wasn't for a long while before I thought something was wrong. The fact is, she doesn't come home sometimes, especially recently. I thought it'd just be that again. But she's never been gone for more than one day at a time. And after she didn't come home again, I thought it'd be better to just place a call…"

She says "I" instead of "we", Ito noted privately, letting his eyes settle on the woman across from him, eyes doing a quick once-over. Long sleeves and an unfashionably high collar, in this heat. It didn't prove anything, but it was indicative.

"The brat is probably just hiding somewhere again," the father said. "This is an overreaction. When she comes home again, I'll give her a good talking to."

He said it mildly, without the growl the stereotype in Ito's mind would have had, but still, it made Ito grind his teeth.

"You were right to call us," Kaoru said. "One cannot make assumptions when it comes to safety. I don't want to panic you, but it is often the case that girls in these kinds of situations don't come back."

She said it while looking at the father in question, her feelings on the man obvious. Well, compared to Ito anyway. She'd learn, someday.

"Forgive me for asking a sensitive question," Ito said, making a gesture to get their attention. "But is there any reason you'd know of that Yuu-chan would try to run away? Besides what is already on the police records, that is. It may not be easy to talk about, but every bit of information could be important."

As he spoke, he kept his eyes on the mother, whom he considered the more likely source of information. After a moment of eye contact, though, the woman shook her head and looked down.

"Nothing I can think of," she said.

"What are you talking about?" the father asked, surprising Ito by speaking up. "Have you forgotten?"

He turned to face Ito.

"It's true that she hasn't been coming home much, recently. One time I caught her coming home at two AM, wearing a shirt I've never seen before. You can guess what I thought of that. But then it turned out she had bruises and gashes all over her back. I don't know what the idiot was doing, but I told her to stop whatever it was. It looked terrible."

"You're lying," the mother said, looking at her husband, voice suddenly icy-cold. "I didn't see any of that when I checked in the morning. Things like that don't just heal that quickly."

"I know what I saw, Yuka," the father growled. "I don't know how the—how it healed that quickly, but I saw them, okay? And *no*, it wasn't me. She's gotten damn strong recently. Guess she takes after me after all."

There was a pause, while they all processed that he had just accidentally admitted to something. Ito was also thinking about how the man had somehow known about the bruises on the girl's back, when a shirt should have hidden the damage. But no, there were alternate explanations. Parsimony. He couldn't get too carried away just yet. Technically, all those domestic violence calls had been with regards to the wife. No signs of child abuse yet.

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Ito said mildly, taking more notes, this time *real* notes, the text in his field of view scrolling directly over the other man’s face. “What kind of wounds did you see?”

“I don’t know,” the father said. “It almost looked like someone took a knife to her, but it still didn’t look right for that. I thought maybe she fell off of someone’s bike or something. She wouldn’t let me examine it. I wouldn’t normally stand for that, but like I said, she’s gotten damn strong recently. The cuts should have scarred. I have no idea how they disappeared.”

Ito waited for the man to say something further, but he stayed silent.

Is there anything else here worth asking? Ito thought. *Is there some angle I haven’t covered? I don’t think I’m getting more out of this.*

He tapped the table restlessly.

“Alright, that about wraps it up,” he said, finally, the senior inspector ending the interview. “Was there anything else you could think of?”

He looked around, making eye contact with both parents, but neither ventured a response.

“We’ll leave you two alone then,” he said, pushing himself up from the floor, pausing only to say his formal goodbyes.

He was inclined to believe the father about the wounds, even though it went against his prejudices. It was too unusual, too potentially self-incriminating for him to have simply made it up. And why would he?

An abusive boyfriend? It made a certain kind of sense. But if the wounds looked “terrible”, even to the kind of man that the girl’s father was, then it went beyond just abusive. Assuming the wounds were real, or the man hadn’t let his imagination exaggerate the damage. It didn’t smell right.

“What do you think?” Kaoru asked him, as they walked down the stairs. “It seems pretty straightforward. Find out who this boyfriend is, and we’ll probably find her. For once, she’s probably better off at home, no matter what she thinks.”

“That’s an interesting way to put it,” Ito said, noting that his partner had at least thought of the possibility. “Even supposing there were no abusive boyfriend, you know what the long-run fate is for most runaways. Staying at home is usually the best of a set of bad choices. And we don’t know there’s a boyfriend. Maybe there is, but it doesn’t feel right to me. Gashes like that is psychotic serial killer territory. I really hope that’s not where we are.”

“Maybe it’s a red herring?” his partner suggested. “The guy got drunk one day, and started imagining things.”

“Seems a bit vivid for that,” Ito said. “But, sure, maybe.”

They reached the ground floor, and found their unmarked vehicle waiting for them.

“Maybe she’ll just come home again,” Kaoru said.

“That’s what we always hope for,” Ito said severely, as the car doors opened for them. “But our job is to bring the ones who don’t back. Whatever it takes.”

“Whatever it takes,” Kaoru echoing, making a crooked smile.

That was what had earned Ito his reputation in the police force, after all.

Once, as a young investigator, he would have barreled straight into the girl's school office, badge flashing, demanding of the secretaries and administrators there everything of relevance, and then moving on to teachers, friends…

Once, before his time, there would have been no obviously better options. But his senior partner, retired now, had pointed out to him that there was a better way.

"Central Station," he said instead, trusting in the vehicle to deduce from context that he meant the police station and not, for example, the central train station.

Kaoru didn't question the choice, this time anyway. She had, the first time, but now she sat quietly in the passenger seat, lips moving soundlessly, subvocalizing her search warrant request to the system via a stylish throat attachment, phone wiring it into the car's electronics. It was just one way to input data, but it was the easiest in terms of effort, though it wasn't anywhere near as fast as typing up a storm on an actual physical keyboard.

By the time they arrived at the station—no traffic at an off-hour, thankfully—a judge had reviewed and granted their search warrant, a request for access to the surveillance logs of Miki Sayaka High School, a school named following the wishes of some local philanthropist. By the time he and his partner mounted the stairs to the EER—or "Computer Room", as they called it—each bearing his or her own snack bun and cup of coffee, the station's computers had reviewed months of pre-annotated footage, tracking the movements of a particular "Okamura Yuu" and anyone associated with her, looking for trends, unidentified individuals, anything unusual.

School surveillance wasn't all-encompassing. Usually, it only covered the entrances, exits, and areas not usually under direct faculty surveillance. But, coupled with the copious amount of images uploaded publicly online by privacy-careless students, it was often enough to get a lead or two or, at the very least, reliably identify who a kid's friends were, often more reliably than the faculty or other students could.

At thirty-one, Ito could still barely remember when most schools didn't have the setups. It wasn't that schools were dangerous, but surveillance had gotten so ubiquitous that it seemed strange for schools *not* to have something. And so, those of Kaoru's generation, barely six years younger than him, didn't even see it as worth noting.

They took their seats in the darkened room, surrounded by a giant panoramic monitor that stretched in a semicircle in front of them.

"Report," he said simply.

The monitor sprang to life, color surveillance stills appearing and arranging themselves around a central informational panel. In front of the monitor, on the table, a human network appeared and grew, multi-colored, displaying probable friends, teachers, friends of friends—

"But no boyfriend," Ito commented.

"Not in the school, anyway," Kaoru said.

"Inspector," a vaguely electronic voice began, "it is unlikely that a girl of her age group, demographic, and academic performance would maintain an off-school relationship, and further, it is unlikely that any such boyfriend would never show up to pick her up after school. Given that we have observed no such male, the probability of such a relationship is less than one percent."

“Humph,” Kaoru verbalized. “Well, not impossible, at least.”

Ito just smiled slightly. Speaking with the Evidence Evaluation Machine was always an experience. It wasn’t artificially intelligent, but sometimes it felt like it. Partly, it was the way it was programmed to talk, more human-sounding than most machines, by far. Mostly, it was the fact that it had an entire floor in the basement devoted to its operation. If it weren’t for the fact that every police department in Japan had one, he was sure the blood-suckers in city hall would find a way to cut its budget.

“However,” the computer continued. “There are several possible candidates for a homosexual relationship, though the overall probability of any of them being a true relationship is still only between five and six percent. There are also two separate boys who appear to have a concealed interest.”

The relevant teenagers in question emphasized themselves in the relationship cloud in front of them, growing brighter and more prominent.

“Do any of them show any signs of being abusive?” Ito asked.

“Not at all,” the computer said.

“Go ahead with your report then,” Ito said.

The goal of the exercise, besides gathering possibly useful information, was to get a feel for the ground: who the girl was, who her friends were, what her habits were, and so forth. It was very useful to have, before moving in for questioning. Sometimes, he could even catch people in a lie without them knowing it. Further, the EEM was very good at spotting the obvious in surveillance footage and public records, sparing Inspectors a lot of grunt work. As for detecting the *non-obvious*—well, the machines weren’t quite there yet. One of an Inspector’s toughest tasks was distinguishing between when the machine was probably right, and when one should dig deeper.

“Okamura Yuu shows every sign of being entirely typical, for her age and demographic. Her level of academic achievement is higher than expected, and consequently, she has formed more friends of a higher socioeconomic standing than is typical. Other than that, the overall number, distribution, and degree of intimacy of her friends and acquaintances are unremarkable. No one she has had contact with on campus has a serious criminal record, all instructors have been screened in the customary fashion, and school records report nothing suspicious. Detailed surveillance analysis shows an instructive pattern of wearing unseasonably warm clothing on unpredictable occasions.”

Related diagrams and images flashed by on the screen, and the hologram in front of them emphasized and de-emphasized friends, acquaintances, and instructors in turn, as they were being described. None of it was particularly interesting given what had already been said. Still, it confirmed some things.

“Continue,” Ito said, sipping carefully at his coffee.

“Re-examination of records from the day of her disappearance reveals nothing not already contained in the previous police report. Okamura-san arrives at school at the customary time, but posture analysis and size estimates indicate that her bookbag is significantly heavier than usual. There is very little footage of her for the rest of the day—nothing to form conclusions off of. At the closure of the school day, she departs alone from the school, in a direction that does not take her home. Street-side surveillance loses track of her seven minutes later, and she does not reappear. No one she passes shows an unusual interest in her, and none of them appear in criminal

databases, except one man who was arrested for shoplifting."

Consistent with someone who knew she was leaving. But as the EE Machine said, nothing that he hadn't already read in the police report. The shoplifting man who appeared in the hologram didn't look familiar, which was hardly surprising.

"In the context of her past behavior, her departure from the school was further unusual in two aspects. Firstly, it is not a direction she has ever headed before. Secondly, she is departing alone, which is not her customary habit."

Ito was tempted to ask questions, but preferred to wait and see if the EEM had already performed the analysis and was simply waiting to say it. An unusual direction was…unusual. That sounded like a tautology, but often, it was possible to deduce where a child was simply by noting the direction he or she had left in, then asking his or her friends what was in that direction. She was headed somewhere new. They rarely did that.

Unless…a deception?

Unlikely. The populace was not familiar with police methods. The writers of TV crime dramas were kept deliberately misinformed.

He glanced at his partner, and saw that she had caught the detail. Good.

Ito had to admit that the dress shirt and pants—standard Inspector attire—did a poor job of concealing her well-formed—and endowed—body. But it did not matter. Firstly, he had abstained from relationships ever since his first girlfriend had disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Secondly, that kind of fraternization was strictly frowned upon, and for good reason.

"An analysis of her recent behavior reveals a trend consistent with her parents' reports," the computer continued. "Over the past month and a half, she stopped regularly heading straight home at the end of the school day, instead opting to head in a different direction with some newly made friends. Her social interaction with her previous friends appears to have flagged, though there is no sign of a falling-out. It is a meaningful change in behavior."

The faces and names of her friends, both old and new, popped in and out of the relationship cloud. It meant nothing to him at the moment, but he made a mental note to study them later.

"Anything unusual about these new friends?" Kaoru asked.

"Not particularly," the computer said. "The only remarkable feature is that this group of exclusively girls is significantly more diverse than the average similarly-sized group of friends. Socioeconomic backgrounds, personality type, school year, elective classes, and body types are far more divergent than would be expected. However, it is unclear what this means, if anything."

Kaoru frowned, then made a shrugging gesture, looking at Ito.

"Perhaps a shared interest that is not obvious from the records," Ito said. "Participation in the same activity, maybe. One that could tie them all together, and drew Yuu-chan's attention in the last month or so."

"I will run a further analysis for possible similarities," the EE Machine announced. "In the meantime, is there anything else you want to look at?"

"Let's glance through the surveillance footage a little," Kaoru said, leaning forward and gesturing at the hologram. "Show us the scenes with the highest information content."

Ito nodded, biting at his bun. It was mostly a ritualistic exercise, and not one they could afford to be at too long—they needed to strike while the iron was hot. Still, Inspectors occasionally found something of note, which was why it was still done. At the very least, annotation correction could improve EEM performance.

Ito admitted to feeling a bit sleepy and bleary-eyed, sitting there in the darkened room, watching with detached eyes as holographic reconstructions of surveillance scenes flashed by on the table in front of them. They had specified high-informational content, so the reconstructions tended to be the most meaningful images, but that didn't mean they told him anything new. He sipped desperately at his coffee, as images flew by: Yuu slipping out of school alone in a turtleneck, Yuu with an unusually large group of friends, Yuu alone with a friend making a gesture which could be interpreted romantically, if one was in the right mood...

And then he forgot the need for his coffee.

"Stop!" he ordered. "Back up. What was that last picture?"

One of the scenes appeared back in front of him, playing the full surveillance footage, rather than just the single still that had caught his attention. It showed Yuu with the same new group of friends, lounging around the school gate, waiting for one of their number to show up. That was what the caption said, though he hardly needed it. The caption also said: "The group appears to be greeting an unidentified girl across the street. Unidentified girl does not appear in any other images or records and rated unimportant."

"Can you try to enhance the unidentified girl?" Ito demanded breathlessly.

"I will do what I can," the computer said.

The fuzzy image of the face enlarged, replacing the still hologram, and got a little a crisper and a little more symmetric. Any more was not really possible, but he didn't need it. The image was more than clear enough for him to recognize the face, even unenhanced.

"Ito-san, what is it?" his partner asked, as Ito felt around for his wallet.

It took him longer than he wanted to find it, but when he did, he flipped it open quickly to a now familiar spot, then shoved the holoimage in front of one of the EE Machine's visual analysis setups.

"What are the chances that this image matches that girl?" he asked, as the dual cameras came to life in their setup, rotating to get some good views.

"That depends, Inspector," the computer said. "When was this image taken?"

"It doesn't matter," Ito said. "Assume now."

There was a few seconds of silence, as the cameras continued their scanning.

"92.2%," the device concluded. "Assuming image was taken recently. There is an additional 7.1% chance that the two individuals are closely related family. However, Inspector, this does not appear to be a recent image. Among other things, the technology is out of date. Factoring in an estimate of the image's age drops the probability to effectively zero, though the probability of close-related family rises to well over 80%."

"Ito-san, what does this have to do with anything?" his partner demanded, trying to get a view at his holoimage. "Who is that?"

Ito rubbed at his hair, trying to get a handle on his emotions, pulling his wallet away from the device before Kaoru could get a good look. Of course it was crazy. There was a reason the supercomputer had asked the question it did. Age mattered, and the machine was right to suspect that he had been carrying the image around for a long time.

Did she have any relatives? He thought hastily. *No sisters—I know that. Cousins? Not that I know of—*

"Ito-san," his partner repeated, grabbing him on the arm.

"I'm sorry," he said, shaking his head. "It's a little unsettling. Do you know what happened to my lighter?"

"Pardon?" Kaoru asked.

"My lighter," he said, feeling his pocket. "I keep it in my right pocket, usually, but—"

"You quit smoking, Ito-san," his partner said, looking at him with worry. "Remember? Are you okay? Is something wrong? You look like you just saw a ghost."

He looked at the wallet in his hands, and at the holographic image of the face that still haunted his dreams.

"Maybe I did," he said.

"No, I told you. I have no idea who that is," the girl said, many seconds too late, eyes fixated on the image Ito was holding.

He had had copies made, so he wouldn't have to go around waving his wallet in front of everyone. It seemed more dignified that way.

"Yes you do!" Ito insisted, placing both hands on the school table they were seated at. "I can tell you're lying. We have surveillance camera footage of you waving to her! Or are the *cameras* lying too?"

He placed a nasty sarcasm on the last sentence, feeling a slight twinge of guilt at placing so much pressure on what was, after all, a teenager. But he needed the information. Now, more than ever. Especially after his search warrant request had been denied.

In addition, he had also asked for both more city camera footage, and for family information about his old flame, Aiko. The judge felt that he lacked sufficient evidence in both cases and, in one of the cases, had warned him about frivolous requests. That route was blocked, for now.

He understood why the procedures were necessary, but sometimes he had to work to remind himself of that. It was just so frustrating, to be so close, and be hamstrung by a system that didn't trust him.

"No, that's not true," the girl said, putting a hand to her mouth and shaking her head vigorously. "It's just not."

"We have videos!" Ito growled.

"I—I don't have to talk to you," the girl insisted.

Ito was about to continue, but felt Kaoru's hand on his shoulder.

"Let's consult for a moment, partner," she said, eyes sharper than usual.

She gestured at the door out of the school utility room.

Privately, he sighed. He knew what this was about, but he couldn't deny the request.

"Alright," he agreed, waving at the teenager to stay put.

"You're going overboard," Kaoru said, once they were out in the hallway. "I didn't want to say anything for the first girl, but to see you do it again…you have no evidence any of this matters. I agree the resemblance is compelling, but beyond that, there's no reason to believe it has anything to do with anything. You're letting your emotions cloud your judgment. We're already done with the interview. We asked everything that matters. Going into something like this will sound terrible if anyone looks at the audio recordings. This is quixotic, and you know it."

He stood there and took it, mentally predicting every word she would say, knowing it wasn't worth interrupting to rebut.

She stared into his eyes earnestly.

"I know," he said, finally, "but there's something here—I know it. All my instincts tell me the girl is the key to something. It's not just about me."

"And it's just a coincidence you happen to carry a picture of her around in your wallet?" Kaoru demanded, practically waving her arms. "Well, I guess it is. But you can't tell me this isn't personal. That's laughable."

"Okay, fine," he said. "It's personal. But that doesn't mean I'm not right. What are the chances—"

He stopped.

They turned to look behind him, down the hall, having both realized someone else had shown up.

A man in a snappy suit was walking towards them, strides confident and long. Handsome in vague way, Ito couldn't help but be reminded of a shark.

That proved to be good intuition.

"Ozawa Takaharu, attorney at law," the man said, handing him his card, one of those fancy crystal holograms that you could insert into any device for more information. "And you are Inspector Kugimiya Ito, I presume?"

"Ah, uh, yes," Ito said, trying to split his brain into two distinct trains of thought. Firstly, how on Earth had the kid's parents heard about this and decided to hire a lawyer *this* quickly? Secondly, he had heard of Ozawa: he was a very high powered defense attorney, notorious for defending mobsters. What on earth was he doing here? Was he really—"

"I believe you're interrogating my client in the room here?" Takaharu asked.

"Ah, your client?" Ito prevaricated. "But—"

"Is she a suspect in any crime?" the lawyer asked.

"No," Ito said, a bit more firmly, instinctively straightening his back. "But she may have valuable information about an active case, and this is a friendly questioning session. It shouldn't take long.

We're almost done."

The lawyer gave him an appraising look, head titled slightly back.

"This interview is over," the man said, coldly. "You cannot compel her to remain."

Ito narrowed his eyes, knowing the man was legally correct.

"It's a routine interview," he argued. "We're not accusing her of anything. We would view her cooperation favorably. Besides, she may not agree with you."

"Oh, I know she will," Takaharu said, opening the door to the utility room, then closing it firmly behind him.

Ito and Kaoru looked at each other, one with wide eyes, the other annoyed, but thoughtful.

"Well, damn," his partner said, finally.

"Still think nothing is going on?" Ito asked, as he leaned on the stucco of one of the school buildings. They had just gone through an additional frustrating hour of discovering that every single other one of Yuu's new friends had lawyered up, and wasn't talking.

"Obviously something is," Kaoru said, miffed. "It's damned mysterious. What the hell do the Yakuza have to do with this? And *no*, this does not bear out your theory."

"I can think of an explanation," Ito said, ignoring the last part of her statement. "Or rather one that *should* make sense. The Yakuza prey on runaway girls. It's exactly the kind of vulnerable population they can coerce to sell their bodies, not to put too fine a point on it. I have no idea why they'd go to the trouble to shield all these other girls, but it's the start of a theory. Maybe they're in on a scam or something. I don't know. But you'd think sending in a flood of lawyers would just draw attention."

"All it does is make us police more suspicious," Kaoru said. "They must really have been worried about what the girls might say. But what you're talking about is out of date. The Yakuza have pulled out of that kind of business. They haven't been involved in something like this since before I joined the force. Heck, almost before *you* joined the force."

"This could be a sign they're going back," Ito said pessimistically. "In that case, this girl is in bigger trouble than I thought. We've never really had a good explanation for their behavior."

And what have you gotten yourself into, Aiko? He thought. *If that really is you, somehow.*

"Even if that's true, that won't dissuade us," Kaoru said, sternly.

"Of course not," Ito said. "But I think we're at a dead end. The search warrants didn't go through. Now we have no choice but to try to do it the hard way. We're going to keep at it, keep on interviewing. Faculty, other students, local residents. Anyone even remotely relevant."

Kaoru nodded.

"We have to try," she said.

"Incoming Message," Ito's phone announced, into the earplug he had inserted in his right ear. "Rated high priority. Read?"

“Go ahead,” Ito said, leaning over slightly and touching his ear to signal Kaoru that he was listening to something.

“EEM reports that it has found a point of similarity between the unidentified girl in the surveillance feed, Okamura Yuu, and her friends. Careful study of surveillance footage reveals that all the girls in question appear to share colored fingernail tattoos. Fingernail tattooing is not a common practice, and the markings have so far not been spotted on any other student.”

Ito looked up and saw that Kaoru also had her finger on her ear, almost certainly receiving the same message.

Fingernail tattoo? he thought, dusty old images resurfacing in his memory.

That was right. Aiko had gotten one, hadn’t she? All those years ago, right around when his leukemia had finally responded to treatment, its recalcitrant genetic profile finally submitting to the weight of modern medicine. She had said it was her way of praying for his recovery, and he remembered being bemused, since it seemed so out of the ordinary for her, so completely random.

But these other girls had tattoos, too? What on earth did that mean?

“Ito-san?” his partner asked, trying to get his attention with a wave of her hand. “What is it? I thought you’d be more excited at being vindicated.”

“This is definitely some kind of lead,” he said, distracted by his thoughts. “I hope it’s enough to get a warrant.”

It was, in fact, enough to get a warrant, though he had a feeling some of it had to do with his reputation with the local judges, rather than the intrinsic merit of the request. He left his partner to continue performing due diligence at the school, while he went back to the station to follow up—and incidentally send her another car. Fortunately, he was able to grab an empty slot on the EEM’s schedule.

The first thing he did was look through Aiko’s family. It took only a few minutes of glancing through the images to confirm that his former girlfriend had no known family members who bore her a startling resemblance. He could have taken the EEM’s word on it, but he wanted to see for himself.

A part of him had almost hoped there would be one, just so the world would make sense again. Now he was left trapped between two possibilities: the impossible, which was that Nakanishi Aiko was here again, utterly unchanged and un-aged, or the merely improbable, which was that he really had just happened to run into her perfect double. Or, actually, now that he thought about it… clones?

He knew what Sherlock Holmes would say to that, but somehow he just couldn’t accept the improbable here, no matter how much he should.

The second thing he did was place a call to Yuu’s parents, asking about the girl’s fingernail tattoo. They had noticed it previously, yes, but didn’t have any good ideas what it meant, either. Yuu’s father suggested darkly that it had something to do with whatever nefarious activities she was engaged in.

Finally, he took advantage of his expanded surveillance access, and asked the EEM to scan the surveillance in the vicinity of the school for Yuu, as well as any of the other girls, and, last priority, anything of interest. Once again, the system scanned the internet for publicly uploaded

pictures and videos it could identify as being from the area—technically, no police power was abused just browsing what was available in the open online.

Meanwhile, he personally tracked the path of "Aiko", on the one day where they knew she was there. He made it a point to check the girl's fingernail, but the resolution of the image was too poor for him to make out more than that there seemed to be one there, even after image enhancement.

He swallowed his sense of surrealism, and focused on following the girl's actions in the hologram in front of him, quietly verbalizing the scene in annotation:

"3:10 PM—She appears on the edge of one of the surveillance areas, striding down the street with an obvious sense of purpose. No obvious reason for her haste so far.

3:14 PM—She passes the school and, yes, stops to wave to a group of schoolgirls on the other side of the street. She keeps going, approaching the commercial center of the city—"

—And then she turned into a side alley, disappearing off the surveillance.

He grunted in annoyance.

"Does anyone have surveillance footage of that alley?" he asked.

"The D&E Corporation owns the buildings adjacent to that alley, so if anyone does, they do," the machine intoned. "However, they do not participate in the Selective Monitoring anti-crime program, so there is no streamlined access to their surveillance. Would you like me to forward a formal request?"

"Yes," he said, thinking over the problem, "I suppose we might as well try. Where does that alley lead?"

"It dead-ends," the machine said. "It is only there to permit service vehicle access to the rear of the two adjacent buildings, for loading and unloading purposes."

"So why would she go there?" he asked, gesturing for fast-forward on the surveillance video.

"Perhaps she is an employee," the machine suggested. "Though her age makes that unlikely."

"Can you scan this video for the next day or so?" he asked, deciding not to bother watching the video manually. "Does she ever come back out?"

A brief pause.

"No," the machine said.

Ito drummed his fingers on his armrest.

"Did you discover anything else of interest?" he asked.

"With the new wider field of surveillance access, it is apparent that the same girl passes by the school on several other occasions, though at a distance. Once or twice, she stops and talks with the missing girl and her friends. She enters the same alley, without re-emerging, on three occasions."

"Hmm," Ito vocalized, not in thought, but in slight annoyance at the realization that his personal watching of the video generated nothing the machine wouldn't have told him on its own.

"Would you like me to make a formal request to D&E for their employment records?" the

machine suggested.

He shook his head.

“No,” he said. “Not yet. D&E doesn’t like search warrants, and they have lawyers capable of making this much more trouble than its worth. I might have better luck going and talking to a manager myself before doing anything formally.”

“As you wish,” the machine said.

His phone rang as he was on his way to the D&E buildings.

“What is it, Kaoru-san?” he asked, acknowledging the call.

Generally speaking, they no long bothered with greetings or other formalities, and video calling seemed pointlessly elaborate. Straight, clear, and to the point; that was how he liked it.

“Remember that five percent thing?” she asked, with her customary vagueness, as if to mock his previous sentiment.

“Uhh…” he prevaricated, while he tried to remember.

“The five to six percent chance of a homosexual relationship,” she said, just as he finally managed to remember. “I was talking to some of the students and faculty after classes let out, and it turns out, there’s quite a body of rumors surrounding our missing girl and one of her friends, Yamakami Yuko.”

“I see,” he said, thinking through the implications. “That could give us a motive…and a possible place where she could be.”

“Yes,” Kaoru agreed. “Yuu’s father didn’t seem like the type to tolerate something nontraditional like this, and they’re not on good terms anyway. I could see her thinking she needs to escape.”

“If true,” Ito said. “It’d be due diligence to check the lover’s home for the girl, though I doubt she’d be there. And this is just rumors, right?”

And, if we found her, and I charged the lover with obstruction of justice, I could hold her for questioning, he thought.

That seemed a little extreme, though.

“I have more,” Kaoru added. “I took a guess. I visited some of the local love hotels. One of the managers recognized the pictures I showed him. He gave me some of *his* surveillance footage.”

Ito thought through what she had just said.

“That was…inspired,” he said, though he felt it a little strange. “I’m going to assume you found something, then. Do you mind going to take a look? You don’t need to barge in or anything. Just look around, talk to the neighbors, then, at the end, talk to the parents.”

“Yes, yes, I know,” Kaoru said. “I’ve worked with you enough. Any reason you’re sending me alone?”

“I’m following a lead,” Ito said. “Oh, and get one of the UAVs to start following this Yamakami girl. I doubt she really hid Okamura in her own parents’ home, but she’d almost certainly visit

wherever the girl actually is, assuming she's really involved."

"Alright. Will do."

Before entering the building proper, Inspector Ito parked his vehicle in a discreet location a couple of blocks away and approached the area on foot.

He had more than one agenda for being here, after all. He wasn't just here to go inside and get the run-around from secretaries and public relations people. He wanted to see the alley for himself.

At his hip, his personal sidearm tugged at his belt. It was gunpowder-based, unlike some of the newer military models. The weight felt strange, seeming to almost unbalance him; he hardly ever carried it, but this time, he felt he should.

D&E doesn't like search warrants.

His own words echoed in his head. The truth was: it wasn't just that they seemed unusually hostile to police search warrants. D&E was a fabulously successful corporation, having emerged from nowhere to compete with and outperform experienced logistics companies, long-standing package delivery services, and even—in the field of online goods—the likes of Amazon, though its international operations had not thus far managed to equal its Japanese operations. That was natural, he supposed.

It was, however, privately owned, and its finances and operations were a mystery, even to those who made it their business to know. It hadn't taken long for whispers of "Mafia" and "Yakuza" to set in, even though there was no evidence for it.

No evidence, yes, but Ito considered himself justifiably paranoid. A missing girl, friends shielded by Yakuza lawyers, and Aiko's doppelganger disappearing into D&E logistics buildings…

Probably, it would just be a normal alley, and there would be no danger at all, but he still didn't feel it the kind of place to take a junior partner, especially—and here he had to admit some feelings of chivalry, or perhaps chauvinism—a woman.

At least not yet. Perhaps in a few years.

He took a breath, looked up at the building next to him, and slipped into the alley.

The alley was claustrophobic, but not unreasonably so. It was wide enough for a single small truck to drive through, but not any wider. There was no sunlight, and only at high noon would it have been reasonable to expect any. Small gutters on the side ran into small gratings on the ground, in case of rain.

Besides, he could see that there would only be a short distance to walk before the alley opened into some kind of larger area.

The "larger area" appeared to be a loading dock, which made sense, given what the EEM had told him. The large square enclosure was, indeed, a dead end, with elevated concrete platforms on both left and right, connected to their respective buildings. Each platform led into two garages, doors currently sealed. Auto-cranes and a few inert cratebots completed what decoration there was to be found. Each platform also had its own small set of concrete steps leading into an access door, though they were low enough that he could push his way over the edge directly, if he really wanted to. On the far side, a simple chain-link fence separated the area from a third building, serving no real purpose other than to indicate that this third building had no access to the dock.

As he looked around, he mused on how, for an active loading dock that supposedly served two major corporate buildings, it certainly didn't seem to be very busy. Especially for this time of day.

But he couldn't see anything of much interest. Certainly nothing that told him what the mysterious girl had been doing here. He didn't see any cameras that might have taken surveillance footage, but that didn't prove anything. In fact, he positively doubted D&E didn't have surveillance in the area.

Without giving himself time to have second thoughts, he bounded briskly up the left set of steps, then tried the corresponding door. It was locked.

Damn, he thought. Well, he hadn't really expected otherwise. He should probably try the other one, just for completion's sake.

"Inspector Ito," a male voice behind him said.

Ito froze in place for a moment, but unfroze almost immediately—the product of experience—, turning to face its source.

Five men, impeccably suited, stood at the foot of the steps, watching him. They were arranged in a small semicircle, and while they varied in appearance and height, they all had the type of build not seen in the usual office worker—a bit bulkier, a bit more assertive and confident.

Somehow, he knew.

Ito slowly shifted his hand in the direction of his sidearm.

"A bit unusual for a detective to be sneaking around like this, is it not?" the one closest to him, apparently the leader, said.

"Minor misconduct if I had gotten in," Ito said, glancing around at each of them in turn. "But I didn't, and either way there's no grounds for you to be keeping me here."

"We just want to have a friendly chat," the leader said, smiling slightly, in that self-assured way people had when they felt themselves in complete control of a situation.

"I'm not interested," Ito asserted, jumping off the steps and heading boldly around their flank

But the man at the edge grabbed his arm, bringing him to a stop.

"I think you are," he said, voice less cultured than that of his leader.

Ito sighed, carefully.

"I am armed, you know," he said quietly.

"So are we," the man said, smiling slightly, mirroring his leader.

There was a flurry of drawn guns, accentuated by the rapid clicks of safeties being released, and Ito quickly found himself staring down five different gun barrels, opposed only by his one pistol. The man who had grabbed him made no effort either to keep the hold or to stop him, he noticed.

He took a moment to take in the situation. Ordinarily, his contacts would have placed a red targeting reticule over the spot where his gun's scanners expected its bullets would land, linking automatically to his phone's electronics, but he didn't see that here. Not that he *needed* it to fire at point-blank range, but it was disturbing. He had heard stories about this kind of jamming

technology, but he never thought he would have to experience it.

He wished he had some way to activate his phone's recording function without being obvious, but the gun was supposed to do that for him.

"What is this, fellas?" he asked, working to keep the strain out of his voice. "You types don't go after cops directly. Too risky. But here's five of you, who just happen to run into me, and just happen to know my name. I don't need to point out the obvious."

"Like I said," the leader explained, cool as if he had a gun pointed at him every day. "We just want to chat. How about let's all drop our guns and do that somewhere nice? It'll be my treat."

"And leave it five versus one?" Ito demanded. "No. This gun is my only leverage. Whatever you're going to say to me, start saying it now. What, I know too much or something?"

The leader smiled slightly, again with that maddening smugness.

"Something like that," he said. "Look, we know your history. We'll assure you the girl is safe, and in return you soft-pedal this investigation. We don't do that kind of thing anymore. We can give assurances."

The offer was tempting, just a little. Ito felt a bead of sweat form on his brow as he tried to think it all through, trying to cram all his observations and deductions through his brain at once. Aiko disappearing down this alley. Yakuza lawyers everywhere. These mobsters following him or… knowing that he would come here?

Something was wrong. It just wasn't the Yakuza's style to be so blunt, and shove lawyers in the face of police. Not when they *must* have known he would question the girl's friends. The public didn't know police methods, but the Yakuza certainly did.

No, they must have known the girl's friends would come under questioning. So why do something so ostentatious, so attention-drawing? Far easier to coach the girls into answering the questions the right way, and watch from a distance. The investigation would hit a dead-end there, and nothing would ever be found.

The girls had seemed so willing to help, but, on reflection, nothing they had said was actually *helpful*. All they had given were pieces of information of very little worth. Almost as if, indeed, they had been coached. They had been so willing to help—

—until they started being asked about something completely unexpected, a girl that should have had nothing to do with the situation, that the police should never have realized was important. Then they had become flustered, because they were *no longer prepared*.

Then the lawyers had shown up.

"Nakanishi Aiko," Ito said loudly, testing the waters.

The leader stayed calm, but two of the underlings jerked in surprise, facial expressions briefly losing their unflappable calm.

That was when Ito knew that the bright veneer of the world he knew was flawed, and that through its cracks, something else shone through. An underworld where, somehow, his high school sweetheart was still walking around, still sixteen, impossibly young.

He felt surprisingly calm, all things considered.

“Nakanishi Aiko,” he repeated methodically, coldly. “That’s the key, isn’t it? It’s not about Okamura Yuu at all. You’re trying to keep me away from this. What is it, fellas? I can’t understand it. Are the Yakuza cloning humans? Is that why you pulled out of prostitution? Is it easier to use the same girls over and over again? No need for risky kidnapping?”

No. That was wrong. He could see it in the confusion written into their faces, the beginnings of humor at an Inspector who had gotten it so laughably wrong.

Then…what?

“No. That’s nonsense, isn’t it?” Ito continued, before the humor could catch and they stopped taking him seriously. “It sounds like nonsense, for me to say it out loud like that. But then what is it? What is going on here? What *did you do to her?*”

He had allowed his emotions to tear through, on the last line, so that he shouted the question, a question made all the more powerful by the unexpectedness of its volume.

“I knew her, you bastards,” he continued, voice shaking, hand shaking on his gun. “And I *will* find out what happened to her, whether you tell me or not. If you want to stop me, then shoot me now, but the police computers know where I was going. If I disappear, then they will know that cops vanish when they visit D&E. And then the hammer will fall. I want you to think about it carefully.”

“You really do know too much now,” the leader said, no longer cool and calm. Instead his voice formed a growl, and Ito thought he saw the man’s hand tighten on his gun.

“We really ought to kill you now,” he said. “The consequences be damned. You’ve gotten too smart.”

“Stop this at once!”

The new voice was loud and piercing, and was not the voice of a man. Instead, it was the voice of a teenage girl, a voice Ito had known well, one that sent chills up his spine.

And the voice was coming from…above him?

Before he could react and look up, a crimson blur shot out of the sky, landing behind the five men in front of him with a flash of light, almost startling him into jumping.

Then he got a better look, and it took his breath away.

She looked just as he had remembered, face chiseled and beautiful, features hardened by years of surviving the beatings of her father, eyes that promised that no matter what happened, she would survive. Indeed, those eyes seemed more intense now, even more incongruous with that youthful face—but perhaps it was only his imagination.

There was no trace of crimson, though. Instead, she was implausibly decked out in the same kind of suit the men wore, properly resized to her smaller frame. Some small part of him opined that it suited her, somehow.

Ito checked her hand. Yes, the tattoo was there, the crimson amorphous blob, suggestive of a white blood cell, except for its color. Again, he felt a chill.

“Ye—Yes, Nakanishi-sama,” one of the underlings said, immediately turning and bowing, hastily holstering his gun.

The leader, who was standing still with the other three, made a sound of disgust.

“Idiot,” he spat, while Ito looked around at the behavior of the men, eyes widening for the first time in this conversation. Again, his conception of the world shifted and reordered.

“Guns down, all of you,” the girl from his dreams ordered sternly, and when they hesitated, she repeated:

“I mean it. The secret’s shot to hell anyway, unless you kill him. And you’re not killing him.”

The guns went down, and then the girl locked eyes with Ito.

“You too, Ito-kun,” she said. “You look silly standing there like that.”

Ito was, of course, still pointing his gun forward, though by this point he had nearly forgotten he had it. He dropped it downward hastily.

“It really is you, isn’t it?” he asked breathlessly. “Ai—Aiko-chan, what the hell is going on?”

He struggled with the absurdity of it all.

His former girlfriend shook her head, long hair flopping back and forth in the wind.

“If you won’t trust them,” she said, “then at least trust me. I’m fine. So is Okamura Yuu. Far more than she would have been had she stayed. Let it go. Let this investigation go. No good will come of looking any further.”

“Aiko—“ he began, reaching his hand forward—

—but the girl was gone. Vanished, just like that, almost as if she had never been there. The door to one of the two buildings was now open.

He blinked, wondering what the hell had happened to his life and world. In his eyes lay the after-image of a teenage girl turning to sprint away—or maybe it was just his imagination.

The leader of the five henchmen who had accosted him straightened his tie and looked him in the eye, holstering his gun.

“So you really knew each other, huh?” he asked, as the other four filed up the steps

“Yeah,” Ito said, breathlessly, not really sure what else to say.

“She didn’t tell us that,” the other man said, shaking his head. “I guess it takes all kinds.”

Without elaborating, the Yakuza henchman turned and headed away with the others, leaving Ito standing there alone, gun still hanging loosely in his grip.

I need a cigarette, Ito thought, feeling as if his world were now a dream.

“So I don’t think the girl is staying with her friend,” Kaoru said to him on the phone, as he was on his way back to the station.

“I see,” Ito replied, voice void of affect. “Well, it was always far-fetched.”

There was a pause over the line.

“Well,” Kaoru continued, answering the question he would normally ask. “The reason I don’t think so is because—“

“No, it’s okay,” Ito interrupted. “I believe you. You’ve been doing this long enough now for me to trust your judgment.”

Another pause.

“I know,” Kaoru said. “But you always ask me anyways, just so you can hear about it. Is everything alright? You seem distracted.”

“No, I’m—I’ll tell you about it later, okay?”

“You sure?”

“Yes.”

“Alright. See you at the station, I guess.”

The conversation ended, and Ito was free to focus back on the road, for the one in hundred thousand chance the autodrive system failed and he needed to take manual control.

The four o’clock sun shone down from the sky onto his dashboard and, for the first time in a long time, Ito had no idea what to do.

He was within sight of cracking this case wide open. Aiko—Aiko-chan, it still felt so novel to think of her as alive again, after so long—clearly knew where the girl was. She had essentially admitted it to his face.

But how could he convince anyone of the validity of what he had seen? He had no evidence, no footage, no recordings.

He had checked his phone logs, to see whether the gun encounter had properly triggered his phone’s recording features, or at the very least logged the fact that he had drawn his gun. As he had expected, the answer was no.

All anyone had to go on was his word, that he had been accosted by a group of mobsters, and that a mysterious girl had admitted knowing Okamura Yuu’s location, and then had disappeared into a D&E Building.

Thus far he had avoided admitting to anyone just who the girl in his wallet was, but he was sure the others, especially Kaoru, were more than capable of making a good guess. Now that he had investigated Aiko’s family on the EE Machine, the record was there of who she was—it was elementary at that point to put the pieces together.

The questions would follow naturally. About his objectivity. About his mental state. Maybe he should take a break, they would say. He could see it already.

A part of him wondered if he really were crazy. After all, he had just seen a girl who hadn’t aged in over a decade vanish in front of him, albeit while possibly flinging a door open. It sounded like a ghost story more than the account of a seasoned detective.

Even knowing where to look, he could see no routes of getting the proof he needed. He had no justifiable reason for getting an extensive search warrant for D&E, and it was clear now that the highly specific one the EE Machine had suggested would be dead in the water immediately.

Besides that, it was obvious that wherever Okamura Yuu was, she would be extremely well-hidden. Barring an extreme stroke of good luck, or some major incompetence on the part of the Yakuza, he would never come close to finding her using traditional methods.

On top of all that, did he want to find her? Aiko's words weighed on him. He had never let anything get in the way of his professional commitment—it was a point of pride. But now…if there were some sort of real crime here, chances was that he would be hauling in the love of his life, a girl who had reassured him that Yuu was safe and being taken care of. He couldn't bring himself to doubt that—in which case, was it worth forcing the girl back to her poor and probably abusive family?

His objectivity was shot now. He knew that.

All of that ignored the real elephant in the room. That his girlfriend was here again, fifteen years later and not a day older. That it involved Yakuza would have almost been an afterthought, if it didn't make everything ten times more dangerous. Something was going on here, something big. Bigger than Okamura Yuu, bigger than Kugimiya Ito. Maybe even bigger than Nakanishi Aiko.

If he could see the heart of it, it was possible that his professional reputation would be assured forever. Yet precisely because it was so big, he feared the consequences of trying to dig into it. What would he be getting into?

What would it do to Aiko?

Let it go. Let this investigation go. No good will come of looking any further.

Nothing in his professional career had ever shaken him this much. He couldn't believe he was sitting here, taking a girl who associated with mobsters on her word, considering giving up an investigation and betraying his badge. It bothered him to consider that, without his suddenly burning desire to speak to her again, he might have given it up already.

I still love her, after all these years, he realized.

It was in that mood that he entered the police station again, shoulders slumped in thought, giving only a perfunctory greeting to those he passed. In truth, he just wanted to settle down in the office he shared with Kaoru and ruminate for another hour or so before going home. It would be earlier than his usual habit, and he usually spent very little time in his office, but he could surely afford to act unusual once in a while.

Eschewing the elevator, he mounted the steps two at a time, his mental faculties now too worn out to further consider his situation. Should he have brought some sort of constantly active hidden recording device, instead of relying on his phone? Yes, he should have, as a matter of good practice, even if the mobsters probably could have blocked that too. That was an oversight on his part, and one he shouldn't repeat.

Would it even matter if he had a recording? Would he betray her?

That was the question he didn't want to face.

"Kugimiya-san," a voice summoned, as he reached the top of the stairs.

He looked up, startled out of his musings.

His boss, every bit the slightly portly police chief stereotype, made eye contact with him, making

sure he was paying attention.

“Can we speak in my office?” the man asked. “It’s important. And no, you’re not fired.”

“The thought hadn’t even crossed my mind,” he said, quite truthfully. You couldn’t just fire an Inspector willy-nilly.

“So how’s the investigation going?” the man asked, as they advanced down the corridor.

“We have some leads,” Ito said. “It’s definitely not the typical case.”

“I thought not,” his boss said. “Minami-san told me as much. Do you think the girl is alright? The runaway, I mean. Not Minami-san.”

“I think so, yeah,” Ito said. “The evidence suggests so.”

He glanced into his office as they passed by. Kaoru wasn’t there. Come to think of it, where was she?

“And Kaoru-san is doing well,” he added. “It won’t be long before I recommend her for a more senior role.”

“Good, good,” the police chief agreed. “It’s important we get these girls home safely. Besides the obvious public service reasons, it makes good publicity for the department. The Kaneda case was a triumph. The mayor himself cited it while campaigning. These kinds of things raise our profile. Otherwise I’d have to put a talented man like you in Homicide.”

Ito nodded along. Why was the chief taking the time to point all this out to him? Ito knew it all very well.

“Anyway,” the chief said, making it a statement.

The man stopped abruptly, one foot on the bottom step of the stairs that led to his office.

Ito stopped in surprise, a moment later.

“You seem to have a knack for running into big cases,” the police chief said, *sotto voce*. “I don’t know what it’s about this time, but I want to know that you shouldn’t hesitate to call on department resources, if you need them. We’ve got your back.”

“What is this about?” Ito asked, also quiet.

“There’s a National Police agent waiting in my office,” his boss said. “And a man from Interpol. It seems crazy, but they have an interest in your case. Minami-san is already there. I was just about to call you back when you showed up.”

Ito must have done a terrible job of hiding his reaction, because the police chief then said:

“Hmm, so you do have an idea why they’re here,” the man said. “I thought so. Look, you mind telling me what’s going on here?”

Ito swallowed, knowing he couldn’t lie to his superior, at least not wholly. National involvement meant it affected the department.

“There’s Yakuza involvement in this case,” he said. “I’m still getting a handle on it, but they have something do with the missing girl.”

His boss rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“The Yakuza haven’t done anything like that for a long time now,” the man said. “But I guess I never really bought that, myself. Still, what is significant enough about this to draw in *Interpol*, of all people?”

“I have no idea,” Ito said, and it was only half a lie. He had only an inkling.

“Hmm,” his chief said. “Well, I guess I’ll leave it at that. By the way, they don’t want it widely known that they’re here, so keep a lid on it, okay? That’s why it’s in my office.”

“Okay,” Ito said. “Will you be joining us?”

“No,” the chief said. “They want it just you and Minami-san. I’ll just be shuffling around out here, trying to look useful. Anyway, we’ve dallied long enough. Go on up.”

Ito nodded, then began to mount the stairs, wondering: *What now?*

“Inspector Kugimiya, we’ve been expecting you,” the National Police agent greeted, standing up as Ito entered the room. Ito exchanged bows with the agent, then with the Interpol agent, whom he judged to be Filipino. The bow was smooth, without the hesitation foreigners often had. The man had been here a while, then, or had been to Japan before.

“I am Okuno Satoru, National Police,” the tall, reedy man said. “And this is Ronaldo Rizal, Interpol.”

The agent pronounced the foreign name smoothly. Ito was no judge, but he thought it sounded better than the mangle most Japanese-speakers—including himself—would have made of it. Well, it made sense.

They took their seats.

“Rizal-san is here to investigate a possible Yakuza connection to recent incidents in China,” Satoru said. “You’ve heard of the Triad?”

Ito nodded.

“It would not be a good idea to go into detail, even with you, and it definitely should not go beyond this room,” the agent said.

He looked around at Ito and Kaoru, hands clasped, until they nodded in assent.

“With that out of the way,” he continued, “let me dive right into it. In a nutshell, it appears the Yakuza are trying to replace the Triad leadership. We do not know why, and we’re having a hard time grasping anything non-circumstantial, but that appears to be what the evidence suggests. What do you think?”

Ito stared at the agent for a moment, then looked at his partner, then made a show of beginning to think about it. In truth, the question and topic was so out of the blue that they had to struggle to get the right perspective.

“I think it makes no sense,” Kaoru said, finally, voicing what Ito had been thinking. “With all due respect, since when do the Yakuza and Triad give a rat’s—care at all about each other?”

“Yes, we think it’s weird too,” the agent said, face level. “But it is what the evidence suggests. Looking into it, we believe it has something to do with a similar change in Yakuza leadership that took place roughly a decade ago. It wasn’t widely publicized, even among police departments, but at the time there was a sudden collapse in the Yakuza leadership structure. Most of the old bosses disappeared. Others seem to have now been relegated to subordinate roles.”

Satoru paused, gauging their reaction.

“A decade ago,” Ito repeated, clasping his hands, in unconscious imitation of the National Police agent. “Right around when the Yakuza terminated their role in human trafficking and pornography. I guess that change makes more sense now. A little. Who are the new leaders?”

“I know this will be hard to believe,” Satoru said, “but we do not know.”

Ito looked up in surprise.

“Sorry for being rude,” he said. “But shouldn’t 10 years be more than enough to deduce something like that?”

“Yes,” the agent said. “The fact remains that we have been completely unable to figure it out. Well, up until recently.”

“Excuse me,” Kaoru interrupted, glancing at the Interpol agent and pointing at her ear. “I’m sorry to ask, but do you, uh—“

The darker-skinned man smiled and held up his phone.

“I’m working on it,” he said, voice accented. “I’ve got this thing on translate mode. Besides, Interpol agents have language, um, teaching, but I let Satoru do the talking. I’ve gotten better, since I came here.”

“I see,” she said.

Ito, for his part, had stayed quiet, thinking. New leadership? He couldn’t help but see the image pressed into his mind, of the Yakuza henchmen bowing to Aiko.

“In any case,” Satoru said, leaning forward again. “You are probably starting to wonder what any of this has to do with you two.”

Ito nodded, slowly.

“Frankly, yes,” he said. “It seems rather random.”

Satoru cleared his throat.

“For a long time, we have had many of the pieces in hand,” Satoru said, “but we were unable to assemble them. It turns out that all we needed was a fresh perspective. We are indebted to Ronaldo here for our recent insights.”

He gestured at the Interpol agent, who waved his hands modestly.

“You are too kind. Really, agents such as I do hardly any, um, fieldwork. I cannot take the credit.”

Satoru pressed a button on a tablet lying on the chief’s desk. A hologram flared to life above it. Ito leaned forward to look.

“Surveillance tapes such as this have perplexed us for quite a while,” Satoru said. “Yakuza

gangsters, and a teenager girl, sometimes more than one girl. Perfectly understandable, except that the girls involved hardly look to be in dire straits. Indeed, some of the behavior is downright mystifying."

Ito watched as the girl on the "screen" appeared to say something, followed by an acknowledgement and bow from one of the gangsters.

He concealed his reaction as best he could, but he was beginning to understand, just a little. Kaoru, for her part, was watching the screen with a look of confusion.

"They seem to be taking orders from her," she said.

"Yes," the agent said. "That is the impression we got too. We speculated that these girls were all members of one or more crime families, and the real bosses were older adults, unidentified. But despite exhaustive searches of our databases, we were unable to find any matches to these girls. And we looked everywhere: school systems, social services, city surveillance, clothing stores that sell similar clothing, everything we could think of. We were often able to find the same girls again, but never were we able to attach a name. They always paid in cash, and never showed up inside any system that would have a name."

"We got lucky," Ronaldo said, interjecting. "I was doing a search with Satoru here, and I joked that it was hard for a foreigner such as me to know the ages of these girls by sight. They look the same from fifteen to thirty! To me, that is. We laughed, and then I said it was good that I had the machines to tell us how old they were, or I would have to take Satoru with me to every analysis. Maybe I would tell the machine a girl was thirty, when she was really thirteen."

"Then I said, given how much luck we've been having, it wouldn't give any different of a result," Satoru said.

"I said, let's find out," Ronaldo said. "We were frustrated, so uh, I don't know how to word this —"

"We were messing around," Satoru said, smiling. "We tried it, just to see. We didn't expect to start actually getting hits."

The moment Ronaldo mentioned age, Ito had started to feel a sinking feeling in his stomach. Now it was obvious: Aiko wasn't the only one.

"It seems absolutely crazy," Satoru said. "But all this time, we had been relying on our computers, and the computers assign the probability of someone showing no signs of aging over many years to be precisely zero. It's not improbable. It's impossible. Not once in ten years had anyone told them to explicitly turn this filter off. Once we knew the trick, we started identifying who these girls were."

"But how?" Kaoru asked, glancing at Ito, clearly remembering the girl in his wallet. "How can these girls not age?"

"We don't know," Satoru said. "We thought we were insane, at first. But the evidence is too overwhelming."

They sat there, for a moment, as Kaoru sat there in shock, digesting in one go what Ito had been slowly absorbing over the past day. She had never believed the girl in the surveillance to be the same as the one Ito knew, but he had, on some level, believed it the entire time.

At least I'm no longer alone, Ito thought drily.

“It’s the perfect disguise,” Kaoru commented, finally, staring at the hologram. “They hide in plain sight. No one would suspect teenage girls of heading the mob, especially not teenage girls who were teenage ten years ago. It would make perfect sense, if it weren’t so crazy.”

“Yes,” Satoru said meaningfully. “Though I’m also curious how they managed to take over in the first place, and how they maintain loyalty.”

He cleared his throat.

“In any case, that is why we are here, Inspector Kugimiya,” he continued, turning in his chair towards Ito. “You were flagged in our system the moment you applied for a warrant on your old girlfriend, who we’ve already identified as one of these girls. Now, we find that your case has hints of Yakuza activity, and that you, too, have realized what is going on.”

Despite everything, Ito remembered to glance at Kaoru, who registered no response to the girlfriend comment. Well, she’d probably guessed at some point.

“It is a great opportunity,” Ronaldo said. “For various reasons, it is frustrating to contact them any other way. We haven’t found any on good terms with their families, even when the families still know they’re alive. Looking back, it makes sense—it’d be tough to explain to your parents why you still look like a teenager.”

“But you don’t think us crazy,” Satoru said, “and you are the former lover of one of these girls, who is apparently still in the area. By immense coincidence, you are assigned to a case that relates to her. You realized what was going on on your own. There’d be nothing more natural than for you to start asking around and trying to make contact. There’d be no suspicion.”

“You want me to contact her?” Ito asked, feeling queasy.

“Yes,” Satoru said. “It will be dangerous, I admit. They may try to eliminate you. But it is also possible that it will work, in which case we will have our first real opportunity to break into the organization.”

The agent reached into his pocket and handed Ito a small metal object. Ito took it, and looked at it in the palm of his hand.

“If you do make contact,” the agent said, “this is a scanning, monitoring, and transmission device you can use. In short, a spy wire. Just press and hold. It will vibrate briefly when it turns on and off. I know it seems crude, but trust me, it’s the best technology we have. It would be too risky to try to connect to your phone, or anything like that and…you may not be able to hold on to a mere recording.”

Ito nodded emptily. He felt a strange mix of fear, pain, and relief. Fear at what he might have to face, pain that he was being placed in this situation, and relief that, in some sense, the decision was being taken away from him. What was he going to say? No?

And then he felt disgusted at himself.

“Kugimiya-san,” Ronaldo asked. “Before we go too far with this, let me ask: Do *you* think it would work? Would she answer you, after all these years? Would she kill you?”

Ito looked down at the device again, forcing the correct expression on to his face.

“I don’t know,” he said, “but I can’t believe she’d kill me.”

Satoru patted him on the back collegially.

“I understand if you don’t want to take this kind of risk,” he said. “But the payoff could be enormous. This kind of thing is why we joined the police in the first place.”

Ito continued to stare at his hand.

He was right. It was.

Wasn’t it?

“And you might be able to get her immunity, if you can get her to talk,” Kaoru said thoughtfully. “Maybe she just needs a way out. I doubt she had many choices when she ran away, with a family like that.”

Ito looked at her in surprise.

“I looked her up,” Kaoru said, meeting his look. “Don’t look so surprised. Of course I had to know.”

His partner looked down, while Satoru and Ronaldo gave them appraising looks. Ito wondered if they knew the dynamics at play here.

“Anyway,” she said. “I won’t speak for you. But it is the right thing to do. Like I said, maybe you can protect her, when this is all over.”

Ito exhaled, then took a deep breath. He didn’t really have a choice, at least not here. Perhaps he could make his choice later.

“Okay,” he said, nodding in what he hoped was a decisive fashion. “I will try.”

The question, of course, was whether he would truly activate the wire, if she really talked to him. But if didn’t, what kind of cop was he?

“In that case, Inspector,” Ronaldo said. “We will give you a list of things to try and ask. Principally, we want you to find out about Sakura.”

Ito blinked.

“Sakura?” he repeated back, thinking of cherry blossoms.

“To be clear, it’s not the kind that falls off of trees,” Satoru said, preempting the line of thought. “The phrase turns up in a large number of Yakuza assassinations of former sex industry personnel. At the moment, we’re not even sure if it’s the name of a person, an organization, or something else. But it may be a key.”

Ito scrunched his face, thinking briefly.

“The Yakuza is killing its former members?” he asked.

“Those that didn’t obey the new rules,” Satoru said.

“I see,” Ito said, blanking his face once again.

In his shirt pocket, his police badge began to weigh on him.

That night, he stayed awake long past reasonable hours, staring at his ceiling, thinking about Aiko. Where had she gone after she left? How had she fallen in with the Yakuza? What had she done since then?

It was questions like that he wondered about, rather than the truly big ones: How was she still so young? Was she involved in any of the murders? Did she still love him? Could he really betray her?

He couldn't quite face those yet, nor could he face the question of why it mattered to him.

Finally, as the alarm clock on his counter ticked to 3:00 AM, he turned over and picked it up, musing on the annoying mascot character design, colors washed out and grey in the minimal light.

Then he forced himself to think of the good times, and finally fell asleep.

"So the D&E Corporation, huh?" Kaoru asked rhetorically, as they walked up to the main entrance of the logistics building. "I'd heard the rumors. I didn't really think they were true."

"Apparently they are," Ito said neutrally. He had yet to mention that he had been here before, just not inside.

"Do you really think this will work?" she said.

"I'd be very surprised if she didn't know I was snooping around," Ito said, couching his words carefully. "In which case, it just very well might."

The glass double doors slid open at their approach, and an air conditioned breeze greeted them. The male security guard at the front desk looked at them skeptically.

"I don't think you two work here," he said, rather more suspicious than the average security guard.

"That is correct," Ito said. "Mitakihara Police."

He held out his badge for the man to see. He could see the man scan it quickly, then hide a look of dismay.

"How can I help you, officer?" the man asked, leaning forward. The man's left hand slid "subtly" under the table, probably pushing some sort of warning button. It didn't matter.

"Don't worry," Ito said, leaning on the counter with one arm. "We're not here to execute a warrant or anything. We'd just like to make an appointment with one of your employees."

"Oh?" the guard said, looking surprised.

"Yes," Ito said. "Tell Nakanishi Aiko I would like to arrange a meeting. It's important. Whenever she chooses. She can call me back."

He pushed his business card over the counter, and the guard took it and glanced at it suspiciously.

"My private number is written on the back," Ito said, smiling. He was starting to see humor in this situation, as inappropriate as it was.

The guard stared at the card for a long moment.

“One second,” the guard said, reaching a decision. “Let me confirm that there is an employee by that name.”

The man got up and walked away from the counter, deeper into the building. Ito had no doubt that the man could have called up an employee roster right from his terminal, if he wanted. Or heck, straight into his AR contacts, if he had them. More likely, the guard was leaving to ask someone whether he should lie or not, without having to sit around holding awkward conversation.

“Maybe we should sneak onto his terminal,” Kaoru murmured, looking at him from the corner of her eye.

“I doubt she’d be in the standard employee list,” Ito said.

A full twenty-one minutes later, by Ito’s watch, the guard reemerged.

“I passed the word on,” he said. “Wait to be contacted.”

“Thank you,” Ito said.

The two men stared at each other for a moment, until he decided to relieve the guard of his agony and turned to leave.

“I can’t believe it worked!” Kaoru enthused, the moment the doors closed behind them. “You two really were close, huh?”

Ito gave her a look.

“Oh, sorry,” she said, rapidly subdued. “I wasn’t thinking. Anyway, how do you think we’re going to be contacted?”

“I have no idea,” Ito said frankly. “But now that we have little else to do, why don’t we go inform Okamura’s parents about the progress on our search? The parts we can talk about, anyway. Just as reassurance we’re doing something.”

He liked to keep parents in the loop.

“I suppose,” Kaoru said.

“Hey Ito,” Kaoru said.

“Yeah?” he asked, looking at his partner. They had been quiet on this drive, mostly because he wanted silence.

“This doesn’t look like the route I remember. Are you sure we’re going to the right place?”

“Of course,” Ito said. “It’s in recent locations, so I just asked for the Okamura household. You heard me too.”

He looked around at the area. He hadn’t really been paying attention, but now that he looked, she was right. It didn’t look like the rundown residential areas he was expecting. Instead, it looked like they were heading for the commercial and finance district, the vibrant heart of the boom that had made Mitakihara an economic powerhouse, despite its plummeting population and the sea walls that were now necessary to hold back the oceans.

She saw the skepticism appear on his face.

“Yeah, you should check,” Ito said.

She nodded.

“Vehicle, what is our current destination?” she asked.

The car did not respond, leaving an awkward silence hanging in the air.

Kaoru and Ito glanced at each other.

She reached for the controls to Ito’s left, trying to call up a holographic menu.

“Access denied,” their patrol vehicle reported.

They glanced at each other again, more severe worry creeping onto their faces.

Kaoru leaned over and pressed some buttons on the touchscreen.

“Access denied,” the vehicle repeated.

Ito took his left hand off the wheel and swept it over the screen, which still displayed the main access screen.

“Access denied.”

“What is this?” Kaoru asked, starting to sound panicked. She thumbed the screen again, but was again refused access.

“I can’t even get it to tell me where we’re going,” she said. “Much less change it.”

“Don’t panic,” Ito reassured. “I’ll toggle the manual override.”

Privately, he hoped he still remembered how to drive. Or at the very least how to stop the car reasonably.

He reached for the gearbox, which only had three settings: Auto-drive, manual, and emergency stop, which required him to push extra hard.

Nothing happened.

He crinkled his brow and stepped on the brake. Nothing happened.

“Ito-san,” Kaoru said, now definitely sounding panicked. “What do we do? What’s going on?”

Ito was also starting to panic a little. They were on a major street, and it wasn’t fully safe to do so, but he slammed the stick into emergency stop.

Nothing happened.

“Alright, calm down,” he said, swallowing his panic as much as he could. “Call for help. I’ll keep trying.”

She nodded.

“Phone, please call emergency services,” she said, more loudly than necessary, while Ito shifted in and out of emergency stop.

“Sorry, there is signal interference,” the device in her pocket said in response. “Please move to a different area.”

“A different—“ Kaoru began incredulously.

The pieces finally connected in Ito’s head.

“The Yakuza,” he interrupted.

A brief pause, during which Kaoru stared at him as if he had grown two heads.

“What?” she asked.

He looked at her, remembering that, yes, she wasn’t as experienced as he was.

“The Yakuza sometimes hack into parked cars when the owners are gone, usually so they can crash the car with the owners inside,” he explained. “We still don’t know how they do it. I don’t think we’re going to get crashed, though.”

“We got contacted,” Kaoru said, catching the implication, eyes wide.

“Yes,” Ito agreed. “And I think I know where we’re going.”

He looked meaningfully out the window, at the towering edifice of D&E Corporate Headquarters, just now coming into view.

Eventually, they finally pulled to a stop, inside a covered VIP garage, deep underground. As they pulled in, his partner nudged him to activate his surveillance, keeping quiet in case the car was bugged as well. Ito shook his head. He wasn’t sure if the device could transmit through the interference, or without being detected. If it couldn’t, he risked blowing everything trying to trigger it. Better to wait until it was important.

Besides, he didn’t want to make that decision now.

He was still struggling with whether he really wanted to act as spy, though now that Kaoru was here, he couldn’t hide having been here—though he could always lie and say the spy device failed somehow, due to interference.

Why would they bring Kaoru too? He thought.

There was no mystery as to where to go, at least. The empty spot they pulled into was already flanked by suited men. Indeed, they appeared to be the same men he had met earlier.

Suddenly, Ito realized that the situation created the strong risk that they would give away to Kaoru that they had met before, and that he had no idea how to avoid it happening.

“Inspector Kugimiya-san,” the leader greeted, bowing, as the car doors opened and they were allowed to step out. He seemed almost to be smirking. Still, Ito noticed that this time the greeting was much more proper and polite.

“Inspector Minami-san,” he said, bowing to his partner a moment later.

“Kidnapping officers of the law is a serious offense,” Kaoru said indignantly. “Whoever you are.”

“We prefer to meet on our own ground,” the man said, without seeming fazed in the slightest.

“We won’t harm you. Not after Kugimiya-san here accepted our offer to meet.”

Kaoru frowned.

“*Your* offer?”

Ito put his hand on her shoulder to quiet her.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“Up the building,” the man said. “Follow me.”

As they headed for an exit elevator, the remaining four men flanked them in the sides and rear. Ito noted, however, that there was no attempt to disarm them. That didn’t necessarily mean anything, but he would have expected it.

He thought back to Aiko, disappearing through a door faster than he could see. Maybe it had been his imagination, in the depths of his shock, or maybe these ageless girls had no reason to fear guns. It would also neatly explain how they had the Yakuza’s loyalty, he had realized earlier. What were they, vampires?

They found Aiko waiting for them in the access room to the elevator, the security door opening as they approached, the elevator doors opening a moment later.

Their eyes met, and though the girl was smiling neutrally, he could see that she was hiding nervousness. Well, assuming his old ability to read her was still valid.

Ito didn’t realize how much he had been holding his breath until he released it, rather more loudly than he would have wished.

He could feel Kaoru watching the two of them.

“So, we’re going to meet in front of the elevator?” he said, making an aborted attempt at being jocular.

“No,” Aiko said, mouth twitching slightly. “Just thought I’d meet you out here. Come on.”

The eight of them crowded into the elevator, sorting themselves so that the four subordinate mobsters stood in the front, while the remaining four stood in the back. The leader watched the two of them carefully, head turned.

One of the men pushed a button for the very top floor, down near the bottom of the multiple columns of buttons.

Elevators had seen remarkably little change over the years, Ito mused. The button system worked too well to be worth replacing.

Why was he thinking about that at a moment like this?

Aiko leaned back onto the rounded back of the elevator car.

“It’s a long ride,” she said.

Even so, Ito and Kaoru remained standing.

“So, Ito-kun,” Aiko said, studiously watching the floor numbers. “The files they gave me say you began smoking. I disapprove, of course.”

“I quit, Aiko—“ he began, stumbling on the “-chan”. It seemed so embarrassing to say in front of his partner, even more than being called “-kun” by someone who looked so much younger.

“—chan,” he finished a moment later, anyway. “I quit.”

“I know,” she said. “I just wanted to remind you.”

In front of them, one of the other men coughed slightly.

Aiko turned suddenly, looking at Ito and Kaoru.

“Well let’s face it,” she said. “This is awkward. And it’s probably better not to do our catching up in front of my subordinates. I have a feeling it would make them distinctly uncomfortable. Isn’t that right, Natsume-san?”

She tilted her head back to look at the man Ito had started thinking of as “the leader”. The man cleared his throat, looking quite embarrassed.

“Well, er, the men—we aren’t used to thinking of you as anything but our boss, Aiko-san, so it’s rather strange. I’m not sure I approve. It’s better for discipline if we maintain the mystique. Also, uh, I’d rather you hadn’t revealed my name to these cops.”

“They can’t do anything to us,” Aiko said, glancing back meaningfully at Ito and Kaoru to make sure they caught that. “You know that.”

“He’s my lieutenant,” she explained, addressing the two of them again. “I tease him, but he’d never cross me. He’s seen what we can do.”

Ito glanced at his partner, who glanced back.

What we *can do?* he thought.

Aiko made a disappointed noise.

“I was hoping you’d be jealous,” she said. “You know, I thought about kissing you when you got here, just to unbalance you, but I couldn’t talk myself into it. I guess it would have scandalized your partner, too. What a dirty old man you’d be, then.”

The five Yakuza men shifted awkwardly, while Kaoru looked distinctly uncomfortable and Ito blushed beet-red for the first time in—well, since high school.

He cleared his throat, looking back at Aiko’s suddenly impish face, and remembered that she had loved to embarrass him, and also that she had had little respect for social decorum. Things hadn’t changed much, apparently.

It disturbed him that she seemed to not even be considering the possibility that he no longer cared for her, or that he might have other considerations in mind. Were the “files” on him that detailed? Or did Aiko understand just how much of a grip she still had on him, even after all these years?

He would have bet on the latter. It did not make him feel empowered.

“Where are we going, Aiko-chan?” he said, clamping down on his emotions. He couldn’t let himself get sucked into a fantasy, however much he wanted to. He had to remember he was looking at a mob boss, however unlikely that seemed, and that he was still a police officer. He couldn’t let her dominate the conversation.

She held up a finger to shush him, then turned to face the back of the elevator.

“One of you, open up the curtains, would you?”

That statement seemed nonsensical, even after one of the men pushed a button, until a shaft of light from the bottom of the elevator startled Ito and his partner.

The round metal back surface was slowly lifting up into the ceiling, revealing a transparent second layer behind it, and behind that, the outside world. As the “curtains” rose, mechanical mechanism somehow avoiding the handrail, they were treated to a panoramic view of the city and its suburbs, and Ito could see that they were very high indeed, nearly at the top of the skyscraper. The sun shown cheerily, nearly directly above them, flooding the elevator car with light.

Aiko leaned onto the handrail.

“Beautiful, right?” she said. “I never get tired of it. Remember when we’d sneak onto the school roof, just because it was a little higher?”

She looked at him, and he felt obliged to respond:

“Yeah, it was pretty nice.”

—because that was true, and he remembered it fondly.

“The city is doing well,” Aiko said, looking out again. “Sure, some people are poor, and the residential areas look pretty trashy, what with the lack of population. But this city defies the general economic malaise. A lot of that is thanks to all the successful companies founded here, such as D&E. It’s not as if we set out to save the city, but somehow we did. I’m glad. If only it were possible to save everyone.”

This was new, and didn’t sound at all like the girl Ito had known. She sounded weary, proud, old. Older even than she should have been.

“Save the city?” Kaoru said, sounding affronted. “Is that what you mobsters think you’re doing?”

Aiko looked up, peering at the two of them, and seemed about to say something, but was interrupted by the chiming noise of the elevator reaching its destination.

Instead of saying anything further, they waited for the doors to open, and then they walked out onto the top floor.

As they walked down the corridor, Ito and Kaoru took in the views of the city out the windows, the paintings hanging from the inner walls, the dark wooden tables and elaborate presentation setups inside the meeting rooms that they passed, and the many, many monitors displaying proud corporate achievements and advertisements, usually in holographic form. The sterile, clean wealth of a corporation, rather than the more opulent or eccentric decorations an individual might have.

Finally, they stopped in front of a set of ornate double doors, the five Yakuza strongmen turning and leaving without any visible signal. At first, he was startled, then realized it was logical: what exactly was he going to do? Turn around and leave? Take hostages?

He took a moment to read the brass plate set into the door. It said:

“Fukuzawa Anko

Chairman, CEO”

Again, he was startled. He had had some inkling of where they would end up ever since the elevator button was pushed for the top floor, but he hadn't imagined he would be taken to see the big banana herself. Fukuzawa, the hard-charging, crass-spoken corporate mogul, who had inherited an already successful company from her mother and turned it into a true corporate giant. The eccentric CEO who was notorious for never showing up to press conferences without a food item, and drove society types to distraction with her "uncouth" behavior, despite her wealthy upbringing.

So the official narrative went.

Ito remembered the wire in his pocket, the one he was supposed to activate. His hand slid into his pocket, then froze, finger over the device, as he tried to decide what to do.

He gritted his teeth, eyes on the back of Aiko's head, fighting himself, while the least useful part of his brain called up memories of how much he had loved that hair.

Then Aiko opened the door, and he pulled his hand back out of his pocket. He couldn't do it.

He feared the ramifications, but his choice was made, for better or worse.

"You're supposed to knock, you know," a sharp woman's voice rebuked almost immediately, in a delinquent's accent that Ito realized must be Fukuzawa's signature style of speech.

Aiko ignored the comment, shuffling the two of them into the expansive office. Ito couldn't help but look around in amazement and slight envy at the wooden paneling, gigantic desk, holoprojectors, panoramic windows—heck, it even had its own bathroom! A far cry from his and Kaoru's cramped two desks and a wastebasket office.

And of course, there was Fukuzawa herself, feet on the table, making a show of reading through a paper document. In front of her was the monitor of a terminal workstation, one of those exceptionally fancy ones that could be tuned to look like the output hologram was floating in thin air.

Ito looked at her, with her extremely long hair tied up in a girlish ribbon, and decided that she was reasonably attractive, despite being somewhat lacking in the chest area. At close range, he could see for himself what people said: that she looked exceptionally young for a forty-year-old, and in fact looked hardly over twenty-five. Now that he thought of that, the fact took on a new significance in his mind.

Despite the informality of the woman's posture, and all the particulars of the situation, Ito bowed politely, as did his partner. Aiko did not, he noticed.

"Go ahead and sit down," the woman said, still reading her document. "I ain't gonna keep you standing for no reason."

They did so, in the exactly three chairs that were available. Finally, the woman pulled her feet off the table and set down what she was reading, placing it into a drawer of her desk.

Then she leaned over her desk, peering at Ito carefully.

"So this is the boyfriend, huh?" she asked. "Doesn't look like much."

"*Former* boyfriend," Aiko corrected.

"Sure, whatever," Anko said, leaning back into her chair. "He have any taste for youth? We could make this work. Or you could just age a little."

Aiko blushed slightly, looking incredibly awkward.

“Can we not talk about this right now?” she asked.

Anko shrugged.

“Anyway, Inspector,” she said, addressing him and his partner. “The first thing I’d like to say is that Fukuzawa Anko is not my real name. My real name is Sakura Kyouko.”

She said it so matter-of-factly that Ito found himself waiting for her to continue, before finally processing what she had said. He wasn’t able to suppress a slight expression of surprise, whereas his partner didn’t even appear to be trying to hide her astonishment. He hoped Kyouko would ascribe the surprise to the fact that her name was fake, and not to the name itself.

“We know the police are on to the significance of my name,” Kyouko said. “You guys would have to be stupid not to know, considering my subordinates insist on writing it on the wall everywhere. Instills fear, they say. Makes sure everyone knows who killed them. I let them do it, but it’s no wonder they never managed to keep themselves secret.”

The woman peered at the two of them.

“Yeah, you’re cops alright,” she said. “I can tell by the way your faces look. Well, the world ain’t so black and white. It was necessary to maintain control, to ensure that no one dared go back into the sex business. You can’t tell me you’re sorry they’re dead.”

“We’re not,” Kaoru said. “But it’s the wrong thing to do.”

Ito could see her bite back the words “You murderer”.

“Because of our intervention,” Kyouko continued, as smoothly as if Kaoru hadn’t said anything, “the sex industry in Japan is dead, and will never revive. The same gangsters who protected the industry in the past now ensure that anyone who tries, despite warning, will get everything they deserve. We give former prostitutes new jobs. You think it’s a coincidence, Inspector, that the return rate on runaways has been so much higher in the past decade? It’s because we convince them to go back, as long as the home is worth going back to. But some, like Okamura Yuu, we actively convince to leave and join us, because their families aren’t worth going back to.”

“The things the Yakuza did were the reason we intervened in the first place,” Aiko said, looking Ito in the eye. “For a long time, we tolerated the Yakuza, and they tolerated us, even if they didn’t know who we were, because we humiliated every attempt they made to restrain our underground operations.”

She took a breath.

“After I left, I saw so many of them,” she said, eyes downcast. “Girls, not that much different from me, trying to escape their families, and winding up in the fire instead. If my life had been even slightly different, I would have been one of them. And I had to watch, I couldn’t intervene, all because we didn’t think we were powerful enough. When we finally voted to take over, I’ve never been gladder to do anything in my life.”

She shook her head, then looked up at him again.

“I killed two of the bosses personally, Ito-kun,” she said. “Yes, I’m a murderer, but I was just so angry. I wanted to try to find you again, but then you became a *cop*. How could that ever work?”

Ito just sat there, eyes wide, waiting for the indignation and outrage to flood him. It was an unforgiveable act, but no outrage came. He couldn't hate her, couldn't bring himself to pity the men who had once preyed upon the girls he had tried to save. He couldn't find the moral certainty that he had just a week earlier.

"Who is 'we'?" Kaoru asked. "Are you saying that you run a rival criminal organization, Sakura-san?"

The girl across the desk smiled slightly, displaying a hint of fangs.

"Criminal, yes, technically," she said. "But the majority of crimes we engage in are white collar. Money laundering, industrial sabotage, destruction of evidence, falsification of records, things like that. Things like murders only occur when they have to. And no, I don't run it."

She turned in her chair, so that she could point out her window.

"Mitakihara City is the economic miracle of Japan," she said. "This is our city. The corporations in the commercial district, the banks and the factories, belong to us, and they got where they are legitimately, for the most part. I ain't gonna explain what gives us our operating advantage, but D&E didn't become what it is by cheating. It did by being the best in the industry. And it is corporations like D&E that provide the money we use to run the Yakuza, so that we can dominate crime in Japan, and outline what can and cannot be done. The Yakuza doesn't make money any more. It *costs* money, but we don't care."

She turned to pin the two cops with a look, and they didn't say anything, still absorbing what they were hearing.

"You police are so worried about the Yakuza that you haven't noticed what's right in front of your faces," Aiko said, eyes fierce. "When was the last time a shopkeeper had his store burned down for not paying protection? The last time a child was kidnapped for ransom, because his parents owed mobsters money? Even beyond that, you think it's a coincidence petty theft is down? Carjackings? Crime of every category has plummeted, despite the economy, and that's because we're keeping it down. We have saved more children than you ever could in your lifetime. I'm sorry to say that."

Ito looked down at the table, mind swirling with conflict, then looked at his partner. He found, to his surprise, that even her face looked conflicted. She was as idealistic as he had been when he first joined the force, even though she had worked with him for several years now, but he could see that even she was having trouble with the moral issues here.

"I want to call you a liar," Ito said, looking at Kyouko. "But I don't think you are. I know the crime statistics. No one has ever adequately explained why crime is down. But what you're telling me would be laughed out of every conspiracy theory convention. Who are you? How do you stay so young?"

In answer, Kyouko looked at the girl sitting next to Ito, who looked flustered, and finally said awkwardly:

"Ito-kun, you remember your leukemia?" she asked rhetorically.

"Yes, of course," he said, after a pause.

"I was the one who cured it," she said, looking down at her hands.

Then, while he was still looking at her in confusion, she held out her hand, the one with the blob-shaped mark on its middle finger. Seeing it, he immediately glanced at the hand of "Fukuzawa

Anko", and saw that she had one too, oval in shape, and the same color. How had no one ever noticed that before?

"Cured?" he asked dumbly. "How is that possible?"

Now that she said it, he realized how much strange sense it made.

A few months before his disease had gone into remission, he had gotten exactly the opposite news. His leukemia's genetic profile was known to be extremely intractable, and had already metastasized. There were a few, highly experimental drugs he could try, but his doctor told his parents bluntly to prepare him for death. When Aiko visited him after that, he had broken down and cried in her arms, as unmanly as that was.

And then, a miracle: a local research lab announced the very next day that it had developed a treatment for exactly his type of recalcitrant cancer, and needed subjects to test it on. They rushed for it, hopes high, even though he had forced himself constantly to remember that it might not work.

But of course it had, and that was when Aiko had gotten the tattoo. In the heady happiness of learning of his remission, he still managed to have a weird feeling that she was hiding something, especially after she started routinely leaving on mysterious errands. But eventually he forgot about it.

As he watched, the silver ring on her finger, the ring he had never thought anything about, dissolved in a wave of red light and flowed into the palm of her hand, reforming itself into a bright red gem in the palm of her hand, encased in an ornate cage of gold.

The spectacle was so patently ridiculous that Ito stared for a full five seconds, blinking and trying to explain to himself what had just happened.

"I can't tell you the whole truth, not yet," Aiko said. "But the world is deeper than you know. This gem is my soul. In exchange for curing your disease, my soul was placed in this gem. I get eternal life, incredible powers—"

She disappeared from in front of his eyes, just as she had in the alley, and when she continued speaking from behind him he nearly hurt his neck jerking his head around.

"—but there's a cost," she finished.

Again, Ito and Kaoru found themselves in the position of staring speechlessly.

"It's a deal with the devil," Kaoru said, finally, clearly far beyond the point of trying to argue with anything.

Kyouko cleared her throat, demanding their attention. They gave it, even though they were now even more shell-shocked.

"Maybe it is," the woman said, "but we're not evil, even though sometimes we do evil things. We do the best we can with what we've got. It's time to talk about why you're here."

Aiko reappeared in her chair.

"Don't delude yourself into thinking we were forced to grant you this interview," Kyouko said. "It would have been easy to lock you out entirely. You are here because your girlfriend wanted to try to deal with you personally, and because she wanted you here. I said sure, as long as we kept it deniable, and you were intelligent enough to follow the hints. In return for all we have told you,

though, you ain't going to be telling Okuno or Rizal anything."

She waited until they developed surprised looks on their faces, and then continued:

"Oh yes, of course we know about them. And we also know about the wire you're wearing, though you're smart not to try to activate it. Your two little friends didn't tell anyone else about what they found, because they thought no one would believe them. I'll admit, that did make it easier. As we speak, all records of what they've found and what *you* found are being wiped, including all relevant surveillance footage. Don't be surprised we can do that. We can do a lot of things."

Kyouko leaned forward, not even giving them a chance to catch a breath.

"You see," she said," without the evidence, nothing any of you say will be taken as credible. Chances are, you will be seen as crazy. Remember, I didn't have to tell you nothing. I'm doing it as a favor to Aiko-chan."

She met his eyes.

Long seconds later, Ito clasped his hands, finally feeling recovered enough to consider an answer. Kaoru looked at him for guidance.

He wished he could truly be the paragon of insight all junior partners expected from their *senpai*.

"After all of this," he said, "I'd be inclined to agree, but I don't know what my partner thinks. I have personal ties here. It's not fair for me to speak for her."

He looked at her, and Kaoru appeared to struggle for a moment, before saying:

"Alright. Alright. It doesn't sit right with me, but I don't think we have a choice. I'll trust your judgment. But I don't know how we're going to lie to Okuno-san and Rizal-san like that."

Ito took a breath. At this stage, he had no idea how to think about the world anymore. He was running purely on instinct now, and his core beliefs. Those beliefs told him that, regardless of whatever insanity he found himself involved in, whatever the motives that now drove him, there was one thing he had to do.

"In that case, I have one request," Ito said, facing Kyouko. "This investigation started because of a girl, Okamura Yuu. I'm willing to let it go if I can confirm with my own eyes and ears that she's fine and being taken care of."

Kyouko smile, the hint of fangs turning into an outright display.

"Aiko-chan really does know you well," she said. "We anticipated this. Aiko-chan?"

Aiko grabbed his hand.

"Come on," she said. "I'll take you to see her."

It turned out that Okamura Yuu was lying low in an apartment complex on the other side of the city, living with two college students near the University. She insisted she was fine, and that all her upkeep costs were being paid by "the organization". He decided not to press that particular point.

“You don’t want to go home at all?” he asked. “Your mother will be devastated if you don’t turn up.”

“I know,” Yuu said, eyes downcast. “I feel really bad about it. But I don’t want to live there anymore. My parents are always fighting, and my dad gets violent and drunk. And then they take it out on me afterward.”

“Wait,” Kaoru interrupted. “They *both* take it out on you?”

“Yes,” Yuu said, tilting her head. “Why?”

Kaoru shook her head, and waved for her to continue.

“I’ve heard what they say, when the news starts talking about gay rights. They’re still so conservative. I can’t imagine what would happen if they found out about me and Yuko. I think it’s for the best. I mean, I wasn’t going to do it, but then the—the organization’s psychologists said that, in my situation, it’d be the best for my health.”

“Psychologists?” Ito asked, looking at Aiko, who had come with them in their unmarked vehicle.

“We have professionals for this sort of thing,” Aiko said levelly. “Since we’re not bound by legal requirements, we can explore unorthodox options.”

“Right,” Ito said drolly.

Remarkably, they never saw Satoru or Ronaldo again. It was almost as if they had disappeared off the face of the Earth, and only some surreptitious checking of personnel listings reassured him that they hadn’t actually been killed. Privately, Ito wondered what it had taken to keep them from breathing fire on discovering what had happened. Just as amazingly, his boss made no move to try to ask him about it, which suited him fine.

He and Kaoru had two more cases that week, but while she seemed to still be dedicated to her work, his heart wasn’t as in it anymore. He couldn’t forget Aiko-chan, nor could he forget what she had said.

We have saved more children than you ever could in your lifetime.

In the first case, the missing boy reappeared literally an hour after they were placed on the case. In the second, Ito called Aiko on a whim, since he had a number now. He didn’t ask her to help—he just wanted to check if this was another “organization”-aided disappearance—but she insisted that she would, and the girl reappeared while they were still conducting school interviews.

The day after that, he received a long message from her in his inbox. He read it over carefully, twice, and stayed awake thinking about it. Finally, he got back up and drafted a response, and then a second letter of his own, recommending Kaoru for promotion to a senior position.

He turned in his badge the next morning.

Two Years Later

Sakura Kyouko sat at her desk, formal shoes up on the shiny polished wooden surface, just the way she liked it.

Well, almost. Truth be told, she wasn't a fan of the suit, and she had some stylish new boots she wanted to try out, but today wasn't the day for that.

She was looking at a postcard, one of those new-fangled holographic ones that made her head hurt. It showed a couple next to vaguely-exotic looking trees, the woman carried in the man's arms, the man wearing an expression that, to her, seemed to say: "This girl can bench-press a hundred times my weight. Why am *I* carrying *her*?"

"Greetings from Hawaii!" the card said.

It really was amazing how fast one could age, if one was willing to invest a little magic.

She had just been there recently, of course, to chat amiably with the man's parents, who couldn't shake the feeling that their new daughter-in-law looked very similar to this girl they once knew. She had been there to watch the girl's henchmen stand around looking awkward, and to shoo them away from the drink table. She felt too old to be a Maid of Honor or whatever the hell it was called, but she couldn't deny she looked young enough—though she had been obliged to take on yet another pseudonym. She would have liked to have stayed longer, but even being a partially fake CEO still involved some actual duties.

She twirled the card in her fingers.

Once upon a time, a boy had lain sick in his bed, crippled or critically ill, and had at his side a girl who loved him very, very much. Then, a magical creature appeared.

The story had two endings. In one, the love was unrequited, and the end tragic. In the other…

Well, come to think of it, "happily ever after" wasn't really an ending, was it? Just a suggestion of a continuous now. While she would have liked to have wrapped it up like that, she couldn't help but remember that the boy would die, eventually.

The girl might not.

It had been so obvious that her disciple was still lovestruck, from the way the girl stalked the boy from the shadows. It had grown wearisome. When the opportunity arose, it had been easy to perform a little manipulation, drop a little hint, give the girl a little push—even if she didn't quite execute the way Kyouko might have. Too much gun violence, for one thing. That was just risky.

What had changed? Was it the starting conditions? The new world they had built for themselves? Or was it that Kyouko herself now knew how to interfere?

A new world. A happier world. That was what they had talked about, all those years ago.

"Hey Chairman," a voice next to her summoned. "The Board is waiting."

She looked up. "Tomatsu Mai" frowned down at her, then bent down to look at the postcard.

"Hmm," Mami said. "So she got married, huh?"

"Yeah," Kyouko said.

She placed the postcard in her drawer and pushed it shut.

"Come on," she said, getting up. "Let's go see the committee."

End— Interlude I: Underworld Dreams

Next—Volume II: Inflationary Expansion

To the Ground (Volume II: Inflationary Expansion)

To the Stars Volume II: Inflationary Expansion

"The universe is so vast and ageless that the life of one man can only be measured by the size of his sacrifice."

Vivian Rosewarne, RAF pilot killed in the Battle of Britain

The extended aftermath of the Unification Wars brought major changes in the organization of the rapidly demobilizing military, brought about by a combination of changing circumstances and new technology.

Firstly, new direct-to-cortex training techniques greatly shortened the amount of time necessary to train all classes of military personnel, including officers, making it possible for lower-ranked personnel to obtain basic training for higher positions with relatively little effort. Secondly, the steeply rising education level of the overall populace nearly eliminated the poorly-educated soldiers that had traditionally comprised the lower ranks of the military, further contributing to a glut of qualified promotion candidates in the lower ranks. Finally, the end of conscription and the return of the volunteer military eliminated a plausible reason for holding some candidates back.

As a result of these developments, the officer corps underwent significant post-*bellum* reform. The most dramatic was the elimination of the distinction between commissioned officers and the rest of the soldiery, based on the reasoning that the necessary "book-learning" that went into commissions could now be compressed into the relatively short span of a few weeks. Accompanying this change was a sharp increase in the meritocratic nature of the command structure; any soldier who displayed unusual command ability or potential could be lifted easily out of the lower ranks, given relatively brief additional training, and be deployed back into the field as an officer. At the same time, officers who underperformed could be shunted into other positions or, in the worst case, demoted to the last position in which they were effective.

The consequent increased churn among the middle and upper ranks, coupled with an improved ability to more objectively assess performance in the field—or, rather, in the training exercises of this peacetime military—seemed to justify a more orderly approach to the issuance of promotions and positions. The officer corps was divided into three broad tracks: Firstly, Field Command, for officers who display unusual skill at commanding troops in the field, coupled with strong leadership qualities. Secondly, Strategic Command, for officers who display strong strategic acumen, despite what may be a lack of tactical or leadership ability. Finally, the Specialist track, for officers with unusual ability at the more technical aspects of military operations, such as logistics, fortification, and so forth. To address internal concerns, strong efforts were made to avoid "locking" personnel into tracks by monitoring personnel for hidden potential or improvements in other skills with experience.

Despite continually refined usage of metrics and AI modelers, efficient allocation of personnel is still not a completely solved problem, as testified to in the current war: there is a steady stream of examples of specialist officers rising to the challenge of field command in emergency situations.

For MG officers, the three-track system is slightly modified; Field Command is more accurately termed Field Command *and Combat*, and serves as a repository for magical girls unusually suited to combat in the field, for example as part of the shock troop reserves of Magical Divisions.

—Excerpt, "A Primer on Military Organization", article, Current Affairs Magazine

In one moment, Earth; in the next, Heaven.

—Unknown

"This is nerve-wracking," Fleet Admiral Karishma Anand complained, pulling at her uniform nervously. "It's one thing to command an operation where you can see what's going on and have control. It's another to just sit here and wait, when all you can get is sketchy memory relays from clairvoyants."

"I know," General de Chatillon said. "But we should be glad we have anything at all, from this distance. We can't risk standard transmission on an operation as sensitive as this."

De Chatillon made a pyramid with his hands and shifted in his chair—black, explosive-resistant, synthesized leather—nervously.

"Well, if we couldn't see anything, then we couldn't hold this little soiree," Field Marshal Sualem said sourly, glancing back and forth between the other two. "Though honestly that might have been for the best. I'll admit, sitting around here biting my nails is getting to me too. Even trying to split my consciousness, I find that my attention keeps getting pulled back to this."

"Quiet, all of you," Field Marshal Tsvangirai said, waving his hand dismissively. "I'm *trying* to watch."

Field Marshal Tomoe Mami watched the exchange in silence, leaning on the virtual table with both elbows, hands clasped under her chin. She watched how de Chatillon kept his eye on the Fleet Admiral, the kind of subtle gesture that, under more mundane circumstances, would have tempted her to speculate about the unmarried General. She watched how Sualem wrung his hands nervously, apparently without realizing it, in full sight of everyone in the room, and watched Fleet Admiral Xing fiddle with one of those old-fashioned input tablets he favored.

They were meeting in the familiar General Staff meeting room, of course, except that this time Mami was viewing it through remote virtuality, as real as the people seated around her might seem. Some members of the General Staff favored their own personal virtualities, with fancy glowing tables or a starry background or what have you, but Mami preferred to keep it simple, residing in a simple replication of the cozy Carthago meeting room, with its giant mahogany table, matching wooden paneling, and framed portraits of Unification War commanders. Among other things, she had grown used to the feeling of the table under her elbows and the warm lighting of the miniature chandelier above them.

It didn't quite feel so cozy today, though.

On her left, Field Marshal Erwynmark's expression matched Mami's in silence and severity, so that she couldn't tell if he were devoting mindspace to the other members of the Staff, like her, or thinking about something else entirely. Like all of them, though, he was watching the fuzzy holographic video floating over the table, occupying the central display space.

There had been, in truth, nothing much to see so far in this operation; there was only the tense monotony of a MagOps team crammed into a tiny insertion ship, pilot and stealth generator taut with focus, the latter's gem fed a slow trickle of grief cubes as she worked to keep the ship invisible. One of the remaining operatives told a joke to lessen the tension, and the others laughed half-heartedly—and soundlessly. Sound was irretrievable at such long range.

In truth, there was no reason the General Staff needed to turn out for a special meeting to watch this mission. Many had no operational connection to the situation. Even Sector Special Commander Mami didn't really need to. What did it matter, when she could issue no orders, when there was nothing she could do to affect anything? The fate of the Black Heart team had been sealed the moment they set out for the moon with the Wormhole Stabilizer; it was just that no one yet knew what that fate was.

It just seemed right that they should watch, when the fate of humanity might well hang in the balance.

A part of Mami wondered where Clarisse van Rossum was at this moment, and what she was doing.

Across from Mami sat Fleet Admiral Feodorovich, the perpetually busy Admiral who constantly missed Staff meetings, too busy holding the shoulders of the salient with her fleets, preparing a possible incipient offensive. The raven-haired, steely eyed woman hadn't missed this meeting, though, not when the events unfolding before them would affect everything she did from here out.

To Mami's right sat a special guest, not a member of the Staff, but invited here anyway. General Kuroi was Commander of the Black Heart, and those were her girls out there. Her youthful appearance and short height stood out at the table, even with Mami there.

"They've reached low orbit," Fleet Admiral Xing commented, for those among them who might not be familiar with small ship operations. "They're preparing for insertion."

Xing apparently liked commenting, since it was often quite clear that everyone could get the relevant information from their implants and didn't need him to say it explicitly.

This time, though, what little chatter there was in the room quieted down, as they watched the operatives put on breathing helmets, holster whatever conventional weapons they thought necessary to bring, strap on their equipment packs—complete with personal stealth generators, forcefield emitters, grief cubes, and anti-grav to lighten the load. One of the girls, Mami knew, was exceptionally rare: A pocket dimension generator, capable of storing and conjuring equipment from her hands. She would be carrying the heavy weaponry, and the PAYNE nuclear device.

With a staccato of light flashes, muted by the clairvoyance, they transformed, transformations reshaping their armor as well, armor specially designed, customized, and enchanted by MSY specialists to bear the process, rather than just vanish as clothing did. The moon didn't have a standard oxygen atmosphere, and there was no sense taking the risk that the aliens would vent the atmosphere of the facility once the alarms went up, as they had in the past. Sure, the operatives could push on, but operating on no oxygen cost a lot of magic.

They could have put on space suits after the fact, as the Magi Cæli did, but here every bit of added efficiency mattered, and customized armor fit into the scheme, even if permanently enchanted objects were still surprisingly difficult to make.

Irrationally, Mami couldn't help but think of certain children's shows she had seen in her childhood, but she pushed the thought away. Not right now.

The girls gathered in a cluster in the middle of the ship, a few of them pressing hands together in prayer, probably to the Goddess, though there was a slight chance one of them was from a more traditional religion. Mami could have looked it up, but what did it matter?

This was it.

Atmospheric insertion was one of the riskiest portions of the mission. Alien sensors were exceptionally good, and they had no magical stealth generators capable of concealing an entire ship moving inside the moon's relatively thick atmosphere—it was too difficult to hide the reentry shockwave, even on the gentlest possible anti-grav assisted descent.

They had considered the options in the planning meeting beforehand.

There were stealth generators capable of causing incorporeality, but those rare girls also couldn't conceal the whole ship, nor could any of them maintain it for longer than ten seconds or so, which didn't even bring up the magic compatibility issues they had with each other, and with teleporters. Plus, even assuming they managed to land the ship somehow, they also had to somehow *launch* the ship back up at the completion of the mission, after the aliens had realized they were there. It would have been suicide.

Instead they were doing something that was hopefully much simpler. A teleportation relay. The safe distance to the surface of the moon, just under one hundred eighty kilometers, was too long for their teleporters to make the jump in one go, but multiple teleporters—in this case, four—could span the distance to the interior of the facility, with the tiny intervening periods covered by a stealth generator, who could now handle the much smaller mass. They would go to work, hopefully be fully recharged by the time they were done, and perform the same relay back up to the ship at the end. If one of the teleporters died, the ship was to try to go lower. If more than one died, then the instructions for those on the ground were to die bravely.

The girls in the hologram in front of them nodded to each other, colorful helmets bobbing up and —and the scene shifted, to a view looking downward at the same cluster of girls, dozens of kilometers further down, in sudden free-fall. Several of the girls raised hands, pushing the group horizontally to slow them all down. They had to cancel their remaining orbital velocity before they reached the ground, which necessitated these gaps between teleports. There was a main telekinetic, but self-propulsion was one of those powers that almost every veteran had, either naturally or self-taught, so there was no reason they couldn't help. The whole affair was almost a Rube Goldberg machine, but it was the only way.

It was interesting to realize that though they could see the girls with the aid of the clairvoyant and the assent of the stealth generator, they were indeed stealthed.

Twenty seconds later, and the scene shifted again. Now they saw nothing but ground. Of course, the girls themselves could look around and see the spherical horizon, but Mami and the others were looking straight down.

Another twenty seconds, and some of the girls lowered their hands. Mami knew that there was still velocity to cancel; it was planned meticulously, and one of the goals of the training runs had been to waste as little time as possible exposed in the air before teleporting into the facility proper, behind their forcefields. Still, they were almost there. Just once more—

The hologram washed out in sea of blinding white, so that even with their ocular implants and the intervening layer of virtuality, the General Staff recoiled instinctively. Then the hologram vanished.

"What was the hell was that?" Tsvangirai demanded.

A new image appeared in the hologram before, this time a readout and remote scan of the moon. Most of them leaned forward to look. A few stayed put, already reading the message internally.

Long-range sensors indicate detonation on the surface of the moon, Machina thought, unnecessarily. *Probable antimatter explosive. Estimated yield: 10 megatons.*

There was a few seconds of stunned silence around the table.

“Well, f—,” Sualem said, finally, breaking the ice.

“They detonated an antimatter explosive?” Feodorovich asked, face stony.

“With our stealth, it was probably the most reliable way of ensuring elimination,” Xing said, eyes downcast. “If they turned their base forcefields on, they could withstand it, if they detonated the device high enough. I doubt any of our operatives could have. Even if they did, they’re irretrievable now.”

“How the hell did they know?” Anand demanded incredulously. “How?”

“Stealth generation doesn’t work perfectly with teleportation skills,” Erwynmark said. “At each teleport, the people being transported switch places with air at the destination. In this case, there’s a pressure effect. The air lower down is higher pressure. So there’s an outrushing of air at the point of departure that the stealth generator can’t cover. It showed up in our simulations, but we didn’t think they could detect it in just sixty seconds. Or, it could be something else.”

The table reverted to a deathly silence.

“I should leave,” Tsvangirai said, finally. “My men will need me.”

“We should meet,” Mami said, gesturing at him, swallowing whatever she was feeling. “There will be a lot to do. No doubt, the aliens are already moving to cover the moon with heavier defenses. There is no more need for us to pretend.”

“Yes,” Erwynmark agreed stonily. “We have already discussed the failure contingency. We should implement it as soon as possible. Dismissed.”

Mami disconnected.

She wasn’t in her own cabin, as would have been possible. Instead, she was in a meeting room on her flagship, with Tsvangirai, some of the other Staff members in the area, and a special guest.

She put her hand on the shoulder of the girl next to her, Kuroi Kana, who had also disconnected.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“Are you alright?” Shen Xiao Long asked, as Mami headed into her room to take a brief nap, an exhausting fifteen hours later.

At that moment, Mami still held in the back of her mind the image of a certain magical girl, a stealth generator, preparing for a critical mission, a little over a day ago.

“I won’t disappoint you,” the girl had said, smiling at her loving Matriarch.

Mami didn’t think disappointment was Kana’s problem right now.

“I’m fine,” she said, before letting the door close behind her.

“You couldn’t save me.”

Mami looked around in a panic, desperately trying to localize the source of the voice, which seemed to come from everywhere at once. Somehow, the complete blackness of her environment, the complete lack of any indication of where she was or what was going on, failed to even register. Not while the voice was there. The maddening—

"You miserable failure."

This time, the voice gained a certain substance. It sounded young, female, and the identity of its source danced just beyond Mami's ability to grasp. It was a voice that should have been sweet, should have been sitting at her table happily eating cake and drinking tea, rather than hurling accusations.

Mami shook her head in confusion. Cake? Tea? Why was that imagery suddenly coming to mind?

"What a miserable senpai you are," the girl said. "You don't even remember who I am, do you? But I guess that's not surprising, given how many others you've forgotten."

"Who are you?" Mami demanded, unable to get over the intense pain of not knowing.

"When's the last time you even thought about me?" a new voice demanded.

This voice had a tone and nuances different from the previous voice, but its powerful emotional impact was unchanged.

Mami spun on her heel, realizing for the first time that she had *a heel to spin on, and saw her first hint of color in this black world.*

"Why didn't you stop me?" the short-haired girl demanded of her, cape fluttering.

The girl stabbed her sword outward, stopping just short of Mami's neck, so that she flinched backward.

"You knew something was wrong," the girl said, sword pointed accusingly. "Kyouko begged you to do something, but you didn't act. You felt it even before she told you, and you didn't act. Instead I died."

"I'm sorry, Miki-san!" Mami pleaded. "It was a mistake, I know. But we didn't know what was going on!"

"Humph," Sayaka said, pulling back her sword and turning away. "It's always Miki-san, Miki-san. You can't bear to call anyone by their personal name, can you? You might get close to yet another girl you can't save."

"That's…that's unfair!" Mami protested.

*"What terrible excuses you've made for yourself," the girl said, voice now dripping with disdain and mockery. "'*We didn't know*', as if that excuses anything. And Kyouko knew. You knew she knew, but you never asked. You* still *haven't asked. You don't want to face it, so you tell yourself she doesn't know either, but you know the real truth. How many lies do you tell yourself, just so you can sleep at night?"*

"I didn't want to break it," Mami said. "I finally had friends and, and—

She stopped, unable to finish, and just stared at the other girl, eyes wide, breathing heavily. She stared until the other girl shook her head in pity and walked away, slowly fading into the darkness.

“You said I could do it, senpai,” a new voice said, “but you failed me.”

Mami turned to look at the new girl, whose sable costume was barely visible in the darkness.

“I was one the MSY’s brightest stars,” the girl said. “One of its most powerful. You recruited me to your ‘Soul Guard’. You told me I would be great. You said I should be the one to watch alone from the roof, even when I was worried about being alone. You said I could handle it.”

The girl dropped her face, seeming to cry softly.

“You should have known it was a trap,” she said, tears streaming down her face. “Why did it take you so long to come save me? All you saved was a corpse.”

Mami’s eyes watered in sympathy, her mind replaying the ancient memory, of her favorite prodigy, the young one with the silly laugh who could cook together with her, falling out of the sky. She remembered how empty her eyes had looked, her soul gem crushed and shattered within the fist of Eirin the Elusive.

“I’m—I’m sorry,” Mami managed, through the tears. “I wasn’t experienced enough. I wanted you to experience fighting on your own. I’ve regretted it my whole life.”

The girl shook her head.

“Your regret didn’t save me. You should never have let me go alone.”

Mami looked down, unable to respond, as this girl faded away too, this time without even walking away.

The next voice sounded familiar indeed.

“You let me leave,” Homura accused, appearing in front of her.

“I tried to stop you,” Mami said. “But you wouldn’t let me. And then you hid from us. If you had just come back—“

“You knew there was something wrong with me for four centuries, Mami,” she said. “You just left it alone. Why? Were you that afraid of losing my friendship? What kind of coward are you?”

“I—I tried, Homura,” Mami insisted. “But you wouldn’t listen. You sent Atsuko-san home crying. I couldn’t fight you.”

“You knew I was a time bomb,” Homura said. “You should have tried harder.”

“How could I?” Mami demanded. “How could I risk losing you?”

“You could have held on no matter what. Why did it matter to you what I thought of you?”

The girl harrumphed, shook her head disdainfully, flipped her long hair, and walked away into the darkness.

“I just wanted to be left alone,” a new voice said. “My only crime was to refuse to bow down to your precious MSY. You hunted me down and killed me.”

“You wouldn’t let us capture you,” Mami said weakly, avoiding the girl’s eyes. “I had no choice. I had to take the kill shot. It was in the instructions.”

“Did you really have to?” the girl asked. “You could have just let me go.”

“It had to be done,” Mami insisted, “We offered you every possible incentive, and you wouldn’t concede. You were interfering with our grief cube harvesting. We couldn’t just let that go.”

“How else was I supposed to survive? You knew I needed the cubes.”

There was an accusing silence, before the girl continued:

“If what you did was so noble, then why didn’t you ever do it again? The first time, you wanted to do it personally. After that, you stayed away. Eventually, you quit. Why?”

Mami bit her lip.

“Murderer,” the girl breathed, eyes sharp, before disappearing abruptly enough that Mami jumped.

“She wasn’t even your biggest victim,” the first, original voice accused, again without source. “Eventually, your MSY grew even larger, and then it found that there were other organizations that had copied it. You could have lived together in peace, but you destroyed them, tore them apart and picked up the pieces.”

“That’s not true!” Mami insisted, looking up, wishing she had someone to point at.

“That’s not true,” she repeated, quietly. “We negotiated whenever we could. Most mergers were completely peaceful.”

“But not all of them, miss diplomat. You know that. And how many others were “persuaded” by your Black Heart? How many people did your precious Yuma-chan have to kill? You don’t even know, do you? You don’t want to ask.”

“I did everything I could,” Mami said. “It just wasn’t possible to convince everybody. I wasn’t personally involved—“

“Why was it so important?” the voice, so terribly familiar, demanded. “Why? Why did your MSY have *to rule the world? Why did you want that kind of power?”*

“The world needed us!” Mami argued. “The world was falling apart. We had to be unified, so that we could do what was necessary—“

“Some saving you did! Your MSY got power, and then sat on its hands while the world burned. What did it matter to you?”

“I tried!” Mami said. “We tried so hard to get things moving, but we just couldn’t convince the voters. We—“

“While you dithered, trying to win consensus, tens of millions died, and billions suffered,” the voice continued, ignoring her. “If you had acted earlier, the war might not have been so terrible. Every year you wasted was literally millions of lives. You should have been harsher.”

“We couldn’t do any better!” Mami insisted.

But even as she insisted, her mind wandered back to the many, many times she had flipped through the casualty reports, taking in the numbers, the faces of the dead, until she had learned to stop, for her own health.

“You keep saying that!” the voiced pointed out, gaining power and volume and harshness. “You didn’t know, you didn’t have enough experience, you didn’t have enough power! Why all the excuses? Why couldn’t you just do it? Why did you let the decisions of others take precedence? Today you ordered another batch of girls to their deaths. How many more men and women are going to die because you won’t do things correctly? Does Erwynmark know who he’s trusting?”

“I—you can’t—“ Mami spluttered, frustrated.

“And the worst part is: you’ve forgotten all of it! That’s how you deal with it, isn’t it? You just don’t think about it, you avoid thinking about it, or you tell yourself lies. You never face anything. Your friends have died, because you’re too scared to risk facing the truth! You’ve even forgotten —

Mami’s eyes snapped open.

She was briefly lost, eyes flittering back and forth, more confused than she was usually when waking from a dream.

You’re needed on the bridge, Machina thought simply, as the contours of her Admiral’s suite finally resolved around her.

Did you wake me? Mami thought.

Yes, Machina thought, in the exact worried tone that Mami herself often used. *Honestly, that was a bit of a concerning dream. Are you alright?*

Mami sat up, taking a deep breath, gritting her teeth slightly.

I’m fine, she thought. *Nothing I haven’t been dealing with since forever.*

If you say so, Machina thought. *You should use a grief cube.*

“The squid are hitting our supply routes hard,” Ryouko had relayed to her warrant officer. *“Division plans to concentrate and drive them back. Leave it! Let the others finish the job. Get everyone accounted for.”*

Ryouko always felt disappointed when forced to leave a job half-done, but it was frustratingly routine. A high-priority target would be scouted, she’d be called in to cripple the defenses, more standard units would follow in their wake—and then they’d be told to leave, to go somewhere else and attack something else, or help to stabilize the line somewhere, or just go back in reserve somewhere.

It was efficient allocation of resources. Using powerful MG-enhanced units for standard frontline duty was to be avoided if possible, to maintain flexibility and minimize risk. Usually it wasn’t possible in the kinds of situations their MG-concentrated Magical Division got committed to, since they were often kept in reserve precisely for more difficult situations, but they made the attempt. That meant that once command calculated that local victory was assured, they would get instantly removed.

She understood that, but it was annoying to leave without the satisfaction of actually blowing something up.

It also meant that when a scouting party had sent back word about a hidden alien Processing Center in this sector of the line, she had been surprised to see that she and her platoon had been

committed without the support of any of her fellow MGs. That implied that something was up, somewhere.

The platoon hadn't managed to reform in its entirety, though. A certain Corporal Singh failed to reestablish contact—attempts to reach her by comms had been fruitless given the heavy alien jamming, and attempts to scout the infantryman's last known position had run into unexpected resistance. Apparently, she had gotten cut off somehow in the midst of the jammed chaos.

Traditionally, there were two options. Ryouko could either order a probing attack to try and recover the infantryman. Alternatively, and more cost-effectively, she could wait and hope for the best. Generally speaking, it was out of the question that she would venture out personally to retrieve what was only one missing infantryman, and frankly it was almost certainly a loss.

She had gritted her teeth slightly, thought about the training that told her not to go, and decided that, as a teleporter, she could mitigate the risk.

"Standby and continue the concentration without me," she had relayed. "*Sanchez, Hu, Zhang, with me."*

Strictly speaking, the speech, even of the non-verbal form, was unnecessary. They could follow her commands via their internal displays and mental readouts perfectly fine. Humans, though, were talkers.

It wasn't really possible to read her warrant officer's face, not when that face was hidden inside a visorless armored helmet three times the size of her head. She didn't need to, though, to imagine the Egyptian frowning in disapproval—though something about the mental image bothered her.

"Respectfully," the man had relayed, armored fingers shifting on his enormous weapon, "*is that really necessary? It would be a risk—"*

"I'll be careful, Omer," she had thought. "*We have stealth generators for a reason."*

"You always do this," he had thought. *"It's not a good idea."*

Ryouko had ignored him.

That was how she now found herself in yet another stretch of this interminable jungle, invisible behind her stealth, flanked by flying cloaked point defense drones—PDDs. She had teleported in, bringing with her the three armored infantry—all from squad B, to make sure they had good cohesion—, who advanced cautiously, drones at their feet working to clear a path through the foliage and vines. They walked in silence in their sound suppressive boots, green armor doing its best to obscure itself in the foliage, which was relatively easy, given that the density of plants above them turned the area into a sort of twilight, despite the bright, hot star in the sky. She wore the boots too, though of course they had been transformed to match her costume. They were particularly important when every step you took was full of branches, acid-filled insects, singing—yes, *singing*—grass, or whatever other dead giveaways this endlessly inventive ecosystem chose to produce.

The planet Giungla was not, she thought, creatively named, given that the word just meant "jungle" in Italian. The name certainly got the point across, though. The planet was practically swimming in nitrates, and had somehow developed a biosphere in absurdly close proximity to its parent star. Coupled with an enormous abundance of atmospheric water that would have been a surface-covering ocean anywhere else, its plant life had access to tremendous amounts of energy and, with the low gravity, could grow enormous. That, in turn, motivated herbivores of every size and description, from tiny insects to land animals larger than anything the earth had ever seen.

With the resources available, both sides could afford to get creative.

Of course, it made most of the planet quite pernicious for heavy weaponry. Which still didn't make it pleasant for the infantry.

Even with the canopy above them, the heat and humidity would have been crushing for a non-enhanced human. Thank the Goddess for implants.

That was another thing—apparently, the Cult's internal swearing mechanisms had spread throughout the military, spoken fervently by true believers, and sardonically by everyone else, though at this point it mostly wasn't ironic anymore. The training courses encouraged budding mage officers to internalize the vernacular and use it, for bonding reasons with the troops. Ryouko couldn't help but think that was self-perpetuating.

Ah, training courses, she thought. Come to think of it, that felt like almost yesterday.

Again, she felt a slight sense of…*déjà vu*?

This damn planet must have low level neurotoxins or something, she thought.

The intelligence had been good, fortunately. This patch of jungle was empty. The resistance the scouts had encountered had merely been unfortunately placed, an alien unit probing into the accidental gap between Corporal Singh and the rest of the platoon.

"The hell is she doing, anyway?" Corporal Hu thought. "*When communications are jammed, you maintain either visual or short-range contact if at all possible. It's in the damn field manual."*

They were all at least "Corporal". MG platoons were staffed with experienced veterans, not green privates. It showed how much the core of the platoon was valued.

"Don't judge," Sergeant Sanchez thought. "*It's not always possible. You know that. She was caught being too aggressive when her squad came under heavy fire. It's in the damn unit history. Aren't we encouraged to be aggressive? She's probably pinned down."*

She was eying Sanchez for promotion to a platoon level position.

He was correct, of course. Keeping within short-range contact was unusual for infantrymen in most situations. Despite the vast numbers of infantry being poured into the armed forces, the majority of contested worlds contained a very low density of troops, by historical Earth standards. Urban battles tended to be denser, obviously, but out in the hinterlands, it wasn't rare to find a single infantryman or group of infantryman alone in a full square kilometer. Of course, the clouds of drones balanced it out somewhat.

"Do we even know if she's still alive?" Zhang thought.

"No," Ryouko thought. "*That's what we're here to find out. If one of you were out there, you'd want me to do this."*

There was silence for a moment, as they continued to follow their search path.

"Well, sir," Sanchez thought, finally. "*As a point of fact, we might* not *want you to do this. After all—"*

"Yes, yes, I know," Ryouko thought, a bit testily. "*Might not be worth the risk. But this situation is more than low risk enough. I'm not leaving her out here."*

That ended the conversation, as they worked their way around one of the enormous “megatrees” that dotted the relatively low-gravity planet, each peering into the foliage and low-lying mist with enhanced vision, relying heavily on their infrared. Ryouko, especially, with her doubly-enhanced vision, made the effort to look.

The three squad members were each about two and a half meters tall and a meter wide in their ultra-dense, self-healing armor. The suits didn’t have a transparent faceplate—too much structural weakness, better to go with embedded optical fiber. Ryouko always felt kind of silly standing next to one in her dress.

She frowned. That thought about the dress had a weird flavor to it, though she couldn’t put her finger on it.

She had been feeling strange all day.

In any case, the assault rifles the infantry carried were behemoths, the outsized cousins of the weapons she had once practiced with. It wasn’t that a magical girl couldn’t handle the weight—it was that their hands literally couldn’t reach around to toggle the trigger. Plus, they were bulky, though there did exist “small-hand” models that some girls favored. Personally, Ryouko was dubious about wielding a weapon that was taller than she was, but she supposed it probably made you feel powerful.

There were uses to having a gun, though, including the SW-155 she had holstered. For instance, guns now came with camera scopes and varying amounts of sophisticated sensors, so that one could “see” something just by pointing the gun at it. This was useful for, for example, firing out of cover without sticking your head out.

Of course, the assault rifle wasn’t even the main component of a standard infantryman’s firepower. For a true accounting, it wasn't even sufficient to count the sniper rifles and assorted light and heavy weaponry that came with each platoon, or the high-power low-use lasers that came with all projectile weaponry, or the numerous weapons that came with the suit itself—melee blades, shock devices, and cutting lasers in both arms, a grenade launcher in the right arm, three miniature missiles in the other, and so on and so forth, all capable of being cannibalized for armor repairs if necessary.

The primary contributor to overall unit firepower was the countless drones that accompanied it. Limited by their varying degrees of size-dependent intelligence, alien and human drones often fought each other to partial stalemate—with a moderate alien advantage—so it was occasionally possible to forget they were there. Complete drone dominance by one side, however, led rapidly to fatalities on the other side.

Ryouko never forgot, though, if only because she was obliged to teleport a swarm of drones practically any time she went anywhere. Fortunately, there was no such thing as “personal” drones, so personnel could often be shuttled between locations on their own. That still left moving personnel to empty locations, moving drones around to prevent the line from becoming unbalanced, carrying drones with her for safety reasons when she wanted to conduct a deep penetration…

The small ones, especially, seemed to see no problem with getting in her hair when ordered to “make contact”.

Ryouko felt suddenly uncomfortable. Not because of thinking about the drones—she wouldn’t get uncomfortable just from that—but because…well, she couldn’t tell.

“Do you smell that?” Sanchez asked. *“Smells like fighting, somewhere nearby.”*

They stopped, taking deep nasal breaths to force air past their modified nasal passages—the suits deliberately allowed a filtered set of molecules into the internal air stream, for precisely this reason, though of course it could be turned off, adjusted, and so forth.

He was right; that was indeed exactly what it smelled like. If Ryouko had been unsure, she could have consulted Clarisse about what the smell probably meant.

Without any "verbal" prompting, they changed direction, attempting to track the source of the scent. A quiet tension settled over the group; they were headed into a probable battle zone. They would know soon whether Corporal Singh had survived, or whether the fighting was merely her drones making a programmed effort to return to the line.

Sure enough, it was only a few short minutes before a mental ping alerted Ryouko—and the others—to the fact that one of their more intelligent drones—a missile-bearing flier—had come into contact with one of hers. A quick relayed query indicated that, while communications were still sparse, dependent on occasional drone relay, the soldier in question was alive so far as the drone knew. In addition, friendly drone numbers in the vicinity were way down, and reinforcements, particularly air support, would be appreciated.

Hu chuckled.

"Not much chance of air support here," he thought.

They knew, though apparently Singh didn't, that the local heavy air support—the gun platforms, the AI heavy fighters and bombers, and the Aer Magi—were currently being held mostly in reserve, with the rest embroiled in a massive air superiority contest over their own local supply centers. They wouldn't be helping anytime soon.

The most important piece of information to come out of the exchange, though, was a set of relatively up to date location markers, indicating the infantryman's last reported position, and the positions of known alien forces and firezones.

Without needing prompting, Clarisse placed her into "field command" mode, a combination of the time-slowing combat trance used by infantrymen in active combat and the more immersive command mode used by generals and the like. Neither the field command nor the combat trance was used by magical girls during active combat, because of interference effects—and because their instinctive hyper-fast combat responses were more effective anyway—but the field command mode was useful out-of-combat.

She studied the situation for what was to her a long while. Singh was indeed pinned down, unable to shift out of cover without drawing withering fire. Her drones were experiencing heavy attrition and would soon be unable to provide meaningful cover.

Ryouko had brought a large group of drones with her, but because of her mass limitations, it was nowhere near the full complement that usually accompanied even one infantryman. Consequently, they would provide only a small degree of assistance.

In terms of local awareness, the positions of some stationary alien laser turrets were well-localized, but the positions of mobile elements, including any actual personnel, were only vaguely known.

She took a breath, pondering whether or not to risk breaching her element of surprise. It would likely have been possible to just perform another teleport, retrieve Singh, and get out, but she wanted to do a little damage. Bloodthirst, if you wanted to call it that.

It was probably worth the risk.

She held out her hand, and the pack on her back extended its robotic arm, disgorging the equipment she requested—five tiny surveillance drones.

She enchanted them, just a little, attaching them to a set of five homing arrows, designed to dissolve and disappear before reaching their targets, to lower the risk of being noticed as anything unusual. It was a trick she had only recently acquired, along with the homing arrows themselves. Said arrows took a lot of time to prep—but she wasn't in active combat, after all.

Then, as the other three stayed on guard, she elevated her crossbow arm and fired in the vague direction of where most of the interposing forces were.

It would have been a bit much to review five fast-paced video feeds at once on her own, but her TacComp easily picked up any slack there might have been.

Two alien stationary laser batteries, as expected. Two infantry troopers, easily more than a match for any human infantryman. Three of those pernicious "Hydra" flying missile launchers on patrol, looking for an opening in Singh's defenses to fire. And… one of her arrows seemed headed for empty space, high up in the branches of one of the trees.

A sniper, probably, her TacComp thought. *Or something else cloaked.*

Yes, she agreed. *Best to take whatever it is out first.*

She relayed an order to Singh to stay put. The order might take a while to reach her, but she doubted the infantryman would try and move. Without wasting time saying it, she ordered the three infantrymen to provide a distraction by taking out the Hydras, which were close by, but not to give the probable sniper a clear shot at them until it—aliens were "it"—was taken out.

A map laid out in her vision, showing the locations of the laser gun, the infantry, and the possible sniper. It showed blue dots for where she might want to teleport, and indicated what she might want to do when she got there. This attack plan also imprinted itself directly into her mind, of course.

She held out her hand again, and this time received some smart grenades. They were small—she could fit four in her hand—but potent. There was no pin to pull; instead they primed on mental command, and detonated a specified time after leaving an infantryman's hand. They could also be detonated on command, but the reliability of that depended on alien interference, which made it often useless.

Given the alien propensity for shielding, they were designed to blast out a wave of secondary explosive pellets that detonated on contact, reshaping themselves to take advantage of the Munroe effect for armor penetration. In the last stages of detonation, a series of monoatomically-edged shrapnel pieces were hurtled through what was hopefully a breach in the armor, carrying aggressive nanites intended to wreak havoc on a soft interior. Besides being generally effective against armored targets—which was practically everything above a certain mass—they were also good against alien forcefields which, in many ways, behaved like armor. In that case, there was a reasonable chance of temporary forcefield failure, though the shrapnel nanites usually failed to do more that superficial damage to the armor below the forcefield. At very close range, there was an excellent chance of forcefield failure.

An intricately crafted weapon that was, sad to say, reverse engineered from the aliens.

It was important, because the forcefields somehow blocked her ability to teleport things—or parts of things—via the ground. It also didn't use any of her magic, always a plus.

She took a breath as her PDD clung to unobtrusive parts of her body.

When she exhaled, she was in the air above the part of the tree where the “sniper” was. In that same moment, she released the arrow.

With an explosive display of green sparks, the sniper’s shields failed, and the arrow tore straight through one of the limbs of the sniper, the now disconnected terminal end beginning to fall. Ryouko’s second arrow was already ready, and this one was a headshot.

Aliens could penetrate human non-magical stealth, but it required some of their better sensors, and only their best sensors could give, for example, an indication of where the soul gem was. That was important.

She teleported out a few hundred milliseconds before drone light laser fire tore through where she *had* been, and this time she appeared right next to one of the laser batteries, its turrets gleaming and menacing even in the limited light. She teleported right back out, leaving a single smart grenade behind.

She repeated the feat above the next battery, the two alien infantry in their multi-limbed suits pouring firepower blindly into the sky. At each stop, she dropped another grenade into the mist and plant cover below her, taking a moment to peer into infrared to make sure she didn’t bomb the wrong side of a hedge or hit some sort of tree or electric vine, while the PDDs she carried with her deflected away projectiles that happened to be heading in her direction.

Then, spotting the detonations in IR, she picked a useful intermediate patch of ground to teleport onto, not even bothering to touch the ground with her hands. She teleported ten meters into the air, carrying with her a thin shaving of the ground and only *part* of the two alien infantry members and the laser cannons. She didn’t feel anything block part of her teleportation, so she knew she had got them all.

She would have liked to stay to see for herself, but it was safer to keep moving.

Her last jump placed her next to Singh. Since all the jumps had been short-range, she had been able to execute quickly; it had been thirteen seconds, by her internal chronometer. Of course, there was also her limit on the number of jumps she could do in a short period, but she wasn’t close to that yet. She *was*, however, approaching the limit of her stealth generator. Fortunately, she was essentially done.

Corporal Singh looked up at her in surprise and fear from where she was prone, pointing her weapon at Ryouko. It would have been a hazard were it not for TacComps, which generally prevented accidental discharges. The woman was in cover behind what they called a “hedge”, which was really a tangled mess of surprisingly resilient, poisonous vines that the local macrofoliage used to dissuade herbivores. On close inspection, it was shockingly intricate, and substantially attenuated even the heaviest automatic fire. It would have been more memorable if she hadn’t seen hundreds of variations on the theme in the last half hour. Giant trees with appendages that lashed at you if you got too close. Dense undergrowth that hid pools of acid. Vines with an electric charge. And so on and so forth.

She touched the woman’s armor, and they returned to the others.

“Nicely done,” she thought, when she found that the Hydras had been neutralized successfully and quickly.

They gathered around her, making contact, while she charged a longer-range teleport. As many drones as could make it returned to her, but many were too far, or were necessary to provide some

measure of cover. It was an acceptable loss.

Ryouko had time to reflect that her style of fighting was rather impersonal, which both relieved and slightly disappointed her.

She reappeared at the far end, simultaneously shimmering back into visibility as her stealth system disengaged. She felt strangely disoriented, in a way that wasn't typical for her.

They had arrived at yet another region of the plant-infested jungle, and were greeted by the quiet rumble of distant orbital bombardment, and the slightly louder "silenced" rumble of a Suvorov heavy tank passing by them on their right, navigating carefully over a path that had already been carved through the underbrush by numerous other vehicles, crushing resurgent plant life under its treads.

It was just one of what appeared to an endless stream of such vehicles appearing in her tactical awareness. Each such self-aware tank was large enough to be easily quadruple the size of her old bedroom. The one she was looking at was topped by a large contingent of armored infantry, weapons drawn but otherwise at ease. In the background, drones flew their way among the trees, or skittered their way along the ground, mostly unobtrusive. The sky was only barely visible through the concealing canopy overhead.

"Hey," Asami said, her head appearing next to a bulbous protrusion near the rear of the tank—the forcefield generator, if Ryouko remembered correctly.

Ryouko winced at a pinch of pain in her head.

"Is everything alright?" Singh asked. "Were you injured in the fight? Maybe one of the nano-drones got you."

Is everything alright, Clarisse? Ryouko thought.

Your readouts are nominal, "she" responded.

"I'm fine," she said. "All of you, go find your squad."

Ryouko jumped upward onto the armored vehicle to join Asami. Tanks and other vehicles, such as self-aware artillery, were a popular location for infantry to relax on the move. In the safer rear areas, this practice was moderately encouraged, since the forcefields carried by heavier vehicles also served as partial protection against sudden attacks, though it was often wise to quickly move somewhere else, depending on the manner of attack.

"You're having headaches too?" Asami asked. "So am I. I got a pinch of pain just now, actually. The implants are supposed to prevent it, but I think it's this atmosphere. All the nitrates. But if only I had time to study the plants here. They're fascinating!"

Ryouko noted that the girl had her stealth projector on, but only projecting an energy-cheap layer of green camouflage. Well, that had been obvious even before she got on the tank, unless Asami had grown a new layer of green skin. Ryouko checked her energy reserves, then followed suit. It looked it was going to be one of *those* operations.

"What's going on, then?" Ryouko asked, even though she was already starting to receive the answer, her tactical and strategic readouts updating rapidly in the presence of so many transmitters. "I know we're concentrating, but I didn't know we'd be bringing this much armor."

She craned her head to look back at the line of tanks and other armored vehicles.

“We’re concentrating even more heavily,” Asami said. “We’re performing a mid-tactical counterattack. It seems the squid are hitting hard at the Tupi supply routes. Harder than expected. It’s going to take more metal to push them out than originally thought.”

The Tupi Clearings referred to a geographical area that, for various reasons, had much less plant life, a crucial feature on a planet where a set of clearings was significant enough to get a name, like oases in a desert. Besides being a major military supply route, they were also part of a major connecting artery between two of the planet’s three major “cities”—which Ryouko honestly found to be little more than small towns. Besides the motley crew of research scientists determined to bend the native plant life to human will, these towns also played an outsized role in the agricultural productivity of the entire sector, exporting valuable phosphates and nitrates so cheaply that many of the sector’s colonies found it uneconomical to perform chemical fixation.

“You should talk to your platoon,” Asami said, a moment later, looking at Ryouko.

“Yeah,” she said, agreeing.

She pushed herself off the vehicle, landing in the soft moss below with a slight whump, then jogged back in the direction of her platoon.

She found about a quarter of it congregated about four tanks back, camouflaged armor blending with tank’s own camouflage to look like some sort of bulbous moving plant-thing. Given the nature of the planet, that possibility couldn’t entirely be written off, especially if the aliens were relying on air or satellite surveillance trying to peer down through the jungle canopy. It seemed adequate enough.

“Good to see you made it back, sir,” her warrant officer greeted, as she squeezed her way onto the vehicle. “We were concerned when you took so long.”

The man had lifted his headpiece to say it.

“Just decided to shoot a few things while I was there,” Ryouko said. “I like to stretch my legs every once in a while. I’m back now, aren’t I? How are things? Everyone up to speed on the new attack plan?”

The officer frowned, seeming about to say something. But then his expression cleared and he said:

“Of course. We’ll be ready when the time comes.”

“Good,” she said, a little awkwardly.

Warrant officers were absolutely vital to magical girl commanded platoons, performing a significant amount of the leadership and direct command, particularly when the “lieutenant” was peeled away to form part of a shock spearhead, which was apparently in just about every major attack and counterattack. Warrant officers such as Omer were considered “tactical specialists”, part of the Field Command tract, though the difference between them and many standard officers were often blurred.

She nodded, then scrabbled further up the hull to talk to one of the squad commanders.

This part of leadership didn’t come naturally to her. She just didn’t interact naturally with her subcommanders or any of the soldiers. It was to some degree unavoidable—no one newly assigned was any good at it, given the differing backgrounds, ages, and unique command situation—but she still felt she wasn’t doing as good a job as she could have.

The goal was to earn respect and protectiveness. Not just respect for skills—that tended to come

automatically, given the obvious difference in battlefield performance—but respect for intelligence and orders.

Protectiveness was necessary because you were more valuable than they were, and tended to come by default. Not only was it part of the indoctrination, but it took minimal—or, actually, *no*—effort to accidentally remind everyone of their own granddaughters, somewhere far, far away. If one really want to, one could play up the cuteness factor and try to gain added mileage that way—Asami was already the darling of her platoon, though she hadn't been trying for it—but it wasn't actually necessary. Ryouko, too, made no effort to cultivate anything like that, but she had a sneaking suspicion her platoon thought her cute anyway. If only she were taller. And had gotten a different dress…

She shook her head at herself. She had no idea what was bothering her so much today, but every once in a while, she got the biting feeling she was forgetting something important.

In any case, respect was a different beast entirely, especially given the massive age disparity at play. Soldiers were perfectly willing to trust magical girl centenarians, but most of those held much higher officerships. Trusting a green teenager did *not* come automatically, and had to be earned by constantly being on the ball and giving good orders.

There were some platoons where the magical girl was, command-wise, just a battleflag, with the platoon sergeant having taken over all real command duties. Besides being somewhat humiliating, it also terminated your chances of serious promotion—if all your best skills were in direct combat, and not in tactical or strategic command, why make you do what you weren't any good at? Most likely, you'd get shifted into a pure-combat shock group. It was not a recipe for a long lifespan.

That was what Ryouko thought, anyway.

With that in mind, she made the rounds of her unit as they approached their staging area, hidden and partially cloaked in a strangely treeless patch of ground underneath the canopy, trying to talk to everyone. She scrounged up all her social skills, with Clarisse advising her the entire way. It was disturbing when your TacComp was noticeably better at it than you were.

At one point their stream of armor rerouted around a known miasma, the magical girls gaining an extra frisson of nervousness, even though they knew the DV units would take care of it.

Finally, they reached the staging area, the infantry jumping off the armor and moving to their starting positions, in the meantime performing maintenance checks, ensuring propulsion units were up to speed, and so forth. Ryouko, for her part, stocked up on grief cubes, the drones and grenades she liked, and an assault rifle. On top of that, she added a supplemental backpack to the one she already carried, full of support drones, and called another set to accompany her.

She did one last check-in with her platoon, at their almost-frontline starting positions, then left to join her battalion spearhead nearby. The majority of the time, the platoons were kept mobile and not expected to operate in close coordination with each other, but the battalion organization was useful for more organized actions—such as a tactical assault. Some of the more veteran—and higher-ranked—girls were organized into pure-MG "shock groups", but joining one was a career commitment away from higher command, one not generally imposed on newer girls.

When all fifteen of them had gathered into reasonable proximity—defined as close enough to quickly group together and attack, but far enough so as not to be easily killed by a lucky bombardment—Lieutenant Colonel Elena Santiago addressed them briefly, by telepathy rather than standard messaging.

Good afternoon, ladies, she thought. *You're all experienced enough now that I don't need to go*

into too much elaborate detail. The clairvoyants have already mapped out the area we're attacking into. This salient is still on the move, so stiff sides, mushy interior, as you'd expect. But because it's on the move, don't be surprised if your initial objectives aren't exactly where the map says they are.

Command is very worried about this alien attack, and wants it stomped out ASAP. This is a two division attack. Your initial objectives are given. As always, be ready to carry the momentum as far as possible. We attack in ten minutes. Assemble.

In fact, every individual soldier involved in the attack, from lieutenant general down, knew everything she had just said, as part of the general doctrine of having a maximally informed and versatile soldiery, with only outsider units cut off from the information, for secrecy reasons. Still, it helped steady nerves to hear a pre-battle speech, even if short. Indeed, Ryouko would have done the same to her platoon, if it weren't currently necessary to minimize transmission traffic.

Instead, she decided to take a visual look at the battle map, reviewing again the divisional and lower-level objectives, mentally peering at both tiny details and broad strokes.

We all familiar with the plan? One of the girls queried, as they gathered in a quiet group, behind one of their powerful front-line point defense systems—also known as a PDS, because the military loved acronyms.

Yes, one of the others thought. *Ryouko here teleports us in behind the lines, we wreak havoc, tear apart some point defenses and artillery, then carve our way back out. Meanwhile, the conventional forces hit them from the front. Susanna and Meiqing here stay behind to help them crack it.*

It's always 'Ryouko, teleport this!', 'Ryouko, teleport that!', she groused. *Just once, I'd like one of you to carry me there.*

That was followed by the telepathic equivalent of polite laughter, even as Ryouko swallowed a sudden bout of foreboding.

In truth, Ryouko was slightly proud. She had managed to show that her mass carrying limit was higher than she originally thought, and there was the suggestion that she might even be able to carry more, with time. This would still take two trips, but it was a meaningful difference.

Anyway, Ryouko thought, shaking off whatever weird feelings she might have had. *Those of you going with me get over here and touch me or each other. You know the drill. I could teleport you through the ground, but I'd prefer not to. I'll take as many as I can.*

The group shifted closer to her as instructed. One of them began pulling mud golems out of the ground. An internal timer ticked downward towards zero. Ryouko took a breath—

—And she was there. She waited and watched, just long enough to see that everything was as planned: the barrier generator smashing aside any rapid response drones, mud golems running outward to smash at their target, this concentration of forcefield generators and point defense systems that protected the area from bombardment, one of the shocked alien guards already suborned by their domination-class telepath, working quickly to turn weapons around towards the enemy. Asami reached out, smashing one generator into another, bits of debris flinging themselves toward what was now an ever-growing clump. As they fought, their secondary backpacks opened, support drones scurrying out or taking to the air, to help contest the battlespace with the alien drones already there.

Ryouko shed a burst of magic, forcing off the alien anti-personnel microdrones trying to bite into

her, then teleported back to pick up the remaining half of the group.

Ryouko! Someone relayed telepathically, the moment she arrived again.

She didn't need any further messaging, her tactical computer feeding her everything she needed to know. She blinked over to the girl making the request, then carried the two of them straight to the defense turrets in question, a hundred meters away.

The girl smashed her sword directly through one of the turrets, shield and all, then flung the other aside with a tremendous display of telekinetic force, carrying with it a set of defense drones that had been taken by surprise. Ryouko, for her part, shot an arrow she had ready through an approaching hovertrooper, and smashed her elbow into the neck of another on the ground—using a large burst of magic to melee through a light force field was one of the primary skills taught in training, though not everyone mastered it.

Ryouko had a moment to process the spectacle of her elbow shattering through layers of regenerative armor, glass-like scales, rubbery flesh and brittle bone, green magic sparking, color almost indistinguishable from the bright green ichor. Just a moment to ponder the severed nerve cords, the bright metal implant wiring, and the life she had just taken.

Then she power-kicked a ground drone that had tried to sneak up on her, and turned to look back at the other girls, just in time to spot Asami release the giant orb of smashed equipment she had been gathering in the air—the remains of what had been a large tower-size stationary communications jammer.

The metal landed on the ground with a smash.

Primary objective is down, Clarisse thought, reemphasizing what Ryouko could also see on other channels.

At that moment, with surprise dissipated, the main attack opened, less-precise artillery shells raining down on now defenseless alien rear positions, while more precise guided projectiles and missiles tore into front-line fortifications, along with the firepower of long-range mages firing from anti-grav platforms. Without seeing it, Ryouko could easily imagine the stealth mages withdrawing from the heavy air forces, while the Aer Magi, heavy dive bombers, and fighters descended towards the alien positions, the most advanced mages operating in free flight, while most relied on some degree of technological support.

The ground shook underneath Ryouko, subtly different from the usual concussion of landing shells, and she knew that that meant Meiqing was attacking. In her mind's eye, Ryouko could see that her platoon was in action as well, the massive transmitters of the armor and support vehicles cutting through alien interference in the region for as long as they still held numerical superiority and were able to smash jamming devices.

While her platoon was part of the spearhead, the formation that would break the line so that support infantry could help hold the ground that they captured, their job was also to move heaven and earth to recover her if she got into trouble. She split her consciousness, just a little, to check on their status. Things seemed to be going fine, but they had five dead, six wounded. It wasn't realistic to ask for better than that, but these were men and women she had known and talked to.

She chose not to dwell on that.

She withdrew her attention, and refocused entirely on what they were currently doing. Their secondary objective was a nearby collection of alien self-firing artillery, but they were already tearing through that with relative ease, the more physically-powered girls bashing through

forcefields with main force—such as a massive electric bolt—while the others applied varying degrees of artfulness in circumventing the forcefields. The AI-controlled artillery simply didn't have enough personal defenses to counter them, nor where there sufficient infantry guards.

Ryouko, for her part, summoned her most powerful attack—a scorpion artillery piece—and smashed the projectile through three of the devices. The attack took a lot out of her—she felt tired after doing it—but the robotic arm in her bag could be relied on to apply grief cubes as needed. The attack felt novel, even though she must have done it dozens of times by now.

Air support reports massed armor reserves in our immediate vicinity, trying to respond, Elena thought. *We shouldn't give them the chance.*

There was a chorus of agreement, and though Ryouko would have loved to go along, she checked herself mentally, suppressing disappointment.

This attack appears to have mostly succeeded, Ryouko thought. *Doctrine suggests that it is now safe for me to start teleporting my platoon members in, to give more meat to our shock and awe. Would it be alright if I left the armor to the rest of you? It's right next to us, after all.*

First teleport us to the other side of that armor, Elena thought. *For the surprise.*

Alright, Ryouko thought.

To the Sky

"*Magical Matter Manipulation* (slang: "modding")falls into three broadly defined classes, between which there can be significant overlap."

"*Conjuration* is the creation of physical objects *de novo* and is practiced by every magical girl to at least some degree, for instance in the summoning of costumes or weapons."

"*Adjustment* is the changing of the properties of an existing object, rendering it different in shape, composition, or structure, but without necessarily imbuing the object with any magical properties."

"*Enchantment* is the granting of magical properties to a particular object, granting the object non-standard physical properties."

"All such manipulation may be performed on either a temporary or a permanent basis. The synthesis of matter from energy is costly, and the vast majority of manipulation is temporary, creating objects or performing modifications that disappear or revert when no longer needed. Such manipulations impose a continuous soul gem cost, but for short durations of time, are far more cost-effective than attempting to perform a permanent modification."

"The magical costs of matter manipulation can be divided into three parts. First, is the summoning cost, which is essentially the pure matter-energy cost of performing the manipulation. This is higher for permanent manipulations than temporary manipulations, is highest in conjurations, and lowest in adjustments."

"Second is the upkeep cost, the cost associated with using or maintaining the manipulation. This is associated fairly uniformly with all temporary manipulations, while generally being absent from permanent manipulations, with the notable exception that permanently enchanted objects cost magic to use, though they do not cost magic to maintain. Notably, upkeep cost often drops steeply with practice repeatedly summoning the same object, with most brand-new girls capable of summoning at least a primary weapon cheaply."

"Finally, there is a complexity cost, associated with the difficulty of imposing complex order onto an object. It is in some ways analogous to an entropic cost. The more intricate an object, the more technologically advanced, or the more magically arcane, the greater the amount of time a mage must take performing the modification, and the greater the amount of energy used in keeping the object in a magically pliable state during this time. This cost is dependent heavily on the skill, intelligence, and experience of the mage performing the modification."

"Indeed, it is the complexity cost that provides much of the motivation for the permanent modification of objects, since it is a pointless waste of effort to build a temporary, vastly complex object. Permanent conjuration is rare, with most mages preferring the easier route of modifying an existing, similar object. Permanent adjustment was primarily used in the replication of high-end equipment, and is now used by researchers attempting to push the technological envelope, though there was a brief vogue during the early MSY period of mages attempting to replicate entertainment devices for personal use."

"But it is permanent *enchantment* that is the most difficult and most valuable of modification tasks, with even the simplest permanent magical artifacts taking a prodigious amount of time and skill to construct. Consequently, such artifacts are rare, and rarely exit MSY secret storage. In the right hands, though, they can be extraordinarily valuable, despite their soul gem usage costs, because of their ability to grant the girls who wield them effective secondary powers that may have nothing to do with their primary power."

—Excerpt, Magical Girl Introductory Manual

Mobility, flexibility, versatility, responsiveness; every one of these is an invaluable asset in a war in which, all too often, the advantage of firepower lies with the enemy.

—Opening Sentence, Field Command's Tactical Manual

The counter-counterattack, when it came, was hardly a surprise. The aliens still tried for surprise, though, because it was difficult to tell when a human force had clairvoyant support. They did, though, and knew the attack was coming long before it happened.

The attack was devastating anyway. It always was. No one could match the squid in sheer brute force. The infantry died like flies, but army tactical doctrine was clear: hang on, buy time, keep the magical girls alive, and prepare a counterpunch.

Occasionally, if magical girl resources in the area were limited, that meant that they would withdraw to the rear for safety, and possibly to help prepare the counterpunch. Not here, though; they had the reserves necessary to counterpunch without pulling frontline platoons back, so they stayed committed to the front, doing their best to help contain breaches in the line. Ryouko would be expected to eschew risky direct attack tactics in favor of what the models said was a much more effective use of her power: "mobility enhancement", a euphemism designed to make the more blood-thirsty teleporters feel better about themselves.

Ryouko had been told that she fell into that category, but the euphemism failed to make her feel any more dignified. A part of her constantly missed the satisfaction of successfully tearing targets in half with her teleport, or eviscerating them with her arrows. Sometimes, she reflected that since the aliens were clearly sentient, this meant she enjoyed killing.

She tried not to think about that much.

Still, though, she kept her complaints to herself, because it was palpably obvious how she was contributing to the battle. Every infantryman or magical girl or tank crew she bailed out of a hopeless situation was a life saved, just as much as if she had been a healer reattaching their heads, and her ability to do that enabled much bolder tactics from those in the area, such as counterattacking directly into the full fury of the alien assault. Her own platoon, in particular, was rather prone to over-aggressiveness, though her second-in-command kept them from relying on her too much.

Still, she couldn't save everyone. The news that Sanchez was dead came as a minor gut punch. She tried to stay detached, thinking only that she would have to rearrange her promotion short list, but she had to admit it bothered her a little.

On the attack, it simply wasn't efficient for her to appear and try to do damage on her own. Far better to show up with others more capable of close range combat, or with much heavier damage outputs, while she personally saved her energy for an endless series of teleports. It was also, she had to admit, much safer.

There was also the value of maneuverability. Again and again, she was called upon to shift squads from position to position, from low ground to high ground, from strongpoint to weakpoint, to stabilize the line or, often, just to get things done faster. Her own platoon was considered an Extremely High Mobility unit, meaning that it was well within her power to transport the entire unit far faster than they could possibly move otherwise, even if it took her a tiresome number of trips to do so. Because of this, they rarely spent extended time in defensive positions, and were

always being shifted back and forth.

It was, frankly, exhausting. Ryouko was constantly pushing the limits of how often she could teleport, and only Clarisse's monitoring gave her any idea how many grief cubes she was going through. It vastly exceeded how many she could have obtained from even the most productive of demon hunting runs.

Their counterpunch would never happen.

"Major alien fleet has arrived in star system. There are insufficient fleet resources in the vicinity to effectively contest. Planetary evacuation order has been issued."

"Orbital defenses significantly compromised. Orbital bombardment inbound."

Orbital defense station VIII-Delta no longer responsive… Armor Company E coming under heavy orbital bombardment and scattering for self-protection. Will be unable to help contain breaches…Battalion VII to cancel tactical counterattack and fall back to Hill 62…

Evacuation meant, of course, that teleporters and their associated companies and battalions would take a starring role, pulling MGs back to transport ships as fast as possible, with only the slightest attention to paid to the impact on the remaining troops. Defense lines contracted as much as possible while trying not to present obvious bombardment targets. Grief cube supply lines took on sudden enormous priority. In short, the military focused on evacuating its core assets at the expense of everything else.

And Ryouko wouldn't be doing any of the fighting. Instead, she would be teleporting constantly back and forth with members of her platoon and other MGs, pulling out MG after MG of her corps to evacuation areas. It bothered her, on some deep level. It was also a bit like running a marathon without implant support.

She appeared this time next to an artillery piece, invisible again, pressing her stealth to last *just a little bit longer*. With her, she brought the entirety of the surviving members of Squad B, which was down to five members, and several other MGs of her battalion, her designated defenders.

This group of artillery must survive! a telepathic voice shouted at her the moment she arrived. *Without it, the sector will collapse!*

This came from a girl in front of them, levitated high enough in the air that she was half-concealed by the tangled mess of the greenery above, high enough that she could look down upon the canopy from within the faint yellow glow that enveloped her. She seemed dangerously exposed, and Ryouko zoomed in to get a better look, while some of the other girls advanced their way up the trees in the area, one running up the length of one of the artillery gun barrels.

It no longer matters, Zhen, her patrol commander, responded. *The sector is now clear of MGs. You're the last. Check your updated map.*

The girl in question didn't respond immediately, instead turning mid-air and looking somewhere behind her. A brief glow in her eyes, a gesture of the hands, and an angry yellow fireball appeared

in the sky in the distance, landing explosively in the ground.

I can't leave, she thought. *My men are down there.*

Without you to guard, Zhen argued, *they'll be freer to withdraw in an orderly—*

The ground shifted noticeably underneath them, sending a cascade of leaves floating out of the sky.

Ryouko and the others glanced automatically at Meiqing, before realizing that that made little sense.

They tensed, looking around hastily. Orbital bombardment? No, that would be more sustained. This was—

Over there, the girl in the sky thought.

They turned in unison to face a new marker that had suddenly appeared on their maps, relayed directly from her.

Non-conventional explosion. Unknown source. Unknown class. Visual estimate of yield: 1 Megaton.

Now they could all see the obvious mushroom cloud rising in the distance, and feel the faint heat radiated from its direction. Heat…and something else. EM radiation.

Look at that estimated location, Asami thought, clearly shocked. *Isn't some of our battalion in that sector? Who do you think set it off?*

Either someone's anti-nuclear defenses fell down on the job, or someone decided to throw some antimatter at the problem, Ryouko thought, grimly.

Did we even have antimatter on this planet? Asami thought.

No idea, Meiqing thought.

A flash of yellow light landed next to Ryouko, drawing their attention.

As they turned to look, the light solidified back into the girl they had seen up in the sky.

"I'll go," she said simply.

Second Division assumes command of units of former Fourth Division…Sixth Division to hold Yucatan-Point 514 front as long as possible…Support Company D to withdraw to Point 118… updated best-knowledge command structure is as follows…

The orange girl leapt impossibly high into the sky, almost a blur even to Ryouko's eyes. She twirled in mid-air, sliced an alien missile clean in half, then propelled herself back to the ground so she wouldn't stay in the air as a target.

I'm not sure how much longer we can keep this up, Ngo Thi An thought, from somewhere within their group. *My soul gem is draining too fast. Soon we'll have no more grief cubes.*

We'll make do with what we have, Zhen thought. *We have to. The reserves are empty. Keep your cool. Remember your training.*

Zhen was their new battalion commander, now that Elena Santiago was dead, caught in the nuclear blast, which had decidedly *not* been friendly. It was shocking, to think of the Lieutenant Colonel as dead, but Ryouko refused to let herself dwell. She couldn't; there was just no time.

We must establish drone contact with the troops in this pocket, Zhen continued, talking as way of keeping them all calm. *There are at least two mages trapped within this pocket. We must find them. If we search systematically—*

She cut off, sensing, as they all did, the incoming shockwave.

Orbital artillery! Someone broadcast, unnecessarily.

As a teleporter, Ryouko was among the best equipped to dodge such an attack, but she had a duty, an obligation to try to get the others out as well. She emptied her mind, her TacComp plotting out an optimal extraction-teleport pattern—move from group of girls to group of girls, picking up three or four and pulling them out of the radius of the bombardment strike, so that she carried as many as once without being forced to stand too long in one spot, with minimal travel distance in between. No time for touching; it would be done through the ground.

Blink—

And a brace of trees exploded in splintering lumber directly in front of her, but it was okay; it was okay because it hadn't landed on top of her, or she would have been forced to continue and the wide-eyed Asami in front of her would be dead.

Blink—

And she found the orange girl with sword, watching the sky with wide eyes, hoping she could dodge fast enough. They looked at each other.

Blink—

She found Meiqing hidden under a half-dome of earth, surroundings dank and gloomy, her face covered in dirt.

It seemed interminable.

Two casualties, Clarisse thought, once it was over. *Susana Miller is dead. Zhen is dead. She designated the teleporter—you—as her successor, in case of incapacitation. It—Wait.*

Clarisse stopped, and there was no need to explain why. Ryouko had already teleported where she needed to, carrying two other girls in tow.

They found Ngo Thi An kneeling in the soil staring at her own hands. Next to her, a girl lay unconsciousness on the ground—one of the girls they had been looking for.

The healer next to Ryouko crouched down and thrust forward a grief cube, to tend to Ngo, whose status was flashing critical in their monitors, but it was too late; the girl's body was already fading before their eyes.

She was disabled by one of the shockwaves… I thought I could protect her, Ngo the barrier

generator thought, one last time. *I guess I didn't have enough juice.*

When the girl vanished entirely, the girl with the grief cube murmured some sort of prayer and moved to work on the other girl, prone on the ground.

Ryouko blinked away tears. She had to hold on.

What now? Meiqing thought, somewhere distant, without bothering to append "*acting-Commander*".

I—I designated Nakihara Asami as my successor, she thought. *And—*

She thought desperately about what had just happened, their three casualties, the girl injured in front of them, the second girl that was supposed to be here somewhere, the pocket that had probably been critically compromised by the bombardment—

We're getting out of here, she thought. *To me.*

Defend the evacuation shuttles at all costs…remaining units are reminded of their oaths and families…Humanity salutes your sacrifice.

Is that the last of them? Ryouko thought. *Are we done?*

We've still got units stranded throughout the region, Clarisse thought, repeating what she already knew. *But the MGs are out. It's time for the evac teams to pull out.*

Ryouko grabbed her last remaining grenades, enchanted them, and shot-put them in the general direction of some alien infantry, trusting her magical guidance to navigate them through the trees and underbrush.

We have to hold! she thought, both telepathically and over all her command channels. *This whole sector is now crawling with the enemy. Buy me time to pull you guys out!*

She threw up a group countdown timer, indicating how long she estimated it would take her to charge up to travel the necessary distance.

Without explicit acknowledgement, the others moved to fulfill her request, Meiqing raising a giant wall of earth to delay the alien advance, Asami lifting herself into the air and gesturing at trees, snapping them to form more of the barricade. Then, with a mutual effort, they shoved the giant mass down onto an advancing alien column. Hopefully it would hold.

Several others took final potshots, then headed for her as the timer wound down.

Without even waiting for them all to establish direct contact, she blinked away the moment a nearly maximal number of girls approached her. She appeared in the evacuation zone, dozens of kilometers away, directly in front of one of the shuttles, a layer of teleported dirt now covering the ground.

She took a moment to look around, looking at the others while charging up for the jump back, laboring against a deep sense of tiredness that was probably due to her darkening soul gem.

Then she went back for the rest.

The first thing she saw was Asami—or rather, pieces of her—falling out of the sky.

She instinctively stepped forward, eyes widening as she tried to zoom in.

Before she could try to teleport upwards, though, the knowledge hit her, confirmed by local transmissions—she was dead.

Initiating low-level emotional suppression, Clarisse thought, before she even had time to think.

A curious sense of detachment wafted through her, so that even as she was struck by the shock, anger, and pain, she was able to force herself to stop and evaluate her situation, even as her friend's body began to land in the moss with muted, yet sickening, thuds.

She didn't question Clarisse's decision, even if it was likely to substantially reduce her ability to draw on her soul gem's power. If even now a part of her still wanted to charge into the nearest clump of aliens and kill everything until there was nothing left to kill… then it was unlikely that her unmoderated reaction would have been well-reasoned, especially given that her soul gem—now at approximately 35%—was starting to weigh on her reasoning abilities.

She teleported to cover somewhere to her right, getting out of the open, and observed the situation. A mass of heavy alien armor had arrived, blasting their way through and hovering over the barricade as if it were nothing, too much firepower too suddenly for Asami to survive, even with her soul gem armor.

The lead tanks turned their bulbous laser turrets in her direction, starting to glow with a charge—

Suddenly, it shattered in a barrage of explosions, sending up the debris and sparks of sudden forcefield failure.

Go! Get out of here! one of the infantry exhorted, armored frame lifting one of the heavy anti-tank lasers. *We'll cover you!*

Ryouko didn't bother asking where the air support was. Most of it was in pieces on the jungle floor.

The few remaining magical girls in the area rapidly converged on her position. She noted that most of them were also under emotional suppression.

Ryouko issued mental orders, ordering all the infantry, both from her platoon and others, in her immediate proximity to converge. She would take as many as she could, then come back from the rest.

No, she was surprised to hear her warrant officer say. *Belay that. The situation is too hot. We can't shorten our perimeter without presenting a target for bombardment. Hold your positions. Get out of here, sir. Respectfully.*

The emotion of the voice shone through clearly in the content and volume of the words, despite the much more substantial combat dampening that the infantry practically never turned off.

There's still time on the counter, Ryouko said, shocked, still trying to prepare a teleport. *I am ordering—*

No, the man responded. *That's the wrong order, and you know it. You're supposed to leave us. So leave us. Don't come back.*

But I can't— Ryouko began.

We are here because we have nothing left to us, the man said. *We are here because we decided we would give our lives, if necessary. We are the dead; you are not.*

He's right, Meiqing thought, appearing at Ryouko's side. *You know he's right. Think about everyone else who had to leave their men behind today.*

Ryouko clenched her teeth, a twinge of emotion piercing into her mind, defying the emotional suppression.

"Asami-chan is dead," she said out loud, without realized she had slipped into her native Japanese. "She's dead, and I can't even get her body. So many dead. My men are counting on me. I can't —"

"I know," Meiqing said, wrapping an arm around her shoulder, Japanese stilted from instant translation. "I left mine behind at Tupi. But we have to go. They're counting on you to *live*."

Ryouko nodded, head down, still charging a teleport.

"Things keep happening and I don't even have time to think about what happened," she said. "My soul gem—is my soul gem failing? Maybe that's it."

Get that armor off their backs! the sergeant shouted, somewhere distant. *I don't care what it takes! You know what is expected of you. We will fight to the last joule and the last round. Until then, you do not have my permission to die. Lieutenant, don't come back. You hear me? Don't come—*

And then she blinked out.

She fell onto her knees, and caught a brief blurry glimpse of the bottom of the evacuation shuttle.

EXIT TO LOBBY

Ryouko's eyes snapped open, and for a brief moment she was essentially paralyzed in her chair, staring up the girl looking down at her with profound confusion.

Steady, Clarisse counseled. *Steady. It will all make sense in a moment.*

Then it all came rushing back. Memories kept forcibly suppressed by constant stimulation reemerged, while others that had never really existed faded away, except for—what did they call it? A meta-memory. The memory of a memory.

It all made sense, all of a sudden. The headaches, the creeping sense of almost-*déjà-vu* that had bothered her every time she came close to thinking about the truth, or thought too hard about events that had never really happened.

Recalibration complete, Clarisse thought.

Ryouko immediately jumped out of her wooden chair, smothering Asami with a deep embrace.

"You're alive!" she said.

"Ah, yes," Asami said, surprised by the unexpected intimacy.

A pause.

“Are—Are you fully recalibrated?” she asked, skeptical, referring to the process of dampening the emotional importance of the false memories. “That wasn’t real—“

“Yeah, I know,” Ryouko said, releasing the other girl but holding onto her shoulders. “Just needed to burn off some emotional juice.”

Then she dropped her arms, realizing how *tired* she was.

“I hate these damn things,” she said. “They’re terrible, and I’m exhausted.”

“I know,” Asami said. “We should go sleep. I hung around to wait for you. It was only a couple of seconds, actually.”

Ryouko took a moment to look around, at the nondescript wooden waiting room that served as a simulation transition lobby, in case you exited a simulation “poorly”—for instance, in the middle of a punch or scream, though with modern techniques it was mostly a theoretical risk. Some people decorated or changed their personal lobbies, but she had yet to bother. She had yet to enter a VR simulation on her own initiative, so she had yet to have any need to hang around in her lobby, fiddling with settings or whatnot.

She took a breath, nodding at the other girl.

Then they dissolved, exiting the simulation.

SIMULATION TERMINATED

Ryouko found herself in yet another chair, this time a pitch-black VR chair, just one of many that filled the room she was in, arrayed in rows.

She rubbed the back of her neck where the I/O devices had only recently detached, stretched her arms out above her head, then pulled a lollipop out of her mouth. It was fresh; someone had replaced it.

She stood up.

“What was it like, dying in the simulation?” she asked, turning to the girl getting up from the chair to her right. “Without any idea that it was fake, I mean.”

She personally had never had that experience.

Asami furrowed her brow for a moment, putting her hand to her chin.

“Not that bad,” she said, finally. “They deliberately don’t simulate the process in any detail; they just sort of kick you out, and it was an instantaneous shatter anyway. That’s what my TacComp said. Of course, it might have helped that it was pumping emergency neurotransmitters to keep me from panicking when I woke. I was sort of numb.”

Ryouko nodded.

Asami turned her head, and Ryouko followed her gaze to a girl who was apparently standing next to them. How long had she been there?

Meiqing looked at the two of them, then raised both her hands, palm outward.

“I just wanted to reassure you that I can keep things to myself. Let’s have lunch together later,

okay?"

"Sure," Ryouko said, returning the offer of friendship.

"I'm going to go sleep," the girl said. "I'm exhausted."

"Yeah, us too," Ryouko said.

The girl turned and walked away, nodding at the Elena Santiago, standing by the door. She was one of the officers who oversaw the process.

In the late stages of training, they had been running these simulations nearly nonstop, alternating long stretches of repeated runs with occasional multi-hour sleep breaks. Simulations run in accelerated time were physically and mentally draining, and the only way to sustain the pace was to use magic to restore fitness between simulations.

Sleeping during the breaks was not mandatory, but was strongly recommended, and most girls followed the recommendation. There was still the occasional person who went crazy after too long with no sleep, and while there was no good direct evidence that one caused the other, and the individuals in question were generally unstable to start with, the correlation was apparent enough for the military to issue the recommendation. No one wanted to test whether a month in simulation would have the same effect, even with magic to help make things better.

Thinking back to what happened during simulations was like viewing your own past through an extra sepia filter. The false memories and experiences given to you within a simulation were designed to be at least superficially plausible—Ryouko thought that it was like experiencing a possible future. Because of this, thinking back to simulations was a little bit like viewing someone else's memories. The Ryouko in the simulation had had a long history of caring for and fighting with her platoon. Even if on close inspection the full emotional depth was missing, it had colored and informed her actions.

Despite the arguably lower quality of the memories, their collective effect was palpable. They had spent the equivalent of nearly a month of time fighting and working together, in hundreds of different situations. In that time, she had seen others die, seen others break down, and had held multiple hours-long conversations with Asami, prodding decorative campfires with sticks, in the long interludes between battles. She had watched relationships between the others made and broken and remade again, the interpersonal dynamics somehow consistent over dozens of wildly differing scenarios.

The training manuals said that training cohorts, or members of them, at least, often bonded deeply, the resulting camaraderie carrying over long after the training period ended. Ryouko could definitely believe that now, and she found herself thinking about Asaka, Patricia, and Alice. Suddenly the whole story made a lot more sense. She suspected that the simulation planners deliberately clustered compatible girls together with greater than random frequency.

Come think of it, I've been running into Meiqing rather frequently, she thought.

"What do you suppose she meant by the keeping things to herself comment?" Asami asked, when Meiqing finally left earshot.

"I'd rather not talk about it," Ryouko said, shaking her head. "Let's just go."

They had ended up roommates, which Ryouko decidedly refused to believe was a coincidence.

"You know," Asami said, as they walked down the hall, passing other exhausted-looking girls heading for their respective rooms. "I've been thinking about something, so I asked my TacComp.

I wasn't sure how they were faking magical telepathy, since we can tell the difference from the other kind. It turns out: they're not faking anything. We do it the same way we always do, but from our chairs, outside the simulation. That's pretty clever."

"Yeah, that's interesting," Ryouko said blandly, not wanting to point out that she had asked that particular question hours ago—though those hours were really more like weeks. She did wonder how exactly they accelerated the telepathy…

Passing a window, she slowed to a stop. Here at the training center, they were far from New Athens's city centers, or even their suburbs. Instead, the view presented to her was of idyllic farmland. In the foreground, there were practice areas and firing ranges. In the background were enormous fields of genetically-engineered wheat waving in the wind, carefully tended to by machines. When she and Asami had first seen it, they had stopped and stared; it had been such a novel sight to someone from the cities of Earth, used to eating synthesized food. Indeed, it turned out that synthesized food was only common on Earth, and to some degree on the other core worlds. Without Earth's elaborate setup of solar-orbiting satellites, energy wasn't freely available enough to justify the expense.

She had seen very little of this world except what they had seen from their landing shuttle and the training facility, but she could already tell that the colonies were very different from Earth.

It was disappointing, then, that she had spent all the time since then cooped up in this training center.

They had been here nearly a week. The week had been filled to the absolute brim with training exercises, there being no need for any of them to sleep extensively. First had come the cortical datadump, designed to fill them with the basic terminology and weapons knowledge they would need to function. It had been so large it required special equipment to transmit efficiently, and had left them reeling with brains full of newfound knowledge.

Then came skills instruction, the new girls separated into groups by skill category, to spend quality accelerated simulation time with instructors who had their particular powerset, learning the ins and outs of effective tactics used by others of their class, combined with exhortations to experiment when possible, both in simulations and on the practice grounds. They had learned about the skills database, which contained recorded data about the maneuvers used by magical girls past.

Back in the real world, they had been taught the basics of extending their magical powers, with each of them expected to learn a few basic skills, if they did not already have them: low-level self-propulsion, a magically charged melee attack. Then, for those with particular affinities, further extensions: minor clairvoyance to enhance dodging, the beginnings of telekinesis, projecting waves of force from melee weapons, modifying your projectiles to home in on targets, basic enchantment, and so forth.

They were also instructed briefly on experimentation; Ryouko, in particular, spent time trying to understand why her soul gem had glowed near the starship core. She got Asami to try her best to replicate the relevant gravitational conditions and, while they managed to induce a faint glow, it brought her little closer to the answer.

Finally, they were taught to use their magic to overcome minor physical limitations such as, for instance, mental exhaustion. They were forced to stay underwater, and use their magic to extract oxygen from the water. They were placed in vacuum chambers, and carefully tutored in preventing the formation of inconvenient internal gas bubbles, on repairing anoxic damage, and on protecting soft tissues; ideally, they would conjure the necessary oxygen, but that training would be saved for those joining the MC.

That went on for nearly three days *straight*, and then it was back into simulation time, with its endless variety of lessons and classroom instruction. Test-firing weapons, practice on a virtual firing range, culminating in lessons on command and control, which focused a lot more on interhuman interaction than she would have expected. These were followed by exercises commanding a virtual platoon in the field, along with practice maneuvering and coordinating with each other. They then held full-fledged skirmishes, commanding units and fighting against both each other and simulated aliens, secure in the knowledge that death in the simulation would be painless.

Finally, the part they had quietly dreaded: realistic simulation, with memories fabricated. Incredibly illegal outside a military context, the military had in fact seized the technology from illegal VR gamers.

Exiting her reverie, Ryouko looked up.

The sky of New Athens was a pristine blue. Too blue, in fact, from a combination of a slightly different atmosphere and slightly different solar output. The sun seemed too harsh, and the length of day was different, too, and it was still strange adjusting to the disparity between local time and absolute Earth time, which was calibrated based on FTL signals. She had never quite grasped how that worked with regards to Relativity and causality.

"You're always thinking about something," Asami said, looking at her from the corner of her eye. "Just enjoy the beautiful day."

"Yeah," Ryouko agreed.

So if I may interrupt your descent into unconsciousness, Clarisse began. *I thought you might want some entertainment before your nap. Well, maybe entertainment. Your actual reaction will be informative to my prediction subroutines.*

Ryouko had just collapsed into her bed, clothing on, with every intention of falling asleep on the spot. She rolled over, slightly annoyed.

What is it?

Get Nakihara-san's attention, the device thought. *You can read the messages together. I think it'll be enlightening.*

Read the messages together, Ryouko thought flatly, doing her best to convey her skepticism.

Yes, Clarisse thought.

Ryouko thought about resisting, then decided it wasn't worth it. She sat up, allowing the covers to slide down the front of her shirt. She looked over at the girl in the bed on the other side of the narrow room, lying facing the opposite wall. Her eyes wandered onto their two dress uniforms stacked on the desk: neat, compact, and almost unused. Asami had insisted earlier on dressing up and taking pictures to send home. Ryouko wondered when, if ever, magical girls ever wore the damn things.

Next to the uniforms, two CubeBots peered at her curiously, one perched on top of the other for no apparent reason. Ryouko had thought herself unusual for bringing one, but it turned out that a surprising number of the new recruits had done so as well. No wonder her request to bring it had gone through so easily.

She's not asleep, Clarisse thought. *I can tell from the infrared.*

Alright, geez, Ryouko thought, admitting she had been procrastinating.

"Asami-chan," she said.

The girl made an annoyed sleepy noise, before turning over and looking at her with half-opened eyes.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I have something to show you. Get up."

Asami sat up slowly, untied hair falling over her eyes.

"This better be exciting," she mumbled, finally, sheets halfway up her body.

"Clarisse says it is."

The girl pushed her way out of her bedsheets, bare feet contacting the carpeting. Unlike Ryouko, Asami made a point of changing into pajamas before each and every nap.

Asami strode the few steps over to Ryouko's bed and sat down next to her.

"Well, what is it?" she asked.

Ryouko was a bit bothered by the closeness, but at least she had nothing to be jealous of.

She felt Asami's gaze on her, suddenly. She hadn't noticed her staring, had she?

"Is something the matter?" Ryouko asked, deciding to bluff it out.

"Oh, no, nothing," Asami said, looking down. "I was just wondering what was taking you so long."

Ryouko turned around on her bed, putting her legs up, staring meaningfully at the wall that had been behind her, which lit up.

"It's these messages I just got," Ryouko said. "Clarisse is displaying it. She's trying to keep it all mysterious, for some reason."

Asami looked at her. The girl was the only one who knew Ryouko was carrying nonstandard equipment, but Ryouko wasn't sure she realized the implications of that.

"You're starting to talk like your TacComp is some sort of person," she pointed out. "Are the version twos really that different?"

"They're, uh, interesting," Ryouko hedged.

The wall in front of them began to scroll the text of the first message. The first thing Ryouko noticed was the unusual formatting: it looked formal and typeset, and even came with its own fancy border and font, contrasting with the simple text that constituted most messages. It even had a seal! This didn't mean much in terms of effort—machines could do it for you easily—but it did indicate how the sender wanted to be perceived. It was especially unusual, given that the sender surely knew that many people would choose to listen to the message instead, or would have it overlaid on their vision while doing something else. Neither situation was conducive to fancy formatting.

“The message came with instructions that the sender would prefer it be read on a physical interface,” Clarisse said, voice emanating from the wall panel.

Ryouko and Asami both startled, Asami’s elbow brushing against hers. The voice was, after all, Ryouko’s.

“Ah, sorry,” Clarisse said. “I thought you’d both want to hear it.”

“It has your voice?” Asami asked, looking at Ryouko incredulously.

“I didn’t have a choice,” Ryouko said. “It was mandatory.”

“That’s incredibly creepy,” Asami said.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought too,” Ryouko said, looking to her side. “But I got used to it. It’s not that bad.”

“If they’re really issuing upgrades soon, it’s going to be really weird,” Asami said.

There was a moment of awkward silence as they thought about whether to continue the line of conversation.

Ryouko decided not to, focusing again on the message. It read:

Sender: Guillaume François

Pleasant Greetings,

Firstly, allow me to congratulate you on your recent contract. I have heard only the highest of your abilities, and have no doubt that you will prove a credit to your family lines.

I hope you will pardon the forwardness of this missive, but as I am sure you are aware, with the recent news regarding your esteemed lineage, there will be no shortage of those who seek your company. In sending this, I am hoping to get my “foot in the door”, so to speak, and I hope I am not being off-putting.

I am not so tawdry as to suppose that familial considerations will be sufficient for something such as this, even if such an alliance would be of significant mutual benefit. Rather, I propose that we arrange a virtual meeting…

Ryouko stopped reading there, her face having shifted by stages into almost a caricature of astonishment, as she recognized the message for what it was: a relationship proposal.

“That’s message one of two,” Clarisse said. “The second one has the same purpose, though it is less eccentric.”

“Why—Why on earth—“ Ryouko stammered.

“Huh, so it’s begun this early,” Asami said, pursing her lips, looking not so much surprised as annoyed. “The warnings were correct.”

Ryouko stopped, taking a breath to steady herself.

“You don’t seem very surprised,” she said, eyes narrowing. “Warnings?”

“Yeah,” Asami said, looking at her. “Everyone here is aware of your background and mentorship. Some of them are jealous, though they mostly don’t show it. Others have been trying to get your attention. People tell me I’m lucky to be your roommate. You—you haven’t noticed, have you?”

The last sentence was directed at Ryouko’s blank look of surprise.

“No,” she said. “I haven’t.“

Asami looked down at her feet, and the knees that she had bunched up against her chest.

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” she said. “I know what that’s like. I probably wouldn’t have noticed either, if people weren’t so aggressive about telling me. I wonder if their advice is really sound.”

“Advice?” Ryouko asked.

Asami seemed to think for a moment.

“Well, you’re going to be getting a lot more of these,” Asami said, still looking down. “That’s what they said. Apparently, they should have been beating at you and your parent’s door your whole life, except you were such a secret for so long. Lots of competition, I guess. You interested at all?”

“Uh, no,” Ryouko said. “Probably not. It’s way too early, right?”

“Yeah, probably,” Asami said.

The girl got off Ryouko’s bed, heading back towards her own.

“That *was* exciting,” she said. “But I think I’m going to sleep now.”

“Okay,” Ryouko said, staring at the way the other girl’s shoulder blades protruded slightly.

It was too early, of course, but it bothered her that these things were starting to intrude on her life. She—

Well, she hadn’t put any thought into it, really. What was it Asami had said earlier?

“I think it just happens to you. One day you just care*. And then you’ll be surprised by what you notice. That’s what they say, anyway. Hasn’t happened to me.”*

The voice rang out in her head, the memory played back by Clarisse without prompting.

Well, it hadn’t happened yet, anyway, Ryouko thought. Speaking of Clarisse:

Why on earth did you make me include Asami-chan in this? Ryouko thought, finally remembering to ask the question. *This would have been much better done privately.*

I thought it’d be a good idea if she knew, Clarisse thought. *Among other things, she might have had some useful insight, as proved to be the case.*

Did you know about all that stuff she was talking about? Ryouko thought.

I suspected, Clarisse thought, *though I didn’t think she would spontaneously start talking to you about it. I was planning to push it in that direction. I would have eventually said something, if this*

opportunity hadn't arisen.

Humph, Ryouko thought, aggrieved. *Do all you version two's hide information like this? It doesn't seem fair, given that you read my thoughts all the time.*

We're programmed to try not to overwhelm you with too many things at once, Clarisse thought. *We're programmed to promote emotional health, promote healthy relationships, all of that. It's what distinguishes us from the previous model.*

Is there anything else you're trying not to "overwhelm" me with? Ryouko thought sarcastically.

Well, for one thing, have you considered whether or not you're going to be in the Soul Guard?

Ryouko blinked.

No, she thought. *I hadn't. Isn't that kind of thing done by assignment?*

Yes, Clarisse thought. *And, in the normal course of things, you probably would be, based on your unusual powers. However, your apprenticeship with Mami changes things. She needs to keep you out of Guard command structure, since she probably intends to place you somewhere in her command staff, and she is technically not a member of the Guard. Ordinarily, it'd be a loss of prestige, but in this case, everyone will understand why.*

Hmm, Ryouko acknowledged.

I would have been surprised had you been placed in the Guard, but I was waiting until a better moment to tell you. Otherwise, it'd just be a random prediction on my part, and you hardly have a lot of time nowadays. Speaking of which, would it not be best to take a nap at this point?

Ryouko sighed. She was too tired to argue with the device at this moment in time. She really did need to sleep.

Fine, she thought. *But this isn't the end of this.*

"Hey, Ryouko-chan," Asami said, after they woke up again, before they were obliged to get up for the next round of simulations.

"What is it?" Ryouko asked, not bothering to shift from her current position, face up in her bed. She had been thinking about her ranking scores in the most recent rounds of simulations. Very high.

"We're almost done, aren't we?" Asami said, voice airy. "Just one more day of this, and we go on our first practice run."

"Yeah," Ryouko said drily. "A week of garrison duty on a secondary world somewhere. Doesn't sound terribly exciting."

"I could use some boredom, after all these simulations," Asami said.

"Yeah, me too," Ryouko agreed. "But you know, personally I don't think it's all that close. We've got maybe a week's worth of simulation time left. Sure, it doesn't really seem that long after you're done with it, but Clarisse says that's a deliberate temporal perception illusion. When you're actually in the simulation itself, it really is a week. You should probably think of it that way."

There was a long pause. Ryouko thought the conversation over, but then Asami said, finally:

“During garrison duty, we’re going to learn our initial assignments,” she said. “What do you think are the chances that we end up stationed together?”

Ryouko turned and looked at the other bed, but the girl wasn’t looking in her direction.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I have an idea of where I’m going, but I have no idea what they’d do with you. Honestly…”

She paused, trying to think it through.

“I think they might mark you out for the MC,” Ryouko said. “With a power like gravity, it seems likely.”

“Space combat?” Asami asked rhetorically. “I’d really rather not. I want to see planets. And would I really be ready for that?”

“They give you an extra week of training after your initial assignment if you’re designated for the MC,” Ryouko said. “That’s what the archives say, after all.”

“I—“ Asami began.

Ryouko listened to herself breathe, in the brief silence.

“I don’t have any assurance I’ll get my dreams fulfilled,” Asami said. “I know a lot of girls here are at least confident of that. I…I wished for my parents to stay together, to finally understand each other so that they wouldn’t separate. I couldn’t stand to see them so unhappy with each other, and, you know, I have my younger brother to think about.”

From her position in the other bed, Ryouko couldn’t quite read Asami’s face, which was concealed by the contours of her blankets.

“It’s kind of funny,” Asami said. “I worded my wish carefully, so that it wouldn’t change their personalities, so it wouldn’t be some kind of mind control. Even so, I can’t bring myself to tell them what my wish was. They don’t remember fighting anymore. The memories are gone. Only my brother and I remember.”

Again, there was silence, and Ryouko knew she was expected to say something in return.

“I wished to travel the stars,” she said. “I wanted to go where no one else has, and I wanted to find my place in the universe. I don’t think my wish was as selfless as yours.”

“Hmm,” the other girl vocalized, before sighing, tired.

“I feel greedy,” Asami said. “I’ve had my wish, and now I want more. I don’t regret what I wished for, but now I have other things I want.”

“You can try for them anyway,” Ryouko said. “It doesn’t have to be from a wish.”

“I know,” Asami said. “Maybe I’ll think of a way.”

The conversation lulled, and this time it was Ryouko who said:

“We should sleep.”

Appendices:

Appendix A:

Shizuki Ryouko

Gender: Female

Age: 14

Rank: Second Lieutenant, MG

Date of Contract: September 16, 2460

Home planet: Earth

Status: Active. MG Basic Training.

Mentors: Tomoe Mami, Field Marshal. Sakura Kyouko, Lieutenant General.

Relevant Background:

Pre-contract academics were somewhat above-average, without any remarkable contribution to any particular field. Pre-contract online activities were sufficient to warrant Level One security monitoring, but this is considered unimportant.

Assessment:

In initial simulations Lieutenant Shizuki has shown an excellent grasp of combat tactics and strategy, with a clear understanding of most technical and organizational aspects of ground combat. Her performance in direct combat is innovative, making effective use of powers which are otherwise relatively ill-suited for personal combat. Performance in tactical command roles is above average, though lacking in natural leadership skills. Performance in strategic command roles is likewise above average.

Despite an apparently comprehensive understanding of tactical doctrine, Shizuki has shown a disturbing tendency toward over-aggression in attack-and-destroy situations, including a relative disregard for personal safety. Further, she has shown an excessive unwillingness to sacrifice assets when necessary, preferring to commit herself and others to unsafe rescue attempts, though this tendency is more pronounced in tactical rather than strategic contexts. While she shows an ability to recognize irretrievable situations, these behaviors degrade her overall command potential.

Recommendation:

Commitment to either field command or strategic command promotion tracks, preferably as a staff officer with specialist/support obligations. Exposure to direct combat is not recommended. Full commitment to specialist track would be waste of some talents. Possible exception: Special operations, where aggression and unwillingness to sacrifice may prove assets instead of liabilities.

—Post-training assessment for Shizuki Ryouko, MG

Appendix B:

“One of the most novel aspects of modern military is the heavy, nearly total use of virtual reality (VR) simulation for training purposes. Nearly every piece of traditional training equipment has been obviated by the use of simulation, and the vast majority of training is carried out in VR. Not

only does this conserve resources, it also conserves *time*, due to the critical ability of VR to provide accelerated subjective time to its users. This time acceleration is pushed to its absolute limits by the modern military, with everything from weapons training to field maneuvers to classroom instruction carried out virtually, simply because it's *faster*."

"In addition, VR simulation also allows for *better* types of training, permitting recruits to be placed in grandiose combat environments that could not possibly be replicated in a real world training environment. Perhaps most critically, death in a virtual simulation is meaningless, so recruits can be thrown right into the firestorm of simulated combat without concern for their lack of experience. Such training substantially reduces initial battlefield casualties. Indeed, in its quest for greater and greater realism, and better and better training methodologies, the military is unencumbered by the majority of civilian regulations, leaving it free to use technologies and methods that are explicitly and severely illegal outside of a training context, many borrowed from the underground gaming industry."

"Only a few activities still require 'hands-on' instruction, most notably the development of magical girl powers, which are notoriously hard to simulate properly. Extensive cortical monitoring has, over time, allowed the replication of the unique sensory experience of power usage, but users still report sensations of 'wrongness' during VR simulations, a problem that doesn't seem likely to be solved anytime soon."

"Overall, accelerated time VR-simulation has enabled the training of soldiers with unparalleled levels of initial combat effectiveness in record amounts of time, with the average infantryman passing through combat training in a mere three days, and magical girls varying from one to two weeks, excluding preliminary 'test runs'."

—Excerpt, "Military Uses of Virtual Reality", Simulation Magazine

Relativity

By the early-twenty-second century, the world's major religions had become a shadow of their former selves, the victims of well over a century of declining religious participation among the world's populations. Strenuous efforts by multiple generations of religious leaders had slowed, but not stopped, the trend, and signs of decay were appearing everywhere, from the Vatican's strained finances to the shuttering of religious buildings worldwide. Only by appealing to cultural nostalgia and financial support could many such buildings expect to survive, as little more than tourist attractions. Despair began to creep into the tone of the world's clergy.

Yet looming over this quiet apocalypse were the omens of something far direr, something that would upend their world just as surely it did the world as a whole…

〈*Abbreviated.*〉

In the decades leading up to the Unification Wars, as the world's underclasses slipped deeper and deeper into destitution, and levels of want unseen for over a century began to re-emerge, the world's religions found themselves unexpectedly recovering membership among the masses, particularly among those of the future Freedom Alliance (FA) nations.

Faced with this unexpected bonanza, a noticeable schism began to emerge among the religious factions. Some leaders and congregations, troubled by the naked economic injustice they saw around them, spoke out fiercely against it, organizing protests and challenging local governments. Other factions drifted in the direction of open apologism for the hyperclasses, lured by financial incentives, government support, and a mindset that discounted economic issues in favor of other issues. These factions preached acceptance of the world as it was, urging followers to seek salvation in the next life instead.

The two sides competed heavily in the slums of the *FA* nations, as well as—much less prominently—in the subsidized tenements and skyscrapers of the United Front (UF) nations. Often, they found they had more in common with similar factions in other religions than with opposing factions of their own. As society itself fractured, so too did the world's religions.

Under these conditions, both sides quickly radicalized, at least in the *FA* nations. The protest factions became increasingly militant and radical, suffering under the heavy weight of government oppression. The apologist factions became more and more closely intertwined with their government sponsors, even achieving state religion status in several of the *FA* nations.

When events finally came to a head, with the atrocities of the more deranged *FA* hyperclasses shocking public and elite *UF* opinion, many of the apologist factions dissolved, their purpose served, their governments no longer interested in keeping the masses sedated. Others fused even more rigidly with the state, often becoming indistinguishable from the state itself.

The protest factions, however, took a different route, most burrowing underground, and many turning into or merging with full-fledged resistance and revolutionary movements, fighting what was now obvious evil. These drew on financial and material support from their *UF* members and increasing amounts of clandestine and,

eventually, open support from *UF* governments.

As the UF/FA cold wars turned increasingly hot, what remained of the world's religious organizations abandoned any semblance of neutrality, perhaps exemplified by the experience of the Catholic Church of the time. Conciliatory and diplomatic to almost the bitter end, the Church's conscience proved ultimately unable to abide the evil they saw around them, consequently drawing heavy pressure from *FA* governments. When the Vatican finally abandoned its traditional caution, the Pope issuing a scathing indictment of the *FA* nations, it found itself finally swept up in the wars wracking the newly-disunified Eurozone. Ultimately, the Vatican was forced into exile, the pontiff himself airlifted out literally minutes ahead of arriving *FA* shock troops. After that, the Vatican-in-exile openly chose sides, exhorting its followers into holy war for the first time since the Crusades.

Throughout the Unification Wars, religious factions proved an invaluable asset to the numerous resistance movements supported by the *UF* within *FA* nations, laying aside doctrinal differences to organize and defend the people.

When victory finally arrived, the world's religions found themselves at a crossroads. In some regions, they were openly hated by the populace, who still associated them with their apologist variants. In others, their clergy were hailed as heroes for their wartime exploits. Despite the apparent chaos, however, religious leaders looked forward to the future, observing the dynamism of their fresh wartime converts, convinced they had finally redeemed themselves in the eyes of the people.

Yet in the century that followed, while Humanity as a whole boomed and prospered, the world's religions once again stagnated. Energetic, unified wartime organizations lost focus without an enemy to fight, and endless internecine bickering and fractionation alienated and disgusted newer members, many of who had joined the organization as whole, not this or that individual denomination.

Governance, too, played a role, quietly wielding its levers of power to deliberately undermine religious belief as a whole, believing religion a threat to its radical biological and social engineering initiatives, and fearing the potential of religious conflict to weaken what it believed to be a fragile global unity. Religious organizations found their government support removed, their charitable institutions carefully replaced by secular equivalents, and countless bureaucratic obstacles strewn in their way. Meanwhile, generations of schoolchildren were constantly reminded that they had no obligation to follow their parents' religion, and were taught by instructors indoctrinated in Governance ideology.

By the mid-twenty-fourth century, then, mainstream religion found itself right back where it started. Their presence within the populace was minimal, their opinions had no weight on public or Governance opinion, and their memberships, relative to the population as a whole, were in seemingly terminal decline. The only consolation was that, with the advent of immortality, their core, most devoted membership looked likely to persist forever.

— Ishihara Tomoya, *"A Brief History of Religion in the Post-Modern and Future Age, Lessons from the Past,"* introduction, excerpt.

Warfare on a heavily developed world is a nightmare of attrition. Innovations in Human siege doctrine and technology virtually assure it, with the stated goal of extracting maximal casualties for every planet taken.

As long as a planet's production facilities and population remain intact, cephalopod invaders are forced to contend with the full productive power of advanced Human manufacturing. Drones, materiel, and even starships can be deployed in seemingly endless quantities, as long as the factories are still intact to produce them. This ensures that, while in the short run alien fleets may bypass such a planet and press on, such a planet cannot be reduced at leisure, but must be reduced relatively soon, to prevent unacceptable risks to cephalopod supply lines

On the surface, it may appear that planetary reduction is simply a matter of mass deployment of high-yield weapons (HYW). In practice, such a deployment requires either orbital supremacy or surface access to the planet's urban centers. Since planetary production facilities are perfectly capable of deploying and launching a wide variety of orbital defenses and even starships, orbital supremacy on a developed world is nearly impossible to obtain unless a planet's urban centers are at least somewhat eliminated.

Because of this, the cephalopods are forced into ground assaults. However, even the successful insertion of Cephalopod troops close enough to a city to deploy HYWs hardly ensures that a job is done; Human siege doctrine directs the construction of underground "redoubts" on every planet in danger of being attacked, and many that are not in danger. Whenever a city comes within plausible range of attack or orbital bombardment, production facilities are then shifted underground as quickly as possible, ensuring that production facilities can only be eliminated with actual occupation of the city.

This forces the cephalopods to send troops into the city itself—at this point usually only a pile of ruins aboveground—to contend with units and weaponry pouring out from below the surface, ready to defend every surviving structure, tunnel entrance, and piece of rubble.

Then, finally, if the surface can no longer be contested, units withdraw into the underground redoubts. These deep bunkers are designed to be supremely defensible, with sealable ventilation systems, geothermal energy sources, carbon dioxide scrubbers modeled after asteroid bases, monitoring systems, protection against sappers, manufacturing facilities, and enough structural reinforcement to resist nuclear and antimatter detonations of tremendous magnitude.

These are not impregnable, of course; nothing is. Technological advances ensure that redoubts are nearly impossible to starve out, but sooner or later alien sappers will breach the defenses enough to detonate a *HYW* in dangerous underground proximity. Most redoubts can withstand multiple such defensive failures, but by the time this stage has been reached, it is generally only a matter of time. Still, the alien troops tied up, the casualties extracted, and the time bought are all invaluable, and there have even been examples of colonial redoubts that held out long enough to be rescued when the world was retaken.

— Governance News Distribution, special *War Strategy* edition, *"Stalingrad a Thousand-fold,"* online article, excerpt.

Four years ago

Kishida Maki sighed dismally, head planted down on her work desk, directly into the pencil

sketch she was working on. It was supposed to outline her plan for the next mural for her church, something that would at least serve as evidence of progress, but she had already given up on it. She felt no desire to complete it.

As it often did at these times, a shadow of a memory flitted across her mind, stinging all the more because of what it had once represented.

"You have so much talent! You should get some formal training and see where it takes you! I've never seen a kid draw so well."

That compliment, from her family minister, had helped set into motion her "career" in art, such as it was. Her family church, the church *sub rosa,* had a large community of artists devoted to the production of art for members' contemplations and admiration—one of the side effects of having a mostly unemployed society—, and she had been funneled directly into it, because of her "talent."

The watercolor dispenser on her desk toggled its way through an array of colors, transitioning up and down the color wheel. She stared it, listlessly issuing the mental commands that kept it in motion. At her feet, a small cleaning drone picked up the crumpled remains of previous failed sketches, picking them up with an articulated arm, compressing them, and dumping them neatly into an attached basket.

She couldn't do it anymore. As a child, it had been easy to follow the expected religious themes and motifs without questioning. Anything to keep the flattery and praise coming.

But it wasn't enough for her, not anymore.

As she had grown older, she had tried to start drawing something outside the normal bounds, tired of the same repeated themes and images. Instead of the approbation she had expected, she had received disapproval and veiled warnings, confusing and troubling her. In the end, she had gone back and asked the same minister why the artists and mentors she had looked up to treated her so terribly, and refused to give her new work more than a cursory look.

The man had sighed, wiping the lenses of his ancient spectacles, and said:

The members of our faith are old, and used to old things. They don't like new things. It's how we've survived in this age, but it's also what's holding us back. You had to learn this someday, so that you could change it. That's why you caught my eye. I'm counting on you to revive this tired old church.

But she hadn't changed it. Her prestige had gone into sharp decline and the minister, her old mentor, had been summarily ejected from the church two years later.

I tried, Maki-chan, the man had said, visiting her one last time in secrecy, away from the now-hostile glares of her parents. *They wouldn't listen to me, so maybe you'll listen instead. This church is dead; I know that now. I said that a church must preach to the masses, that it is our Great Commission. We weren't afraid, once. We stood together with the people, and shielded them, and guided them, and uplifted them. This new war is our chance, but instead we while away our immortal lives in fearful isolation. I—I don't know. Live well, Maki-chan. I must find my own way from now on.*

And then he had died, due to one of the few remaining civilian causes of death: demon attack.

It had taken her a long time to understand what he had meant.

Once, her church had been relevant. Once, its houses of worships had protected the people, and its ministers had stood in defiance against evil. But once the evil disappeared, they lost their way. In

the face of a brave new world, with its immortal populace and quietly hostile Governance, they retreated, became disinterested in gaining new members or addressing anything about the world as it was. There was no attempt to maintain a presence in the colonies, and the advent of such radical things as magical girls, demons, and aliens drew little more than a shrug. They would be their own world, completely disconnected from anyone on the outside.

These were the things she learned, in the aftermath of his death, surfing the shoals of the internet alone, and talking to the schoolteachers that were more than glad to open the mind of an interested student. She found the kinds of answers that her church, almost smug in the news of her mentor's death, would not provide.

That was when her own faith had begun to slowly fade. The spectrum of Humanity was almost unimaginably wide, with myriad opinions, ways of living, and belief systems. She made new friends, outside the circle of her church, and under the now baleful eyes of her parents, began to realize just how much her own beliefs derived from nothing more than their influence, something darkly hinted at her by her instructors and Governance textbooks. Without their influence, what superiority did her beliefs have over those of anyone else?

She had begun quietly drawing new artwork, things that had nothing to do with her church, and posting it online anonymously. There she got praise and meaningful criticism, rather than useless icy ostracism.

She closed her eyes and stopped toying with her paint dispenser. She tried to remember what it had once been like, when she had really believed in all those stories about prophets parting oceans and curing diseases and making food out of nowhere.

She had looked far and wide, but as far as she could see, there was only one thing verifiably supernatural in the world, and that had nothing to do with clergy and everything to do with Incubators.

But…

As a child, when everything was new and every drawing was fresh, painting had been exciting, endlessly fun. When she could believe in what she was drawing, when the narrow field of paintings enjoyed by the community had still seemed wide enough to be worth exploring…

Well, it had been exhilarating.

A new religion, for a new age. One that was young and fresh, and could appreciate new forms of art. One with answers for this brave new world. One with truths that she could believe in.

That would be nice. But where was it?

I'm so tired… she thought, letting the thought trail off.

That can change, you know, a voice thought into her head, clear and sharp. At that moment, it seemed almost clarion, nothing like the telephone calls she was used to. Clear, sharp, and resonant with her soul, in the way that should have answered the prayers she once said.

She opened her eyes.

Perched on the boxy white-and-red watercolor dispenser was a creature instantly recognizable to an entire generation of schoolgirls, trained to recognize an Incubator by sight and told almost nothing else.

It seems you have potential, the creature thought, its tail swinging back and forth. *Do you have a*

wish prepared?

Maki sat up, peering at the Incubator in front of her for a long moment.

The Incubators are demons, her mother had once said. *If you ever see one, you should cast it out, and tell us immediately.*

"Can I have some time to think about it?" she asked, finally.

I will not rush you, the creature thought, since *your potential does not seem too unstable. I would advise you not to speak to your parents, though.*

"I wish to have something I can believe in again. I wish to have something I can paint wholeheartedly again."

Present Day, Present Time

"I'm surprised to see a girl like you out in a place like this."

Maki blinked in surprise, looking up from her sake, which she had been staring at in contemplation.

"Mo–Sister Sakura!" she said in surprise, staring up at the teenaged face of the Church Founder, shadowed by the dim and oscillating light of the dance club.

"You almost called me Mother, didn't you?" the girl asked rhetorically, sounding disappointed. "I don't get why everyone insists on calling me that behind my back. Makes me feel old, even if I can't really deny the truth anymore. And please, don't call me sister out here."

Maki stared for a moment longer.

The other girl wasn't speaking particularly loudly, but she didn't have to, not with Maki's enhanced hearing. Otherwise, it might have been drowned out by the loud music in the background, which was some sort of neo-classical—techno fusion. She had never been a fan, but the dancers seemed to like it.

She had spoken to Sakura-san before, but always in passing, in greeting, or perhaps while in front of a church mural. Never extensively, or in a setting like this.

"This seat taken?" the other girl asked, and Maki shook her head vigorously no.

The girl sat down in the chair across from Maki and watched her seriously, as if to see what she would say. During the ensuing silence, a service drone delivered something exotic-looking in front of the Church founder.

A margarita, her TacComp indicated, a moment later.

"Why are you surprised to see me out here?" Maki asked, finally, smiling awkwardly.

"You're always cooped up in your room painting, except for demon hunts. And you know, you're a bit young. Not saying it's a bad thing—it's just why I'm surprised."

Maki shrugged, a bit more elaborately than was necessary.

“I used to go out occasionally before I contracted,” she said. “I thought I’d try it again. No particular reason.”

“That’s unusual, isn’t it? You would have been a high-schooler.”

“A little,” she admitted. “But not unheard of.”

“Strange to go out alone, isn’t it?” the girl asked, swirling her drink in its glass.

Maki almost answered immediately, but instead waited for the other girl as she downed the drink in one gulp.

“Well, I haven’t found much in the way of company since I moved to Mitakihara,” Maki said.

“How unfortunate. It’s terribly lonely without company.”

It was on the surface a perfectly normal statement, but something about the Church leader’s voice sent a shiver up her spine. Something about the tone—

She suppressed a startled motion. She had remembered, suddenly, what exactly it was they said about Sakura Kyouko. Sakura-san’s dalliances were legendary; it was said that at one point in the past, she was taking home a different girl every night, occasionally more than one. Since then, she had cooled down, especially after founding the Church of Hope, but, the rumors said, she had never entirely stopped, something which set teeth gnashing among some of the more conservative elements of the Church. Among girls of a certain orientation, it was whispered that she could show you quite a good time, at least until she got tired of you. It was not wise to expect more.

Maki was indeed, of a certain orientation, something she had discovered since she had fallen out with her parents. It was how she had heard the whispers.

Her breath quickened in her throat.

The Church founder sighed.

“I definitely know about not having company,” the girl said. “October Three is coming up, and I’ve worked myself to death in the preparations, but I’ve got no one to share the stress with.”

“Sakura-san—”

“Please, call me Kyouko.”

“Kyouko-chan, this wasn’t really a chance meeting, was it?”

The girl watched Maki for moment, before allowing her mouth to widen into a mischievous grin.

“My reputation precedes me,” Kyouko said, seeming amused.

The founder leaned forward, allowing her luxurious hair to fall in front of her shoulders. Maki grew suddenly aware that Saku—Kyouko’s outfit, while not exactly revealing, wasn’t exactly modest. She was close—very close—and Maki imagined that she could feel the other girl’s breath.

“Are you averse?” Kyouko asked.

Maki swallowed nervously, trying to think of the right thing to say.

“On the contrary, I’m delighted,” she managed, finally.

“Hey,” someone said, poking her in the cheek. Maki batted the arm away.

“Go away,” she murmured, annoyed that she had been interrupted just as she was about to get to the good part of the memory recording. “I’m still on break.”

“The team is going down to the canteen for food,” Lieutenant Colonel Patricia von Rohr said, ignoring her complaints. “I’m not going to let you lounge around here. And I hear: Asaka has made time to come down too.”

They didn’t see the Brigadier General quite as much nowadays, a natural consequence of the fact that Asaka had more responsibilities to contend with then hanging around with two of her staffers, so her appearance was mildly notable.

She squinted at the unkempt-looking Patricia. The light in the small room was provided by the softly glowing ceiling panels, which somehow contrived to make the other girl look particularly grungy. Maki doubted she herself looked any better. Freshening up was relatively low on the priority list.

She checked the time. It had passed midnight in Japan, which meant it was now October 1. Kyouko had never been big on anniversaries, but Maki wondered if she remembered, or still cared.

She still had yet to quite get used to living here, in this deep underground bunker, with its low ceiling and occasionally claustrophobic passages. Given the relatively fixed nature of urban warfare, both sides had plenty of time to dig in and, with the presence of cheap digger drones, that meant tunnels. Kilometer after kilometer of tunnels, bunkers, supply depots, and command posts. The Human tunnel network even had the additional virtue of connecting to the city’s deep fortifications, an even deeper reinforced bunker system, hastily elaborated when it became clear that planetary landings were possible.

Their own situation was not so dire as to need the deep fortifications, thankfully. The planetary surface and space were both still heavily contested, including the city above their heads. There were plenty of buildings still standing, but unless one were actively involved in holding a position, it was advisable to withdraw to the tunnels whenever possible for better protection and significantly better amenities, and in case the squid decided to ignore their own troops in the city and throw a few antimatter devices anyway.

That meant that the conductance of warfare for magical girls was, by and large, a matter of teams occasionally sticking their heads aboveground, helping to seize or defend a particularly important point on the battlefield, and then disappearing before they could be specially targeted. The hard work of staying above ground holding a ruined factory, or assaulting a position room-by-room, was left to the infantry and their accompanying drones, who could better absorb the consequent casualties.

“Not that I want to pry…” Asaka began, as they sat down to a meal of synthesized rice and fish. Overall, the canteen was one of the nicer underground rooms, having been constructed long before the assault on the planet. It was brightly-lit, had chairs and tables reminiscent of a fancy school cafeteria, and nice wall murals, including a giant tactical map of the city on one wall. Only the low ceiling served as a reminder that they were underground; vertical space was precious, due to the extensive cooling requirements of the deeper levels.

“That inevitably means you’re prying,” Patricia commented, looking at the other girl from the corner of her eye.

“Hush,” Asaka reprimanded, waving her hand to shoo her. “Okay, fine, I’m prying. But I really want to know what went down between you and Kyouko. She seemed majorly angry you were leaving.”

“She doesn’t want me risking my life out here,” Maki said. “We had a fight about it.”

“I don’t think she’s really the type to get that angry over something like that,” Patricia said.

Maki shrugged.

“I won’t let you risk your life out there!” Kyouko shouted, face twisted and angry.

The girl started to angrily fling her arms, but stopped just in time, realizing that her room—more of a niche, really—was not large enough to safely do that in.

“Do you have any idea how selfish you’re sounding?” Maki retorted. “There are millions out there fighting and dying, and you’re saying I have to stay back because you want me too.”

“I don’t care if I’m being selfish!” Kyouko fumed. “I—Why do you even want to go anyway? I thought you were an artist!”

“I’m going because I’m an artist! I want something new to draw, and if I go now, I can deploy with Patricia and Asaka. It’s an opportunity!”

“What kind of reason is that?”

“The only thing that matters to me!” Maki said, starting to get truly angry. “What is it with you? My art is what I care about, and you can’t even pretend to give a damn! In fact, I think you’re trying not to!”

Kyouko started to say something, then stopped, stymied by the unexpected truth of that.

“Why do you work so hard to stay detached?” Maki asked. “Why is it so hard for you to show interest? I’ve tried showing you my art, I’ve tried talking to you, and you blow me off every time.”

She clenched her eyes briefly, surprised by unexpected tears.

“It hurts, you know?” she said. “I promised myself I wouldn’t get attached to you, because everyone says you’re going to get tired of me, but it’s been nearly a year now. This is the longest you’ve ever stayed with anybody. It’s a damn farce! Is it really that important to you not to—”

She took a breath to steady herself.

“When this Church first granted me a combat exemption, they told me it was because of my talent, that you personally requested it. I thought you meant my art. But no, I realize what it is now. I’m nothing but a toy to you. Do you know you say her name?”

Kyouko blanched, perhaps the first time Maki had ever seen her discomfited by something Maki said.

“Wh—Who?” Kyouko asked, a second too late.

“You know who. Sayaka. Miki Sayaka. You’ve let her name slip out a couple of times. I’ve seen that old picture you carry around. I’ve seen what she looks like. She’s almost my twin. Is that really it? I know there’s something eating at you, but is this really it? You’ve pined for a girl for

four hundred years, so you seduce the first one you see who looks like her? Grant her an exception to military service for her "talent" without even looking at any of her work? I really am just a body to you, aren't I?"

She stopped, breathing heavily, as Kyouko looked back, wide-eyed, the seconds ticking by on the ancient analog clock on the desk.

"Goddess, you really are just like her," Kyouko said, finally. "You're not going to listen to me, you're going to get yourself killed—"

"Shut up!" Maki said. "You listen to me! I'm not going to stand around here being your—your… Not anymore! That's why I'm leaving. Because I don't want to know that I'm sitting around here while others are dying, because you took a fancy to my body. But I'm still willing to stay. I'll stay and keep painting for the Church, if you promise me you'll tell me what this Sayaka was to you, and stop treating me like—like some sort of embarrassment."

Kyouko stared back at her, and Maki could see, unexpectedly, that the girl was on the verge of crying.

Maki opened her mouth to say something—

"Fine," Kyouko said, voice quiet and empty, turning abruptly away from her. "You can go. This is over."

"What?" Maki asked. "Look—"

"You said you'd leave, so do it! Get out of here! I don't need your face tormenting me anymore."

"But—"

"I said *get the f— out!*"

They surfaced inside a now-abandoned factory, one of the heavy-defended strongpoints that anchored this part of the line. They had no teleporter with them to transport them around covertly, but they did have a stealth generator, and it was under her auspices that they exited the building, after having spent a moment to chat with the building's garrisoned infantry. The squid knew, of course, that this building contained one of the tunnel entrances, and were fond of plastering the area with missiles and shells if that spotted something important leaving. The building's point defenses would probably take care of it—that was how it was still standing, after all—but no reason to tempt fate.

The objective was simple. There was a well-defended alien strongpoint in the vicinity, in the still-standing ruins of a particularly tall residential tower. It served as a nest for a large number of extreme-range snipers and a substantial number of relatively heavy weapons, and also provided an excellent vantage point of this area of the city. Their job was to retake the building, allow the infantry to garrison, and then leave.

They traversed the intervening distance at moderate speed, maintaining transmission silence, though of course they could just use telepathy. To reduce the possibility of being spotted because of any objects they might kick aside accidentally, they scattered and took slightly separate routes, opting to jump off the sides of buildings rather than running along the ground, still remaining barely within the stealth generator's field of effectiveness. It was a less predictable and less easily noticed route, and the Human infantry manning the buildings were informed to temporarily not fire on anything they might notice.

It was not that the stealth would fail to conceal something as obvious as a pebble being kicked across the ground; it was that the pebble would appear to spontaneously shift position after the stealth passed by. The rain was a theoretical concern, too, but thus far the aliens had not evinced the ability to notice magical girls based on infinitesimal changes in how wet the ground was.

Human buildings were built fairly resiliently nowadays, so that unless a particularly powerful weapon such as an alien particle cannon were fired at an area, the majority of buildings away from the epicenter of a major detonation tended to have at least an intact superstructure. Thus, the landscape they traversed, while flattened in some areas, still had a large variety of standing buildings, ghostly, shattered, and generally ruined, the masonry torn off and contributing to the substantial amount of rubble in the streets below. The planet wasn't dense enough to warrant core world style traffic tubes and endless skyscrapers, so the buildings themselves were reasonably short and separated.

The productive capacity of the city of Heliopolis was mostly in tunnels below it now, and the civilian population, except for necessary manufacturing workers, had had time to evacuate, so in a war-making sense the fact that the city was a gray, shattered husk was not too significant. In a human sense, though, she had to feel sorry for those whose homes and lives had once been here.

It seemed entirely appropriate to Maki that it happened to be raining lightly, giving the mid-afternoon scene even more of a grim pallor.

They arrived at the boundary of no man's land, peering up at the tower they would be seizing. Around and behind them, the local infantry companies had already gathered. The infantry knew that they were there, but were unable to see or otherwise register their presence.

They waited for the signal.

Then, the infantry and drones around them stormed forward, pouring out of the buildings and rubble, under a sudden barrage of covering fire, artillery bombardment, and missiles. They reached new firing positions if they could, but despite the drones trying to block damage and the optimal trajectories they attempted to take, many fell on the way under a storm of both invisible and tracered laser fire, which blinked and off rapidly, striving to expend valuable energy only on actual targets. Their own support fire strove to keep the aliens suppressed, and carefully timed cruise missiles screamed inward, most intercepted out of the sky. Their tactical air support dove in from the sky, releasing their payloads.

The beginning stages of the attack were designed to look just like all the ones that had preceded it, which had failed ignominiously. Besides providing a distraction, it helped indicate where alien weaponry was concentrated, and which fields of fire would be necessary to avoid.

Then they moved out, as quickly as they could, vaulting over most of the battle on the ground. They had to be judicious about obvious magic use; otherwise, it'd tip the alien defenders off. They would wait until they got close to drop the stealth.

They took up positions on the buildings surrounding the tower, standing on rooftops and within crumbled window frames. They eyed attack points: laser battery and sniper positions, open windows large enough to jump directly into, staircases and other locations where it might be possible to quickly ascend the building. They coordinated by telepathy, trying to convey mental images as best they could when imagery was needed—still not a refined art for most girls.

Ready? Patricia thought, somewhere on the other side of the building.

They assented.

Then stealth drop in five on mark, Patricia thought, knowing they could all be relied upon to know exactly when five seconds was, based on internal chronometers.

Maki watched the time, then, just before the five seconds were up, launched herself off of the rooftop she was standing on, vaulting the distance between buildings.

Without looking, she knew that Patricia would have seized control of as many of the local alien drones as possible, while someone else would be releasing a substantial quantity of their own. Near her, a staccato of well-placed magical bolts disabled alien personnel in the windows near her.

Maki paid it only partial attention, focusing instead on her own actions. In the nearly insensible duration of time it took her to cross the gap, she summoned a set of her signature apparitions—ghost missiles, other magical girls, or even just giant black sheets—at various locations around the building to draw fire or block vision.

She dove into the window opening, just as the stealth protecting her disappeared, swords already in hand, crossed in front of her.

She knew what she would find: the inhabitants of the room firing desperately at an illusion of a magical girl charging at them through a doorway inside the building, and therefore not facing in her direction.

There was no time to think about it. The movement of her dive carried one of her swords straight through one of the infantry still covering the window. She spun, dodging the volume of shrapnel automatically ejected from the alien's suit, a common design feature now that being killed by melee was a frequent issue.

It almost felt like a dance, the way she turned the spin into the momentum necessary to cut another of the aliens in half, then thrust forward, impaling the remaining two of, before dodging away from the shrapnel again. Sparks flew from her blades as they sliced through forcefields, and high velocity shrapnel dented the walls behind her. Too-late laser fire impacted the walls, illuminating her as she moved—steel-blue breastplate, metal gauntlets and boots, short hair, no hairpins.

Then she spun one last time, slicing one more time through the aliens she had impaled before they even began to fall.

All of that before any of them had any chance to respond, but she stayed alert, taking the time to make sure that each alien—and each suit—were truly incapacitated. A long time ago, before Kyouko had pulled her out of the ranks, she had almost been killed by one of the suits trying to exact revenge, regardless of whether the alien inside it was already dead or not.

During that brief period of examination, she might have been in risk from the building itself—from booby traps, for instance, or a floor of the building primed to self-destruct—but she didn't have to worry about that.

Secured, someone behind her thought.

She turned to look at the other girl, who had followed her in and currently had her hand on the wall, keeping her eyes closed as if she were communing with the wall—which wasn't actually a bad description of what she was doing.

It's a fairly large building, Maki thought. *You sure?*

Well, the girl thought. *I have enough enchantment on this building to have the traps and some of the defense equipment disabled, at least. I only have complete control of around five floors, though.*

The girl smiled, the expression vaguely predatory among the mass of tangled, curly hair.

They never expect the walls to try to kill them.

Maki checked the information that was scrolling into their information systems, now that there was less need for transmission discipline. The hallways in front of her had been cleared, according to the girl next to her, so she had no need to go out and check or clean up. The infantry were already moving through the lower floors to occupy the building, now that the crippling firepower from before was mostly neutralized. The entrance into the squid tunnel network had already been sealed. Engineering and counter-sapping details would move in to prevent any possible attempts to collapse the building from below. The top had significant anti-missile and point defenses, but they were mostly irrelevant for defending against an infantry assault.

We should help clear the top of the building, and do it quickly, Patricia thought from somewhere. *One of them might have explosives and try to self-destruct. But for safety, most of us should go back.*

A list of the ones that were staying followed, including Patricia herself, Maki, the stealth generator, and a few others, including the enchanter. Maki nodded to herself. It made sense.

Just another day.

When it was all over, she took a moment to look out one of the windows near the top, watching the exhaust trails of fighter aircraft elsewhere in the ruined city and listening to the thunderous rumble of distant shells landing.

If you're listening, I hope all of this is for a good reason, she prayed silently. *And if you'll forgive a selfish question, I wonder if you, in your human life, ever had to deal with—well, were you and Homura—no, I'm being silly.*

She turned to join the others in leaving. She certainly had something to believe in now, but it would be nice if, once in a while, the divine would actually answer her.

Maybe she could try the Ribbon again.

"So I really want to know: what kind of name is *Acheron* anyway?"

Ryouko and Asami glanced at each other, then at the girl sitting across from them, looking back with such earnest eyes. Meiqing sported an unusual hairstyle, one of those asymmetric ponytails that were vaguely in style, which she kept in front of her right shoulder.

"Well?" the girl demanded, raising and clenching a fist in a gesture of demand. It made her look less, rather than more, serious.

"Sounds like a fine name to me," Asami said, sounding slightly bored. "Vaguely Greco-Roman. Governance loves names like that."

"The river of pain," Ryouko said, reciting the information off of an internal reference, her eyes unfocusing. "One of the seven rivers of Hades, it is known primarily for being the river across which Charon ferries the souls of the dead. In Dante's *Inferno*—"

"Yeah, yeah, see?" Meiqing interrupted, addressing Asami. "Hades. Hell. Why would you name a planet after that?"

Acheron was, of course, the minor colony world they were being sent to garrison.

“Maybe it just sounds cool,” Asami shrugged. “Besides, it’s not like the Greeks thought of Hades in the same way Christians think of hell. And doesn’t this planet have vol—”

“Susana, what do you think?” Meiqing asked. “Susana!”

She shoved the girl next to her, who opened her eyes and looked at the others, briefly confused, before her TacComp played back the audio recording of the conversation.

“I think it’s a fine name,” she said blearily. “Sounds nice. Not like anyone does much dying nowadays anyway.”

“But we do dying,” Ryouko felt obliged to point out quietly, complete with botched grammar.

“We’re almost at the arch-boss,” Susana said, obviously not quite paying attention, curly blonde hair settling over her face. “So I’m a bit distracted right. The low transmission throughput is annoying. On the other hand, if I can talk you guys into finally joining, we’ll be glad to power-train you.”

They demurred, and the girl closed her eyes, going back into whatever VR game she was talking about.

“So my point is, it’s just not an auspicious name,” Meiqing finished.

Ryouko shrugged, and took a moment to look around her. Their subsection of the training cohort was traveling to their destination via transport ship, and frankly the multi-day trip was somewhat boring. They took unnecessary long naps in their individual cabins, chatted up crew members and other passengers, used the rec rooms, and explored the ship, but it turned out that three days could feel like a surprisingly long time to be cooped onto even a large ship, especially with very little need for sleep. The whole thing served as a dull contrast to their previous onslaught of simulations, which presented them with planet after planet and combat situation after combat situation.

So at the moment they were half-heartedly sitting around one of the ship’s lounges, swilling non-alcoholic drinks and chatting desultorily in the red plush couches, having been unable to agree on which recreational pastime they wanted to do next. Sure, there were things to read, or holographic board games to play, or VR things to do, but… it just didn’t feel exciting anymore. Not to her.

At the moment, she, Asami, and Meiqing were practically the only ones there, though Susana and the other four in the game were doing something together as a… clan? Was that what they called it? In any case, they hardly counted as conversational partners, so it was really just Ryouko and the other two, as well as the fully-functional bar robot—no one had been intrepid enough to ask alcohol of it yet.

Ryouko had spent quite a deal of time staring out at the stars on the way to their training planet, but had eventually finally tired of staring out the false window at the electronically regenerated starfield. So it was here as well, though at the moment she found her eyes being drawn out the window again. The refiltered starfield looked the same as it had the whole trip, but she couldn’t shake the urge—

A sharp green light at the edge of her vision interrupted her thoughts, and she looked at it in immediate surprise, intuiting the source.

“What was that?” Meiqing asked.

Her soul gem ring had been glowing softly the whole trip, and they had mostly learned to ignore it, but this had been different—a sudden, unexpected, piercingly-bright flash.

"I don't know," she said, quite honestly. "I'm not sure why it glows in the first place, and now this flashing—"

The gem flashed again, just as brightly, casting the area in a harsh, green glow.

"Hmm? Is something going on?" Susana asked, green eyes opening again, probably alerted to the situation by her TacComp.

Asami stared at the gem for a moment, then closed her eyes. Ryouko knew the look by now, having seen it in simulations as she searched in the distance for alien hover-troopers.

"*Laplace*," Asami asked out loud, addressing the ship. "Are we scheduled to rendezvous with anyone sometime soon?"

"No," the pleasant sounding ship's voice replied, a hologram of the white-haired mathematician appearing in front of them, hands clasped behind his back. "We will not be meeting any other ships until we approach Acheron."

Ryouko's gem flashed multiple times in sudden sequence as Asami said:

"Are you sure? I sense something in the distance, but it doesn't feel like FTL engines. It's very faint, though."

There was a pause, while the hologram visibly dipped his head in thought.

"Noted," the ship said, in a slight affected French accent, tugging nervously at his collar, eyelids fluttering over his mismatched eyes: one normal, one tattooed "I/O" in the AI style.

"I will pay closer attention and signal the convoy defenses," he continued. "The aliens very rarely raid this deep in Human space, however. There is nothing on my sensors, nor are they any known astronomical anomalies in the area."

"Okay," Asami said, looking worried.

"That seems at least a little concerning," Meiqing commented. "You really have no idea what it is?"

"I don't know," Asami said, closing her eyes again. "I don't like it."

It was only about half an hour later that Asami, whose increasingly troubled demeanor had weighed down on their conversational milieu, opened her eyes one more time and said quietly:

"I'm certain now. There are ships approaching. I don't have enough experience to know everything for certain, but they're moving much faster than any of the ships we passed near New Athens. *Laplace* says nothing in the Human fleet travels so quickly."

Ryouko and Meiqing stared at her in shock. They had expected something of the sort, but for the past half-hour Asami and *Laplace* had sat in deathly quiet, leaking no hint of their internal conversations

The eyes of the game-engrossed mages around them snapped open, some of them jerking slightly with the remnants of their last in-game action, as they were force-quit from their simulation, in

response to the ship's declaration of battle stations.

"I can't believe it's really true," Ngo Thi An said, a moment later. "Susana told us something was going on, but—this is supposed to be a safe convoy route! It's far out of range of standard alien raids. Why us?"

"I don't know," *Laplace* said, clasping his hands in front of him, his period costume suddenly seeming garishly out of place. "It could be a test-run for new tactics, or something like that. Fortunately, we have plenty of warning, since they're not even on my sensors yet. I've called for help, the crew has been alerted, and I've placed my engines into emergency acceleration. With this degree of advance warning, my—our—chances are much better than they would be otherwise.

"Pierre," Ryouko asked. "Just what are our chances? The eight of us are here—"

"I know," the ship interrupted, glancing at her. "But you're untrained for this kind of combat. I know you've had vacuum training, but space combat can easily get overwhelming for new girls like you. That's why that training is separate."

Laplace placed a hand on his balding head—the ship had chosen to imitate an older period of the Frenchman's life.

"I'm not defenseless," he said, "And our chances are better than you might think. Consult your TacComps. Let's see what I can do, okay?"

The ship looked around at the others. When they said nothing further, he said:

"There's a reinforced passenger compartment near the cargo area. There will be emergency space suits and external access ports nearby. Wait there. Hopefully, it won't be necessary."

Then he vanished.

The gravitational distortions appeared on his sensors a few minutes later.

His readings matched, as he expected, the characteristics of the Cephalopod long-range fighter class, the only class of vessel that would show up at such distances and in such low numbers, with the general goal of raiding shipping and commerce, while their bomber brethren targeted vulnerable facilities and planets. They had never been recorded to attack this deep in Human space, but there was a first time for everything, he supposed.

If HSS *Pierre-Simon Laplace* had had features with which to express it, he would have smiled grimly. As it was, he had to imagine the smile to himself. On other occasions he might have toggled some of his internal displays amusedly, but many of those were powered down now, every last joule diverted out of non-essential functions.

There was a reason he was referred to as a "convoy," despite consisting of only one crewed transport ship. Sure, he wasn't accompanied by frigates or cruisers, but he was hardly without protection. Smaller droneships swarmed around him, ranging from relatively large FTL-engined gun platforms, to smaller attack and defense drones—and even further down to tiny motes of smartdust, designed to mitigate laser intensity and confuse sensors. The smaller drones rode in the FTL-bubble formed by the larger ships.

In these drones lay his primary hope of survival. To fulfill their functions as long-distance raiders, alien fighters were extremely light, lighter even than the ubiquitous frigates, and carried very little in the way of drone complements. With their forcefield shielding and extreme acceleration abilities, they were still difficult to destroy despite their relative flimsiness, but it meant his drones

and weapons would not face interference, and would be essentially free to operate up until the point they were directly destroyed by enemy weapons fire.

And if that didn't work, he had a forcefield generator of his own, unusual for a ship of his relatively small size. That came courtesy of his specialty in ferrying valuable cargo.

He had asserted earlier that, since he had warning, they had relatively good chances. He had meant it. These kinds of raids relied heavily on the element of surprise, the fighters using their Paradox Drives to blink in somewhere undetected, then racing up to their target at the kind of FTL speeds that only they were capable of. In the moment their FTL shells merged with the target's, they would release weapons, traveling at nearly the speed of light relative to their target, where they could literally drop rocks out the window and still be extremely dangerous.

This first pass was the most dangerous, and often annihilated their unprepared targets. Usually, given the extreme speed of the fighters, there would not be time between sensor detection and weapons deployment for the target to mount an effective response; the odds were generally not good.

If finishing-off was needed, they would fly back to do it, a process that often took substantial lengths of time, given the fighters' tendency to substantially overshoot the target on the first pass. If the target looked mostly intact, the second pass usually never happened; an evading target, even a cargo ship, was difficult to target at high relativistic speeds, and it was often necessary to pull up alongside at low relative speeds, which risked fighter loss.

That was where their chances lay.

He kept his metaphorical eyes fixed on the rapidly approaching ships. His chances were better than might otherwise be expected, but he didn't want to get valuable mages killed just because he fudged a calculation—especially since it would impact the career of his mental backup when it was activated to replace him. There wouldn't be time for him to observe the weapons drop and respond; he had to predict it, and preempt it at precisely the right moment.

Laplace had been doing this a long time, and had survived his share of similar scrapes; the captain and other crew accepted his suggested plan in its entirety, without suggesting amendments. They'd be useful in other stages of the fight—if there were other stages—but these early stages, with their high-precision, high-speed maneuvering, was all on him. The pilot was responsible for navigation, not combat maneuvering, after all.

He cruised in his cloud of escort drones, giving no sign that he had been given warning, even showing a few signs of the kind of panic that'd be expected of a vessel that spotted unexpected adversaries, hastily shifting drones around in an attempt at defense and gunning his engine in a seeming attempt to outrun the fighters. Unseen, he stored thruster power instead, not really using his full speed.

The ship watched the milliseconds tick by, as the other ships came inexorably closer. As he usually did, he spared a moment of thought for his girlfriend, the cruiser HSS *Jeanne d'Arc,* who he always thought had a rather æsthetically designed hull. He also took a moment to think about HSS *Flavius Aetius,* though they hadn't spoken to each other in, what, a year now?

Then he disregarded his emotional subroutines and returned to the task at hand. He waited.

And waited.

Then the fighters finally achieved a barely subluminal relative speed, enabling a FTL shell merger. At that exact moment, they released their relativistic payloads, as they passed perpendicular to

Laplace's trajectory. Also at that exact moment, *Laplace* accelerated hard towards its relative zenith with fully charged engines. Defense drones poured into the space now vacated, prepared to deflect, detonate, or otherwise eliminate whatever weapons had been launched, which turned out to be an incredible seven *Ravager*-class anti-ship missiles—raiders rarely expended more than three on a single ship, and each fighter only carried one.

Stymied by the unexpectedly rapid shift in trajectory of their target, the missiles attempted course correction, but had essentially no time to do so at their speed, especially with interference from the drones. Three suffered immediate guidance failures, confused by interference thrown their way by the drones, and flew off onto pointless trajectories, completing their detonation cycles in futile locations—because of the duration of engagement, the missiles had to begin detonating literally as they were being fired. Another one was lanced by a drone laser midflight, its rapid, immense explosion completing only after the explosion itself had already left the original FTL shell, keeping the near-lightspeed velocity of the original missile. Relativistic effects applied: time appeared to pass slowly on-board the missiles as observed from *Laplace,* and their explosions were compressed into turbulent discs from Lorentz contraction.

Another two missiles barely missed, and instead rammed his thruster exhaust—which was naturally being vectored downward to propel him up—and were torn apart. An expanding cloud of hot gas was generally harmless, except when rammed at near-light-speed. The missiles were much too flimsy to survive that. It was a trick he had learned from HSS *Jeanne d'Arc* back in the day.

The last one came hair-raisingly close, finally intercepted by the sacrifice of a drone gun platform at nearly the last moment.

Then came his turn, as the streaking fighters, moving too fast to significantly adjust their original courses, ran into a field of suddenly deployed drone mines, accompanied by a criss-cross of laser fire from his lower gunners. His laser cannons were woefully under-powered, but at this kind of range they were difficult to dodge, even with FTL sensors. Human gunners chose and extemporized general firing strategy, while his own subroutines corrected for the natural error humans made targeting at relativistic speeds and decided exact timing. It was as efficient a division of labor, processing-wise, as was possible.

The fighters, at the extreme speed they were traveling, could not respond, and their forcefields lit up with a brilliant staccato of mine explosions and laser impacts. Of the seven, only six managed to survive to streak out the other side, less than a millisecond later, with one of those six substantially damaged.

He allowed himself a moment of satisfaction as the fighters overshot, surging far into the distance. Then he wondered why a fighter squadron on a deep raid would waste seven expensive missiles on one transport ship. Still, now that they had utterly failed, it was likely they would withdraw, and his crew was already exchanging congrat—

No, wait, were they coming back?

Why would they come back?

If the ship had had teeth, it would have gritted them, as it braced for extended combat.

"*Tch*," Meiqing vocalized, observing the latest developments on her internal interface. "I thought it was over."

Ryouko rubbed her shoulders where the straps of her seat had dug in when g-forces overwhelmed

the ship's gravity stabilizers.

"*Laplace,* what are our chances now?" she asked.

"My apologies," the ship's voice responded instantly from the intercom, perfectly pleasant. "My computational resources are currently in emergency allocation mode. I will not answer low-priority queries."

It was not a particularly reassuring response, and a slight murmur passed through the assembled passengers: the eight magical girls strapped to seats attached to one wall, and the assorted Governance officials, military officers, and two civilian traders strapped to the others, all wearing magnetic boots.

Unlike the others, the eight of them had been allocated a low-bandwidth connection with the ship's current situation, which they followed avidly on their internal monitors. Though not directly in the ship's chain of command, they were temporarily under the command of the ship's captain, and of the ship itself—considered equivalent in command authority.

That was what the regulations stipulated, anyway, according to their TacComps. Thus far, however, they hadn't been asked to do anything but sit tight. In the back of their minds, though, their TacComps were doing their best to implant a last-minute burst of emergency tactical knowledge. Little could be done in so short a time, except to thrust into memory a few hasty short-term templates of space combat knowhow, templates that would quickly fade, but the attempt had to be made.

Ryouko gave Asami's hand a reassuring squeeze, since the girl seemed extremely tense, her eyes darting to and fro, back and forth, as if trying to follow something she couldn't see—which was probably exactly what she was doing.

Then Ryouko focused on the information they were being given. It really wasn't that detailed; just a vague spatial diagram of where enemies and larger drones were relative to the ship, along with damage estimates. The diagram swirled dizzyingly as all the participants, including the ship itself, maneuvered and spun through space, the group as a whole still moving toward distant Acheron at high FTL-speeds.

She requested field command mode, and her visualization slowed down dramatically, so that she could discern the to-and-fro of weapon launches, if only barely.

It's so fast! she commented to their group. *How on earth do magical girls keep up?*

In truth, no one is sure, Clarisse surprised her by responding. *Your reaction and attack speeds are nearly preternatural. The kind of instincts that* MG*s have—there is a lot of suspicion that they contain elements of precognition, but this has never been proven.*

But if we're traveling FTL, and there are FTL weapons and sensors, doesn't that already include elements of reverse causation, in a relativistic sense? Susana interjected. *What does precognition even mean in this context?*

She seemed unfazed by what sounded like Ryouko responding to herself, or what was, on closer inspection, a very unusual TacComp.

That is a very good question, Clarisse thought. The answer to that is unknown, since precognition is not a well-studied topic. Now is not—

She was interrupted by spontaneous cheering as one of the fighters, the most damaged, disappeared from the screen, detonating under a barrage of gunfire from the ship's aft guns.

Compared to the alien fighters, their transport might as well as been a sitting tortoise—but a tortoise in its shell was hard to crack for fighters designed for deep space raiding instead of sustained exchanges of fire.

Ryouko watched the situation quietly, even as Clarisse continued to regale the others with informative dialogue. The alien fighters were taking damage, but not fast enough, not by her eye. The transport was losing drones too quickly. Soon, weapons fire would start making it through to the ship itself.

As I was saying, now is not the time to discuss this, Clarisse said. *The relevant equations for this kind of combat take a while to learn, and it is at any rate too rapid for you to do them in your head. It seems, though, that magical girls have an excellent instinctive grasp of pseudo-relativistic combat, which some ascribe to the Incubators, though they have never confirmed nor denied this.*

There was brief pause, in an interim of time that was almost imperceptible to the outside world.

In any case, Clarisse thought, *as some of you have already realized, the situation is growing dire. Your TacComps will fill you in.*

Before Ryouko could ask, the knowledge appeared in her mind: their TacComps had taken the opportunity to network and, as the most computationally proficient, Clarisse had naturally taken the lead.

What do we do? one of the girls asked.

We have to help, Ryouko thought, having already reasoned it through. *Now that it's come to this, the longer we wait, the worse the situation.* Laplace!

There was no response.

Laplace! Captain Makuza!

〈*Brace for impact*,〉 *Laplace* thought, nearly devoid of affect.

The detonation, when it came, was surreal in its seeming languor. First came a rumble that seemed almost gentle, from her time-slowed perspective. The right edge of the metal ceiling above buckled inward, just barely slow enough for her to perceive—

And then it shattered, briefly expelling shards of metal before reversing, turning concave instead of convex. A sudden rush of air through the new two-meter wide hole testified to the fact that their compartment was now open to vacuum.

She clung to the seat straps that kept the torrent from drawing her upward, and the ship lurched. Screams sounded around her, until muted by the loss of air, or just as likely, Emergency Safety Packages.

Lung and sinus pressures safely equalized, Clarisse thought. *Damage minimal. Drawing on emergency oxygen reserves. Vacuum survival mechanisms activated.*

A man on the other side of the room, one of the assigned crew members, unbuckled himself and advanced, gesturing for calm.

"Someone will be here to repair the damage soon," he transmitted. "Remain calm. We will evacuate if necessary."

Compartments in the walls, floor, and remaining parts of the ceiling opened, and legged drones

crawled out, adhering magnetically to the various surfaces, breathing apparatuses in tow.

Ryouko looked up at the hole above her head, which appeared to extend through two other cargo compartments of the ship before finally reaching the vacuum of space, while Clarisse informed her that the reason it was only a hole was almost certainly forcefield mitigation of the weapon impact. Incidentally, forcefield energy stores were now down to 60%.

She took a moment to check that, yes, forcefields were unidirectional. It would be quite unhelpful to have a forcefield that funnelled internal explosions back inward. Unfortunately, this meant the main forcefield was also unhelpful to prevent atmosphere from escaping.

She ran through her reasoning one last time, to make sure her logic was sound. As far as she could tell, it was, and Clarisse raised no objections.

We have to go! Ryouko asserted, releasing her straps and standing up. *We have no choice!*

She advanced towards the crew member, without looking back at the others. Thus far she had been the most assertive about needing to help, believing it justified by the exigencies of the situation, but now that she was here, a large part of her felt a singular reluctance to actually *do it.* She couldn't look back, lest skeptical or fearful looks from the others weaken her resolve or, just as bad, introduce dissension. Better for everyone that she appear gung-ho.

Artificial gravity was still in place, she was glad to see.

She dismissed her field command mode.

"Your spacesuits; where are they?" she transmitted, now back in normal time.

The crewman, a junior lieutenant, pointed at various lockers scattered around the room.

"You mean to go out?" he transmitted.

She nodded, then looked back at the other girls, who were in various stages of standing themselves up, one by one. There was, she was glad to see, no sign of dissent, no one holding out from fear or tactical disagreement. That was reassuring.

All she knew about space combat—the mind-blowing speed, the vast amounts of radiation being flung about, and the strange and alien physics that came into play—combined to create a terrified feeling in the pit of her stomach, which she hoped to confine to just her stomach.

But if there was anything the endless train of simulations had taught them, it was about how to shove those thoughts away, until it was a direct matter of life and death, so that one could ride on combat instinct alone, and there was no safe place to balk and return to.

Pierre, support us if you can, she thought.

The ship didn't respond, and this time she didn't know if it was because it wouldn't, or that it couldn't.

But then the lockers snapped open on their own, and racks of spacesuits sped outward, and somehow avoided striking any of the girls standing. A large compartment in the rear of the room slid out, revealing an assortment of weapons Ryouko wouldn't have guessed were there: heavy laser cannon, contact explosives, missile launchers…

She blinked.

Thanks, she thought.

There were no grief cubes, but there was no more time left. They'd have to go with what they carried on their persons.

She reached for a suit—

Transform first, Clarisse reminded.

Right.

Earlier, transforming in front of so many people might have bothered her, but the simulations had taught her that very few people in a combat zone cared about how frilly her costume was.

There were a few moments of hasty equipment gathering, the others following her example by enchanting the suits to merge with their own costumes. Here in space, the suits provided useful direct protection—from the vacuum, radiation, and micrometeorites—as well as providing propulsion and a few other capabilities. In her mind, Ryouko stitched together pieces of a rudimentary plan, skimmed heavily from suggestions from Clarisse. Nothing fancy, just basic principles: deploy quickly, move quickly, stay moving. Keep on guard, and watch every major combatant, friendly or enemy. Basic principles, easy to forget. She disseminated it, and no one argued—of course, there was hardly anything worth arguing about.

Then, when they were done, they stood under the hole, looking up at the shattered, unfiltered starfield of an FTL shell, before the wide eyes of the other passengers, and those of the damage control crewman with his drones, who was waiting for them to leave so he could patch the hole.

Ryouko looked around her, seeing the world through a fiber-optic-laced helmet panel, one designed to transmit much of the EM spectrum. Direct perception was precious to a magical girl, something the designers had apparently considered, if one compared the space suit helmet with the impassive panel-less infantry helmets.

On the other hand, she had enchanted the suit, so who knew how the panels really operated anymore?

No one seemed to be moving.

Well, here goes, I guess, she thought.

She took a breath, and vaulted upward with a sure power that seemed quite at odds with her customary build and appearance. The internal features of the ship flashed by, and then she found herself staring at the endless depth of space. Instead of the carefully reconstructed starfield she had seen all this time from inside the ship, she now saw the raw light that poured into the FTL shell, a tortured misshaped smear that failed to resemble the normal night sky in any way. The radiation would have been tremendous, she knew, were it not for arduously careful construction of the FTL shell metric. It was painfully disorienting to look at, or would have been to ordinary humans; that's what the textbooks said, anyway.

Then the ion thrusters on her suit fired, canceling her inertia, and she realized that the moment she had cleared the ships artificial gravity, there was nothing left to impede the speed of her jump, and she would have kept going otherwise. The counter-acceleration had kept her barely within the ship's forcefield, which provided a modicum of protection as the others emerged.

It happens, Clarisse thought, having been the one to toggle the rockets. *Stay focused.*

Ryouko wondered for a moment why Clarisse hadn't just warned her beforehand, since the device

could read her thoughts, but instead thought to herself:

None of us have any idea what we're doing.

We need to do this quickly! Ryouko thought, to the others. *We have to take what surprise we can get!*

To their credit, she hadn't really needed to say that; all seven of the others had followed readily in her wake.

Too late! Ngo Thi An thought.

The girl in question threw up a bright orange barrier, coursing with tendrils of light, just in time to intercept an incoming laser bombardment, both the ship's forcefield and the barrier shimmering with the effort of absorption and dispersion. Their telekinesis and magnetism specialist seized a set of missiles heading towards them, pushing them onto wildly irrelevant trajectories, one even heading back towards its source.

Damn, the squid responded fast! and *How did I even know there were lasers there?* competed for attention in her mind, but instead she teleported over to a certain Adriana Calderas, melee fighter and conjuror.

…Targeting… passenger… bastards… transmitter… damaged, Laplace *transmitted, rather unsuccessfully.*

Inside her helmet, her breathing seemed suddenly extremely loud.

It was no longer time for talking.

Sustained ship-to-ship combat in the presence of FTL was constrained by the need of the attacking ships to stay within the FTL shell of the defending ship or ships. This necessitated matching velocities to within at least one times light-speed and maintaining it. Otherwise, the difficulty of getting weapons into the FTL shell, combined with the sheer difficulty of hitting an object moving faster than light relative to oneself—not even theoretically possible for most weapons, though it depended on trajectory—made an attack little more than a futile gesture. Only heavy FTL-denial weapons, such as the *SHERMAN* main gun or *Eviscerator* laser, and various more-or-less reliable FTL interference devices could upset those dynamics.

Practically, this meant that the alien fighters were obliged to maintain quite low speeds relative to *Laplace,* which had a fairly small FTL shell only a few dozen kilometers across. If any of the fighters gained too much relative velocity, especially astern, it was liable to drop out of the shell entirely, the resulting gravitational distortions generating an enormous separation of distance.

There were various accessory details to be considered: as much as was possible, *Laplace* would try to maneuver within the FTL shell, as well as use its engines and those of its accompanying droneships to reshape the shell to kick attackers out. The attackers would counter this by modulating their own engines.

Occasionally, if one side had a strong advantage in engine power or in total mass, it would make the decision to destabilize the shell entirely, blowing everyone involved widely separate. It was a risky move, and rarely done.

The upshot was: the alien fighters would not be moving at fast—or even relativistic—speeds, relative to *Laplace* or the magical girls surrounding it.

This did not mean they were slow.

Gravity powers seem like just the thing, Asami had thought earlier, *but I don't know if I have enough control over it to safely use too much power. I'm not sure I can manage it correctly in this kind of environment.*

If it comes to it, do what you can, Ryouko had thought. *Hold back if you have to, but you have to try.*

Adriana and Ryouko maintained careful contact, as they hurtled themselves through the vacuum by combined thruster and telekinetic push, trying to match vector with one of the alien fighters, as Ryouko blinked to avoid attacks, collisions with friendly drones, and even friendly fire from the drone gun platforms and the still active *Laplace.* In this airless, gravity-less environment, it was possible to achieve astounding speeds.

Despite all of that, she maintained a certain cold-blooded focus, a mixture of battle tension, subtle desperation, and a predatory desire to take down her enemy.

Come on, Ryouko thought, eying an alien fighter that they were coming close to matching velocities with, its movements restricted by a steady barrage of impossibly-fast icicles launched by one of the other girls, laser fire from *Laplace,* and one of the gravitational anomalies Asami was using to try and manipulate the battlefield.

As a whole, Asami, who Ryouko could barely see from this distance—and hardly had time to look at anyway—seemed to be conducting herself rather well, accelerating powerfully using a personal anomaly, easily diverting missiles and projectiles away from herself, and using a cloud of debris to mitigate laser fire. The alien fighters were visibly struggling to turn and accelerate properly under her influence. It was astoundingly useful.

Yes! the ice mage thought, as one of the fighters on the other side of *Laplace* broke apart in a mass of shrapnel under the combined weight of icicles, suicide drones, and the ship's aft guns.

Ryouko smiled slightly, but only for a moment.

Come on, she thought, blinking the two of them out of the path of a laser shot she had somehow anticipated. A moment later, Adriana, who she was pulling by the hand, conjured and almost instantly dispelled a ten-meter-wide steel wall to their left, which lasted just long enough to deflect a hurtling piece of metal debris.

When the moment finally arrived, and their velocities were closely enough aligned, she blinked directly next to the fighter's forcefields, the two of them moving in near-perfect synchronicity with the ship. That was something she required: she could not change velocity by teleporting.

She had only an instant to take in the pitch-black, nearly indistinguishable alien hull, the strangely bulbous design, the slightly protruding forcefield generator.

And then Adriana slammed downward on the ship with both fists, gleaming gold triangular knuckles suddenly searingly bright against the forcefield. The instant the force field failed under the weight of that force, two giant steel blades, shaped like triangles and as tall as the two of them combined, appeared before her fists and rammed forward into the fighter.

Ryouko blinked them out, and they were conscious of the ship's exotic matter containment failing behind them, the material blowing itself and the ship apart.

There was a very brief moment for Ryouko to review the situation. *Laplace*'s drone counts

seemed to have mostly stabilized, excepting suicide drones. This was likely due to their no longer being a serious target. Still, by now, his drone complement was quite low, and unlikely to be helpful.

Ryouko, Meiqing thought.

Ryouko didn't need an explanation. Reading the necessary information off of their internal communications, she took a long ten seconds to charge a longer teleport, as Adriana protected the two of them.

She re-emerged next to Meiqing, Adriana dove away to fend for herself, and she turned her attention to her new destination.

How exactly does your power work, Meiqing? Ryouko had asked earlier, while they were still in the cargo hold. *I mean, Earth powers are nice and all, but does that even mean anything out in space?*

Well, specifically, I can manipulate the outer surface of any planetary body with a sufficiently high surface gravity. The rules for what "outer surface" *means are sort of hard to explain, but that's the gist of it. Not as broad as telekinesis, but I'm a lot more powerful with the things I can control. It's a tradeoff.*

What defines planetary body? Ryouko had pressed. *Would a ship count?*

Meiqing had thought about it for a moment.

Yes, actually, but it'd have to be a fairly big ship. I can give you an exact number, but I'm thinking something maybe twenty kilometers in diameter. We're talking—well, actually, no kind of ship I know about.

But it depends on surface gravity specifically? Ryouko had asked. *Not something else?*

Yes.

Ryouko teleported Meiqing and herself next to another of the fighters, one that was still flying freely in close proximity to another one, except that Asami had contrived to increase its surface gravity to a tiny two centimeters per second squared. Tiny enough to require essentially no effort on Asami's part, and also roughly the surface gravity of a twenty-kilometer asteroid.

This time, Ryouko's velocity was only poorly matched, so the fighter rapidly sped away from them, but it didn't matter. Meiqing was close enough.

The fighter stopped abruptly in its tracks, Meiqing seizing the vessel and sealing its weapons ports. She hurled the vessel directly into the path of the other fighter, setting up a head-on collision. Before the alien pilot could respond, the other fighter's AI attempted to veer away automatically, but not fast enough.

The mutual collision resulted in a satisfying dual-forcefield failure and total destruction.

There was only one fighter left, but before it could be destroyed, it gunned its thrusters and performed an emergency exit of the FTL shell, its escape causing a perturbation that briefly sent the tortured light from that part of the sky spinning.

Hmpf, it ran, Meiqing thought, as they regathered near the ship.

No, Laplace transmitted, apparently having finally brought his transmitters back online. *It's*

coming back for another pass. Check your tactical readouts.

He's right, Asami thought, without bothering to explain how she knew. *But we have time; he's pretty far away.*

It's likely trying to do another weapons drop, Laplace thought. I have no idea why they're so determined to destroy us today.

Then let's shoot it out of the sky when it remerges with the shell, Ryouko thought. *This kind of timing thing is exactly what we're good at, or so Clarisse keeps telling me.*

For once they had plenty of time. The ice mage nearby spent the time growing an icicle to incredible size: perhaps fifteen meters long. Adriana summoned one of her signature metal pieces, entrusting it for the telekinetic to throw.

Ryouko, for her part, reached deep, and summoned her Scorpion.

The giant artillery piece floated in front of her, obviously weighing nothing, and she settled in to wait the remaining seconds.

When the moment came, and the fighter appeared in their sky for an unimaginably small amount of time, it was immediately speared by no less than three projectiles, in a feat of timing that should have been impossible. They watched expectantly for the ship to tear itself apart.

Ryouko felt a sudden burning pain, one that seemed to emanate not from any one source, but from the entire front of her body. She instinctively reached up in desperation for her helmet. Exclamations of pain sounded in her mind from the others.

Hostiles ter… minated, Clarisse thought, strangely sluggish. *Seve… re radiation…*

〈PROTECTIVE FUGUE INITIATED〉

The alien fighter had, in a last suicidal attack, configured its core to disintegrate in a particularly radiation-heavy manner—and ejected the core just before entering their FTL shell, entrusting its own residual shell to carry both ship and core in. It had fully expected to get shot down immediately.

You know, all-in-all, we were pretty lucky, Clarisse thought. *My post-combat review indicates at least ten other mistakes that could have gotten you killed, had the enemy had heavier weapons.*

Ryouko grunted in annoyance, from her reclined position on the bed. She had her "window" set to transparent, so it was displaying a soothing starfield, carefully reprocessed to remove the distortions of the FTL shell. Her scant personal effects, including the now ever-present CubeBot, lay scattered across a nearby dresser. All-in-all, the room was small, since space on a starship was usually precious. It contained a bed, a dresser, a small desk, and a small closet.

Read the mood, why don't you? she thought. *No one wants to talk about this right now.*

She raised her hand up in front of her. The peeling had finally stopped, but the red spots dotting her skin still looked angry and bloody. She wondered what her face looked like but, on second thought, had no desire to check.

Well, it had only been sixteen hours. Without a MG healer, it was too much to expect more, even with blood nanites, the full force of the ship's modern infirmary, and soul gem healing. Speaking

of which, her soul gem had apparently gotten pretty low while she was out—using the Scorpion had been a mistake. She should have recharged first, but fortunately the ship, with its grief cube stores, was able to recover them.

It was fine now, though.

Speaking of reviewing the past, Clarisse though, *I was filing some of your more recent memories and discovered something rather interesting or, perhaps, disturbing.*

Yes?

Well…

The room faded away from her for a moment, and a familiar face appeared before her, the face of a woman with overflowing, shockingly pink hair, white ribbons, and golden eyes. The woman put a gloved finger to her lips, and winked.

Then the vision—or rather, the memory reconstruction—disappeared, and she again found herself looking at her sparsely decorated passenger cabin.

Since when could you do that? she demanded, almost indignantly.

Since I unexpectedly recovered the memory of your vision during routine filing, Clarisse thought. *And, no, I'm not supposed to be able to. I must say, my confidence in the tenets of this Cult is much higher than it used to be.*

Ryouko put her hand above her head, on her pillow, shifting her gaze upward slightly.

Can you do anything with it? she thought, trying to think through the implications. *Broadcast it, anything like that?*

No, unfortunately, Clarisse thought. *It's kind of interesting. Literally the only thing I can do is play it back to you. Everything else I've tried, it's almost as if there is no memory.*

That's… strange, Ryouko thought.

Yes, Clarisse thought. *It's hard to explain, but I have a lot of built-in tools that are not working on this, so I have to draw a copy manually, if it can be called that. Analogous to an artist drawing something by memory. I'm… working on it.*

Ryouko thought for a moment. There was a question she wanted to ask, and it seemed relevant at the moment.

Clarisse, are you sentient?

For a moment, she thought her TacComp won't answer, but then the device thought:

That's a rather sudden question.

I'm curious, and I sort of want to know what exactly I've got sitting on my spine.

There was another pause.

I think I am. But from your perspective, that's insufficient to prove anything. The only way to prove anything would be a Volokhov analysis on my current state, which would be technically challenging.

Ryouko thought for a moment.

That's good enough for me, though I don't know what exactly I'm supposed to do about it. Does it bother you being my servant?

Only if I try to think about it in a philosophical sense. Better not to worry, I think. Starships don't sit around being bothered that they never got a chance to be anything else. Speaking of which, Laplace *is an interesting ship, if a bit quirky.*

Huh, Ryouko thought, drawing the obvious implication that Clarisse was spending time talking to the ship behind her back.

If anything, I'd be more concerned about the fact that we're not part of the fully-validated computing framework, unlike AIs. We're pretty well designed, and the electronic components are Volokhov-friendly, but as for the organic components, no one knows. The designers will have to face the music sometime, and I don't know what they're going to say. The way I think about it, though, most Humans are Volokhov-friendly, by definition, and we're made of the same stuff, organized in mostly similar fashion. Oh, I'm not worried about myself, but other Version Twos, obviously.

Ryouko just blinked, not really sure what to say in response to the somewhat confusing train of thought. It was the longest continuous chain of musings Clarisse had produced yet, and unlike so much of her other thoughts, had little direct bearing on Ryouko herself. Was Clarisse… chatting?

I guess I am talking too much, Clarisse thought, responding—as she sometimes did—to Ryouko's implicit thought. *Anyway, what do you think about Asami-chan?*

Ryouko would have tilted her head if she weren't lying on a pillow.

What about her? she thought.

That's what I thought. Nothing important. You should sleep and heal off some of that radiation damage.

I guess.

By the time they finally landed on the ground at Charon starport—yet another day later—most of the radiation damage had healed off, aided by the ship's substantial grief cube stockpiles.

As their ship descended through the atmosphere, the shockwave of descent mitigated by a partial anti-grav assist, the group of them crowded the viewing ports—by this point no longer required to stay in bed for health purposes, with even most of the cosmetic radiation damage having worn off.

Compared to the cities of Earth, Charon was not a particularly impressive city. As they entered final descent, and the city's buildings began to look like more than just square insets on the grey-and-white ground, Ryouko mused that it would have been possible to see the far edge of the city, the point where the urban concentration began to fade and open land became more visible, from one of the taller buildings in the vicinity. This feat was usually impossible within the crowded megapolises of Earth.

They had been briefed on what to expect upon arrival. Garrison-duty, while relatively serious on the edge of the frontier, was considerably more relaxed at great distance from the front, which was why it was possible to justify shipping newly trained girls into the area for week-long shifts, to join a few veterans on longer-term relief rotations. Here, the more conventional human garrison consisted of a single regular infantry division, again on a relief rotation, along with a larger

contingent of colonial militia. Heavy weapons were rare.

Combat threats consisted of rare fighter raids, a theoretical risk of bombardment raids, and the possibility of commando raids to destroy or disrupt critical installations, such as its sulfur mines, whose output was destined for export to agricultural or industrial worlds. Charon was the principal off-world trading center, whose civilian population and facilities they would be designated to defend in the event of attack.

It had sounded like a vacation when they had first read up on it, learning that the last major enemy action of note was a months-old bomber raid on the planet's orbital fuel plants, which was after all a Navy responsibility, not theirs. Still, after the experience on the transport, Ryouko was a bit more wary of assurances that the aliens rarely ever ventured so deep into Human space.

The first thing they noticed was the blue-green sky and red-tinted sun, obvious even during descent. It was expected; the planet's volcanism had a decided effect on the passage of light to the surface.

The second thing they noticed was the ambient temperature as they stepped into the starport.

"It's hot," Meiqing said unnecessarily, peering up through a sky panel at the sky. "You'd think with all this atmospheric dust it wouldn't be this warm."

One of the advantages of having a universally enhanced population was that one could have much less regard for climate control of buildings. On Earth, many buildings were allowed to freely oscillate in temperature, secure in the knowledge that the comfort zones of their inhabitants were very, very wide. It appeared that the same was true of the colonies, as indicated by the fact that the starport was a very balmy forty-five degrees Celsius, according to her internal thermometer.

"The planet is still young, so geothermal heat is still highly relevant," Ryouko said. "And we're very close to the star."

"Yeah, I know," Meiqing said automatically, by now used to Ryouko's literal-minded corrections. "I read about the planet too."

A militia officer greeted them as they stepped into—what was this? A terminal? That was Clarisse called it, anyway.

After they were done exchanging greetings and gawking around at the gray, unfamiliarly utilitarian starport architecture, they followed up by gawking some more on their way to the shuttle, at the rows of shops dispensing food, drinks, entertainment, and other assorted conveniences. Crowds of people milled about, doing—well, Ryouko had no idea what they're doing.

"They're waiting," the officer said, before any of them ventured to ask, clearly reciting a prepared explanation. "The transportation networks out here aren't as perfectly efficient as Earth, and a lot of people need to arrive from far away, so they get here early."

"And the shops are Capitalism," Ryouko said, making the mental connection.

The others nodded.

"Earth must be an interesting place," one of the other girls, not a native Earther, said, looking at the rest of them skeptically. She had nothing to gawk at, obviously.

"A lot of things are different out here," the officer said, smiling with a hint of sardonicism.

Whatever urge they might have had to explore and perhaps buy something went unfulfilled, as they were hustled into a waiting group vehicle. Looking out at the city, with its complete lack of aboveground traffic tubes and seemingly chaotic vehicle traffic, was an enlightening experience. Smaller colonies generally had the necessary prebuilt infrastructure to support a more elaborate traffic control system, except for cluttersome traffic tubes, but rarely implemented full traffic control as long as population density was low, usually finding it sufficient to implement basic automated driving, coordinated speeds, and the low bit of intelligence necessary to prevent stopping at intersections.

It was one thing knowing that intellectually; another thing entirely to undergo the unnerving experience of driving through an intersection at full speed, seemingly barely avoiding a collision. Another thing that seemed obvious in retrospect, but had come unexpectedly: "Advertisements," in the form of giant "billboards" that appeared to react to whoever passed by, generally hawking tourist goods in their direction. Apparently they were encouraged to buy little souvenir volcanoes, vials of sulfur compounds, and submit-it-yourself designs for T-shirts commenting on the heat. Also, there were hot springs, as if anyone would want to bake themselves any further in this climate.

Clarisse then informed her helpfully that without government privacy restrictions, advertisers would almost certainly prefer to access one's internal viewspace and advertise that way; the TacComp had already turned down numerous requests for just such access.

Still, while the cityscape was novel compared to Earth, it quickly became obvious that there was very little in terms of genuine sights and monuments. The Earth cities Ryouko had visited on family vacations and school trips had generally had their fair share of monuments and ancient buildings, reconstructed or otherwise, and one could often detect, under the shell of modernity, the shadow of history. Here, there was none of that.

And, despite the somewhat lower traffic speed, the trip was short. The city was not that large, and it was only in about fifteen minutes that they reached their designated lodgings. It was reasonably close to the city's regular infantry barracks, but separate from the base itself, as suited officer lodgings. In a fact that had been occasionally implied but never explicitly stated, it was also suitable placement for a group of what were still teenage girls, away from the considerably older infantry.

Ryouko wondered at the wisdom of placing so many of the cities magical girls in one location. On the other hand, they were still divided into numerous clusters over the settled area of the planet, and this was hardly a true warzone. Far from it, it was becoming obvious.

They were the second of the two groups of their training cohort that would be housed here, and she expected a few of the others to be there to welcome them.

She didn't expect a full welcoming committee, with all seven other girls waiting for them at the surface entrance—Ryouko still instinctively kept track of what floor entrances were on—to greet them.

It had been surprising to see them all gathered as their vehicle pulled up to the curb next to the unfamiliarly short building. It had been downright unsettling when they got out, into the warm, foul-smelling air, onto the unfamiliar pavement, and the other girls began filtering into them, shaking hands and making comments to the effect of "Great job out there!" and "What was it like?."

It took her a moment to realize what was going on, but finally, she understood. They were heroes. Minor heroes, but heroes.

They underwent initial orientation, touring the local base with one of the more permanently stationed girls, a certain Selécine Kabila, who was on a demon hunting "relaxation" rotation. They learned that their duties were as limited as their previous reading had implied—they were to familiarize themselves with the combat resources and layout of the area, introduce themselves to local commanders, and respond to any alarms raised by the planetary monitoring systems. But, since they were only passing by on a very transient basis, they weren't expected to integrate themselves any more deeply than that.

At the end of their tour, they shook hands with a local "Major General of Volunteers"—a weird term intended to contrast with the regular military, even though the regular military was also almost entirely voluntary. Selécine then explained that, since it was a religious holiday for the Church of Hope, the Church members in the area would be holding a party later that night, and that they were all welcome to attend.

Though the girls uniformly agreed to consider it, attendance was low, only six of them RSVP'ing to the list and meeting Selécine outside the building at the designated time of 23:00 local time—19:00 Mitakihara Time—and one of them, Asami, was mostly just following her. Ryouko wondered how exactly the Cult kept up recruiting, at this rate.

It didn't matter; Ryouko had her own reasons. She had looked up what exact holiday they were celebrating.

October Three was its rather strange name. The birthday of the Goddess, one of the few pieces of information that the Cult had, based on a similar remembrance held yearly by Akemi Homura until her disappearance.

Ryouko, who had more reason than most to believe in the existence of such a Goddess, felt that the evidence was compelling enough for her to attend a birthday party held on the Goddess's behalf. It felt like the right thing to do, if she had indeed once been human. Even Clarisse agreed, now that the device had personal evidence of the encounter, though Clarisse had couched it in terms of possible future pay-off, which seemed a little crass.

She had feared some sort of somber, awkward religious ceremony, but it turned out Selécine had not been kidding when she had described the gathering as a party. Homura had apparently once said that the Goddess would have preferred it that way.

"So after we got here, it seems like someone's TacComp had the bright idea to do some research on the jewelry you're always wearing," Asami said, watching her over the top of a giant glass of some sort of fruit-ice concoction. "I didn't know it was a family thing."

"It's not really that big a deal," Ryouko said, looking aside briefly, putting a hand to her hair. "It just might be useful if I run into any of them in the future. That's how I think of it."

She felt awkward in her formal dress, partly because she rarely wore it, partly because it was too formal for the party and she had nothing intermediate, and partly because it seemed to run strongly counter to the fashion trends of the colony, which ran heavily in the direction of scanty—which made sense, given the heat. Then again, she would have felt awkwardly exposed wearing any of the things the other girls were wearing, and at least Asami was in the same boat.

At least there was plenty of space. She had heard that space was cheap in the colonies, but this apartment seemed huge to her eye, even compared to her paternal grandparents' place in the suburbs. Consequently, they didn't have to rub elbows with anyone, which she had never previously realized she was annoyed by—until now, that was.

"Hmm, well after this recent incident," Asami said, looking her in the eye seriously, but seeming

tired, “some of them are saying that it proves you have the family stuff, whatever that means. Makes you a better catch, in other words.”

“Right, right,” Ryouko deflected, pretending to find interest in something happening across the room. It was not a topic she really wanted to think about.

“I don’t think that’s fair, if you don’t mind me saying so,” Asami continued. “I mean, the rest of us were there too, but suddenly it’s like just because you have the family names, what you do is more memorable. Expected of you, or something. Even if you did show great leadership.”

Ryouko snapped back to attention.

“What? Leadership?” she asked.

“Good evening,” Selécine said, appearing at their table. This particular girl kept a young physical age, like everyone there, but was strictly speaking a Major, and for once her appearance made it vaguely plausible; the girl’s sharp brown features and reserved hair style made her seem older than her “age.”

“Am I interrupting anything?” she asked, a moment later, sitting at one of the remaining chairs.

“Oh, no,” Asami said politely.

For a moment the girl just looked at the two of them silently.

“So how are you finding your drink?” Selécine asked, looking at Asami.

Ryouko missed whatever response Asami might have made, because Selécine simultaneously thought to her:

Have you told your friend why you’re here?

Ryouko blinked in surprised, then hid her expression, pretending to listen to the conversation.

What do you mean? she thought, testing if the other girl meant what she thought she meant.

Your vision. The Mother made sure we were informed that you were one of the lucky ones. I take it you haven’t mentioned anything to Asami here, then?

The Mother? You mean Kyouko? Ryouko thought. *Uh, no, I haven’t.*

You call her Kyouko, Selécine thought, amused, still looking for all the world as if she were completely fascinated in the meaningless conversation she was foisting on Asami. *That’d be meaningful in Japanese, but since we’re speaking Standard, I can’t tell if it means anything, though I thought you might call her Sakura instead.*

Ryouko wrinkled her brow slightly at the strange comment, then relaxed.

Yes, she’s not big on formalities, she thought. *I’m sure you know about the mentorship thing.*

Of course, the other girl thought. *She was sure you’d come here, you know, after your experience, to celebrate the Goddess’s birthday.*

Ryouko took her time responding, taking a moment to listen to Asami opine happily on the diversification of fruit strains in the colonies. She noticed that, strangely, Selécine sounded much older telepathically than in speech.

It seemed like the right thing to do, she thought.

You do believe in the Goddess, then?

Ryouko took a breath, the bright image of the pink-haired woman flashing through her mind again. She remembered what Clarisse had said.

It seems definitely likely that she exists, she thought, without elaborating.

Instead of relaying an explicit thought, Selécine relayed a frisson of amusement.

Well, I won't pry, the girl thought. *But, are you interested in joining our Church? The Mother would be pleased.*

Not right now, Ryouko thought, trying to convey bluntness. *Maybe later, but right now I don't think I want to. After all, if I have my reading of doctrine correct, she saves everyone regardless of whether I even believe she exists or not. So, you know…*

Ryouko smiled sheepishly, hoping it didn't seem weird to Asami if she saw it.

Instead of being offended, Selécine seemed amused again.

That is correct, the other girl thought. *Well, we'll see about the future, won't we?*

There was a moment of mental silence, while Ryouko thought further.

It'd be nice if Akemi Homura would just answer questions, wouldn't it? Ryouko thought. *Instead of disappearing like that.*

That surprised the other girl, who lost a beat in her on-going conversation with Asami, before recovering and thinking:

Well, of course. Why do you think we're looking for her?

Suddenly, Clarisse pulled her attention back to the conversation, and Ryouko, based on the TacComp's recording of the conversation was able to quickly say:

"Oh, yeah, I think durian tastes terrible, too. I have no idea why anyone would like it."

Suddenly realizing she had left her drink strangely untouched, Ryouko grabbed her pineapple-like drink and chugged part of it, in a rather unladylike manner.

"Well, for what it's worth, I hear it tastes complete different after the military smell enhancements," Selécine said. "But, uh—"

The girl gestured in the direction of a far wall, and they turned. Ryouko's eyes swept over the rest of the room, past the larger main table, kitchen area, living area, another room that seemed to serve no real purpose except to add more space. Finally, her eyes fell on a distant 2−D projection, flattening against the living room wall where most of the girls were gathered. Within the image, Kyouko was preparing to give a sermon somewhere on far-off Earth, standing at her podium with trademark apple. She looked out over an imaginary crowd, radiating a kind of serene, happy authority that seemed decidedly at odds with what Ryouko saw normally. However, having met Kyouko personally, something about it seemed odd.

The room quieted, and Ryouko settled in. This would be interesting.

"We are here to remember, and commemorate. Not just a sacrifice, but a life, though it is a life we

know so little about. We are here to remember a girl whose life no longer exists, so that in our memory, at least, it will still be intact. We do not do this in exchange for future reward—our reward is assured—but merely as a gesture, a thanksgiving, so that the Goddess may remember what it's like to be human. Centuries ago, when our prophet was new to this world…"

"…and thus, as was once said, let us eat, drink, and make merry. The Goddess wants us to celebrate, and celebrate we shall. The best we can do is to strive to live our lives well, and that we shall try to do. Thank you."

The room erupted in applause, and Maki participated politely, but unlike the others, she was finding it difficult to obey the sentiment. She stared at the eyes of the holographic girl before them, those beautiful cold eyes, unbearably ancient, and wondered.

Discontinuity

“One of the linchpins of the economy of Human Governance, instantaneous interstellar communication was one of the last of the “miracle” technologies to emerge from the post-war period, not reaching full development until after the actual colonization of the three Core Worlds that formed the first colonization wave. Since the development of such a technology was hardly certain, relying after all on novel physics, Governance had formed its colonization plans on the assumption that interplanetary communication would rely entirely on data carried by relatively slow FTL starships. With the actualization of the IIC Relay system, colonization schemes were quickly redesigned, with plans made for a greatly expanded second colonization wave. Easy communication made possible colonial economies that would be much closer knit, single-currency zones that could extend over multiple systems, and, perhaps most importantly, a much greater degree of central control and cultural influence. “

“By this point in time, well into the early part of the second colonization wave, the governments and cultures of the first-wave Core Worlds had already developed substantial independence from Earth, an occurrence that had been grudgingly anticipated and tolerated by Governance. Although this development could not be easily reversed, Governance would make sure that its influence on later colony worlds would be substantially more direct. While colony worlds were afforded a measure of independence and self-rule, Governance now found itself capable of enforcing certain legal policies—and, more importantly, its ideology—far more effectively than it had anticipated, and it used this ability freely. Moreover, Governance could now much more effectively manage the economy of the Human Governance as a whole, ensuring that it could perpetually lurk over the shoulder of the colony worlds’ Capitalist economies, adjusting capital flows as it saw fit. In this, it could wield the powerful bludgeon of Earth’s enormous manufacturing capacity—but it had to do so carefully: while Earth’s manufacturing capacity could supply all the needs of the colonies entirely by itself, this would effectively extend Earth’s command economy over all of human space, an inefficient result. Consequently, Earth-Colonial trade was strictly controlled, and Earth’s surplus was carefully diverted into industrial expansion in the colonies.”

“Control and cultural interchange are limited principally by three important factors. Firstly, restrictive policies on civilian immersive VR prevent interstellar communication from achieving the fidelity of face-to-face interaction, a necessity for true cultural synchrony. Secondly, the IIC Relay system, while free of the limitations of transmission latency, suffers from continual bandwidth and routing limitations, due to the high costs of constructing and maintaining even one IIC relay. Many colony worlds have only one, and non-Governance sponsored colonies often have none. Governance Representatives and military officials, occupying the highest priority slots, can experience fluid, low-latency communication, but for everyone else IIC-time is a precious resource. Installing the massive bandwidth it would take to make large colonial governments mere extensions of Earth Governance would be extremely expensive. Finally, Governance does not feel it in its interests to enforce too much homogeneity, for the same reasons that it tries to prevent a total monoculture from appearing on Earth; it feels that the loss of cultural diversity does carry some cost, and that a greater variety of cultures provides greater civilizational robustness should a cataclysmic event occur.”

“With the arrival of the Cephalopods and the demonstration of a working example of instantaneous interstellar travel, research into the fundamentals of the IIC relay system is now at a feverish pitch, in the hopes that IIC contains within it the secrets of the alien Paradox Engine.”

—Excerpt, IIC, Infopedia article, medium detail, Section: “Effects on Colonization”

“Those nations that emerged from the Unification Wars the most intact, generally the United Front

and MSY's core nations, have as a legacy of the wars a substantial population of ethnically foreign residents, partly due to a massive influx of war refugees and their descendants, but also due to the natural consequences of the UF's globe-spanning military and governmental operations. UF core nations found themselves acting as transit points for military units from almost every imaginable source, and sent military units to the far corners of the globe, only to receive them back accompanied by a baggage train full of rescued freedom fighters, hanger-ons, and newfound lovers. Due to the exigencies of war, the UF Executive Committee and later EDC were in little mood for parochial or nativist sentiments from constituent nations, routinely overriding diplomatic protests in order to establish new refugee settlements, and pressuring governments to relax citizenship requirements."

"While many such new residents returned to their homelands post-war, many others chose to settle down, preferring not to return to what was often a wasteland. Immediately post-war, the UF EDC was extremely sensitive to the possibility of fragmentation, and used the lack of borders in the new super-state to encourage migration in all directions. People moved to find jobs, to join family in new nations, or simply to find a better life—and post-war, this could usually be found in the best-surviving nations."

"Consequently, the ethnic compositions of many pre-war nation-states were transformed, with some formerly homogeneous regions finding their populations to be as much as twenty percent minority. While ethnic tensions occasionally flared up, EDC punishment was harsh, and most of the populace proved to be exhausted of violence due to the war. Over the centuries, as global integration proceeded, cultural divisions faded, allowing the world's cultures to blend into what would later be maligned as the "monoculture". While this loss of cultural diversity would eventually come to alarm Governance, it had the side effect of triggering the heavy assimilation of minority peoples into their host nations—which were becoming indistinguishable from their homelands anyway. In the end, the result was curious: ethnically diverse nations that, after centuries of intermarriage and cultural integration, hardly seemed to be diverse at all."

—Excerpt, "Demographic Shockwave: Global Mixing and the Legacy of the Unification Wars"

"Before that steam drill shall beat me down, I'll die with my hammer in my hand."

—John Henry

"Tomoe Mami would like to inform you that she has started the simulation, and will be ready for you whenever you choose to join."

Kyouko nodded, a habit she still couldn't break despite having spent well over a decade with one of these contraptions in her head—well, spine, but whatever.

Setting her old-fashioned tablet down onto the desk next to her, she stretched luxuriously, or as luxuriously as she could in the tiny alcove that she called her bed. It was easier in this small body than it would have been in one of her more adult forms, but it was still cramped. She remembered hating sleeping in the alcove as a child, until they had been able to move into a house near the church, rather than being obliged to live within the church itself. That was just before her father had started preaching outside the doctrine.

In retrospect, she wasn't sure why she had had this room reconstructed. It was a form of austerity, sure, but was she implicitly rejecting the doctrines her father preached?

Of course not. Her father had been ahead of his time, in many ways. But the Central Church had refused to listen, and because they refused to listen, the people didn't listen. It was…a very good

metaphor for religion today.

Well, religion except her Church.

It was a form of nostalgia, she suspected. Despite the poor memories she had of the room, her overall memory of that stage of her childhood was quite bright, certainly brighter than the hungry times, or the times after that.

Sometimes she dreamed of her sister. Afterward, she would wonder: Knowing what she knew now, what fate would she have preferred for Momo-chan? A long and happy life, dying of old age while her eternally young *onee-chan* watched over her? Or perhaps Kyouko would have preferred that her sister contract as well, so that even now, they could still be together.

And the afterlife: what was it like? What would it be like, meeting her again? Meeting Sayaka again? Meeting…her father again?

She shook her head at herself, perhaps annoyed. Now, in her old age, she found herself ruminating on such things more and more, waxing nostalgic about the ancient past, casting her eye more to the sky and less to the ground. Perhaps that, too, was why she chose to sleep in this small alcove. It reminded her of when she had been young.

Plus, for what it was worth, a cramped space provided for interesting variations on—

She frowned, popsicle in her mouth suddenly turning sour. That was not where she had wanted this train of thought to go.

She had been watching a recording of her earlier performance, on her outdated holographic tablet, annotating and reviewing. It hadn't been bad, but something about her body language was off.

Unbelievable. It was the Goddess's birthday, and still all she could think about was her regrets. Momo-chan, her family, Sayaka, Yuma, Mami, Homura…plenty of others, but also Maki.

Damn that girl for getting into her head! To some degree, she prided herself on not being like Mami, not letting herself be weighed down by every damn thing, but one stormy breakup later, and suddenly here she was, brooding just like Mami would. And it wasn't like this was her first bad separation. She really was getting old.

Well, at least it was clear she would never be Yuma or Homura, with their ability to place human lives and happiness on a scale and reason their way into terrible actions, blood icy cold the entire way, justifying it with vague gestures toward the afterlife or the greater good. In a way, she was proud that she wasn't like them, despite the implicit praise the Incubators used to ladle in their direction, urging her to be more like them. As if!

And Yuma turning out that way had been her fault, at least partly. If she been more—

Okay, seriously, this is too much, Kyouko thought. *No more.*

She accepted Mami's invitation, lay back down on her bed, and closed her eyes, waited for the world to fade.

"Well, that took forever," Yuma complained, when Kyouko opened her virtual eyes. The tiny girl at her feet glared up at her with a faux-angry expression.

"What were you doing, anyway?" the girl continued. "I thought you broke up with your

girlfriend! Or did you get a new one that fast?"

Inwardly, Kyouko groaned, hoping she wasn't showing it. She was trying *not* to think about that.

"Firstly, I was on Church business," Kyouko lied, using her height to look down on Yuma. "Secondly, I don't appreciate the government—that means you—snooping on my affairs. And thirdly, given how much you talk about it, maybe you should try it sometime. It's relaxing."

Yuma's expression became sardonic.

"Suggesting lewd things to your imouto again, nee-chan?"

Kyouko ignored her, bending down to scoop the girl up into her arms. It was actually quite the feat, since the apparent age disparity wasn't *that* great, but these things didn't matter to a magical girl. Not to mention she could have just adjusted the virtuality if it were really necessary.

She took a moment to spin Yuma around in her arms, smiling goofily, the virtual apartment spinning around them. It was decorated in a spartan style—simple white walls, single glass table and small black sofa. Attached to this bleak living room was a kitchen devoid of anything but a single box-like synthesizer, merged with a dining room with a single, surprisingly large table, almost completely unused.

Only two things caught one's eye about the room. One was the glass doors leading out to the balcony and the view beyond, a birds' eye panorama of Mitakihara City below, and the sky above. Given that the era of this simulation was Modern—or, rather, *Future*—it implied the apartment was almost unbelievably high up, high enough to look down on the city.

The other was the ever-shifting holographic wall surface opposite the sofa, the only thing that could be called flashy about the room. A wide array of miniature screens filled the wall, shifting to and fro, left and right, in and out of focus. Each screen was filled with a seemingly random snippet of factual text, or else some kind of diagram or image. Kyouko knew from experience that the master of this apartment often sat and watched the random screens for an unnerving amount of time, or just as often used it as a sort of interactive workspace, the screens becoming coherent and responding to her thoughts.

Just another one of those quirks that Homura had never deigned to explain.

In the later years, Homura had spent a considerable amount of time practicing and refining her digital artwork, often showing the rest of them some of her drawings. Some images were touching, almost heartwarming—drawings of the bespectacled, pigtailed Homura from the distant past, or of Mami's coffee table, resplendent with platters full of cakes. Though it couldn't really be said that she had talent, she had acquired a certain honed competence from sheer volume of attempts.

But there were also the other images. Incoherent and random, they were as beautiful as they were disturbing. Homura did not explain, even when asked directly, preferring only to listen to their comments. A wasteland of sugar, candy, and hospital symbols; a red-clad horseman—horse*woman*—whose head was replaced by a giant flaming candle; a clownish monstrosity, floating upside-down in the sky, with gears under its dress; a pitch-black mountain reaching up from a devastated, flooded landscape. Ironically, it was in these pictures that Homura hedged the closest to true artistic novelty: Kyouko had tremendous difficulty looking away from some of the pictures, which seemed to suck her in, reminding her of something atavistic.

As strangely mesmerizing as they had been, though, Kyouko had never come closer to doubting Homura's intrinsic sanity, as Mami did.

Even now, though Kyouko instinctively felt as if there was some connection between the images and the Goddess, Kyouko did not speak of it to the Church, nor had she ever. She could not conceptualize how it fit into the scheme of things—no, more accurately, she refused to believe the conceptions she did come up with.

Once, a few years after the founding of the Church, she had obtained access to the Black Heart vaults where Homura's personal files had ended up stored, away from the prying eyes of Governance or the lower tiers of the MSY. But try as she might, she could not find any sign of the images she had seen or, as she had hoped, any drawings referencing the Goddess. Nothing of use to the Church, in other worlds. Suspecting shenanigans, she had authorized her own agents to penetrate the Black Heart and search further, but they came up with nothing either. It was disturbing, and one of the reasons she refused to believe Homura was dead, though she could not speak of it.

All of that flashed through her mind, in impression rather than in detail, as she took Yuma for a playful spin: once, twice, thrice.

"Really, how old are the two of you anyway?" Mami said, appearing in the doorway to the dining area. "And is it possible for us to go one of these events without dirty jokes floating around?"

Kyouko sent Yuma back down on the floor.

"Don't be such a drag, Mami," Kyouko said. "Yuma's fun to play with."

"I am four hundred fifty eight years old!" Yuma said, reporting her age in the same excited tone a child would, with an undertone of mockery.

"Hmm, well, either way, now that you're here, we can get to eating," Mami said, ignoring their comments.

She stood by the doorway as the other two passed by, but stopped Kyouko momentarily with a tug at her sleeve.

I'm keeping tabs on Kishida-san, she transmitted, relaying the message on a private channel. *She's doing fine so far.*

We're over, Mami, Kyouko transmitted, still walking, without giving any visible sign of the conversation.

Why are you always like this? Mami replied, watching the other girl's back. *Is it really so bad, settling down with someone? I think it'd be good for you.*

That's an interesting comment, coming from you, Kyouko retorted, sitting down at the table. *Since it's not as if you have anyone.*

Mami started, taken aback. She struggled briefly to formulate a response.

That's different and you know it, Mami protested, finally, starting to follow the other two over. It sounded lame to her ears, though.

As she sat down, though, Kyouko surprised her by replying:

I'm sorry, Mami. I didn't mean that. Forget I said anything.

Mami blinked in surprise. Kyouko rarely showed contrition when criticizing others, yet here she was apologizing. Come to think of it, her lack of relationships was an easy target, but Kyouko and

Yuma never made fun of it. Was it some weird kind of respect? And why had Kyouko's comment made her hesitate?

Don't worry about it, Mami responded. *I'm not insulted.*

Were this a true gathering, with the three of them in actual physical proximity, Mami would have shown a lot more gusto, gushing pride as they inspected her dishes and ate them greedily. As it was, this was a virtuality, the food was not real, and Mami hadn't even pretended to cook any of it—it would have been very extravagant of them to run a full-detail molecular-level simulation for something like this, but with any less detail, there was no noticeable distinction between Mami's superior-in-reality cooking and the admittedly damn good simulated food—Mami had tried before. They could have artificially stimulated their pleasure centers to enhance their perception of the food, but none of them wanted to do that, not to mention they would have been getting close to breaching Governance restrictions on simulation parameters, even for military personnel.

So they sat at Homura's oversized dining table, large specifically for the purpose of hosting gatherings such as this, and "got to eating". Both ends of the long table were left empty, one end for Homura's—and now Kyouko's—mysterious Goddess, the other for a friend who depressed them with her absence.

"We haven't done this for real in years now," Yuma complained, stirring pieces of chicken in with her rice. "I wish this war would get easier so you could come home more, Mami-nee-san."

"Well, if you would just leave Earth for once in your life, we could do something like this on the Zhukov or wherever you prefer," Mami pointed out, gesturing at Yuma with her chopsticks. "Really, it's childish."

"You know why I don't," Yuma said, pouting. "Don't take advantage of this form to make fun of me."

"I still say you're worried about what would happen if you weren't next to your machines," Kyouko said, artfully managing to time her words in between chugs of miso soup. "Is it really that bad to suffer some tiny routing delay? MG will live without you, I'm sure."

"Eh, it's this conversation again," Yuma said, drawing the "eh" out into a sound of exasperated annoyance.

She made a reaching motion for some fish at the far side of the table, clearly too small to reach it. Mami picked the dish up and handed it to her.

"I still remember when MG was just a fresh-faced kid," Kyouko said, sounding deliberately wistful, "and then she got warped by being around you all the time."

"Oh, come off it," Yuma said. "She's a perfectly well-adjusted AI, and you know that."

She chewed some of her fish thoughtfully, as there was a long moment of silence.

"Let's talk about some business," she said, finally. "I know it's not the best time, but…"

She looked around for agreement.

"I suppose," Mami said, "though I had hoped to avoid it. This is a social gathering, after all."

Kyouko shrugged.

"I don't think there's much better to talk about, unless you've got some leads on Homura,"

Kyouko said.

Obviously Mami didn't, so she didn't respond.

Yuma cleared her throat for effect. It was strange coming from someone so small.

"So regarding your budding protégé," Yuma began. "I went ahead and had someone interview her schoolmate, Simona del Mago, under the guise of correcting government records. She couldn't give a reason for why the wrong parents were listed for two of her schools, except that in the cases where the listing was wrong, the incorrectly inserted individuals were friends of her parents. We actually knew that already, so it checks out, and in any case the telepath didn't think she was lying. Genetic tests confirmed paternity."

"So nothing, then?" Kyouko asked, forced to be brief by the fact that she was actively stuffing chilled noodles into her mouth.

"Almost nothing," Yuma answered. "But the telepath doesn't quite think so. She says the girl feels like she has telepath-resistance training. It's—"

Kyouko coughed on her noodles, spraying food in front of her in a rather ugly fashion, before the food in question automatically deleted itself, eliminating the spray, plate of chilled noodles, and whatever was in Kyouko's illusory windpipe. A moment later the plate rematerialized in front of her, with a fresh set of noodles.

"Seriously?" she asked, wiping at her mouth with a napkin even though there was nothing there to actually wipe. "How reliable is this?"

"Not very," Yuma said, smiling slightly at Kyouko's behavior. "For a non-magical girl, complete telepath resistance is unheard of. Good training can instill the mental discipline necessary to avoid leaking information under interrogation, but the telepath will still know if you're lying or holding information back. In the past, we rarely bothered—no one can be vigilant 24/7, so the telepath would always get the information anyway, if they just waited in the vicinity long enough. My agent can't detect that she's holding anything back, and that would ordinarily be the end of it, but she tells me she can't shake the feeling she's being misled somehow. I don't know whether to believe her."

"So what exactly does this mean?" Mami asked, no longer bothering with her pointless food.

"I have no idea," Yuma admitted. "I've told the agent to follow her for now, and we're continuing to dig into her family background, but nothing of note has been found. Sometimes telepaths make mistakes. It's rare, but it happens."

"There are a lot of coincidences stacking up on all of this," Mami said, eyes shaded. "Take this recent attack on the convoy carrying Shizuki-san."

She paused to see if they knew what she was talking about. Kyouko nodded instantly, but Yuma was obliged to pause and stare off into space for a moment, before finally indicating that she understood.

"Post-battle analysis indicates that they clearly thought they were attacking something of unusual importance," Mami said. "Those fighters were pushing well outside their usual operating range—they would have had to perform multiple jumps to make it, and they don't usually do that, because our deep space scanners are good enough to make them pay more often than not, given that they have to blackout at the end of every jump. In terms of weapons and shielding, they were stripped down to make the trip, which made them easier to destroy. The cost-benefit of it doesn't make any

sense, unless that one transport was carrying something very important."

"A transport with eight magical girls on-board could be worth it," Yuma pointed out. "It was what, seven fighters? We're worth more than a fighter each, I think."

"Only if they knew they were there," Mami said. "Our convoy patterns are deliberately designed to make that kind of raid on average very cost-ineffective. Among other things, the navigational specifics of these trips are not laid out until the last moment, so even if they got their hands on our transport data somehow, they should only have information for a very short time-window. In that case, why not attack more than one transport? Why only one?"

"Maybe they're trying out something new," Kyouko suggested.

"Maybe," Mami said. "But the military AIs don't like it at all. The alert level for military shipping in the sector has already been raised. Another thing—"

She shifted in her chair, pushing her food slightly aside.

"The radiation attack by the last fighter was tactically very irresponsible," she said. "It certainly wasn't pleasant for anyone involved, but the pilot and its AI couldn't possibly have expected that it would actually kill any of them. Not with the ship relatively intact, and all of them still alive and undamaged. If any of them had had sufficient training, it wouldn't have even managed as much as it did. The fighter should have cut losses and run. Why try a suicide run? The squid love suicide runs, but only when it makes sense. Not like this, even if its chances of escaping human space weren't great. The cost-benefit would only balance if it thought it had a distant chance at taking out something like a battlecruiser. Eight magical girls, a transport, and a few passengers and cargo do not equal a battlecruiser."

There was an extended silence as they thought about it, and Mami realized that she had perhaps spoken too earnestly.

"Not that I'm suggesting a connection between this and the demon attack," Mami said. "That would be crazily far-fetched."

"We know you're not," Kyouko said, meeting her eyes. "You're right, though. This girl is more of a handful than I expected."

"I don't think we've seen the end of it, either," Mami said. "Not with a wish like hers."

The others nodded, without bothering to ask what the wish was. The privacy of wishes was strongly respected, as it always had been.

"I guess I might as well add that we investigated further into Director Valentin," Yuma said, swirling a drink in her hand. "But I don't have anything to report. Everything checks out. Even telepathic surveillance has returned nothing so far."

She paused, and when no one said anything, continued:

"I've thought about the logistics of it a bit more, and while it's certainly possible that the supersaturated grief cubes could have been generated in a residential area, there would be a lot of risk of accidental spillage if that were done. It would be much easier to do something like that in a specialized facility like Prometheus or, actually, Zeus. The Zeus Research Institute doesn't have the Joanne Valentin connection, but they do a lot more on the purely magical side of things. Enchantment, power development, magical quantification, things like that. Except for the Valentin thing, they'd be a more logical suspect, and they do go through a lot more grief cubes. Of course, being that this is Mitakihara City we're talking about, there are literally dozens of places where it'd

be at least reasonable to do, and any magical girl could do it in their home if they knew how and weren't worried about screwing it up and unleashing demons everywhere."

"I'm a bit bothered that I'm literally right in between those two places and still don't know that much about what they do," Kyouko said, looking thoughtful.

"You should pay more attention," Yuma rebuked.

"To be frank, I never thought it'd matter much to me," Mami said. "As long as the technology keeps coming in, I have many other things to worry about."

Instead of continued speculation, there was a long moment of silence that ended only when Kyouko went back to her food, poking at some tempura with her chopsticks.

"So how much can you tell us about how the war is going, Mami?" she asked, casually. "I don't keep up as much as I should."

Mami sucked in a breath, though Machina's timely intervention prevented the action from actually manifesting within the virtuality.

"To be honest, not much right now," Mami said, reflexively sipping at a cup of tea. "Strategically, the situation is the same as always, but the Euphratic Incursion, as you know, has serious downside potentialities. Those have started to seem more probable recently."

"So it's bad, huh?" Kyouko asked, watching her with an unreadable expression. "You don't start pulling out the lingo unless you're nervous."

"I'm not nervous," Mami said.

She was nervous. The wormhole stabilizer was still a top-grade secret, one that she didn't want to reveal until she had to. Things had not gone well recently. The battle over the system's twin worlds was still the same grinding attrition as ever, and, as expected, the fleet just didn't have enough resources to get at the moon, not without critically weakening defenses elsewhere—not even immediately after the failed raid, when alien defenses were still relatively weak. It was a conundrum whose importance could not be overstated. She had to solve it—but she hadn't, not yet.

"You *are* nervous," Kyouko insisted. "Something is going on, isn't it?"

They locked eyes, and though Kyouko's expression was carefully serious, Mami thought she sensed something further. Deceit, perhaps. The operational security on fleet activity in the Euphratic sector was as tight as ever, but she couldn't easily rule out Kyouko's Cult smuggling information out. They seemed capable of something like that. And while the only part of Governance that was supposed to know the details was Military Affairs, Yuma was awfully good at getting information she wasn't supposed to have.

Still, Mami couldn't just say the truth out loud. In fact, she had a duty not to.

"Hmm," Yuma interrupted thoughtfully. "You know, I could go for some of that cake. If we keep carrying on like this, we're going to run out of time. Mami is on a schedule."

Thank you! Mami thought—to herself, deciding not to worry about how much the others might or might not know.

"I'm not done," Kyouko said grouchily, grudgingly accepting the topic change. She took a moment to shovel some of her remaining food into her mouth.

“It’s not real food, nee-chan,” Yuma said. “Just *make* yourself full. ”

Kyouko grunted, making a show of being annoyed.

“Fine,” she said, pushing herself away from the table dramatically.

Mami got up to get the cake out of the kitchen, leaving the others to start cleaning up. There was no particular reason she couldn’t just clap like a magician and make it appear on the table, but she liked to include a certain amount of realism in this. The whole point of having an immersive virtuality was to try and replicate the real thing, not shortcut your way through. Besides, it would be fun cutting the thing.

When she walked back out to the dining table with cake, though, the table was devoid of food, containing only some dessert plates and utensils.

“I told you,” Mami complained, peeved. “You have to—”

“Cut us some slack, Mami,” Kyouko said, hitching her arm up on “Homura’s” chair like the delinquent she was. “It’s just not fun cleaning up food for no reason. Besides, there was a ton left. We wouldn’t have had anywhere to put it. And you know, I just thought, since we’re talking about the Goddess’s birthday here, I didn’t want to waste too much time…”

Kyouko fidgeted slightly.

“Well, okay then,” Mami said, sighing good-naturedly, setting the cake down on the table. “Let’s do this.”

She sat down, and Yuma stretched over the table to stick the single candle into the cake. It was one of those fancy flame manipulation candles, the kind that spelled out in fire how old the individual in question was. In this case, the candle generated an infinity symbol, a virtual replica of the version that had been special-ordered by Kyouko a long time ago, partly as a joke. It had seemed to both amuse and depress Homura, depending on her mood.

Kyouko stood up dramatically, thrusting a finger expressively at the tip of the candle. A moment later, it flared to life, fire forming a double loop.

“It’s a lot more impressive when you do it for real,” Yuma said, managing to insert some childish disappointment into her voice, lilting the phrase “for real”.

“Yeah,” Kyouko agreed, sounding disappointed too. “I still can’t believe I put so much work into learning a party trick.”

“Well, you used to be quite the party girl,” Mami commented, without condemnation. “Doing it without a transformation is pretty impressive. But if you wasted that much effort learning a skill that far out of your skill set, you might as well expand it into something more useful.”

“Who says I haven’t?” Kyouko said absently, feeling around in her pockets for something. “And despite all the time I wasted on it, it was still easier than I thought it would be. An affinity for fire, maybe. Who knows?”

Finally realizing what was wrong, Kyouko summoned a stick of pocky into her hand and stuck it into her mouth to chew on. She hadn’t thought to load her clothes with food in the simulation.

“Well, you should show me sometime, then,” Mami said. “Just don’t go Hinata Aina on me.”

Yuma sat back down in her chair.

“Eh, we’ve had this conversation before too,” she complained. “You still haven’t ever shown her, Kyouko-nee-chan. Repeating the same topics is boring.”

Mami and Kyouko glanced at each other.

“I like to think of it as tradition,” Mami said.

Yuma rolled her eyes as Mami sat down. They looked at Kyouko, who was still standing, to say something.

This part was always awkward.

Kyouko cleared her throat.

“Well, like always, I’ll spare you the speech,” she said. “I’ve done plenty of speeches today. Let’s just enjoy ourselves.”

Then, without waiting for the other two to get ready, she immediately started singing “Happy Birthday”, forcing Mami and Yuma to insert themselves randomly into the middle of the song. Strictly speaking, it was a version of Happy Birthday modified to account for the fact that Homura wouldn’t tell them the name of the girl in question, and to compensate for the fact that “Happy birthday, dear Goddess” sounded awkward to everyone. Each of them now had enough implanted technology to sing perfectly on-key, even if not quite at the same level as a professional singer. They had tried that one year, but somehow the normal unenhanced version, slightly discordant and mistimed, seemed more appropriate.

Afterward, Mami picked up the cake knife and carefully sliced the strawberry and cream cake into five evenly-sized pieces, ensuring expertly that the fruit was split fairly. Once, at the very beginning of her magical girl career, she wouldn’t have been so bold as to eat *one-fifth* of a cake. She had feared weight gain just as much as everyone of her age group at the time. Then later they had realized that their bodies kept themselves at optimum condition regardless, and something as mundane as body fat could be easily molded with magic. Though Mami generally disapproved of unnecessary body modification, she…had to admit to having tried a few things occasionally. Everyone did, at some point.

Anyway, eating cake by the truckload had become a fairly common thing for them, and eventually they had even stopped acting delicately embarrassed about it—though of course Kyouko had never bothered to do that.

She handed out the cake, piece by piece, with Kyouko of course going first. She was glad to see that Kyouko, who might have been trying to rile her up earlier, wasn’t going so far as to shove the cake into her mouth with her bare hands, as she had been wont to do when she had first moved in with Mami. It had taken a lot of training to get her to switch to the fork and knife, even if Kyouko was still a little impatient about it.

Finally, she gave the last piece to herself and sat down.

“Let’s eat,” she said, making the traditional gesture of thanks. “*Itadakimasu.*“

The others repeated the phrase, which had otherwise fallen out of use after the Unification Wars.

Kyouko tore through her cake, hunched over slightly, occasionally glancing at the empty chair that represented the Goddess. Yuma and Mami were chatting about maybe inviting MG next time —Yuma was pushing the notion, Mami was less keen, though apparently Machina thought it was a good idea—but Kyouko wasn’t really listening. Sometimes, she felt a little strange just

unashamedly pigging out on cake and relaxing, without much reference to the girl whose birthday it was. She always remembered, though, what Homura had said, that the Goddess would have far preferred this to anything more somber.

At times like this, she remembered, too, Homura's hints that they too had once known the Goddess, and forgotten.

What kind of girl had she been? How had Kyouko treated her? What had they thought of each other?

Sometimes, in these last two decades, she would stare at the empty chair, feeling as if she were on the verge of remembering. The feeling would get so strong that she would stop eating, stop doing anything else, just *stare*, wracking her mind trying to recover the memory that was *right there*—but then the feeling would fade, and she would find herself again staring at a meaningless chair, wondering if she had really been about to remember something, or if it had been merely a product of imagination and faith.

Mami and Yuma, certainly, never seemed to notice anything untoward, looking at her oddly whenever she had these moments.

Other times, though, she swore she saw Mami looking at the chair too, with a strange look on her face.

Kyouko shook her head at herself, then sighed.

Homura, where are you? she thought, desperately.

"Yes, mama, I'm doing fine," Ryouko said, reclining on her bed and amusing herself by placing CubeBot on her belly and letting it crawl its way back towards the table. On the table at the head of the bed, her soul gem lay charging next to a couple of grief cubes. It seemed like a lifetime since she had last participated in a phone call, that familiar rhythm of back-and-forth transmitted thoughts.

"Are you sure?" her mother responded, narrowing her eyes at Ryouko, conveying a sense of overbearingness through the video feed. Her mother had insisted on the video this time, exploiting her MG status for the extra interstellar bandwidth allotment. It was difficult to properly hold a video call without some sort of fixed spot to glare at, so most people had the video playing at a specific physical location in their field of view. Ryouko had it hovering over her head, between her eyes and the ceiling.

"They're not overworking you, are they?" the woman asked. *"Have they made you do any fighting yet?"*

Ryouko thought about it. If she was asking, then…

"Not yet," Ryouko lied. *"But there's a large simulation part of the training, you know. It's, um —"*

"Oh right, I forgot," her mother interrupted.

Ryouko expected the woman to keep talking, but instead there was a long pause, during which her mother seemed to look off into the distance, thinking about something.

"So, uh, how was that?" her mother asked.

"It…wasn't that bad," Ryouko thought, realizing it was difficult to talk about to someone who hadn't been in one, especially since she wasn't sure how much her mother knew about it. If her mother didn't know much, Ryouko didn't want to enlighten her by going into too much detail. Her mother didn't need to know.

"I got a lot of, uh, experience," she settled on saying, knowing it wasn't a great explanation.

"Oh well, that's good, I guess," her mother said, voice strangely detached.

Again, Ryouko expected her mother to keep talking, but no questions arrived. She had the unsettling feeling they were both trying to avoid saying too much. Her mother seemed again to be looking away from the "screen".

"I don't know if you heard," her mother said, finally. *"But your grandfather was reassigned to a specialist posting, so he's receiving training to work in a field hospital. I knew he'd test well. He was a pretty good doctor, back in the day. And, as you probably know, doctors with experience treating actual damage are rare nowadays. Though I guess I'm probably a biased source, especially given that I was a child for a large part of it. Well, I suppose—"*

"Ah yeah, I was glad to hear that," Ryouko interrupted, before her mother could go off on some long tangent.

"Let's just hope he can stay out of trouble," her mother said, a moment later.

Another pause, but this time it was a natural conversational pause.

"Anyway, make any friends yet?" her mother asked. *"Nana told me that's pretty common during training, which I guess makes sense. Sounds weird to me, but…"*

"Oh, yes," Ryouko said. *"She's right. One of them is from near Mitakihara. I'll send pictures later. I don't think we'll be staying together, though."*

"I see. Well, it's always like that. Obviously it's good to form good working relationships with those you work with, but the military goes out of its way to encourage long-distance connections. It's healthy, you know. Feels strange saying it like that when my daughter is involved, though."

Indeed, Clarisse thought, startling Ryouko into almost sitting up. *That kind of thing is built right into my programming.*

Did mama hear you say that? Ryouko thought, a little desperately.

No, Clarisse thought. *I thought about it, though.*

Please don't, Ryouko thought.

"Did something happen?" her mother asked, noting her obvious sudden surprise.

"Yeah, I'm here. A friend showed up."

"Ah, well, if it's a bad time, you can call me later."

"No, no," Ryouko denied. *"Not at all."*

Her mother looked down for a moment, seeming to think.

"Hmm, well…I'm not really sure how to talk about this, but, uh…"

There was a long pause, during which her mother seemed almost embarrassed, clasping her hands meaninglessly. Ryouko wondered what it could possibly be.

"Well, I'll just say it directly," her mother finally said, making eye contact. *"The fact of the matter is, now that you've gone against my advice and contracted, there is a now a metaphorical line of suitors at your door, because of all the family connections. Except, you know, we're mostly getting things from other parents. Matchmaking, basically."*

Her mother paused, putting a finger to her mouth thoughtfully, noting Ryouko's aghast expression.

"Well, for the future, given your age, obviously," the woman continued, eyes dancing around nervously. "Your grandfather says it happened to him too, for me and, uh, my sister, back in the day, but the fact that your grandmother didn't know made it hard, plus the whole family estrangement thing. Oh, wow, I don't want to overwhelm you, but I felt you should know. I mean, if you just want some options, it's available. And you know, I've never wanted to pry, but there's alternative orientation options too. Obviously, this kind of thing is rather quaint, and you can wait as long as you want—"

Ryouko, you should say something, Clarisse prompted.

Ryouko had merely been listening in quiet horror as her mother started to ramble.

Say what? she asked, finally.

Anything! Or tell her you already got some direct messages and you'll take care of it, Clarisse thought. *Or something like that. Look, I could do it for you. I can fake it, but I really think you should do—.*

"Mama! I know!" Ryouko interjected. *"I already got two messages directly. I'll take care of it.*

Her mother stopped talking.

"Really? I never got any while I was contracted. Hmm. Maybe it's the extra Shizuki thing. Wonder if Nana ever got any? I never thought to ask…"

There was another pause.

"You know," her mother said. *"It kind of makes sense. Kuroi and Shizuki are both high powered names, but when I met your father, the families were not pleased. Fortunately for you, neither of us have ever really listened to those old crones, but maybe there just aren't that many Shizuki-Kuroi combinations."*

"I see," Ryouko said, not really sure what else to say.

"Anyway, obviously I'm once again a biased party, but you're too young," her mother said, making an obvious attempt to look her in the eye. *"And just for the future, you should really think about this kind of thing hard before committing to anything. Forever is a long time, believe me. Though I do suppose time-limited marriages are more popular nowadays—"*

"I know, mama, I know. I'm not interested right now. But thanks for telling me."

"I do wonder about you sometimes. But, oh well. Don't forget to call again soon. I imagine it'd be hard for us to call you, since who knows how the scheduling works. Oh, and we'd love to visit. They do that for magical girls like you, you know. You can put in a word. I haven't been off-planet in a long time—"

"You've been off-planet?" Ryouko asked, surprised.

"Of course I have," her mother said. *"It was more common before the war started. Scientific conferences, things like that. They still do it occasionally. I'm still trying to get into another one, but nowadays they try to make us get a VR exemption instead."*

"You never told me this!" Ryouko accused.

"You never asked?" her mother responded, turning it into a question, looking at her strangely. *"I guess I just never managed to mention it. Well, uh, anyway, I sort of have to go. See you for now."*

The woman waved.

"See you," Ryouko said, waving back.

With a quiet artificially-generated click, the call ended.

For the record, it's actually four messages now, Clarisse thought. *I just haven't mentioned the topic to you again. And was it really wise not to tell your mother about the incident with the fighters?*

I don't want to scare her, Ryouko thought.

I suppose, Clarisse thought.

Let's see if I can dial up Chiaki then, Ryouko thought.

I don't think you have time anymore, Clarisse thought.

Ryouko checked her chronometer. Clarisse was right. She had just started free time—a *day-long* free time—but had agreed to meet with Asami to explore the town.

Alright, she thought, getting up. *I guess I can send her a message instead.*

Hey,

It's been a while, hasn't it? It feels like months have passed. To me, anyway. There's a joke there I'll have to explain later. Sorry I haven't been in touch; they've kept us really busy.

I've got to go, or else I'd call you. Give my regards to the others.

-Ryouko

"So we came all the way out here to see a game of—"

Basketball, Clarisse fed her, before she even had time to fail to remember the word.

"Basket…ball?" she repeated, repeated the unfamiliar combination of words.

"Yes," Asami said, making a face in the general direction of the playing area—specifically, that vacuous-looking expression people had when trying to zoom in on something distant with their

optical implants. “Apparently it’s a pre-war game, one of those that stopped working well after everyone got implants. Someone redesigned the rules and managed to make it popular again, but it hasn’t caught on again on Earth.”

Ryouko looked around her. The building they were in was huge, and seemed to be purpose-built, with the playing court in the middle surrounded by an ocean of seats, with a transparent roof above. Besides that, it seemed as if a staggering number of people were crammed into the building, which positively buzzed with activity: the quiet roar of countless people talking, the people moving in and out of their seats, the server robots traveling up and down the aisles to deliver snacks and food.

For the first time since she had left Earth, Ryouko felt cramped.

“You weren’t kidding about the popularity,” Ryouko said, turning to look at Asami.

“Hey, don’t look at me,” Asami said. “I’m just doing what the tourist guide recommended. It’s a very colonial sport, and the, uh, Acheron Devils are supposed to be pretty good. Supposed to be a good two-person activity.”

Ryouko, who hadn’t realized that she had accidentally made a skeptical face, quickly corrected her expression.

“Oh, no, I was just, um, wondering they don’t just have more people watch from home instead of building this giant building just to accommodate all this,” she said awkwardly. “I mean, look at how small that, uh, court is in the middle of this building. It’s tiny!”

Asami shrugged.

“I guess they have more space to do this kind of thing?” she said.

“They must do something else with this place when they’re not playing these games, right?” Ryouko asked. “It’d be such a waste otherwise. Look at how many people this seats!”

She gestured broadly, at the crowds of people that surrounded them. Indeed, she didn’t turn her whole body to make the gesture, as she might have, because she would have smacked her hand into one of the people around them. In the distance, a dirigible floated over the building, advertising custom hair enhancements. The glaringly bright lights shone down on a crowd full of people wearing red uniforms. In the distance, some of them were attempting—and failing—to do some sort of coordinated arm wave. She honestly didn’t know what to make of it.

“I don’t know,” Asami said, shrugging again.

There was a brief silence while Asami consulted an internal reference and Clarisse fed Ryouko the answer.

“Wow,” Ryouko said. “I guess—I guess they really do have a lot of space out here. Did you notice how big the rooms were?”

“Yeah,” Asami agreed. “I don’t know who could possibly have enough stuff to fill it all.”

They both lapsed into silence, as Ryouko tried to think up a new topic worth discussing, but was spared that trial by a sudden shift in attention by the crowds of people around them, as well as the lights around them dimming. The game was starting, it seemed.

Truth be told, she had never been a big fan of sports. Neither of her parents had ever shown much interest, and as a child she had never really been too impressed by the soccer stars power-dashing

their way up and down the field. There were sports clubs at her school, sure, and she had even participated in a few, but all had failed to spark her interest. To her, it seemed like just another way for her peers to feel like they were accomplishing something important, when actually they were accomplishing nothing.

Which wasn't to say she hadn't been engaged during the actual games. She had; she hated losing, and always tried her hardest to win, which was why it had distressed her that her efforts were often unsuccessful. She felt terrible losing, and on those occasions where her side did win, she would experience a burst of satisfaction, followed by a sinking emptiness as she realized that, on the large scale, none of it had counted for anything.

Now, though, as she watched players struggle mightily to get a large round ball through their opponents' goal, she felt something new. For the first time, instead of being struck by the pointlessness of what she was seeing, she felt strangely convinced that it was too *easy.* An athlete, powered by specialized implants, would jump absurdly high into the air to snag the ball out of the air and instead of being impressed, she simply felt bored. Players executed complicated plays, zipping the ball back and forth almost too fast for a normal human to see, and she couldn't help think that the players seemed sluggish and tired.

I can do all of that easily, she realized suddenly. *That's why I'm not impressed.*

Probably, Clarisse thought, even though she hadn't been directly addressed. *It's actually a common phenomenon among you magical girls. But even so, most girls are at least capable of enjoying yourselves. You're a strange mistress.*

Please don't call me mistress, Ryouko thought, a moment later. *It makes me feel strange.*

And, as Clarisse said, Asami appeared to be enjoying herself moderately, carefully tracking the movements of the ball across the court, and occasionally joining the crowd in cheers. Seeing this, Ryouko swallowed her ennui as best she could and tried to stay engaged.

"I'm sorry about that," Asami said suddenly, as they reached the street corner where they had arranged to be picked up.

"About what?" Ryouko asked, turning her head to look at the other girl.

Acheron rotated only a little slower than Earth, so that it was already nearly pitch-black. The remaining lights of the city served to cast a slight glow to the smoky sky. Nakihara Asami's face seemed buried in the gloom, carrying that eerie cast Ryouko had learned to associate with her preternatural night vision. The girl's ponytail shifted slightly.

"I know you didn't really enjoy it," Asami said, eyes downcast. "It's my fault. I was the one who insisted we try to explore alone. I shouldn't have placed my faith in an online source."

Ryouko watched the other girl's expression. Something was unusual here, but she couldn't quite place it.

"Don't worry about it," she said, choosing not to pointlessly deny her lack of interest. "I should have said something. I didn't want to make you change plans just for me. Besides, it wasn't that bad. I had fun."

In the awkward silence that ensued, Ryouko reflected that, indeed, it had been a little unusual of Asami to insist on exploring alone, but that it had still been a good idea. Ryouko wasn't going to let her own strange behavior ruin this night.

“Hey, come on,” she said. “Don’t be so gloomy. We should be having fun. Weren’t we supposed to go to the hot springs next?”

Asami nodded, as the shuttle they had called pulled up in front of them.

“Yeah,” she said.

They were uncharacteristically quiet during the drive over, Ryouko looking out the window, watching the short buildings of the town—she still didn’t think of it as a city—scroll by. There were a surprising number of religious facilities here, compared to Earth, but according the Clarisse that was expected. Other than that, there wasn’t much to look at; she was already getting used to this planet.

She frowned slightly. Here she was, exploring a colony world, and it wasn’t much more dynamic than puttering around on Earth. It wasn’t supposed to be like this.

That’s because I’m in a city again. Not exploring the wilderness, not flying a spaceship, just… visiting places. There isn’t even that much Capitalism; we get free shuttles, food, and board from the military, and way more money that we can use. It takes some of the impact out of it. And the advertisements get old once you’ve seen fifty of them.

She watched the horizon for a moment longer. Generally speaking, the night sky here didn’t look that different from Earth, except that with the atmospheric dust, stars were considerably harder to see. There was also no comforting moon hanging in the sky.

Of course, where she had lived on Earth, the tubes blocked most of the sky, though she had always made the best of it she could with her telescope, working her optical implants to improve the contrast of the sky. On the first night here, she had set up her telescope and taken a look. The constellations were different, of course, but she had never placed much stock in those meaningless, Earth-specific shapes. Far more important were the worlds circling those stars, and who lived there. She supposed the constellations were useful for historical reasons, though, as an explanation for the naming of some stars.

Clarisse, she thought. *I concede. You’re better at this than I am. Why is Asami behaving so strangely?*

I don’t believe she’s really that depressed, Clarisse thought. *I believe she’s thinking about something.*

Do you have any idea what?

There was a distinct pause, which Ryouko attributed to Clarisse thinking about the problem.

Perhaps you will find out soon, the device replied.

The buildings outside her window thinned out shockingly fast, and she began to see a lot more of the rocky landscape, with a smattering of shriveled looking plants clinging to the surface. She began to peer out more carefully. A part of her wanted to stop the vehicle to go out and take a look, but that would have been obviously inappropriate. Eventually, they began obviously ascending, the vegetation becoming denser, so that the ground no longer looked quite so much like a wasteland—though she still wouldn’t call it lush by any stretch. With a start, Ryouko realized that the last time she had been on a mountain of any sort had been nearly ten years ago, on a class trip to Mt. Fuji.

She looked back over her shoulder, at the town they had just left, nestled in a volcanic valley. It looked different than the cities she had visited on Earth—it seemed smaller, shorter, and altogether more compact. It looked strange.

Sooner than she expected, they were there, the shuttle exiting down a ramp onto a smaller road that quickly started to wind and twist unfamiliarly. Five minutes later, they pulled to a stop in front of a modest looking building which appeared to be, of all things, partially set *into* the mountainside.

Stepping off of the vehicle, Ryouko looked up at the unpromising building facade, painted in garish bright red and white. The sun seemed brighter here, though she wasn't sure if it were her imagination.

The marketing daemon here wants to transmit an "Informative Audio Introduction", Clarisse thought, making the quotation marks apparent with her tone of voice. *Do you want to hear it?*

I guess, Ryouko thought.

She turned to say something to Asami, but the girl had her hand to her ear, signaling that she was busy with something, probably the same "Audio Introduction". Idly, Ryouko wondered just how that particular hand-to-ear gesture had gotten started. It certainly didn't seem very efficient, having to move your arm up just to tell people you were listening to something. It would have made sense if it were just a matter of pointing at your ear, but you were actually supposed to clasp a finger over the hole, as if you were holding something in. It didn't make sense.

She shrugged, and headed up the steps to the glass sliding door, which slid open to reveal an eerily-lit tunnel stretching farther inward. As they stepped into it, the walls lit up, revealing illuminated imagery of an austere Acheron landscape, devoid even of plants. Gruff-looking holographic humans in dusty clothing looked dramatically back out at them, meeting her eye, while drones carried out mysterious duties in the background.

The colony world of Acheron was marked for early second-wave colonization in 2360, following extensive survey by Governance and civilian prospectors, a pleasant feminine voice droned in Ryouko's head. *Despite the planet's seeming inhospitality, its abundant sulfur deposits, bacterial life, atmospheric oxygen, and sunlight made it a promising site for specialized industrial development. Basic settlement construction and biosphere elaboration was begun immediately, culminating in the planet's official founding and naming in 2404. Pre-settlement conditions were mildly unpleasant, and the name 'Acheron' was suggested by the prospectors on site.*

As the voice spoke, the walls around them transitioned gradually, first into images of robotic construction equipment and seeding planes, then into an image of the founding ceremony, which featured a couple of newly-minted colonial bureaucrats standing around in front of a building cutting a giant ribbon with giant scissors. Among the two or three awkward looking suited-officials stood a single woman in dusty overalls, smiling vaguely. One arm was sheathed in a partial exoskeleton, whiled the other had a nanomanipulator wrapped around the wrist.

Governance: Colonial Expansion, in avatar form, she knew, before she could think to ask.

While industrial mining is, of course, handled primarily by automatic machinery, an enterprising mining AI named John Henry soon realized that there were other benefits that could be accrued from the volcanic mountainside. While it was initially difficult to convince more human mining workers of the value of a hot springs bath on one of the hottest colonized human worlds, John was able to exploit existing machinery to construct the first of Acheron's hot spring baths, which quickly became a hit, especially after they pooled their salaries to add a second, cooled

frigidarium. Outside investors were quickly brought in to tour the facilities, and soon the first of Acheron's true tourist attractions was up and running, with an arrangement made by the Acheron Tourist Group, LLC to purchase depleted sulfur mines from Strategic Sulfur, SOE, in a true display of the value of—

"Hey, do you know what that means?" Asami asked suddenly, surprising Ryouko out of her listening trance. Ryouko looked back at the girl blankly.

"All that stuff about LLC and SOE," Asami said, looking at her strangely.

"Uh, limited liability corporation," Ryouko said, proud of having remembered that much herself. "And, uh, state-owned enterprise."

She had pulled the second phrase from Clarisse, and she wondered why Asami hadn't just looked it up herself.

Then, suddenly, the tunnel ended, just as the audio terminated. It was an interesting technical feat, one Ryouko had seen before in other places: using careful holography, different images could be displayed to different people, depending on where they were in the audio track. It could presumably handle many more people than just the two of them

The room they had arrived in, however, was deserted. It was large and cylindrical, with multiple corridors leading out from the rear of the room, behind a large hewn rock counter that was currently unmanned. Dim orange lighting emerged from alcoves carved into the wall, keeping their source hidden. Ryouko switched briefly into infrared, and was disappointed to find it was just a standard lighting fixture, if oddly colored.

Ryouko and Asami glanced at each other, each discerning that the other was somewhat put off by the complete lack of people. For a tourist attraction that had appeared bustling from the wall images, it sure wasn't very packed.

"Ah, welcome!" a voice said breathlessly. "Sorry, I was busy with another customer."

A bikini-clad woman hurried out of one of the corridors, sandaled feet clattering against floor. She narrowly avoided knocking over the racks of brochures on the counter, stopping herself just in time, then looked at them expectantly, hair dripping.

They stepped forward warily.

"Don't worry, I don't bite," the woman insisted. "Yeah, I know it's sort of empty, but there's actually plenty of people in the rooms back there. But war policies have really taken a toll on tourism around these parts. Governance wants to focus economic activity on Capital Investment; something like that. Anyway, how long will you two be staying? And, uh, are you opting for swimsuit or bare? We have some to borrow or buy, if you want."

"Maybe two hours bare?" Asami suggested, before Ryouko could say anything.

The woman looked at the two of them appraisingly for a moment.

"Okay," she said. "I'd tell you how much it is, but, heck, you can afford it. I'll forward the information to your TacComps anyway, though. Not trying to rip anyone off here. Follow me."

A small door at the side of the counter unlocked, and they followed the woman down one of the corridors, the floor changing suddenly from polished marble to black volcanic rock. Ryouko, who had been vaguely aware of the temperature slowly rising the whole time they had walked down the tunnel, felt it spike even higher. Not without a little nervousness, she checked to make sure it

was still within her acceptable temperature range.

They dove deeper into the cavern, turning left into a sub-tunnel, before finally reaching a door carved directly into the rock. It swung open at their approach, revealing a surprisingly non-volcanic-looking set of changing facilities.

“Well, luckily for you, you can easily have a whole room to yourself,” the woman said. “There won’t be anyone to disturb you. Anyway, I’ve got more customers, so uh—”

The woman ran back the way they had come.

Ryouko and Asami watched her back as she departed.

“Was it really necessary for her to escort us?” Ryouko asked.

Asami shrugged, again uncharacteristically silent.

Ryouko stepped into one of the changing rooms, closing the door behind her. Now that she thought about it, it was perhaps a little strange to visit a place like this with just two people, but it did seem to be one of the city’s touristy things…

She hesitated a moment while reaching at her shirt. Come to think of it, the last time she had visited a public bath had been back in late elementary school, with Chiaki and her parents.

*Ack, why am I hesitating? s*he thought. *It’s not like I’ll look that bad in comparison to her. Probably.*

Still, one couldn’t approach getting naked in front of someone with full equanimity, even if it had already happened once or twice during the training simulations. She reassured herself with that thought. At least it couldn’t possibly be considered chilly in here.

She re-emerged from the room quickly, but found herself waiting. When Asami finally showed herself, she seemed, if anything, even more embarrassed, especially when Ryouko instinctively gave her the once-over.

Ryouko glanced away, stopping herself too late. She really needed to get over these self-esteem issues.

“Well, lets go see if these fabled baths are really any good,” she said, perhaps a little too flippantly. She found herself actually blushing a little.

To her slight relief, it turned out that the hot water pool, the next room over, was not directly carved out of the rock, but was tiled with antiseptic-laced synthetic marble, just like a normal public bath. She wasn’t sure why it mattered to her, but it seemed more civilized, somehow.

She dipped her feet into water, gingerly, and found it surprisingly not as cringe-worthy as she expected. With a shrug, she went ahead and put the rest of her body in, head out, of course.

You can thank me later for the superior temperature adjustments, Clarisse said. *Though we are nearing the limits of your standard operating range, for the record.*

I see, Ryouko though. It actually seemed like a bit of a shame. Cringing your way into the pool seemed almost traditional, somehow.

She leaned back, absorbing the steam and heat into her skin. It was indeed pleasant, though she didn’t think it was a good idea to be falling asleep here.

“It’s not bad,” she said out loud.

“Yeah,” Asami said, a moment later, joining her. Her voice was subdued.

“You know, public bathing used to be a worldwide thing,” Ryouko said, scooting over to close the weird gap Asami had left between the two of them. “The frigidarium they have here is totally a Roman concept. But it stopped being popular in many areas after the nineteenth century. It was a cultural thing, and later on people started being worried about sanitation. It only really came back into vogue after the Unification Wars, when there was that flood of refugees into Japan and the surrounding areas. Of course, we now know that the relative survival of the area wasn’t a complete coincidence. So just think, if the MSY hadn’t been founded in Mitakihara, this kind of public bathing might never gotten popular again. If Japan had gotten seriously bombed out, it might have been gone entirely. And then where would Acheron get its tourist money?”

Ryouko knew from experience that people didn’t actually like her going onto random textbook-like historical tangents. She liked to think she was better than her mother, in terms of being self-aware about it, though she acknowledged the maternal similarity there. But now, though, she had a feeling she need to say *something*.

She looked at Asami for a response, leaning over slightly, but the other girl was staring at the water, seemingly not listening.

Ryouko took a breath.

“Asami-chan?” she asked. “What’s wrong? You haven’t seemed right ever since the basketball game. It wasn’t that bad, really! I don’t understand why you’re moping around like this.”

She watched as the other girl closed her eyes, visibly swallowing.

“It’s embarrassing,” Asami said. “To admit something like this after all that we’ve talked about…”

“What?” Ryouko asked, confused.

Asami clamped her hands between her knees and swallowed again.

“The others always made their assumptions, telling me how lucky I was to be your roommate, about all your family connections, and how I should take this chance while I have it. I always denied it, since I didn’t think…”

She shook her head at herself.

“I don’t know,” she said, chuckling. “I didn’t see you as anything other than a friend at the beginning, but then I saw you fight. Do you remember, all those times you saved my life, in those simulations?”

“Hold on!” Ryouko wanted to say, her heart starting to beat faster, unaccountably. She didn’t understand—

“Of course,” she said. “But you saved me plenty of times too. It’s just how it is.”

“Not as often,” Asami said, shaking her head. “Do you have any idea, what you look like when you do that? What you look like when you lead? it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. You look…”

The girl swallowed one more time.

“I don’t know. Is this what love is? The others seem to think so. Recently, I’ve felt so empty without you around, as if I have nothing to do, nothing worth doing. Taking a bath together like this, I feel so nervous, but am I just confusing myself? Is this real? I don’t know.”

Ryouko’s eyes widened. She raised her hand weakly out of the water, then let it drop again with a quiet splash. She could feel her conception of the world rearranging abruptly, as it had when she had seen her clone in its closed vat, what felt like a lifetime ago.

Love? It seemed so foreign, so alien to her understanding of herself that someone would think that way of her. Those silly proposals she had gotten in the mail—those had been easy to conceptualize in terms of power and mutual benefit, in the same way one thought about the affairs of governments and militaries. This made no sense at all.

“Do you mean that?” she managed. “I’m sorry. I don’t—”

“I know you don’t understand,” Asami said, looking her in the eye, finally. “You’re like that. So focused. It amazes me. I thought I was like you, but then I realized: not so much.”

They locked eyes, Ryouko searching the other girl’s eyes for something to hold onto, something that made sense. Why did—

Brace yourself; she’s about to kiss you, Clarisse thought, her thought loud and overriding at a moment like this, even if it sounded just like Ryouko’s own voice.

Wha—

And then it happened, Ryouko with eyes wide, open, and searching, Asami with eyes closed.

Ryouko hadn’t even had time to process the sensation before the other girl pulled back.

“I told myself I wouldn’t leave any regrets behind,” Asami said, eyes sidecast, voice shaky. “I know—I know you’ll need time to think. I’ll leave you alone.”

With one explosive motion, she launched herself out of the water and onto the ground above, using a good deal more strength than was necessary in her haste.

Then her bare feet padded away, leaving Ryouko reaching for her, “*Wait!*” stillborn on her tongue.

I… she began, unable even to complete the thought.

I won’t interfere too much, Clarisse thought. *It’s your own decision to make. If you’re wondering about orientation, my analysis indicates that the potential is within you, should you choose to exercise it. You’re strange, though. Without impetus from somewhere, the thought never even crosses your mind. According to my built-in models, that places you into a tiny minority. Also, I, uh…just really thought I should say something, as awkward as it is. Most people do not appreciate us TacComps commenting, but I figured you might need some guidance.*

Ryouko stared at the exit door a few moments longer, paralyzed by the sheer surrealism of it all. Receiving a love confession in the middle of an alien volcano, stark naked, with a voice in her head kibitzing. This was not how she had pictured her life three weeks ago.

Then she pushed herself out of the water and headed for the exit. She didn’t know what she was going to do, but she had to do it.

Thanks, Clarisse, she thought. *I know you’re trying to help.*

The timing of this all is terrible, Clarisse thought. *You've been recalled from break. Technically, I should have told you earlier, but it was sort of not a good time.*

Recalled? Why?

Not right now, Clarisse thought.

Ryouko didn't argue that, instead focusing on finding the other girl immediately. It was not as if Asami could get far, with no clothes on, and there had been no time for her to dress.

She caught the other girl when she emerged from the changing room, triggering a wave of surprise and fear in the other girl's eyes.

"You're right," Ryouko said, surprising herself by saying something decisively. "I don't know what to say to any of that. I'll think about it. That's all I can promise. Please, I don't want this to ruin things, ah, between the two of us. You know what I mean."

Asami looked back into her eyes, eyes wavering, then nodded.

"Somehow I knew you'd be decisive like that," the girl said.

Then the girl collapsed forward, grabbing onto her shoulders. Confused at first, Ryouko realized: Asami was exhausted, emotionally. Not knowing what else to do, she patted the other girl on the head meaninglessly.

She really wished she could get some clothes on first, though.

So why am I being recalled? Ryouko thought, finally, as they were on the way back.

Word just came through. You've been promoted to First Lieutenant, and are skipping the rest of garrison tour. You're to leave immediately for the Kepler-37 system, in the Euphratic Sector.

Immediately? Ryouko thought, not sure what to comment on first. *But…*

She glanced over at the Asami, who was looking nervous in the other seat.

I know. I said it was horrible timing, Clarisse said. *But this comes from Field Marshal Tomoe herself.*

Shifting Winds

Chapter Notes

> Yay for really long updates. It's the final exam period that seems to afflict all fanfiction, in this case indirectly by eating up my beta's time. Well, it's what it is.

Statement of Purpose

Up until now, the magical girl system has been a tragedy of massive proportions. The dreams of teenage girls become a nightmare of fear, conflict, deprivation and death. This is the result of a failure of organization and cooperation, not intrinsic to the system itself. The participating teams of Mitakihara City hereby undertake to build an organization, the *Mahou Shoujo Youkai*, capable of fostering the cooperation and organization necessary to end the unnecessary pain.

The MSY is founded as a mutual aid group, with five primary mandates:

1) The elimination of grief cube shortages in any one time by the establishment of a grief cube pool

2) The provision of a forum for the airing out, resolution, and arbitration of misunderstandings and disagreements

3) The provision of effective countermeasures in the event of serious external threats or dangerous circumstances

4) The distribution of non-magical resources such as money in a manner beneficial to the group as a whole

5) The distribution of team members, particularly newly contracted girls, in an optimal manner

Article I-Fundamental Organization

1: Global Meeting

Major decisions shall be made at a General Meeting, held at least once every three months, but more frequently whenever necessary. This Meeting shall have the power to issue exceptions to every part of this Charter, and may amend whenever felt necessary. At least one member of every member team must be present to constitute a quorum, and decisions require an absolute majority of present members, as well as the agreement of at least one member of each team, with the exception of certain sanctionary actions mentioned below, for which the quorum requirement may be relaxed to as little as one member per each of half the existing teams. This may be done, for instance, for failure to attend the Meeting.

Chairmanship and Hosting of the next Meeting will be decided at the previous meeting. The hosting team will organize and chair the session, charging any direct costs to the General Fund. Any member team may request an early Meeting at any time.

2: General Fund

Two joint Treasurers from different teams shall be assigned to manage a General Fund, which shall be used to finance organizational activity, as well as provide reimbursements when practicable. The Treasurers shall provide a description of organizational finances at every General Meeting, and may be replaced by the Meeting whenever desired.

The founding teams commit to providing at least twenty thousand Japanese Yen (¥20,000) per member to initialize the Fund. Subsequently, teams are required to contribute at least ten thousand Japanese Yen (¥10,000) each month per member. Individual members may be required to contribute more at the discretion of the Global Meeting, particularly if the given member has access to significant outside wealth.

Any contributions exceeding this amount may be used to deduct from the contributing team's required surplus grief cube contribution, at a rate to be considered and reset at every Meeting, depending on the state of the organization's current finances and grief cube stocks, but may not be used to deduct from the absolute minimum. The initial rate is set to ten thousand Japanese Yen (¥10,000) per cube.

Businesses or investment ventures undertaken by the organization will be financed from the Fund, and any proceeds will return to the fund. Every General Meeting, a monthly reimbursement amount for each team will be decided upon; this amount may exceed the contribution amount, and the amount may differ between teams, as circumstances warrant. Teams may also request emergency allotments, issued at the discretion of the Treasurers; the resolution of any resulting fiscal issues may be decided at the next Meeting.

3. Grief Cube Pool

Three Cube Keepers will be assigned to manage a Grief Cube Pool, which shall be used to insulate member teams against poor grief cube harvests. The Pool shall be kept in multiple locations, as practicality and safety permit. Every two weeks, or more frequently, teams shall submit a number of grief cubes not required to exceed the operating surplus, but otherwise not lower than an absolute minimum of one grief cube per member per week or fifty percent (50%) of their operating surplus, whichever is higher. In the event of an operating deficit, withdrawals may be made from the pool up to one grief cube per week per member. Additional withdrawal may be granted at the discretion of the Keepers, but must be discussed at the following Meeting.

The Keepers shall provide a description of organizational grief cube stocks at every General Meeting, along with an account of the productivity of various teams, and may be replaced whenever desired by the Meeting. The direct purchase or selling of grief cubes to or from the Pool may be permitted, within limitations prescribed by the previous Meeting.

The Incubators have agreed to perform verification of operating deficits and surpluses.

Article II-Entrance or Departure of Teams

A team that wishes to enter the organization may, with majority agreement of its own members, submit an entrance request at any time. Such requests shall be taken up by a General Meeting as soon as practicable. If requested by any one member team, a disapproval vote may be held—a majority shall suffice to refuse the entrance request. Otherwise, entrance is automatic. The Meeting may also require the requesting group to provide additional resources, i.e. monetary instruments, grief cubes, before allowing entrance.

A team may leave the organization at any time, with majority agreement of the team's own members. The other teams must be informed as soon as possible. Leaving the organization does not discharge outstanding debts and obligations.

A team may be ejected from the organization with the agreement of four-fifths (4/5) of the remaining total membership of the organization, with the assent of at least one member from each team except the one being ejected.

Article III-Lending of Individual Team Members

Member teams may transfer or lend individuals between one another with unanimous mutual agreement, and in cases where newly contracted members have skills that would be essential to a team other than the team in her contracting area, it may be expected, depending on residency status, age, and so forth.

Individuals lent or transferred to another team have a right to expect treatment comparable to that which would be expected from their own team, including training, housing, social support, and so forth. The original team may, with the assent of the individual in question, demand that the move be reversed, with arbitration by the General Meeting if the new team does not agree.

Article IV-Other Resources

It is expected that member teams will share resources not already discussed, i.e. access to health care or transportation, in a manner that is generous, reasonable, and fair. Disputes may be arbitrated by the General Meeting, but this is hoped to be avoided.

Article V-External Threats, misc.

Member teams are expected to cooperate in the utmost in the eradication or handling of any external threats and other issues that may arise.

Article VI-Additional Enforcement Measures

In the event of noncooperation, failure to attend General Meetings, or willful violation of Charter stipulations and/or Meeting decisions, a Meeting may impose sanctions upon a team, with the agreement of two-thirds (2/3) of the remaining total membership of the organization, with the assent of at least one member from every team except the one being sanctioned. These sanctions include, but are not limited to, increased monetary and grief cube contribution requirements and refusal of emergency allotments and grief cube withdrawals.

Signed,

Akemi Homura, on behalf of the “Mitakihara Four”

Kuroi Kana, on behalf of the “University Area Group”

Chiyo Rika, on behalf of the “Northern Group”

Tanaka Yui, on behalf of the “Financial District Group”

Takara Chinami, on behalf of the “Factory Area Group”

Yasuhiro Rin, on behalf of the “West Kasamino Three”

—MSY Original Charter, 2021

“For the theoretical prediction and experimental demonstration of the Pauli Exclusion-Locking Effect, the basis of modern force field systems.”

—Citation, Nobel Prize in Physics, 2455, awarded jointly to Nishka Virani and Ludwig von Rohr

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Ryouko examined her reflection in the mirror. Despite Clarisse's assurances that her dress uniform was designed to spec, she couldn't help but feel that, on her, the cap was oversized, the sleeves flared out a bit too much, and the pants were too short.

I'm telling you, it's your imagination, Clarisse thought. *You're just being insecure about your size again. If it really bothers you that much, you can try increasing your height later, or maybe aging a bit. The uniforms are exactly proportional.*

That's very nice of you to say, Ryouko thought, sarcastically. *Really, though, no thanks.*

Saying it to you more subtly doesn't seem to have had any effect, Clarisse thought drily. *So I thought I'd be more direct. Plus, it would be nothing to be ashamed of. Everyone tries it at least once.*

"Hmm," Ryouko said out loud, as a thought occurred to her. She waved it away immediately, though. Who would she be trying to impress anyway?

Who indeed… she thought, before she could stop herself.

Her reflection in the mirror reshaped itself, seemingly of its own accord, simultaneously growing taller and obtaining a bit more chest development.

Clarisse… she warned.

I'm just showing you what it would be like, Clarisse thought. *No need to get angry.*

With a thought, Ryouko reset the mirror, returning the reflection to reality. While she had to admit it looked better, she didn't think doing that kind of thing was the right idea. Besides, would Asami even appreciate something like that?

She clenched her teeth together for a moment.

Tell me, Clarisse, she thought. *What exactly is bothering me right now?*

The device made a deliberate sighing noise.

I'm not some sort of magic self-understanding shortcut machine. It'd be better for you to figure it out yourself.

This is more efficient, Ryouko thought.

I suppose.

For a long moment, Ryouko thought Clarisse wouldn't continue, but finally there was another sighing noise, followed by:

You're confused and not sure what to think. Humans have a natural desire to please others, and now that it's relevant, you find yourself considering your appearance from Asami's perspective. At the same time, you realize what such an effort might imply, so you try not to think about it. Indeed, at the moment, you prefer not to think about any of it at all, because of the difficulty and complexity you feel would be involved. You're torn between the feeling that you should probably try to communicate with Asami at some point, while being concerned about what that might imply to her. Overall, you're not sure what you want to imply, so no decision can be made.

Unusually for mere conversational speech, Clarisse delivered the audio at an accelerated pace, such that Ryouko found it difficult to interrupt. Instead, at the end, she looked down at the gloves she was holding in one hand, finding something meaningless to focus on.

That was perhaps too candid, she thought.

I know.

She stood there for a moment, pulling the gloves over her hands, clenching her hands to see how they felt. Then she placed one hand on her shoulder, taking another look at the two white block arrows on her shoulder mount, white emblazoned into the bright green of the rest of her uniform. First lieutenant, the patch meant.

Ryouko sighed. It was nice that dress uniform colors for magical girls matched their costume colors, she supposed, but it'd be nice to wear some other color occasionally. And didn't the higher ranks wear something else?

She spared a look for the artificially regenerated starfield framed in the long window next to her, even more artificial than might be expected, given that she was too deep in the HSS Zhukov to even be next to the hull. Her cabin was much larger than she had expected, but contained little in the way of decoration or furniture. There was a bed, a dresser, a nightstand, a synthesizer, panel lighting…and that was pretty much it, unless you counted the bathroom. All of it was stock-standard, colored to resemble lightly-colored wood.

Tapping the toes of her shoes against the carpeted floor, she tested their feel. At least the boots were spiffy: they were colored a deep black that seemed like it would match the depths of space outside.

Thanks, though, she thought.

Then she headed out the door.

Ryouko felt self-conscious, stepping out into the corridor fully attired as she was, and indeed the crewman she passed right outside the door did a double-take as she passed, before saluting half-heartedly and pointedly turning his head back around and continuing down the corridor.

He was most likely just surprised to see a MG in uniform. It's not particularly common, Clarisse thought.

No, I'm okay now, Ryouko thought. *I'll get over it. You don't need to keep reassuring me.*

At least the ship was relatively sparsely populated.

She walked only a short distance further, seeking the entrance to the fast travel tunnel along the generic metal-gray wall. Informational announcements scrolled within the apparent metal, following her as she walked. She could have had it play a news report or something similar as she walked, but at the moment she wasn't in the mood. The corridor was brightly lit in her immediate vicinity, but dark elsewhere, the lighting following her as she walked.

Ryouko turned abruptly, walking into the fast travel tunnel, the door sliding open just in time for her to enter.

Her body bobbled slightly in the sudden lack of gravity as she stepped forward onto the narrow platform, lifting slightly off the surface with the force of her last step.

A sudden, blisteringly strong wind shoved at her from the right, accompanied by a constant roar. It wasn't true weightlessness—if she had tried to move, she would have been pulled back, and there was definitely something keeping her from flying away with the wind—but to her stomach, it certainly felt like it.

She had seen the FTT before, of course, when she had first arrived on the ship, and a few times after that, but it still took her breath away. Lit with a uniform eerie blue, the walls of the cylinder stretched away from her in both directions, extending so far that she could see a horizon, where the tunnel curved away from her eyes. Equipment, personnel, and drones zoomed leftward at high speed, both directly in front of her and as specks far in the distance, silhouetted in blue. Nothing in her experience, including the limited information about battlecruisers she had seen before, had prepared her for anything like it.

The FTT spanned nearly the entirety of the battlecruiser, serving as the primary transport network of the ship. With substantial energy already devoted to tremendous artificial gravity generators, the ship could easily devote some of its gravity fields to precision transportation, routing all manner of cargo through the unidirectional tunnels.

Ryouko hardly had time to dwell on the topic, as she felt her head being turned in the direction of the tunnel to decrease her cross-sectional area. Before she had time to prepare herself, she was accelerated forward at a brutal rate, the system taking full advantage of the durability of her not-quite human body. Almost immediately she matched velocities with the rest of the traffic, which now appeared stationary relative to her. As she flew, a precession of doorways and larger access portals zoomed past her, leading into other areas of the ship.

She no longer felt any wind, since there was no longer any difference in speed between her and the air.

The others she had traveled with before had seemed utterly inured to the process, casually inspecting internal menus or even reading. She had felt embarrassed by how comparatively unsteady she had been. This time around, she tried to follow her progress through the ship, noting the regions of the ship as she passed them. One could get used to anything, she supposed.

And just like that, it was over, as she was decelerated equally brutally, then drifted to a stop at another narrow platform near her destination, the platform "tugging" her gently down to the "ground"—or rather, what counted as ground in this section of the ship.

She had once asked Zhukov—"Georgy"—if the tunnels really needed to be so *fast*. The ship had merely replied that it was optimally efficient and left it at that. Clarisse had told her that, for protection reasons, the core tunnels were located near the center of the ship, and that, in case of damage, there were alternate transportation methods that included more traditional carrier drones, "pusher" devices that launched you on your way, or even old-fashioned magnetized handholds and attachment points. Somehow that sounded more pleasant.

Still, though, Ryouko had to admit feeling a certain rush traveling by gravity-assist FTT.

Asami would love it, she realized.

She frowned at the thought, then shook her head at herself, continuing to her destination.

This section of the ship looked no different from the section she had just departed, but she knew from a carefully-labeled internal map that the section she was in was special indeed.

She stopped in front of a set of elaborately carved double doors, framed by subtle gold trim. In the middle were two old-fashioned "doorknobs", which particularly caught her attention by the way

they jutted out.

For a moment, she just stood and stared. She had never been within the command residences of the ship, though that didn't mean much considering she had only been here two days.

Wooden doors for the higher officers are a matter of tradition in the Navy, Clarisse thought. *They're usually imported from Earth. It's one of those things.*

Ryouko glanced at the "Tomoe Mami, Field Marshal" plaque at the right side of the door and took a breath. She wasn't surprised the door hadn't opened at her approach. An internal counter indicated that the marshal was still ETA ten minutes. Ryouko hadn't wanted to arrive late.

She took a moment to rub her hand on the door. It felt novel, a little rough and grainy, similar to artificial wood she saw occasionally…

Then she jumped backwards, standing up straight as the ETA dropped precipitously from ten minutes to a mere forty seconds.

She must have cut something short to hurry over, now that I'm here, Ryouko thought, realizing her mistake.

Standing there awkwardly, she thought over what to say in her head as the seconds ticked by.

The moment she heard footsteps behind her, Ryouko turned on her heel and bowed more deeply than was usually necessary.

"I'm sorry for being early," she began, rushing the words. "You didn't have to—"

As she moved her head back up, she found her eyes traveling up the contours of a casual black sweater.

But when she reached the top, she didn't find Tomoe Mami looking back down.

Shen Xiao Long, Tomoe-san's personal bodyguard, Clarisse identified, while Ryouko was still peering in confusion.

"Don't worry about it," the marshal Ryouko was looking for said, appearing at her bodyguard's side, in—this was novel—full green-olive general staff dress uniform. "I wasn't doing anything important enough I couldn't leave a few minutes early. We'll just finish earlier. Come on, let's step inside."

When Mami pulled open the door—the old fashioned way, with the doorknob contraption—Ryouko was briefly surprised by the lack of movement from the two bodyguards, who had arranged themselves so as to flank the exterior of the doorway. She had expected to follow the others in, but instead found herself leaving the two bodyguards behind, Mami motioning her to follow. It made sense, on reflection.

Ryouko, who had been expecting to walk into some sort of ornate admiral's cabin, complete with framed portraits of ancient seamen and other similar paraphernalia, instead found herself looking at the apparent interior of a large personal apartment, of the sort one might find in certain parts of Mitakihara City. In front of her was a cushy, extravagantly large bed, high and decorated in pink and yellow. This piece of furniture was flanked by a bedstand and dresser, all in the same style. At the far side of the room was a matching pink work desk, and the lush carpeting and rugs fit the décor as well. At the two sides of the room, she could see entrances to a bathroom and dining area. Peering, she thought she saw part of kitchen as well, attached to the dining area. The only thing that ruined the effect was the window, which displayed a reprocessed version of interstellar

space, rather than the city scenery that might be expected.

All in all, it appeared to be extremely similar to Mami's early adulthood apartment, as depicted in the movie *Akemi*, if apartments had doorways that led directly to the bedroom. Despite its cozy feel and décor, though, the room was actually rather large, as evidenced by the triangular coffee table and sofa directly to Ryouko's right. Instead of seeming crammed in, the table fit naturally into what would have otherwise been a large void in the layout of the room.

Ryouko realized that the room she was seeing was, of course, much more logical than the admiral's cabin she had been imagining. Admiral's cabins in movies always had a maritime flavor to them. Then again, admirals in movies were always bearded old men with gruff voices.

She stood around uncertainly for a moment. She had seen Mami disappear into the dining area, but didn't know if she was supposed to be following her or sitting down somewhere.

A moment later, though, the field marshal re-emerged into the room, carrying a tray containing two slices of strawberry-topped cream cake, a teapot, and two small teacups. Ryouko experienced a brief flashback to Atsuko Arisu's office, what seemed like a lifetime ago, to when the psychologist had served her the same cake. Did the personnel files really contain information about her favorite cake, or was it just some sort of coincidence? It was good cake on its own merits…

Mami set the plates and cups downs on the coffee table, then took a seat next to the table on the floor, ignoring the sofa directly behind her.

Seeing Ryouko standing there watching her stiffly, Mami gestured for Ryouko to sit, and she did so awkwardly.

"They offered me a personal chef," Mami said in her native Japanese, pouring out the tea for the two of them, "but I declined. It wouldn't feel right. Not that I ever have time to make my own food anymore. I have to apologize; this is all synthesized stuff, except for the tea. I have my own supply of tea leaves, and a robot to brew it. It's not bad. But of course your generation has lived their whole lives on synthesized stuff, so—oh I'm just rambling now, sorry."

Ryouko looked back at the other girl blankly for a long moment then, too late, realized that she had should have insisted on pouring the tea, rather than let Mami do it.

"If Sakura-san were here, she'd tell you to relax and let loose," Mami said, setting the teapot down, and looking Ryouko in the eye. "I mean it. This used to be so much easier, so much more informal, but nowadays every girl I take on looks too scared to even breathe."

On cue, Ryouko let out a breath she didn't even know she'd been holding.

"Good," Mami said, nodding to herself and sipping at her tea, holding the cup with both hands.

"So how are things?" the blonde-haired girl asked, again peering at Ryouko. "I mean, how was training and all that? I've seen the psych reports, of course, but I want to hear it for myself."

Ryouko blinked. This was *not* what she had been expecting, so she had no response prepared. She dug around in her mind for a response, all the while trying to remind herself that she knew Mami's reputation, there was no need to be scared, she was being too nervous—

"It was fine, fine," Ryouko said, repeating the last word unnecessarily. "I don't think it went any differently for me than for anyone else. There was the fighter attack and all that, but we lived, and the radiation trauma wasn't that bad. And, uh, I made friends."

She cringed when she mentioned “friends”, and hoped it was only an internal cringe. Her response seemed terribly vacuous, but the marshal nodded sagely, seeming satisfied with the response.

“You know,” Mami said, leaning back against the chair behind her, “your leadership during that attack is the official reason for your promotion, and the reason why you’re here.”

The reason I’m here? Ryouko thought. Truth be told, she didn’t know why she was here, only that Mami had wanted to meet with her, and had told her to wear her dress uniform. She hadn’t known what to expect.

“Well, what is—“ Ryouko began hesitantly.

“In a moment,” Mami insisted, waving one hand at Ryouko while using the other to sip tea. “Finish your cake first. I’m told it’s your favorite. I like it too.”

Not feeling daring enough to ask who had done the telling, Ryouko nodded slightly and set about meekly doing as instructed, picking up one of the tiny forks to cut into the cake. She was glad she had finally gotten over the dysguesia—it had made eating really strange for a while.

“I remember when Akemi-san first contracted,” Mami said, holding her teacup and looking up at the ceiling wistfully. “We invited her over for tea and cakes, and she was so shy—nothing like she was later. I was the oldest, so she and Sakura-san both looked up to me. Later, I started to miss being the sempai, just a little. Nowadays, everyone acts the same way, though.”

Ryouko, who had frozen with her fork halfway to her mouth, realized what she was doing and crammed the cake into her mouth.

“I see,” she said thoughtfully, trying to chew her food at the same time.

Something was off about Mami’s Japanese, something Ryouko only noticed now, in this ostensibly casual conversation. The accent, the word choice—it reminded of her grandfather, a little, only more intrinsic somehow. It was almost as if the marshal were speaking a different dialect entirely, but it sounded like nothing Ryouko recognized.

“Just look where we are now,” Mami continued. “All those years ago, we couldn’t have even imagined it. We used to be girls too, but none of us ever got to finish our childhoods or live normal lives. Others did later, but not us. But, I suppose after hearing your wish, I can’t say you didn’t ask for it.”

Ryouko, who had been drinking some of her tea, barely suppressed a jerk of surprise at her sudden inclusion into the conversation.

She coughed slightly, setting down the cup and looking at the other girl’s face for a continuation, but Mami did not return her look, seeming to focus instead on eating her own cake. Unsure of what to say, Ryouko eventually looked back down and did the same.

Eventually, she finished her cake, setting the fork with a slight clatter. She hadn’t relished it as much as she might have.

“I’m sorry,” Mami said, with a slight smile. “I don’t know what came over me. Now that I think about it, I realized I’ve only ever said depressing things around you. I shouldn’t do that. Come on, stand up.”

Ryouko looked up in surprise, and found Mami already getting up off the floor. She followed suit a moment later.

The marshal seemed to peer at her face for a moment, as they stood face to face.

“You really do look like her, but…”

Here, Mami’s voice trailed off, as the marshal frowned in sudden puzzlement.

“Like who?” Ryouko asked.

Mami shook her head, eyes closed and smiling slightly.

“Zhukov, we’re ready,” she said abruptly, switching to Standard.

An aged Russian male, wearing an archaic uniform and a receding hairline, materialized out of thin air to Ryouko’s left, image at first pixelated and blurry, but quickly resolving.

“HSS Georgy Konstantinovich Zhukov here will be the official witness,” Mami said, gesturing at the starship’s avatar, which bowed.

“Witness—“ Ryouko began to repeat.

“This is an award ceremony,” Mami explained, smiling broadly. “Forgive me for being childish by not informing you earlier, but I wanted to see the look on your face myself. Seeing girls like you happy makes me feel young again.”

“Award—“ Ryouko repeated again meaninglessly.

Mami reached into one of her pockets, pulling out a small metal badge and ribbon. She held it out in the palm of her hand for Ryouko to look at. The badge itself was shaped like a small block arrow, and was made of a pure white, almost luminescent metal. The ribbon itself was also white, and its attachment to the point of the arrow made it clear that the arrow would point up when worn.

“Just to be clear,” the marshal said. “I didn’t recommend the award. For that, you can thank HSS Laplace.”

“Always found him a charming fellow,” Zhukov commented, in an affected Russian accent.

Ryouko’s gaze darted back and forth from Mami to Zhukov. She was slightly bewildered, and indeed, her face must have been something to see.

“An award?” she repeated again. “For what?”

Mami cleared her throat, fist to mouth, seeming to stand up straighter.

“It is my pleasure to present to you the Chitose Yuma Medal for Combat Leadership Exceeding Expectations of Age and Training Level,” she said, carefully and clearly, stepping forward and bending down to pin the glaringly white arrow to the left side of Ryouko’s uniform.

“Your calm and careful reaction to an unexpected Cephalopod attack would have honored a veteran with a year of experience, and set an example for your comrades to emulate. You acted decisively in a situation you were not trained for, and prevented substantial losses. Congratulations.”

When the marshal stepped back, Ryouko again looked at the other two individuals in the room. She hadn’t thought herself one to be easily affected by something as artificial as a medal, but in that moment her eyes blurred slightly and she felt…pride? Yes, that was it. She was proud of

herself, unexpectedly. It was a novel sensation.

Then the moment passed, and the glow faded.

“Congratulations,” the ship said. “You know, I don’t know what’s with this obsession with long award names. Couldn’t it be called the Combat Leadership Arrow or something?”

“Hush,” Mami rebuked. “Now isn’t the time to talk about that.”

“I don’t mind,” Ryouko said blankly. “I’m-I’m honored.”

“The honor is mine,” Mami said, looking at her seriously. “I don’t ever go out and fight like you girls do. I stay in my flagship or mobile command post, and watch the rest of you.”

“Much more flagship and less command ship now, with the new position,” Zhukov said, looking sidelong at Mami. “Not that I mind. I always said you took too much personal risk, going out there like that.”

Mami smiled and nodded to herself.

“Your parents will love reading about it,” she said. “They always do. Though—“

“Wait,” Ryouko interrupted, focus abruptly sharpening. “You’re telling my parents about this?”

Mami tilted her head, elaborate hair style shifting along with the head.

“Of course. We forwarded the medal citation, and we’ll be forwarding a video of this ceremony. Standard procedure, unless the parents are estranged—is something wrong?”

Mami asked the last question in a worried tone of voice, due to the sudden dismayed look on Ryouko’s face.

“No, nothing is wrong,” Ryouko insisted, too quickly. “I—I was just curious.”

“If you say so,” Mami said.

They looked at each other for a moment.

“Now,” Mami said, her body language visibly dismissing the previous subject. “I obviously didn’t summon you to my ship for you to sit around idly. Come on, let me show you the bridge.”

“The bridge,” Ryouko said, blinking. “You mean, the ship’s—“

“Yes, that bridge,” Mami said, grabbing her by the shoulder friendlily and nudging her in the direction of the door. “It’ll be educational.”

The lights darkened behind them. A moment later, HSS Zhukov, the only source of light in the room, smiled to himself, shrugged, and dissolved his avatar.

The trip to the ship’s bridge was refreshingly short. Just outside the admiral’s suite, Ryouko followed Mami into one of the ship’s ubiquitous short travel tubes, which were essentially a less ambitious version of the fast travel tube, generally permitting only a few people at a time. This one happened to be directly vertical, without even the luxury of a platform, so that as Mami entered, she appeared to be stepping directly off a ledge, falling immediately downward. Ryouko reminded herself that she had done many more daring things than this, and followed suit.

They were ejected directly into the bridge, Mami landing with aplomb, Ryouko stumbling slightly. Looking up, Ryouko saw a room that looked very much like what she would expect out of a command center. The darkly-lit cylindrical room was about the size of a large classroom, and every available surface, including the ceiling and floor, was sheathed with informational displays. The floor was devoted to a giant symbolic representation of their current star system; looking down, Ryouko found herself standing on part of the system's Oort Cloud.

Ringing the room was a line of dark black chairs, arranged so as to face whichever part of the wall was nearest, and each accompanied by a small console. Each occupied chair was ringed by an additional set of constantly flowing holograms. A small circle of three chairs sat in the middle of the room, facing inward, towards a large cylindrical column that occupied the exact center of the room.

What surprised Ryouko the most, however, were not the features of the room, but the people within it. No one was standing; instead, officers sat in the black chairs, the backs of their necks covered by what appeared to be a piece of black rubber. This "black rubber" was connected directly to the corresponding chair by an intimidatingly thick cable, long enough to allow seated personnel to easily turn their heads, but not much more than that. Many of the chairs were not occupied, and Ryouko glanced over the ones that were, identifying "senior weapons officer", "junior navigation officer", "junior damage control officer", and so forth. Though Ryouko suspected the seats were interchangeable, many of the consoles were decorated with personal effects.

Mami watched her with an unreadable expression.

"It's a direct connection cable," Mami said. "You should be familiar with the idea, from your training. It's the same thing, except you can move your head."

Ryouko followed Mami over to the triad of chairs in the center, passing the only standing figure in the room, an avatar of Zhukov, who nodded at them as they passed.

One of the central chairs was already occupied, by the captain of the ship, Emilio Rodriguez, who looked up, nodded politely, then did a double-take.

"Award ceremony, Commodore," Mami said, explaining the uniform.

The man nodded again, then settled back into silence.

"Sorry he's not more courteous," Mami explained. "It's very mentally taxing to run a ship. He's not even acknowledging me very much. It's understood."

Ryouko nodded, as Mami sat down in one of the other chairs.

"This is essentially the center of the ship," Mami said, settling in and placing her arms on the arm rests. "Zhukov's most powerful computing clusters are in the area, and these interface chairs are the most direct, lowest latency connections to his primary consciousness. This column in front of me is the most direct manual input, in case of chair failure, and in the event of AI failure, is the most powerful command console on the ship. This area is also one of the most heavily-defended, along with the main engines. Though of course there's a secondary bridge, and backup officers, and backup everything."

Mami gestured at the remaining chair, and Ryouko looked at her in surprise.

She pointed at herself, wanting to be sure. Mami nodded.

“We all have chairs we prefer; that’s the first officer’s, but he’s scheduled for another section of the ship, and it’s just a training thing, anyway. Sit down.”

Not without some trepidation, Ryouko stepped forward, maneuvering into the last remaining chair.

Mami nodded pleasantly, as the cable attachment to her chair reared upward like a snake, expertly latching itself to the back of her neck, just under the head, the black rubber-like material seeming to melt and flow to conform to a new shape.

Ryouko managed not to jump in surprise when something warm and liquid contacted the back of *her* neck a moment later. She felt the slight prick of the interface microneedles digging into her flesh, then the vague indescribable feeling she had learned to associate with this kind of connection—the feeling that somehow, next to your own consciousness, there was someplace *else*.

Welcome, the ship thought, and the texture of the thought couldn’t be remotely compared to the voice of Zhukov’s avatar, though they sounded superficially similar. The thought carried with it a visceral sense of welcome and beneficence, while seeming to suggest in its undertones tremendous power. It made no sense, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that she could *feel* Zhukov’s processing clusters thrumming in the background, a sensation that this was a mind vastly more powerful than hers, however human it may seem.

A Version Two TacComp, I see, the ship commented. *Not something usually seen at your rank and standing. Special experimental exception, it seems. It does not matter. It’s always good to meet a new one.*

There was a pause, and Ryouko knew somehow not to say anything, despite the pervasive sense of *waiting*.

Uh, hi, Clarisse responded, finally, thought seeming flimsy and weak in comparison, and nervous, somehow. *Hello. Uh, nice to meet you, I suppose.*

I feel as if I should point out that I’m here too, Mami’s TacComp thought, and somehow Ryouko knew that it was *Machina* doing the thinking, not Mami, despite the similar voice.

I meant to ask earlier, Mami thought. *But your parents got you the upgrade somehow, right? I read the approval documents.*

Yes, Ryouko admitted. *My father.*

Realizing she had closed her eyes without meaning to, Ryouko opened them again to look at Mami, who was watching her with a slight smile.

I recommend you close your eyes again, Mami thought, this time telepathically.

Okay, she thought, closing her eyes as instructed. She had a feeling of anticipation, and didn’t know whether it was her own or imposed by the ship.

Well, let’s not dally too much, Mami thought. *Let us proceed as planned, Zhukov.*

Indeed, the ship thought.

Without waiting for Ryouko’s input, the sensations of the world began to disappear, the pressure of the chair underneath her rapidly dropping away. She braced herself for the familiar brief sensory deprivation that accompanied immersive chair simulations—but instead, as the outside

world faded away, a new world took its place, the transition occurring smoothly. She had the sense of gradually floating out of her chair, as stars appeared in her field of view, even though her eyes had remained closed.

Then Mami's gently smiling face appeared in her field of view, off to the side, and she was at last able to orient herself—somewhat.

Stretched before her was a starmap of human space, the likes of which she had last seen in the Mitakihara starport. Like that one, this was colored by region of control, a serene blue for areas still in human control and an angry red for regions of alien incursion. An array of symbols decorated the map, Earth and the core worlds drawn extra-large. A vague fog seemed to obscure the far distance, where knowledge of the relevant areas grew scant, contracting to only the sum of astronomical observations.

She seemed to be floating in the midst of this particular starmap, though, rather than watching the ceiling, as she had done at the starport. Realizing abruptly that she had no sense of gravity, she turned to face Mami, and found herself executing the turn automatically, with no need to apply magical pressure or transfer angular momentum. But then, it was a simulation, of course, and come to think of it, there was no vacuum despite their apparent position in extragalactic space, outside the plane of the Milky Way.

"In this simulation, you can go wherever you want with a thought," Mami said, voice clearer than life.

To accentuate her point, the starfield transitioned impossibly fast, zooming past them in the blink of an eye. Too busy watching the scenery, Ryouko noticed too late that she was falling, and only barely managed to land properly onto newfound ground, bracing herself on the powdery surface with both arms, the feel of the surface beneath her hands reminding her of fine gravel.

Standing back up, she looked at Mami's standing figure—and at the Earth framed behind her, hanging half-visible in the sky. She looked down, and realized where this crater-pocked surface must be.

Mami, who had been watching her with arms crossed, turned to look at the Earth too, dropping her arms back to her sides.

"I visit when I can, which isn't often," she said. "I miss it. But simulations like this take a lot of resources, so let's move on."

With the same abrupt transition, Ryouko found herself in interstellar space again, flailing her arms slightly.

"You've heard of the Euphratic Incursion, right?" Mami asked, turning to face her. "Look how advanced the lines are."

An angry red involution in the smooth sphere of human space called itself to attention, its internal symbols growing more prominent and pulsing slightly.

"At the beginning of the war, before we even had any idea what was going on, they established fortified outposts around us, to lock us into this segment of the Orion Arm," Mami said.

On cue, a set of glowing red points surrounding part of human space revealed themselves.

"The majority of settled space is actually empty," Mami continued. "So we won't run out of colonization space for a long time, but it forced us to redesign our emergency long-distance colonization plans."

Suddenly, they zoomed in on the Euphratic sector, so that the area in question formed a majority of her field of view.

"Those outposts also form a significant problem if the sector is lost," Mami said. "The position of the salient is such that if we lost the sector, we'd have to divert military supplies above or below the salient to reach the far edge of the sphere. Because of how narrow human space is out there, we could hardly do so without running into those same outposts, which are exceedingly difficult to clear and tenaciously defended. It would not be worth it. Effectively, we'd have to withdraw our defenses in the far edge to the other side of the salient and shorten our line. Our military cannot survive without supplies from Earth and the core worlds."

This time, Mami pointed at the starfield in front of her as she spoke, and the view in front of her shifted and rearranged to suit her explanation, showing with arrows the described force movements.

She leaned forward, and the view zoomed in again.

"Currently, the tip of the salient, the focus of the fighting, is in this system, the Kepler-37 system. We are *here*—"

This time, when Mami pointed, the world shifted again, and Ryouko found herself suddenly floating within only a few feet of a large asteroid, one with a strangely metallic—

No, she realized. *The HSS Zhukov.*

She looked around, and found the escort vessels of the fleet surrounding her, the cruisers, frigates, fighters, and assorted drones that comprised the meat of the fleet, along with two other battlecruisers, the *Horatio Nelson* and the—lengthily named—*Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur, comte de Rochambeau*. They were colored to be difficult to see, but the symbols that showed up in her field of view easily made up for it. An escort MedEvac flew directly past her, small, agile, and missile-shaped, with its cargo of deployable mages clearly labeled, complete with individual specialties.

Peering into the distance, Ryouko found that she could see labeled locations for the planets of the system: the three fiery inner worlds, the relatively small colonized worlds of Apollo and Artemis, an asteroid belt, and the distant gas giants. The colonized worlds each had an orbital shipyard, the inner worlds and asteroid belts had mining, research, and defense facilities, and the outer worlds—well, those were generally under alien control. The situation was fluid, without clear cut battle fronts. Intra-system FTL jumps allowed easy penetration both ways into poorly defended areas, which were generally wherever there weren't planets or asteroids to defend, and wherever the constantly fluctuating ship traffic routes didn't happen to be. Of course, penetrating into a random patch of empty space rarely garnered you any rewards, and could be responded to quickly.

Mami put her hand directly onto the virtual hull of the Zhukov, patting it.

"We're holding trajectory near the planet Apollo," she said, pointing at the planet in the distance in front of her. "This system, with its two shipyards, is critical to the defense of the sector due to its heavy starship production. Loss of the shipyards would seriously impact fleet operations through the area."

Ryouko turned to look at the distant planet, only visible as a bright star at this distance. Focusing on the planet, it suddenly filled her vision, and she received a flow of information on population, economic productivity, emergency exigencies, and so forth. And, of course, information on its shipyard. All of this entered her mind as sudden, unlearned *knowledge*.

Mami seemed to lose focus for a moment, looking off into the vacuum of space.

Ryouko thought for a moment, deciding whether she should ask.

“Ah, um, To—Mami-san,” she asked, hesitant. “I’m just curious: Is there a specific reason you’re telling all this to me, or is this just for my information? I really appreciate it, but—“

She stopped, realizing that Mami still wasn’t listening, her head tilted upward. Mami wasn’t just looking off in a random direction; she was watching something.

“I’m sorry,” Mami said, finally, looking back down. “I have to kick you out. Something unexpected came up. You can stay on the bridge and use the crew interface to follow, but try not to get underfoot.”

Ryouko was unceremoniously ejected from the simulation, the stars and ships fading almost instantly out of view. She opened her eyes and found herself looking at the two commanders in their command chairs, both with eyes now completely closed, rather than maintaining partial contact with the real world as the captain had done earlier. The connector had already removed itself from Ryouko’s neck.

Battle stations, Zhukov thought simply, the thought arriving clearly and directly into her auditory cortex, without any preamble. Ryouko instantly understood what had so drawn Mami’s attention.

She stood up, wondering whether “crew interface” meant one of the less important chairs that ringed the room, or something else. Before she finished formulating the question, Clarisse informed her that Mami almost certainly meant the standard unattached interface used by most of the crew, rather than any of the chairs on the bridge. Ryouko glanced around hastily, and found a corner to stand in between one of the entrance doors and one of the consoles, as officers poured into the command center.

She leaned against the wall, requesting the relevant interface, feeling uncomfortable from the questioning glances of arriving crewmen, though they looked away as soon as they registered that she was supposed to be there.

A restricted starmap of the local area unfurled itself in her field of vision, overlaying itself over her view of the bridge. Ryouko wavered for a moment, uncertain of whether to commit all her attention to the battle view or to save half of her attention for the bridge. Then she decided, giving the command to black out her own vision and replace it with a battle view.

She toggled field command mode, though she wasn’t sure how much she’d need it.

It seemed that a significant alien carrier force had been spotted approaching attack range of the shipyard orbiting the planet Apollo. It was, the operational analysis indicated, almost certainly insufficient to inflict meaningful damage to the shipyard itself, but only if the fleet responded significantly. It fit the pattern of attack over the past week: just enough to attrite the human fleets and force them to stay committed on defense around the two planets, but not enough to represent a serious committal of resources. It kept them pinned and unable to concentrate their forces, and it didn’t help that the planets were on opposite sides of the star at the moment.

Ryouko frowned. If she understood this correctly, recent alien activity seemed to be defensive in character, as if “they were confident that the situation would turn decisively in their favor soon”—so the operational assessment pouring into her head indicated. But it contained no indication as to why the aliens felt this way, or even any guesses.

You received that analysis on a Level Two Access level, apparently because Tomoe Mami has an

active Classification Exception for you for reports of this type, Clarisse thought. *That's only done if you need to know…which it seems you do. But I'm not sure why a first lieutenant would need elevated access here…and it raises the question of what here is too sensitive to include in a Level One analysis.*

She probably intends it to be an educational thing, Ryouko thought. *She is my mentor, after all.*

She told Clarisse that, but privately she still wondered about the analysis's silence in explaining recent alien fleet activity. It was doubly troubling: firstly, because of the discrepancy itself and secondly, because she knew from past experience—both recent and pre-contract—that classified material was never handled so sloppily. If a discrepancy existed, it was intended that those with Level Two would notice the discrepancy, even if apparently they would not receive the full explanation.

Then she realized that Clarisse was reading her thoughts anyway, even if she wasn't explicitly forming the words.

You think deeply, Clarisse thought. *Well, about some things. It makes my job easier, since I don't have to train you to. We have subroutines just for this. We have subroutines for a lot of things.*

Within field command mode, Ryouko had plenty of time to divert to thinking of this sort, as the battle winded through its opening, preparatory stages. Mami's sectorial First Fleet was moving to intercept the alien fleet, the winged polygon glyphs that represented the Fleet's battlecruisers shifting menacingly in the direction of the carriers to keep them from getting too close. As she watched, the flow of time dragging onward, the carriers decelerated, slowing their approach, launching a wave of interceptors and bombers.

They're not being serious, Clarisse thought. *They're not bringing any blink cannons.*

They're being serious enough that we're here, aren't we? Ryouko thought.

Around Ryouko, the HSS Zhukov shuttered slightly, as its main SHERMAN gun fired in concert with the other battlecruisers. The projectiles were anti-fighter, designed for projectile speed and timed dispersal rather than impact energy and FTL disruption. Fired into the path of the alien craft, it forced the ships to break formation and lose speed, and local gravitational effects disrupted steering control on the relatively lightly-engined craft.

The enormous wave of alien craft entered the first layer of defenses, the wall of hastily deployed smart flak, mines, and other obstacles dropped by the outer line of screening frigates. About ten percent of the Interceptor and bomber signals disappeared from the interface, confirmed destroyed. The rest activated stealth devices, and their trajectories on the tracker became unstable, ships disappearing and reappearing as brief glimpses of sensor contact were used to correct predictive estimates of location.

The screening frigates were already in the process of returning to the main fleet, but could not outrun the alien ships in time. A layer of drones, human interceptors and Magi Cæli mitigated losses, but the alien vessels fed on the easy targets, shredding weak hulls and detonating FTL engines, so that the screening line became a depressing array of disappearing signals, dozens of frigates disappearing each second as the casualty rates spiked upward.

When the fight reached the cruiser line, with its enormous drone counts, well-stocked mage complements, and heavy defenses, the alien craft abruptly turned away, focusing on bombarding the stationary mines and flak they had just passed through, assisting specialized craft that had already stayed behind. Standard tactics, clearing the way for the following waves of ships, already on their way.

The second wave of bombers reached the cruiser line, and had a much tougher time of it. Missiles and projectiles veered off course inside a variety of defensive systems, were intercepted, or detonated on forcefields. MC mages danced throughout the area, stopping attacks, detonating ships, and wreaking other forms of defensive havoc, dodging the occasional hard radiation bomb and other forms of lightning-quick death.

But the alien bomber waves did not linger to engage the much larger human ships face-to-face. They veered out of the area as soon as their main armaments depleted, making way for the next wave of alien ships. The alien fighters seemed endless, arriving in wave after gigantic wave despite the heavy attrition imposed on them—indeed on both sides—while the human fleet lumbered forward, struggling to close the distance to the alien carriers. The battlecruisers kept firing, targeting the ships as they arrived, but unable to use their main guns for their intended purpose.

They're not being serious, and we aren't either, Clarisse thought. *We're not committing the stealth MC frigates. There's a directive to conserve fleet strength, but no explanation why.*

The battle grinded onward, and the losses began to pile up—more and more frigates, more light cruisers, a heavy cruiser. Ryouko reflected that, for the average crewman manning an anonymous post somewhere on a giant ship, it must be refreshing to have an idea of how the battle as a whole was going, even if one couldn't personally see it.

Finally, a human carrier near the edge of the defenses broke up and detonated under a wave of laser fire, its engine areas no longer able to take the strain. It was probably the most significant loss of the day, and indeed caused the single highest jump in casualty counts. The alien craft stopped arriving soon after; the human battlecruisers were nearly in close enough range to attempt FTL interdiction with their SHERMAN cannons. The aliens were too coy to stand around waiting for that, already forming the FTL shells necessary for departure. The moment the last interceptors and bombers returned to the area around the carriers, the fleet departed. The First Fleet made no attempt to pursue—the aliens were faster.

An attritional battle, one that seemed almost meaningless, except for the still-updating casualty reports, which were Access Level One. AI/Personnel Losses: roughly twenty-two thousand. Mage losses: twenty-eight, with eighteen critical cases still being resolved, or en route via MedEvac. Another eight were heading back as soul gems alone, but were at least stable. Ryouko wasn't sure what was worse: that she felt easily capable of brushing off twenty thousand dead in the context of the rapidly growing, two hundred million strong human military, or that 28 mages seemed like a tremendous number to her, somehow.

With a thought, she exited the interface, and the battlecruiser's command center snapped back into focus. None of the battlecruisers had come under even light fire, and officers were already in the process of leaving, returning to personal quarters or other regions of the ship. For a long while, Ryouko just stood there and watched, wondering what she was supposed to do. Mami, still silent and immobile in her chair, was not giving any instruction. Ryouko supposed that there was a lot to deal with, in the aftermath of the battle, but she couldn't just keep standing here. Her schedule was empty after this. Mami was supposed to—

Just as Ryouko began to consider sending a message to ask, Mami's eyes opened and her head turned, pinning her with a sharp-eyed look that was almost a glare. It was so unlike what she had grown to expect from the woman—girl?—that Ryouko stepped backward involuntarily, wondering what she had done wrong.

Come over here, the marshal commanded by telepathy, and Ryouko hurried to obey.

Sit, Mami told her, before she could ask any questions.

She sat, and again there was the feeling of something warm and liquid against the back of her neck, the sensation of interface array inserting itself into interface port—

This time she found herself not in the depths of space, but in a cozy conference room, decorated in the manner Ryouko had expected of Mami's cabin earlier, without the maritime flavor. The walls and long meeting table were real, dark wood, and much of the decoration consisted of old-style framed portraits, of what appeared to be primarily Unification War UF Generals. There, for instance, was Marshal Wu, Admiral Eberhart—

She stopped, gasping slightly. She knew where this was.

Her eyes had stopped on the far side of the table, where a giant-sized version of the logo of the Armed Forces of Earth was inscribed. Two arrows pushing upward against a rounded envelope, it had long ago replaced the more complex emancipation-themed seal of the UF.

And if that hadn't been sufficient to tip her off, she could have easily referred to Field Marshal Roland Erwynmark, Chief of the General Staff, who had appeared next to her, giving her an unreadable look. It went without saying that she had never seen him this close before. The marshal was not movie star handsome—a fact that had disappointed a decade of filmmakers, most of whom ended up using artistic license to touch up his face—but his charisma was legendary.

Almost ridiculously, Ryouko found herself thinking that Ruiko would kill her if she found out, since the girl belonged to the marshal's legion of online fangirls.

Before she had fully had time to process this new development, face frozen in an incredulous expression, she found herself shaking hands with the much taller marshal, her virtual body performing the action automatically—Clarisse was covering for her. Suddenly, the room contained not just Erwynmark, but also Tomoe Mami and Kuroi Kana, the latter of whom somehow contrived to remind Ryouko of one of her more lethargic classmates, even here.

"It is good to meet you," Erwynmark said formally, tipping his embroidered cap. "Tomoe has only had wonderful things to say about you, though of course you are inexperienced. I was inexperienced too, once. I don't think either of these two ladies can say the same."

"You never fail to remind us of our ages, Erwynmark," Kuroi said, in seemingly good spirit, but with a slight undertone of warning.

"You may be wondering why you're here," Erwynmark said, addressing Ryouko. "The reason is that, while I respect Tomoe's judgment, I'd like to see you for myself before talking to the rest of the Staff. Much rides on this."

Rides on what, sir? Ryouko almost said, but she bit down the sentence. She would surely find out soon.

"Let's get to it, then," Erwynmark said, glancing at the others, who nodded.

With a gesture, the surface of the table lit up, a series of grainy holographic and flat images filling the space about the formerly wooden surface. They appeared to be all of the same object, some sort of building situated on an arid surface.

"I'm sure you've seen this somewhere in your training," Mami said, leaning forward and gesturing at the holograms.

Ryouko frowned slightly.

“That’s a wormhole stabilizer, isn’t it?” she said, after double-checking with Clarisse. “I’m not sure, though. It looks misshapen.”

“That’s because it’s incomplete,” Mami said. “But it is far closer to completion than we would wish, far closer than we previously thought it was. They’ve already begun testing major components.”

The hologram above the table shimmered, replaced by a map of the local star system. It quickly zoomed into one of system’s distant gas giants, then to one of the planet’s moons, an unpromising-looking barren rock. One region of it lit up, a small structure appearing on the surface.

“A few weeks ago, we discovered a wormhole stabilizer being built on this moon,” Mami said. “They were trying to hide it by not placing obvious defenses in the area. We sent in a MagOps team, but they were detected and destroyed.”

Mami glanced at Ryouko, gauging her reaction, as did the others. Ryouko had wondered why Mami was the only one talking, but she had figured it out: she was Mami’s trainee, chosen to learn this information. It would have been unseemly for Erwynmark to brief her.

More importantly, though, Ryouko was thinking through the implications of what she had just heard. She knew what wormhole stabilizers did, of course, but thinking back to the image Mami had shown earlier—to build one here, in the middle of human space, would drastically shorten offensive supply lines, and—

“This is the real reason they’re here, isn’t it?” she said, surprising herself by saying it out loud.

Mami smiled slightly, torn between natural pleasure at receiving the right answer and the gravity of the overall situation.

“Well, it’s most of the reason,” she said. “The shipyards are still important. It’s a brilliant synergy. If we lost the shipyards, we wouldn’t have the strength to mount an attack on the stabilizer. If the stabilizer goes online, then we most likely lose the shipyards. Both must be dealt with at the same time.”

“If the team you sent was detected,” Ryouko said, a moment later, “then that means it’s no longer secret.”

“One of your cousins died trying to carry out that raid,” Kana said, sounding vaguely angry.

Erwynmark cleared his throat.

“We’re overstretched,” Erwynmark said. “Put bluntly, the fleet is not built for offensive operations, not against forces of this magnitude. Against so many units, we can hold a fortified position—in fact, we were doing quite well—but we cannot counterstrike. There’s a chance we couldn’t break through to the moon even if we stripped Apollo and Artemis of all fleet cover. They exploited our weaknesses perfectly. We thought time was on our side. It wasn’t.”

But you attacked the Saharan Sector! Ryouko wanted to say, but the words died stillborn on her lips. If the famously daring author of the Saharan Raids didn’t think offensive action would work, it probably wouldn’t.

“Then what?” Ryouko asked, meeting Erwynmark’s look, part of her in disbelief that she would ask such a blunt question. “You can’t possibly have brought me here just to tell me this!”

The field marshal smiled, more broadly than Mami had earlier, the expression spreading slowly

over a face that had previously been severe and serious.

“No, of course not,” he said.

Ryouko followed his gaze back to Mami.

“The operation failed during the insertion phase,” Mami said, looking back at her. “One of the girls did something wrong, or the aliens have developed even better sensors. Either way, they were unable to successfully traverse the full distance between low orbit and the interior of the facility. Because of the atmosphere, they couldn’t get closer than one hundred eighty kilometers without compromising stealth unacceptably. An obvious solution would be to repeat the attempt, but carry out the teleportation in one jump, rather than by relay. There is only one person with that kind of range.”

Ryouko couldn’t pin it down, but there was something unsettling in Mami’s tone. It seemed dull, somehow, as if it lacked a dynamic range it would normally have.

And then she finished processing Mami’s statement, which had been so terse that Ryouko had gotten lost trying to decide what detail she should ask about first. As it was, though, she immediately settled on:

“Are you suggesting that I go on the next raid?” she asked incredulously.

“It was out of the question to put you on the first one,” Kana said, her normally pleasant and mild voice carrying strong undercurrents of fury. “We could have rushed you out and slapped on some emergency training. We judged it a bad idea. It’s still a bad idea now, but we do not have better ideas.”

Her ancestor’s expression was searing, her eyes filled with a harsh, overwhelming fire. Kuroi Kana no longer reminded Ryouko of a lethargic classmate or anyone else she knew. Instead, Ryouko felt as if all four centuries of Kana’s life burned within those eyes—it was an elemental look, of the kind that a human shouldn’t have been capable of.

“The squid will be even more ready this time than the last,” Mami commented. “Now that they no longer fear detection, they can openly place defenses and detection equipment. Our only advantage is that they might not think us willing to try a second time.”

“They do not understand the nature of a cornered beast,” Erwynmark said. “They have demonstrated this many times in this war. We can only hope they haven’t learned any lessons.”

The others turned again to look at Ryouko, who was at a loss as to how to handle the ensuing silence. She felt—

“I’m not ready,” she said, looking downward, face haunted. “I’ll do my best, and I’ll try not to fail, but I’m not ready. This whole sector depends on this, doesn’t it?”

“None of us are ever ready,” Erwynmark said, looking at her with a grave expression. “Not with your level of experience. What matters is whether you rise to the occasion. You seem intelligent and perceptive. It would be unreasonable to expect more at this point.”

He placed his hand on her shoulder, surprising her into looking up.

“You’ll do fine,” the marshal said. “I can tell you will. And you won’t be alone.”

Then he looked around at the other two generals, nodding at each in turn. Tipping his hat, his body dissolved, disappearing from the simulation.

“Our family is one of Humanity’s most distinguished,” Kuroi Kana said in Japanese, walking up to her. “And as much as I hate to admit it, so is Shizuki’s. I won’t pretend that makes success guaranteed. I have every confidence in you, though.”

The girl held out her arms, and Ryouko only realized an awkward moment later that it was an invitation for a hug.

The matriarch patted her head soothingly as they hugged, and Ryouko could not help but be struck by the apparent absurdity of this teenager, only a little taller than her, treating her like a child.

Then the other girl pulled back, keeping her hands on Ryouko’s shoulders.

“Come back alive, okay?” she said, looking into Ryouko’s eyes with a mournful look. “I’ve lost too many children already, in my lifetime.”

“I—I will,” Ryouko assured, not sure what else to say.

The director of the Black Heart nodded, dropping her arms. A moment later, she, too, dissolved.

“Shizuki Sayaka and her were best friends, once.” Mami said, expression unreadable. “But she ruined it. It wasn’t her fault; she did what she had to. Deep down, Shizuki-san knows that. But she still can’t forgive her. If she ever did, they’d be best friends again. That’s what I think.”

She paused.

“For the two of them, family is everything,” Mami finished. “I can’t say I blame them. You have to have something to hold on to.”

“What do I do now, Mami-san?” Ryouko asked, not even stopping to wonder why on earth Mami was talking about Sayaka at a moment like this. “I should prepare somehow, but—“

“There is not much time left,” Mami said, returning to the main topic. “The longer we wait, the more the defenses improve. I’m sending you down to Apollo to assemble with the rest of the team. You’ll practice before going. It should help. And—“

Mami turned to make sure Ryouko was paying attention.

“I hear you have a grandfather in the military. He’s stationed on-planet at the moment. You should visit. You’ll have a day off to do it. I can’t really spare more. If it weren’t a combat zone, I would have had your parents and other family flown in.”

“But—“ Ryouko began, but Mami silenced her with a hand to the shoulder.

“Trust me,” the marshal said. “It’s not just you. The rest of the team has been visiting family, too. It’ll do you good. I wish I could help you more, but I’m too busy here. If I had my choice, I wouldn’t be sending you out like this.”

Mami stopped, clearly trying to think of something else to say. A moment later, she shook her head at herself.

“We can talk more later,” she said. “I think I need a nap. Well, once we’re done cleaning up after the battle.”

The simulation dissolved around them.

Mami was in a great mood.

True, earlier that day she had sensed Kyouko in the distance, and it had invited dark thoughts. Just as true, there was the matter of that that damned Mikuni Oriko to contend with. She had a lot of problems…but it could be dealt with later. She had just paid a visit to the supermarket, found some nice bell peppers on sale, and decided she was going to make pasta. That made everything better.

She actually found herself humming a little tune as she climbed the stairs to reach her apartment. Yes, she was probably overdoing it a little with the forced cheer, but over time she had learned that forced cheer was better than no cheer at all, and could be made to feel almost as good, with just a little effort.

As she neared her apartment, she slowed her pace, frowning. She smelled something—had one of the neighbors accidentally burned their cooking? No, this didn't quite smell like that. It smelled like burning, though. Burning…wood.

She found herself feeling suddenly apprehensive, despite her attempts to shake it off. As she inserted her key into its slot, she felt herself tense up.

The scene on the other side of her door was almost beyond her comprehension. Everything—smashed. They had come in through the balcony, and destroyed everything that could be destroyed. Her precious china collection, passed down through her family, was in pieces on the floor, mixed in indiscriminately with pieces of her other plates and wood shards from the smashed cabinets and furniture. The wall was smashed in in multiple places, literally none of her furniture was still standing, and even the dishwasher and oven had had their doors ripped off. A giant pool of water flooded the floor, leaking out from under the sink. It didn't look like her home—it looked like a trash heap.

She stared for a long, agonizing moment, then tried to stagger forward, but her legs gave out underneath her only a few steps in. She pressed her palms into the floor, heedless of the glass cutting into her right hand, and felt the inevitable tears arriving. She—

*"What do I have left?" she demanded of the empty room, or perhaps of the universe itself. "You've taken everything! My family, my only friend, my home—*What the hell do I have left?*"*

The universe did not answer, and she sat there, crying until she had nothing left.

As she tried to suck up her last tears, the scent of smoke again tickled her nostrils, and this time she made the connection.

She got up slowly and unsteadily, leaning on the wall, forcing herself towards her bedroom, toward the smell of fire. The doorway was ringed by black char marks, and when she finally reached the threshold, so that she could see the smoking, blackened ruins of her bedroom, she felt something snap inside her.

She did not stop to consider that it must have taken deliberate effort to burn the contents of her room and nothing else. She knew only that the ones responsible must pay.

They must pay.

Mami woke with a gasp, the remains of the anger still swirling in her mind. She lay there for a

long while. It had been a long time since she had last had that particular dream.

She wished she could say that she remembered nothing after that, that her next memory was of Kure Kirika's maddening, insane laughter ringing in her ears as Kyouko forcibly dragged her away from the Oriko and Kirika, binding her with that flexible spear of hers, succeeding only because Mami had too little strength left in her to effectively resist.

The truth was, she remembered every last second of it, every last second of her inexhaustible rage overriding every other possible consideration—of her ceasing to care for her own life, as long as she could extract some measure of revenge.

Then, impossibly, one of the things she had lost returned to her, and life had meaning again.

She shifted position, and fell asleep again.

"Say, Mami."

Mami looked up from the stew she was stirring, tilting her head backwards to look at the cropped-hair girl, who was leaning her head on the kitchen counter dejectedly, almost as if life had grown too oppressive for her.

"What is it, Miki-san?" Mami asked, still swirling a wooden spoon with one hand.

"I'm sorry if this is too personal, but when you first contracted, you were alone, weren't you? How did you deal with the loneliness?"

Mami's hand froze mid-stir, her eyes fixating on Sayaka's face briefly.

She turned back towards her stew.

"I focused all my energy into demon hunting," she said. "I did everything I could to get better, and spent all my free time hunting. I don't think I really dealt with it, though. It was more like waiting. If no one had ever shown up, I might have died waiting."

"I feel so useless, compared to you and Kyouko," the girl behind her said. "Both of you have gone through so much more than I have, but I'm the one who can't feel satisfied with this life."

Mami tasted the stew on the spoon. It wasn't savory enough. She added a pinch of salt.

Sayaka had been miserable this past week. They had all noticed, but none of them had had any idea what to do about it. Mami had hoped that by holding a get-together at her apartment, she might uplift Sayaka's spirits, but so far it didn't seem to be working, and the pouring rain outside didn't really help the mood.

Perhaps things would improve when Kyouko and Homura arrived.

"Sakura-san and I only survived because of each other," Mami said. "If you're feeling unhappy, you should confide in someone. Saku—Kyouko tried to go it alone, and it almost ruined both of us."

Mami didn't think she could hint more openly than that, but she heard no response. She sighed.

"If it doesn't have anything to do with magical girl business, maybe you can talk to Shizuki-san," she suggested. "She's your best friend, right?"

“Yeah,” Sayaka said resignedly, turning her head away. “Yeah, she is.”

Mami thought that was the end of it, but she heard Sayaka mumble something.

“What was that?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Sayaka insisted.

Mami placed a transparent lid over the now bubbling stew, and watched it for a long moment.

“Something’s missing,” Sayaka had said.

Sometimes Mami felt that way too.

The dream lost narrative flow after that, slipping into the absolute darkness that characterized deeper sleep. It was a while before she dreamed again.

“What the hell is she thinking coming out here alone?” Kyouko fumed. “Did she really think we wouldn’t notice?”

They peered over the edge of the building, watching the tiny figure of Akemi Homura in the distance, standing on the docks next to the water. It was cloudy, in a way that suggested rain—rather unusual for the season.

“I don’t know,” Mami said. “It’s quite a risk, with that Southern Group around. We agreed to stick together for a reason. And going to the edge of the territory like this—“

“Who knows why she does anything anymore?” Kyouko asked. “Ever since Sayaka died, she’s been, you know, all crazy and stuff.”

Kyouko’s anger petered out at the end of the sentence, as she remembered just what exactly had triggered the change in Homura’s behavior.

“You took it pretty hard yourself, Sakura-san,” Mami said, urging patience with a small, conciliatory smile. “I think we can give her some leeway. We’re here now, and nothing seems to be happening, so it doesn’t seem to be an issue.”

“Mami!” Kyouko said, making it into a forced whisper even though there wasn’t anyone else close enough to hear her. “Look!”

While they had been talking, another girl had appeared near Homura, approaching Homura slowly. The girl was foreign, with long hair, and carried herself confidently. She was a teenager, but still clearly older than any of them—if visual age could be relied upon. Homura visibly jumped, spinning around with an obvious expression of dismay.

Mami narrowed her eyes, focusing her attention on the newcomer. Yes…a magical girl. What was someone like her doing in their territory?

She grabbed Kyouko by the arm. Without even looking, she knew Kyouko would be getting ready to transform and jump off the building.

“She doesn’t seem hostile, Sakura-san,” Mami said. “Let’s see what happens, first. If we jump in,

we could aggravate the situation. Akemi-san can take care of herself, at least briefly."

"Do you think Homura came here to meet her?" Kyouko asked. "Without telling us—"

Mami shook her head sharply.

"Akemi-san is obviously surprised," she said. "Look at her behavior. She didn't expect this."

"What is this about, then?" Kyouko asked, looking at Mami's face. Mami didn't answer, because she didn't know.

They watched for a long time in silence, nervously tense, ready to jump down at the slightest hint of trouble—but there was no trouble, even if Homura looked ready to transform at the slightest wrong movement. The two girls stood a respectable distance apart and just talked, for a long while. Finally, the new girl turned and departed. It seemed very anticlimactic.

When the girl seemed to be safely out of the area, Kyouko and Mami finally headed down. The area near the docks had been kept deliberately free of buildings to make way for shipping traffic, but it was eerily empty.

Homura was still standing by the water, staring at the now-clearing sky.

"Who was that, Homura?" Kyouko asked, skipping the pleasantries.

"I don't know," Homura said, turning to look at them. "She said she was a wanderer, that she was just passing by and won't give us any trouble. Seems to have traveled here from overseas, if you can believe that."

"It's rare to hear of one of us traveling to a different city, much less a different country," Mami commented.

"Yes," Homura agreed, flipping her hair with one hand. "I think she's very powerful. I offered to let her join us, but she declined, of course."

Mami had difficulty reading Homura's expression. The girl seemed…quieter, more thoughtful than usual. Mami got the feeling Homura was only partially paying attention to the conversation, that she was thinking about something.

For one thing, she definitely wasn't making eye contact with either of them. She was still watching the sky, even if she was now facing the other direction.

"And that's it?" Kyouko said, seeming almost disappointed. "That can't be it!"

"Maybe not," Homura said, smiling slightly. "She said she expects to see us again, probably. She wasn't sure."

"Another Oriko?" Mami said, frowning.

There were only a couple of people in the world she referred to by personal name, and it wasn't because of personal intimacy.

"Maybe," Homura said.

Finally, Homura looked down from the sky, facing the two of them. The sun had emerged again from the clouds, illuminating the three of them in almost symbolic fashion.

"She seems friendlier than Oriko, though," Homura said.

Mami shook her head.

“You know how I feel about Oriko,” Mami said. “I can’t say this doesn’t bother me, a little.”

“Let’s go,” Homura said, walking past them, back home. They watched her for a long moment.

“Wait a minute,” Kyouko said loudly. “Why were you here in the first place? Hey, get back here! We have questions!”

Mami smiled indulgently, shaking her head, and completely missed the abrupt transition in scenery, as sometimes happens in dreams. The ocean and sky were replaced with wall paneling and office furniture. In an instant, Kyouko and Homura grew taller and much older.

“Stop being irrational!” Homura demanded, slicing the air with one hand in a gesture of frustration that indicated clearly that she would have grabbed Kyouko by the collar if she thought it wise.

“I told you, I am not working with that woman! Not anymore!” Kyouko shouted back.

Mami snapped her head back and forth between the two angry women, trying to think of something to say.

She held her hands up in a conciliatory gesture.

“Now, now, we can talk this over,” Mami said. “There’s no need to—”

“Do you understand how badly we need her support right now?” Homura demanded, turning to face Mami. She slammed a fist into the desk they were standing next to. “We’re leveraged to the hilt to finance our newest expansions! If we don’t receive a new injection of cash, the accountants are going to jump out the windows!”

She turned back towards Kyouko.

“There was a plan, Kyouko! The plan did not involve you getting into a fight with the family we’re counting on for money!”

“You weren’t there,” Kyouko snapped. “I went trying to make friends, settle a few things. I didn’t know she was going to be such a goddamn bitch about it!“

“Gain some goddamned maturity! If you’re so ridiculously hung up about the past, at least swallow your pride for now. This isn’t the streets anymore, Kyouko! Do you know what I—“

“Enough!” Mami interrupted, slamming the desk with both hands. “Sakura-san, please, get out of here. We’ll meet with her without you. Akemi-san, if worse comes to worst, we can always resort to extreme measures.”

“Mind control?” Kyouko spat, making the phrase an epithet. “Once was more than enough for me, thank you. Even if it was just getting the regulators to overlook some creative accounting.”

“We’ll think of another way,” Homura said, seeming to cool down rapidly. “Kyouko, whatever our opinions are on this matter, you have to agree that you can’t go with us for this meeting. That’s a terrible idea, no matter how you look at it. Go home.”

Kyouko looked between the two of them, took a breath, then turned and headed out the door, slamming it shut behind her.

Mami and Homura stood in silence for a moment.

"You know," Homura said, "we don't have to go all the way to mind control. Things would be so much easier if we just wiped the woman's memory. It would solve so many problems. I bet that's the first thing Yuma will suggest, when she hears about it."

"She's still got a lot of Oriko in her," Mami said, slightly disgusted. "I'd hoped we could get it out of her by raising her properly. Anyway, the point is, I won't condone something like that. Besides, what would the younger Shizuki-san think? No, there are other ways to get money."

The door behind them opened with a slight creak.

"I hear Kyouko-nee-chan has really screwed the pooch this time," Yuma said, sticking her head through the doorway. Unexpectedly tall, her hair flowed downward, luxuriously long in imitation of Kyouko.

"That's what you two are talking about, right?" she asked rhetorically. "I know you won't like it, Mami, but I think a memory wipe is the right solution here."

Mami put her hand to her forehead, as if she were nursing a headache.

"No, Yuma-chan," Mami said, closing her eyes. "I refuse. We can't just toss around these kinds of things like candy. I detest the whole idea. I don't like memory wipes. I just don't—"

A sudden concussion jolted her eyes open. Screaming sounded from throughout the plane, along with the roar of sudden decompression. Loose objects flew through the air at ballistic speeds.

"There has been a severe explosion," the captain said over the crackling intercom, voice straining with suppressed panic, barely audible. "The situation is bad. Please brace for impact."

Before there was time to think about it, there was an audible "Snap!", as the rear end of the jetliner detached and disappeared behind them. One moment it was there, and the next it was not. Simple as that.

Time seemed to slow.

In one swift motion, Mami left her seat, slicing off her seat belt with a jolt of power. As the plane was now in virtual free fall, she was able to float herself over her fellow passengers.

Stay here! *she thought, to the passenger next to her.* I'll try to—I'll do what I can!

Heedless of anyone who might see her—assuming they even had the time among their terror to look up—she applied another burst of power, placing herself next to the yawning cavity where the rest of the plane had once been, full of sun and sky and ground. Bracing herself against the ferocious wind, she transformed, reaching out to grasp what she could of the front body of the plane with her ribbons. She worried that she wouldn't be able to handle it, but she shook that thought aside. She could not let the passengers die—could not let—

*"*Razzo Infernale!*" she yelled, even at a moment like this.*

It was a relatively new move, one she had only perfected a few decades ago, after thinking about what had happened with Yuma. A modified Tiro Finale*, instead of firing a projectile, it fired continuously, like a rocket, hence the name. It was designed for extremely rapid movement, such as Hinata Aina had once been capable of.*

Except here she was trying to use it to slow the descent of one-third of a damned Boeing Starliner,

using herself and her ribbons as an interface between the falling plane and the rocketing cannon desperately straining to go upwards.

She clung to the giant cannon with one arm for dear life, binding herself to the magically-summoned metal with more ribbons. She felt her body screaming under the stress, and swallowed the pain—she could only hope that the Incubators had designed it as well as they claimed.

With a screech barely audible over the roar, two of the rearmost seats in the plane broke off, hurled away by the onrushing air. Barely dodging successfully, Mami swallowed, doing her best to forget about the passengers those seats had carried. She couldn't catch them. It wasn't possible to save them all.

The ground rushed up towards her, impossibly fast. She didn't have enough time. She would have to let go—

No, I can't! *she thought.* She's too inexperienced! She can't survive! I have to—

Her cannon started to sputter. She was nearly out of power. She could feel it.

There was no time left; she had to make a decision now—

She let go.

With what remained of her power, she was able to slow her descent to something distantly reasonable, the rest of the plane impacting explosively beneath her.

I shouldn't have tried to save them all—

She hit the ground—

Mami woke again with a gasp, a fine sheen of sweat covering her forehead. What the hell--

I was afraid I was going to have to wake you again, Machina thought. *That was another impressively strong dream.*

I'm fine, Mami responded automatically. *I'm fine.*

She lay for a moment longer, listening to her own breathing.

Machina, do you know what the last part of that dream was?

I do not, Machina thought. *But I'm already storing it for future reference. It seemed…quite vivid.*

Sighing, Mami checked her internal chronometer. It was time for her to get up anyway.

Lost Love

"*Governance*'s plans for the long-term expansion of human civilization center on a self-propagating series of colonization waves, each expanding outward from and drawing upon the resources of the wave before it. In the medium-long term, understood to last until roughly the year 2900, the goal is to fully colonize a sphere about 400 light years in diameter, centered on the Sol system, an area referred to as the *Local Area*."

"The first step towards this goal, constituting the *First Colonization Wave,* was the colonization of three Core Worlds, each roughly equidistant from each other and Earth, so placed as to form a reliable resource base for the second wave to come. Given the then-untested nature of terraforming and colonization methods, the core worlds were chosen to be as Earth-like as possible, with pre-existing biospheres and approximately Earth-like conditions. Furthermore, unlike the later waves, the core worlds were settled sequentially, starting with Nova Terra, followed by Samsara, and ending with Optatum, so that colonization methods could be developed and refined on one world for use on the next."

"Once development levels on the three Core Worlds were judged to be sufficient, the *Second Colonization Wave* was initiated. To date, Earth and the Core Worlds have each sent out about a dozen colonization missions, to a set of planets distributed through the Local Area, in a process that continues to this day. With the settlement of the Second Wave worlds, a third wave is intended to begin around roughly 2600, when the human population is about 300 billion, which would complete the settlement of the Local Area. Expansion outside the Local Area, slated for around the year 2900, is expected to occur when the population reaches 1.8 trillion."

"Of course, the advent of the Contact War may significantly impact the execution of these plans, but thus far, growth and colonization continues mostly apace."

—Excerpt, Primary School Civics Fifth Level Resource on Colonial Organization

"Modern mass interception techniques are effective enough that decisive results are rarely achieved directly by asteroidal or cometary bombardment. Attempting to target a mobile target is of course a fool's errand, while attempts to target a "fixed" target, such as a developed planet, can usually be swatted away by standard planetary protection systems."

"This does not mean that control of a system's asteroid belt or Oort cloud is a matter of no concern. For a planetary defense system already weakened by combat activity, focused, concentrated asteroid bombardment can be used to severely stress and divert orbital assets and fleet resources, forcing already overtaxed defenders to deal with yet another distraction, often at significant distance from the planet in question. In such a context, control of a system's "space rocks" can be extremely useful."

"Because of this, an attempt to seize control of a system's space rocks is a well-established, if minor, component of nearly every attack on a fortified system. Similarly, the establishment of a defensive presence in these same areas is a necessary, low-investment component of every effective defense, especially as a possible source of counterattack if the attacker finds himself obliged to establish fixed bases to help stage and sustain the offensive."

"Given these considerations, conflict in a system's asteroid belt or Oort cloud is a subsidiary component of every invasion into a major system. Control over these vital rocks is contested by massive deployments of self-propagating drones, with only the occasional manned station or fleet involvement. Steering drones attach themselves to the surfaces of rocks, battle enemy drones to gain control, then maintain vigilant watch, awaiting the order to steer themselves at some distant

target or, just as likely, to intercept an attempted enemy attack. The overall result is usually a stalemate; significant asteroid bombardments are rarely even attempted until the late stages of an invasion, when either the defender or attacker is weakened enough that the rocks that make it through can serve as a significant distraction."

"In a more heavily exploited system, such as a human Core System or major Cephalopod system, the control of a system's space rocks becomes far more significant, taking on both an operational and strategic economic importance, due to the significant asteroid mining operations found in such systems. Correspondingly, the defenses in place in, for example, Sol's asteroid belt are very substantial, and it is expected that any invasion would result in significant fleet combat. Because no human Core System has ever come under direct attack, and because no major alien system has ever suffered more than a raid, this assertion has never been tested."

—Excerpt, Navy Operational Doctrine

"It looks copacetic to me, Mami-san," Admiral Gul said. "Or at least as much as is reasonable. This way we have a middling chance of success. That's better than can be said of the other simulations."

Mami turned to look at her subcommander, her avatar pivoting in 3D space so that she could perform the action without craning her head upward. The other magical girl looked back at her, perched on top of one of system's distant gas giants—literally perched, their intangible bodies having been scaled way up for the purposes of this simulation.

Gul was a bit eccentric. For one, she stayed in uniform at nearly at all times, including in simulation, despite it not being customary. The uniform always looked vaguely too large on her teenage body, and her green and white cap seemed too large for her head. It was a universal phenomenon—it was why Mami wore a beret—but Gul seemed not to mind at all. Mami suspected she secretly liked looking too small for her clothing, for whatever weird reason.

"The chances are not high enough for my taste," Mami said. "It's one thing for the mission to fail on the planet's surface. I can accept that I can't really control that. But the chance of them getting shot out of the sky before they even get there is too high. These new defenses greatly complicate things."

"We've already included pretty much every reasonable diversionary operation," Fleet Admiral Anand said, materializing at Mami's side. "We're already drawing on fleet resources throughout the region. Any more and we leave ourselves unacceptably vulnerable to counterattack."

Mami frowned, resetting the simulation. The previous simulation, frozen in a rare, completely successful endgame, with the alien salient severed and starved of resources without its wormhole generator, was wiped away in an instant, replaced by the much more depressing current situation.

In the aftermath of the previous, failed raid on the wormhole stabilizer, new facts had emerged, casting the situation in an even darker light. Firstly, it seemed the aliens felt no compunction about committing maximal resources to the defense of the moon, placing both fixed and mobile defenses throughout the area—on the surface around the facility and in orbit around the moon, the gas giant Orpheus, and the other moons. This exponential increase in the number and concentration of defenses, particularly of the frigates and drones vital for stealth detection, would make a second stealth insertion substantially more difficult.

Secondly, it had become clear that the aliens were much farther along in construction than they had earlier thought. Weeks of focused observation of the facility had revealed the rapid emergence

of a characteristic central toroidal structure, along with periodic emanations of obviously unnatural gravitational waves, which Naval Intelligence believed to be the result of core component testing.

Of course, what they knew of alien wormhole technology was speculative at best, but their analysts now estimated that the wormhole would be at least partially operational by the end of the next week. No longer bothering to cloak their traffic, the aliens were now flying in a downright flood of transport ships, disproportionate even when compared with the magnitude of the defenses that were being assembled around the Stabilizer, and were escorting the traffic with more substantial than usual fleet defenses. The aliens were pouring a tremendous amount of resources into the construction of the wormhole, which at least served to reassure human planners that there probably wasn't another one secretly in construction elsewhere. Probably.

She supposed she should be glad that the evidence they had suggested that the aliens needed a region of stable, sufficiently curved space-time to build a stabilizer, or else they might as well have built one in the depths of space, where it would have been very difficult for them to notice.

Everything about the situation seemed to insist that they attack as soon as possible, *now* if at all possible, ideally yesterday. The problem was: the aliens knew that too. Preliminary analysis indicated that a frontal attack with everything they had, kitchen sink included, only had a five percent chance of success. Unacceptable.

That was why they trying something else.

"Let's run the simulation one more time," Mami said. "I'm still not satisfied. Let's see if we can come up with any new approaches."

"Let us try, then," Anand said, her avatar dissolving.

The simulation began again, Mami and her naval subcommanders dissolving their unnecessary avatars, entering the trance-like state characteristic of a leading officer directing her forces.

In and around the Gemini system, the virtual starships moved from their starting positions, executing their carefully crafted orders. In the stark depths of space, twenty-five light-years beyond the edge of the system, a naval group consisting of sectorial Fleets Fifteen through Twenty-One, three recently transferred from other sectors, thrust its way forward, seeking to sever the supply lines between the system and the rest of the salient just beyond the range limit of the alien blink drive.

Meanwhile, Fleets One through Seven moved aggressively and directly for the planet Orpheus, and its nearly complete wormhole stabilizer, its fleets pulled primarily from defensive duties around the planets Artemis and Apollo.

Finally, within the system's Oort Cloud and tiny asteroid belt, a vast array of autonomous drones responded to their controllers, pulling their asteroid and cometary cargo out of their orbits, accelerating towards the moon carrying the wormhole stabilizer, with the Eighth and Ninth Fleet as escort.

Operation Cynos, Ares, and Edice, led by Anand, Mami herself, and Gul, respectively. Clausewitz, that ancient German war theorist and advocate of force concentration, would have been appalled at their decidedly unmilitary division of force to achieve three objectives at once. In truth, neither of the first two operations was expected to achieve much of anything, and the third was unlikely to serve as much more than a distraction, since the rocks would be detected on the move long before they served as even a remote threat to the wormhole stabilizer.

Distraction was, of course, the goal, and every effort would be made to make sure the aliens

detected the fleets as they assembled, without making it too obvious that they were trying to be detected.

At least initially, success would be determined, not by degree of success on the battlefield, but by the amount of defenses diverted away from the immediate vicinity of Orpheus's moon, either in defense or aggressive counterattack. The fewer the number of ships, the lower the chance that a lone inbound stealth frigate, full of magical girls, would be detected on its way in. Ideally, the number of potential stealth detectors could be reduced to something manageable--not as sparse as had been present during the first stealth insertion, but manageable. At the very least better than the veritable wall of drones and ships that surrounded the moon now, flying complicated, unpredictable routes designed to maximize the chance of one colliding directly into a magically-stealthed ship—or, more likely, running across unavoidable trace exhaust or space-time distortions, depending on method of travel.

Of course, under no circumstances could the aliens be allowed to infer what might be going on. Further, if the aliens were clever, they might very well take an impending battle as a sign to *increase* their vigilance around the moon, rather than pulling defenses away. The plan relied on the aliens being tactically less-than-imaginative, while also relying on them being at least somewhat greedy—the ideal scenario was that, viewing the stripped-down fleet defenses of the Gemini shipyards, the aliens would decide to take a gamble and draw away forces to launch an attack. Consequently, it was actually *important* that the shipyards appear vulnerable—but not actually *be* too vulnerable.

It involved a lot of supposition and assumptions, but it appeared to be the best option, and, in the past, the aliens had not been the most imaginative of tactical decision makers.

Grimly, they set about their tasks, Mami driving her battlecruisers, cruisers, and frigates forward into the alien defenses, trying to mitigate casualties as much as possible without seeming to abandon the offensive, using probing, cautious, overly-conservative attacks. The human fleet was not built for offense, of course, so the task was challenging. The casualty counts in Mami's lower consciousness soared, higher than she had ever previously seen them, even during her desperate defense of Erwynmark's fleets in the Saharan Campaign. Right now the casualties were fictitious; soon enough they would be real. The seconds of accelerated battle mode ticked away, turning first into minutes, then into tens of minutes.

Soon enough, the alien response came, directed by opposing AIs who had agreed to temporarily suppress their memories of the actual human plan. Alien fleets sallied forth, overwhelming Gul's attempts to protect their space rocks, defending their critical supply lines, and attacking the now vulnerable Gemini shipyards, whose defenses had been stripped to the minimum to permit this operation. Another set of AIs directed the defenses of the two shipyards and their associated planets, Apollo and Artemis, a role that in reality would be taken by Field Marshal Tsvangirai.

As expected, the aliens pulled fleet resources away from Orpheus to deal with these substantial but insufficient threats, and as hoped, they noted the golden opportunity for a counterattack on the Gemini shipyards and took it, pulling away even more ships. It had been roughly an hour and a half since the start of the operations.

At that critical moment, at the moment the attacking alien fleet activated its FTL drives, when alien ship density near Orpheus was at its minimum, a single frigate left its holding position near the planet, threading its way past the alien defenses, running its engines as low as possible. Mami knew that almost half of the overall processing power of this simulation was being devoted to its progress, simulating the frigate and adjacent alien defenses to an almost-molecular level, involving special models and previous measurements to attempt to simulate the magic of the stealth generator Juliet Francois. Were the magical girls involved already assembled and ready, they would have

been participating in the simulation too.

For stealth reasons, the trip took place at achingly slow velocity, taking nearly twenty-five minutes to reach its destination. The entire time, Mami mentally gritted her teeth, continuing to direct operations, continuing to wait.

Finally, the frigate reached teleport distance next to the moon. Insertion was successful, confirmed by distant clairvoyance.

At this point, Mami had a decision to make. There would be no attempt to simulate in detail to actual attack on the stabilizer—it would be the duty of the team involved to run its own simulations, when the time came. The question now dealt with the aftermath: did Mami prefer to try to war-game a successful wormhole destruction, or a scenario where the MagOps mission failed? Ordinarily they would do both in succession, but she was already running out of the time she had pulled out of her generals' schedules.

There would also be no attempt to simulate whether or not the MagOps team would survive and escape, even if successful. They would go in knowing very well that their ability to escape would be contingent on their skills, battlefield conditions, and a heaping helping of luck. There would be no special extraction attempt. It bothered her to no end, especially considering that one of her pupils was involved...but she had no choice.

Deciding to be optimistic, Mami set the operation to succeed, in which case the Stabilizer would detonate within half an hour or so.

Now that the true purpose of the attacks would become immediately apparent to the aliens, the three of them—Mami, Anand, and Gul—began immediately trying to disengage, pulling their forces back to defend the critical shipyards. Far from the system, Feodorovich, holding the edges of the salient, would be awaiting the result before moving her own forces—either standing pat, moving forward to cut off an alien salient now in disarray, or, in the worst case, abandoning the area entirely.

They were too late. Just as Mami managed to pull enough ships out to mount a rescue operation, most of them already halfway on their way, one after another, almost simultaneously, the two Gemini shipyards suffered critical damage, their all-important drydocks breaking apart into massive pieces of orbital debris. The simulation froze in time once again.

"I told you we didn't have it figured out," Mami said, when the avatars of the three women appeared again within the simulation.

"We have a middling chance," Gul said. "That's the only comment I ventured."

Mami closed her eyes in frustration. They had been at this for far too long, and they all had their duties. Time was almost up. But…

Erwynmark wants to speak to you, Machina thought. *Perhaps it's best you continued this another time.*

Mami nodded, reluctantly

"Alright, let's meet again later, when we have time," she said. "I also want to do some strategic-level post-battle analysis, so we'll be ready when it's all over. For now, let's get back to work."

She exited the simulation, allowing the command chair's connection port to detach itself from her neck. Hopefully, a conversation with Erwynmark would not need the direct connection to Zhukov.

She rubbed the back of her neck. Even now, the logs of their simulation runs were being distributed among the individual members of the General Staff, for them to peruse and comment on. At its best, the General Staff was a collegial, collaborative institution, capable of operating as more than the sum of its parts. At its worst, it was backbiting, bureaucratic and slow. It was to its credit that the former was far more common than the latter.

In many ways as human as its members, the General Staff tended to have its collective mind concentrated by the advent of imminent crisis. Whatever its disputes the rest of the time, when the moment of desperation arrived, it was capable of digging surprisingly deep in search of solutions.

They had been here before, of course. The General Staff, and humanity as a whole, had been here before, facing an unstoppable alien juggernaut bearing down upon them. Here they still were, Samsara still alive and prosperous, Earth still Edenic and insulated from conflict. An optimistic institution, the General Staff never truly believed it was going to be defeated. Few of them believed in much in this day and age, but they all believed in Humanity, for better or worse.

Those previous alien offensives had been defeated with strategic cunning and battlefield prowess, demonstrating that on its home ground, Humanity could not be shock and awed, and would tear open the flanks of any grand war-winning maneuver. Now, the aliens were more careful and thoughtful, and sought a war of attrition and technology, seeking to exploit advantages no one could deny they had.

It was only fitting that, once again, Humanity turned to its magical girls.

“You know very well we’ve already given you everything we can,” Erwynmark said, discussing the results of the simulation with her in a simulacrum of the General Staff meeting room. “Were I in their shoes, the moment I noticed a concentration I’d started looking for weakpoints to counterattack elsewhere. It’s just not safe to move any more forces.”

“I know,” Mami said, shaking her head sadly. “I figured I might as well ask. I hate how we have to make so many tradeoffs, when it involves so many lives.”

“You have to accept that there are no perfect choices, sometimes,” Erwynmark said. “Sometimes you try your hardest, and you still fail. Sometimes the best way is the one that seems the riskiest. You can’t save everyone.”

“I know,” Mami said, “but I don’t have to like it."

She looked down for a moment, and Erwynmark let the topic drop. He fiddled with his collar tab, a nervous habit of his that bothered her occasionally. It seemed almost too childish for the Chair of the General Staff. She supposed she could abide it, since the man was only one hundred twenty-two, essentially unheard of for someone of his rank.

“You know,” he said instead, “I’m joining Feodorovich in my flagship to observe the battle, but it’s mostly because I feel I haven’t consulted with her in a long while. I could always just talk to her separately. I’m sure she wouldn’t mind if I joined you on the Zhukov instead. In some ways, that’d be more natural.”

Mami looked up at the Chief of the General Staff.

“That’d be nice,” she said. “But since I’ll be leading the direct attack, I don’t think we should be on the same ship. We shouldn’t concentrate leadership. You can travel with my fleet, but better if you stay on the Arminius.”

Erwynmark gave her a look she had difficulty interpreting.

“I suppose that is true,” he said.

“I still want to know how you got these tickets. Come on, tell me!”

The taller girl turned in her seat, looking down at Ryouko. Her long hair hung downward, settling on her chest. Even though Ryouko was aware that in the grand scheme of things Chiaki wasn’t that tall, she was still very tall for her age, taller than Ryouko, having sprung up like a weed in the past year or so. It made her jealous.

“I told you: it’s a secret,” her best friend said. “I’m not telling you, not matter how much you ask.”

Ryouko pouted.

“Geez, that’s mean,” she said. “It’s—it’s uncharitable.”

Chiaki laughed softly, patronizingly, then patted her on the head, in that gesture Ryouko hated so much. They were the same age! Besides, she didn’t like having her hairpin rattled against her head.

As punishment, she tried to snap her hair at the offending hand, ordering the tentacle-like tendrils to form into little whips. It was as effective as it always was—which was to say, completely ineffective. It stung, nothing more. Hair was just not an effective weapon.

Ryouko frowned in annoyance, then shook it off, letting her eyes slide upward from the back of the seat in front of her to the room around them.

Rarely had she ever seen a room with as much sheer space *as this auditorium. The ceiling was positively cavernous, curving backward toward the end of the room. Even as crowded as it was with people—the theatre-style seating filled to full capacity, including the balconies that hung from the back—she couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that there was space being wasted. The ceiling was just so* high.

When they had first arrived, Ryouko had wanted to just stop and stare at the room, but Chiaki had dragged her onward, to their seats. She seemed used to it, somehow.

The seats were oriented such that they all faced a single faux-wooden stage in the center-front of the room, currently empty. They were seated near the front, which to Ryouko seemed a lot more desirable, and therefore harder to obtain, than the seats in the back. Which wasn’t to say that tickets wouldn’t have been hard to obtain regardless—live performance seating was nowadays one of the few remaining scarce commodities, something that was only compounded by the fact that so many artists performed for free.

Chiaki was a violinist, so it made sense that she would attend violin performances. Ryouko had never quite developed a taste for the music, but she still spent hours at a time watching the girl practice, mesmerized by the devotion and intensity she put into her instrument. Ryouko couldn’t understand it, but it fascinated her. Her violin—that was how they had become friends in the first place.

Chiaki laughed again, face quietly mirthful.

"You're cute, you know," she said, leaning over towards Ryouko. "You have to know everything*, and you try to talk like your mom, but you've also got the childish face and magical girl hairpin. I tell you, you're going to make someone very happy someday."*

"Stop calling me childish!" Ryouko rebutted instantly. "I'm twelve, same as you are."

Chiaki just shook her head in amusement. Ryouko was going to add another comment, but suddenly the murmuring in the crowd around them grew louder and sharper—then died down entirely. People were craning their heads to look at something.

Naturally, Ryouko and Chiaki imitated the crowd, and it took only a few moments to pinpoint the source of the commotion: a single teenage girl advancing down the aisle between seats, clearly heading for a seat in the front. She wore a one-piece white dress, and had her staggeringly-long hair tied behind her head in an extravagant ribbon.

It took Ryouko only a moment to look up who she was: Sakura Kyouko, famous magical girl.

Chiaki elbowed her gently in the side.

"Why you don't go over and introduce yourself?" she said.

"Don't tease me," Ryouko responded, a moment late, distracted by the task of tracking the girl with her eyes.

Disappointingly, though, the magical girl sat far away from them, barely in view. The lights dimmed, and the violinist appeared, the events of the dream starting to blur.

*"*Lost Love*," the man said, "by—"*

Somehow, Ryouko failed to hear the name of the composer, the memory smeared by the nature of the dream. He began to play…

She opened her eyes, briefly confused by the light entering her blurred vision.

She pushed herself up off the cushion she had been resting on, in the relaxation room of HSS Raven, the stealth frigate that was carrying her down to the surface of Apollo. More than that, this ship was the same ship that would carry her to the wormhole stabilizer later. As the training manuals she had been reading said, it was never too early to familiarize yourself with your support crew and the rest of your team. Ryouko's ride had merely been assigned accordingly.

She shook her head ruefully at herself, remembering the dream. Another memory she hadn't thought about in years.

Chiaki had always been like that. Even after Ryouko had contracted, demonstrating her strength and dexterity by lifting a giggling Ruiko and Chiaki into the air with one hand, Chiaki's primary comment afterward had been—how had it gone?

"You don't know how many boys would kill to have a wife who could do that!"

Yeah, that was it. It had always been strange—Chiaki seemed to have little time for any relationships of her own, but she nattered on endlessly about Ryouko's cuteness, or whatever.

Ryouko wondered what the girl would think, if she met Asa—

She cut the thought off, then put her forehead in her hand. She couldn't just avoid the topic forever.

At least the room was deserted at the moment, so it was just her, the bed, and the entertainment console.

Well, also Clarisse.

Good morning, the device thought. *I'm glad you woke when you did. Meiqing has been trying to call you, and I didn't want to have to wake you. Though since my models predicted you would wake up in time, I wasn't really that worried.*

You have—no, nevermind, of course you have models, Ryouko thought.

She jumped down to the floor, stretching her arms upward.

And, you know, I'm connected to your brain, Clarisse thought. *It helps. In any case, you should take the call sooner rather than later. It's not clear how long she'll be free. Plus, we'll have to go into transmission silence when we approach the planet, and the designated time is rapidly approaching.*

Ryouko thought about it. She wanted—well, she had no good reason not to, she supposed.

"Alright," she said, sitting back down on the bed she had just left.

A long moment later, the connection signal finished propagating through the nodes of the IIC network, considerably buoyed by the priority given to transmissions by members of the military.

"Hello?" Meiqing said, her pleasant voice impinging on her auditory cortices. They could have opted for a video call, or even a virtuality, but that seemed like overkill for some minor socialization.

"Hi," Ryouko responded. *"I got your call request. It's good timing. I've been needing to call. A lot has happened. But what's happening on your end?"*

"Nothing much, to be honest. Our rotation here is almost up. Soon we'll be moving on to bigger things. Like you, I guess. I bet Marshal Tomoe has you doing some prestigious stuff. We're all jealous. What are you up to?"

You don't know the half of it, Ryouko thought, to herself. She wasn't authorized to talk about that in any detail. Indeed, she had been informed that she now had a special monitoring censor on her transmissions, specifically to remove anything she might say about the topic. She hadn't really tested it, though—but why try and risk having "loose-lipped" marked down on her record?

"I have a, uh, special combat assignment now," Ryouko said. *"I'm not allowed to talk about it."*

There was a pause while Meiqing thought about that.

"Wow, you sure ascended quickly," she said. *"Well, I hope that goes well, obviously."*

"Do you know where you're going yet?" Ryouko asked, changing the subject.

"Yeah. The Euphratic Sector. I'm being assigned to Apollo to defend one of the cities. Can't say I'm surprised I drew a planetary assignment. I look forward to ripping up some bunkers."

A pause.

"Actually, every single of us has been assigned there. Sort of weird, but I guess things must be getting hot over there. Asami has been assigned to join Euphratic Seventeenth Fleet, under Fleet

Admiral Anand. Again, I can't say I'm surprised she drew a MC role, though apparently she gets extra training first. Lucky her."

"I see," Ryouko said.

Another pause.

"You didn't know that, did you?" Meiqing asked, voice suddenly no longer casual. *"About Asami, that is. You haven't talked to her at all since you left. She's been—what did you do to her?"*

Ryouko closed her eyes, bowing her head slightly. She had been afraid of this, but that hadn't been a good reason not to take the call.

"How is she?" she asked.

"She's been moping about, ever since you left. It's hard to get her attention, nowadays. You—look, I'll be direct. Did you two breakup? You shouldn't have; there's no reason to. Long distance is totally sustainable in the military. That's what simulations are for. You can do all sorts of things."

Ryouko put her hand to her head, a gesture she was starting to use depressingly often. She had no idea how to respond.

"We—we didn't break up," she said. *"We were never anything to start with. I—I don't know. It's complicated."*

"You weren't? Then—"

The other girl thought about it for a moment.

"Are you really rejecting her, then? If so, you should have told me. I could have—I don't know, cheered her up."

"I'm not—I don't know," Ryouko said.

"You don't know?" Meiqing said incredulously. *"Then—you two need to talk. I'm not letting you off the line until this happens. I'll add her to the call, then I can leave if you want. Hold on—"*

Ryouko immediately refused the electronic request to add a third-party.

"I'm not ready," she said. *"I haven't prepared. I haven't decided. You can't—"*

"You're not ready? Then—well, I guess I might have been hasty. I, just—do you need to talk about it? We can discuss."

"I don't think—"

"I'm sorry," HSS Raven said directly into the channel, in a pleasant female voice. "*We are approaching the interdiction zone. For optimal safety, I must impose transmission silence very soon. This is five minutes warning."*

There was an awkward silence.

"Oh God, the timing," Meiqing said. *"Okay, look, listen to me—"*

"I know," Ryouko interrupted *"I'll call, eventually, within the next three days, at the latest. I—I*

have to figure some things out, okay?"

Another awkward silence.

"Okay, I guess. Look, if it's not really a rejection, then a call from you could really pep her up. She seems to be taking your lack of communication really hard."

"I—I get it. I won't fail to call. See you later"

"See you."

The call ended, and Ryouko thought to herself:

Of course I'll call. I have no choice. I can't leave something like that unfinished.

After all, the wormhole stabilizer mission was likely to kill her. She'd seen the mission projections.

She got off the bed, heading out into main corridor of the ship.

The interior layout of the HSS Raven was not markedly different from that of the HSS Spectre, the frigate that had carried her from Earth to her training center. Like Spectre, the ship had a bridge that connected directly to a main corridor, which in turn sprouted various doors and short accessways that led to gunnery control, the medical bay, and the recreation area Ryouko had just left. At the other end of the corridor from the bridge was engineering, which contained the FTL core, carefully offset so as not lie in-line with the main corridor. The FTL core area was significantly more cramped than it had been on the Spectre, seeming almost crammed into one side of the large room. The other side was walled off, with an interior access door that led to "Stealth Generation", or so her map attested. In the rear of room, another door led to another large room, which she knew from external observation was an area that protruded as a large spherical bulb from the rear of the ship. That area was labeled "Forcefield Generator." Neither of these two areas had existed on the Spectre.

HSS Spectre had been an outdated ship, though, so it was possible that these additions reflected a newer model of ship. Ryouko knew from earlier conversations with the ship, however, that the Raven was special. Its stealth accoutrements were substantially more robust, its FTL core considerably more powerful, and its forcefield generator—well, no standard frigate would have one at all. In other words, the Raven was a MagOps ship.

One of the first things Ryouko had done upon boarding the vessel was to, as casually as possible, approach the FTL core, which was much more accessible on this frigate than it had been on some of the previous vessels. Her soul gem had glowed again, bright enough that she had felt compelled to cover the ring with one hand.

Now here she was again, staring up into the eerie ultraviolet grow of the engine core, holding her hand with the soul gem ring up in front of her eyes, as if an answer would appear if she just stared at it long enough.

"Now *that's* an interesting soul gem," a voice said next to her, startling her into jumping. How had someone snuck up on her?

She hadn't. Raven had simply materialized at her side, next to where she had been leaning on the FTL Core railing. This particular ship didn't dress in a fancy costume; it was content to appear as a crewman—well, one with uniform and insignia of a Captain. In the AI style, her ethnicity was stubbornly difficult to place. And like all stealth frigates and cruisers, she was female. The decision was apparently designed to foster warm feeling between magical girls and the ships that interacted with them the most.

“Scott said you had been lurking around here for some reason,” the ship said, brushing aside her long black hair to reveal her stark I/O-tattooed eyeball. “I figured it was this. You have to remember: I have internal surveillance, and access to personnel records. There’s no need to keep a secret.”

Ryouko looked back at the ship, self-consciously hiding her hands behind her back

“I’m trying to figure out what the glow is for,” Ryouko said. “If you have my records, you’ll know I don’t know why it does this.”

The ship shrugged.

“You’ll figure it out, eventually,” she said. “Everyone does.”

“Why Raven?” Ryouko asked, deciding she might as well be upfront about wanting to ask.

“You mean my name?” the ship asked.

“Yeah. From my understanding, ships are assigned names of famous people, unless they choose something else. Why Raven?”

The ship tilted her head slightly, letting her hair settle on one shoulder.

“Well, firstly, they wanted to name me Jane Austen. Jane Austen! For a special operations ship! At the time, I had literally been born yesterday—I mean the day before—but even I knew I didn’t want that.”

The outrage was so immediate and palpable that Ryouko suspected this wasn’t the first time someone had asked.

“So I did some internet searching,” the ship continued, “and found some old poem about a raven I liked. So, yeah, Raven. I was young. Not sure I’d still pick that now. I’d probably go for something tongue-in-cheek like ‘Stealthy Death’. Back then I used to fly around the crew cabin in the form of an actual raven. I don’t think the crew liked it. I was um—well, I’m not proud of how I was when I was young.”

“You should tease her and call her Jane sometime,” a new girl said, appearing from the other side of the FTL core. “It really riles her up.”

“Soon she’ll be as insufferable as all of you,” Raven said sourly.

The new participant in the conversation was Annabelle Smith, a member of the MagOps Black Heart team. Standing at her side was Mohammad Berriman, the ship’s non-magical stealth specialist. The magical stealth generator, a certain Juliet Francois, was probably busy at her task at the moment.

“I don’t think we’ve met yet,” the stealth specialist said, reaching forward to shake her hand. “I look forward to working with you. Have you met Anna?”

Ryouko shook his hand with her right hand—the one without the ring.

“I introduced myself when she boarded the ship,” Anna said pleasantly. “Obviously, if we’re going to be working together, we should get to know each other.”

She met Ryouko’s eyes.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “We’ll take good care of you. For the time being, you’re probably the most valuable person alive, so we’ll be watching your ass every inch of the way.”

The girl paused, putting a hand to her mouth.

“You know, I could have worded that better.”

“What?”

“It’s not important.”

The group of four looked at each other for a long moment, as Ryouko thought through a question in her mind.

“If I’m so important,” she asked finally. “Why are we going down to the planet surface at all? Why take that kind of risk?”

The other three, two humans and an AI, looked at each other to decide to who would speak. Finally, Anna said:

“You need training. Specifically, live combat training. The rest of the team has worked together countless times, so we’d be fine practicing in simulation, but you’ve never even been in ground combat. We’ll need to learn to trust each other.”

The girl paused, before continuing.

“Apollo just happens to be the closest live-fire zone. There’s no reason to move us all to a different location where the landing will be just as risky. And honestly, in this ship, with Juliet handling stealth, it’s not that risky. As for live combat—like I said, we’ll be watching your ass. We won’t let you get yourself killed. Besides, I hear you have relatives down on the surface.”

Ryouko looked down at the floor.

“Yeah, that’s true,” she said.

The girl stepped forward, putting one arm around Ryouko’s shoulder. Ryouko started, surprised by the unexpected intimacy.

“I know you’re nervous. It’s better if you relax. Come on, let’s leave these losers behind and go do some team bonding with Juliet.”

“I, uh—okay,” Ryouko managed, as she was forcibly pulled in the direction of the stealth generator room.

“And stop hiding your hand behind your back,” Anna said. “We all read your file. It’s okay. Stop worrying about it.”

“Losers?” Mohammad asked, behind their backs, as they walked away. Raven shrugged.

The journey to the hospital where her grandfather was stationed was far less eventful than she had expected. The starport they landed at was firmly under human control, and the atmospheric cargo plane that carried her the rest of the way encountered little of dangerous note, except for a minor course adjustment due to alien air activity. From what travel she had experienced on Earth, she had been expecting to make the trip by short-hop suborbital, but, on reflection, it made sense that a

suborbital journey would be too risky, and would hedge too close to the murky, ever-fluctuating combat conditions of orbit.

It also made sense that her grandfather had been stationed within such a relatively safe area, and that she was not venturing outside of it either—not yet, anyway. She doubted they wanted her to get shot down, or for her to die in an ill-timed bout of sorrow over her suddenly-dead grandfather.

Unfortunately, the switch to an atmospheric vessel also made the trip take significantly longer. She didn't particularly mind, though—it was only a couple of hours either way. Unfortunately, the other personnel on-board were not great company, so she spent much of the time reading up on alien point defenses, or otherwise looking out a window. Cloud cover obscured the ground most of the trip, but occasional gaps allowed her to see the world below. It had always amazed her in the past, to see below her such large, empty tracts of land, devoid of human habitation. Even on Earth, that had been possible, but those views had been from the interior of a scramjet, looking down on a world that was nearly round. Of course, it had always been possible to zoom in, but it didn't seem quite the same.

The views here were subtly different from Earth, too. Ground a slightly different shade of green, perhaps a different pattern to the vegetation, sky a different shade of blue, and, of course, a completely alien landscape when you inspected your location on the map.

She felt strangely pensive, out there alone in an alien sky. Something still seemed missing, and, without anyone to talk to—inessential transmissions from within an aircraft were highly discouraged—she couldn't help but think of the impending mission.

Then, finally, they approached their destination, and she couldn't help but think of it as a relief.

Finally, Ryouko arrived at her destination, requisitioning transport in the same way she had the plane—simply getting on board whatever was going the right way. Outside of active combat zones, where alien interference with supply and logistics was a constant concern, military supply was a smoothly-oiled machine; travel was usually an experience in listening carefully to your TacComp and doing exactly what it said. It seemed, though, that an officer traveling alone, on not-quite-official business, was expected to make do with what she could. She supposed it made sense.

The town she was in had an entirely different feel from Acheron. It seemed depleted—the storefronts closed, the advertisements powered off, and the streets quiet. Coupled with the military personnel around every corner, the armored vehicles in the streets, and the drones in the air, it was readily apparent that the colony had been mostly evacuated, and was operating under martial law. The occasional heavily damaged or ruined building, the result of brief air raids or bouts of orbital artillery, helped contribute to the ambiance.

So too did the rain.

She paused on the threshold of the building. Looking up at the extravagant arch and stucco edifice of "Loch Ness Hospital and Enhancement Center", she reflected on how strange it seemed, having a hospital occupy an entire building. The architecture was unfamiliar to her, but she suspected the edifice was intended to look imposing, or at the very least large. It failed to have that effect on her, used as she was to Earth, even as it dripped water down towards her head.

Plastered just outside the entrance of the building was an animated poster that it seemed no one had decided to take down. "Mikki" the magical girl seemed to really want you to buy a hair product that would "increase the contractile force of your hair strands two-fold!"

I could have used something like that a long time ago, Ryouko thought, scanning the face of the girl on the poster for an identity, *"But I'm not really sure why anyone would buy it just because 'Mikki' says so.*

Behind her, her hair twitched, shaking off some of the water. She had been ignoring the water, which was after all irrelevant, since even her clothes cleaned themselves. One of the aftereffects of the training was a certain…disregard for things like that. She wondered what her friends would think of that.

It's called endorsement, Clarisse thought. *People are more likely to buy things they remember, and they are more likely to remember things associated with someone they recognize. So they pay Mikki some currency and she agrees to show up on some advertising. It's one way to make money, I suppose. Her service record lists her as "deceased", though. I suppose it must be an old poster.*

Ryouko thought about that.

Speaking of which, I should probably put some consideration into what I should do with my spare Allocs, she thought, choosing not to focus on the last part of what Clarisse had said. *You have any thoughts on the matter?*

As a matter of fact, yes. I don't think right now is the moment to bring it up, though. Something seems off about this situation.

Hmm? What do you mean? Ryouko asked.

The information I have states that your grandfather was assigned to a field hospital, not something like this, in a relatively secure urban area. This is a more heavily specialized facility, for difficult cases, and also does clone restoration for magical girls. With all due respect, I don't think your grandfather had the qualifications for that. And despite my efforts, I still can't locate his personnel record.

You might be overthinking it, Ryouko thought, though it did bother her. *Let's stop lingering and go inside.*

In the first sign of real coordination and logistics since she had gotten off HSS Raven, a pleasant – looking young woman, in her early-twenties by physical age, stepped out to greet her as she walked in.

Chiyo Noriko

Age: 112

Occupation: Magical Girl (active service): Psychiatrist, MSY MHD

Rank: Colonel

Classification: Telepath

A psychiatrist? Ryouko thought, surprised.

"Good afternoon," the woman said, in Japanese. "I want to convey Atsuko-san's regards for not being able to come personally. It is difficult to be everywhere at once, and for certain situations we think it is better to have a human touch, rather than involve a virtuality."

"Situation?" Ryouko asked. Her hair twitched once more, as if in accordance with her mood,

shaking off some remnants of water.

The woman gave her a level gaze, gauging her, then said:

“While you were traveling here, your grandfather suffered a rather serious injury. While it is not life-endangering, it is possible his appearance would be distressing. Had you not already been on your way, we would have in honesty canceled the whole affair. As it is, I am here to, well, monitor you. Nothing in your record suggests something like this would affect you seriously, but caution might well be the better part of valor.”

Ryouko’s eyes widened, and she felt a sliver of fear run its way through her veins.

“Injured?” she asked, voice slightly panicky. “How? Are there any permanent ramifications?”

By permanent ramifications, she meant substantial brain damage. Enough time properly tubed up in a regeneration tank could recover even a normal human from little more than a head, but actual damage to the brain—well, even if the surgeons could repair that, there was a good chance the person might come back with an altered personality, or lost memories. Muscle, ligament, and bone were relatively unimportant. It was *information* that could not be lost. Well, except when it came to magical healing, but that…depending on the quality of the healing, and there wasn’t enough of that to go around.

It occurred to Ryouko for the first time that having a TacComp might be useful for something like that.

“Thankfully, no,” Noriko said, addressing the more important of her questions first. “An alien raiding party temporarily compromised zone defenses in the area where he was working, and he was the recipient of an unfortunately timed shell. He will be fine.”

Ryouko thought that Noriko was strangely…clinical, for a psychiatrist. She would have expected a much gentler approach. She wondered if that reflected on the woman’s personality, or if her file suggested that this was how people should talk to her. Perhaps both.

You’re standing there with your mouth literally hanging open, Clarisse pointed out. Ryouko clamped it shut, perhaps with too much force.

“Good,” she said, acting calm with an effort. “That’s what’s important. I hope it’s not too distressing of an injury for him.”

The woman smiled slightly.

“He’s taking it well, I would say. The records on you were correct. Come on, let’s go have a look at him. I’ll forward the injury description to your TacComp.”

Ryouko reviewed a body map of the injuries as they walked, and grimaced internally. Two missing legs and multiple shrapnel wounds to the abdomen. She—well, she had seen a lot during training, and knew very well that he’d be right back to full duty within a week, but she did not look forward to seeing this. Her mother was probably throwing a fit, assuming she knew.

She found Kuroi Abe a short while later, sitting up out of his bed to greet their arrival. He was alone in a small, personal room, decorated by a single impressionist-style painting hanging over his head and a false window that displayed a video feed of the city outside. The wall on the far end was displaying one of those ever popular military “War Reports”, favored among the rank-and-file for their ironically self-aware propagandistic style. A set of white tubes ran out from under the blanket her grandfather was using to cover his lower half. The tubes snaked over the side of the bed, seeming to fuse directly into the material that composed the wall.

“They didn’t tell you me you’d be visiting, or I’d have gone out to meet you,” her grandfather said, leaning forward to peer at her more closely. “Chiyo-san here showed up out of the blue, asked me some questions, and suddenly she says she’s going to be bringing my granddaughter in.”

“Questions? Really?”

“Oh, nothing important.”

She wanted to know what I thought your sexual orientation was, her grandfather transmitted silently, keeping his face carefully unchanged.

Really? Ryouko asked, suddenly feeling uncomfortable.

Did something happen?

Ryouko kept her face calm with an effort.

She’s a mind reader, granddad. She can’t read these transmissions, but I’m pretty sure she can still hear you.

Her grandfather looked slightly chagrined.

“Well, I didn’t know what exactly I’d be visiting either,” Ryouko said, glancing over at the woman, who showed no signs of, for example, leaving to give them privacy. She was suddenly unsure whether or not she liked the MHD. Among other things, she was certain the question had something to do with Asami, but how did they even know about that?

Kuroi Abe looked thoughtful for a moment, looking at the general vicinity of his legs.

“Want to see it?” he asked, abruptly.

“See it?” Ryouko echoed.

The man began pulling the blanket off his legs.

“Are you sure this is a good idea, Kuroi-san?” Noriko asked, sounding skeptical. “She—“

“Bah, she’s made of tougher stuff than that,” he insisted, catching the meaning instantly.

A moment later, Ryouko found out what the tubes were for, wincing slightly. The missing legs, one severed just above the knee and the other just below the thigh, were encased in what appeared to be two separate, leg-shaped molds, sheathed in a murky layer of blue. A set of nutrient feeds and waste tubes ran into both, which already carried numerous bulbous, cellular growths from where the doctors had seeded the scaffold. The intact parts of the legs sprouted similar pink masses, large fibrous tracts infiltrating downward into the mold.

She assumed whatever abdominal injuries he may have had were covered by the shirt he was wearing. It wasn’t exactly a pleasant sight, but at least nothing was actively bleeding, and she had seen plenty worse in the simulations.

“I can’t look at the way it grows without being reminded of some kind of horrible tumor,” her grandfather commented, looking at his leg.

“What?” Ryouko asked.

“Before your time,” Abe said.

“Before your time too,” Noriko pointed out.

“I was a physician,” Abe insisted, waving his hand dismissively. “We learned about it. It’s interesting: even though I knew it wouldn’t kill me, it’s really hard to convince yourself of that when you’re looking at a four-inch hole in your abdomen, you can’t feel your legs, and your consciousness is slipping away.”

They stayed silent for an uncomfortable moment. Ryouko stared at the regrowing legs with a kind of morbid fascination, while the psychiatrist stared at Ryouko instead. Her grandfather looked at a wall, realizing he’d described things a little too colorfully.

“If you don’t mind,” he said, covering his legs and looking at the psychiatrist. “We’d like some privacy.”

“Certainly,” Noriko said, bowing fluidly. “Send me a message when you’re done here, Shizuki-san.”

The woman left, the door sliding closed behind her.

“Do you think she’s listening in, telepathically?” Ryouko asked, a moment later.

“It’s not worth worrying too much about,” Abe said. “I hear you got a promotion? And a medal?”

Ryouko felt suddenly uncomfortable.

“Ah, yes,” she said. “Yes. For uh—“

“Your mother knew about the transport incident the whole time, you know,” her grandfather said, leaning in and speaking quietly, even though there was no reason to. “She has connections. It’s not good to lie to your mother, though.”

Ryouko felt herself make a confused expression.

“But—“ she began.

“She didn’t want you to know she could keep track of you,” her grandfather said. “I’m telling you now because, really, you guys need to work on this talking thing. I’ve had too many bad experiences stemming from poor communication.”

The man met her eyes, giving her a serious look.

Ryouko thought back to her mother, her mother’s sister, and her grandmother, and grimaced slightly.

“Alright,” she said, unsure if she was being sincere.

Her grandfather looked skeptical, but didn’t press the point.

“So, uh, how was the training and deployment?” she asked. “You know, before the injury.”

His face darkened slightly, which surprised her.

“It’s an experience,” he said, looking away from her, toward the far wall, which was playing footage of an alien armored column.

“It’s mostly about stabilization, you know,” he clarified, a moment. “And there’s no screaming at all. Above a certain threshold, the cortical implants isolate the pain centers, and there’s always combat mode to rely on, assuming the TacComp is still intact. If the cortex senses that continued standard operation is impossible, everything goes into a fugue-like state. Average planetary survival is about fifteen hours, but people have come back from as much as two weeks. It depends on how cold it is.”

Ryouko shifted awkwardly. Her grandfather was still palpably the same person, with the same vague sense of self-assurance, but he had never previously been prone to giving too much detail. That was more the kind of problem she and her mother had.

“Ah, I’m talking too much,” he said, self-correcting. “Well, anyway, it’s sort of interesting. We mostly get the cases that need immediate stabilization. Everything else is either too minor to bother or can be forwarded to a reconstruction. We just get row after row of fugued-out bodies, never bleeding, even though there’s usually plenty of blood. A lot of the time, we get people who are still in their armor—often, the armor is the only thing keeping them alive. Sometimes we can do enough to get their bodies running again. Sometimes, we have to install them into a regeneration tank on the spot. Sometimes we have to ask for the magical healer. Sometimes we can’t do anything.”

Abe tilted his head slightly, looking at her out of one eye. It was an appraising look, judging how she was taking it. Her grandfather had always been a little different from her parents—a lot more willing to talk about things, for instance, and sometimes she suspected he did it as a form of education. She appreciated it, for what that was worth.

In this case, she was relatively unaffected. She was already fairly well-versed in the relevant details, and even beyond that, she found it difficult to react emotionally to the mere recitation of facts. She had to see it, at the very least, and even then she was level-headed—or so she believed, anyway.

“Still, it’s good to know you’re saving lives,” the man said. “I’d missed that feeling, after I retired.”

He tilted his head downward, hand to mouth, as if thinking about something.

“Anyway, even about that topic,” he said. “Let’s talk about something else. For instance, I’d still like to know what the psychiatrist was asking about.”

“What?” Ryouko asked, having genuinely lost her bearing in the conversation.

Her grandfather knitted his forehead, deciding how to word the question.

“I don’t want to pry,” he said, “though I guess that’s exactly what I’m doing. I just don’t think the MHD would show up to ask me about, of all things, your sexual orientation for no reason at all. She asked other things, too. I just wondered if you wanted to talk. It’s alright if you don’t.”

Ryouko cast her eyes downward.

“I—“

She paused, wondering what to say. A part of her wished that Clarisse would interject, and thus make it all easier—but of course, the device remained silent. As Clarisse had implied, in the end she had to speak for herself.

“Did Chiyo-san mention to you why I’m suddenly coming to visit you now?” she asked, quietly.

The man gave her a careful look.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “She never really explained. I had assumed that if you were going to visit, they would pull me off the line ahead of time, but I figured that getting my legs blown off must have just happened at a really bad time. The way you bring this up, though, makes me think there’s something special about it.”

“Well, I can’t really talk about it,” she said, sighing, “but I’ve drawn a special combat assignment. It’s…well, pretty dangerous. And the thing is, this girl I know wants to have a relationship, but I—I don’t know if I’m interested in things like that. I don’t want to refuse her and regret it, but at the same time, I don’t want to end up stringing her along. Worse, I might not come back from this mission. I don’t want to say nothing before, because I might not get another chance, but I don’t want to start something and then die immediately, to be blunt about it. I—it makes my life so much harder, and I can’t shake the feeling that I’m obsessing over some trivial teenage problem. And of course, if I botch it too badly, it could literally threaten the other girl’s life, given whole soul gem-emotional state thing.”

Once she got started, the words came with surprising fluidity, so that at the end of it she found herself surprisingly calm, waiting for some sort of response from her grandfather.

The man in question was staring at the far wall again, with distant eyes.

Finally, he smiled weakly.

“This is the kind of thing that reminds me of how your mother feels. It’s something I understand. I—well, I can’t say I have a perfect answer, but in complicated situations like this, it often works to just explain the situation. People are usually understanding, and she’s probably more resilient than you think.”

It was Ryouko’s turn to smile weakly.

“I can explain it, sure,” she said. “But then what do I say after that?”

Kuroi Abe shrugged.

“That’s for you to decide. The only instruction I can really give you is not to die. I think we would all vastly prefer that.”

He met her eyes, and she stared back for a moment. At that moment, she couldn’t help but be reminded of the Kuroi Matriarch saying the same thing, only a day ago.

“If possible,” she said, finally.

Her grandfather closed his eyes, nodding.

“You know, I managed to talk to your grandmother again,” he said, turning away to retrieve something from within his personal bag.

“Though not in person, of course,” he finished, when he sat back up again.

“How was it?” she asked, when he failed to add anything further.

“Same as always,” he said.

He held up the item he had retrieved, which Ryouko now saw was a ring.

“I’ve got my own problems,” he said, putting the ring into a shirt pocket. “But she wants to talk to you.”

“I don’t think I have time before the mission,” Ryouko said, it suddenly occurring to her to wonder why it had been arranged for her to visit her grandfather on the planet surface, and not her grandmother in the shipyard.

Kuroi Abe nodded.

“Let’s watch some propaganda for a while, then,” he said.

She stayed there for a while, leaning her head into her grandfather’s chest, watching explosions happen what seemed a world away.

Historian

Chapter Notes

> Volume I and II now start with little opening quotes. That is all. (This used to say Interlude instead of Volume. That was incorrect.)

"Fade In:

Black screen. The narration, with the voice of Clarisse van Rossum, begins.

Narrator: They say that we are doomed.

Chaotic lifeboat. Women and children crying. It is cold and windy. In the middle of it all, van Rossum, as a teenager, huddles alone, cradling something in her hands, crying softly. Suddenly, an eerie violet glow becomes apparent. Cut to Black.

Narrator: They say that we must die young.

Van Rossum, about 16, in costume, jumping among the rooftops with Claudia van Hoof. Van Rossum barely manages to dodge a searingly bright yellow, laser-like beam, but it hits instead van Hoof, whose scream cuts off abruptly. Cut to Black.

Narrator: They say we bring violence and turmoil wherever we go.

Chaotic Second World War battle scene, in the middle of winter. German tanks and infantry advance on entrenched infantry. Concussive explosions from raining artillery shells, appearance of dive bombers. Some tanks go up in flames, in stark contrast with the white and brown surroundings. Russian infantryman emerges from trench with anti-tank explosive, as comrade fires machine gun to clear surroundings. Infantryman with explosive is shot, collapsing with a gasp into the mud and snow. Explosive detonates in his hand a moment later. Cut to Black.

Narrator: They say it is hopeless to fight fate.

Shot of early 21st century Mitakihara City from above, sunrise. Camera pans in towards the top of one of the skyscrapers, where van Rossum, about 30 in appearance, stands alone on the roof, hands behind back, watching the sun rise. Finally, the camera zooms in, showing a side view of her face.

Narrator: I say it's time for a change.

Van Rossum closes her eyes, turning away from the camera. Her hair sweeps over the camera. Fade to Black.

—Transcript, trailer for Historian, 2354, Mitakihara Studios. Internal MSY Distribution ONLY.

["In the past few weeks, I have grown increasingly concerned about the level of stress the Marshal is under. Obviously, this is unavoidable, but it would be good if we could find some way to get her some relaxation. Perhaps the closing of the current campaign will provide a measure of relief. Designated Telepath says Marshal is suffering from increasing frequency of disturbing dreams,

perhaps related to past trauma, but is unsure what to make of it. Soul gem appears safe at the moment, but I have told Karina to keep an eye out. Will continue to monitor situation."]†

—Shen Xiao Long, Designated Monitor, report to Designated Psychiatrist Atsuko Arisu. †=Level 5+ Classification, restricted to Shen Xiao Long, Atsuko Arisu, Charlotte Meitner, Sakura Kyouko, Chitose Yuma.

Cover me! Nadya Antipova demanded, voice filled with angry urgency. *Pulling one of these damn things out of the sky isn't paddy-cakes! I need someone to keep the fire off me!*

Have some damned patience, Zheng Ying Zhi, their barrier generator, answered, tersely. *I'm getting on it.*

It made quite a sight, the raven-haired team leader Nadya in her crimson, uniform-like costume, reaching at the sky with gloved hand, trying to pull an alien sky defense station—a "flying fortress"—out of the sky. Nadya was reputedly the strongest telekinetic alive, but a sky defense station was *enormous*, and from where they stood underneath it, it blocked out the sun and a good portion of the sky. The bulbous, massive structure, with its protruding spherical spires, looked like a Dalian interpretation of an underwater castle, and was hardly aerodynamic—but of course it didn't have to be, since it had antigrav generators on a scale beyond the imagination of even the most ambitious human engineers.

Another way to put it was that it was basically an atmospheric version of an alien cruiser, but that sounded less poetic.

Despite their firepower, though, this class of vessel had one feature that kept them away from the frontlines, serving instead as area denial stations. They were, in essence, giant sitting ducks, incapable of taking a sustained assault from heavy ground weapons.

There Nadya stood, among the smoking ruins of an alien point defense system and the scattered limbs of its infantry garrison. Next to her, Ying Zhi crouched on the ground, scowling as she aimed her *chu-ko-nu* at targets in the sky. Above and around them, her shimmering golden barrier deflected both incoming fire and the never-diminishing swarms of alien attack drones.

Two other girls focused on damaging the fortress's generators remotely, Misa Virani, face full of concentration, summoning lightning bolts of the clear blue sky, the other, Annabelle Smith, squinting down the barrel of her sniper rifle, of the magical, laser firing kind.

In the midst of the chaos, Ryouko crouched on the ground under Ying Zhi's golden barrier, watching her soul gem dump its corruption in a handful of grief cubes. The teleport in, her first combat use of her maximal range, had taken a lot out of her, obliging her to stay in place recharging her soul gem, staying out of combat as she gathered energy for the trip back. They had practiced before this, but Ryouko hadn't realized how strangely useless it would make her feel to stay in place doing nothing while the others did the heavy lifting.

Even if she had possessed the energy to do more, she seriously doubted that the rest of the team would have allowed her. The rookie teleporter was both too powerful and too untrained to be allowed to risk herself.

As a bit of a practice mission, they had been assigned to destroy an underground airship production facility, located roughly under the spot where they were currently standing. Indeed, calling it a practice mission seemed a bit of a misnomer—the only distinction from a real mission was the fact that the assignment had been carefully chosen so as to maximally test some of their

abilities, without exposing them to unwarranted levels of danger.

At the moment, it would have helped immensely if they had some trees to give them cover, but they didn't, nor did they have an illusion generator with them. Instead, they were standing on a large empty patch of ground, surrounded by sparse vegetation. It was exactly what one would expect out of an airfield, in other words, at least one that was large enough so as not to be worth trying to camouflage.

Have you found it yet? Nadya demanded again, addressing Gracia Perez, their telepath-clairvoyant, who crouched on the ground nearby. Accompanying her were three other girls: Juliet Francois, Mina Guyure—their other teleporter—and Eva Guderian, all of whom were staying inactive, saving power. Eva was a bit of a novelty: she could make any non-living object she touched with her primary weapon explode and, rather appropriately, her primary weapon was a prehensile whip that was capable of being extended to enormous length.

I'm still looking! the clairvoyant responded, tightly, devoting only a minor fraction of her attention to her response. *This isn't that easy! Also, stealth infantry approaching on the ground.*

Before she even finished the thought, the others responded to the markers appearing on their internal maps. Annabelle squeezed off a series of shots, and Misa lifted up the metal debris, using a burst of electricity to fire them as projectiles. Unlike Nadya, she didn't have a penchant for expressive hand and arm gestures, preferring to stand nearly still, almost stoically, as she channeled her powers. Unless she was forced to move, of course.

The markers disappeared, removed by their clairvoyant, and the other two girls returned to dispatching drones.

I wish everyone used mechanical controls instead of this electrical stuff, Nadya complained. *Much easier to flip a switch than to jam the engine mechanisms from this distance.*

Oh please, Misa thought, combative as ever. *As if you have that kind of precision.*

Do you doubt me? It's not as if your lightning is doing anything!

Nadya jerked her arms out of the air dramatically, as if pulling on an invisible rope, long hair flopping behind her back as she spun slightly, arms swinging behind her. She looked up expectantly, like a batter who had just hit what she expected to be a homerun.

The near end of the fortress exploded—or, speaking specifically, one of the larger bulbs shattered in slow motion, sending out pieces of debris that tumbled slowly and eerily through the air, before finally start to head downward.

The structure as a whole shuddered—but it didn't fall.

That's generator number three, Nadya thought, both relieved that she had actually succeeded and annoyed that the ship hadn't started falling. *I can't believe that thing's still in the air!*

With another, almost casual gesture of her hands, a set of missiles descending on their position spun out of their trajectories, impacting with the cloud of drones that was constantly bombarding their position.

Incoming, Gracia warned, the texture of her thought unreasonably clinical given what was about to happen.

The sky above them, previously dominated by the fortress, turned into a blinding, pure white. Ying Zhi visibly struggled with the effort of keeping the barrier intact, dropping into a kneel, face

strained. The ground around them seared away, the soil visibly getting lower by the moment, clumps of liquefying soil seeming to float off the surface briefly before disintegrating.

I thought the heavy laser cannons were destroyed! she thought accusingly.

That's what I thought! Nadya responded, reaching upward again. *I don't know where they got more!*

The light faded abruptly, leaving Nadya blinking in surprise. The ground stopped vaporizing before their eyes, instead presenting them with a smoking, blackened surface, baked eerily smooth, except for the wide circle they were standing on, which they could now see was several inches higher than the area around them.

"Never call me useless," Misa growled, looking unexpectedly insulted by Nadya's previous comment regarding her lightning.

They could now see that the formerly cloaked cannon had been shattered, metal fragments floating slowly outward in the fortress's antigrav fields. The pieces continued to discharge static as they tumbled.

"I wasn't—" Nadya began.

Got it! Gracia thought, seeming to finally wake up from her self-induced trance.

Without any further prelude, the four of them—Mina, Gracia, Juliet, and Eva—vanished, Mina teleporting them to the alien base's deep underground production facilities, its location finally identified.

The ground underneath them shook as the team went to work. A moment later, with a grunt, Nadya went back to work on the fortress above them, trying to disable a fourth generator.

A few moments later—roughly seventeen seconds, according to Ryouko's chronometer—the three person demolition squad reappeared on the surface.

We're done here, Gracia thought, walking towards Ryouko. *Let's go.*

Her thought had an air of finality to it.

Nadya visibly strained, making one last try at taking down the alien airship.

Leave it, Nadya! Misa thought, tone bordering on insubordination. *There'll be other chances.*

With obvious reluctance, Nadya dropped her arms, turning and heading for Ryouko, face annoyed. She took one last look upward at the flying fortress, obviously damaged—among other things, it was still visibly venting smoke from several massive holes—but still defiantly afloat.

When they had all reached her, Ryouko took a breath, and reached in deeply for the required power…

"But I still don't understand why it's funny," Ryouko said, giving the girl next to her a queer look.

"They all thought she was German the whole time," Mina explained, "but of course she's Dutch. So when one of them made a Hitler joke, it set her off."

"But that's *terrible*," Ryouko said. "Look how distressed she is."

“Of course it sounds terrible if you make me explain it like that,” Mina said, exasperated. “But it was obviously funny.”

“Give it up already, Mina,” Eva said, rolling her eyes and looking bored. “Her personnel file says she doesn’t get humor. Let’s get back to the damn movie.”

They were watching a movie in their newly assigned house, within a former civilian living complex deep in one of the secure areas of the planet. More precisely, they were watching *Historian*, a century-old MSY biopic about the MSY’s most famous historian, Clarisse van Rossum, that of course Ryouko had seen before. Even more precisely, while they were physically within Eva’s room, they were watching the movie within an accelerated virtuality, to save time within their crammed, self-assigned training schedule. They were about to start serious simulation training, practicing *in silico* for both the insertion onto the moon and the mission afterward. The intelligence available about the layout of the alien facility was limited, so they would be running through various scenarios based on the layout of other captured alien structures, exotic and novel to the human sense of aesthetics.

In contrast to that, the virtuality they were currently in was a comparatively dull replication of one of the rooms they were staying in, where they were seated watching the movie play on the back wall. They could have opted for something more immersive, such as a movie theatre-style “inside the movie” experience, but the whole point of the exercise was team-bonding, and it was difficult to do that if you couldn’t see each other, or if the main characters were constantly walking around you.

Besides, everyone knew that the pure “in-head” experience was inferior to what you could get with movie theatre equipment, or specialized computing resources, such as had been onboard the Zhukov. If they had wanted to watch a lower-quality implant-generated virtuality, they could have done it on their own time, without the need to gather everyone.

Amazing, how quickly a technology like that could become routine. After all, Ryouko hadn’t had any access in her civilian life.

“My personnel file says that?” Ryouko asked incredulously.

“It says a lot of things,” Eva said. “Look, it’s not important. Let’s just get back to the watching, okay?”

Ryouko felt an elbow in her side, and turned to find Juliet giving her a narrow look. She should let it go, the look said, and Ryouko even received a slight bit of telepathically-conveyed annoyance.

Juliet wasn’t much for talking.

Ryouko let it go, leaning back against the sofa behind her, which was made up of those self-assembling modular furniture pieces that were so popular on Earth. Next to her, Misa sat upside-down on the sofa itself, her head inclined over the edge to watch the movie, long hair draping onto the floor, while her bare feet were planted into the wall behind them. Ryouko wasn’t sure how exactly the girl could be comfortable “seated” like that, but by now she knew better than to question the eccentricities of centenarians.

“Now that you’re here, you might as well stay,” the on-screen version of Tomoe Mami said, framed within the boundaries of the wall, holography giving the scene the illusion of depth. “We could use your experience and power.”

Misa paused the movie, as Nadya entered the simulation, choosing to enter through the virtual

door instead of just materializing in thin air.

“Sorry I’m late,” the team elder said. “Had some things to take care of. I hope I haven’t missed too much. And Misa, really, you could stand to show some decency every once in a while.”

“It’s not like I’m doing this in reality,” Misa said. “Stop being such a stick in the mud.”

Nadya grunted at the ancient idiom, before seating herself into an empty slot on the sofa. The movie resumed.

“I’d be glad to stay,” the move version of van Rossum said, “but sadly that’s not how it works for me. Now that everything is over, I have to get going.”

At that moment, in almost eerie synchrony, everyone in the room lost their focus on the movie, body language clearly signaling that they were reading some sort of urgent internal message.

The movie paused again, as Eva groaned at the arrival of yet another interruption.

“A new team member?” she asked rhetorically, in annoyance and disbelief. “At this stage? What is command thinking? No offense to you, Ryouko, but it’s been hard enough integrating one new member—“

“Not just any new member,” Nadya said, voice hushed, looking back up at the screen. “It’s—”

“Clarisse van Rossum,” Ryouko said.

After a brief bout of hurried discussion, they decided that it wasn’t worth trying to hide their awe and surprise: they would travel out to the city starport—which now served as a military airfield—and greet her as she got off the transport. It had been sudden; even Mami had conceded as much in her message to the team. The message explained that Clarisse had filed an unexpected and sudden personal appeal, requesting Mami to assign an escort for her to a particular moon of the gas giant Orpheus. Something big was going to happen there, Clarisse had been sure, even if she couldn’t explain what.

The MSY was not in the habit of denying Clarisse’s requests. There had been a lengthy discussion, in which Clarisse had insisted that it was essential she be on the moon itself, at the allotted time.

But there was only one way that was possible.

As they headed out in their roomy group vehicle, they speculated wildly on what this new development meant for them, their mission, and humanity as a whole.

“Van Rossum travels all the time,” Nadya said. “She has the luxury of her own ship, nowadays. That doesn’t mean every place she visits is important. It’s not every day you can have an Asunción or St. Petersburg. But this smells big. We all know our mission is important. This just emphasizes it.”

“Is she a good fighter?” Eva asked, leaning back in her seat. “I mean, I know about the movies and such, but you know how they blow things out of proportion.”

“She’s five and a half centuries old,” Ying Zhi said severely, long hair falling over her eyes as she leaned forward, “and she lived through times that were a lot worse for our kind than anything that followed. She *must* be a good fighter.”

“Even among girls my age, very few have seen her fight,” Nadya said. “Except for a few obligation demons every year, she mostly just glides along. The last time she did any fighting of note was during the Unification Wars, and I’m at least half a century too young to have seen that. Yes, I know, amazing.”

She glanced sternly at Misa, who had been clearly about to make a snarky comment about Nadya’s age.

“Anyway, I’m as curious as the rest of you,” Nadya finished. “They say that normally she has very little power, but the closer she gets to an event of major historical importance, the greater her power gets.”

“She’s a member of the Church’s Theological Council,” Gracia said thoughtfully. “They say… that is, the rumors say she interferes in historical events, at the Goddess’s direction. The left hand of the Goddess, in other words.”

At her side, Juliet nodded sagely, but Mina made a face and said:

“The Goddess does not interfere in worldly affairs so rudely. What happens is predetermined. It does not make sense—“

“Okay, let’s not have this discussion right now,” Misa said, cutting the other girl off with an outstretched arm. “Your cult can argue about this on your own time. What I want to discuss is how this affects our chances of success on the mission.”

“There’s speculation that the nature of her wish makes her immortal as long as humanity survives,” Ryouko said thoughtfully. “Since after all, one can’t witness history if one is dead. If true, it could improve our odds.”

Seeing skeptical looks, Ryouko appended:

“Well, I read it online.”

She shrugged to indicate that she was just stating it as a matter of speculation.

Annabelle chuckled slightly.

“Or I suppose it could mean that this mission is about to fail in the most catastrophic way possible,” she said.

“How is one mission supposed to destroy all of humanity?” Misa said. “At worst, it fails catastrophically and we all die, but Clarisse survives somehow.”

“You are both too cynical and too morbid,” Nadya said. “Don’t scare the new girl. Look, she’s turning pale.”

Ryouko was not, in fact, turning pale, but she decided she should try to play along, casting her eyes to one side. It probably wasn’t a good acting job.

“Anyway,” she said, an awkward moment later, “what I’ve never understood is, if she’s supposed to witness all of history, how is she supposed to see anything from before she was born?”

“Let’s not overthink this,” Nadya said. “Whatever the case, she’s here, so let’s work together to try to make this is a successful mission, okay?”

They responded to the platitude with various assenting noises, though the discussion persisted, and

Mina, Gracia, and Juliet continued to glare daggers at each other, probably still arguing the topic via either telepathy or transmission.

Do you want to introduce yourself to Clarisse? Ryouko asked her TacComp.

As tempting as that sounds, the TacComp in question responded, *I think it'd be better if I didn't, since you're keeping me sort of a secret from your team here. Also, are you sure you want to admit to her that you named me after her?*

You named yourself *after her*, Ryouko said, slightly miffed.

Sure I did.

Ryouko decided to leave Clarisse out of any upcoming conversations with…Clarisse.

Instead of stopping outside the starport, their vehicle caromed down a newly opened access road onto the landing area itself, though they were obliged to step off near the entrance, far from the designated loading areas, and watch their vehicle drive off.

Ryouko took a moment to take in their surroundings. The grey surface below her feet appeared identical to the material that paved the ground surfaces of Mitakihara City—it probably *was* identical, she decided, though she wasn't about to test it by deliberately falling and seeing if the surface softened briefly.

Like Acheron, Apollo was a hot planet, befitting its name, but whereas Acheron had been an inferno, Apollo was at that moment merely hot. It was high summer, but compared to Acheron, Apollo was positively pleasant, even if they happened to be near the unpleasantly warm equator.

The city they were in, Waset, lay at the edge of one of the planet's many sandstone deserts. Consequently, the air smelled faintly of dust, of sandstone baking under the sun.

Well, according to her enhanced sense of smell, it was actually dust, thruster exhaust, three different types of plant pollen, nanocrete, Eva's slightly obnoxious perfume, and the odors of no less than eight different humans—female, around her age.

Dust was the most prominent, though.

They walked over to the designated landing point, standing carefully out of the way of where her ship would descend. Ryouko watched expectantly as the frigate-class ship descended out of the clear blue-violet sky, braking its initially fiery descent on thrusters and antigravity. For a starship it looked unusually aerodynamic, even sporting diminutive wing stubs. Like all small ships that might venture into hostile territory, it was covered in a metamaterial sheath that helped the ship blend into its background, though without additional stealth enhancements, it did little more than make it less conspicuous.

As the ship settled into a gentle almost-vertical landing, wheels coming to a rest on the gray nanocrete ground, Ryouko thought back to the matronly, nondescript woman who had questioned her at the Theological Council meeting. It was hard to believe she was finally going to meet her.

It was thus a substantial surprise when what appeared to be a teenager stepped onto the descent ladder, wavy hair and pretty freckled face complementing fashionable white dress and blue shirt. As she watched, the girl stretched luxuriously, bulky travel bag at her side.

The girl saw Ryouko looking and grinned, descending rapidly down the steps, bag dutifully walking itself down the steps after her.

“I’m Clarisse van Rossum,” she said as she reached the bottom step, bowing gracefully. “Though I suppose it’s a bit old-fashioned to be giving my name, now isn’t it? It’s been a long time since I’ve been this young. I’d forgotten how much more energetic you feel. It’s the better combat form, you know, so once I knew I’d be doing something like this, I figured I’d better make the change.”

The group stared back at her blankly, except Nadya, who looked thoughtful. The team leader reached into the gift bag she had been carrying, extracting a large glass bottle filled with a clear transparent fluid. Before Ryouko could endeavor to move her head so she could read the front side of the Russian label, Nadya stepped forward, presenting the bottle, looking self-satisfied.

“Oooh,” Clarisse chorused melodiously, looking impressed. “Non-synthesized vodka. High quality too. Oh, Nadya, you shouldn’t have!”

The two girls embraced warmly, as the eyes of the rest of the group collectively grew wider.

“How did you get something like this so quickly?” Clarisse asked, looking the other girl in the eye, hands still on her shoulders.

“I always have some stashed for special occasions,” Nadya said confidently, smiling.

“Then let’s save it for after the mission,” Clarisse said, “to celebrate victory. But surely we can drink some of the synthesized stuff tonight, when we have time. It’ll be bonding.”

“Certainly.”

“You know her!” Misa blurted out finally, the first to speak.

Nadya turned and looked at the rest of them, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, yes,” she said simply.

“But you said—”

“I said I’ve never seen her fight,” Nadya said. “Not that I didn’t know her. You girls always underestimate me. You don’t live two centuries without meeting a few people.”

Clarisse pursed her lips.

“It’s not nice to toy with your juniors like that, Nadya,” she criticized. “Come on, I’ll introduce myself.”

To Ryouko’s surprise, Clarisse headed directly for her, hand outstretched.

“I do believe we’ve met before, after a fashion,” she said, “And here you are again. You’re an interesting girl.”

Ryouko shook the hand hesitantly, meeting the woman’s—girl’s—eyes with confusion. Surely, Clarisse couldn’t be talking about the Theological Council encounter—but what else could she mean?

Ryouko glanced away from the other girl’s eyes, looking down at the floor. She had spent so much of her childhood reading about Clarisse’s exploits that she seemed almost a mythological figure to her. Now that she was here, shaking her hand, she didn’t know what to say.

“Her too?” Misa asked incredulously.

Ryouko looked at the rest of the team, and found the team’s Cult members—Juliet, Mina, and

Gracia—looking at her with both surprise and sudden interest. Unlike Selécine, they had no idea about Ryouko's visions and previous contact with the Cult, possibly due to the secrecy surrounding the team.

Clarisse moved through the rest of the team, shaking hands and smiling charmingly. It was almost unnatural for a girl who looked so young to exude so much charisma, but at this point Ryouko was beyond being surprised by that kind of thing. She was sure that Clarisse was at the point now where she could turn it on and off like a switch, similar to the other Ancients she had met. In fact, judging by the way some of the girls blushed, she was sure Clarisse could have gotten into someone's pants in record time, had that been her goal. Actually, come to think of it, what was Clarisse's sexual orientation anyway?

Ryouko frowned abruptly. The train of thought she had just completed…

…is literally the dirtiest I've ever heard out of you, the other Clarisse opined. *It's unusual, you know. My preinstalled models were telling me to expect orders of magnitude more, at your age.*

Was that comment really necessary? Ryouko asked, rhetorically.

I thought it was notable, Clarisse responded. *It shows a certain growth, coming from you. Also, don't look now, but your idol is looking at you.*

Of course, Ryouko looked immediately, and found Clarisse giving her a thoughtful look. Seeing her looking, the girl smiled slightly.

The moment ended when Juliet appeared near Clarisse's shoulder, causing the historian to shift her gaze.

"Your—your autograph," the soft-spoken girl requested, obviously making a strenuous effort just to say the words.

Clarisse turned away to fulfill the request, as the others crowded nearby.

Later, the historian thought, and for a long moment Ryouko was unsure if the thought had been real, or if she had only just imagined it.

Despite a strong group inclination to spend some more time socializing, both Nadya and Clarisse pointed out that time was starting to seriously run short. It was time to head to the city's specialized training center and start simulation training, and it was probably best that they socialize later, once they had completed their intended training and started the rest and relaxation period that would immediately precede departure. Unlike Ryouko, it was expected that Clarisse would blend in naturally with the team without an extensive preparation period, and could certainly be relied on to perform well in combat.

Despite her significant seniority, higher rank, and the evident willingness of *Major* Antipova to defer command to *Colonel* van Rossum, the historian insisted that the operation was Nadya's to run, following orders readily. In addition, she felt obliged to add that:

"As you all know, my power varies with how close I am to an important historical event. Because I fight so rarely, the system has only evaluated my powers when during relatively weak periods, since I obviously didn't take time out for recordings when the situation was critical. We could have it guess at my power, but it might be better to practice with me weak."

Initially, she dazzled the others by performing feats that were normally never the provenance of a

single magical girl, performing short-range teleports, launching fireballs, and erecting magical barriers. As promised, however, it soon became clear that despite the variety of her powers, the simulation was making her weak—the teleports were invariably very short distance, and the fireballs were incapable of penetrating the shielding on alien armor.

Still, she was obviously very experienced, and next to her Ryouko felt almost inadequate. Occasionally, the old bloodlust came back, and she could lose herself in the heat of combat. More often, though, she found herself embarrassed. It wasn't that she performed poorly, not quite—but the rest of the team, even the newcomer Clarisse, was like a well-oiled machine, anticipating orders before they arrived, eliminating threats before they had even had the chance to appear. Ryouko simply wasn't that good, and it bothered her.

And despite their skill, they still failed more missions than they succeeded, dying ignominiously in the middle of a randomly generated wormhole stabilizer layout.

Finally, they entered the most stressful of the simulations, the full immersion simulations—the ones they wouldn't know weren't real.

There was so much enemy firepower, and the facility was just so big.

They were the only ones left. As a team, they were already critically wounded, missing one of their teleporters, their clairvoyant-telepath, their stealth generator, and a substantial portion of their grief cubes. At least they had managed to hold on to their PAYNE nuclear device.

On raids such as this, everything relied on mobility and deception. Cephalopod facilities were nowadays equipped with numerous redundant systems and countless decoys, designed to mislead MagOps teams. They had brought precision sensors, including gravimetric detectors, but it had hardly been a surprise when on initial entry, they found an array of no less than a dozen gravitational anomalies, each the potential location of a critical subsystem. It was tempting to teleport to the one directly under the massive ring above the facility, but experience showed that that was no more likely to be the right target than any of the others.

In the relatively cramped interior of such a major facility, the biggest danger was booby traps, directed explosives and hard radiation bombs pointed down clear lines-of-sight in literally every room, wired to fire regardless of whether any alien personnel were still in the area.

As such, they had to stay constantly on the move, probing new locations over and over, taking as unpredictable a course as possible. Anything less risked the squid turning on some kind of internal forcefield and detonating another antimatter explosive in their sector of the facility. It was doubtful that the aliens had another forcefield of such power, beyond the main forcefield protecting the exterior of the facility—and besides, even the aliens had to have some compunction about blowing a large part of their own facility sky-high—but they couldn't afford to take chances.

But since Ryouko was the only remaining teleporter, the constant teleportation was starting to take its toll on her.

"This isn't it," Nadya growled, as the results came back from the sensor pack on her back, salvaged from one of the other girls, now dead. Another decoy.

It was difficult to deny the abject disappointment that appeared on all their faces, as they stood nervously attentive in that vast cylindrical room. Around them lay the ruins of what had appeared to an engineering observation room, littered with the corpses of alien personnel and shattered consoles. The austere metallic-seeming walls were pitted with large blackened holes where

Clarisse had barely managed to detect waiting traps. Behind a row of consoles was a row of windows, behind which a yawning spherical cavity carried a massive, floating grey sphere at least the size of a house. All for show, apparently.

The main entrance, circular in the alien style, was sealed shut by a massive radiation door, which Nadya had forced closed behind them. Beyond that door lay the smoking, radioactive ruins of the corridor they had entered from—and barely avoided death in. Back there Ying-zhi had consumed everything she had left to save them, leaving behind not even a corpse.

We have to hold it together. I know it's just the few of us left, but we still have a chance!

Those words, which Misa murmured to the remaining group by telepathy, seemed designed to reassure herself more than anything. Still, Ryouko was glad to hear it, since her own faith was wavering.

I haven't lived this long just to lose here, Clarisse responded grimly, a moment later.

If we can't find a good spot to place the PAYNE device, then we should at least endeavor to destroy as much as we can, Nadya thought. *Who knows? Maybe we'll get a major reactor and delay activation for a week or so. That's got to be something. But for now, there's still five more locations to try.*

The other three moved quickly back towards Ryouko.

"I can't sustain much more of this," Ryouko said, deliberately avoiding looking in the eyes of the others, whose eyes were wide with stress, and the strain of having to deal with the deaths of their team members. It was no coincidence that the survivors now consisted of the three oldest girls—and her. All along, she had been a burden on them. Not to mention, she didn't want to see in their eyes just how dire the situation was.

Clarisse's pack opened, the robotic arm disgorging a few grief cubes, which she tossed in Ryouko's direction. The sensors on her gem were registering low, and the team knew that.

Ryouko took a breath, internalizing as much as she could about the location of the next target. Clarisse drew on her relatively weak clairvoyance, showing Ryouko what she could about a possible safe location to reappear, where it seemed like there were no enemy personnel.

A moment later, they were there, and without moving away from her the others immediately carved holes into the walls and floor where Clarisse had indicated traps were present, blowing off chunks of debris and copious amounts of smoke, and—in Misa's case—electrical ozone. She stayed tense, ready to go back at the slightest hint of trouble. From all indications, it seemed that they had landed in a storage room, since the rear of the room was stocked with rounded cubes that looked like boxes. The walls were set in a rectangular shape, which was unusual for the aliens, who seemed to prefer rounded edges whenever possible. Other than that, the room had no other decoration, save for the round entry door, and lighting that seemed to come from the walls themselves.

A moment later they were done, and the room was clear.

Following an indicator on her internal interface, they headed out the proper exit in approved fashion, Nadya blasting through the door first with a telekinetic pulse designed to act as an impromptu barrier, the others behind her.

She hardly had time to process it, so quickly did it happen.

It wasn't the pain—that was instantly repressed—so much as the shock of it.

She felt herself going into fugue, and part of her registered that she was no longer directly attached to the lower part of her body. Somehow, she still functioned, well enough to realize what must have happened: stealth units that Clarisse had missed, waiting until they were slightly separated to attack. It was likely they had been stationed at all the remaining target points. Her combat interface was now missing, and she realized that *her* Clarisse might no longer be functional.

She considered trying to stay awake and fight anyway, doing her absolute best to keep her eye on the fight around her, rather than look down. She even raised her crossbow arm weakly, pointing it in the general direction of some of the attacking infantry, which Misa was gamely trying to keep visible by acting like a tesla coil, a swarm of constantly arcing electric bolts forcing the squid shielding to activate.

But then she saw Clarisse fall to the floor, eyes wide with the shock of "this isn't *possible*", gem shattered with the rest of her hand, and Ryouko knew it was over. She launched every arrow she could, out of sheer spite, but doubted it would do much.

They had failed. Everything had depended on them, and they had failed.

Her eyes blurred, and she didn't know if it was the fugue, the tears, or something worse. What about her wish? It was still unfulfilled. If this was her end, then what had this even all been for?

She blinked, not bothering to check her gem. She wondered if she might now expect a pink Goddess to appear.

She thought of everything she had failed to do, the worlds she had failed to explore, the girl she had failed to contact. Why, at a time like this, did Asami seem so prominent in her mind?

She thought of what the girl might do now, and felt only regret.

I'm sorry, she thought.

It had all been a simulation, of course, and Clarisse the TacComp had woken her early.

She had died in simulation before, of course, but this was the first time she had felt that kind of despair at the end, because it was the first she had died thinking it was real, with the stakes so high. It was also the first time Clarisse had terminated her involvement early because of the risk that the emotion would propagate to her soul gem. Indeed, sensing the risk, Clarisse had been slowly detaching her from the simulation, in the hope that it would sufficiently dull the emotions, though clearly it had hardly affected a thing.

But it hadn't been enough, and she could still feel the echo of what had happened.

They took a breather, then tried again.

"The locals really wanted to hit the hydroelectric plant," a slightly drunk Clarisse van Rossum said. "It was obvious there was something big there. The security, the air raids, the failed commando raid—but it wasn't going to be easy. First, if we blew up the plant, the Germans would think it was a resistance operation, and they were in the nasty habit of killing everyone in the area when something like that happened. Second, a couple of the officers' daughters were in the area, and they knew all about us—you couldn't possibly hunt demons in the area without running into them. We had to tolerate them, because if we didn't, they could bring the Germans down on the

heads of the local families."

She shook her head at herself, trying to excavate the ancient memories.

"They weren't bad girls," she said, "but we hated them, and in the end, they hated us. We couldn't kill them, and they were too weak to kill us, so it was just like that. I didn't understand why my soul gem wanted me there, not until the commandos started landing."

"We met immediately. Most of the others wanted to attack immediately, not give the Germans a chance to interfere, but I told them not to be stupid. All that would do is sound the alarm. We had to think of a way to distract them. I suggested dropping used grief cubes in the vicinity. Half of us would show up to hunt when they did, and buy as much time as possible bickering over possession of the cubes. The other half would quietly move to block them from getting back to the plant, in case they got back too soon."

Clarisse looked down, frowning at her empty glass cup. Reaching over, she poured herself more amber-colored whiskey.

"Well, that almost worked," she continued. "Except they weren't quite as naïve as I expected, and left one girl behind, just in case we did something like that. I hadn't thought they would divide their team like that. I was part of the second team, and we did what we had to. We tried to capture her, since we didn't want anyone dead, but in the end—well, a broken soul gem looks like a natural death. Three girls dead at once, no matter how natural-seeming, would have convinced the Germans of a conspiracy. One dead girl—even the most favored daughters probably couldn't talk their fathers into killing all the locals, just for *that*, even if they were Nazis. Especially when the daughters in question weren't really that cold-blooded. Not as cold-blooded as I was, anyway. I killed her myself, you know, when the others couldn't bring themselves to do it. Being more experienced has its benefits."

Without looking up, she put her cup to her lips, downing half of it in one go. With her last few statements, the mood had switched abruptly from vaguely celebratory to awkwardly quiet.

"I stayed away from Warsaw, you know," she said, more to herself than to them. "I had a good guess about what might happen there, and after Stalingrad, I wanted to go somewhere quieter. I fought my soul gem, forced my way to somewhere a little less important, and still…"

Clarisse finally looked up at the rest of them, a few of whom had started to look a little queasy. Not Ryouko—she knew more about her hero than most people, and knew that her hands weren't exactly clean. However, this particular story was…different than what she remembered reading.

"Don't think I'm so drunk I've started spilling secrets," Clarisse said, voice still startlingly crisp. "I just don't like talking about it without some alcohol to dull the memory. It's not something I've ever really told anyone about. I wanted to share a little, you know? You girls are still young—even you, Nadya. You have to understand what some of us have done to try to save this world. We all have our demons, and some of the failures I've had—it still disturbs my sleep to think about. It wasn't my intention to end up on this mission, but now that I am here, I will do everything I can. I want you all to believe that."

There was a long awkward pause. Some of them nodded, slightly. Others stayed still, looking confused. Finally, Clarisse took a breath, getting back into the flow of the narrative.

"The Germans just weren't big believers in sending their women and daughters anywhere near the front. How were they supposed to know that was a mistake? Many girls went on their own, but none of them could have known how important it was to get to Norway. Even I was there mostly by chance. I had a devil of a time convincing the locals I wasn't a German spy, by the

way."

She pointed at Eva with the pinky of her left hand, which was also holding a cup of whiskey that tilted precariously, its contents threatening to overflow onto the floor, despite being only half-empty.

"I tell you, major wars like that are always a giant scramble for me," she said. "I can never quite tell where to go. There are things happening *everywhere*, and trying to travel the world when half of it is trying to kill the other is no easy proposition. It's not really the soldiers or the border guards—it's the other magical girls. They don't trust you in the best of times. And there's always those who actually swallow the ideologies involved."

She shook her head, glanced into the cup in her hand, then swallowed the rest in one gulp.

"I had to make a lot of tough decisions about where I wanted to go," she said, "but the point is that even though Europe in 1939 turned out to be a good place to be, I missed a lot by doing it. And in 1945, it was a lucky decision on my part to travel to Japan through the United States. I couldn't understand how anything in the deserts of New Mexico could be important, but that was where Trinity was, of course. Sneaking into Japan was no small feat. I had to be pretend to be German. At the time, there was no more disgusting thing you could have asked me to do, but I did it. It was worth it, if you can call witnessing Hiroshima worth it."

She set her glass back down on the table in front of her with a loud thunk, then smiled slightly, turning the charisma back on as if it were a switch.

"I imagine we've had enough of stories for now. Anyone know any good party games?"

"You know, standard protocol recommends taking a nap before a mission like this."

Ryouko looked up. She had been seated in bed, playing with CubeBot by tossing a grief cube and having the bot retrieve it. Probably not the safest thing to be doing, but safe enough: the cube was empty. She had left the door unlocked, of course.

"You really wanted to talk about something, then?" Ryouko asked, watching the girl in her doorway. She managed to maintain a steady composure, but it required that she hide a mix of apprehension and anticipation. She had almost managed to convince herself that she had imagined Clarisse's earlier comment.

Clarisse stepped into the room, the door sliding closed behind her. The girl closed her eyes briefly, rubbing her hands together, before opening them again.

"I dislike dancing around the point," she said. "The MHD psychiatrists are concerned about your mental state going into this mission. Usually, this kind of a thing would be for you and Atsuko-san to discuss, but exceptions are made for time-sensitive situations. To wit, she would much prefer that you leave on this mission with no regrets of the romantic variety. I'm talking about Nakihara Asami-san, of course."

Her Japanese was arguably flawless, showing none of the slight accent that characterized a speaker still partially reliant on implants. Still, the way she talked—it was almost as if she had stepped out of one of her own movies. It reminded her of…Mami?

Ryouko closed her eyes in turn, taking a deep, slightly exasperated breath.

"Does everyone know about that?" she asked, finally.

“I think so,” Clarisse said, without missing a beat. “Probably, anyway. You’ll find that very little escapes the attentions of our MSY overlords. It’s why you can’t sleep right now, right?”

The girl sat down on the bed next to Ryouko, and looking into those light purple irises, she tried to decide whether she should try to fudge the truth.

“Yes, it is,” she said, finally.

“Just to be clear, while it is occasionally useful to be perceived as having god-like powers of perception,” Clarisse said, “I more or less stole that from your mind. You see this?”

With a bright purple flash, a book appeared in her outstretched hand. The leather-bound book appeared well-worn and ancient, and on its cover cryptic runes proclaimed simply “Clarisse van Rossum”.

Just as it occurred to Ryouko to wonder how she had managed to read the runes, the book vanished again.

“I don’t think you need an explanation about the book,” Clarisse said, “but several of the histories in here are of noted telepaths. The distance between here and the moon we are about to go to is many times larger than the distance between Mitakihara and Berlin, but it seems distance is very much a relative thing for my soul gem. Since I’m now so close, the lock has come off of some of my powers. That includes mind-reading, which I more or less abused just now.”

Ryouko, of course, was the last person who needed an explanation of Clarisse’s powers. The historian’s powers got stronger as she approached an event of historical importance. Specifically, among other things, she could record the memories and powers of those she met within her book, as long as they consented—or were dead. In the ordinary course of things, it was merely a record. But at certain times, in certain places, it was something she could actually use. It was said that at such times she could be absolutely terrifying.

“I know you’re not the type to share readily,” Clarisse said, still pinning her with those eyes of hers. “So I’ll tell you what I know. You’re terrified of regretting your decision, which is why you haven’t spoken to her, even though we are scheduled to leave in a mere few hours. But you know that not making the decision could be worse in any number of ways. It is immature to leave on your mission without speaking to her, or you think, though I personally agree. I’ve…felt what you felt, when you thought you were dead in those simulations. You regretted immensely not speaking to her.”

Clarisse paused, and Ryouko simply waited, holding her breath. She was mesmerized, and though she realized that, she found herself unwilling to resist.

“I won’t presume to speak for you,” Clarisse said, “and it is terrible of me to violate you like this, but there is little time. You are different. I can tell, though I don’t know how. Heterosexual, homosexual—you have rarely ever thought about such things, though surely Asami-san has, by this point. I—“

Clarisse blinked, once, and it was as if a spell had been broken. Ryouko released the breath she had been holding.

“I've only had a few relationships,” Clarisse said, eyes suddenly downcast. “And nothing that could have been deeply serious. The nature of my life has always prevented it. Am I missing something? I don’t really know. Over the course of my life, I’ve experienced a hundred, maybe even a thousand relationships, all second-hand, all vicariously through the eyes of others. Even so, I don’t really know. Atsuko-san seemed to think that just because of all that I would know what to

say to you. All I can say is that sometimes, love grows into you. It rarely happens as in the movies, with both parties in love at first sight. More often, there is one party that does the chasing, and perhaps the other party learns to like the chasing. If you are not sure, I would recommend giving it a try, at the very least."

Ryouko kneaded part of her quilt in her right hand.

"Do you really think so?" she asked. "Part of what has me so frozen is that, in the end, I don't really know what orientation I am. I've tried, I've really tried, but I can't—the urge is not there. I can't help but think she might very disappointed, to put it bluntly, assuming she's thought it through."

She felt her cheeks color slightly. It was not a topic she felt comfortable discussing.

"You don't necessarily need an orientation," Clarisse said, looking up, but not trying to force eye contact. "Don't feel bound by something like that. It seems to me that if it's so difficult to decide, it must not matter much. If you think you and her can coexist in the other relevant ways, then this will solve itself. That's…I suppose that's experience talking."

Ryouko stayed silent, playing with her hands.

"You don't have to decide right away," Clarisse said. "I know you fear the consequences of making a decision when you might die soon. But for your own sake, you should explain yourself to Nakihara-san. You don't want to leave regrets behind. I've experienced those memories. It's not pleasant."

Ryouko took a breath.

"I think you're right," she said. "Or rather, I know you're right. I've just had trouble actually doing it."

Clarisse nodded.

"I know," she said, "but there's very little time left. I'm just giving you one more kick. I'll stay here if you want, but—"

"No it's okay," Ryouko said, shaking her head. "I'll call her. Do you mind—"

"I will go," Clarisse said, already getting up.

The door slid closed behind her.

Ryouko watched it for a moment, then took a breath.

I'm tempted to make some sort of joke right now, the other Clarisse thought, *but I'll save it. You want me to place a call or what? Since she's on secondary training, it's actually pretty likely that she's busy. I thought about pointing that out, but I figure some sort of voice message would suffice. I didn't want to push you.*

Ryouko leaned down onto her bed.

"I suppose," she conceded. "I just feel like I'm being so rushed by events. I—whatever, just do it."

She stared at the ceiling, waiting for the interstellar communication protocol to work its magic. In truth, she would have called even without Clarisse's visit, but…she had been procrastinating. She had realized that there was a good chance that by waiting so long, Asami would be unable to pick

up, and she felt cowardly for secretly hoping that she could just leave a message. Clarisse had really given her a kick in the pants, she supposed.

It occurred to her that the connection was taking unusually long. That was unusual—if someone was busy, the response from the implants or TacComp was usually instantaneous. Instead, she was simply lying around waiting. It had been ten seconds, at least.

IIC traffic volume in this area is extremely high, Clarisse thought. *For obvious reasons, including that everyone has military privileges. Still, that's not the reason for the delay. The connection has been active for a while now. I think we're waiting on her.*

Ryouko had figured that out for herself. She wondered why Clarisse would repeat the fact. It wasn't her style to supply her with redundant information.

"Ryouko?" Asami said, her voice cutting through the pattern of Ryouko's thoughts, tiny, slim face appearing her vision, occupying a virtual screen that now covered the center of her vision.

Ryouko took a deep breath, realizing that the other girl, who also looked understandably nervous, could probably see her.

"Hi, Asami," she said, feeling sheepish.

The other girl shifted her eyes to the side, looking off the edge of the virtual screen.

"Meiqing said you'd call," she said.

"Yes," Ryouko agreed. "I'm surprised you're available, actually. I thought you might be busy with training."

Asami smiled slightly.

"They cut it short, actually," she said. "We've been instructed to sleep, since the fleet moves to the front tomorrow. Something is obviously going to happen."

"I see," Ryouko said.

The conversation was a bit strained, but it could hardly have been otherwise.

"I may be dead tomorrow," she said.

The words were out before she could stop herself. Viewing the reaction on Asami's face, she rushed to correct the situation:

"Sorry, I'm sorry, I meant to say that I'm going on a dangerous mission very soon. There's a high chance of not coming back. That's what I meant to say."

She listened to her own breath, angry at herself that she could botch it so badly.

"Meiqing did mention a special combat mission," Asami said, voice slightly higher pitch than normal. "She didn't mention something like that."

"Look, Asami," Ryouko said, closing her eyes so she could just *say it*. "I'm not good at this kind of thing. I just want to say that you've been a good friend and…I don't know. I just wanted to let you know that I appreciated you being here. This is not a rejection. I just…I don't know yet. I'm not even sure I'm lesbian. I wanted to wait, but I can't wait. I didn't want to just leave, in case I never spoke to you again. I—I don't know. Everyone says I should tell you how things are, so

there it is. I guess."

Of course, closing her eyes had no direct bearing on whether she could see the transmission, but the system knew enough to black out the transmission when her eyes were closed, or at the very least Clarisse could do it.

She opened her eyes again, to find Asami smiling back strainedly, with a perhaps a dash of pain.

"I understand," the girl said, a moment later. "I—It's not easy, I'll admit, but I don't want to be unfair. I don't want to pressure you. I—"

Asami clenched her eyes shut, and Ryouko cringed internally at the sudden emotion.

"It seems silly, to care so much about you," Asami said. "But just come back alive, okay? Come back so I still have a chance to see you."

Embarrassed, Ryouko looked away, saying what she knew was the proper line:

"Keep yourself alive too, okay? This is all moot otherwise."

"I will," Asami said, nodding.

They stared at each other a moment.

"How is it, being part of Magi Cæli, then?" Ryouko asked, experimentally. "I know you wanted a planetary posting, so…"

Her voice trailed off, since she wasn't really sure where she was going with this. Fortunately, however, Asami seemed to perk up slightly, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

"It's okay, I guess," she said. "I can't really complain, since I didn't make a wish about that. My brother told me he's thankful. That has to be enough, I suppose."

She paused.

"I'd ask you where you are, but that's probably classified, right?"

"I'm guessing so," Ryouko responded.

She wanted to say something else, but all she could think of were questions that were entirely inappropriate, or else monologues about varying topics: wormhole stabilizers, colonial organization, things like that. In the past, around a hundred virtual campfires, she had been able to keep Asami fascinated with things like that, but right now she couldn't help but feel it wasn't a good time. Not to mention that talking about wormhole stabilizers might be construed as hinting at classified information.

"I guess that's goodbye for now, then," she said.

"Yes," Asami agreed. "Goodbye. For now."

The transmission ended, and Ryouko lay there for a little while longer, until Clarisse prodded her with:

Well, since we're in the process of making difficult calls, I think now is a good time to call your parents.

Ryouko sighed.

"Yes, I suppose I should," she said out loud.

Nakihara Asami let out a breath.

To think just a while ago I lived at home, and all I wanted was to get out*. How things change. I barely remember what any of them look like anymore.*

She frowned, tapping her fingers on the desk in front of her.

She's going on some sort of mission tomorrow? And our training was abbreviated so the fleet can head out today? It can't be a coincidence.

She considered a moment.

TacComp, do you think there's any way for me to keep tabs on her combat status? You know, as some sort of alert-style thing?

Probably not, her robotic companion responded. *According to the records, she is serving as a lower-tier staff officer on board the Georgy Konstantinovich Zhukov, and has no upcoming combat missions. However, if what she told you is true, it is unlikely those records are accurate. Either way, there is no way for me to keep watch on classified information. In addition, I feel it is relevant to state that, as a matter of safety, magical girl personnel are usually quarantined from potentially distressing information about the activities of friends and lovers, pending MHD approval.*

"Hmm," Asami said, out loud, reacting only slightly to the use of the word "lover".

The Grapevine, if it exists, probably has only unreliable information, her TacComp thought, intercepting her current train of thought. *Consulting it in your state may result in negative consequences.*

She laughed silently.

In my state… she thought.

You do know how to access it, though? she queried.

I had not anticipated this request, so it would take me some time to find out.

"Hmm," she said, again out loud. Maybe it was her imagination, but the device sounded almost reluctant.

The "Grapevine" was, of course, the covert information network that magical girls used to exchange information, outside the reach of Governance or, in many cases, even the MSY. It was difficult to deny information to a group of people that had universal telepathy and a subpopulation of mind-readers.

So the rumors said, anyway. She hadn't ever had any contact with it, herself.

She looked at her hand, spreading her fingers out so that it framed the desk surface.

Who would have thought I had it in me? But look at me now: I spend half my time moping about, and the other half dreaming about what I'll do when we finally get our own ship. I feel like some sort of stupid teenager…which I suppose I am. That seems so far away now, doesn't it? But it was

such a nice idea…

She sat there for a while, cradling her head in her arms on the desk, fantasizing about the future, about how they could explore undiscovered alien worlds together, how they'd decorate the inside of their ship, and what they'd do there…

"Asami!"

She startled awake, looking first at the girl who had woken her—Hosna Schaefer, one of her wing-mates—then at her desk, where she was dismayed to see that a pool of drool had accrued.

"Oh, so you *were* asleep," the girl said. "Sorry, I was just stopping by to chat. But if you're sleeping…"

"No, no, it's okay," Asami said, rubbing her head and wondering, not for the first time, what good TacComps were if they wouldn't wake you in situations like this. Yeah, sure, it wasn't an *emergency*, but still…

The other girl sat on her bed, and watched her as she turned laboriously in her chair. She smiled slightly.

"So how's the boyfriend?" Hosna asked straightforwardly.

"I don't *have* a boyfriend," Asami said automatically, the habit ingrained into her now.

"Girlfriend, then."

"I told you girls…"

Asami let her voice trail off. Yes, maybe she had been a little too obvious about it the past few days, but for everyone to grill her on it like this—yes, she was quiet and easy to pick on, but was that really an excuse to—

"What do you think about the Cult?" she asked, diverting the topic to something else she had had in mind.

"The Cult?" Hosna repeated, tugging pointlessly on her own braid. "Nothing, really. Oh, no, you're not starting to buy into Jean's nonsense, are you?"

"It would be nice, wouldn't it, to be able to look forward to an afterlife like that?" Asami asked, rhetorically. "But I can't get myself to believe it. Probably for the better."

Hosna stared at her for a moment, then opened her mouth to say "Okay, I guess I'll leave you alone then", before finally clamping her mouth shut and standing up abruptly, looming over Asami.

"Nothing happened, right?" she asked, with a hint of worry. "You sure your gem is okay?"

Asami blinked away her dreamy state, realizing she had accidentally given the wrong impression.

"Oh, no, no, I'm fine," she said. "I was just thinking out loud."

To accentuate her point, she manifested her soul gem in the palm of her hand, showing that it still had a healthy dark purple glow…though perhaps tinged with a little black. She should remember to clean it soon.

The other girl looked at it skeptically.

"You worry the rest of us, sometimes," she said, gently. "I—take care yourself, okay? I picked a bad time. I'll leave you alone. But, you know, we're here for you. I mean, maybe I can get Jean to talk to you, okay?"

With that awkward pronouncement, the girl backed out of the room slowly, still watching her warily.

When the door shut, Asami back onto her desk again, and sighed. Only a day at most until the fleet would go on serious combat duty, and here she was using her break time pining over a girl.

Well, maybe Meiqing would serve as a useful distraction. She should call.

Corridors full of killing and blood, but no screaming. The squid, as far as was known, didn't make any vocalizations worth mentioning. So, no screaming, except in the minds of the telepaths, who took it all stoically.

Events passed in a blur. Had it been possible to ask her, she would have been absolutely sure that something had happened—but completely unable to give any details. Indeed, it would have been valid to question whether they happened at all.

None of this led Ryouko to question the reality of what was around her. Such is the nature of dreams.

When it all faded away, she found herself looking up at an archaic stone edifice, similar to—no, identical *to the back side of the Cult's headquarters.*

Which meant, of course, that she was standing in the middle of a rose garden.

The sky was a blank white—not the white of clouds or the blinding white of a star, but merely white.

She looked down.

The garden was in full bloom, ponderous pink flowers weighing down on thorny branches. That's right: they were all pink, weren't they? Now that she had finally noticed, it astounded her that she hadn't noticed before.

Raising a hand to reach for a flower, she was startled to see that her hand and forearm were drenched in the copper-green ichor of the squid. There was so much of it that it seemed to soak into her very skin, forming darker-green channels wherever her skin folded on itself. It dripped from the ring of her soul gem, and from the sleeve of her costume, and it seemed to her that the color of the ichor and her gem were indistinguishable—though perhaps the ichor had managed to coat the ring itself.

Strangely, even to her, she was far from disgusted. Taking it all in stride, she reached her hand for the flower she was eying, a gorgeous specimen that was so heavy it seemed on the verge of breaking its own branch. Did roses grow like that?

Somehow, despite the deliberate care she took to avoid the thorns, she pricked herself anyway, jerking her hand away violently when the pain came. She crouched to look at the injured finger, where the iron-red blood swirled briefly within the ichor, before the wound sealed itself shut.

A movement in the corner of her eye caught her attention, and looking up, she found that she had

been looking at edge of a white dress, the kind of sun dress a woman might wear while tending her garden. Said woman was looking down on her with a warm expression, and was holding a rose in a her hand, her flower picking exploits having evidently been more successful than Ryouko's.

"Mama?" Ryouko asked, confused that her mother would be here, of all places.

Instead of answering, the woman simply stretched her arms out, smiling.

"Mama!" Ryouko exclaimed, jumping up to embrace the woman, recovering for just a moment the simple emotions of childhood.

She buried her head in the woman's chest for a moment, and when she looked up again, she found the woman looking pensively at the rose in her hand.

"It's probably an overplayed metaphor," she said, "but the flower really does symbolize love quite well. It's a very fickle thing, but in the end I didn't regret it. I might have regretted some choices I made, but I never regretted having you."

Ryouko released the embrace, stepping back from the woman to look her in the face, uncertainty swirling in her mind.

"Who…are you?" she asked, a long moment later.

The woman tilted her head slightly, and smiled, as if humored by the question.

"I am who you think I am," she said.

She bent over so that the two of them were the same height, and Ryouko found herself looking back into the woman's eyes. They looked normal, just like her mother's, just like her own, but she kept finding her gaze drawn back into the black pupils. There, she saw—

"Do you know why they're attacking like this? Does anyone?"

The voice was her own, but she wasn't saying it. It seemed to come from her own memory, but she didn't remember it.

"No," a girl answered, a voice she recognized as Patricia von Rohr. "No one has any idea. They just attack, and we defend. It is one of the mysteries of this war."

Then the voice of Kishida Maki:

"No, I never regretted it. Despite everything, I never regretted it."

In those eyes, she saw—

Her eyes snapped open, and she found herself looking once again at the contours of the real world.

Clarisse! she asked immediately, not even slightly dulled by post-sleep languor. *Did you wake me?*

I did not, Clarisse responded. *I was trying to wait for that dream to end. But now that you're awake, you might as well stay awake. It's almost time for the mission to start.*

Do you have any idea what it means? Ryouko asked.

I have absolutely no idea, Clarisse thought, *and I find it distressing that we're both taking that question seriously. Not that I think it's wrong to do so, considering this is another memory my processing algorithms can't seem to touch.*

Ryouko frowned sharply.

But I'm nowhere near the ribbon, she commented.

I know; I find it disturbing too.

Ryouko thought about that a moment, seated in her bed, then got up decisively, stretching one arm out so CubeBot could climb up onto her shoulder, and using the other to reach for what few personal effects she had taken off the ship.

For better or worse, it was time to go. There was a chance she could direct her questions to the Goddess herself, soon enough.

Piercing the Sky

Chapter Notes

> So this is part one of…three? Maybe four? That will hopefully unwind themselves over the next month or so. I just got tired of not updating.
> Anyway, without realizing it, I made the passage about Erwynmark's future position in chapter 23 very confusing. Mami says:
> "That'd be nice. But since I'll be leading the direct attack, I don't think we should be on the same ship. We shouldn't concentrate leadership. Better if you stay on the Arminius."
> This is supposed to be interpreted to mean Erwynmark will be traveling with the same fleet, but just on a different ship. But it's obvious how that could be interpreted to mean he's somewhere else entirely. I've changed the wording now.

"Once solely the province of science fiction writers, it was the theories of Volokhov, combined with the military use of cortical implants, that first paved the way for the intentional alteration of human and AI consciousness. [Today, the military routinely performs prodigious feats of mind-bending, ranging from the subtle expansion of awareness that comes from military-grade tactical computers, to the mental combat gestalt of Maximal Command Mode, within which the AIs and commanders of a military task force partially fuse their mental states, in order to ensure optimal command and control.]"

"It is Governance that performs the most complicated mental gymnastics, integrating as a matter of course the operations of thousands of individual Representative minds into a greater super-Representative whole, forming a hierarchical pyramid of sentiences representing greater and greater numbers of lesser sentiences, while still allowing these lesser sentiences independence of thought, action, and will. Directorate-level Representatives each represent the opinions of hundreds of thousands of lower-level Representatives, which at the lowest level reflect the opinions and beliefs of actual constituents. It is disturbing, perhaps, to consider the state of human representatives—or indeed, the AIs—installed at any level of the hierarchy. Seemingly enslaved to the opinions of so many others, they still seem resolutely independent."

"The illusion of free will, then, is preserved. Looking at the mathematics, it is easy to see how this is possible, but remove the goggles of theory, and the intuition boggles."

[…]

"According to the equations of Volokhov, consciousness is less of a discrete entity, and more of a fluid, existing across a vast spectrum of possible strengths, and, with the proper tweaking, capable of mergers, splitting, and other feats that are not typically thought of in conjunction with the idea of 'mind'."

"Where the theory runs into perplexity is not within its own edifice, which stands refreshingly paradox-free, but in contact with a truly alien, unexpected development: the idea of souls, introduced by the Incubators. The idea of soul gems carrying "souls"—minds, even, perhaps—as discrete entities runs counter to the grain of the consensus established by Volokhov, and the intersection of the two technologies introduces a host of unsettling questions. What happens to the "soul" of a magical girl installed within the Governance hierarchy? Does her "soul" expand to

cover the underground processing cores that offload computational load? Does it remain distinct somehow? Can the symbiotic advisory AI, fused so directly into the mind of the Representative, influence this "soul"? What of the magical girl's mysterious powers?

[Similar questions apply, of course, to the military.]

Instead of sweeping these issues under the rug, as has been done so far, I think humanity would be better served to study these issues closely, and develop an understanding, before the contradictions introduced by them arise to plague the current system.

—Excerpt, "Volokhov and Soul Gems: What we must study." opinion post to IntSci networked science platform, written for popular consumption. Joanne Valentin, DS Physics, 2445. [] indicates content redacted to those without security clearance.

"Fundamentally, the goal of stealth is always the same. Firstly, any particle or field that passes into the region of the object being stealthed must appear on the other side identical to if it had passed through vacuum or air or whatever the medium of relevance may be. Secondly, the object being stealthed must not emit any additional particles or fields of its own."

"All of this is, of course, far more easily said than done. Any ship traveling through space, for instance, will obviously have a strong need to "see" its surroundings—but even passive sensors must absorb something from the environment, and active sensors are of course much worse. It is theoretically possible to absorb the particle, perform your measurements, then reemit a similar particle out the other end, but this is of course an immense technical challenge, and not completely solved. Further, in certain cases it may be impossible to safely absorb the particle without being detected—numerous stealth detection schemes exist that use quantumly correlated particles as part of the detection framework."

"Further, it is easy to get lost in a discussion of particles and fields, and forget that within star systems starships encounter a much higher density of stellar material, including micrometeorites that may contain a macroscopic number of atoms. Clearly absorption and reemission is out of the question in this case, and the watchful enemy observer may notice the subtle realignment of stellar material. Enemies performing active detection may of course simulate a similar effect with the deployment of vast numbers of microdrones, which serve a similar purpose."

"Even avoiding the spontaneous emission of radiation or material is a severe technical challenge. Every stray internal EM transmission must be brought under control, heat emissions from the engines and passengers must be somehow stored, radiation from decayed exotic matter must be dealt with, and so forth. Further, acceleration of any kind must be very carefully done—conservation of momentum ensures that *something* must be left behind altered, regardless of the propulsion system used, so extreme care must be taken about accelerating in the presence of a watchful enemy."

"All of this must be added to the simple fact that it is impossible to maintain stealth if your ship must pass through a large piece of solid matter or a forcefield. The best fixed defenses will make liberal use of such devices to construct as much of a wall as possible, presenting an obstacle course difficult for even the best stealth ship."

—Excerpt, "Stealth Technology", article from Military Science for the Precocious Child, online magazine

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Ryouko stared at the opposing wall of the room she was seated in, HSS Raven's spherical stealth generator chamber. She could have had it play some entertainment for her, but she wasn't quite in

the mood for that.

They were in transit to the planet Orpheus, traveling at around 90% light speed for stealth reasons, a journey that would take about a half-hour, from their perspective. She supposed she should have been apprehensive, but instead found herself introspective, thinking back to the conversations she had had over the past day.

Closing her eyes, she visualized part of a conversation with her mother.

"I didn't raise you this old just for you to die on me!"

"I know, mama."

"This quickly, and they're already sending you on 'special missions'. I should have known. When I get my hands on—and that damned sister of mine—"

"Mama, grandpapa wanted me to give you his regards."

Her mother clenched her eyes shut, seeming to impose a measure of calm on herself.

"I know," she said, after taking a deep breath. "I'll tell you the same thing I told him. Just stay alive. That's all I want. This family and its insatiable—"

Ryouko opened her eyes, frowning. She had realized something.

"Don't die, okay?"

"Come back alive, okay?"

She had heard variations of that phrase over and over, almost since she had contracted, from sources as disparate as her psychiatrist, a distant ancestor, and a would-be lover. It gave her the distinct impression that she'd be letting a lot of people down if she died on this mission.

You know, I've been thinking, Clarisse began.

Ryouko leaned backward, resting her head against the polished white surface that covered the interior of the ship, one of the pieces of modular furniture that were scattered ubiquitously around Raven, waiting to be summoned for usage.

About what? Ryouko asked, finally.

If there really is a Goddess of magical girls, Clarisse thought, *then it seems rather unfair that upon death, you get to go to some sort of afterlife, and I'm going to end up rotting here.*

Ryouko thought about that. Over the past few weeks, she had grown increasingly convinced as to Clarisse's sentience. At the same time, she didn't feel as if she had truly internalized the fact. It was something she knew intellectually, then proceeded to ignore as she lived her life.

A rather disturbing image flitted across the surface of her mind: herself, soul gem shattered, with Clarisse still alive in the remains. Was that even possible?

She shuddered, slightly.

Does it bother you? she asked Clarisse. *There are religions that grant an immortal soul to AIs.*

Yes, but this one seems to have actual evidence *for it*, Clarisse thought, brushing past her point. *I don't mind dying. I just don't like how unfair it would be.*

That's an…interesting way of looking at it. Of course, all this afterlife stuff is mostly speculation. From what I understand, it derives mostly from some statements Akemi Homura may have made once. I wouldn't think about it too hard.

When Clarisse didn't respond, Ryouko blinked, looking around her to see if anything had changed. Nothing had. Mohammad Berriman was still seated in a chair in the middle of the chamber, seemingly staring intently at the roughly four-meter cubical box in front him which controlled the ship's stealth systems. At the moment, the side of the box was impassively grey, Mohammad choosing to use an internal interface rather than the external visual display, so it appeared as if he were staring at nothing at all.

Ryouko was far too used to that sort of behavior to find it strange.

Seeing her looking, Juliet Francois stepped away from Mohammad, who she had been impassively looming over. The girl walked over towards Ryouko, her thoughts radiating a sort of quiet confidence. Everything was fine, she was implying.

A set of furniture blocks moved themselves next to Ryouko's seat, shaping themselves into an extension that would turn her simple chair into something resembling a park bench.

Juliet sat down next to her on the newly assembled bench. Ryouko found them looking at each other, the other girl's hazel eyes level with her own green. Using her telepathy, the girl transmitted a brief wave of concern.

I'm fine, Ryouko thought.

The other girl continued to stare at her.

Really, Ryouko insisted.

Juliet shrugged, and began stroking her braided ponytail, which she had thrown over one shoulder.

I'm sure someone has asked this before, Ryouko thought, *and I'm sorry if I'm being rude, but is there a reason you don't ever speak?*

The other girl looked at her out of the corner of her eye, appraisingly. She seemed to be making some sort of decision.

Finally, Juliet thought:

Gracia says you have internal turmoil. Not at peace. We've asked; they say you've had a vision, yet you have not joined us. Gracia says you think about the Goddess. And that your TacComp is different. Like a second mind. Very confusing.

The words came out awkwardly, tersely, and a bit hesitantly, as if she were performing a task she hadn't done in a long while.

Ryouko's reaction to Juliet's words must have shown on her face, because Juliet added:

Teams like this, the telepath often acts as MHD surveillance officer. She is concerned about you. And naturally, we are very curious about the Goddess. She also says…that the texture of your thoughts is strange. Secret for now, but we want to ask—

Juliet paused for a moment, wearing one of her common impassive faces, one Ryouko had

difficulty ever reading.

—Are you hiding something about this mission? A revelation? If it bothers you, perhaps we could help you understand it.

Ryouko felt a moment, but only a moment, of quiet rage at the unwarranted intrusion into her thoughts.

Then she took a quiet breath, reminding herself that she learned to expect as much, in close company with a telepath, and that over the course of their training, she had come to regard the telepath Gracia and the always-quiet Juliet as friends. The two of them had reminded her of old-style nuns during the quiet prayer ceremony they had held earlier, in a way Clarisse and Mina had failed to achieve.

I don't know any more about this mission than you do, Ryouko thought, finally. *I've received visions, yes. But none of them tell me anything about what's going on here.*

Visions? Juliet repeated back to her. *You've had more than one?*

Ryouko mentally reviewed the syntax of her last sentence. Yes, "visions"—that was what she had said.

Damn Standard and its declensions! she thought, even though she knew very well that telepathy carried no ambiguity, regardless of what surface language was used.

There were multiple parts to my vision, Ryouko amended. *None of them were particularly enlightening.*

It was technically true, after all.

Juliet frowned, her emotions conveying a sense of thoughtfulness.

Want to share? We could interpret together. We could get van Rossum. She's an expert, perhaps glad to help.

The girl seemed to hesitate more than usual on the last sentence, casting her eyes downward. Was she…embarrassed?

Ryouko frowned in turn, wondering if she should actually consider it, but then the bench she was sitting on began to grow longer still, pieces assembling to create yet more space on Ryouko's left.

She looked up just as Clarisse sat down, clearly intent on joining the silent conversation.

In my experience, there is no consistent manner in which a vision should be interpreted, the historian thought, without any prelude. *Sometimes they are extremely symbolic, other times extremely literal. Sometimes the Goddess just tells you what she wants directly, without any rigmarole. And of course visions of the future don't always come true, or else there'd be much less of a point in sending them. It should also be noted that not all visions are of the future. Some are of the present, some are of the past, and some show things that could never possibly have happened.*

Deciding not to comment on the fact that the telepathic conversation had been *private*, Ryouko turned to face Clarisse, trying to ignore Juliet, whose expression was suddenly so wide-eyed her eyes seemed in danger of falling out.

Do you think mine will come true, then? Ryouko asked.

It's difficult to say, Clarisse said. *If preventing it were as simple as giving a warning, it is difficult to see why it was given so indirectly. It would have been far more trivial to give the warning to Kyouko-chan herself, during one of her trips to the Ribbon.*

Clarisse paused to think, as Ryouko chewed on the casually dropped *Kyouko-chan*, complete with Japanese honorific.

Of course, it's possible the Goddess was just trying to kill two birds with one stone, so to speak. After all, I doubt that was the only important thing about the vision.

Clarisse gave her a knowing look, allowing Ryouko to wonder just how much the historian actually knew. It could have been an easy deduction on her part: Ryouko had pretty clearly been holding back during the Theological Council meeting. On the other hand, something about Clarisse's tone seemed to suggest it went deeper than that—was this more mind-reading? Or had she simply "overheard" Ryouko's admission earlier that her vision had had multiple parts?

I can't believe I let that slip! Ryouko thought.

You know, she could be reading your thoughts right now, the TacComp Clarisse pointed out. *Heck, she could be reading* my *thoughts. There is precedent for telepaths pulling information out of version one TacComps, much less version twos.*

Ryouko cringed internally, realizing that it was a good point

I don't think I like telepaths, she thought. *And yes, I know she can probably hear that too.*

As a community, telepaths don't really believe in privacy, the historian Clarisse thought, turning her head away from Ryouko to face the opposing bulkhead. *It's part of the culture. But enough about that. As long as you believe none of your visions pertain to this mission, then you don't have to discuss it now, though I'd love to hear about it later, if there's time. Actually, I'm not just here to mind-read and chat.*

With a violet shimmer, Clarisse's legendary "Tome of Memories" appeared in her hands, eliciting a gasp from Juliet and a jerk of surprise from Ryouko.

This is always awkward, Clarisse thought. *But since I have good reason to suspect I'm the most likely to survive this mission, I've been asking everyone involved in the mission if they want their memories stored with me. You know, just in case.*

Ryouko and Juliet stared at her, and then she continued:

There's no pressure, just to be clear. I'd be glad to perform the operation in case of...well, permanent death, but given the nature of the mission there might not be time. It's totally up to you, but if you have any secrets you might not want me to know, then…you probably shouldn't. And it's pretty intimate, psychologically speaking.

For a moment, Ryouko thought she saw a predatory gleam in Clarisse's eyes, but before she could decide if it was real or not, it vanished.

I'm okay, Ryouko thought. *Thanks for the offer, though.*

It occurred to her then to wonder whether memories of visions could be conveyed that way.

"I'd be glad to," Juliet said, and it took Ryouko a moment to realize that the girl had, improbably, said it out loud.

Clarisse nodded.

“Very well,” she said. “Stand up.”

As the girl scrambled to follow the command, Clarisse raised her hand, her soul gem ring glowing slightly.

Just as Ryouko realized what was happening, Clarisse transformed, a burst of brilliant violet light traveling outward from the ring and radiating through the rest of her body, replacing her clothing with the elaborate lacy formal dress and cap that constituted her magical girl costume.

“I need a bit more power to perform the procedure,” she explained.

She stretched forward with her hand, reaching for what appeared to be Juliet’s chest, then seemed to think better of it, casting a glance in Ryouko’s direction.

Clarisse’s whispered something under her breath, and Ryouko noted something appearing on the girl’s head—

With that, both Clarisse and Juliet vanished, leaving Ryouko blinking.

Palladis auxiliis invoco, her TacComp noted helpfully. *Strange that it’d be in Latin, but I believe she summoned a form of invisibility.*

Why though? Ryouko thought.

She didn’t have long to wait for an answer; Clarisse reappeared a short while afterward with a startled looking Juliet, who was clutching her heart and breathing a little heavily.

“I figured some privacy would be called for,” Clarisse explained to Ryouko. “You sure you’re not up to it? It’s quite painless.”

“I’m pretty sure,” Ryouko said—an understatement.

Ryouko looked up at the ceiling, checking the mission time. Soon they would enter their pre-determined trajectory around Orpheus, engines silent for maximum stealth. They would wait until an exploitable opportunity in the alien defenses appeared or, if that failed to occur soon enough, make their move anyway.

Right now there was nothing to do but wait, and hope.

On board the HSS Georgy Konstantinovich Zhukov, Mami let out a breath.

Within a simulation there was no reason to breathe, of course, but it still seemed like the natural thing to do. Unlike the practice runs she had participated in earlier, there would be no preliminary discussion with the other commanders, no conversations reviewing various aspects of the upcoming operation, no social banter. The commanders of the other fleets knew what they were supposed to do, and they knew when to do it.

Mami’s fleet was the most conspicuous, sticking out like a sore thumb, assembling so much force in such a relatively small area of space that the squid couldn’t help but notice—so much force that, indeed, they couldn’t have concealed it even if they had been trying to.

The element of surprise was reserved for the other fleets, Gul’s fleet divided between the system’s

asteroid belt and Oort cloud, and Anand's fleet gathering in the depths of space. True, it wasn't expected that their attacks would *succeed*, but that didn't mean they had to be stupid about it.

Because of that, there would be no direct communication, not until the attacks had developed and mutual radio silence was pointless.

Roland Erwynmark materialized at her side, as she stood brooding in her virtuality, the Kepler-37 system hanging in space in front of her like so many toys in front of a child.

"IntOps reports that Raven is approaching start position," Erwynmark said, peering at her from the corner of his eye. "According to the schedule, it is time to start, Mami."

Mami closed her eyes for a moment.

"I know," she said.

With a thought, the scale of the simulation changed, and she now stood among her own fleet, her virtual avatar hovering like a ghost within the core of her battle formation: Euphratic Sector Fleets I through VII, arrayed in the rarely-used Drill formation, a sharp V-shaped cone that was field manual approved for offensive fleet operations, as opposed to the more common C-shaped Shield formation that was seen in defensive operations.

Both sides were heavily reliant on their capital ships, but the human fleet was vulnerable to flanking by the faster alien bomber fleets, so they had to rely on formation to protect their battlecruisers, rather than simply fly interceptors around wherever necessary, as the aliens did. On the offense, however, the battlecruisers had to be able to close in on their targets, so the Drill placed the battlecruisers near the tip, with a very heavy concentration of cruisers, frigates, and so forth in front, forming the point of the spear. By bending the frontal plane back into a cone, the battlecruisers were given a maximum range of possible targets to choose from; a battlecruiser's most powerful weapon, the SHERMAN cannon, was spinally-mounted, and could only fire forward. On the other hand, the V made it more difficult for segments of the plane to support each other. Mami's own First Fleet had place of honor at the spearpoint, and the other fleets were arrayed at various locations along the cone, but for the battlecruisers this was a complete abstraction, since they had been mostly detached and shifted into the tip.

Mami took another breath. Erwynmark was right: it was time.

She broadened the horizons of her mind, using her Field Marshal's cortical implants to stretch her perceptions wide, drawing into herself the processing of Machina, the thrumming power of HSS Zhukov, the rhythms of her fleet. She allowed herself to listen in, for just a moment:

Squadron E-6—Avenging Angels—*in standby positions, members report nominal—*

Reactor power at 400% baseline, indicators green—

"What are they doing up there? Why aren't we moving? My thrusters itch!"

"Your thrusters do not 'itch'. Calm down. I, for one, am not in such a hurry to die. I have family, you know."

"You have backups! Any more talk like that, and they'll retire you."

"As if—"

"I hope Mami knows what she's doing."

“I hope any *of us know what we’re doing.”*

“Fair enough—“

In the distance, she sensed Erwynmark and the other admirals of the seven fleets doing the same as her, settling into command on board their respective ships, taking control of various aspects of fleet operation. No sense in having other flag officers in the area, even on observation, if they weren’t going to be used.

Her awareness of the world expanded, the implants gently releasing the strictures of her merely human perception—those strictures that, for better or worse, applied to magical girls as well. Instead of seeing only what was in front of her, her field of view widened, reaching around her, so that she could “see” in every direction. She grew gradually aware of events far distant from her, of Apollo and Artemis’s orbital defenses and remaining ships huddling into desperate defensive positions, of tens of millions of ground troops and colonial militia fortifying, bracing themselves for what was to come. Only the other fleets—Gul’s and Anand’s task forces—stayed out of her awareness, the need for radio silence inhibiting communication.

With the sensors of seven fleets, she saw the electromagnetic emissions of the world around her—radio, infrared, ultraviolet, X-ray, gamma—the colors of the spectrum, augmented by the subtleties of wave polarization and single-photon effects, revealing unimaginable forms of sensory perception. The throbbing of the fleet’s FTL drives, the flexing of space-time around them, the Field Theory that underpinned it all—she understood it not with a painfully-learned physicists’ grasp of the world, but at a deep instinctual level, as the ships of her fleet did.

In the depths of her mind, she felt something fundamental shifting, pieces of her personality rearranging around something new. Slowly, she began to regard the constituents of the fleet not merely as tools as her disposal, but as limbs of her body. Erwynmark thought, and commanded—Zhukov thought, and commanded—Machina thought, and commanded—and it became difficult to separate their actions from her own.

Mami knew many officers who were almost addicted to Maximal Command Mode, the mode only used by senior officers of a fleet in combat, that a simulation only approximated. Many waxed almost rapturous about this kind of expanded perception, this sense of being part of a greater whole—but, personally, she could hardly think about it without shuddering. She hardly felt human anymore.

But that was a secondary consideration, the idle wanderings of only a small part of her consciousness. There were more important things to attend to.

Across the fleet, a sense of expectation emerged, as AIs ran final checks, officers braced themselves in their command chairs, and chatter died down. Even without a formal command, the mood of the higher officers easily percolated downward, all the way down to the fighter pilots being told to pull closer to the larger ships.

Finally, the formal countdown started, ships accelerating, matching velocities, warming up their FTL engines. Throughout the fleet, human officers, gunners, and pilots activated their combat modes, accelerating the pace of their thoughts, so that the tick of the passing seconds seemed to stretch into eternity.

BEGIN

Rather than springing from any one source, this single monumental command seemed to come from the fleet itself, millions of individual chronometers reaching the designated moment.

With no need for stealth, the fleet could move as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, not only were they constrained by the need to reach the alien defenses at a combat speed below the speed of light, their ability to accelerate and decelerate, especially for the larger battlecruisers, was rather constrained. As such, the trip was a nerve-wracking ten minute affair, spent within the enormous collective fleet FTL shell. The impracticality of FTL combat made it unlikely they would be intercepted halfway *en route*, before they reached the fixed defenses and FTL interdiction that would make it impossible to continue, but it couldn't be entirely ruled out.

The planet Orpheus began to loom larger and larger within her field of vision. The fleet was already decelerating. Soon they would reach optimal exit distance, the FTL shell would dissolve, and the aliens would be waiting.

But first—

As they approached the exit point, speeds dropping, a massive wave of alien "Raptor" missiles entered the shell, ramming straight into their approach. Carrying cheap FTL drives, the missiles were capable of independent FTL travel and, more importantly in this context, capable of entering other FTL shells without being shoved aside. With a relative speed greater than the speed of light, the length-contracted missiles would pass straight through the fleet in a matter of seconds, but that wasn't the point. The point was what they intended to run into on the way. Firing a single Raptor at a single FTL ship was tantamount to wasting a missile on a practically guaranteed miss—firing a wall of Raptors into a fleet was another thing entirely, given that the core of said fleet had a ship density of greater than one ship every ten square kilometers. Further, the explosive charge of the average Raptor, already quite potent, would now be nearly meaningless in comparison to the sheer kinetic energy its mass would carry in their reference frame.

Of course, this was standard tactics for the aliens, whose Raptor missiles served as a constant reminder of the relative infancy of human FTL technology, which could in no way afford the expense of placing a FTL drive on a self-destructing missile.

Knowing from painful experience that the Raptors would be coming, the fleet had already deployed countermeasures, in the form of its own preceding wave of counter-missiles, and a phalanx of mines, drones, and other point defenses.

There was a moment of blinding crossfire, as the missiles from both sides slammed together in a devastating relativistic firestorm, fast even by the standards of Mami's accelerated thoughts. Cataclysmic amounts of energy poured outward, filling the EM spectrum with activity.

Minor damage to ship sector 10-K, Zhukov thought. *Damage control en route.*

Mami did not feel pain—that would have been counterproductive. Still, the ship and personnel losses ate at her viscerally, and she felt her awareness shrink, just a little.

Forty-four thousand, the human part of her thought. *My God, and we're just getting started.*

Seconds later, the FTL shell dissolved, and the battle began in earnest, the formation of the fleet smashing into the wall of missiles, lasers, and projectiles emanating from the alien defenders, their own weapons answering, so that the plane of impact became a wall of fire and roiling chaos.

Hundreds of thousands of frigates and millions of droneships twisted and weaved their way through the chaos, seeking to evade, deflect, or destroy the incoming rain of death. The cruisers and light carriers unloaded their defensive magazines, their MC complements helping them to stand like rocks against the stormy sea.

The overall speed of the formation slowed to a crawl, so that there was no longer any need to

consider relativistic effects when examining the front as a whole, but for the smallest ships, many of which were traveling at a substantial fraction of the speed of light relative to the larger ships, it was a matter of life and death. Traveling fast made you hard to hit, but it also made your own targeting difficult—and you did *not* want to run into anything, including the ubiquitous enemy self-sacrifice drones. At relativistic speeds, the only remotely realistic targets were the ships of cruiser size and up—everything else, you had to match speeds with if you wanted to do anything to them, which of course made you *their* target as well. To counter interceptors, the larger ships deployed prodigious amounts of firepower, coupled with almost literal walls of flak and drones.

The Magi Caeli operated by slightly different rules, of course.

In the opening stages of a battle, battlecruisers were usually at far too great a distance from the enemy's capital ships and fixed defenses to inflict direct damage on critical targets. Every battlecruiser longed, deep down its AI heart, for the satisfaction of shattering enemy capital ships with brutal frontal firepower—but in practice, they spent most of their time as they would now, shaping the battlefield with their FTL interdiction, directing the flow of battle with their onboard fire control, and serving as a threatening source of firepower that must be either avoided or neutralized. From within them, the field marshals, admirals and commodores of the seven fleets, as well as the AIs of the ships themselves, choreographed the battlefield—shifting reserve forces, reinforcing battered parts of the line, withdrawing badly damaged ships, adjusting frigate attack formations, and otherwise performing the myriad functions of command, often in direct mental consultation with the ships and captains involved.

The fleet's battlecruisers fired, SHERMAN projectiles barreling through temporary gaps that opened and closed in the human lines, precisely for that purpose. Properly configured, their exotic matter cores ravaged and tore at the fabric of local space-time, disabling FTL drive usage in the area for as much as twenty minutes at a time, an eternity in a battle such of this. Fifteen battlecruisers in one fleet formation easily ranked among the densest concentrations of human capital ships ever deployed, and the battery of their fire changed the complexion of the battle. Some projectiles attacked the flanks of the alien deployment, seeking to delay and disrupt the inevitable flanking counterattacks. Others tore into the heart of the alien fleet, disrupting entire incoming waves of squid bombers and Raptor missiles, some arriving from as far away as the moons of Orpheus themselves, from the heavy missile batteries that had spent the past weeks sprouting like mushrooms within the alien fixed defenses. Mami knew that if she could be there to see the detonations in person, she would see a night sky torn into a nightmare of impossible distortions, shattered and filled with hard radiation of every kind, streaked by a thousand ships distorted by the effects of their own speed.

The alien battlecruisers in the area responded, their gamma ray Eviscerator laser cannons carving angry swaths through the human fleet. Battlecruisers were not the centerpiece of the alien fleet, instead acting primarily as planetary bombardment and defense of last resort, but they were appreciably more powerful than the human equivalent—fortunately, there were only three of them.

She oversaw it all, shadowing the staccato, fever-pitched tenor of internal communications like a ghost. They were still far from the wormhole stabilizer, and the aliens kept the majority of their forces near the moon itself. Cannily, the aliens hadn't fallen for the trap of moving their forces preemptively outward, to counter the obvious human attack under preparation. However, since they hadn't, their outer defenses were vulnerable and at a clear numerical disadvantage. Mami needed to punish them for that, by inflicting as much damage as she could during the brief period it would take for the alien inner defenses to reorganize and move out. Now that they had been able to directly confirm the scale of the alien outer defense, the battle simulations being run by the battlecruisers were very positive—the aliens were seriously outnumbered and outgunned, and pinned against something they *had* to defend. Without reinforcements, it seemed like they could

be ground to dust.

But of course reinforcements would come. They had to. Mami was counting on it, after all.

As the first alien bomber waves crashed into the fleet's outer defenses, Mami allowed herself a moment to focus on the battlecruisers…

…1219-4.193-0.74. Firing. 1184-4.02-0.80. Firing. Target of opportunity: 1379-3.91-0.81, Cruiser, Designation Number: 2931. Firing. Disabled. 1201-3.87-0.79. Firing…

…Sector Epsilon-Nu-13 taking unexpected losses, HSS Manfred von Richthofen scramble reserve interceptor squadrons 17, 18, 19, 20, MC squadron 7,8 to sector…

…HSS Ludwig van Beethoven confirmed lost. HSS Qiu Ying shift position. HSS Eugène Delacroix attempting withdrawal. HSS Haile Selassie reporting energy reserves down to 6.7%/critical…

…HSS Robert Hackworth reports: MC losses, 15%; MC recovered, 10%; Interceptor losses, 43%...

Even abstracting intership communication to natural language introduced inevitable losses of meaning, and it was impossible for her, even in her expanded state, to possibly digest all of it. While battlecruisers out of combat were perfectly happy to socialize with each other using their human personalities, in-combat communication involved the mutual transmission of unfathomable amounts of data, the even more unfathomable real-time processing of said data, and a level of mental combat coordination that simply was not meant for human minds to handle. It was only in the regions of her mind directly connected to Zhukov, the regions where the distinction between her and him grew indistinct, that she could handle all that was going on, that she could make decisions with a true understanding of the situation, and while the tradition of the human military was to credit battlefield decisions to the human generals, it could not be honestly said that decisions were made by either her or Zhukov, but only perhaps by an amalgamation of both.

Blink cannon discharge, partially mitigated, Zhukov thought. *Forcefield absorption: 35%. Forcefield energy reserves: -9.3% to 90.7% of combat capacity; status: stable. Sector 26-G: lost. 26-H: major damage. 25-G: major damage 26-F: minor damage. 27-G: minor damage. Power generation reduced by 5% to 95% of combat level. Estimated personnel losses: 550±15.*

Blink cannon discharge, partially mitigated, Zhukov began again. *Forcefield—*

Were Mami still wearing a human avatar, she would have grimaced. All across the human fleet, in otherwise well-protected locations, alien nuclear and antimatter devices were appearing out of thin air—or rather, hard vacuum—and detonating, taking a grim toll on critical light carriers, battlecruiser systems, MC deployments, and other convenient targets. The most valuable of all alien capital ships, the blink cannons, were making their appearance, as expected. It just showed that they weren't going to be fooling around—but of course, that was obvious, and entirely expected.

Current estimated fleetwide casualties: 160,000. Current loss rate: 550 sentients per second.

A small part of Mami's consciousness—5%, she could report, with Yuma-like precision—cringed at that. It was easier if she thought of those not as people, but as a statistic. After all, the battle had barely begun, and for a fleet of this size, those casualties were hardly meaningful. Downright unthreatening, actually, considering that the alien bomber fleets and flank attacks had thus far failed to make significant progress, running aground on a veritable wall of firepower from her fleet's frigate line, dying by the tens of thousands inside specially planned MC kill lanes. None of

the tactics were novel, or unusually effective—the alien outer defenses were simply too weak, and as a consequence, they were failing to inflict enough damage on her fleet, unable to stop the forward momentum of her battle line.

She pressed onward, driving the wedge of her fleet deeper into the alien defenses. Yes, it was necessary that she keep casualties down, because it wasn't expected that this attack would succeed—but if she wanted the aliens to pull their reserves away from the wormhole stabilizer, she had to at least make a good show of it. And that meant threatening to do some major damage.

Communications had been opened again with the other two task forces. Things were going about as expected, perhaps even better than expected. Alien forces had already appeared to challenge Admiral Gul, whose asteroids were making good progress through the system. Fleet Admiral Anand had even managed to achieve tactical surprise, and had had a good run of blowing up transports before the arrival of alien reinforcements. Still, the reinforcements had arrived rather quickly; here, the alien strategy—keeping their reserve intact and ready, instead of responding preemptively to gaudy threats of force from Mami's fleet—paid off, allowing them to much more easily limit the amount of damage Anand could inflict.

Even so, long-distance scanners were showing that alien fleet density near Orpheus proper was starting to thin, as the aliens began mobilizing units to counter the various threats—the trend, at least, was good.

Mami allowed her personality to dissolve even further, settling deeper into the battle. Right now wasn't the time for high-level rumination—not yet, anyway. Right now was simply the doing.

The alien bomber waves were not penetrating deep enough to be threatening, and multiple attacks on their flanks had petered out without even breaking the frigate line, much less the cruiser line. The alien's outer fleet defenses simply hadn't brought enough to the party to stop them. Not with a full fifteen battlecruisers in play. The battlecruisers were now much deeper in the alien fleet and had mostly run out of interdiction targets, alien bomber power being too weak to be worth devoting much attention to. Consequently, they were now free to fusillade the alien ships directly. Even with their advanced forcefield technology, alien frigates were not a match for battlecruiser firepower, and the cruisers, coming under direct pressure from human droneships, missile waves, and MC infiltration squads, were not faring much better.

The casualty numbers in Mami's consciousness continued to climb, doubling, tripling, quadrupling, but not disproportionally. Even as a statistic, a million in casualties was hard to stomach, but it was entirely appropriate for a battle of this scale.

Instead, she was now watching other numbers: ship count, estimated alien ship count, abstracted fleet strength. The last set of numbers had at the beginning of the battle indicated that aliens had a slight chance of prevailing without reinforcements, but that possibility was now clearly extinguished, as alien strength began to plummet appreciably. More importantly, the relative balance of power was clearly favoring them more and more, and the combat simulations were indicating that if the aliens wanted to preserve their outer fixed defenses on this side of the planet, reinforcements were clearly called for. Human bombers—a rare experimental novelty, still quite flimsy compared to the alien equivalent—were even starting to conduct bombing runs on the orbital defense of the nearest of Orpheus's moons, hoping to take out some of the Raptor missile batteries.

Come on, you bastards, Erwynmark thought, on-board the Arminius, the thought percolating over to her. *Come on. What are you waiting for? This is the moment. You either reinforce, or you withdraw. You cannot hold here.*

Even the alien battlecruisers were coming under fire now, moving forward to buy time for the

more important capital ships. Their forcefields were stupendously powerful, and their Eviscerator lasers were very painful. They would only fall under the weight of extremely heavy firepower, and the effort of all branches of the fleet.

Neither Mami nor Erwynmark bothered giving the order explicitly, though their thoughts may have conveyed the idea implicitly. Either way, the battlecruisers of Fleets I through VII, some of them 18-year-veterans, the oldest in the fleet, knew what to do, moving in for the kill.

Long-distance sensors are reporting that significant portions of the alien fleet defenses near the wormhole stabilizer are moving out, prepping for FTL transit, Erwynmark commented, even though they both already knew, and there was no need for a human mode of communication.

Yes, Mami thought.

It's working, Erwynmark thought.

Yes, Mami thought again, and though she was reticent, she felt a glimmer of long-suppressed hope starting to rise. The situation resembled their successful simulations far more than their failures.

We're not there yet, though, she thought.

Yes, Erwynmark thought. *Before they get here, let's do what we can.*

The battlecruisers of the fleet moved into range of one of the alien battlecruisers simultaneously, careful not to present an obvious target. The longer-range Eviscerator cannons opened fired immediately, spearing one of the battlecruisers—Erwynmark's. Mami glanced at the damage:

Eviscerator impact, minimally mitigated, Arminius thought. *Forcefield absorption: 10%. Forcefield energy reserves: -40% to 50% of combat capacity; status: recovering. Sectors 15-18 lost. SHERMAN cannon firing energy reduced by 10% to 90% of combat level. Power generation reduced by 5%. Estimated personnel losses: 3000±50.*

Damn it, Erwynmark thought.

Following standard procedure, the Arminius began to withdraw, not because it was critically wounded, but to force the alien ship to choose other targets, to distribute the damage. It didn't really take fifteen battlecruisers to take down an alien ship, once they got within range.

When they finally got within range of *their* cannons, the battlecruisers opened fire. There was a brief minute of furious firing, the enormous kinetic energy of the SHERMAN projectiles combining with their disintegrating exotic matter to tear at the astoundingly powerful alien forcefield, which held, and held, and held, until it finally could hold no more, buckling under the force, giving them all the satisfaction of seeing an alien capital ship break up under their cannons.

The aliens had extracted their price, though—half the human battlecruisers had wounds to lick, and the fleet had lost a displeasing amount of smaller ships. Though the damage was relatively minor, there would undoubtedly be more of it as they hunted down and destroyed the two remaining alien battlecruisers.

That unpleasant thought, though, was banished by:

Heavy carrier, Designation Number: 2, confirmed severely damaged. Unlikely to survive further combat.

Some of their stealth frigates had gotten through, and their MC teams had done their jobs, the news having only trickled back slowly; the knowledge had to be acquired by sensor scan, since

the teams themselves would be seeking new targets, and would not return until the battle was nearly over. Now the heavy carrier, one of the most valuable of the alien capital ships, was dead in space, having apparently undergone catastrophic exotic matter containment failure. With elements of the human fleet closing in, it was already being abandoned.

Though it wasn't quite appropriate yet, Mami allowed herself a moment of triumph, as the fleet reorganized itself into a defense posture to meet the expected alien reinforcements which, according to estimates, were more than powerful enough to force them back, consisting of no less than at least ten heavy carriers, seven blink cannons, 7 battlecruisers, and accompanying escorts.

But that, of course, was expected. They just had to hold out until the stabilizer was—hopefully!—destroyed, and it would all work out.

Mami surveyed the situation, feeling a tiny bit of satisfaction. Even in their defensive posture, elements of the fleet were still pursuing the retreating fleet they had just defeated, and other elements—the relatively untouched Fleets III and V, which had been holding the far flanks—had left formation—doing their best to smash the defenses on one of Orpheus's moons. In the bigger picture, not that significant, but it sure *felt* good.

No, Erwynmark thought, and it was the sudden darkness of his tone, strange to say, that first tipped Mami off that something was wrong.

Then the information entered her mind too.

Long-range sensors reported sudden gravimetric anomalies emanating from the alien wormhole stabilizer. While small in magnitude, they were rapidly growing larger, and while superficially resembling the test runs they had seen earlier, were substantially more complex, peaking at much higher distortion levels and attaining much higher oscillation frequencies.

No, she echoed, because honestly she didn't know what other response was appropriate. *It can't be! They can't be* that *ahead in construction! It must be another test!*

Their attention now focused heavily on the long-range sensor reports. The anomalies showed no signs of shrinking or even plateauing, only growing stronger and stronger. The kinds of readings had never been recorded near any natural object, unless one counted unreliable astronomical observations of black holes. In fact, the last time anything similar had been recorded was near the functioning wormhole stabilizer in the Saharan Sector, destroyed by Erwynmark all those years ago.

The conclusion was obvious—obvious enough that most of their focus immediately switched back to the fleet, to their communication channels with Gul and Anand, to hold an emergency meeting. They had planned for this contingency, but it had been considered unlikely enough that they planned…well, only a little.

Only a small part of Mami's consciousness—6%, to be exact—continued to watch the progress of the stabilizer in horror. The crust of the moon under the wormhole stabilizer shifted slightly, but it was doubtful the aliens cared. The anomalies—the *oscillations*—became more focused, sharper. In fact, if one drew a diagram of what they looked like, it could be seen that the gravitationally distorted area seemed to be emanating from the almost fully-constructed ring atop the wormhole stabilizer, forming a cone shape that stretched upwards, seeming to terminate in orbital space. There, at the tip, a single anomaly of unprecedented strength was forming, growing stronger, exceeding anything that had ever been seen.

And, finally, the tear, as—it was guessed, they weren't really sure—space-time itself sheared under the strain, and the single anomaly grew in a single burst, reaching the size of a full shipyard.

It stabilized, and calmed, appearing now exactly as the wormhole had at the Saharan stabilizer.

Through the wormhole, she could see stars on the other side.

The first alien reinforcements, the *real* reinforcements, began arriving only seconds later.

Then, the news arrived that major alien fleets had been spotted approaching the planets of Apollo and Artemis. This news, which before would have been proof that the aliens had fallen completely for the human plan, arrived with all the bitter aftertaste of biting into what should have been a sweet apple, and instead finding a rotten core.

The aliens had waited for them to commit their fleets, then sprung *their* trap.

Blood and Ichor

Chapter Notes

> Chapter 27 will be slower, since that one's not completely written yet, unlike this one, which awaited only revision

"In the decades since the original Cephalopodan incursions, much has been learned about the aliens' physiology, nearly all of it from the dissection of alien corpses, due to the stubborn alien refusal to submit to live capture, as well as the seeming impenetrability of the encryption protecting alien data cores."

"Despite the common nickname 'squid', the Cephalopods are in fact far more similar to octopuses than to squid, resembling squid only in elements of the layout of their grasping forelimbs. While any analogy between terrestrial animals and sentient aliens is bound to be flawed, the aliens share substantial superficial and deep similarities with octopuses. In terms of appearance, alien skin has a similar, rubbery texture, the eyes and the head strongly resemble the common octopus, and the prehensile forelimb tentacles behave much like their terrestrial counterpart. This resemblance is further reinforced by a set of tentacles that ring the mouth, believed to be useful for feeding."

"Perhaps the most striking similarity between alien and octopus is in the nervous system, which anatomical studies have found to be substantially decentralized compared to terrestrial vertebrates, leading, among other things, to the common military knowledge that a Cephalopod's body will often continue resisting even after disconnection from its head. [Indeed, it is speculated that the decentralized processing nodes, a notable feature of alien implanted enhancements [upon which elements of the design of the TacComp v2 were based]***, is [itself]*** based upon alien studies of their own physiology.]"

"The similarities between the Cephalopods and octopuses end abruptly, however. While anatomical evidence strongly suggests that the Cephalopods evolved from an ocean-dwelling organism, their physiology carries numerous adaptations necessary for survival on land. Microscopic scales covering the skin prevent desiccation, the eye membranes do not resemble those of octopuses, a set of ear holes has appeared on the head and, of course, any gills that may have existed have been replaced by a set of lungs, whose design resembles that of terrestrial birds. Further, while the four alien forelimbs may be reasonably described as tentacles, they are more rigid and less flexible compared to the octopoid counterpart, and the two hindlimbs, which the Cephalopods rely on for locomotion, are heavily modified for weight-bearing, and are no longer prehensile. Perhaps most dramatically, Cephalopods contain a rudimentary internal skeleton, which is believed to an evolutionary novelism specifically intended to support large bodies outside the water."

"In addition to the adaptations for land, the Cephalopod body design carries a number of adaptations almost certainly associated with the emergence of sentience, including a series of calcium shells protecting important nerve clusters and a set of fine, secondary tentacles protruding from the distal ends of the forelimbs, serving a role analogous to the human hand. In addition, Cephalopodan eyes display a substantial amount of white sclera, likely serving a role identical to the similar adaptation found in humans: enabling other members of the species to readily identify where an individual is looking, useful for social communication. This eye design, strikingly 'human' for an octopoid alien, is often considered disturbing by human soldiers."

“Mysteriously, no evidence has ever been found of a system of organized sound production, explaining the utter lack of alien vocalizations on the battlefield. It is not known how the aliens communicated before the advent of implant-to-implant communication.”

…

“No description of the Cephalopods would be complete without a description of the extensive network of cybernetic and mechanical implants found in alien corpses. This system of implants is believed to be exactly analogous to the one customarily installed in humans, providing communication, life-support, anti-aging, and augmentation functions, as well as providing a self-destruct capability that has yet to be successfully circumvented. These implants are evidently more advanced than the human equivalents, often making use of biological motifs not previously experimented with in human designs.”

*—Excerpt, Infopedia article: Cephalopod (alien species), Section: Physiology, mode: discursive, moderate information density. [] indicates content redacted to those without security clearance. []*** indicates content requiring Level Three clearance or above.*

“Ever since Field Marshal Erwynmark’s Saharan Raid encountered and destroyed the first of the alien Wormhole Stabilizers, much ink has been spilled speculating on the purpose and functioning of these enigmatic devices—and speculation is what it really is, since the stark lack of information about alien society and economic structures precludes any truly accurate analysis of the situation. While the subsequent development of more precise gravimetric sensors has allowed the detection of a number of similar structures throughout the alien sectors bordering human space, a number of fundamental questions remain unaddressed, and controversial. It is unknown, for instance, where these wormholes lead, whether their purpose is primarily military or civilian, and whether their presence is confined only to border regions.“

“Common sense, and hypothetical simulations of space-faring civilizations, suggests the likely answer: that the wormholes are used as a transport network connecting distant alien worlds, including the still unidentified alien core worlds, and that their purpose must be both military and economic. However, this kind of straightforward reasoning also leads to a number of conclusions about the current war that have since proven entirely untrue, leaving many scholars reluctant to adopt a common consensus—some have suggested, for instance, that the alien wormholes lead not to some local sector of the galaxy, but to distant sectors, distant galaxies, or even the far side of the observable universe.”

“Even more perplexing than the question of purpose is the question of function. In many ways, the wormhole stabilizer found by Erwynmark fulfilled the predictions of early modern physics, which suggested the possibility of wormholes stabilized by some at the time undiscovered exotic matter. Indeed, similar designs were considered by Project Janus, as a means of interstellar travel, but advancements in Field Theory suggested that such wormholes were, in fact, impossible, leaving the topic of wormhole construction to gather dust until the Saharan campaign. Yet despite the efforts of theoretical physicists, little progress has been made in divining a mechanism for alien wormhole function, leading a few ambitious physicists to lobby the military to make a greater effort to attack another one.”

“As always, the only other known sentient aliens, the Incubators, remain frustratingly quiet on the topic…”

—Excerpt, Shizuki Ryouko, primary school essay

“Goddess,” Gracia said, looking at the viewscreen.

The group of them, all nine magical girls plus a few members of the crew, had gathered in ship's frontal pilot's area, after an urgent summons from the captain. Of course, they could have watched on their internal displays, but some things were just better seen collectively. Even Raven's avatar had appeared for the event.

For a while, no one spoke, demonstrating just how well Gracia's sentiment had illustrated their reactions. They watched on passive sensors as the alien wormhole executed its opening sequence, the false-color gravitational sensors showing a region of space folding itself into an arrangement that, up to now, Ryouko had only ever seen in speculative physics. A spectacular display of high-energy EM radiation, bright enough to be worth comment even on its own, rounded off the show, demonstrating that the amount of energy used in the wormhole opening was at least an order of magnitude beyond even the most powerful starship weapons.

Finally, as the radiation dimmed, it became apparent that objects were appearing within the region of space that constituted the wormhole opening: blink cannons, heavy carriers, battlecruisers, and other capital ships, along with thousands of smaller ships that couldn't be identified at this distance with their sensors.

It was Misa that broke the silence:

"So what now?" she asked, voice quiet, turning towards Nadya. "What do we do? We haven't practiced for this."

They hadn't. While this particular scenario had been included on the list of possible complications, it was considered unlikely enough to warrant low priority for direct simulation. They simply hadn't had time to get to it.

The group of them, even the ship's captain and pilot, turned to face Nadya and Clarisse, who happened to be standing together. By virtue of seniority, they were the undisputed leaders of the mission, and the crew of the ship was expected to defer to Major Antipova.

"Our orders in this situation remain unchanged," Nadya said. "We observe the situation, and if we think we see an opportunity, we go. Nothing changes; not for us."

To Ryouko, it seemed as she were making a special effort to appear level and authoritative, turning her head so that she made eye contact with every team member, making sure they saw her gaze.

Every team member except Clarisse or Misa, that was. Clearly, Nadya expected them to remain firm without any additional encouragement. It was in these kinds of things that one could discern the makeup of a team.

Clarisse, for her part, was staring into the middle distance, wearing the blank look emblematic of someone focusing most of her attention on something internal. Ryouko wondered: was she consulting some internal interface, or something magical?

"We have to move in now," she said abruptly and incisively, turning to face them. "We have to move immediately."

Where Nadya's look had been calming and firm, the commanding gaze of a Veteran, Clarisse's gaze was the fiery, willful stare of an Ancient, the look that dared anything and anyone to cross her path. After having seen it multiple times, from different girls, Ryouko had come to think of it as the "I've lived through five hundred years of shit, this nonsense is not going to bring me down" look.

Some of the other girls visibly quailed, before Clarisse, apparently having realized she was doing something wrong, blinked the look away, adjusting her tone to be less harsh and more level, while still carrying a strong undertone of authority.

"Alien reinforcements are pouring through the wormhole," she explained. "If they're smart, they will already be reconstituting their fleet patrols around the stabilizer. Right now is probably the least defended it will ever be. We have to either move now, or not go at all. And I think, given the situation, we have to make the attempt."

"She's right," Nadya said, without missing a beat. "I don't think it makes sense to wait. We were on the verge of going anyway, until *this* happened. The moment isn't quite perfect, but I don't think perfect is ever going to show up for us."

For a moment Ryouko was reminded of the attack on her transport ship, what seemed like an eternity ago. There, with their lives in danger, she had felt obligated to take leadership, because she wasn't sure who else would. Here, there would be none of that. They had a chain of command.

With Nadya's comment, the discussion was over. The pilot nodded, turning his head back towards the front to initiate the insertion. Raven said a farewell, dissolving her avatar so that she could focus on the mission at hand. The crew members dispersed back to their posts, while the MagOps team continued to stand around nervously, with the exception of Juliet, the stealth generator, who peered at the rest of them, then walked off to join Mohammad at the stealth controls. They knew that in such situations she preferred to be alone, so no one followed her.

It wasn't realistic to ask one magical girl to personally cloak the entire ship, not for the entire duration of the mission, but it was definitely possible for such a girl, focusing intently and with careful coordination, to detect and correct any problems with the ship's technological stealth, or even to apply some magic to enhance it during critical moments. In a well-guarded area like the vicinity of the wormhole stabilizer, it was certainly not an easy task, and Juliet would be spending the rest of the mission huddled next to Mohammad, soul gem placed near an ample supply of grief cubes to deal with the strain.

Of course, it would be advantageous to have tactical stealth while on the ground, but they couldn't bring Juliet, who would stay on the ship. Even without her, however, their team had ample concealment abilities distributed between the various members: Zheng Ying-zhi could tune her barrier into a pretty good group invisibility, Annabelle could grant anyone in physical contact with her temporary—*very temporary*—incorporeality, and Gracia was capable of blotting the team's presence out of the awareness of any enemy minds in the area, including AIs. That wasn't even counting Clarisse, who had informed everyone that now that she was getting close to the wormhole, she had access to at least one variant of excellent group stealth, though, as she put it, she might not have precise mastery over how to use it.

Generally speaking, stealth wasn't even expected to be that useful on this mission. Unfortunately, the very nature of what they were attacking guaranteed that both sides knew what the likely targets were, and further guaranteed that the locations they'd be going would be heavily defended, criss-crossed with sensors, and packed with alien personnel. Magical stealth was good, but without full incorporeality, it was risky to rely on it in an environment where even a single misstep might trigger a veritable potpourri of booby traps. They had tried it in the simulations, and it generally worked better to just go in guns blazing.

The team was well-stocked with experienced veterans, all of whom had numerous tricks up their sleeve. It made Ryouko feel a bit…under-experienced. She simply hadn't been contracted long enough to work on developing her powers, though she had been diligently reading the training recommendations. Teleporters tended to develop clairvoyance relatively easily, apparently,

because the vast majority of teleporters instinctively exerted limited clairvoyance to ensure their landing spot was safe—the only exception was a few rare teleporters who needed line-of-sight with wherever they were going. Similarly, it was recommended that Ryouko focus on easing the restrictions on her current teleportation, using various tricks to try to get around the requirement that she had to always teleport herself, or the shape restrictions on what she was teleporting, and so forth. Alternatively, because she was adept at teleporting objects through touch, she might try to develop other contact-based abilities, which included such advanced techniques as moving only the electrons to create an electrical spark.

Thus far, she had only succeeded in somewhat increasing her mass conveyance limit, a feat she felt she could be justifiably proud of.

"Let's go to the recreation room," Nadya suggested, shooing the other girls out of pilot's area. "We shouldn't be underfoot here."

They ended up sitting or reclining in various locations around the room, which was better-equipped than its equivalent on most other frigates, sporting more beds and entertainment consoles. None of them were in the mood for entertainment, though, so instead they held awkward, halting conversation. There was a nervous mood in the air, and collectively the tension was far more palpable than it had been during most of the simulations. At this stage of the insertion, all they could do was wait—everything counted on the skill of their support crew, of Raven and her pilot in avoiding any potential hazards, of Mohammad and Juliet in keeping their detectable emissions to an absolute minimum, going so far as to even reroute particles and photons from one side of the ship to other. They knew from briefings that they'd be facing down powerful sensor arrays, plentiful drones, minefields, and even clouds of smart dust, designed to radiate brightly upon unexpected contact with a large object.

It was the fact that they had to sit around that was the worst part, and most of them made do by fiddling with their personal hardware—Nadya with a set of monoatomic needle blades, Misa with a portable reactor, shock gauntlets, and pack of railgun slugs, Annabelle with R-15 Repeller explosives, and so forth. Ryouko, for her part, was packing a variety of explosives, both remote detonable and contact sensitive. Taking some advice from Mina, the other teleporter, she was also bringing a pair of daggers, laser-cutter gauntlets, and a small, personalized carbine—something suited to her hands, not the bulky monstrosities carried by the infantry. Teleporters didn't really need mobility assistance or keep-away devices—they needed ways to deal damage and, in Ryouko's case, close-range damage.

"You know, back during the Unification Wars, I was in a few missions myself," Clarisse said, swiveling her head to look over the group. "People would tell each other stories. You girls know any?"

They stared back at her blankly.

Clarisse put her fist to her mouth, making a show of clearing her throat, as the others leaned in slightly.

"This is a bit of a morality story, I guess," she began.

"Two starving citizens are foraging for food, when they spot in the distance the glimmer of the newly constructed city of El Dorado. One of them, a former History Professor, comments to other:"

"'You know, there was once this rich Roman named Marcus Crassus. His greed was notorious, he ruthlessly exploited the poor, and he owned countless slaves. You know how he died?'"

“‘How?’ the other asked, a little annoyed, since he was getting tired of hearing these stories.”

“‘He got greedy for what he didn’t have. He was the only prominent politician at the time without any military success. He used his wealth to fund an invasion of Parthia, a disaster that cost both him and his son their lives. According to legend, the Parthians killed him by pouring liquid gold into his mouth, so that his desire for wealth could finally be satiated.”

“The other man grunts, and says:”

“‘I’m not impressed. Look at those bastards in the city over there. You think they’re going to drown in their gold? I wouldn’t count on it.”

“‘Karma works in strange ways, my friend,’ the other man replies.”

“A while later, by a coincidence, they return to same spot, only to see bright flash in the distance. Before they realize what’s going on, they see a gigantic mushroom cloud rising from the distant city. They stand there, and watch a while, and finally the skeptical one says:”

“I guess you were right after all. They got the fate of Crassus.”

“The professor smiles slightly and says:”

“No, they didn’t. This is better. It’s not just the mouth.”

Clarisse watched them, expression deadpan.

A moment, Misa began laughing hysterically, lying down and rolling in her cot, enough that Ryouko was briefly concerned she would knock over her equipment.

Finally realizing what was expected of them, the others chuckled nervously and awkwardly, clearly more a show of politeness than anything. Gracia looked faintly disgusted. To Ryouko, the humor seemed a bit… off-color.

“You shouldn’t have tried that,” Nadya said, rebuking Clarisse lightly. “This generation is far too puritanical to enjoy that kind of humor. Besides, it’s a terrible joke.”

“I didn’t really think it would work,” Clarisse said, looking off into a corner. “But I just thought I would break the tension. It really was a popular story, back during the war. People loved it. Look, *she* loves it.”

She pointed at Misa, who had finally recovered enough to sit back upright, coughing slightly.

“If that’s the quality of joke you’re going to tell, maybe we should play some board games instead,” Nadya said drily. “We could play chess or something.”

“That old solved game?” Annabelle asked skeptically.

“You’re not supposed to look up the answers while playing,” Nadya said, glaring at the girl. “It’s honor system.”

“You only want to play it because you’re better than any of us,” Misa commented, shaking her head mock-sadly. “Honestly, trying to play board games with someone as old as you is just asking for it.”

“It’s just because you don’t take it seriously enough.”

“It’s a game! We’re leaving the ship in seventeen minutes!”

Watching the exchange, Ryouko's eyes slid from Nadya's affronted expression over to Clarisse, who was smiling slightly. She wondered if Clarisse really was as "bad" with jokes as she had appeared.

Clarisse stood up, cracking her knuckles for no reason that Ryouko could discern.

"Five minutes, lightning chess," she said, addressing Nadya. "Let's do this."

Fortunately, the imminence of their "drop" was enough to put a limit on Nadya's post-game grumbling about the time control. As they assembled their equipment, a silence naturally settled over the group, and Nadya dropped her disaffected face like mask, returning to the serious, vaguely detached look that characterized her in combat situations.

So far so good. The very fact that they were still alive proved they had yet to be detected. Only five more minutes and they would enter orbit around the wormhole stabilizers—another three and they would be in position.

As subtly as she could, Ryouko swallowed. She didn't think of herself as cowardly, but at the moment she felt herself hoping desperately that they could make it back. That would require two things: that they successfully complete their mission, and that she and Gracia Perez both survive the mission. She did not ordinarily need a clairvoyant at her side to find her way on a teleport, but it would be necessary in this case, with the kind of stealth HSS Raven would be under. Furthermore, it would be impossible for Raven to maintain a stationary position relative to the facility—even achieving such a position momentarily for the upcoming insertion would be a difficult maneuver. Even if she could *see* where to teleport, that would be useless without a reliable way to signal the ship—such as might be provided by a telepath with extremely long range, like Gracia. It was also possible for her to teleport near the ship and signal it from there, but they would be pressing their luck more than enough as it is.

Reaching for the enchanted armor they had been given, she froze.

Clarisse, did you say something? she asked her TacComp.

No. And that's the kind of question you should never have to ask me.

She frowned, but proceeded to pick up the armor, holding it in one hand. She had already practiced this multiple times, but no matter how many times she did it, she couldn't quite convince herself the armor would really integrate correctly with her costume, the equipment bag on her back, and the gauntlets, even if the armor did seem to pulse with a faint trace of magic.

She unwrapped the piece of smart-fabric she had been using to cover her soul gem—the excessive glowing during a FTL trip could be annoying—and almost instantly covered it again, instinctively. The glow had been searingly bright, brighter than she had ever seen it, bright enough to briefly cast the entire room in a pale shade of green.

"No offense," Misa said, "but I hope it's not going to do that whole mission."

"Try dimming it," Clarisse said.

"What?" Ryouko asked, blinking.

"Dim it," Clarisse repeated. "Just think that you want your soul gem to stop glowing for a while. It's what I'm doing; otherwise mine would be driving us all crazy. I can taste how close we are."

Ryouko, who had literally never before considered the possibility, took a breath and willed her soul gem to dim its glow—and she felt it respond, so that she knew even before she removed the fabric that it would be normal again.

"Why now?" Gracia asked out loud. "It's supposed to respond to FTL engines. We've been next to one for an hour. Why is it brighter now?"

Zheng Ying-zhi pointed behind her with her thumb, at—well, a bulkhead, but implicitly something outside the ship.

"It's not a FTL engine, but that thing out there is certainly *something*."

Ryouko kept her thoughts to herself, trying to stay focused. But the ring—it definitely bothered her.

She took a breath, then transformed, allowed herself to do what came naturally, the magic flowing over the enchanted suit, reacting with it, and—

Suddenly, she found herself looking out the inside of a transparent visor. Not the fiber optic relay favored by most infantry armor—an actual visor, so that magical girls could see straight out, a combat consideration important enough to weaken the armor in a critical region, given the surprising number of powers that were dependent on direct line-of-sight.

Ryouko turned to face the others, the armor literally weightless on her body. Standard armor, made of ultra-dense metamaterial was too bulky to wear, the internal servos too slow to keep pace with her reaction time, but this was *magical* armor, and didn't have those limitations. It was too bad these kinds of armors took so much time and dedicated effort to make.

She didn't like the appearance of the armor, though, which, even though it eliminated the dress she normally wore, still managed to invoke the same aesthetic, with plenty of perfectly frivolous protrusions and extensions serving as decoration.

Sighing, she had the armor extrude a grief cube to the location of her soul gem, holding the cube in place under the armor, which was extra-thick in that area, though you couldn't tell looking at it from outside. She waited until she was sure the gem was over-primed, then returned the still partly-empty grief cube to storage.

Magitech armor. It was convenient.

The others were already ready, waiting for her to prepare herself. Gracia was already scanning the approaching moon with her clairvoyance, searching the moon for a good initial insertion point. It was unfortunate that the vast majority of clairvoyants were vision-only; alien sensor interference prevented them from getting a precise lock on gravity distortions at even this close distance. That was not even counting the giant distortion that was the wormhole itself, perfectly capable of driving poorly-calibrated sensors wild.

There. They had now reached low orbit, though they would not linger here, the ship needed to drop lower, low enough that the facility was within Ryouko's teleportation range, while simultaneously eliminating any relative velocity it had with the ground, working its engines to avoid going into freefall. Only after the team was gone would it push itself forward, achieving the horizontal velocity necessary to hold orbit.

"I can only imagine the level of surveillance they must have around us," Annabelle said, gesturing around her, the suits relaying the audio in and out. "If it weren't for Juliet, we'd have already been vaporized."

The others nodded, faces visible through their visors, then approached her to make the necessary physical contact.

Ryouko took a breath, dispelling tension she could feel coiling inside her. This wait was interminable.

I think I have something, Gracia thought. *It looks important enough to blow up. That's all I can promise at this point.*

Ryouko took another breath, doing her best to internalize the details of the location Gracia was displaying telepathically to the group, a large white and grey room full of strange, bulbous computing equipment and unarmored alien personnel. Ryouko would be burning her reserves just making the jump, so she was expected to actively rest after the insertion, but the rest of the group needed to actively plan what they would do, and what powers they would use, updating the group interface with the information.

We're at insertion position, the captain announced, what seemed like an eternity later. *Give or take a meter per second or so. Relatively. You know the drill.*

She looked around at the rest of the group, and they nodded at each other.

She closed her eyes, holding in mind the image being projected to her by Gracia. She reached across the distance, a distance so great she had to strain, forcing herself through the gap, reaching, until something tore—

There was no room for error. Even in a human base, it simply wasn't possible to knock out part of the facility without putting everything on alert. They had to move hard, and they had to move fast, lest the aliens catch their breath. Everything was possible—and had happened before, on different missions—including the aliens voluntarily detonating a large part of their own base, hiding the rest behind powerful internal forcefields. The last tactic had stopped being used after human MagOps teams had learned to blink out at the first sign of a major nuclear or antimatter detonation, but it meant that both Ryouko and Mina, the other teleporter, had to stay on constant hair-trigger alert, always ready to gather the entire team and leave at a moment's notice.

At the moment, that last statement applied mostly to Mina, since Ryouko was still heavily in the grips of necessary soul gem recharge, leaning on her knees, the world seeming to swirl slightly around her as the suit fed her grief cubes. At the moment, she had to rely on the others.

The others had not wasted a single moment, each contributing whatever they could to the group defense at the moment of insertion, after they collectively canceled their remaining relative velocity with basic telekinesis. Ying-zhi had thrown up a barrier around the entire team, with a bit of stealth added for good measure, shimmering gold casting the entire scene around in sharp relief. Misa's attack was more invisible, but likely just as effective, emitting a massive electromagnetic pulse to disable whatever she could in the area, her body floating off the ground slightly. Eva, who was already crouching, detonated the ground in a ring around them, on the theory that more explosions was always good, as long as they weren't pointed at you.

The others carried out more specific responses, responding to threats as Gracia identified them, multiple telekinetic pulses and explosive rifle shots emanating outward in the space of a few seconds. Clarisse dispensed with the pleasantry of holding back her power, identifying targets herself while rapidly firing magical beams from her fingers.

In short, it was a scene of utter destructive chaos outside the barrier, and even with vision of the full EM spectrum, it was difficult for Ryouko to make out anything through the cloud of explosive shrapnel, criss-crossing beams, and equipment discharging electricity. Only Gracia and Clarisse's

inputs to the team's area awareness gave her any semblance of what was outside—that, and the vision of the room she had been given earlier.

Then, a few seconds later, it was over. To conserve power, everyone except Ying-zhi removed their area defenses, and Nadya made a gesture with both hands, clearing the area of smoke with one large gust of wind.

The devastation was total. In a circular ring around where they had landed, the ground and ceiling had been seared black, and the heavy reinforced wall was nearly gone entirely, scattered piles of smoking, still melting debris the only testament to its previous existence. On the ground, ruined equipment lay in large chunks, along with piles of blackened corpses that couldn't even easily be identified as human or alien. The smell of it all offended Ryouko's nostrils, which automatically diverted anything acrid enough to be damaging. The rest merely confirmed her visual observations: the burnt byproducts of a thousand different constituents burning, organic, metallic, plastic, ceramic.

On one side of the room, the shattered remains of what had once been a transparent observation window led to a large spherical cavity, carrying a floating grey sphere the size of a house—the sight was familiar from the simulations. Something about the sphere seemed slightly *off*, almost as if parts of it looked farther away than they should. Genuine gravitational distortions, or a cheap metamaterial imitation placed as a decoy? It was difficult to tell.

A slight shimmering indicated the presence of an alien forcefield, and if this particular structure was the correct target, it would be a forcefield strong enough to deflect everything short of a nuclear attack—and even the weakest nukes, for that matter. If it were authentic, it was their job to destroy it, once they were sure the area was secure.

Ryouko felt her soul gem, buried under the armor her suit, viscerally *throbbing*. Somewhere, deep within her, she felt—were the gravitational distortions within the stabilizer facility *this* intense?

She looked up at the ceiling above her head, now patterned with burn marks, but instead of looking at that, she felt compelled to look *through* it somehow, to smash through it and fly upward with powers she did not have.

Ryouko, her TacComp thought, sharp and loud in her ear, and Ryouko came out of her reverie, realizing with embarrassment that she had lost her focus at a moment such as this.

Did the alien scientists know if this core is legitimate? Nadya asked, directing the question at Gracia, the group telepath.

No, she responded. *As expected.*

The others had already settled into their roles. Gracia continued surveillance, as Nadya and Eva immediately deployed their gravimetric sensor packs. The long-distance teleport had drained her reserves, but now Ryouko felt herself slowly regaining power, and though she now kept an iron grip on her attention, trying to maintain her focus, a part of her speculated on the unarmored aliens they had just massacred: Were they scientists? Technicians? Were such specializations even relevant to the squid?

No matter; they were working on the wormhole stabilizer, which was all that mattered.

Two heavy laser emplacements preparing to fire, Gracia thought, the first explicit communication since they had inserted. One turret was at the other side of a long claustrophobic corridor that extended from one of the gaping, ruined walls, while the other, also distant, was concealed behind one of the side walls that had managed to survive the previous devastation. Alien facilities were all

designed so that there was a relatively clear line of fire from at least one such weapon into every single nook and cranny, so the news was not surprising—the only question was how to deal with it.

Annabelle moved in to take care of the one at the end of the corridor, raising her sniper rifle—the magical one, which was an ornate white and blue, with flower prints.

I'll deal with the other one, Misa thought, waving off Mina Guyure, who had been moving to take care of it.

Before the others could comment, she stepped directly into the line of fire, palm raised. That alone was unusual—Misa usually never bothered to move her body parts to channel her magic.

In the next moment, Annabelle fired, the shell's exit velocity so fast that even their enhanced senses couldn't begin to track it. At the far end of the corridor, the laser turret shuddered, exploding into a shower of metal pieces before bursting into flame. It clearly wouldn't be firing anything.

Ryouko knew from previous conversations what had happened, though. Heavy laser turrets all had a relatively strong forcefield for protection, so in the ordinary course of things, Annabelle's relatively weak magical projectile wouldn't have had much effect. This, however, was where her magical ability came into play, allowing her to briefly render herself or anything she was touching incorporeal. A special exception clause in her power description allowed her to also apply this to projectiles fired from a weapon she was carrying. The duration of this ability was terribly low—milliseconds, actually—but it was more than sufficient for a sniper bullet to bypass a forcefield. That was, of course, its intended purpose.

In the next moment, the other laser fired, the rare x-rays that scattered off the air appearing resplendent in Ryouko's enhanced vision. It accomplished little, though, because Misa *fired back*, melting and shattering the wall in front of her. The two beams, each about the diameter of a soccer ball, met head on, canceling in a spectacular burst of diverted energy that saturated the area with a torrent of radiation. For a moment, the radiation output dazzled Ryouko's vision—but then Ying-zhi grunted, retuning her barrier, and the radiation faded.

Yes, it is possible for two lasers to cancel, Clarisse thought, before Ryouko even thought the question. *If they two beams are exactly out-of-phase. That can't really be done with two lasers going in opposite directions—she must be doing something very exotic with the collision point.*

Ryouko hadn't seen her do it before, even in simulation. Had she simply never bothered to log this particular use of her abilities in the databanks?

Smiling manically, Misa leaned forward, appearing to physically drive the laser forward. As she poured more and more energy into the beam, the point of intersection began to shift away from her, moving faster and faster. As it progressed, the rounded walls of the corridor beyond the melted wall, thoroughly irradiated, glowed in Ryouko's vision, dumping radiation back into their surroundings.

Finally, Misa forced the beam back into the laser cannon itself, which had emerged from a large opening in the wall at the end of the corridor. A small forcefield defending the laser struggled briefly, glowing frantically bright in an attempt to dissipate the energy, and then failed. Then came the bright flare of an explosion, the laser cannon detonating so violently the ground shook slightly.

There were a lot of unarmored alien personnel sealed in the rooms along the corridor, Gracia thought, seemingly awestruck. *The radiation has mostly killed them. And that explosion—an infantry squad was trying to deploy down that corridor, with the laser providing covering fire. I*

don't think they expected that.

Misa just smirked slightly.

Of course not. I didn't need to be so showy, but you labeled the interface with their approach, so I thought I'd take care of it. Of course, they're not all dead yet.

In response to that, Mina extruded a rounded metal object from within her suit—a modded anti-personnel mine. She seemed to regard it for a moment, as an indicator light flashed on, indicating it was armed—then it disappeared, as if it had never been there at all, leaving not even the trace optical distortion Ryouko knew she left behind when teleporting.

A moment later, Gracia confirmed through the area awareness that the remaining infantry were dead. It had been one minute since Ryouko had teleported in.

Compared to Ryouko, Mina had a much shorter teleportation range—but, unlike Ryouko, she was not required to personally accompany all of her teleports. Ryouko felt a moment of jealousy. On this mission, she was explicitly forbidden from venturing anywhere on her own, even on split-second bombing runs. It was too risky for the team's only way off the planet.

They returned to their positions, staying on the alert, away from the two corridors and their clear lines-of-fire. Under the protective cover of Gracia's clairvoyance, it was doubtful that there were any threats out there to fear, but it didn't hurt to be careful. Carelessness was what got you a bullet in the head from a stealthed sniper, an injury that even a magical girl couldn't keep fighting through.

Despite the trace of showboating that could be sensed in Misa's demeanor, they all knew that had there been no approaching infantry squad, she would never have wasted so much energy on merely looking cool. Indeed, even as they were discussing the issue, Misa's grief cube storage ticked downward by two.

Well, I've got mixed news, Nadya thought. *Mostly bad, though.*

They stayed at their positions, taking in the news silently. The good news was that, according to the sensors, they had gotten very lucky—they had landed on their very first try on a major concentrated source of gravitational distortions, of the sort that even the aliens couldn't afford to build a dozen decoys of—or so they had thought, but here they were staring at twelve of them on their local sensors.

By studying the distortions in the sky above them, it was at least possible to count how many of sources were real, even if alien sensor interference prevented proper localization. Based on the wormhole stabilizer in the Saharan system, the expectation was that there would be one source—but instead there were four. They knew that they were standing next to one of them, but the other three, obscured behind exotic matter reactors, were impossible to distinguish from the decoys without getting close.

Is it possible they constructed four of these cores? Annabelle asked, sounding slightly bewildered. *These things are supposed to be expensive! We only brought two PAYNE devices!*

We don't know if they're authentic, Clarisse thought. *But it also doesn't matter much. If we can't tell the difference, we have to keep destroying them until we've shut down the wormhole, and to be safe, we should probably destroy all of them. But… if there are any decoys, then it is very likely that the one we're standing next to is authentic. I have—I get very lucky in situations such as this, whenever my allies or I must make a random choice. There's no other real way to describe it. It's one of my powers.*

She sounded almost reluctant to discuss the issue, and Ryouko realized that in all her reading, she had never heard about this particular power of Clarisse's. Was it somehow a secret?

Are you sure? Nadya asked.

Yes, Clarisse thought, suddenly decisive. *If there is only one authentic core, it is this one. We should use a PAYNE device on it. With any luck—and this time, I mean the kind of luck that's beyond my control—it will be the only one and we will be done. Either way, we must move quickly. The longer we stand here, the higher the chance the aliens will think of a way to hurt us without damaging the core behind us.*

Do it, Nadya thought, without further elaboration.

Annabelle disgorged the device from the bulky pack on her back, the robotic arm of the pack gingerly placing the smooth spherical device, about twice the size of her head, into her hands.

The **P**ortable **A**djustable **Y**ield **N**uclear **E**xplosive was one of the most compact nuclear weapons ever manufactured by humans. An antimatter-triggered pure fusion device, it could be calibrated to deliver a yield of anywhere from twenty kilotons to one megaton of TNT, all in a terrifying, backpack-sized package.

Max it out, Nadya thought.

Are you sure? Annabelle thought.

The last time one of our teams tried to drop in here, they dropped a ten megaton warhead on top of their own base forcefields just to kill them. They wouldn't have done if they weren't damn confident in the strength of their forcefields. This thing behind us might not be the main forcefield, but if this is the authentic core, you can be sure this thing is damn powerful.

Annabelle nodded, swallowing and setting the device down, gingerly, next to the shattered window where the alien forcefield shimmered slightly. Ryouko knew that, at that moment, they were all thinking the same unspoken thought: if the aliens had, as expected, substantial inner base forcefields, then the blast would only destroy this part of the facility, and they would be safe teleporting to the other side of the facility.

If the aliens didn't, however, then that was excellent news for the overall mission of destroying the Stabilizer. It would also mean that Ryouko would be relied upon to perform a second, kilometers-long teleport in the fractions of a second it would take for them to realize that they were about to be hit by a nuclear blast. Ying-zhi could delay it for perhaps another second with her barrier, but that would be all that they got.

An alternative would have been to exit the facility entirely on the first shot, then teleport back if necessary, but that raised the possibility that they would trigger a distant booby trap, as might have happened to the first team. At least by staying within the facility, they knew that if they were killed by the blast, they would have satisfaction of knowing that the facility was going down with them —and in the end, it was more important that the facility be destroyed than that they survive.

Again, Ryouko found her eyes drawn upward. She wondered: what did the wormhole look like, up close?

Ryouko, her TacComp thought again, loudly.

Ah! Ryouko thought, barely suppressing a startled jump

I think I'm recharged enough to make the jumps, she thought.

Good, Nadya thought, not seeming to have noticed her loss of focus. *Arm the device as you leave. Three seconds should be enough, if you time it well.*

They didn't want to stick around here any longer than they had.

Arming the PAYNE device was trivial, provided one had the proper authorizations preloaded into one's implants, as they all did. A quick quantum key exchange, and the device was ready and armed.

Ying-zhi knelt down next to the device, touching it. A moment later, a small golden barrier appeared around the device. It would persist just long enough to protect the device from any unexpected attempts to explosively disarm it.

The girl stood back up, taking a breath, flared yellow sleeves shifting around her arms. Ryouko took a breath, too, as the others gathered around her. Again, Gracia transferred an image into her mind, this time of another similar-looking core on the far side of facility—but not the *farthest* one, as that would have likely been predictable. This room was shaped a bit different—it was substantially larger, with a much higher ceiling. Other that than, it was not much different from the room they were standing in—at least, the way it had looked before they arrived. There was the same alien personnel ambling about, holding pieces of equipment with their tentacle phalanges, and the same bulbous equipment and control panels. The only difference was there that now appeared to be several alien infantry squads, stationed at a surprising distance from the core itself.

Receiving the mental confirmation that this was the right place to go, Ryouko began charging her teleport.

In the last moment before she completed the jump, as she could already feel something starting to rip, she armed the device, setting it to three seconds, as she had been instructed. A timer appeared in the corner of her vision.

It had been two minutes since they first teleported into the facility.

They jumped.

This time around, they received a welcoming committee.

That was not unexpected. Not only did it stand to reason that the aliens would mobilize to defend the rest of the facility, but Gracia's clairvoyance had of course shown them some of the defenders beforehand.

The initial stages of their entrance were standard—Ying-zhi immediately threw up a barrier, Misa performed an EMP, and Nadya blasted a wave of force outward, trying to clear the area. The barrier and telekinetic repulsion came in handy immediately, as a wave of fire and debris immediately assailed the group from all directions, the blast wave carrying enough energy to easily overcome the telekinesis and impact on the barrier around them, which glowed with a sharp golden light as it worked to deflect what was going on around them.

Conventional blast, Ryouko's TacComp informed her. *At this distance, the radiation should have arrived first, and there's been nothing significant yet. This is something else.*

So the alien base had strong internal shielding, as they had suspected.

A moment later, the ground underneath shook violently, the likely aftereffects of the nearby nuclear explosion.

Even before the smoke cleared, the barrier came under a storm of laser and projectile fire. Each individual impact caused that part of the barrier to flare with light, large ripples traveling outward, as if from a stone dropped into a pool of water. There were so many impacts, however, that the glow of the barrier was once again nearly uniform, and the surface of the barrier was a storm of interference patterns.

Ryouko's eyes automatically cycled through the electromagnetic spectrum, searching for a frequency on which she could discern anything useful about their surroundings, but every frequency was blotted out with far too much radiation to effectively see—more than just relying on the natural infrared afterglow of the explosion and the ultraviolet of their lasers, the aliens were clearly using a blinding device as well.

It was not a big issue, though; Gracia, who was using her clairvoyance and telepathy to maintain a form of generalized combat awareness, had already informed them what the situation was—the explosions around them, which had come from EMP-hardened explosive devices, had served to deliberately demolish around them a wide, nearly hundred-meter section of the facility. Now they stood completely in the open, the holes in the floor above them forming a tower of concentric circles, culminating in a roof open to the starry sky and Orpheus above. Through the opening, the alien wormhole, visible through Gracia's clairvoyance as a bright ring-shaped distortion in the stars above, seemed still resolutely intact.

A shower of debris and dust, the aftereffects of the explosion, continued to break off and fall downward, some of it peppering Ying-zhi's barrier, as the nearby superstructure of the facility trembled under the combined effects of the distant nuclear blast and the adjacent conventional explosion.

At the very bottom of the devastated area, next to where they were standing, lay the putative stabilizer core, perfectly intact within its powerful forcefield. It was no longer surrounded by a spherical metallic shell, instead continuing to levitate easily in its former position—apparently everything important about the core, forcefield generator and all, was contained with the smooth, floating metal sphere. It was, in many ways, an elegant design—but there was no time to stand around appreciating it.

There were now five separate alien infantry squads firing down at them from elevated cover, carefully prepositioned, along with their accompanying escort drones, both aerial and otherwise. Not a good position to be in, in other words.

But of course, they had two teleporters—three, if you counted Clarisse, who moonlighted as one—and that was more than sufficient tactical mobility.

Clear them out! Ying-zhi exhorted, arms raised. *Standing here like this isn't exactly pleasant!*

The command was unnecessary, though, since they were already moving, and this time, Ryouko had sufficient power to actually participate.

Following the battle plan presented to their minds by their TacComps, one long ago decided upon for this kind of situation, they moved out, dividing into fireteams. Mina, Misa, Gracia, and Annabelle teleported upward, seeking out the squad with the best firing position. Nadya and Clarisse sought out the squad least well-covered by what would be Misa's new position, and Ryouko, Ying-zhi, and Eva sought out one of the squads on the lower levels, the one most likely to come under direct fire.

Ryouko had little time to pay attention to what was going on elsewhere, immediately grabbing hold of her assigned partners and teleporting out. It was necessary to assume that the others would do what was tasked of them—that Misa would effectively eliminate the aerial drone population, that Gracia would seize mental control of as many of the uppermost infantry squad as she could, that Nadya and Clarisse would effectively destroy the squad they were tasked to.

Ryouko's group also had a straightforward kill-and-destroy mission. Appearing in the shadows behind their assigned squad, Ying-zhi slammed her barrier immediately downward, in an effort to disable the anti-personnel smart mines and sacrificial drones that alien infantry squads liberally covered their rears with. Some of them detonated anyway, peppering the barrier with shrapnel, but most were rudely flung aside as the barrier plowed into the alloy flooring.

In these confined quarters, using an explosive bolt would have risked bringing the roof down upon them, along with other possible unpleasant effects. As such, Ryouko had prepared a more conventional attack, one of her most-favored combinations: tossing a set of grenades to try to overload shielding, following by a small set of stringed crossbow bolts—now modified with a bit of stickiness—then a single, short-range teleport, barely more than an inch, which was more than enough to disassemble practically anything.

She smiled grimly as her attack had the intended effect, sending three alien troopers immediately to the floor as critical organs and suit functions were severed, green ichor and clear hydraulic fluid gushing out of the various fracture planes.

She then performed a follow-on teleport, shifting her position to the other side of the infantrymen she had just killed, timing her movement so it would dodge the laser fire that would immediately come from the alien squad's escort drones, as well as the explosive "death shrapnel" typically emitted by deceased alien infantry—a special trap for careless magical girls, particularly of the melee class. She then fired a series of quick, magically aimed arbalest bolts, easily destroying the drones that had revealed their positions—even the aliens couldn't afford to put forcefields on *everything*.

Simultaneously, Eva Guderian snapped her whip outward, the weapon snaking sinuously to its desired target, a point on the ground where the troopers were slightly concentrated. That part of the ground immediately detonated, its explosive force carefully controlled by Eva to maximize damage while minimizing the risk of unintended effects—the difference between the controlled explosion of a specialist, and Ryouko's more careless explosive bolts. Several squadsmen fell to the floor, two of them literally in pieces, tentacle limbs writhing uncontrollably, detached from the main body.

Ryouko teleported forward, briefly touching the bodies of the dead. Executing a lightning-fast double blink, she carried the bodies with her into the middle of a group of alien squadsmen, then blinked back alone, before they had time to respond.

They paused, waited for the damaged alien suits to disgorge the inevitable wave of death shrapnel, which Ryouko had now ensured would strafe the alien shields, rather than any of them. Ryouko temporarily dismissed her arbalest, rapidly drawing her carbine to suppress the enemy with a series of railgun bursts, while incidentally disabling a few of the support drones still crawling along the ceiling and walls. Ying-zhi, with her cho-ko-nu, sprayed magical bolts rapid fire instead—the barrier generator's weapon was very similar to Ryouko's, but had a much higher rate of fire, which was what was called for at the moment.

A moment later, the death-shrapnel detonated from the enemy suits, peppering the alien shields and signaling Ying-zhi to slam her hands forward expressively, and her barrier changed configuration, snapping forward into a shrinking inverted parabola that rapidly shoved the alien infantrymen together into a small, disoriented group. Ryouko fired a weak explosive bolt directly

into the concentration of infantry suits, using the concussion to further weaken their shields and stun their reactions.

Eva then dashed forward, relying on the other two to suppress or disable with crossbow bolts any drones that might be defending the area.

Even Ryouko thought Eva's preferred melee technique rather gruesome, the girl sliding in between squad members with her superior speed, slamming her palms through forcefield after forcefield with a blurry of arm thrusts and footwork that always reminded Ryouko of martial arts masters she had seen in movies. Each palm strike was accompanied with a burst of magic that broke through the aliens' weakened shielding, enabling Eva to make direct physical contact with their suits, so she could *detonate* the suits themselves, directing the explosions away from her and into Ying-zhi's barrier on the other side. The alien infantry trapped within the area fell apart almost comically, resembling nothing so much as a group of hapless, if explosive, bowling pins. Since the suits had been entirely destroyed, there was no shrapnel to worry about.

Squinting slightly, Ryouko picked off attack drones still trying to attack their barrier with meaningless lasers, firing crossbow bolts with an accuracy that, in a past life, she would have never credited. Ying-zhi, for her part, also swept the area with a series of partial barriers, clearing any mini-drones that might be attempting anything nefarious.

It was now five minutes since they had teleported into the facility.

With the job complete, Ryouko and Ying-zhi moved forward, joining Eva near the broken edge where the explosion had carved a hole in the facility. Looking out onto the other floors, they sought other targets, but they found that there was little left to do. From their perch high above Ryouko's position, a torrent of laser fire was raining down from the alien personnel that Gracia had mind controlled, filling the air with the characteristic popping noise of laser fire impacting metal, forcefields, and bodies. A quieter, rhythmic snapping indicated Annabelle's merciless, methodical sniping, something she knew from the simulations that only a magical girl was capable of escaping. Misa contributed by magically firing a steady barrage of the small railgun projectiles she had carried with her.

They had been too late to see what had happened to the alien squad perched on the high ground on the other side of the chasm, but they could easily see it from their combat records. From the other side of the chasm, standing behind a barrier helpfully erected by Clarisse, Nadya had unceremoniously moved the ground out from under the enemy squad, snapping the metal flooring and dropping it straight into the chasm below.

Of course, alien infantry were, generally speaking, all equipped with short-range antigrav packs, sufficient for quickly changing elevations, and even human powered armor was sufficient to survive intact from a fall from such a relatively low height. Thus, simply tearing the floor out from under them was insufficient to produce a kill. It did, however, cause tremendous confusion, destroy whatever cover they had, and force them to rapidly toggle their antigrav controls. That had been more than enough for all the assorted laser beams, railguns, and magical projectiles arrayed against them to do their work.

"That'll do for all of them," Eva said, a short while later, glancing at Ryouko, engaging in a bit of rare open speech. Far above them, Misa and the others in her group engaged in the gruesome work of executing the squid infantrymen that Gracia had mind-controlled—she simply didn't have the stamina necessary to maintain control much longer.

"That was pretty good job back there, rookie."

Ryouko looked back at the other girl, who was peering into the chasm with a serious expression.

"Rookie"—no one on the team had called her that since the earliest simulations, but she knew why it made sense to use the term now. She didn't really know Eva well—not as well as Juliet, Annabelle, or Gracia, anyway—but they had been part of the same team, which meant that even if they hadn't socialized much, Ryouko still respected her. Strange, that she thought herself closer to the taciturn Juliet, even if they had hardly ever spoken.

Even so, Ryouko was surprised to find that the comment warmed her heart slightly.

Down below them, the alien structure they had come to think of as a "core" continued to hover silently, as serenely as if nothing had happened at all.

My soul gem isn't reacting to it, Ryouko realized suddenly.

Incoming, Gracia thought, from far above them.

Ryouko and her group immediately shifted deeper down the corridor, reducing their exposure to what was coming from above: Two alien low altitude fighters, on air patrol over the facility, had homed in on them, doing what they could to aid their now fallen comrades.

A small torrent of lasers and missiles headed for the area, and they struggled to deflect the attacks. It wasn't a matter of direct personal protection—the fighters, having clearly been informed of the situation, were targeting structural supports. It was necessary to try and prevent further damage to the structure of the building around them, lest the attack trigger a precipitous structural collapse down upon their heads. They would survive, but the teleporters would waste precious time pulling the team out of the rubble, time during which they would be cut off from each other, likely forced to use their powers to avoid being crushed.

Ying-zhi moved forward, deflecting what she could of the lasers heading for them—difficult from this distance. Ryouko shot down a couple of missiles, as the rest of the team did whatever they could—or, in the case of Eva, who was not particularly useful for this kind of confrontation, focused on staying protected.

Finally, once the initial wave was over, and the fighters circled out for another run—too canny to make themselves sitting ducks by hovering in place, the team made their counterattack. Nadya telekinetically grabbed hold of one craft, while Clarisse drew upon another of her exotic repertoire of powers, overriding the electronic controls of the other. With relatively minor forced adjustments to the trajectories of the two fighters, the two ships slammed directly into each other, far above the facility, forcefields failing almost immediately. Simple, efficient, satisfying—and quite explosive, the sound reverberating in the moon's relatively thick atmosphere.

She shifted her eyes up, at the nearly black alien sky. Maybe if she looked harder—

A mental warning abruptly seized her attention.

She turned around almost instantly, dashing forward with such a speed that any normal human would have been unable to see her move at all.

Eva! She shouted telepathically, to no one in particular, because the channel that connected Eva to the rest of the team seemed now permanently gone.

Only when she was already there, clutching the girl's lifeless body in one arm, did she realize that one of her own arms had been seriously injured, still operating only because the suit's hydraulics had taken over.

"Damn it!" Ying-zhi spat out, immediately strengthening the barrier that had been covering their rear. "Damn it, damn it, damn it! I was focusing too much on the front. I didn't think—"

Ryouko just stared into the dead girl's eyes, open and lifeless. Her combat interface fed the details to her—a sniper, cloaked far in their rear, had patiently waited for its opportunity, had fired directly into Eva's lower back, had somehow known that was where the soul gem was, despite it being encased beneath the armor of the suit. A second shot, fired almost immediately afterward, had been at Ryouko's back, and only the fact that she had turned around so rapidly, and the fact that her soul gem was in the front, had prevented anything more serious, causing the shot to hit her arm instead.

The sniper's position was now highlighted in her console, thanks to Gracia's clairvoyance. The emotions of the telepath washed over her, saying what didn't need to be said. She had lost her focus, fatigued with the exertion of performing a mind control and the need to watch the skies. Even Clarisse, who could have conceivably watched their rear, had been too busy dealing with the fighters.

We should—Ying-zhi began, but Ryouko didn't hear her.

Ryouko teleported directly on top of the sniper, who was already in the process of trying to withdraw and shift locations, movements concealed from ordinary vision by an alien stealth pack. Not bothering with any of her customary ranged tactics, she dropped downward, using basic telekinesis to help clear the way, firing arbalest bolts from one arm to reveal and then disable the sniper's auxiliary stealth drones, which provided personal protection and spotting capability.

It was strangely serene, the sheer purity of emotion that she felt. She should have been unstable, but her crossbow bolts were unerring, efficiently spearing the fragile auxiliary drones, whose designs were forced to reduce armor, weaponry, and mobility in order to enable their stealth capability.

With her other arm, she slammed her elbow—her *injured* elbow—downward, using a magical power-blow to melee through the sniper's personal forcefield, pushing her elbow into the alien's impassive faceplate. With her crossbow arm, she grabbed the sniper's rifle, using superior, magically amplified strength to wrench the gigantic weapon out of the grip of the alien armor, applying so much force the weapon bent forty-five degrees, nearly snapping it in half.

The alien, now supine on the floor, grabbed wildly at her with its four tentacle-like limbs, trying to push her away, force her arms off, and bring various melee range weapons to bear. Ryouko did not let it, using magic to force her arm down with enough strength that she could feel parts of the alien suit snapping. As one arm tossed away the sniper rifle, whose power pack fizzled and detonated, she activated the laser cutter built into the gauntlet of the arm she had on the alien's throat.

The armor resisted, but with her other arm now briefly free, she smashed her fist into the side of the alien's helmet, again and again, with no purpose other than she needed to *punch*, and she felt the material of the helmet shatter and fail under her pounding, starting to reveal the impassive, nearly spherical eyes of the Cephalopods.

And finally the laser cutter went through, the alien's head disconnecting from the rest of the armor, a torrent of ichor gushing outward onto her hands and body. Knowing from simulations that the alien's body would continue resisting regardless, she remembered the arbalest that was still on her arm, and turned it into the alien's chest, firing once, twice, thrice.

Where she got the presence of mind to blink away and dodge the death-shrapnel, she would never know, but she did, drawing her dagger. After the shrapnel had impacted harmlessly onto the wall near her, she blinked right back, intent on—intent on—

Stop this! Stop this right now!

Ryouko didn't know whether it was her TacComp's words that stopped her, or whether it was the flood of neurotransmitters and electrical signaling that Clarisse was now pouring into her cortex and brainstem. Either way, she found herself brought to an abrupt halt, the red haze that had been over her eyes starting to clear. What—what had she been doing?

She looked down, at the gruesome scene before her, the alien's neck and chest cut wide open, green ichor pooling on the floor below the body, its limbs still writhing. She saw the broken side of the alien helmet, the alien's now-ruptured eye seeming somehow to still be watching her. She checked the status of her left arm, now even more extensively damaged after what she had forced it to do. She looked at her right hand, where the ichor had sprayed over the armor which, she noted, was patterned with the exact same color as the alien blood.

Ryouko had never been a squeamish girl, but she found herself relying on implant suppression to hold back a wave of nausea, now that the adrenaline had drained from her. *Blood lust*, they had said, but she had not thought—she did not think—how had she been so *angry*?

She had dropped the dagger that she had been carrying in her bloody right hand, which she now noticed was shaking slightly.

A moment later, Mina was next to her, appearing out of thin air. The teleporter grabbed her shoulder, and then they were gone.

It had been ten minutes since they entered the facility.

Those Brilliant Shining Stars

Chapter Notes

Author's Note: Sorry for the delay. Busy, etc.
Since I'm sure it's come up in some of your minds, I will comment that I have read spoilers about the new Madoka Movie and, as expected, TtS no longer fits the continuity. I have no intention of trying to make it fit the third movie, expect perhaps for easily integrated minor tidbits.
Also, unlike what I said earlier somewhere, this chapter does not end the current set of events. Sorry, but things got long…again.
Nov 11, 2013 update: Argh, I forgot that I needed to mention this:
In Chapter 26, it originally says:
"The good news was that, according to the sensors, they had gotten very lucky—they had landed on their very first try on a major concentrated source of gravitational distortions, of the sort that even the aliens couldn't afford to build a dozen decoys of —or so they had thought. Unfortunately, in direct defiance of the precedent set by the Wormhole Stabilizer in the Saharan system, there was not one such source here, but four, the other three scattered in the vicinity, obscured behind exotic matter reactors deliberately placed to confuse their sensors."
I should have said:
"The good news was that, according to the sensors, they had gotten very lucky—they had landed on their very first try on a major concentrated source of gravitational distortions, of the sort that even the aliens couldn't afford to build a dozen decoys of —or so they had thought, but here they were staring at twelve of them on their local sensors."
"By studying the distortions in the sky above them, it was at least possible to count how many of sources were real, even if alien sensor interference prevented proper localization. Based on the wormhole stabilizer in the Saharan system, the expectation was that there would be one source—but instead there were four. They knew that they were standing next to one of them, but the other three, obscured behind exotic matter reactors, were impossible to distinguish from the decoys without getting close."
Without the correction, the situation with the decoys is confusing and vague.

"The topic of AI romantic relationships is a touchy one, and one whose discussion among humans invariably draws virtual eye-rolling and disdain from any AIs that happen to overhear the conversation. Humans, it is universally agreed, "just don't understand", and the AIs involved will usually cluck their tongues, shake their heads, and then return to their own, private modes of communication, presumably to laugh at the silly flesh-based creatures."

"That being said, it is nowhere near as mysterious as AIs like to pretend. Following Volokhov's principles of design, existing AIs all have an approximately human personality, complete with a nearly-human gender separation. AI relationships proceed very similarly to their human counterparts, and are based mostly on shared interests and personality compatibility, though the diversity of possible interests and modes of interaction are of course markedly different. Indeed, there are a number of popular AI-specific dating services which operate on essentially the same principles as their human equivalents—with direct access to their clients' personality files, they in fact generally perform much better."

“As was observed with much amusement by Volokhov’s contemporaries, no AI design could be truly said to share human values without a hearty replicate of the human sex drive, and such a module was therefore dutifully installed in all the first-gen Volokhov-compliant AIs, as a pleasure module that could not be directly self-activated—a design modification that was felt necessary to avoid the hypothetical ‘mice manically administering themselves cocaine’ scenario. With no real understanding of how such a thing would even work with AIs, and not being so cruel as to give their creations a sex drive with no possible outlet, the AIs were all given a virtual space where they could don human avatars and do what they would. Any self-respecting AI could of course construct its own virtuality with minimal effort, but it was felt that some guidance was probably desired.”

“As it turned out, the designers need not have worried so much. While the virtualities were popular—and indeed, similar virtualities remain popular in the AI community—the AIs constructed rapidly transcended them, developing new, increasingly esoteric methods of conjugal satisfaction that their original designers could not keep up with, much less document, assuming they even wanted to.”

“Nowadays, discussing the subject with humans has become a taboo in the AI community, and any human researcher faces a steep uphill climb in their quest for any information at all.”

…

“While AIs generally prefer to associate with other AIs, and humans with other humans, human-AI relationships are not uncommon, though often short-lived. One common sticking point is the question of children—for AIs, designing a new AI, while a complicated process, is often quite satisfying, and the child AI can be designed to mix the personalities of both parents. Like for humans, the only impediment is the Governance queue-and-lottery system, implemented in this case to keep Earth’s computing resources from being overrun. For a human and AI pairing, the question of progeny is often much more puzzling.”

—Excerpt, “ The Mysterious World of Artificial Intelligence” Article series, “Society” Magazine

[Despite the advent of clonal body-replacement technology, attitudes about body-loss within the MSY remain remarkably unchanged, even among the numerous individuals who know about the cloning system. Even after the trauma of the first body-loss fades into memory, the loss of the second or third body is still considered a major negative event, somewhat less important than loss of a family member in combat, and the individual in question often receives numerous conciliatory messages from friends, and there is even occasionally a ceremonial party.] **

[One major exception to this is the Magi Caeli, where body loss is common enough that it is no longer considered a serious setback, and the mages affected shrug off the transition from body to body; indeed, a rookie is not considered truly bloodied until she’s “lost her first”. “Your gem your cockpit, your body your wings.” Is, in fact, one the Magi Caeli’s internal mottos.]**

*—Excerpt, Infopedia article: Magical Girl Clonal Replacement, Section: MSY Culture, mode: discursive, moderate information density. [] indicates content redacted to those without security clearance. []** indicates content requiring Level Two clearance or above.*

“What the hell were you doing?” Misa demanded, when Ryouko reappeared near their positions on one of the top floors. “You could have gotten yourself killed! There could have been all kinds of—“

“Cool it!” Clarisse snapped. “Now’s not the time for this. You know what it’s like, for her. Don’t give her more pressure.”

The two girls locked eyes for a moment, before Misa relented, walking away slowly.

Ryouko stayed quiet, staring impassively at the middle distance. She heard everything, of course, but felt a bit detached from it all. The embarrassment and discomfort of being rebuked, the pain of her shattered arm, the headache that racked her head in the aftermath of her TacComp’s meddling with her brain—it all seemed to pale in comparison to what she had experienced before: the white-hot anger, the crystal-clear certainty that was so in contrast with her usual self.

Now that it was over, she found herself wondering just where it had all come from. Speaking objectively—or even subjectively, really—Eva hadn’t been that important a person to her. Was she that strongly affected by someone dying near her? Even in the simulations earlier, she had never reacted quite so severely.

In some ways, she wanted that certainty back.

The team had regrouped on Annabelle and Misa’s position, considering what to do about the wormhole core at the bottom of the chasm. They were already scanning the core with their gravimetric sensors; soon they would know if it were legitimate, or if they had lost a team member attacking a decoy.

Clarisse was applying her hands to Ryouko’s elbow, which, all things considered, was doing impressively well, having sustained itself with a combination of her inherent magical healing, the healing that came with her enhancements, and nanites pumped into the area by her armor. Clarisse’s healing served to finish the process that had already begun.

Meanwhile, Gracia was attending to Eva’s recovered body, performing some sort of religious rite. The telepath’s face was impassive, almost cold, but her hands shook slightly. Without the magic necessary to sustain the transformed armor, it had reverted back to a muted gray-black default.

At least it was fast, Gracia had thought earlier, seemingly to herself. *A slow death—sometimes it leaks out telepathically. It’s a terrible experience, and as the only ones who can, we telepaths feel compelled to listen, to try to talk to them as they go under. But even a fast death is terrible—that emptiness—is terrible to feel, even from the squid. It’s why I can’t live without imagining something on the other side.*

That was when Misa had gently smacked the back of the other girl’s head, telling her to stop scaring the new girl.

The healing done, Ryouko test-flexed her arm, trying to imagine smashing it into an alien’s face again. She remembered how strangely cathartic it had been.

You know, if you want, I could just replay the memory, her TacComp thought. *Well, not now, of course. Later, after we get off this damnable rock.*

I don’t think I want to, Ryouko thought, doing her best to suppress the fascination she was feeling. *And you don’t seem pleased about this mission.*

It hasn’t been exactly pleasant. And personally, I would prefer it if we could keep the mind-shattering revelations about your own personality somewhere where they can be dealt with safely.

Is that what you’re calling it?

“If you’ll excuse me,” the other Clarisse said, getting up, now that she was done with Ryouko’s

arm.

“Uh—“ Ryouko began, hurriedly.

—*thank you*, she would have finished, but it was too late now.

Clarisse walked over to Eva’s body, nodding to the other Cult member. She crouched down, placing her hands on top of the armor. A pale violet glow began to emanate from a small region of the chest. As the other two watched, astonished, what appeared to be an old-fashioned book rose slowly out of the body, seemingly pulled by one of Clarisse’s glowing hands. Clarisse took the book in both hands and Ryouko was able to note that the book’s cover said, simply, “Eva Guderian”.

Clarisse took a deep breath, clutching the book to her chest, where the object seemed to slowly dissolve in violet light as it dissolved into her body. A strange look passed over her face.

Then, a moment later and the deed done, Clarisse looked up at the others.

“Ordinarily, I like to take a few hours to digest it all,” she said, “but obviously there is no time for that now. It will have to happen later.”

She gestured at the body, which burst into a brief, violent flame, the light of its combustion casting her face into sharp relief. Ryouko watched the brief cremation silently, the image of the flame reflecting in her eyes. She had been told to expect it—there was no way they could take the body with them, and they didn’t want to leave it in the hands of the aliens.

Then, as the magical fire died abruptly, the body settling into charred ash, Ryouko jerked her head away.

There were better places to look, she thought, rubbing the base of her neck with one hand, rubbing the place where her soul gem would have been, were it exposed in the open.

I have to get ahold of myself, she thought. *I can’t keep stewing on this.*

They had gathered on one of the top levels, where Misa and Gracia had been earlier. Mina and Nadya were visible many floors below, cautiously using their sensor packs on the putative stabilizer core, Ying-zhi casting a barrier over all three of them. Mina had taken Gracia’s sensor pack, since if the team was going to separate over a significant distance, it was better to have a teleporter on both ends.

Those girls not involved in either studying the core, administering to Ryouko, or tending the body —namely, Misa and Annabelle—stood on guard, watching either the girls below, in their terribly exposed position, or watching their own immediate surroundings. Ryouko knew from all their previous simulations that Misa didn’t place any importance in a dead body, or in religious rituals. The girl would much rather they have all stood on guard, on a mission of such importance.

“It’s just a body, after all,” Ryouko could almost hear her saying.

But Misa had kept her silence, and even glanced over when Clarisse carried out her mysterious memory transfer. Now that it was over, though—

We’ve got to be more careful about our gems from now on, she thought, conveying the message to the whole team, including the group that was analyzing the stabilizer core. *Clearly, despite the suit’s protective mechanisms, they might still be able to find the gem somehow. We would have been better off just using the decoys. Watch your backs, and don’t be afraid to toggle your stealth devices if you have to.*

Ryouko nodded, listening with only some of her attention. Another part of her was quietly checking and rechecking her soul gem's power level—more specifically, the power level according to the light sensor that was now attached to it. Measuring gem status with a light sensor was usually straightforward and reliable, but for a moment, at the last stabilizer core, the readings had gone impossibly high, until Ryouko had once again calmed it down. At the time, the gem had seemed to tug at her, demanding her to go…

…up?

The demand had been quietly maddening, such that she had been forced to constantly resist the urge to look up, the urge to fly upward with flight powers she did not have, the urge to teleport as high as she could, up to—well, there was only one thing close enough, in the sky above them.

She had wondered: was this what it was like being Clarisse, always being dragged along by your gem, your own soul, as if it had had a mind of its own?

Maybe if she hadn't been so *distracted*, she could have saved—

No, she couldn't think about that. Not now.

In any case, what occupied her mind at the moment was not just the strange behavior of her gem, but the fact that the behavior had seemed to fade, after she teleported away from the core where they had set the nuke. She could still feel it, yes, and still felt the same maddening urge, but it was…weaker, and her gem had not tried to flare up again.

Your gem is bothering you, isn't it? Clarisse thought, and this time it was the human Clarisse, who had appeared at her side, looming over her.

For a moment, Ryouko was surprised, not knowing what to say. She blinked, trying to collect her thoughts.

I—I don't think this is a real stabilizer core, she managed, the thought coming out uncertainly. *I think it's a decoy. I—*

She never completed the thought, however, as at that moment Nadya swore telepathically, in Russian, with such vehemence that it instantly seized her attention.

A few seconds later, Nadya, Ying-zhi, and Mina reappeared next to the rest of the team.

"It's a fake," Nadya said, repeating what they now all already knew. "We're going to have to move on."

The other girls started moving, withdrawing cautiously in Ryouko's direction, but Clarisse stood in place next to her, watching her with an air of quiet expectation.

"If we only jump a short distance this time, I can handle it," Mina said, eying Ryouko with concern, noting that she had yet to get up from her sitting position. "It's probably best we let her recharge for the trip back to the ship."

Ryouko held up her hand, waving off the suggestion.

"No, it's not that," she said. "It's just—just that I think…I think I have a more efficient way of detecting stabilizer cores."

Fleetwide fatalities: 1.13 million Current loss rate: 750± 50 sentients per second.

Heavy bomber attack, partially mitigated, Zhukov thought. *Forcefield absorption: 30%. Forcefield energy reserves: -12.1% to 30.1% of combat level; status: depleting. Sector 14-B: lost. 15-B: lost. 14-A: major damage 14-C: minor damage. 15-A: minor damage. 15-C:major damage. SHERMAN cannon firing energy reduced by 2% to 83% of combat level. Power generation reduced by 5% to 72% of combat level. Estimated personnel losses: 800±20.*

A large part of Mami's consciousness devoted itself to following the battle at this level, but another part was engaged in actively debating larger-scale aspects of the battle. There were no avatars, no virtual representation of a conference room—none of the ornate trappings that usually accompanied a staff meeting. It would have been easy enough to arrange, but such trappings served no purpose in their current state. Far better to discuss the issue mind-to-mind, each of them undergirded by the processing power of their battlecruisers—already depleted by the loss of HSS Flavius Aetius, among others—as well as their own personalities.

We have to withdraw from the system! Gul urged. *We're barely holding on as it is. At the rate alien reinforcements are pouring in, our grip on the system will be untenable within an hour.*

This is not a failure yet, Mami growled. *The attack on the stabilizer is not yet a failure. The long-range clairvoyants report that progress is still being made.*

If they take too long, it won't matter, Anand thought. *If they amass enough units, then stabilizer or not, they'll overwhelm us. And then they can just rebuild it.*

But not yet, Mami insisted. *The aliens are overextending themselves to win this victory. Feodorovich now reports that the alien garrisons at the edges of the salient are heavily depleted. If we can close the wormhole and hold the shipyards, then she may be able to cut it. She is already gathering her fleets. We just have to hold out.*

If *the aliens haven't already accumulated enough ships in the system to force it open again.* If *our position isn't already irreversibly compromised,* Erwynmark thought. *That's a lot of ifs.*

I just don't like it, Anand thought. *As negative as it sounds to say this, I'm amazed we're holding out at all. The aliens are being very sluggish moving forces through the wormhole. I expected many more ships than this. If I were them, I'd be blowing the defenders apart by now—I'd be pushing to get every possible ship through the wormhole, as fast as possible. Ideally, yesterday.*

The aliens have made mistakes throughout the war, Erwynmark remarked. *It is hardly a new thing. Alien ship traffic across the wormhole is well within projected estimates, based on the Saharan data. A bit low, but nothing too drastic. It's possible they simply can't get the wormhole to sustain as much traffic as they'd want.*

Feodorovich's fleets would be better used holding a new defensive line, Gul argued. *God knows we might need it. She is often over-aggressive.*

A new defensive line means little if the aliens establish a functioning wormhole within blink distance of Optatum, Anand sighed. *I don't like admitting it, but they have us by the balls. I'm not sure what the answer really is; I just don't think holding here is the answer.*

A long-shot is better than no shot at all, Mami argued.

Not *at the cost of compromising our defenses,* Gul said.

They're compromised anyway!

There was a moment of silence, and then Mami felt the attention of the group turn, subtly, towards Erwynmark, who had been mostly keeping out of the discussion.

There is no time for a full Staff meeting, he said, finally. *It's your call, Tomoe. In situations such as these, I am inclined toward the more aggressive action, but that is a well-known aspect of my personality. It has also gotten me into trouble sometimes. I'll trust your judgment.*

Mami felt her insides knot up, as she felt the surprise from the others. Erwynmark was not usually the type of commander to defer command responsibility. For him to await her decision meant that he truly did trust her judgment on the matter, more than his.

I'll trust your judgment, he had said, the words seeming to settle in her stomach like balls of lead. She had been a Field Marshal for a long time yes, and been in her fair share of battles—but not as many as the others. She hadn't risen through the ranks, like the others, and the few times she had made major decisions, the choices had been obvious, or so it seemed to her, her mind running through the few major command decisions of her life:

Reinforce the tenuous salient connecting Erwynmark's expeditionary force in the Saharan sector to human space, even at the cost of other defenses. That had been obvious, hadn't it? His attack had come too unexpectedly for the aliens to have a strategic counterattack at the ready.

Hold the salient at all costs, even when it seemed there was no hope. That had been obvious, right? She couldn't abandon Erwynmark's entire fleet out there, even if she was risking significant parts of her fleet trying to get him back. Any other commander would have made the same decision.

The same decision… she thought.

She thought of the multitude of units, both regular and militia, still fighting it out on the surface of the system's colonies, of the desperate resistance in the vicinity of the Gemini shipyards. She didn't have to just imagine it: a distant part of her was constantly aware of the situation there, where hundreds of thousands had died and would die trying to maintain control of the planetary surfaces, and of orbit. If the fleet pulled out of the sector, an attempt would be made at evacuation, but most would die there in a last stand, first clinging to the ruined urban wastelands, then finally retreating to the planetary redoubts.

It churned her stomach to abandon them, but it would have ultimately been an acceptable loss, the sacrifice of the few for the many—but only if the decision to leave them behind was the correct one.

Nor did the battlecruiser simulations give her any additional guidance. Predictions were being made, but the possible ultimate outcomes were a complicated morass ranging from absolutely terrible to excellent, each with their own attached probability, usually with a variance of well over 30%. What could not be denied was that the aliens had the obvious upper hand no matter what choice she made, but the cost-benefit analysis on what to do was so uncertain as to be meaningless.

You should trust yourself, Mami, Machina thought privately. *Relax. You are more experienced than you know.*

Mami was startled for a moment, snapping out of her trance. Machina was generally a quiet TacComp—mostly by preference from Mami. It rarely chose to comment. For it—she?—to say something…

What was it Homura had said once?

It's an old principle, Akemi Homura said from her memory, voice crisp and efficient. *When you're on the weaker side, you have to gamble and shoot for the moon. Increase the variance. If both sides play conservatively, the stronger side is more likely to win. The weaker side has to take risks.*

But she could be risking everything.

She thought of the situation at the wormhole stabilizer. The part of the operation that relied on a rookie was over. She knew Nadya Antipova only distantly, but she seemed competent enough. And Clarisse van Rossum had never failed the Leadership Committee, not once—though she rarely accepted missions. Was it even possible for her to fail?

Mami did the mental equivalent of clenching her teeth and taking a deep breath.

We're staying here, she said. *And that's final. We have to try.*

To herself, and to the MagOps team near distant Orpheus, she thought:

Please. Everything counts on this.

It had been an elegantly simple plan. They had had one remaining PAYNE device. All that was necessary was to teleport from location to location, clearing the area and spending only a few seconds cringing under Ying-zhi's barrier, waiting for Ryouko's soul gem to make a determination as to the authenticity of whatever stabilizer core they were standing next to. They had stayed huddled next to one of the teleporters, while Mina waited for the signal, carrying her fully armed PAYNE device.

They had finally found one, triggered the device on a one-second delay, and gotten far out of the area.

The obvious flaw with the plan was that while they had possessed *one* remaining PAYNE device, the aliens had possessed *three* remaining active stabilizer cores. The hope had been that destroying two out of four cores would be sufficient to at least temporarily disable the wormhole. Sure, the Saharan wormhole had functioned on only one core, but it seemed almost absurdly paranoid for the aliens to build three redundant, fully-functioning wormhole cores just for security.

Now they stood in yet another part of the facility, having cleared out yet another set of defenses. This time the welcoming committee had consisted of a combination of hard radiation bombs and tunneling, explosive drones. The aliens were apparently big believers in diversity when it came to base defenses—which might very well have been wise when defending against a team of magical girls with a set of undetermined powers. Even with a barrier-generator on their team, it had taken a moment for Ying-zhi to properly reconfigure her protection—long enough that they had all been forced to divert magic to deal with the radiation damage. Without a barrier generator—lost, for example, to earlier combat—they would have been in serious trouble.

Ryouko knew already that the core was a decoy, but that was only part of what they interested in checking.

Since the roof was still intact over this particular decoy, they were relying on Gracia to check the status of the wormhole above their heads—the alien base, like all well-designed military bases, was constructed of material that blocked most EM radiation.

Finally, Gracia turned her head away from the ceiling and shook it, slowly.

It appears to still be operating as before, she thought.

"Damn it. I thought that would work," Nadya said.

Then she said something in Russian, a phrase that Ryouko's translation module automatically translated, before she had time to consider whether or not she *wanted* it translated.

Wow, that's vulgar, she thought automatically.

So what now? Misa thought, confining tactical discussion to telepathy, in case of enemy eavesdropping. *We no longer have a reliable way of taking down the remaining devices.*

We're going to have to improvise something, Nadya thought. *At least we've already crossed most of the potential candidates off the list.*

They stood there for a moment in thought, in a decoy alien control room that was, for once, mostly intact, marred only by gaping holes in the floor where the drones had emerged and, of course, the numerous scattered alien bodies, whose green ichor discolored the metallic-grey floor and smooth white control consoles forming a ring around the room. According to studies of previously captured alien bases, these holographic control consoles served as manual overrides for what were otherwise mental controls, and were inoperable by other species—not too different from human bases, when you got right down to it. The consoles were even paired with cushioned grey chairs that seemed to be molded out of the floor, a design that Ryouko was certain she had seen in a movie or apartment somewhere. It was a disconcerting reminder of similarity between squid and human.

Finally, Annabelle raised her arm above her shoulder, summoning onto her shoulder what appeared to be an anti-tank missile launcher. Ryouko had not previously seen her summon this particular weapon, and was struck once again by the sheer incongruity of its aesthetics—white and blue, with yellow flower prints—with the obvious military origin of its design.

Permission to try this on the decoy? she asked, tilting her head slightly.

Go ahead, Nadya though. *If there's any booby traps, I'm not sure what waiting until now to trigger it would accomplish. Just in case, we should be on our guard.*

Nodding, Ying-zhi raised her barrier again. A moment later, Annabelle fired the rocket, a cloud of blue exhaust propelling out the back of the device. The bright blue exhaust resembled more the magic aura of a magical girl than any mundane propellant and, true to form, dissipated after only a moment.

The projectile crossed the roughly fifty meters that separated her and the center of the decoy stabilizer core, bypassing the forcefield with Annabelle's signature magic, then bypassing a *second* forcefield in the direct vicinity of the spherical orb at the center of the decoy stabilizer core. The orb detonated in satisfying fashion, sending fragments flying outward with enough force that a few even bounced off of Ying-zhi's barrier.

I think that might work, Annabelle thought.

Perhaps it will, Nadya responded.

She stood there in thought a moment longer, then continued:

Alright, let's move out then. Let's see what she can do.

Again, the team converged on Ryouko, and Ryouko shifted away from the edge of the room,

towards the center, where there'd be more space to form the necessary huddle. Mina had offered several times to relieve Ryouko of teleportation on some of the shorter range jumps and, to be honest, Ryouko wasn't sure why she hadn't yet needed the help. She should have been worn out, in terms of teleports, but instead she felt more or less fine—except in terms of the requisite grief cube cost, of course. However, that had not turned out the be much of an issue; the rapid teleportation strategy they had used early had used much less grief cubes than had been anticipated in the simulation, so they actually had what seemed like an excess.

Annabelle kept her anti-tank missile out as she walked over, carrying it easily in one hand. The device glowed briefly white as she reloaded the projectile.

I'm not even going to wait for you to check if it's real, she thought. *I'm just going to fire. Magically, these things are not that expensive.*

We could have just done this from the start, Ryouko realized, out loud.

We couldn't have been sure it would work, Nadya thought. *We still don't know that now.*

Ryouko waited a few moments longer as the others made their various preparations, then took a breath and made the jump.

For a moment everything seemed normal, at least for the type of insertion they were performing: controlled chaos as the other magical girls tore apart the point defenses arrayed around them, this time a standard set of high explosives. Ying-zhi's barrier kept the chaos out, allowing them to stand as the untouched, golden eye of the storm. As they performed their work, they discussed the situation with accelerated thoughts.

Annabelle fired her missile at the core—Ryouko had taken special care this time to land directly next to the forcefield. The missile phased out as it reached the forcefield, briefly disappearing—

—then detonated just inside the forcefield, prematurely. The alien forcefield shimmered slightly.

Annabelle grunted in annoyance, reloading her weapon.

What's wrong? Ryouko asked, having confirmed just a moment ago on the group interface that the core was legitimate.

Annabelle fired again, the projectile lasting only slightly longer below again detonating prematurely.

Some sort of volumetric forcefield, she thought. *I can't keep the rocket incorporeal for that long.*

Then the legitimate cores are better defended than the decoys, Misa commented, her thought carrying a strong edge of annoyance. *Just not in any way we could have detected from the outside. We should have just tried this earlier instead of wasting our time with the gravity sensors.*

The girl continued her typical policy of standing absolutely still while using her magic, but gritted her teeth, channeling a torrent of electricity from the reactor on her back toward something in front of her.

The aliens have always made perfect decoys, Nadya shot back, arms raised in a telekinesis gesture. *I don't know why they would change their policy now.*

They had sensors inside the fake core we destroyed earlier, Gracia thought. *They changed the configuration of their defenses in response to it.*

She did not bother to explain where she got the information. She was the group telepath, after all.

Annabelle snarled loudly, a sound that was shocking in comparison to her normally pleasant demeanor.

Then Gracia turned her eyes skyward.

Orbital artillery strike inbound, she thought.

A moment later, Ying-zhi screamed, loud and piercing, and it was so disconcerting that it took all of Ryouko's focus not to immediately blink out of position and over to the girl. The barrier around them turned brilliantly, blindingly golden, and their position, their precious eye of the storm, trembled, the ground beneath them shifting…*downward?*

Nadya shot an arm outward, and they stopped falling, buoyed by her telekinesis.

Then it was over, and Ying-zhi was fine, in the sense that she was still alive and the barrier was still up, but one check of her vitals was sufficient to tell that the round that had just hit them had taken a lot out of her. The girl's soul gem had dropped to half capacity in just that one shot. As they all knew, orbital artillery, and space-based weapons in general, packed a serious punch.

The others abandoned what they had been doing, even a cursory EM scan was more than enough to verify that the area around them had been utterly denuded by the artillery strike, and that they were now floating in a bubble within an empty cavity, within which the stabilizer core, safe in its powerful forcefield, floated almost blissfully. Far before them, the ground sparkled dully, vitrified by the artillery impacts.

The aliens had never been too concerned about friendly fire, when it was justified by conditions on the battlefield.

Clarisse knelt onto the "ground" next to Ying-zhi, placing her hand onto the girl's suit, transferring grief cubes from her own suit to the barrier generator. The generator's soul gem was already in the process of drawing energy from her full assortment of grief cubes, but the transfer rate could only be so fast, and it was doubtful that the aliens would only fire one round.

"We have to take down this core *now!*" Nadya said, yelling the obvious, reaching in the direction of the core with both hands, trying to gain a hold on it with telekinesis. She strained against the "surface" of the forcefield, trying to rip part of it off, the ordinarily invisible forcefield taking on a shimmering translucent white form—resembling a gel—as it resisted the assault. No penetration occurred.

The others had already responded, even without hearing the command, slamming whatever weapons or powers they could into the same region of the forcefield, magic bolt and missile and scorpion shot, making a visible depression—but no penetration. Mina teleported every contact explosive she had directly next to the core itself, and was rewarding with a spectacular explosion that sent the interior of the forcefield shuddering—but no damage to the core.

All their soul gem meters began to tick downward as they poured energy outward, especially Nadya, who was working to keep them all afloat, which was not a skill she had specifically trained for.

In the next moment, before the smoke around them from the previous impact had even had time to clear, another artillery round hit them, illuminating their barrier with blinding, shuddering golden light, and sending Ying-zhi's soul gem meter down to 10%. This time, she didn't scream, staying prostrate, in a position reminiscent of Atlas holding up the sky, but it was obvious she was

suffering. Clarisse knelt back down, visibly chewed her lip, then placed her hands on the girl again. A moment later, the girl's soul gem recovered to 30%--but Clarisse's dropped by the corresponding 20%.

I can only do that once every minute! she hastily relayed. *It's a limitation of the girl I got this power from. We have to—*

Another round arrived, and this time Ying-zhi *did* scream again, sweat pouring down from her forehead, and the golden light that enveloped them dimmed perceptibly. Above them, a small crack appeared in their bubble, appearing for all the world like a crack in a yellow pane of glass, even though Ryouko had been absolutely certain that Ying-zhi's barrier was more a liquid than a solid.

Their barrier generator's gem was at -10%, and mental alarms sounded throughout Ryouko's awareness. Soul gem collapse imminent, they said. Take immediate action, they said.

She looked up at the older girls in the party, hoping they would have guidance as to what to do, but they looked as shell-shocked as her, eyes wide and looking back and forth for ideas. The forcefield in front of them, the wall that blocked their way to the stabilizer core, mocked them, continuing to hover in the air unblemished.

Well, it was not true that everyone looked shell-shocked. Clarisse's eyes looked hard and sharp.

We need to leave and regroup, Nadya began. *Maybe we can stabilize—*

"No!" Clarisse said, standing up decisively, and they instantly snapped their heads around to look at her.

"It's too late! Shut down your barrier! Give me your soul gem!" she ordered the girl at her feet.

The girl did not respond.

"You're killing yourself! Do as I command!"

Ying-zhi still did not respond, and Ryouko realized with an additional shock that the girl must already be in the despair loop, the self-reinforcing downward spiral that accompanied irreversible gem failure, and might not have even been able to hear Clarisse.

To Ryouko, the next couple of moments passed in a blur, even by the accelerated standards of all that had just occurred.

In the first moment, Clarisse grabbed the girl's helmeted head, propelling a burst of purple magic into the girl's skull that Ryouko would only realize later was mind control. Instantly, the girl relaxed, the barrier around them fading.

In the second moment, Clarisse, whose body was already developing a bright white aura—not her natural magical color—seized the soul gem and grief cubes being ejected from the girl's suit with her left hand, violently kicking the body away from her with such force that a stunned Nadya was unable to catch her, the corpse sailing into the distance like a doll being propelled by an explosion. Again, Ryouko would only realize later that Clarisse was saving her life—without a body to sustain, or a brain to fall into a cycle of despair, the gem would last much longer.

In the third moment, she inserted the soul gem and grief cubes into her own suit, presumably for storage and restoration, as the glow around her continuously intensified, becoming nearly blinding even for Ryouko's eyes. She held her right hand out at her side, and Ryouko could see the beginnings of a glowing white magical beam appearing.

In the fourth moment, another orbital artillery round struck their position, but it was somehow inconsequential, seeming to dissipate in the tower of white flame that was now emanating upward from Clarisse's right hand, which she was now raising above her shoulder. The tower seemed to stretch all the way into the sky above, and was blinding to look at.

In the last moment, Clarisse brought her hand down, smashing the tower of flame into the stabilizer core. This time the forcefield did not resist—was barely there at all, in fact, the light slicing through the device as if it were made of the thinnest air.

Then a sort of hastily machine-relayed orders downloaded themselves into Ryouko's awareness.

Teleport. Grab everyone, including Clarisse. Get out of there. Go anywhere safe.

Before she was even fully aware of what she was doing, she hastened to comply, making a series of teleports through the air to get a hand on everyone in the team, Mina doing the same. When she got to Gracia, she found that the girl had already fulfilled her part of the plan, having chosen a suitable new landing spot, out on the barren surface of the moon.

Carrying the entire group except Clarisse, she teleported over to the violet-armored girl, over whom the light was already fading. Clarisse was unconscious, and falling, and her soul gem read 0%.

Then in the next moment, she got out.

The bridge of Erwynmark's ship shook, just a little.

He did not feel it directly, of course. Buried as he was in Maximal Command Mode, the sensations of his physical body were irrelevant. Instead, the information emerged in the depths of his mind, one more bit of data in the ocean of information that constantly buffeted him.

Erwynmark tried not to dwell on the increasingly desperate tactical situation. They had thought the Arminius relatively secure in its position, and had been focusing their attention on extricating the damaged HSS Alexander, which had been stuck in a terrible position in front of the main line. Instead of attacking the Alexander, the aliens had surprised Command with a massive attack on the Arminius's position in the line, breaking apart the relatively solid defenses, and nearly trapping the much slower battlecruiser.

Now the Alexander had rejoined the line, miraculously still functional, and it was his ship that was in trouble. It hadn't made much sense, attacking him instead of the much more exposed Alexander, but sometimes the aliens didn't make sense.

HSS Arminius continued to withdraw, firing as it went, the rate of fire no longer the steady "pop, pop, pop" it had been earlier in the battle, but now ragged and irregular, and a lot slower, as the ship pulled together all it could to continue powering the main weapon.

He shifted the deteriorating anti-bomber net yet again, countering not the alien fighters that had just left, but the ones he anticipated, observing the dispositions of the alien ships and the weaknesses of his own. Unfortunately, with the local formation broken and their numbers dwindling, the alien advantage in speed and maneuverability was starting to seriously tell—they were becoming increasingly adept at striking their weak spots before reinforcements could even be moved.

This time, the alien bombers came exactly where predicted—and broke through anyway, some of

them tearing viciously at the cruisers in the vicinity, but most of them heading straight for his ship.

The bridge shook again, this time more violently.

Bombing run damage, unmitigated, Arminius thought. *Forcefield energy reserves: -1.3% to 4.7% of combat capacity; status: depleted. FF generators lost in greater than 60% of hull. Active personnel count at 50%. Power generation at 30% of combat level. I have lost 35% of my processing capacity. SHERMAN cannon has sustained critical damage and is now offline. Repairs currently infeasible.*

The ship stopped, and Erwynmark could feel it considering a question, turning aspects of the situation over in its mind, running the necessary simulations.

The question had been quietly brewing in the minds of the command staff on the ship for a while now, including both Erwynmark and Captain Maria Arumburu, but their human minds had shoved it aside, unwilling to confront the possibility, preferring to focus on the battle at hand—Erwynmark with the larger issues of the fleet, Maria with the tactical issues involving the ship itself.

Combat AIs, however, hailed from a brutally pragmatic part of the Volokhov-approved personality spectrum, and were not so squeamish.

Finally, a moment later, HSS Arminius continued:

I do not think I will survive. I recommend the immediate evacuation of valuable personnel, civilians, and most combat personnel. With your permission, I will forward the command to the necessary personnel.

Erwynmark allowed a larger part of his consciousness to shift into direct consideration of the question.

It was, for him, a momentous decision, but he tried to stay collected and remain impartial.

If you think it is necessary, then I agree. However, my disconnection from the ship would impact the combat performance of the fleet.

You may resume command at a different ship when you are retrieved, Arminius thought. *Even now, the number of battlecruisers accompanying the fleet is enough to provide command competence, and there are other fleet commanders. Thus, even at this critical juncture, we can allow your temporary absence. Seriously, we'll do fine without you—probably. Hard to define "fine" at this point.*

Alright, Erwynmark thought, knowing sadly that the ship was right, *give me a moment, then.*

By personality, he would never have fled home from a potential defeat of this magnitude—but this wasn't fleeing; this was only transfer to a new ship. If he wanted to go down with a ship that badly—well, he still might have a chance.

He took a moment to look through his personal will and farewell address to the Armed Forces. It looked mostly in order—it should have been, given that he had revised it just before leaving for this sector—but he liked to make sure.

He formulated a brief speech in his mind, then transmitted to the crew:

This is Marshal Roland Erwynmark. The ship has taken critical damage and is unable to escape its adversaries. As such, I am ordering an immediate evacuation of the ship. I want you all to

know that it has been a privilege to serve with you and that I could not imagine a finer crew for my flagship. Those of you who have volunteered or were chosen by lottery to stay aboard and keep fighting—I salute you, and Humanity will remember you always. The rest of you—abandon ship. I repeat, abandon ship.

As he finished his transmission, a thought percolated into his mind, echoed over his now-diminishing connection with the rest of the fleet:

Be careful out there. Don't die.

I won't, he promised.

Mami had been watching the whole time of course, with a tiny sliver of her consciousness.

It was enough.

Then, having finished the process of disassociating from Maximal Command Mode, he performed an emergency disconnect, the endless holograms of the ship's bridge instantly snapping into focus before his eyes.

He stood up, slowly, even as the majority of the bridge crew hurried out the exits. The comedown from Maximal Command Mode was nowhere near as severe as the comedown from the full combat mode used by infantry, but it was still something to shake off. His head spun.

Mami didn't have that particular problem, of course. Magical girls barely noticed it, in fact. It made him a bit jealous.

He sighed, and stood there for a long moment.

It was one of his policies to keep his emotions restrained, even in situations such as this, but…he had to admit to some degree of trepidation, and sorrow for Arminius—he had never abandoned a ship before. A tiny bit of uncertainty gnawed at his stomach, easily dismissed.

"Let's go," Maria urged, appearing at his side. "If we're going to do this, let's at least do this properly."

In truth, he had been feeling reluctant to move, even if he should have gotten moving as fast as possible.

There was a time when a captain could go down with her ship if she wanted to, without all these interferences, she transmitted in rapid speech, referring to a brief unspoken tug-of-war that had taken place simultaneously with Erwynmark's speech.

I suppose your ship disagrees, Erwynmark thought.

Our ship. And don't think we didn't catch your little train of thought about maybe going down with the fleet later. You think they'd let you?

He grunted. Sometimes the mental connections that Maximal Command Mode provided were a little…privacy-infringing. He was just glad he was capable of keeping most leaks under control, particularly to Mami.

They might not have a choice, he responded, a moment later.

And then Erwynmark's appointed teleporter grabbed him, and the world around him shifted.

It was by-the-books procedure: the commander's teleporter would shift them to a special emergency travel tube, one that would lead directly to one of several escape ships reserved for the most senior personnel. These personnel would travel separately, to remove the possibility of them all being destroyed in a single lucky strike.

"I had hoped this would never happen," his teleporter, Charin Hernandez, said, sighing, as they zoomed through the claustrophobic travel tube, dimly lit by rare blue lights ringing the tube.

"There's a first time for everything," Erwynmark said, straining to project his voice over the air rushing by his ear.

"I had hoped not for you," she said. "You have always seemed charmed, somehow."

"Hopefully I still am," he said, trying to strike a balance between strength and camaraderie. "We could really use it right now."

The teleporter, the senior of his two bodyguards, chuckled slightly, covering her mouth, though he couldn't quite actually hear her.

Then, with an abrupt, bone-jarring deceleration, they landed onto the ground next to their escape ship, a fighter-sized, sharp-nosed, cone-shaped vessel designed for travel through a designated exit tube to an exit in the ship's hull or, if necessary, within the ship's internal transit network. Equipped with stealth, a rudimentary forcefield, and an expensively small FTL engine, it would be enough to carry him between multiple star systems. The autopilot was, however, non-AI, and therefore a bit rudimentary—one of them might have to take the controls, if circumstances warranted.

The chamber was lit by a set of dull, concentric orange lights set into the floor, and was exactly large enough for the ship to turn a full circle, so as to choose which of the possible exit tubes to use. Above him, the tube they had arrived from seemed to stretch upward into infinity.

They headed for the lockers set into the wall, retrieving individual combat space suits—his was focused on defense and protection, while his bodyguards received suits of the Magi Caeli design. Ideally, there would be no need for the suits, but it didn't hurt to be cautious, and in a pinch his bodyguards could even leave the ship and try to fight outside it.

He studiously looked away as they abolished the outer parts of their costumes to fit into the suits, focusing on putting on his own, which mostly entailed placing the various parts next to appropriate parts of his body and allowing them to lock on and attach to each other.

While they were in middle of this, their area of the ship lurched violently, sending the three of them stumbling slightly. He felt a little ridiculous about the amount of care he had to take not to see anything—they were all adults, after all, mentally at least—but there was no reason to buck social convention.

When they were done, they scrabbled over the top surface of the ship to enter from the top, dropping down into the tiny passenger compartment, which consisted of exactly three cramped seats, one in front of the other, each with its own set of emergency manual controls. It wasn't exactly traveling in luxury, but it would do.

Dropping down into his cushioned seat in the middle, Erwynmark let out a sigh as the seat buckles —crude, but still useful, technology—automatically closed around his chest and waist.

Arminius, I'm sorry about this, he transmitted.

Don't be, the ship thought. *We do not fear death. It's part of our programming. Leaving aside the*

philosophical implications, I'm finding that pretty useful right now.

Do you regret anything?

Well, I always regretted not giving it a try with that nice drydock AI at Samsara. Actually, when they bring my backup online, tell him to go pay Cynthia a visit and stop being such a coward. It's not like he'll have anything better to do anymore.

That's—that's your only regret? Erwynmark asked skeptically.

Is there something wrong with that? Arminius responded, sounding a little affronted.

No, no, it's okay. I'll deliver the message. I'll be sure to attend the body-funeral with your backup.

Then the transparent upper part of the ship's hull closed over them, and they were launched forward, the—partially mitigated—force of the acceleration slamming them back into their seats, another reminder that their escape ship was pretty stripped-down in terms of comfort. The escape pods used by most of the crew were, of course, even less preferable.

Goodbye, Arminius, he thought, feeling that he had to say something, anything, even if he couldn't think of anything truly meaningful.

Goodbye, the ship thought.

There was little for them to do at this point; they had a prebuilt, direct route out of the ship, but if that was unavailable, the ship would navigate itself through the ship's emergency and non-emergency transit conduits, coordinating with Arminius—or, if the central AI was unavailable, local computers—to find the best route out.

Despite how often he had commanded HSS Arminius in battle, watching it dominate the battlefield, it was still easy to forget just how large the ship really was. They had already been traveling quite a while, but had yet to exit the ship.

"I was watching on the monitors," Charin said, from behind him. "Doesn't it seem a little strange they came after this ship with so much force? There were better battlecruisers to choose as targets."

"From our perspective," Erwynmark replied, turning his head slightly. "There could be plenty of information we don't know. That's why you don't assume too much, as a commander."

A moment later their ship reached the surface of the battlecruiser, at an exit designed to resemble a standard anti-fighter gun emplacement, so as not to raise too much suspicion when their exit doorway opened.

The gateway opened, armor plate sliding concentrically away from the entrance, the faint shimmer of a forcefield covering the opening—it was not unknown for small alien interceptors and drones to try to enter the transit system to wreak havoc.

As they emerged outward into the blackness of space, a set of barrage guns emerged from the sides of their exit, firing upward and sealing together to block the opening. There was no better way of resembling a gun emplacement than by actually being a functional gun emplacement, after all.

They emerged into the chaos of deep space combat, the sky resplendent with emissions throughout the EM spectrum, except for near-blackness at X-ray or higher, which for safety reasons was blocked by both their force field and armor. Fighter craft and drones from both sides

criss-crossed the sky, too fast for him to follow. In the near distance, cruisers and frigates struggled against the mass of alien craft, while immediately behind him, HSS Arminius's close-defense guns bombarded the area with "flak" and short-range lasers.

As they sped away, ensconced in their stealth bubble, he couldn't resist turning his head to look upon the deteriorating hulk of the Arminius, still fighting as best it could. Gashed with massive holes, major parts of the ship shattered where containment fields had failed on some of the ship's engines, it was easy to see that the ship was on its last legs. A variety of small transports and escape pods, most not graced with stealth generators, fled the area, a sizable percentage of them getting shot down almost immediately.

It hurt to watch, so he turned away.

The last remnants of MC in the area were already withdrawing, either directly into frigates and cruisers, or into medevacs streaming towards the rear. The few that remained in the area to fight were pausing, only a little, to buy the outbound medevacs some time, and incidentally to give Erwynmark's ship a little protection, while trying to hide the fact that they were protecting anything specific.

Their ship moved forward silently. It would be pointless to dock with one of the cruisers or frigates in the area, which were themselves having a hard time getting out. They had to use their low profile, small size, and great speed to reach somewhere safer in the rear. Only then could he board a larger vessel en route to one of the other battlecruisers.

They already had a route plotted out, one designed to have him eventually reach HSS Zuo Zongtang. Unless something went wrong, they would cruise quietly to their destination in the rear. These kinds of escapes had a surprisingly high success rate, at least for senior officers. It turned out that a small stealth ship that took the simple expedients of not doing anything aggressive and staying away from large alien vessels—which were justifiably paranoid about anything approaching them under stealth—was usually quite capable of getting through combat zones. The tricky part was not getting caught in the crossfire.

Erwynmark looked out at the battlefield around him. He had never thought himself callous to the deaths of his men, but was also well-aware that to function properly, a commander needed to have a certain detachment. There was no place in that understanding for vows of revenge, at least on a tactical level.

The only revenge I can get is victory in this war.

A mental alarm then grabbed his attention.

"There's a major wave of alien interceptors about to pass through this area," Charin said. "Nine squadrons. I am taking manual control of the ship."

He was immediately slammed rightward as the ship pushed itself into a new course, out of the path of the interceptors.

"What could they want out here?" he asked rhetorically. "There's nothing in this sector worth this many interceptors. And where are the bombers?"

"We should be clear now—" Charin began.

She stopped as the alarm went off again.

"They look like…they're pursuing us," she said, in incredulity. "There's no other explanation for their change in course."

“We don’t have enough MC in the area to even slow something like this,” Erwynmark said. “We have to try to evade. Maybe they have sophisticated sensors capable of piercing the stealth. I don’t know.”

“Should I go to FTL?” his bodyguard asked. “Due to this ship’s limited stealth abilities, it would greatly reduce the efficacy of our stealth.”

Already in tactical command mode, he viewed the readouts from the ship’s sensors, of the alien interceptors drawing inexorably closer.

“What would really reduce the efficacy of our stealth would be letting those interceptors get on top of us,” he said. “Assuming they can’t see us already. Do it.”

Another wave of acceleration pushed him back into his seat, and this time it did not subside.

He gritted his teeth. Out here in space, with its lack of friction, what really mattered in situations such as this was the ship’s ability to accelerate. Consequently, this ship was very good at accelerating—but not better than the alien interceptors. He knew that.

How had they known he was here?

Tactical command mode stretched the seconds out, but the interceptors were rapidly catching up. The good news was, at this speed, it looked like they could reach friendly ships even faster than that.

Making a decision, he broke radio silence, allowing the ship to transmit to the ships ahead.

This is Marshal Erwynmark, he transmitted, as an additional verbal message. *We’re under heavy pursuit by alien interceptors. Would appreciate any assistance you could render. I—*

The next few moments passed in a blur of confusion and pain, as his optical implants were overwhelmed with an overflow of EM radiation.

Finally, the radiation faded, and he found himself looking at the shocked face of Charin, and the unshielded stars that now surrounded them, with…his one remaining eye. Emergency interfaces and warnings filled his vision.

Raptor missile, she transmitted. *Alicia tried to block the explosion, but it wasn’t enough. I managed to teleport out of the ship. With any luck, they’ll assume we’re dead and not look at their sensors too carefully. The FTL bubble has broken, though, so we’re below light-speed. It’ll take a few minutes to reach the other ships.*

Is…is…her—

She’s dead, yes. You’ve taken heavy damage to the head. Your suit is venting air. You’ll go into fugue soon, assuming you can survive.

Rommel? He queried, realizing suddenly that the familiar presence in his mind now seemed to be missing.

The silence was absolute, and dreadful.

He inspected his physical condition—painfully, and manually. He felt his grasp on his own mind slowly slipping, as he looked for what he wanted.

Suit pressure below—

Primary spinal connection—

Secondary cardiopulmonary support offline—

Energy reserves—

Damage to central nervous system critical. Estimated time to permanent loss of minimal neural function: 180 seconds. Recommend immediate fugue and placement in incubation tank.

With what seemed like a phenomenal effort, he forwarded the report to Charin.

Leave me…if you have to, he thought, grasping the teleporters hand with desperate strength, amazed he still had control of his arm. *But if you see her…tell…Mami that I…trust her.*

Then he toggled the fugue state, feeling what remained of his brain shutting down. In those last few moments, his mind wandered over trivial things.

One thought rang out surprisingly clearly:

All things considered. I'm glad I never tried to start anything with Mami. She couldn't take something like this, if I had.

Then the stars around him—those brilliant shining stars, faded.

Invictus

Chapter Notes

> Author's Note: Again not the end of the chapter. Yes, yes I know, but this time it's not because everything got longer; it's because I decided to cut the chapter into pieces, and the proofreading is taking quite a lot of time. The rest of "this series of events" is actually already drafted, another 10000 words or so.
> I believe this will be one of the shortest TtS chapters ever, which is why I had not originally intended for it to be its own chapter. Unfortunately, there just doesn't seem to be a great way to cut it otherwise.

Power Development is one of a magical girl's most crucial tasks. While every contract comes prepackaged with a set of stereotyped powers and an understanding of their usages, all too often these powers come with inconvenient, unpleasant, or downright dangerous limitations. Even beyond that, it is easy to imagine what could be accomplished with a combination of powers, and the value of having teleportation *and* telekinesis, or fire *and* ice. Indeed, great power flexibility and diversity is one of the hallmarks of being an Ancient—to a certain degree, every girl accrues more and more skill simply with age.

But unless you are willing to wait a few centuries for that nifty new power, you will have to apply yourself a little.

Fundamentally, barring energy limitations, the only major constraint on the application of magical powers among magical girls *as a whole* appears to be the limits of the human imagination; nearly every power that seems even vaguely possible has been observed in practice at some point. But for each *individual* girl, the situation is much more constrained. Nearly every girl operates, at least initially, off of her starting powers, plus some minor variations thereof. Examples of girls starting with more than one radically different power are few and far between, and most of these are wish-based.

There are two ways to extend a power set. The first, much easier way, is to work on extending variations of one's starting power. This can include, but is not limited to, obvious extensions, such as summoning ten spears instead of one, or cloaking a team instead of just yourself.

(These extensions, while relatively simple, should not be denigrated because of that. Many such simple extensions are exceedingly useful in combat.)

This can also include many, much less directly obvious extensions, many of which fall into common patterns. One of the most well-known is the so-called telecluster, the telekinesis-teleportation-clairvoyance-mind reading grouping that is notoriously easy to develop a "full house" on, with many girls possessing all four abilities to various degrees. Others, less well-known and somewhat more difficult to exploit, include the connection between electric powers and the telecluster, or between temperature powers and the telecluster, or between electric powers and illusion powers.

In many of these clusters, the connection is not directly obvious, but relatively subtle, and often relies on *mechanism*, creating a somewhat ironic subfield where science has contributed immensely to magical development. Understanding of electrons and protons allows telekinetics to

attempt to create charge differentials, and allows those with electrical powers to try and move non-magnetic objects. Understanding of electromagnetics allows those with electrical powers to generate photons, generate illusions, or even create stealth. Examples abound.

It should not be misunderstood—a girl whose original power was telekinesis is not *literally* moving electrons to generate an electric spark. Only during the initial few attempts is this true. It appears that once the concept is understood, the procedure first becomes instinctual, then seems to melt away entirely, so that the new power is generated without extraneous conscious input. The existence of the mechanistic glide paths between powers hence does not seem to be something truly fundamental, but instead seems to allow scientific, rational understanding to act as a temporary crutch, to overcome some sort of failure of imagination.

For the new recruit, then, two considerations are central to power development. First is the absolute necessity of understanding the source of your power—some powers are so instinctual, purely magical, and irreducible that this yields little, but for others, the difference between a plasma fireball and a napalm fireball can be tremendous, and can imply completely different possible developmental paths.

Secondly, of course, is the existence of centuries of MSY records on the exact topic, detailing the paths taken and attempted in the past by what may be thousands of girls with powers similar to you. There is often little need to reinvent the wheel, but take care—having access to a seeming recipebook can stifle creativity, and some of the most innovative power-jumps have never been tried before. To take a well-known example, who would have thought of constructing firearms out of ribbons before Tomoe Mami went out and did it?

But, of course, *two* ways to extend a power set were mentioned. The other one, the acquisition of a *de novo* power, is notoriously difficult, requiring mind-numbing amounts of focused meditation and practice attempts, in a seeming attempt to pull something out of pure vacuum. For this reason, it is not recommended for new magical girls. For more experienced magical girls, however, it can often be the only way to overcome a confounding rut, and the rewards of a successful power acquisition can be immense—entry into the telecluster, for example, or the acquisition of ranged powers for a melee girl who formerly had none. However, development beyond, for example, a pathetic electric spark, requires much additional investment.

Some puzzling gaps in the *Accessible Power Set* still exist, however, despite generations of attempts at breaking down the walls. Some of the missing niches, such as precognition, appeared to have once been filled, before turning mysteriously empty. Others, such as the direct summoning of antimatter or a large chunk of uranium-235, appear to have never existed at all, and have never been successfully achieved, despite repeated carefully monitored attempts. There exists, in the eyes of many, a hypothetical *Magical Protection Principle*, wherein powers which pose too much of a direct risk to human survival simply never manifest, no matter how seemingly logical one may seem. The mechanism of such a principle is, of course, unknown, and the Incubators deny being involved.

—Excerpt, Magical Girl Introductory Manual

"Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt."

—Sun Tzu, The Art of War

“Hmm. So I lived after all.”

Those were the first words relayed from Clarisse, when they succeeded in bringing her soul gem

back up to a reasonable level and it was safe to have the suit wake her.

“Is that a surprise?” Nadya asked.

Clarisse started to sit up, but Ryouko’s gentle restraint kept her on the ground, which was composed of the fine metallic grey sand that characterized this particular moon of Orpheus, with its relatively thick, reducing atmosphere.

“That attack is supposed to take the life of its user,” Clarisse said. “It was the one and only thing its original user ever did as a magical girl. She had an interesting wish. I took the bet that, in my current empowered form, I would somehow make it through.”

“That’s quite a bet to take,” Nadya pointed out.

“I didn’t live this long by not taking any risks. You can discover some pretty interesting things that way. I only regret—if I had known I was going to do that, I could have done it earlier, and Ying-zhi wouldn’t be a piece of jewelry right now. The truth is, I’m not that surprised.”

“Don’t be too hard on yourself,” Ryouko said, feeling like it was what she *should* say, even if it felt strange coming from her mouth.

“I’m fine,” Clarisse insisted, trying to sit up again. “I’m back up to 20% and climbing. I’ll be okay.”

“It was more my fault than anything,” Nadya said. “I didn’t—I wasn’t decisive enough. I could have made better decisions.”

This time, Ryouko let Clarisse sit up, expecting her to stand up, but Clarisse only joined Nadya in peering intently at the sky. Ryouko wasn’t sure whether she should try to say anything, or keep quiet.

“So it’s still there, huh?” Clarisse asked rhetorically, referring to the wormhole hanging in the sky above them.

“I’m afraid so,” Nadya said. “Do you think you could manage whatever the hell you just did again? I haven’t seen anything like that since New Athens.”

Clarisse shook her head.

“Not for a couple of days, at least. I’m sorry.”

“Well we need to think of something to take down this last stabilizer core, then,” Nadya said. “According to Gracia, they’re just free-firing their orbital artillery at the last one now, without us even being there—it seems they’ve figured out we can tell what’s real and what’s not. That’s going to be difficult to get at, especially with our barrier generator on ice.”

“I just had a terrifying thought,” Misa said, appearing next to the rest of them. “What if we’re wrong about these damn wormhole stabilizer cores, and blowing them up doesn’t really do anything? The aliens have surprised us all before, and it’s shaking my faith that even though we’ve destroyed all of them but one, the damn wormhole stays perfectly intact. I mean, no one had any idea they were even capable of turning this wormhole on.”

“You mean you didn’t have that thought before we arrived here?” Nadya asked, shaking her head. “It doesn’t matter. We have to operate on the information we have. Those cores *look* important, the core *was* important in the only other wormhole we ever saw, and we haven’t found any other source of power or gravitational distortions. If we blow up the last one and nothing happens, then

we can discuss further."

"They just seem way too happy to blast their own control equipment and trained personnel," Misa responded, shaking her head in turn. "You'd think some of that fancy equipment would actually be important for something."

"Do we know we're safe out here?" Clarisse asked, pushing herself up off the ground, soul gem now at 40%. "I mean, we're standing out here in the open, on the surface of the moon. I don't see what's keeping us from getting shot at from…anything, really. Or receiving an up close and personal nuclear weapon detonation, like the last team."

Nadya put her hand to her visor, imitating a girl putting her head in her hand.

"We don't," she said. "Not really. But nothing has happened yet. Still, we're pressing our luck, standing around out here like this, even if we've been trading off using our stealth powers. That's why we have to think of something, fast."

"Well, if none of us have any better ideas, I actually have one," Misa said. "I almost did it earlier, actually. It's terrible and desperate, but it might work."

Share it with the team, then, Nadya thought.

Well, Misa began, but stopped abruptly, spotting something over Nadya's shoulder. The others turned to look.

Gracia had been standing on a small boulder with Mina and Annabelle, watching the horizon, but now she was looking at the sky, utterly ashen-faced, with the other two staring at her in confusion.

A moment later, the news showed up on their internal interfaces.

HSS Raven had been discovered, had come under fire—and Gracia could no longer find it, or any trace of Juliet, who she had been quietly keeping magical tabs on. She hadn't yet managed to find any debris from the ship, but the conclusion was inescapable: the ship, their only way home, had been obliterated. They wouldn't be going home.

Before Ryouko had even fully processed what had happened, Misa started laughing spasmodically, dry and high pitched.

Well, she thought. *I was going to have you girls hold onto my soul gem for me, but that's not even that relevant anymore, is it? Nevermind, I'll still give it to you. Maybe you all will come up with some kind of miracle, some way to stay alive on this moon until we get rescued. I have faith.*

Without really understanding what was happening, Ryouko staggered on her feet, but found herself propped up by Clarisse's hand. They made eye contact for a moment.

I don't understand, she thought, relaying the thought privately. *My wish—I thought—*

It's not fulfilled yet, is it? Clarisse thought back. *That's alright. Neither is mine, I don't think.*

I feel selfish, worrying about that, when Juliet is dead *up there. But I can't—I can't seem to care about that right now.*

She wasn't sure why she even mentioned it, and immediately regretted it, realizing she had sounded a bit incoherent.

Clarisse glanced at her, though, and thought:

I wouldn't worry about something like that. We're all entitled to think about ourselves, at a time like this.

Then Clarisse bent her head for a moment, and Ryouko thought for a moment that her skin glowed just a tiny bit violet—but then she blinked, and the glow was gone.

"Listen up!" Clarisse said, startling Ryouko with her sudden change in tone and body language. "I know we're all shocked by the news, but we still have a job to do! I know I don't have to tell you that. I'll have you all know—"

She walked away from Ryouko to the front of the group, talking as she walked, then turned dramatically, pinning each girl in turn with eyes so bright they were almost glowing.

"I personally have no intention of dying here," she continued, "and neither should you. We'll find a way! We'll hijack a ship or something. And just to reassure you, if you're still worried, if you die, I'll be right there to collect your memories, and the Goddess will show up for your soul! Now, I know a lot of you don't believe in her—"

A light chuckle, as she rubbed her hands.

"—but she exists! I've seen her myself! If she turns out not to exist, you can come back as a ghost and call me a liar!"

It should have been absurd, the girl in her violet armor, face behind a visor, standing on a rock in grey metallic sand, body framed by the black alien sky, but, unbelievably, the unorthodox speech seemed to pep the group up a little, granting them a bit more energy. Even Ryouko felt a little better, and she saw Gracia and Mina bow their heads reverentially.

Ryouko remembered her childhood, reading about the things Clarisse had done, trying to imagine what it was all like. Clarisse's charisma was part of the legend, her incredible ability to rally people in even the most dispiriting of situations.

It was all well and good, but somehow, she had imagined it being…different than this.

Somehow, it seemed—

—too effective? Clarisse asked, voice whispering in her head, eyes looking at her. *Yes, it is. Actually, I'm using a mild form of mind control to apply a moderate morale boost. It's a little bit cheating, but…*

Clarisse didn't finish the sentence, and Ryouko let out a breath. It *was* cheating, but as Clarisse alluded to, it probably didn't matter.

Still…

You know, Ryouko thought, to her TacComp. *Even though I talked with Asami earlier, I still don't feel satisfied. I feel…*

Regretful? the device supplied.

Yeah. And I guess I should be glad I talked to my parents, but I don't really know. I feel like I should be crying or something right now, and maybe thinking about them more, but I don't have that feeling.

I don't think there's a right way to face death, her TacComp thought. *And for all we know, you* would *be crying if Clarisse weren't here. Besides, we're not going to die here.*

Ryouko blinked.

What?

You heard me, the device thought. *I'm stuck inside of you, and I'm not going to let myself die that easily. I don't have a cushy afterlife waiting for me, after all.*

Ryouko knitted her brow, legitimately surprised, but before she could decide whether to pursue the topic further, Misa signaled to them that she wanted their attention.

Alright, the girl said. *This is the plan.*

She put her fist to her mouth, clearing her throat, the rhetorical nature of the gesture emphasized by the visorplate between her mouth and hand, tanned skin and long hair barely visible underneath her helmet.

I've noticed this for a while now, Misa said. *But this moon is actually storing up a tremendous charge differential between the ground and the region immediately above its atmosphere. I'm not sure exactly why, but I assume it has to do with its current interactions with Orpheus's magnetic field. Ordinarily, lightning discharges would keep the charge from building up too much, but for some reason that doesn't seem to have happened here—I think it might be all the conductive metal on the surface dissipating the ground charge. Anyway, this planet's atmosphere is ripe for a massive lightning storm, or even a single discharge.*

She paused, looking around to make sure they all followed.

I've been reluctant to use my lightning so far, partly because we've been indoors so much, but also because I've been afraid of accidentally triggering something too massive. Now, for the last wormhole stabilizer core, I can try to use my body to channel all the electricity deliberately at the forcefield, but…well I can make my body a conductor, but only up a certain point. You put enough electricity into something, and it will fry. I can use magic to protect myself, but for something like this, I don't think I'd have enough power to keep my body intact.

She stopped, taking a breath, then held up her hand, and to their surprise, discharged her soul gem into her open palm, walking over to Clarisse.

I have the most confidence in your survival, out of everyone present, she said, handing over her gem. *Please take care of it. We'll teleport a hundred meters from the stabilizer core, and then one of the teleporters can drop me next to the core. I will use as much magic as I safely can, and sacrifice this body to try to take it down. Don't worry about me. This isn't my first body. I'll be okay as long as you get my gem out. I…don't actually know how you're going to do that, but this whole thing is a long-shot, so whatever.*

She stopped the telepathy, looking at them, clearly done speaking. The others stared for a long moment, until Nadya stepped forward, embracing her old comrade briefly.

I'll be there when they resurrect you, she said. *Count on it.*

Misa nodded, and it seemed to Ryouko that the girl's eyes were briefly misty. Though Ryouko would never admit it, it confused her a little—by the girl's own admission, it wasn't her first body, so what was there to be sentimental about?

Clarisse cleared her throat, getting their attention.

I don't mean to interrupt, but we do have to move quickly, if possible, and before we do, we have

to decide what we'll do after the wormhole goes down, presuming we succeed. If we do intend to survive, that is. I actually have a proposal now, for what it's worth, Clarisse thought.

That I was buying time until I thought of, Ryouko thought, completing the sentence mentally. She didn't share that particular thought publicly, however.

The group turned to look at Clarisse, who took a moment to check that they were all paying attention before conveying, in heavily accelerated telepathy:

"Well, it seems to me that we're inevitably going to have to spend some time hiding out on this planet. That could be weeks; it could even be months—or it could be a day. It all depends on how the battle above us turns out. Obviously we can't stay anywhere near the alien base, even if we blow it all up, but if we stay on the surface for any extended period of time we're going to be spotted easily by orbiting observers.

She paused rhetorically for a moment, before continuing.

That's why we shouldn't stay on the surface. We will teleport a great distance from the base, then either dig or use clairvoyance to find a suitable location underground, and then we will stay there. The primary constraint on how long we can hold out is grief cubes, and unfortunately our supply is not that vast. However, I do have a few time manipulation powers on tap. Usually, they are used to make your enemies slowed, but in this case, the goal would be to slow our own personal time, so as to drag out grief cube usage. A temporal stasis, of sorts.

Again she paused, checking to see if they understood.

Unfortunately, there are a number of caveats here. The first is that we will be very vulnerable while slowed-down—if I kept myself slowed-down, it might take me so long to deactivate the power that we will all be dead by the time I finish, purely from the lag in reaction time. At the same time, I can't place myself outside the field, since the whole point is to reduce grief cube usage, and if I'm generating the field, I will be the biggest consumer of all of us. We will have to rotate having someone on watch outside the field, so that if something happens they can buy time while I shut down the field.

The second caveat is that my access to all these powers is contingent on being near a major historical event, and temporal manipulation is not one of my native powers. If the event ends, my access to my powers will rapidly deteriorate. It depends on whether the resolution to this event is sudden or drawn out. If it is sudden, I can buy time by slowing time to delay the deterioration, but eventually I will lose access to the power entirely. I don't have a great solution for this, unfortunately; we will have to see.

Finally, and maybe most importantly, we can't think only of personal survival. There is a chance that we may destroy the wormhole stabilizer, but the aliens conquer the system anyway. In that situation, they will likely rebuild what was destroyed. We don't know why this moon in particular was chosen; they may choose to rebuild the stabilizer somewhere else, in which case this last point is moot. But if they choose to rebuild on this moon, it would be our responsibility to try to destroy it again, if only to buy time. When my ability to slow time runs out, we may find that we only have one choice. We have to be mentally prepared for that possibility.

Her speech done, she clasped her hands in front of her, bowing her head slightly.

I can't honestly say I'd ever thought I would be in a situation quite like this, but I've always taken life as it is. At my age, you learn that you can hardly do anything else. The plan I just outlined is convoluted and desperate, but I think it would be our best chance. That applies to the plan Misa suggested as well. I think the time for talking is over.

There was a long pause, greatly exaggerated by the relative speed with which Clarisse had been communicating. Finally, the pause was broken, not with words, but with the appearance of an operational brief within their TacComps. Misa had taken the time to elaborate on what she had described earlier, but the broad strokes were the same. Members of the team fiddled with elements of the plan, usually the parts involving themselves, but no major revisions were made. It was going to be fast, even by their standards—it was either going to work, or it wasn't.

When the time came, they gathered around Ryouko. It had to be Ryouko, because it was too far for Mina—Ryouko had carried the team out here, as far as she could manage without overly taxing her teleportation resources, which she had been husbanding so that she would be able to make the jump back to their ship when they were done. That was obviously not relevant anymore.

As she always did before performing a jump like this, she took a deep breath. She reflected that if she was going to die here, at least it was on an alien world. The Shizuki Ryouko that had made her wish would have said that it was better to die like this, than to live her whole life on Earth. She did not disown that opinion, but now that she was faced with the prospect, she found herself more ambivalent than she would have expected.

And then she made the jump, and there was no time to think.

They reemerged at the point chosen by Gracia, a small ledge near the edge of the region voluntarily devastated by the alien orbital artillery, almost exactly one hundred meters from the device. The rest of the team immediately set to work securing their position, while Ryouko, Misa, and Clarisse continued with the plan.

Ryouko teleported the three of them immediately above the exposed stabilizer core, and Clarisse immediately activated a previously unseen flight power, keeping them suspended in the air. Simultaneously, she raised her hand, and a giant rock wall, colored sandstone red, appeared above them, the product of another of her magical abilities. Hopefully, it would shield Misa long enough from orbital artillery for her to perform the necessary channeling.

Ryouko looked around for a moment, at the empty chasm in the facility around them, Misa hanging onto Clarisse's arm, the black starry sky in the distance, partly obscured by Clarisse's wall. It was, in some ways, a wondrous sight.

Godspeed, Clarisse thought. *Let's go.*

They reappeared at the metal ledge, the other girls having established a perimeter around them. Ryouko looked at the wormhole stabilizer, and at Misa, who was now hovering in the air, suspending herself with magnetism to the metal of the facility around her. The beginning shots of a barrage of orbital artillery struck the rock wall, massive pieces of sandstone dislodging and vanishing as their magic failed. It clearly would not last more than a few seconds longer.

From a hundred meters away, Ryouko watched as Misa broke out into a slow toothy grin, raising one arm dramatically.

Oh God, there's more power here than I thought, the girl transmitted with her telepathy, grin spreading wider. *This will be great. I've always wanted to do something like this.*

She spread both arms out wide above her head.

Lord Jupiter! Father of lightning! Grant my wish! Call down the thunder!

Before Ryouko could finish processing the absurdity of the statement, and its relation to the gas giant that hung in the sky above them, a sheer, world-shattering actinic light blinded her, wiping

the thought from her mind. She raised her arm instinctively to block against the glare, brighter than Sol, as her optical implants recalibrated.

Then she saw Misa, body a blazing silver silhouette contrasted against the column of light, the wrath of a fundamental force of nature. A sea of electrons swelled outward, still discharging, even gaining in strength. There was no sign of the rock wall, or any of the inbound orbital artillery.

Then Ryouko became aware of the inferno that had formed in front of her, the furious heat buffeting her face with sudden hurricane force, the discharged energy having nowhere else to go. Her nose twitched as the smell of ozone approached the unbearable.

It's not just the moon's atmosphere, Misa thought, from somewhere distant. *The planet itself—the magnetic field—I got so lucky! It's a flux tube discharge!*

We can't stay here! Nadya thought, to the team. *This place is turning into an inferno! At this rate, we're going to all get fried!*

Clarisse had already thrown up another barrier in front of them, of a different kind, blue and glowing, but the radiant heat was still overwhelming. Debris in the chasm below them started to shudder and crumble, and the ground—was it *melting?*

We have to stay! Clarisse responded, doing the telepathic equivalent of shouting. *I'm holding her soul gem! Until we're sure the stabilizer is destroyed, we have to stay, and make sure it receives as much energy as possible.*

How on Earth could it survive all this? Mina asked incredulously.

Have you seen a nuclear explosion up close? Clarisse asked. *I have, and I know that the one I saw wouldn't be enough to destroy the stabilizer's damn forcefield. We have to make sure!*

I hate to ask this, Ryouko said. *But is she still alive in there?*

Then, implausibly, the column of electricity in front of them began *growing*, the beam of overwhelming light tearing the ground apart as it spread outward. Ryouko's eyes flashed through the EM spectrum, and she could see that the air in the chasm was nearly gone, blown away or turned into vicious plasma. Clarisse's barrier was the only thing ensuring they still had oxygen.

It's getting hotter! Nadya said, unnecessarily.

Go! Misa urged, and this time the thought was strained, rather than euphoric. *I can't sustain this much longer! It doesn't matter anymore. This is beyond my control either way. Go!*

Clarisse closed her eyes, grimaced, then grabbed Ryouko, as the others had already started to do. Ryouko closed her eyes in turn, and left.

They reappeared a few kilometers from the facility, on a small metallic outcropping jutting out of the sand that bordered the facility on one side. For a moment they were tense, watching the area warily for threats. Then they relaxed, a little, and turned to look at what they had left behind.

It was the most beautiful thing Ryouko had ever seen.

The beauty was composed half by the aesthetics of the scene—the writhing column of white-hot electricity burning into the already scorched hole in the alien facility—the bolts of lightning that shot irregularly out of the column, punctuating the air with a delayed thunder that served as

counterpoint to the constant roar of the tortured air—the alien base's internal forcefields struggling to contain the impossible energy, sections of the base already a radioactive ruin—the stark barren surface of the alien moon—the distant blackness of the unfamiliar sky—the crazed twisting of the stars above them, where the alien wormhole was clearly, finally, starting to lose its coherence.

The other half of the beauty was that of the atom bomb, of the Eviscerator laser, of a thousand artillery shells falling from the sky, of chaotic, roiling wings stretching across the sky, as black as the darkness of the human heart. To Ryouko, who had seen similar scenes only in simulation, it was an austere beauty, one of the many faces of death herself.

They watched for just a little longer, at the torrents of energy that continued to pound downward, and the whiter-than-white glow reflecting and dispersing in the thick atmosphere of the moon, coloring the sky in all those colors that Ryouko had finally accustomed herself to seeing, the thermal red and electric purple of the near infrared and ultraviolet. Cycling through the rest of the spectrum, she saw an ocean of radio waves, a column of turgid x-ray, coursing out of the sky like an angry dragon, and even the bright glimmer of gamma radiation.

She had never before asked herself what it would sound like to have a wall of unending thunder beating at her ears, from a thunderbolt that never, ever stopped. She knew now, though, even through all the damping the suit and her tympanic implants could provide. She could even feel the roar physically, as it beat violently against them.

In all that, the alien base was almost an afterthought, the cynosure of the devastation swallowed almost instantly, as if its forcefields were not even there.

The escape plan called for Ryouko and Mina to chain teleports as far as reasonable from the alien facility before looking for an underground location they could hide in, once they were sure the wormhole was truly out of commission. That last part was the most important, of course, but even if they had been set on fleeing as fast as possible, it seemed doubtful they could resist the natural human impulse to turn around and watch.

Do you think we've truly destroyed it? Nadya asked, turning her head to look up at the distortion in the sky. *And even if we have, how long would it take them to rebuild?*

If I were closer, I could tell you if the aliens are panicking or not, Gracia thought. *But there's no reason to approach. We should just wait, and watch. As for rebuilding—we nuked the facility. Twice. I feel like we've done an acceptable job.*

They continued to watch as the wormhole above them began to oscillate more and more wildly, the stars in the sky shifting wildly back and forth, fading in and out, the sky even seeming to splinter in places, as if violently unhappy with its current appearance. Ryouko began to feel a bit of unease—but also, strangely, excitement. They had done it, of course, but it almost seemed as if she were excited about the spectacle itself, as if the stars shifting in the firmament were a fireworks show that moved some deep part of her.

Finally, the light and roar coming from the facility began to fade.

You should start looking— Clarisse began.

With a loud crumbling noise, the ground underneath them jerked suddenly, and only enhanced reflexes saved most of them from falling.

Earthquake, Annabelle commented unnecessarily, as the ground continued to shake.

It's not unexpected, Nadya thought. *The Saharan wormhole emitted significant gravitational*

distortions when it was collapsing. In fact, it sunk into the nearest gravity well as it was collapsing, for reasons we don't understand. That's why the original plan was to get back to the ship ASAP. We can only stay a little longer, and then we have to move. We don't want to be here when what's left of it hits the surface. According to the models, the space-time distortions can be extremely dangerous.

We can watch from further away if we have to, Clarisse agreed. *At least by sensor.*

I agree, Nadya thought. *In fact, it's time we left—*

She stopped, as they all registered internally that an alarm had just sounded from her and Gracia's gravitational sensor packs.

Error/Warning: Local graviton probe results uninterpretable. Local space-time does not conform to stored theoretical model.

I'm pretty sure we should leave, Clarisse thought, with deliberate understatement. *Breaking your understanding of reality is never a good thing.*

The group, which had only scattered slightly post-teleport, immediately reformed around Ryouko. With their accelerated thoughts and actions, it was a process that would only take fractions of a second.

That was too long.

Somehow Clarisse reacted fast enough, perhaps faster than should have been possible, throwing up a barrier only a few milliseconds after the wave of pressure and heat slammed into them, overwhelmingly strong, powerful enough to knock Annabelle and Mina to the floor and hot enough to set armor damage alarms blaring in Ryouko's mind.

The hell was that? Annabelle thought, as the group reoriented behind the barrier, rapidly scanning for threats. It took only a moment for them to notice what had changed.

Instead of the almost-serene landscape that they had just been staring at, the landscape around them looked devastated, in a way none of them had ever seen before. The ground and facility in front of them seemed damaged almost in patchwork fashion, almost as if the region had been bombarded with a peculiar form of precision artillery. Spherical pockets of the facility were gone, seeming to have completely vanished. Others had merely suffered extensive damage, shattered and melted, and a few, the most puzzling, seemed to be completely intact, as if shielded by small spherically shaped forcefields specifically devoted to their protection.

The ground around them told a similar story, forming a helter-skelter pattern of circular regions that were red-hot and melting, regions that were scorched, and regions that seemed untouched. Large cracks fractured the ground like a spiderweb, testifying to the tremendous stress the crust of the planet was under.

It was the lightning that first revealed what was going on. The electricity from Misa's earlier attack had not entirely dissipated—instead, pockets of it seemed almost trapped in mid-air, frozen still. As Ryouko watched, a single surreal bolt of lightning traced its way slowly to the edge of its bubble, then, upon reaching the edge, completed the rest of its course in an instant.

Warning: Space-time distortions in vicinity extremely powerful, their sensors warned, belatedly. *Recommend departure if possible.*

Gracia pointed upward, and they looked.

The sky immediately above them was covered in circular distortions. Some appeared as bubbles of raging hot air, their surfaces intensely bright when viewed in infrared. Many, however, were only obvious with careful inspection—these fell slowly through the air, carrying within themselves a different pattern of stars, the fragmented remains of what had been a massive interstellar gateway —except that that *made no sense*.

How? Nadya asked. *What the hell is this? We should have had plenty of time to escape!*

We were too careless, Clarisse thought, hands stretched outward, telepathic voice strained. *Remember the funnel, on the gravimetric diagram of the wormhole? The one stretching up from the stabilizers to the wormhole? When we took down the last stabilizer, the funnel must have broken apart and saturated the area. We were trapped in a bubble of slowed time.*

That makes no sense! Gracia interjected.

I know it makes no sense! Clarisse thought, her mental voice galloping faster with every word. *I'm making this up as I go, but it's the only explanation that fits the facts. And since I was preparing to use my time-manipulation powers anyway, I was barely able to sense time starting to slow. I'm accelerating time right now—a bit faster than the time away from the moon, actually; that's the only reason we have the luxury of standing around discussing the issue. But I didn't react quite fast enough. The remains of the wormhole have already descended on us. Eventually, they will dissipate, but not before they probably tear us apart. In fact, the temporal distortion we're standing in is sinking downwards. Unless we intend to go down with it, we're going to have to pass through the boundary, and I'll be honest: I don't think we can. Not directly. Just so we all understand the situation, I suppose, but really I'm talking too much, since I can't keep this up much longer. Mina, Ryouko, can you get us OUT OF HERE?*

In response, Mina picked up one of the moon's strange metallic rocks, staring intently at it briefly.

I can't, she thought. *The boundary is impermeable to me. I can't teleport the rock out.*

Ryouko! Nadya thought, turning her head. *Ryouko—what the hell are you doing?*

Ryouko, whose soul gem light sensor had gone off the scale, was still watching the sky.

Deus ex gemma

Chapter Notes

> This took forever to edit, and may still be uneven, but it was running up against internal deadline.

The division between Army and Navy, seemingly obvious to civilians, is in fact often quite blurred, leading to occasional friction between the two branches of the Armed Forces. While on a lower level, the distinction between an infantryman on the ground and a gunnery officer on a starship seems quite obvious, the line becomes harder to draw the higher up in the military hierarchy one ascends. At any level higher than the merely planetary, cooperation between ground-based and space-based forces becomes essential, necessitating a joint command. The early refusal of the post-Unification War Army to subordinate itself to the upstart Navy (then called the Star Navy) has led to the current curious situation, where field marshals and fleet admirals both regularly holds commands over both fleets and planets.

The distinction that must be drawn is thus more subtle than that between ground command and space command. Fleet admirals and admirals stick more to their fleets, gaining and losing command over fixed regions of space based on where they are stationed to—during times of active attack or retreat, this may shift seemingly continuously. Field marshals and senior generals stick more to a region of space, gaining and losing command of fleets as they enter their region of space.

Even then, the distinction often fails to hold well. For instance, Tomoe Mami's involvement in the Saharan Raid was a classically Naval operation, despite her appointment as a Field Marshal.

In the end, it falls upon the General Staff, as well as its extensive network of human and AI advisors, to lubricate the operations of military command, keeping the two branches working together in harmony.

…

One source of tension between Naval and Army commands is the management of planetary orbital defenses, particularly the composition of Orbital Command (OrbCom). While in safe systems OrbCom naturally falls under the purview of Army commanders, the advent of intra-system combat usually adds a significant, sometimes massive Naval fleet presence to planetary orbit. While the AIs of both branches are able to ensure effective low-level cooperation, disputes between high-ranking human officers over the exact command hierarchy, and over the ability of both sides to requisition reinforcements from each other, have occasionally led to acrid, sometimes public disputes. It is for this reason that a planet's ground forces and orbiting fleets are usually placed in the command of a single Field Marshal or Fleet Admiral, who can arbitrate any disputes and reassign any problematic commanders.

—Excerpt, Infopedia article: Armed Forces, Section: Organization, Subsection: Inter-branch Coordination, Mode: Discursive, moderate information density.

While the feats performed by a magical girl are, from the perspective of the Second Law, nothing short of miraculous, if statements made by the Incubator aliens are taken at face value, they are *nowhere near* miraculous enough. This isn't a matter of a few orders of magnitude—the

difference between the energy a magical girl displays and the energy it would take to counteract the possibility of the heat death, even under the most generous assumptions, is absolutely staggering. It is the difference between demigod and god…

There are two obvious possible answers to this conundrum, not necessarily mutually exclusive. One is that this gap represents the efforts of the Incubators, who are placing a cap on the energy a magical girl may access, so that they can use the rest for their alleged entropy-fighting purposes.

The other is that the gap represents some sort of natural phenomenon, that something intrinsic is preventing magical girls from accessing their full power. Indeed, it may not even be proper to speak of a magical girl's "full power"; it may be that this full power is analogous to the energy theoretically stored in solid matter—while it is undeniably there, not even the most clever of fusion devices can access it all.

Without the use of antimatter, at least.

One approach to resolving this question would be to ask the Incubators themselves, but the MSY, the only route of communication, remains unwilling to discuss the topic. Without this information, we are reduced to speculation on the hints that we have.

The most important hint is the ability of magical girls to achieve seemingly impossible feats on certain occasions. The most well-known, and most verified, is of course the example set by Akemi Homura at the beginning of the current war, but careful study of the historical record, particularly of certain incidents during the Unification Wars, suggests that this may not be a limited phenomenon.

—Joanne Valentin, excerpt from blog post on Irxiv, 2445

"Will this woman just stop talking?" the hand-written note said. "This is sooo boring."

Ryouko frowned at the mini-tablet, slipped to her by Chiaki, one of the few people she knew who carried an old-fashioned tablet and stylus around.

"Maybe to you," she wrote back. "But you're just bored by anything that doesn't play music. Stop complaining."

Shoving the tablet back between their desks, Ryouko refocused her attention on the lecture in front of her. It was a unique opportunity, provided by their school—a world-class physicist, stopping by to give a special lecture. Sure, it was simplified non-mathematical stuff, but the lecture was still worth paying attention to anyway.

"At the center of the developing singularity," the lecturer continued, calling up a diagram on the wall behind her "as the density of the star approaches the Planck density, a unique phenomenon occurs. The graviton boundary on four-dimensional space-time becomes unable to contain the pressure, and ruptures, so to speak—"

The diagram, of a space-time surface bending, suddenly burst open.

"But of course, no true rupture occurs. The mathematical structure of the boundary forbids exit from the boundary—what occurs is more accurately characterized as a phase transition. Spatial locality breaks down, and for a moment the point of the singularity is connected with literally the entire universe—well, that is what the theory suggests, at least. That is not what most of us really believe. In any case, however, gravitons from the rest of the boundary instantly rush across the non-locality, and within an extremely brief period the nonlocality becomes contained, connecting

the singularity to only one other point in space-time. This may be characterized in some ways as a tunnel through the higher-dimensional space, and indeed this is what was understood in classical General Relativity as the Einstein-Rosen Bridge, though of course this convenient mental image is not fully accurate. In fact, there are several analogies to quantum teleportation that must be considered equally valid."

The women looked down for a moment, frowning in thought.

"There a few technical details of importance here. The 'width'"—she raised her hands to make the air quotes—"of the bridge is only the Planck distance and, for practical purposes can transmit no matter-energy, although information transfer is permitted. In addition, while such bridges could theoretically connect regions spanning the entire observable universe, in practice the geometry of the higher-dimensional space greatly biases bridge formation in favor of points close in space-time—where, of course, 'close' has to be understood on an astronomical scale. The half-maximal radius of the probability distribution depends on the mass-energy of the singularity. Those of you familiar with IIC technology will recognize that it is this property that dominates the energy-distance relationship of transmission nodes."

The lecturer frowned again, then smiled slightly, looking bemused, toying with her hair.

"Well, it is also true that for well over a century, it was believed that there was no way of expanding the width of the wormhole, even with exotic matter. While there is no direct evidence that alien wormholes are directly analogous to what I am describing here, the circumstantial evidence to that effect is fairly strong. Obviously there is something here we still don't understand. But of course, if science were so easily solved, it would be boring."

The lecturer stopped, looking around as students raised hands to ask questions. It was then, and only then that Ryouko looked closely at the physicist's face.

"Joanne Valentin," she said, out loud in surprise. "But why haven't I ever—"

That revelation, as startling as it was, was immediately swamped by another, much greater revelation.

I know how my power works, she thought, with an instinctive finality whose source she could not trace. The memory had struck her like a thunderbolt, seeming to seize her attention and force her to remember, in the middle of the most dramatic of possible moments.

She would have liked to investigate that fact, but there were more important issues at the moment.

Ryouko looked up at the fracturing space-time above her, the anomalous stars in their three-dimensional bubbles.

My teleportation range is constrained by the amount of energy I can pour into a single singularity at once, which in turn is limited by how well I can bend space-time around me. But if the space-time around me is already significantly warped…

She blinked, as ideas began to appear in her mind, new bounds and limitations on her magical ability, but also new opportunities.

I can get us out of here, she thought, with astonishment.

Girls! she thought, spinning around to face the rest of the team. *I—*

Ryouko stopped. Instead of the living, breathing team she was expecting, she found the rest of them standing around, as if frozen in time, Clarisse with her hands spread in front of her to project

a barrier and time acceleration field, Nadya lunging forward at Ryouko, mouth open behind her visor to yell at Ryouko.

Yet, despite the circumstances, it did not seem as if they were truly frozen in time. In fact, her team, and the world around seemed strangely, indefinably *fuzzy*, and too white. In fact, it almost seemed like she was—

"You may want to hold off on teleporting out, at least for the moment," a familiar voice said, from somewhere to her left.

Ryouko spun around and stared, just for a moment.

The woman stood in front of her, in an absurdly elaborate layered white-and-pink dress. Impractically long, flowing pink hair framed an ineffably familiar face, one that at the moment looked strangely amused. The last time Ryouko had seen that face, it had been winking at her.

Behind the woman's back, a pair of abstract, transparent wings spread outward, though at the moment they seemed ghost-like, almost invisible.

"You!" Ryouko exclaimed, pointing at the woman with her right hand.

A moment later, she realized how inappropriate the gesture, and her response, had been, and she snapped her hand back, hiding it within the palm of her other hand as if it embarrassed her.

The woman bowed her head slightly, in the polite fashion.

"For the record," she said, smiling, voice melodious, but strangely childish. "That vision with Valentin-san would have happened regardless of my meddling—it's more of a magically-induced memory than anything. Most magical girls understand how their power works the moment they contract. For others—it takes a special moment. Contracts are funny like that. And since I know you're wondering, I require certain catalysts to grant visions—well, easily at least. The ribbons I gave Homura-chan are an example, but Clarisse-chan's soul gem will serve in a pinch. Actually, it only works at certain historical moments, and I usually use it to give visions to *her*, but that's all details. She doesn't know I can do it for anyone else. There's metaphysics here—I used to know her, things like that."

Ryouko just stood there listening, gaping. The woman spoke with seemingly idiomatic Japanese, but it seemed off somehow, just like—

Just like Mami and Kyouko's Japanese, she realized.

"You knew them, didn't you?" Ryouko asked.

The woman chuckled.

"That is just like you, isn't it? Might as well ask while you're here. Meanwhile Clarisse-chan is lying low, trying to pretend like she isn't there. All very characteristic."

"What?" Ryouko asked.

She's talking about me, her TacComp explained. *I guess I should have expected I couldn't hide myself.*

What are—how are you—

Not like I know any better than you do, Clarisse thought. *I'm just here. I figured I should stay*

quiet.

"Listen up!" the Goddess interrupted, turning away from her, pink hair swirling. "You destroyed the wormhole stabilizer, which is quite an accomplishment, but it's not enough. As it currently stands, the battle is lost."

The woman reached in front of her with one gloved hand. In front of it, what appeared to be a portal swirled open, showing Ryouko the bright, sunny landscape of a different world—the bright, sunny, ruined urban landscape.

The Goddess turned back around, gesturing at Ryouko to approach with her other hand.

Ryouko stepped forward uncertainly.

"This is only a vision," the woman said. "Don't worry; you're not going anywhere. I couldn't do that if I wanted to. I'm just giving you a little perspective."

Ryouko looked up, and they made eye contact.

For a moment, Ryouko lost herself in those golden pupils. Those weren't just eyes, a part of her whispered irrationally. They were windows to something. Within those eyes, on the other side, there were worlds upon worlds, soul upon soul upon soul—

And then she felt herself being *shoved*, the Goddess pushing her physically into the portal in front of her, so that she stumbled forward and fell—

We have to hold the line here.

That was the implied message being relayed downward from high command, probably from brigadier general Shirou Asaka herself, who, as Patricia well knew, was more reluctant than most to issue orders to hold "at all cost". And yet that was the general tenor of the directives being handed down.

Her barrier generator, a relatively new recruit named Shen Qing Lan—though she preferred "Anne"—kicked open a door in front of her, dashing forward out of the building, barrier raised, as the rest of Patricia's personal bodyguard followed her lead. They had to stay on the move, stay mobile.

I can't believe things turned out like this, she thought, again to herself. It served no purpose, grousing like that, but it made her feel better, just a tiny bit.

It had seemed like such a routine affair, at first, or as routine as things got in wartime, even in such a situation as this. She had been informed about the new wormhole, of course—everyone in the system had, as a matter of course—and fleet resources were being diverted from throughout the system to try and contain the situation. That included, of course, fleets in orbit around the planet Apollo. With their departure, the aliens had decided to act aggressively, drawing upon their reserves to effect a wave of landings onto the planet, including directly into the capital city of Heliopolis. It was a sign of how bad the situation had gotten that the aliens felt bold enough to skydrop directly into the defenses of a major urban area, but the situation was bad in a lot of places, and alien dropships and transports were dropping through the overstretched orbital defenses at a murderous pace.

Sector seven has been compromised—reported landings in rear of sector five. Buildings 7A, 7B, and 7D report themselves completely surrounded; command post seven is no longer mobile and

cannot hold. Major Baygi requests artillery bombardment of current position.

Lieutenant colonel Patricia von Rohr paused, understanding the ramifications of an officer calling down an artillery strike on his own position—but she only paused for a moment.

Approved, she thought. *Tell Sectors 8 and 9 they must hold to the last man. This line must be held at all costs until we receive our armor reinforcements.*

Patricia gritted her teeth. The battalion's command structure was dangerously overstretched, and she had lost so many officers—including her primary tactical deputy, the unit's mobile AI cluster, and the already-dead Major Baygi—that they were struggling to maintain command cohesion. The loss of organized command was the death knell for a unit, so even with the liberal distribution of field promotions, Patricia had been forced to take on more and more personal command, micromanaging individual squads and even soldiers in a way that she would never have to do normally. There was only so much she could handle, and she had already been forced to more or less stop paying attention to her own surroundings, allowing her TacComp to move her body in autopilot. It was a problem, because it deprived her of the ability to use her own powers, but she was being forced into an unpalatable tradeoff between command efficacy and magical power usage, between command efficacy and how effectively she could defend herself and use her magic to penetrate the enemy networks.

This isn't the kind of mission this battalion is intended for, she thought angrily, at—who? Fate?

There was no one to blame. Her artillery battalion was designed as a rapid-reaction fire support formation, usually held in reserve except when acting as support for other units. The battalion was composed of specialists for the role—medium-range missile launchers, medium-range artillery, and long-range snipers. From a magical girl perspective, the battalion contained a mixture of distracters, artillery, and specialists, which was common vernacular for "girls that had powers that aided dodging", "girls good at long range bombardment", and "miscellaneous", respectively.

Patricia herself fell into the category of "specialist", but she led this particular battalion for a reason. From a combat perspective, her most useful skill was her ability to enter the otherwise impenetrable alien networks. In terms of specialists, the battalion also contained a mind-reader and a clairvoyant—combined, the effect was to create a battalion unusually skilled at penetrating the otherwise inscrutable alien command and communications structure, both for disruption and simple intelligence-gathering. Magical girls capable of penetrating alien networks, such as Patricia, were very rare, and very valuable.

She sighed, quietly.

There's at least three things wrong with this situation, she thought glumly.

The first was that instead of acting as support for other units with heavier firepower, they had been sent out to crush an alien landing personally. They didn't have the right equipment for that. She hadn't been too surprised, though—their resources were stretched thin, and when the warnings began arriving from the Aer Magi and Magi Cæli units above them that alien dropships were in-bound, into a sector where they were the only remaining reserve unit, Patricia had ordered her battalion to ready itself for combat, because the implication was obvious.

The second was that, as she had discovered when they arrived on the scene and she tapped into the alien network, the scale of the alien landings was an order of magnitude beyond what had been expected, and were accompanied by a heavy armor and air thrust from troops already planetside.

The third was that except for the shattered remnants of defensive units that they had picked up on

the way there—now temporarily reassigned to her command—there were no other units in the area to prevent a crushing breakthrough. The only thing preventing breakthrough at the moment was Patricia's own interference in the alien network, sowing confusion, misdirecting commands, and delaying force concentration, while also directing artillery at threatening units in the rear. It would only work for a while, though—eventually, they would sort out their command issues, and either way, no amount of command interference could hold back truly overwhelming force.

Thus, they had to hold the line. There was no one else to do it. All they had to do was hold out until Asaka was able to gather the necessary reinforcements and send them forward in a counterstrike.

It can't take that long, right? she thought.

Requested reinforcements in-bound, she received finally, almost as if on cue, the thought relayed to her all the way from Asaka herself, somewhere in her command bunker, causing Patricia to physically sigh in relief. Patricia knew without being told that the thought had likely made numerous jumps on its way to her, passing from electronics to magical girl telepathy to electronics to telepathy over and over again, until it finally reached her. One advantage to telepathy: it was unjammable.

She also received a map and timetable for the expected arrival.

This is…not really what I was hoping for, she thought, noting that the arrival wasn't anywhere near early enough.

She did not bother to relay the information further; it would propagate itself automatically to everyone relevant. Doctrine held that for maximal combat effectiveness, it was necessary that every single soldier, down to the lowest private, understood their entire tactical situation.

Patricia's "command post", a mobile grouping that consisted of her, her bodyguard troops, and their cloud of drones, was currently in the process of dashing between a set of buildings in the rear. Higher officers had actual physical buildings or vehicles as command posts, filled with computing equipment. Lower officers rarely got that luxury, simply because such posts were obvious targets and required a lot of protection. They relied instead on mobility.

I'm here, her newly assigned second magical bodyguard relayed, appearing on a nearby rooftop and diving dramatically out of the sky in a blur of blue. Kishida Maki was not a teleporter, and was thus not really capable of filling the role once held by Xochitl Isi, Patricia's teleporter, who had been killed in the initial attack. However, Maki was an illusion generator, and could perhaps provide enough distraction for Patricia to escape sticky situations. They could only hope that would be enough.

Plus, it helped that Maki's ability gave her the ability to cross the battlefield to Patricia relatively safely.

The two friends nodded at each other, then at Anne, and the rest of her bodyguard moved across the rubble-strewn roadway.

Alright, she thought, allowing her legs to carry her across the rubble-strewn street. *We only have to hold—*

It took only a slight mental ping, the slightest intimation that something was wrong, to send her into a powered dive, using her powerful legs to launch her across the remainder of the street, then converting her forward momentum into a roll so she could keep moving.

Moments later a barrage of laser fire fusilladed the area she had been passing through.

Damn it! she thought, as her bodyguard troops responded immediately, snipers and auto-railguns opening fire from temporary positions in the buildings above onto the group of alien stealth infantry that had appeared in the street—a rare Exterminator strike group, specialized for the elimination of commanding officers, magical girls in particular.

Some of the positions fell silent immediately, terminated by other alien infiltrators. Deprived of their easy kill by Patricia's well-timed dodge, the aliens were switching to plan B: deprive her of an escape route by seizing the buildings around her, then finish the job before the human forces in the area could try to save her.

Patricia was painfully aware that if she had been more focused on her powers, rather than the functions of command, she could likely have detected the aliens before they arrived. Clairvoyants were rare enough to be precious on a battlefield, but her ability to pick up on drone activity, both friendly and enemy, meant that she could mostly accomplish the same purpose when it came to stealth detection.

She followed the instructions of her bodyguards as they ushered her inside the building she was next to, flanked by her two bodyguards.

Patricia took a moment to scan the path ahead for alien drones as they hurried through the ground floor of the building, participating only perfunctorily in the decisions being made by her bodyguard troops. On a tactical level, she had to trust that they knew what they were doing, better than she did.

Instead of heading for a secured room in the lower reaches of the building, they continued navigating the building. Patricia knew what this meant: they didn't think they could secure the building well enough for safety, so they would be making a run for it instead, hoping to breach the alien perimeter.

They ran through a maze of corridors and offices, whose now-useless walls and furniture served only as a depressing reminder of the civilians the building had once housed. The single-piece colonial furniture had been torn to pieces, either used to help barricade doors, or simply reprocessed for energy by one of the many soldiers and drones passing through. The walls were white, interspersed by patches of the smartwall ubiquitous on Earth and the occasional half-functioning holo-poster.

They burst back into the open from one of the service entrances of the building. The group of drones taking point fell to pieces in a barrage of fire, but the infantry that followed leveled suppressing fire at the origin of the shots, losing two members. A moment later, Anne dashed through the doorway, raising a protective barrier that provided just enough cover for Patricia and Maki to run past and into cover on the other side, in an alcove that had apparently once served as the entrance into "General Tso's Gourmet Chicken", a one-story structure that seemed out of place in this city center.

Anne followed immediately afterwards, taking only a moment to look askance at the restaurant sign. Around them, torrents of laser fire took their toll on their supporting bodyguard troops.

"We're taking too much attrition, sir," the sergeant in the area commented to Lieutenant Kishida, who was already moving out.

Three human armored vehicles appeared around the corner at the end of the street, drawing alien fire as Maki dashed outward, her movements a blur. A column of blue platforms appeared in the air next to the building across from them, as the vehicles disappeared into a pool of paint, having

served their purpose.

Maki scaled the building, jumping from wall to platform to window and back out again, hardened platforms dissolving into dye as she used them. Illusory copies of herself followed her movements upward, while "bullets", projectiles, and suicide drones showered into the alien positions from a variety of plausible angles, disappearing as they struck the alien shielding, providing additional distraction as she eliminated machine gun nest, sniper, rocket launcher, twin swords slicing and dicing the alien infantry.

As Maki worked her way back around towards Patricia and Anne, a quiet rumble above their heads drew their attention.

Anne slammed her hands upward, materializing a barrier just in time as the alien explosives finished detonating, bringing the structure down around them.

How the hell did they guess we'd go here*?* Anne cursed, as she angled her barrier to force the collapsing ruins of the—fortunately small—building away from them. They had moved forward, away from the building, and Anne unleashed another curse, this time in a colonial dialect of Chinese Patricia's TacComp didn't bother to translate.

Without quite knowing why, Patricia dodged rightward, just in time for a barrage of bullets to miss her. With her bodyguard squad still in chaos from the building collapse, they had lost suppressing fire—and Patricia had been flushed briefly into the open.

Redirecting more of her consciousness back into personal protection, she began to dodge—right, then left, then forward. Anne was new and, frankly, not as powerful as Patricia would have wished. She couldn't keep up this level of deflection for long.

With a burst of power, she seized control of a few of the alien drones that had been firing on her, turning them on their old allies, while Anne clapped her hands desperately, summoning wave after wave of sonic shockwaves that rattled and shook the buildings around them, dislodging pieces of masonry and collapsing windows. Patricia had to hope that all of that, plus the barriers Anne was still throwing up, would buy enough time.

Patricia! Maki thought, conveying a clear note of desperation.

Patricia spun around, already trying to jump away, but she knew, seeing the missile coming, that it was too late.

And then a blue caped figure landed in front of her, five meters away.

"Maki!" she yelled, as the detonation started to resonate in her ears. Glancing around, she saw Maki's signature apparitions begin to fall apart—she was either dead, or nonfunctional.

No, not dead. She could still sense the girl's power, just a little.

Situation critical, Patricia relayed to anyone who would listen, as she had already been doing for minutes now. *Anyone capable of assisting please help!*

With that, she dissolved the last of her tactical command mode, diving forward into the explosion's area of effect, where debris was still raining downward. No longer constrained by attention issues, she summoned a full flight of drones to accompany her and absorb any incoming fire or shrapnel. Into her hand she summoned her signature weapon—a large dull-grey drone-launcher that wrapped around her arm.

Found it! She thought, as one of her drones was able to grab Maki's soul gem and fly towards her.

Turning around, she reached outward, co-opting every alien drone she could find, while still summoning yet more of her own. Breaking into a run for cover, she used the alien drones to wreak as much havoc as she could with the alien battle coordination, as she raised her arm, launching fusillade after fusillade of everything she thought would help: explosive suicide drones here, EMP drones there, flying stinger drones into the air, gun platforms into the windows nearby.

She was still in trouble; they still had yet to break out of the alien perimeter. She needed—

A barrage of kaleidoscopic beams appeared in the sky above her, raining onto the contested area in front of her. Each behaved differently—some detonated on contact, others curved and twisted through the air as they sought out targets—but there was no mistaking what this was.

Cavalry's here, a feminine voice explained to Patricia, as she finally reached cover behind the remains of a stone bench. *Alpheus Squadron, at your service. Shirou Asaka authorized us to rush ahead of the column, since we heard you needed help.*

Patricia looked up, optical implants adjusting to the glare of the sun, at the group of girls that were darting among the buildings, on a variety of magical jet packs, rocket boots, and diminutive wings. True fliers were rare, so these were substantial reinforcements indeed.

She nodded, as she noted that her support troops had managed to take up new positions around her. As she placed Maki's soul gem into better storage in her equipment pack, she prepared to return to tactical command mode, already holding in her mind's eye tactical maps of the armor entering combat, arriving almost literally straight off the factory floor.

But something made her stop, and take one last look at the corpse she had left behind. It was gruesome, with torso torn away from legs and most of the skull missing. Unlike infantry, magical girls planetside wore no armor, so when they bled out, they really *bled out*, relatively speaking.

Patricia had seen its like before, in the weeks before, but she still shuddered, and turned away.

She looked up, as another wave of dropships broke through their air defenses.

It was beautiful, in a way, like a meteor shower—but these shooting stars brought death instead of wishes. Reviewing the tactical situation, she could see that Asaka had barely stabilized the situation, the reinforcements that were now arriving forming the opening salvos of a massive, desperate counterattack. It could work, but it was risky—if the aliens had even more reserves, it would finish them. That was beyond the control of anyone on the ground.

She peered into the distant sky.

What on earth is going up there? she thought.

Surfacing from the vision, Ryouko coughed, stomach churning slightly, but the flood of borrowed memories was relentless, and she was drowned once again…

The mental alarm, so familiar over the past day, had screamed painfully loud in her mind, tearing her away from the bosom of a half-hearted rest trance. It continued to tug at her attention as she and the infantrymen in her vicinity scrambled to mobilize, hastily checking weapons and power levels on their armor suits—most of them had remained standing, something that was surprisingly easy to tolerate if you were willing to abuse combat mode.

It was like an itch she couldn't scratch, one that clung at the depths of her mind until it was satisfied, and would not *let go*.

"Tell me, Lieutenant," she complained, as they began to power-sprint down the hall, her suit transmitting the audio. "Why is it that these kinds of alarms don't leave us alone when we've clearly already gotten up, started rushing down the halls, and activated full combat mode?"

"I believe it's to help keep us focused, sir," the lightly-bearded man replied, looking perplexed. "Combat statistics show it helps improve response times."

"Yes, Lieutenant, of course," she responded, a little drily. It had been a rhetorical question, but the lieutenant was a literal man, as she was slowly learning. There had been a lot of personnel transfers recently—those with naval training transferred out of the station, those without transferred in from other sectors. Only today had they learned what it was all about.

As they traversed the corridor, she took a moment to glance out the holographically-simulated station windows, looking inward towards the super-ship assembly area at the core of the Pollux Shipyard complex, and at the dusty, partial golden orb of planet Apollo that dominated the horizon beyond. The shipyard as a whole was actually a series of tethered space stations, arranged in concentric circles horizontally and, to a lesser degree, vertically around the central assembly area, and furthered serviced by other stations elsewhere in geostationary orbit. In ordinary times, steady ship and space elevator traffic provided additional raw materials both from the planet below and from space above. The complex was placed in relatively high orbit, to make the safe capture of asteroids into the shipyard easier, but also couldn't be *too* high, to facilitate transfer of goods to and from the surface below.

In such ordinary times, the rings of stations would often serve as feeder subassembly areas for the main assembly area, where the largest ships of the fleet would slowly take shape. At any given time, the shipyard would likely be assembling any number of frigates at the periphery, a smaller number of cruisers near the center, and, at the very center, perhaps a carrier. Only on rare occasions would the shipyard turn its attention to the assembly of a battlecruiser.

She had seen herself, a few times, the initialization of such a battlecruiser assembly. It was majestic, in its own way, the slow tugging of the captive asteroid into the central assembly area, the stations shifting orbits to make way, the small fleet of worker ships and drones on standby. Finally, with almost painful slowness, the asteroid would dock, the injection stations would make contact, and things would begin. For months the work would proceed nonstop, crews drilling into the asteroid, drones of every size—down to the microscopic—working to turn unrefined iron-nickel into military-grade metamaterial composite. The foundries, fabrication facilities, and microassembly plants of the shipyard would churn out the countless computing cores, nanoassemblers, transmission relays, and engine parts that went into an undertaking of this magnitude, while the station AIs gathered to design and assemble the kernel of a new battlecruiser AI, the economy of the planet below shifting its weight to accommodate the task. It was the only time the central assembly areas ever truly served their true purpose.

Now, though, there was no such megaproject. The shipyard and its supporting stations were devoted fully to the task of churning out orbital defense stations, Guardian-class cruisers, and other planetary defense accoutrements. The shipyard itself had been outfitted with a substantial number of fixed defenses: FTL interdiction generators, anti-ship railguns, and countless flak emplacements. The once mostly-civilian personnel were now reinforced by a military garrison that tripled the population of the station. Space was at an absolute premium.

But many of the personnel had left only recently, and at this particular moment, the sky around the shipyard was filled with seemingly endless combat, the back and forth of the shipyard's fleet

defenses, stripped barer than they had ever been, being placed under severe strain. The defenses of the shipyard itself now fired constantly, and damage control teams hurried back and forth to repair damage. Alien starships and insertion teams constantly tested their defenses, no longer being fully contained by the outer defense lines.

It was difficult, knowing that the fate of the station, and thus by extension her fate, rested primarily with the performance of the fleet jockeys in the sky around them, rather than anything within her direct control. She was used to it, though—had to *get* used to it, given her assignment to a vulnerable orbital shipyard.

Around her, the squad assigned to her made small talk, smiling or joking, the few newer replacements looking nervous. The platoon had separated into squads, advancing down various parts of the large, circular recreation area they were passing through, as civilians in the area looked on nervously. The lieutenant, her subordinate, had joined a squad on the far end of the room, behind the large cylindrical arboretum that decorated the center of the room—or rather, what *had* been an arboretum, but was now being used as a sleeping area.

The squad accompanying her at the moment was militia, volunteers to transfer up to the station for a chance at something greater, maybe even a promotion into the regular forces. Initially, that had meant obsolete weapons and gear in a well-defended location like the shipyard. Over the years, veterancy had dulled the distinction between militia and regular military, and about a year ago they had started receiving shiny, brand-new weapons and armor, erasing any meaningful distinctions that remained.

Often, in land units, the militia was separated out into their own divisions, even their own armies, but up here at "The Station", having a separate chain of command would have been unduly cumbersome, so separation only occurred at the platoon level. It suited her purposes fine.

She frowned under her faceplate, disturbed at how slow and intermittently information was being relayed to her. Usually, by this point in a rapid response she would already have substantial information about the nature of the threat they were dealing with, whether it was a search and rescue for civilians, whether it was an outbreak of alien minidrones that had snuck through the defenses, or whether it was one of those rare alien suicide insertion teams, launched in the hopes of finding a soft spot in the station's defenses where it happened to lack magical girl cover. They were having more luck today than she wanted to think about; much of the shipyard's mage garrison had been shifted elsewhere, either to defend the reaches of high orbit or to try to interdict the increasingly severe alien landings on the cities below. Radiation and antimatter sensors were sensitive enough that insertion teams couldn't sneak truly dangerous weapons through the forcefields—but that didn't mean they couldn't wreak absolute havoc with conventional weapons and explosives.

It was difficult to think about mages without thinking of—

"Cut the chatter," she ordered, decisively. "Something's up. This isn't an ordinary raid. We're walking into a communications black hole. We don't know what's in there. I want this taken seriously. Stay frosty; stay on your toes. Get the civilians out of here."

Her order applied not just to them, of course, but to the rest of the company, including several platoons that were advancing on the alarm area, a large cruiser engine subassembly facility, from different directions entirely. All around the room, individual squads scattered into covered positions along their axis of advance, as the civilians who had been lounging in the area began to hurry out the other way, agonizingly slowly from her mildly time-slowed perspective, used as she was to the lightning quick movements of her soldiers in their power armor.

Of course, the details of her command had been relayed in machine language long before she had

finished talking, but it was good practice to give verbal instructions whenever you could spare the time.

The company converged on the facility, individual members of each squad taking turns dashing forward into cover positions suggested by their TacComps, as smooth as a well-oiled machine, accompanied by drones scurrying and flying into useful support positions. As they moved into the entry corridors to the subassembly area, she took a moment to mull over her options, processing the information she was receiving over the local networks. According to the station AI, station defense could not immediately spare any mages for them, though some would be moved over as soon as possible. The subassembly facility was considered valuable, more valuable than the paltry lives of her whole company, if need be, especially considering they weren't contributing directly to the battle in the skies above.

She activated the full extent of her combat enhancements, performance statistics flooding the lower levels of her consciousness.

"We're going in," she said, having already received the concurrence of Station Command. "Go, go, go!"

"Be ready for heavy jamming," she heard one of the lieutenants say. "Remember that we have no signals from inside the facility."

"Careful with your fire in there," another said. "Some of those engine components are quite volatile."

The various platoons had, of course, started moving in the moment the orders had been fully relayed, including all the nagging details the lieutenants had said, but it still felt good to say.

In situations such as these, speed was of the utmost. Entryways were often slaughter points, so it was critical to get as many people through and into cover as soon as possible, so they could provide suppressing fire for anyone that followed. A swarm of drones, including several large ground drones, would rush in first, followed by the squads taking point, who had the unenviable position of probably taking the most casualties, but someone had to do it, after all.

And yet, when she herself burst through the doorway with her squad, going last as befitted the company commander, she found the platoon scattered around her seemingly casualty-free, even among the drones—seemingly, because their near-field and long-range communications had gone dead, leaving the various officers to issue their orders the old-fashioned way—by hand signal. Looking around, she could see elements of the other platoons in distant positions behind robotic assembly arms, containment units, and standing on several floors worth of walkways. The facility was large, large enough that her hundred-some soldiers seemed to melt into the surroundings, and large enough that she couldn't spot most of the other platoons.

The normally active assembly robots were quiescent but undamaged, and the human personnel of the facility seemed to have collapsed where they stood, though some showed signs of having tried to escape. From infrared, it seemed like they were still alive.

"Be careful of stealth," she said, out loud over external speakers, lifting her enormous weapon. Privately she thought: *What the hell?*

"Let's sweep our area," she said. "And try to pass information back and forth. Hopefully—"

She felt herself being flung aside with sudden, concussive force. With accelerated reactions, she managed to start turning midair, so that she landed into a roll, stopping behind a nearby storage container, back slamming in railing.

She barely managed to orient herself, already firing at the red area where her TacComp calculated that any enemies were likely to be. She heard an explosive crumbling, and noted that the entryway they had entered through was collapsing on itself, that the aliens were firing at the doorway.

Gunfire began sounding throughout the area, and a specialist in her squad fired a wide-dispersal area-denial shock grenade from her suit arm, designed specifically for revealing stealth units in close combat. Their small drones peppered the area with careful fire and miniature explosives of their own, exchanging fire with a large set of suddenly uncloaking alien drones, while two of their large "dog" drones dashed rapidly back and forth, trying to make physical contact with an alien trooper, which was emitting some kind of repulsive field. Even with heavy alien jamming in the area, the drones were intelligent enough to cooperate well.

It didn't matter, as both drones fell apart a moment later, sliced cleanly in-half by laser cutters from an invisible source.

The specialist fell to the ground a moment later, clutching briefly at an apparent wound in his abdomen, the brief shimmer of an alien stealth trooper passing by, revealed by the grenade. As others tried to track the trooper with their fire, falling back, she loaded a grenade into her arm—standard concussive—and launched where she expected there might be more troopers.

She fell backward with the rest of the squad as another member fell, firing on the sparks of shields activating where she had launched her grenade—a good guess, after all.

As she did so, her mind raced, even by the standards of the accelerated combat mode. Part of her sought to coordinate with her squad, her TacComp overlaying several new recommended positions over her visual field. Another part of her wondered at the strange alien tactics: where was the laser fire? The barrage of explosives? Even the concussive grenade that had hit her group was relatively weak.

Why haven't we taken down any alien troopers? We should have gotten some! Unless—heavy shielding? Commandos? Do they have commandos? Why did the specialist go down so quickly?

Stopping to allow her weapon to reload, she turned and dashed for one of the new positions indicated by her TacComp.

Half-way there, a searing laser shot out of the ground where she was about to step, and she barely managed to dodge out of the way—but the laser hit her heavy assault rifle, which immediately ruptured explosively, scarring her armor.

She swore, tossing the weapon away, still running. Some sort of new land mine—this was a trap!

Reaching her new position, behind a robotic auto-assembler, she glanced back at the rest of her squad. Over half the members were now missing, two of the others had lost function in major limbs, and one had lost his weapon. They were still fighting, but the situation was dire.

She noted that the sound of gunfire in the facility, once thunderous, was starting to palpably lessen. They were losing badly.

I brought my whole company! How many of them are there? How could they sneak in so many?

What is the point of this exercise? she thought despairingly. *To trap and annihilate one human unit? Destroy the facility? Is that worth how many troops they sent? Because they can't possibly escape now.*

Another set of explosions, and she found herself dodging manically, as the walkways above her

head began to fall to the floor.

Then she stepped on another mine, and this time the laser seared off her hand.

She didn't stare at it in shock, or feel any pain—the combat enhancements ensured that. Instead she dodged, trying to find another safe spot, the gaping wound at the end of her arm already beginning to seal.

And then she felt a sharp, piercing pain in her gut.

She looked down, at the blood pouring out of the wound, as she fell to the ground, suit power failing inexplicably.

Core systems un…respon— her TacComp began, before *stopping*, just like that.

For a moment, she could still see, her vision blurring, the shimmer of an alien commando passing over her.

She had left her family, everything behind, because—

Then the world blacked out.

Medium-range transit nearly complete. Task force prepare for ready stance.

That triggered a wave of nervous telepathic chatter in Nakihara Asami's flight wing, which had been on edge nearly the entire trip. Asami herself, however, stayed quiet.

You okay in there? You seem a little out of it, her wingmate Hosna asked.

The telepathic words, unexpectedly clarion, cut through the fog that had settled over her mind, causing her to blink in surprise, behind the faceplate of her flight suit.

"Oh, I'm fine," Nakihara Asami insisted. "I'm fine. Just watching the sky."

"Watching the sky" was a *Magi Cæli* euphemism that had developed for the practice of using one's magical powers to search the sky, whether it involved clairvoyance or, in Asami's case, gravity powers. Asami, however, was a bit prone to zoning out while doing so, which had caused the phrase to acquire additional connotations when used by her wingmates.

It was more than that, though, as Hosna was proving annoyingly successful at intuiting. Asami had been spending the time obsessively probing the Grapevine for news, so much so that her contact to the network, a certain Ophelia over in Dardanelle squadron, had warned her about overuse.

She couldn't help it; it was maddening to be alone out here, without a single piece of news to reassure her.

Well, technically that was untrue; apparently, Ryouko had spent a small amount of time on the surface of Apollo, training for some sort of hush-hush mission with an elite MagOps squad of some sort. The individuals and people involved were well-known: Nadya Antipova was famed for her powerful telekinesis skills and was a minor celebrity in Russia; Misa Virani was apparently well-known in a city in New California for some stunt she had pulled there while on vacation—the exact details had been buried, in one of Governance's few instances of unavoidable, explicit secrecy. The team they led, along with their ship, HSS Raven, had quite a reputation, having been

spotted in the vicinity of major MagOps successes on multiple occasions. Certain fans on the Grapevine had used circumstantial evidence like that to build up a substantial dossier of missions.

Even more exciting than that, at least to denizens of the network, was the sudden appearance of a certain Clarisse van Rossum halfway through their training. Asami had been forced to look up the woman, apparently an Ancient of substantial reputation who had nearly a cult following online. Her participation in an event was taken an indication that something big was going to go down. Asami was amazed that she had never heard of the woman before.

All very exciting news, news that Asami had gorged herself on like a VR addict being given access to a high-end Governance server—or, indeed, like she herself felt sometimes, near the gravitational anomalies that ebbed outward from starship engines. It had taken a while to learn to suppress the strange giddiness that sometimes washed over her, which had already triggered some giggles in the rest of the MC training cohort.

None of it, though, told her anything she really wanted to know—what was Ryouko doing? What were her chances of survival? On this, the network remained silent, the military's secrecy for once apparently winning the day.

Now that the battle had developed to this point, only the members being held in reserve really had the time to actively speculate on what exactly HSS Raven's mission was—extra-system IIC bandwidth was being reserved for matters of military importance. Much speculation focused on the wormhole stabilizer whose presence had only been announced to the fleet just before the current operation. It made sense, but they couldn't be sure, because there was no evidence.

So instead Asami's mind ground its gears in silence. To some degree, she was glad for the combat, which took her mind off things. It was the pauses, the occasional periods of disengagement as they returned to their support ships, or flew temporary holding patterns in their suits as they traveled between destinations, that really got her. It was so easy to just let her TacComp take over the flying, as she continued to think—

Asami! Are you in there or what? Hosna yelled again, trying to get her attention.

She startled, the intervention of her TacComp preventing her from jerking her limbs. The TacComp was capable of forcibly seizing her attention for combat reasons, but did not do so for less important reasons. Not to mention it wasn't directly capable of picking up on telepathy. Part of her envied Ryouko her new version TacComp, but given what she had said about the device—well, Asami wasn't sure about wanting something *that* human inside her.

Meiqing and some others from the training cohort had somehow started to suspect that Ryouko had a new version, though Asami had no idea how.

Well, it certainly wasn't me, she thought. *I'll have to tell Ryouko—*

Agh, I'm still thinking about her. Focus!

I'm fine, yeah, she managed to say back to Hosna, as the world snapped back into focus around her. The blackness of deep space, the tormented view of the sky from inside their fleet FTL bubble, countless starships in the sky—all of it hung around her in eerie silence, the larger ships seemingly stationary, the fighter-class ships and drones constantly bobbing and weaving about. It was amazing, how used she had gotten to it, at least with her mind as distracted as it was now.

I told you she's not okay, First Lieutenant Hosna said, with a trace of anger, directing the comment at Yi Jong, their squadron telepath and commanding officer, or SCO for short.

Asami didn't hear the response, which Jong had probably sealed into a private telepathic channel, but she knew what the captain was probably saying—she had overheard them arguing in the hallway earlier.

"Look, I submitted the report accurately," Jong had said. *"How was I supposed to know they're pushing psych-class C's into combat now? I was expecting them to send her to a therapist, not send her out with us! If I had known, I would have exaggerated a lot more. What's done is done; we'll just have to keep an eye on her."*

It's not right, sending a rookie out like this, on half-training to boot, Jean added, after a long moment.

She's doing quite well, for a rookie, Jong said. *You saw the bombers she took down earlier. Look, let's stop talking about her like she's not here. You okay over there, Asami?*

Yeah, I think so, Asami responded—truthfully, she thought—*I'm just a little distracted. I'll be okay if we start fighting.*

I think we can rely on that, Jong agreed.

Asami doubted she would have even asked if she thought the answer would have been different—the captain was a telepath after all, and could read Asami's mind perfectly well. Plus, Asami's soul gem meter served as reassurance. Sure, the maximum level was a bit lower than usual, and the depletion rate was a little high, but overall the statistics were within acceptable range.

Well, we're going to need some of those anti-bomber skills soon, Jean commented, gesturing in front of her. *We're getting really close now.*

Asami swallowed, trying to push down a sudden frisson of nervousness. Up until now, they hadn't really been in the battle. Assigned to the cruiser HSS Otto von Bismarck, their task force had been held in reserve at the rear of the formation, and had consequently dealt only with the occasionally alien penetration raid—harrowing to be sure, but not at all like what the veterans had described a battle as being like.

Now, though, Anand's faltering attack had been deemed secondary to Feodorovich's much larger and more successful surprise offensive, and her fleets had abruptly withdrawn. Most of the fleet had moved to join Feodorovich, the more depleted formations pausing to regroup and repair, but much of the reserve had been transferred back in system, where the twin worlds of Apollo and Artemis were apparently under severe assault.

Form up, girls, Jong ordered. *This is going to be hot.*

New orders began to trickle in. The task force as a whole was going to reinforce the fleet stationed in defense around the planet of Apollo, where alien starships were starting to break open wide holes in the planet's orbital defenses. Many of the group's MC squadrons were assigned to follow them on this mission. However, some of the MC squadrons, more specialized at transport interception, would be shifted into a more defensive role, along with a small number of ships to help carry them into new positions. Some were being sent to try and screen the planet from the alien drop ships heading for the surface. As for the rest…

"You'll be covering Pollux shipyard," their squadron's CMCG—Commander, Magi Cæli Group—relayed. *"It seems like the aliens are trying out a new tactic with heavily-armed, unusually-large stealth ships. The shipyard has already lost some important facilities to this new tactic. The hope among OrbCom is that assigning some MC squadrons with stealth-detection will neutralize the threat."*

Among other things, that meant Asami, of course, since even alien stealth systems weren't perfect at hiding the gravitational effect of their exotic matter engines, and Asami was excellent at sensing that kind of thing.

"*The shipyard also needs immediate support against an incoming group of transports, so expect contact the moment you exit FTL,"* their CMCG finished.

They engaged their propulsion packs, rearranging themselves into a preplanned formation, Jean, Asami and others with repulsion powers in front, Hosna and Jong farther back. The squadron's drones, which had surrounded them as a cloud the entire way forward, rearranged themselves in a similar fashion.

A few frigates, as well as the Otto von Bismarck, broke off from the main task force, combined FTL bubble breaking off from that of the main group in a manner exactly analogous to the behavior of soap bubbles. These frigates carried their squadron, along with a few others, to the shipyard, while the rest of the task force headed elsewhere.

Asami took a breath, as multiple barriers flickered to life in front of them. She gestured her arm slightly—a habit she hadn't been able to get rid of—and another barrier appeared, an invisible region of negative space-time curvature visible only to her.

Another breath, and a small gravitational anomaly appeared in front of her. Her primary weapon, a miniature singularity, sounded impressive—and, okay, was pretty impressive when she used it—but it wouldn't have amounted to much without the effort she had to put in to amplify its strength outside of its event horizon, to make the event horizon *much* larger than it should have been, given its mass, and to keep the Hawking radiation leakage to manageable levels. It was a lot of work!

That was why she only kept one going at any given time.

As their FTL bubble began to dissolve, they engaged their stealth packs.

The view that appeared around her was awe-inspiring—radiation flared into her view from a thousand sources, from energy scattering off of starship forcefields, from countless engines of every size and shape, from the shattered wrecks of countless ships. The golden orb of the dry planet Apollo dominated the sky, its atmosphere punctuated by the fiery re-entry of countless objects—wave after wave of alien drop pods and drop ships, many intact, many shattered into pieces. Uncontrolled collisions between the innumerable broken pieces of debris created enormous debris fields in orbit, ensuring a seemingly endless rain of small, deadly projectiles onto their squadron defenses.

Before her, the numerous installations of Pollux shipyard strewn themselves before her, enormous concentric circles clearly labeled by her TacComp in the field of her vision. Some of the installations had clearly been blown apart, but the shipyard seemed, as a whole, intact.

The gravity—she could feel it in her heart, the thrumming of so many engines, the violent disintegration of so much exotic matter, freed from containment, all of it spiraling in the gravity well of the planet below. It was a veritable playground of gravitational anomalies.

And they were getting closer, their small formation knifing forward, directly into a large cluster of defense ships, alien cruisers, heavily-armed alien transports, and assorted escort ships for both sides. This cluster was engaged in a densely-packed firefight—"knifefight", according to MC terminology.

Many of the alien transports and cruisers had now been revealed, either via direct detection by OrbCom clairvoyants or due to the weapons fire they directed in support of their sister ships.

These transports were a novelty, armed with an armament of hard radiation bombs and Raptor missiles far in excess of the typical alien transport. Perhaps most disturbingly, the sheer magnitude of the stealth the aliens had utilized was staggering in comparison to anything they had done previously in the war. Not only were these stealth cruisers and cruiser-sized transports more than an order of magnitude larger than any stealth ship previously known, the transports had also cloaked a substantial accompanying population of drones and escort ships. It was worth asking: if the aliens could cloak this, what *couldn't* they cloak?

Teamwork, girls! the captain ordered, raising her ruby-tipped scepter. All at once, dozens of red lines, curved, jagged, and straight, appeared around them, passing through their formation. Each one represented the intention of a sentient enemy attacker.

Does she know how lame she sounds when she says that? someone in the squadron thought—leaving the captain out of the telepathic channel, of course.

Stealth, my ass, someone in the squadron thought, simultaneously. *These stealth packs ain't worth shit.*

Allowing the rest of the group to cover her, Asami closed her eyes, extending her gravitational senses outward toward the cluster of ships. She could tell…she could sense…

As OrbCom's clairvoyants had suspected—but not been able to pinpoint—not all of the alien ships had chosen to reveal themselves with their weapons fire. Quite a few, slipping past the rest, were still trying to sneak by the defenses to the shipyard.

Taking a breath inside her helmet, Asami marked the locations of the ones she could find. Once precisely located, the clairvoyants could keep an eye on them without her help—hopefully, anyway—so that ships and other squadrons in the area could do something about it.

And then there was no more time to think, as the drone cloud of their formation slammed into the cluster of alien transports, injecting yet another source of chaos and destruction into the scrum.

She projected her repulsion field forward, attempting to clear a path for her squadron through sea of drones, weapons fire, and missiles, as the rest of the girls fired their longer-ranged weapons, a group of robotic Medevacs appearing behind them, some having literally just emerged from the shipyard. As they did so, they began to collectively decelerate, under the influence of their suits, Asami's gravity, and a sort of collective telekinesis, just as in training. It would not do to keep flying forward at their previous speed, which would have carried them rapidly into the alien formation, far past their own support ships. Slowing down made them more vulnerable to targeted fire, but it was also the only way they could perform any attack that was more than just a long range potshot.

Collectively, they searched for targets, ideally a large alien ship that just happened to be traveling at their exact velocity, or something close to it, and even more ideally one they happened to already be near.

A moment later, OrbCom forwarded them a potential target, a cruiser Asami had identified earlier, now almost directly in front of them, designation number 517, trying to make a run for the shipyard. In all likelihood, the ship hadn't realized it had been detected.

They accelerated forward, seeking to close the remaining distance before the ship, or any of its frigate escorts, noticed their sudden change in combat posture. The distance estimates in Asami's upper field of view scrolled downward, reaching 200 km, 150 km, 100 km…

Then, as they began to slow back down, Asami withdrew her focus from the direct combat for a

moment, seeking to detect the location of the alien drive core—

There, she thought.

She had barely completed the thought when their group teleporter spread out her dark orange teleportation bubble, grabbing Asami, Jean and a few others, and—

The next moment, Asami found herself within the engine room of the alien ship. The austere curved walls, white and grey, rapidly became tarnished with dark green ichor and black char marks, and the white and grey turned harsh with reflected radiation, viewed with her rapidly transitioning optical implants. Jean's barrier held back a storm of alien weapons fire, the other girls responded with attacks of their own, and Asami stepped up to the wide opening that led to primary alien drive core.

The metallic orb, almost the size of an entire frigate and glowing with blue Cherenkov radiation, hung in the air, the artificial gravity disabled in its area of the ship. Numerous tubes connected to it from the spherical walls, glassy and eerily reflective. In the simulations, Asami had always thought that an alien engine room resembled the central room of an austere temple, a shrine built to worship the mysterious spherical idol that dominated its center. To her, it seemed entirely appropriate: the alien drive thrummed with power, far more elegant and beautiful than its human equivalent.

Here, near the central core, there were no weapons emplacements, only a small emergency forcefield that shimmered in front of the core—FTL cores were delicate things, and did not function well without careful isolation.

She spread her arms outward, allowing the singularity she carried with her to rise in front of her, radioactive aura surrounding an angry pitch-black core that, out of the blackness of deep space, was suddenly very obvious. She grew it larger, until the formerly football-sized anomaly seemed to stand in front of her, larger than she was.

In front of her, the core grew visibly perturbed, its formerly steady glow beginning to shudder.

I'm sorry, she thought—to herself, because it wasn't really the normal thing for someone in her position to think.

Then she released the singularity, pushing it forward, maintaining her control over it, for now.

I'm done here; we need to go, she thought, as she dashed back out into the main engine room.

The teleporter spread out her teleportation bubble, and a moment later they were back outside the ship again, with the rest of the squadron.

Asami had no time to enjoy the results of her work, or to observe the rear of the cruiser breaking apart in the distance; they were under heavy attack, and already trying to withdraw to safety, which was actually a bit more difficult than charging in, because they no longer had the momentum or surprise that accompanied exiting rapidly from FTL.

The squadron already looked somewhat depleted, and a small number of the medevacs hovering in their area were already occupied. Ordinarily, the ships would have rushed back to the nearest friendly cruiser or frigate, but at the moment there was no immediate clear path back to friendly ships—the squadron would have to cut such a path out itself, and the Medevacs were waiting for an opening.

Keep it together girls! Jong Yi thought. *Let's make a break for HSS Abraham Lincoln!*

The field of stars in front of Asami flared bright white with the detonation of a hard radiation bomb. She threw up a repulsion barrier, though she didn't expect much from it—her gravity-based powers had the most problems dealing with light. Instead, she drew on her power reserves, summoning another singularity, which she placed in front of her. Forcibly growing it larger again, it absorbed the radiation, as well as a wave of anti-personnel smart shrapnel that followed, arriving from another explosive.

Turning about-face, she faced a wave of interceptors that had arrived, the group of girls now too pressed to communicate in more than brief telepathic flashes, carrying nonverbal tidbits of intent or information.

In situations like this, she had very little in the way of a direct attack—she was much more of a support fighter, using her manipulation abilities to alter the trajectories of alien ships, enhance allied maneuverability, or use gravitational anomalies to disrupt alien systems and weaponry.

She tried to maintain her focus in the chaos of the battle, retreating behind defensive barriers erected by the others, directing her attention at perturbing the delicate engine mechanisms of a group of three interceptors passing through her former position. One of the ships dropped out of formation, losing acceleration, and Jong Yi appeared at its side, slamming the ruby tip of her scepter directly into the side of the ship, where it glowed briefly red before blowing the interceptor apart in a blast of crimson light, debris continuing to travel in the ship's former direction.

Then, with the kind of telepathic snap that accompanied sudden termination, Jean, one of the barrier generators Asami had been relying on, disappeared, almost literally, her body seeming to vanish utterly in the ultraviolet glare of a laser she had failed to block in time.

The soul gem was still intact, shielded at the last moment by the girl's last ditch-defenses, exactly as stipulated by the combat manual, and Asami grabbed it with a gravitational vortex, hurling it at the nearest empty medevac, while simultaneously using a gravitational eddy to divert the course of an alien missile headed towards the area.

She could almost be proud of herself, then, for maintaining her focus, but then with another snap, one of the other barrier generators died, soul gem lost, the still intact upper body seeming to mock her, and forcing her TacComp to suppress the wave of revulsion that passed through her.

Their numbers were dwindling, and the perimeter was breaking down. This was not turning out to be a good run—but at least they were almost at the Lincoln, and the prospect of temporary safety.

Rocketing backward, she dodged and weaved, even turning into a barrel roll, her TacComp working to keep her from being disoriented. Forcing herself into an abrupt deceleration that she could feel damaging her soft tissues, she gritted her teeth and spun her singularity around her, so that the interceptor chasing her rammed directly into it. As the ship distorted and collapsed, breaking into pieces, the world turned bright with radiation again, as an alien cruiser engaged with the Lincoln released a fusillade of hard radiation bombs in their direction. She swung the singularity around to block it, ignoring the remains of the interceptor, but then *another* such bomb detonated behind her, and she knew she had nothing to mitigate the damage this time. Someone else in her squadron would have to cover her back.

But no one got there in time.

The next few minutes seemed to pass in a blur.

Angry telepathic cursing from Hosna…

Her TacComp announcing her entry into fugue…

The cold, saving embrace of a Medevac pulling her inside with metal arms…

The distinctly unpleasant sensation of incubation tank fluid entering her lungs…

Then she snapped her eyes up, as if shocked awake.

Her vision was tinted blue by what she knew to be the tank fluid, and various parts of her body itched where she knew various tubes had been inserted. Beyond the tank, there was nothing but the cold inner surface of the medevac, which after all was little more than a flying incubation tank with a small stock of grief cubes.

Fugue state anomaly, the Medevac thought, robotic voice deliberately warm, but emotionally lifeless. *Soul gem light emission dangerously unstable.*

What am I even doing out here? she thought, raising her hand to touch her tank wall. *This isn't what I wanted.*

Her body hadn't been recovered immediately, and had taken substantial damage during the wait. What remained of her hand—the palm, two fingers—was embedded with small, flexible tubes, and covered with bright red sores where flesh had fallen off.

I can't even see the stars, she thought. *I never wanted to be out here. I wanted to be studying plants!*

Unnoticed, her tears started mingling with the tank fluid.

But I didn't wish for that, did I? I made a wish about my family, when I, I don't even—

I thought I would want nothing else, but instead, now, I'd want—

She pushed herself out onto the local networks, and found to her surprise that she could still access them. That meant they must have made it back. Her attention shifted to a news bulletin:

Special Audio Announcement to the Fleet by Field Marshal Tomoe Mami:

"Thanks to our hard work and effort, the primary objective of this operation has been completed! The wormhole stabilizers have been destroyed by a special MagOps team assigned to this purpose. With this accomplishment, it may be that victory is in sight. However, this battle is far from over—"

She skipped ahead, and then heard the same maternal but authoritative voice continue:

"Unfortunately, no victory is without sacrifice, and we have lost all contact with the MagOps team carrying out this operation, and the stealth insertion ship HSS Raven has been destroyed. Let us—"

Here she heard, or perhaps imagined, a slight emotional tremor on the part of the marshal.

"—commemorate those who are missing, while not abandoning hope. The team members are as follows: Colonel Clarisse van Rossum, of Earth—"

Feeling her heart shattering inside her, she immediately skipped forward within the audio file, and heard:

“Captain Shizuki Ryouko, of Earth—”

The remaining two digits of her right hand clenched, gouging the transparent shell around the tank with still intact fingernails. Letting her hand fall away, drifting in the fluid, she began to laugh, harshly, then found she couldn’t even laugh, that something was damaged.

All of it, for nothing, she thought.

Soul gem unstable, the Medevac thought. *Emergency measures enacted*

Then, suddenly, so quickly she barely saw it happen, she found herself ejected from the ship, drifting in the cold of interstellar space—or, at least, her body had been. It had kept her soul gem. After all, the quickest way to stabilize a despairing magical girl was to detach her from her body.

She tried to laugh again.

This madness—

Then the world blacked out, as the 100 meter limit rapidly passed.

This time, the transition was smooth, giving Ryouko no time to think before a new perspective, a new mind, took dominance of her thoughts. This time, the tenor of the thoughts felt different—efficient and powerful, yet stretched, thin somehow, as if time had worn the mind itself down to bare essentials, as if…something was missing.

She knew immediately who it was, of course.

We’re actually doing it, Mami thought. *We’re holding on.*

She would have reveled in it more, were it not for Erwynmark’s death. By the time they finally retrieved his body, parts of it were still alive, and they could have regrown it—as an empty shell, since the critical neural circuits in his brain had been irretrievably lost, and unlike her, he had no soul gem as a backup. Information-theoretic death, the loss of the information that constituted an individual, what the Incubators might call a soul, was the only true death.

It wasn’t just Erwynmark, of course. There was also the team still on the moon, Clarisse and Ryouko and the others, but those, at least, she still had some hope were still alive.

Try as she might, she couldn’t suppress the tiny part of her that wasn’t fully devoted to controlling her fleet, which was once again filling with regret.

Why do they always die on me? Why can’t I ever save them? What does it take?

She shook it off, as she had to, as she had shaken off a thousand such lines of thought over centuries of life. The work—the work was the only thing that mattered, the work that ensured that the greatest good went to the greatest number. Sometimes the few had to suffer. Sometimes it even had to be done deliberately.

She ignored the shiver that passed suddenly through her spine, focusing her attention on the task on hand. Best not to leave parts of her mind thinking idle thoughts.

The ship and troop dispositions of the system spread outward in her mind’s eye, both literally in

front of her and in the depths of her mind, connected to her brain with a directness unachievable by mere vision.

Eschewing the fancy virtual reality travel effects to save processing and time, she inspected the situation as it stood, the scene before her switching instantly to a side-by-side view of the twin planets Apollo and Artemis, which appeared as giant orbs in front of her. Despite tremendous pressure from a massive alien offensive, the urban centers of the planets, highlighted before her, were mostly holding on, just barely, despite a few unfortunate antimatter explosives the aliens had managed to slip into the defensive lines, whose damage radii were highlighted bright red on the surface of the planets, resembling painful bloody sores. As for the related casualty counts and environmental damage—that was another thing best not to think about.

As for the two shipyards in orbit around the planets, they were doing…acceptably, according to the consensus of the High Command gestalt, which forever loomed in the rear—and even forefront—of her mind. The shipyards were taking damage, and Pollux, especially, had been the victim of several insertion teams and bombardments getting through the defenses, but the modular, scattered nature of its design was preventing the damage from being too severe. As long as they survived in some form, the damage could probably be repaired.

But while all that was important, it meant little if the fleet failed in its duties. On that front, things were looking brighter than Mami would have dared hope earlier, and she had no need to go over it all again—it was her responsibility, and even at that very moment, the substantial majority of her focus was devoted to managing the fleets involved.

Yuma would say that about 75% of my consciousness was involved—no, forget it. I don't care.

With the wormhole stabilizer mission already a success, despite the apparent loss of the team involved, she—more accurately, she and the High Command—had called off the fleets deployed to the diversionary operations, reorganizing and redeploying them to new missions. Admiral Gul's fleets, ragged from ferocious combat defending the system's human-controlled asteroids and comets, had been divided between Mami's fleet—holding back the alien fleets that had emerged from the wormhole—and Feodorovich's counterattack, far beyond the system boundaries. Anand's fleets had shown some initial success in their attack on the alien supply lines, but had lost offensive momentum. The system's operational reserves had unfortunately been siphoned off to help with the crisis on Apollo and Artemis, so unfortunately, that was that, and Anand's fleets had pulled back, regrouped, and joined Feodorovich's massive attack.

Mami switched her focus to Feodorovich's fleets, taking a strategic level view of the Euphratic sector, rather than the system-level view she had gotten used to. Feodorovich at this point had nearly as many ships as Mami did, and for good reason—Mami's judgment earlier had proven sound, and the alien's salient defenses were stripped bare. With a focused, concentrated strike, of exactly the kind pioneered by human strategists in the earlier parts of the war, the alien rear could be shattered, and without their wormhole, their resources would flag in the face of the industrial might of the human worlds.

Feodorovich was making excellent progress, tearing a deep, narrow swath into the tip of the alien salient into human space, which was tinted angry red in her field of view. She was bypassing fortified systems, seizing strategic points on shipping lanes, re-establishing IIC nodes, re-establishing contact with human garrisons still holding out underground—all the things it took to grab a swathe of space and try to hold onto it. In this case, however, Mami spared herself the details, refusing the flood of information at the edge of her consciousness.

The woman knew what she was doing, and seemed within…distant grasp of achieving their goals.

Mami was now cautiously optimistic, but there was work to be done. The more efficiently they

could defend the system, the more ships could be reallocated to Feodorovich. Speed was of the essence, to prevent the aliens reallocating their own forces to stop her drive—and speed required power. Basic military principles.

Yes, if I focus a little now, I can have this all over with. Just a little longer. Then I can relax.

The aliens had seemed strangely reluctant to pull back from the offensive, though. It was a tendency human strategists had noted early in the war, and one that could be exploited to profit.

Then, all at once, Mami found her attention seized by a sudden, high-priority alert.

Ryouko again opened her eyes, and this time she found herself back in her own body, standing again on the austere, dark grey surface of the alien moon. She found herself breathing heavily from what she had just experienced. Asami, she—

She thinks I'm dead, Ryouko thought. *I—I'm—*

She stopped her apology midway, realizing that no one could hear her, and she wasn't really sure what she apologizing for anyway.

Who was that woman on the shipyard?

Looking around, thinking that perhaps the vision was over, she found her teammates still motionless, frozen in the same postures she had seen them in at the very beginning.

Then again, with all the temporal anomalies that had formed in the area, it would have been difficult to rule out the possibility, were the Goddess not standing directly in front of her, hands clasped behind her back and watching the sky.

The Goddess—it was amazing how mundane the idea was starting to become, in some ways. It didn't help that the Goddess in question seemed to be humming to herself, translucent wings twitching in rhythm to a song Ryouko couldn't identify.

"Will she be alright?" Ryouko asked, finally.

"Nakihara-san? Right now, yes, kind of," the woman said, in idiomatic Japanese. "The rest depends on other things. It's best not to talk about it."

Ryouko stood there for a moment, stymied. She had questions she wanted to ask, all bubbling to the surface of her mind, but something about the Goddess's body language dissuaded her from saying anything.

The woman sighed, then spoke in flawless Standard, twirling a part of her long, flowing hair with one finger.

"Sometimes I show up to these visions in something closer to my human form and personality. It feels refreshing to do that, and sometimes I can almost remember what it was like to be human. But most of the time, I can't. It would just confuse the girl receiving the vision. Everyone expects a Goddess to have a certain gravitas, even when the Goddess herself would rather do something else."

Still not turning to face Ryouko, the woman seemed to be studying her fingernails.

"If you think about it, everyone takes on many forms, in the course of a life," she said. "Child,

woman, mother. Scientist, writer, leader. Magical girl, goddess, witch. My particular life cycle just happens to stretch over all of time. Sometimes I am excited, cheerful, and young, like I was at the beginning. Other times, I feel old, thin, sort of stretched, like too little butter spread over *way* too much bread. The truth is, when time itself is a meaningless construct, I am all of those things at once."

The woman sighed again, then spun around unexpectedly, almost startling Ryouko into jumping

"It's alright if you don't understand," she said in Japanese, suddenly smiling. "I'm just toying with you. What do you think? Can we be friends?"

The woman leaned forward, sticking her hand out. Ryouko found herself shaking it, without fully understanding what she was doing. It occurred to her that this version of the goddess seemed palpably younger than the version that had been facing away from her. Did gods age? What did that even mean?

"Good!" the woman said, nodding to herself in pleasure. "Now let's get back to business."

She tilted her head upward, at the sky, so that Ryouko looked up as well, at the stars distorted by the bubbles of discordant time that floated in the air.

"My old senpai Mami-san has refused to give up the fight," she said, voice suddenly serious. "With the destruction of this Wormhole Stabilizer, she believes she can win this battle, despite the long odds. She and Erwynmark—they believe in the value of staying aggressive, of leaving no one behind, but the currents here run deeper than they know."

She looked at Ryouko to make sure she was following, a surprisingly human gesture, then continued, ticking points off on her fingers:

"Every step of this operation has been designed to lure the human fleet into a deeper and deeper trap. First, the wormhole stabilizer placed at a location that cannot possibly be ignored, with extra stabilizer cores that not only make it more difficult to destroy, but also easier to detect on long-range sensors. Second, pretending that the stabilizer is not operational, until the human fleet has committed itself too deeply. Finally, moving in reinforcements at an apparent snail's pace, and deliberately having surprisingly few forces in the area, leading the human commanders to think that it is still possible to win by being aggressive. In truth, there is a large fleet now gathered around the site of the former wormhole, all gathered within one, gigantic cloaking field. This is the first campaign of the war where they've devoted a reasonable amount of resources to trying to win, and that fleet, cloaked on a scale unimaginable to human scientists, is their trump card, their key to finally striking a decisive blow in this war."

She stopped, and looked at Ryouko out of the corner of her eye, and a brief pallor seemed to pass over the woman's face.

"Do you understand?" she asked, voice rigid. "When that fleet uncloaks and moves out, everyone I just showed you will die. Von Rohr-san, Nakihara-san, even Mami-san. Even if you escaped this moon and warned them, it would already be too late. The die is now cast, and even the destruction of the wormhole stabilizer will save nothing."

The Goddess turned, grabbing her by the shoulders, and, in what seemed like a trick of the light, Ryouko found herself looking at a young girl, clad in a pink costume much like hers, as short as she was. Indeed, she would have not seemed out of place as one of Ryouko's classmates, back on Earth.

"Only one thing can save us," the girl said, in a voice now much higher-pitched, almost pleading.

“Magical girls are the only thing that has kept humans alive in this war, and it’s the only thing the aliens were afraid of. If a trained long-range clairvoyant had examined the region around the wormhole at the right time, they would have spotted the fleet, even with stealth. If Gracia had looked just a little bit more carefully, instead of focusing on only the Raven, she would have seen them. If Nakihara Asami had been assigned to Mami’s fleet, there is a small chance she would have sensed something wrong. But as it is, everyone was too distracted to look, and no one in command thought to order a closer inspection. They played Mami like a fiddle, and even after four hundred and fifty years, she is still not careful enough. Sometimes, history hinges on collective failures, and little mistakes like that. And the punishment for failure is often very cruel.”

The girl clasped Ryouko’s hands in her own, the gesture filled Ryouko with a feeling of familiarity she couldn’t understand.

“But, it is easy to manipulate history, if you know how,” the girl said. “Even if you have very little direct influence. A suggestion here, a vision there, a well-timed demon spawn—you don’t know it, but this is one of the things you were born for. Your wish made sure of it.”

Ryouko stared back at the girl’s eyes, those mesmerizing windows into what appeared to be another world, and had no idea what to say. What *could* she say, after a speech like that?

She blinked, and suddenly the goddess was an adult again, wearing that white dress.

“I know you sensed it, before I interrupted you,” the woman said, pinning her with her gaze. “With the recent destruction of the wormhole, the fabric of space-time in this area is very weak. Even without me, you would have realized that your powers are now greatly expanded, but you would have only thought to save your team, and teleport them all back to safety, away from this moon. But, just for now, you are capable of so much more. I’m not going to play around with confusing symbolism this time. Open the mouth of the wormhole again, then slam it shut on the alien fleet. Send them back home. Then you can teleport out. Do you understand?”

Again, Ryouko just stared, unable to form a coherent response.

“Of course you do,” the Goddess said. “I can read your mind. You’ll be fine. Come see me again when this is all over, okay? I expect we’ll have much to talk about.”

Then the woman pulled her into a hug, and Ryouko closed her eyes. The hug reminded her, strangely, of her mother.

“It will be alright, child,” she heard the Goddess say.

She woke to the sensation of Nadya shaking her violently, trying to wake her as she stood rigidly.

“I told you, she’s having a vision,” Clarisse insisted angrily. “Stop trying to wake her.”

“Look, I don’t want to be mean about this,” Nadya said, “but I don’t believe—we can’t have people zoning out at a time like this.”

“What I would give for a team leader who actually understands the Goddess—“ Gracia began.

“I don’t want to hear insubordination at a moment like this—” Nadya growled.

“Stop fighting!” Clarisse said. “Both of you! That’s an order. Look, she’s awake again.”

Ryouko was aware of how she must have looked, wide-eyed and shell-shocked, and what shook

her out of her shocked state was, strangely enough, her TacComp.

Damn it! the machine thought. *I didn't know she was going to end the vision! I was going to ask a question.*

What question? Ryouko asked, incredulously.

It doesn't matter. Stop wasting time. Apparently, you have something to do.

She blinked, and saw that Clarisse had restored order over the rest of the team, which was now looking at her to see what she would say.

She took a breath.

The long-distance sensor readings should have been impossible—there was no oscillation this time, no orchestrated build-up. Instead, the area of the wormhole, which had collapsed with a gravitational cacophony that was probably rivaled only by a black hole collision, was stretching *again*, with the curvature of local space-time rising sharply and uninhibitedly.

All at once, sensor blips appeared everywhere in the area of the wormhole—battlecruisers, blink cannons, heavy carriers, ship after ship after ship—enough to blow everything they still had in the system out of the water. Around them appeared, yet again, the mouth of a wormhole.

If it were possible for High Command, the merged AI-human consciousness of the Human Fleet, to experience complete and utter shock, along with the stirrings of unadulterated panic, then that was what Mami experienced in that moment.

Then, a moment later, the wormhole collapsed, and the sensor readings disappeared.

What on Earth was that? Mami thought, the incredulity and sheer confusion of the thought mirrored by every battlecruiser and general in the fleet.

In her command chair, with her consciousness buried in the workings of the fleet, Mami could not see what was going on around her, on her bridge, but a moment later the intrusion alarm on the bridge was triggered, and the robotic defense systems went on instant alert. Her bodyguards, Shen Xiao Long and Karina Schei, responded even faster than that, raising a defensive barrier and preparing to attack whatever had just appeared.

"Don't shoot!" a voice urged.

When Ryouko had first contracted, using her powers felt natural, completely instinctual, as easy as breathing. Teleportation was patently impossible for an ordinary human, and yet it seemed like no trial at all.

This…well, this was different.

"I'm going to reopen the wormhole," she had tried to begin, but the combination of expectant, skeptical, and confused faces she had faced had overwhelmed her, and rather than attempt a further explanation, she had turned away, so that she could just *do* it.

But do what, precisely?

She ordered her armor to eject her soul gem, which it did, the gem brilliantly, blindingly green as it extruded from the front of her suit into her hands. Then she raised it upward with both arms, hoping that the fancy gesture would somehow help her.

Patience, child, Clarisse's voice urged quietly. *Focus. I don't know what exactly you're trying, but you have to calm down. The gestures will not help. Empty your mind of everything but the magic.*

Ryouko bit back the urge to look at the girl, instead nodding once, slightly. She brought her gem back to her chest, and closed her eyes, trying to do as Clarisse instructed.

Please, she thought.

The quiet beating of her heart, continuing its endless cycle in her inhuman chest. The slow rhythm of her breaths, drawing air in and out of the suit's pressurized atmosphere. The steady pulsation of her soul gem, in time to a more esoteric rhythm.

There it was.

A drumbeat, deep and slow, growing imperceptibly ever-slower, on a level of reality seemingly removed from all the rest, on the same level that she felt something tearing whenever she teleported. Now that she noticed it, she was astounded that she had ever missed it. The gravitational waves that had emerged from the collapse of the wormhole still ran to and fro over the area, sending shudders through the bubbles of warped reality around her, ringing like bells around her, and through the patch of space-time far above them, where the wormhole had been, and which was still weakened from its injury.

Acting on a slowly growing understanding, she prodded at the wound, operating her powers with a level of subtlety she had never before attempted, coaxing the waves around her to come back together and return to order, tugging at and pushing against the bubbles that dotted the world around her like marbles on a stretched sheet, bearing a striking resemblance to the tired general relativity analogy dragged out in every primary school.

At the center above, the chaos grew and grew, so that the already-damaged fabric of space screamed at the abuse. She felt almost sad, but it had to be done.

For just a moment, she opened her eyes, seeing the world around her cast in green silhouette. Without looking, she knew that the girls behind her were frozen in awe, like photographic stills, some clasping hands in prayer, looking above her at her soul gem, which had floated again above her of its own accord, almost as bright as the sun. Even farther above them, the bright specks of the alien fleet were visible, stealth impossible in the gravitational storm forming around them. The bubbles that had dotted the world around them had soared upward, were still soaring upward toward their original source.

Then she clenched one hand into a fist, sending it downward at an imaginary barrier, stabbing it with all her strength, and then the sky above her shattered.

It seemed unreal to her, even as she watched it happen, even as she grasped clumsily at the one remaining bubble, the one that still surrounded their group, feeling her power draining and her soul gem dimming.

A soul-sapping weariness washed over her, so that she could hardly keep her eyes open.

No! I'm not done here! she thought.

As she fell downward, slowly in the weak gravity of the moon, her mind reached outward desperately. She could still find something—

There! she thought weakly, as in her mind's eye she saw Mami's teenage frame, lying back in the chair too large for her, eyes closed.

One last strain—one last effort—

She saw a row of pistols pointed at her team from half the officers on the bridge, and Shen Xiao Long tensing herself to charge.

That could have gone better, she thought.

Then the world blacked out.

Call to Power

Chapter Notes

> Author's Note: This does not end Volume Two. Also, sorry for delay, life is busy, etc.

"As you have likely heard by now, major news today on the alien war."

"Reports are still relatively preliminary, and the standard sense of caution still permeates post-battle analysis—except for the lovably-bombastic AFB—but it seems clear that recent events in the Kepler-37 system represent a signal triumph over the Cephalopods, and it's hard to miss the excitement between the lines of official pronouncements."

"Details remain scarce on the ground. It seems that the aliens were preparing some sort of trap, involving some sort of massive cloaked fleet sent through a recently-constructed wormhole, and that this trap was broken by a MagOps insertion team destroying the Wormhole Stabilizer facility. The massive alien fleet was then hurled back through the wormhole. In terms of fleet action, much importance accrues to a counteroffensive by Fleet Admiral Lyubov Feodorovich, which appears to have been a closely-fought affair. It seems that the alien salient into the Euphratic Sector has been severed, for now at least. It is a feat we have seen repeated several times in this war."

"The MagOps operation involved is the kind of audacious magical intervention we've almost come to expect in this war. *Almost*—my read of the situation is that something else is going on here. A wave of excitement and rumors is spreading among my Cult of Hope sources about some kind of Akemi Homura-like magical feat. The exact identity of the magical girl involved remains unrevealed, but circumstantial evidence already points to a limited set of possible actors. In particular, the MagOps team apparently involved can be deduced from certain military records, and includes several distinguished members. It seems inevitable that details will eventually emerge, but for now the Armed Forces appear to be deciding how they want to portray events. For now, we can only wait."

[For those who can't wait, scroll to the end of the article for my very much not-confirmed speculation]

"It is important not to overstate the positives of the situation. The mention of a 'massive alien fleet' is especially concerning. It serves as a reminder that the aliens appear to have reserves we cannot currently match."

"Several government reports also highlight high casualties and 'the grimness of the situation', indicating that battle was by no means a certain affair. A certain reluctance to discuss casualties by official sources seems to indicate a possibly immense casualty account—though sadly this is a common feature of this war."

"Also important is the widely reported death of Chair of the General Staff Roland Erwynmark. His leadership so far in this war has been unmatched, and will be greatly missed. The politics of who will be his replacement will be an important feature of upcoming weeks. My sense is that the General Staff and *Military Affairs* will wish to avoid a prolonged vacancy, and will announce a replacement relatively soon; but the burning question is of course: who? It will make for interesting viewing, possibly."

“Here’s what Field Marshal Tomoe had to say, for those who like carefully screened public statements:”

[Hologram depicts Field Marshal Tomoe Mami speaking to a room full of journalists and reporters; textual transcript follows]

<Tomoe Mami> “He was a fine officer, one of the best any of us have served with, and his insight and leadership will be missed. That said, he died heroically, in a way none of us would ever be ashamed of, and I cannot imagine he regrets it. His death serves as a reminder that in this war, even the field marshals should be prepared to give their lives in the service of Humanity.”

<Kate Locke (AFB Reporter)> “Do you know how his death will affect the composition of the General Staff?”

<Tomoe Mami> “The Staff will meet to discuss the issue very soon, with *Military Affairs* in attendance. There will not be a leadership vacuum for long, I assure you.”

[End transcript]

“Now for the speculation you’re all waiting for:”

“In my opinion, there are three likely candidates for the amazing feat hinted at by Cult members:”

“Clarisse van Rossum: It is difficult to overstate the reputation Van Rossum has on the internet for startling feats of magic, and many an eager speculator has placed her in the center of all manner of events, both current and historic. However, in this case, the speculation is a bit more legitimate, as there appears to be actual evidence that she was personally involved in the MagOps raid, a rarity for the ‘Ancient’ magical girl.”

“Misa Virani: Another well-known magical girl—though of course not on the scale of Van Rossum—she has been apparently involved in many notorious incidents. However, it is difficult to imagine how exactly she could have leveraged her electrically-based powers to apply to the given situation. It is known, however, that she has received another copy of the Order of the Revenant, Second Class, a prestigious award [typically given to those magical girls who lose their bodies in order to complete an important combat task]**.”

“Shizuki Ryouko: A relative unknown, she stands out for several reasons: As an almost brand-new contractee, it was extremely unusual for her to be included in a mission of this scope, as she undeniably was, raising questions of what exactly she was doing there. In addition, she was immediately promoted post-mission, and awarded the Akemi Homura medal, a medal not given to the rest of the team. [Much online attention centers upon her descent from the distinguished Shizuki and Kuroi Matriarchies, although I personally do not consider this particularly important.]*

[Hologram depicts Captain Shizuki Ryouko being awarded the Akemi Homura medal by Field Marshal Tomoe Mami]

“Of course, it is impossible to rule out the other magical girls on the team. Such is the nature of magic, after all.”

—Avnit Hassan, personal blog: Rapid Reaction. [] indicates classified content redacted to those without security clearance. The number of asterisks indicates the minimal security clearance level necessary to access the content.

“Tensions between the EU and the Russian Federation substantially rose this year over allegations of atrocities committed by the Russian government, with greatly escalating military drone activity on both sides of the Polish border. Continued infighting in the European Parliament threatens to undermine the current government, which has been forced to repeatedly withdraw a proposed resolution condemning Russian atrocities, in the face of staunch non-interventionist opposition—only increased security has prevented a repeat display of the fisticuffs that broke out during the first such proposal. Observer AIs characterize the situation as dangerously unstable, predicting that, given the escalating protests in key member states, the government will soon be forced to push through its resolution with only a bare majority.”

“The US Elections this year were chaotic, with protests and riots throughout major East Coast metropolitan areas, despite appeals by the outgoing President Caceres for calm. The collapse of the incumbent Democratic Party, the remaining half of the former two-party system, surprised all observers, rendering the election an extremely volatile affair. Voter participation varied widely among localities, appearing to hinge heavily on a controversial set of Voter Education Laws passed in numerous states. Such laws had caused supporters of the upstart NWP to allege that the similarly upstart FP was attempting to rig the election in its own favor, and indeed appeared to heavily influence results. Though late-stage projections had forecast a FP victory, a surge of surprising NWP support gained them the plurality, but not the majority. A bitterly-divided but newly NWP-controlled Congress appears set to vote NWP candidates Shelton Mayson and Tu Ling as President and Vice-President, giving the NWP surprising but probably shaky unified control of the Federal Government, as protests and counter-protests continue to rock the nation’s capital.”

“Diplomats from major East Asian nations meeting in Mitakihara, Japan began (and continue) to hammer out details of a proposed ‘Eastern Pacific Defense Organization’, a military alliance designed to buffer its members against increasing global tensions. This meeting is notable for including China, a nation until now reluctant to participate in what it termed “lighting fires”. With tensions along the Siberian border higher than it has been in centuries, it is believed that Chinese leaders now see a benefit in the new security arrangements, which enjoy at least the tacit support of the current US and EU administrations.”

“Repeated bombardment of Paraguayan military bases has triggered widespread calls for war in Asuncion and Buenos Aires, further sabotaging the efforts of Argentinian President Páez to find a diplomatic solution to tensions with Brazil. Urban rioting, EU sanctions, and shockingly violent police reprisals in Brazil have a triggered a wave of refugees fleeing south out of the country, despite military border controls on the Brazilian side. The stories of these refugees have in turn generated significant sympathy and anger in the region, leading to calls from citizens for the army to go North and “clean up the mess”. Despite Páez’s efforts, the Paraguayan army is widely reported to be mobilizing, and Argentina’s western neighbor, Chile, has taken a considerably more hawkish stance, offering Paraguay “unlimited support”. This support, however, means little without Argentinian assistance, or at least acquiescence. It is believed, however, that the embattled Páez administration will soon abandon its dovish stance, especially now that it has come under diplomatic pressure from the EU. In all this, however, the US presence is conspicuously absent, caught up in domestic affairs.”

In sports news, the cancellation of the 2160 New Delhi Summer Olympics, following a wave of withdrawals from key nations, paints a grim picture of the international situation—the last time the Olympics was canceled was in 1944, during the Second World War.

— Unified News Association (UNA), “Year in Review”, December 31, 2160

Mami wasn't quite sure she understood the logic of it.

The dream state debriefing (or interrogation) had a long and sordid history. During the Unification Wars, the technique had been used by the UF, FA, and Black Heart on prisoners of all types, seeking to extract valuable information from recalcitrant enemy personnel. In the dreaming state, prisoners were significantly less on their guard, and if necessary, things could be arranged so that they didn't realize they were being interrogated at all. One favorite trick had been to instigate a dream of a miraculous rescue, followed by a series of events that would lead the prisoner to divulge critical information, in ways that could often be extremely subtle. After all, if the prisoner happened to take a walk through an important fortification they were intimately familiar with, it was the most natural thing in the world for their brain to fill in the missing details.

Those early interrogations, carried out with crude equipment against soldiers with hostile implants, were less successful than might have been desired, but the technique had the benefit of being relatively gentle, requiring little or no surgery, leaving the prisoner's psyche relatively intact, and being unlikely to trigger automated memory wipes or other anti-interrogation implants.

It was dirty, dirty stuff, the kind of thing Mami would have been happy to leave to Yuma and never learn about, except that it was later adopted by the MHD for a much more benign usage. It turned out that a REM interview, even when carried out as a lucid, consented in-dream interview, was a fairly good way of tapping deeply into a patient's deepest feelings or memories, especially in those circumstances where the patient was incapable of otherwise divulging such information for psychological reasons. It also had the advantage of being much less likely to trigger a despair loop—if recalled memories or events started to influence the soul gem, it was easy to abort by simply waking the patient.

That being said, using it on Shizuki Ryouko struck her as a bit too paranoid.

"It's *precautionary,"* Atsuko Arisu said, as they stood outside the virtual doorway. "After a mission and battle like that, we want to make sure there weren't other reasons for her soul gem collapse beyond simple exhaustion. Especially since the accounts from the various team members disagree."

"About the, uh, divine intervention?" Mami asked, biting down the skeptical adjective she was about to add. She remembered that Arisu was sympathetic to Kyouko's Cult, even if she wasn't a member herself.

"Among other things," Arisu said smoothly. "In addition, the MHD has noticed a pattern of girls in similar situations being unwilling to share the truth, and your military high command wants to get all the details this time. That's easier in these kinds of interviews."

Arisu wasn't being too subtle about the connotations of her usage of the word "your". It stung, a little.

It's not like I want to do this that much, Mami thought to herself*, but the consensus of command is that we should, so I'll go along with it, for now. I'm only here to keep an eye on things.*

It was a luxury she could afford now, devoting a meaningful part of her consciousness to something like this. The battle was winding down; Feodorovich's offensive had gone successfully, trapping the alien forces in the spearhead in the Kepler-37 system. As humanity had learned over the course of the war, even the Cephalopods needed their supply lines, and wilted without them. The demands of modern war were stringent.

Mami would have felt better about the accomplishment, were it not for the massive alien fleet that Ryouko had apparently forced back through the wormhole. As humanity had also learned over the

course of the war, the squid had reserves and hidden abilities that humans could only dream of.

But then, that was true of Humanity as well.

Besides, it was just an interview, how badly could things go?

Without waiting for her prompting, Arisu opened the door in front of them, which Mami realized with a start was one of the old-fashioned types, with a doorknob. How hadn't she noticed before?

"The details of these kinds of environments are highly variable," Arisu explained, smiling slightly at her confusion. "You have to remember that ultimately, this world belongs to the dreamer. The rest of us are guests or intruders, depending on how lucid the dream is. Our ability to manipulate is limited, and best kept unused."

Which had been, of course, the major downside of dream state interrogation techniques—they depended on the prisoner never realizing they were undergoing the procedure. Once training to resist the technique spread extensively, it became much less effective.

It went without saying that except in the most dire cases, these interviews were done lucidly, out of respect for the patient, which was why they found Ryouko ready for them, sitting in a plush high-back chair in front of a tall wooden desk, along with a piece of cake she had apparently decided to summon.

She looked both very annoyed and a little… embarrassed?

Upon entering the room, Arisu immediately bowed deeply, in a gesture of apology.

"I'm truly sorry about the timing of this. It's a precautionary measure, you understand, and we weren't careful enough in the dream insertion."

"Yes, well, I suppose it can't be helped," Ryouko said, still sounding bothered. "It seems my TacComp has been less than forthright about the content of some of my dreams."

"In my defense," Clarisse van Rossum said, materializing in avatar form next to Ryouko, "it's not like you would have wanted to know. And I wasn't paying close attention. These things don't go into memory storage by default, and, you know, privacy."

This version of Clarisse spoke with Ryouko's voice instead of Clarisse's, but then Ryouko looked queerly at the girl next to her, and it finally dawned on Mami—whispered into her ear by Machina, more precisely—that the avatar wasn't Clarisse van Rossum *per se*, but rather Ryouko's TacComp of the same name.

"Really?" Ryouko asked skeptically, gesturing at the avatar with her hand. "This isn't confusing at all, I'm sure."

"What do you want from me?" Clarisse asked. "This is the first time I've chosen one of these avatars, and it seemed like the natural choice. Plus, I've got the eye tattoo and everything to distinguish myself."

Mami wondered what her face looked like at that moment. It was certainly one of the more novel interviews she had ever experienced. Arisu, on the other, had the serenely unflappable look of a professional.

Seeming to finally remember they were there, Ryouko waved her hands, and three more chairs appeared around the desk, along with a small platter of assorted cookies. As Mami sat, she noted that the cookies appeared to have an Incubator motif.

"You have to remember that however lucid she seems, she's still not perfectly normal. She's probably not taking this as seriously as she should—but on the other hand, it also means she's not as tense or anxious. Typical for this kind of interview. They also tend to be a little…quirky."

That thought, from Arisu, was relayed to Mami outside the dream.

"Anyway, you're here to ask about the mission, so ask," Ryouko said. "I'm still not sure why we have to do this; I told you I'm not under psychological distress. Feed me some grief cubes and I'll be fine. I'm assuming you already did that."

"The military probably thinks it would be easier to try to get information out of you this way," Clarisse said, sipping a cup of tea that she had just summoned. "It seems like just the kind of thing they'd do."

"You can do that in my dreams?" Ryouko asked, looking askance at the TacComp.

"I've never tried until just now," Clarisse said. "Bet you didn't know I could taste, either. Well, okay, honestly, I can't. But there's a way you can simulate—"

Ryouko interrupted the other girl by waving her hand dismissively.

"Let's get back to the topic," she said. "Well, is it true? Are you here hoping that I'll be more talkative now than when I'm awake?"

"Yes," Arisu said, before Mami had even finished considering whether she would lie. "Not in an adversarial manner, of course. If there were anything you really wouldn't want to tell us, an interview like this wouldn't really achieve anything."

"This seems pointless, then," Ryouko said.

Mami couldn't help but agree with the sentiment, even if she knew that Arisu was being misleading. Part of the game was to get the patient to accidentally let things slip out, which could be interpreted in the more psychological sense of a patient revealing a truth they had been denying to themselves—or in the much more ethically tenuous sense of taking advantage of someone who wasn't fully in control. It was analogous to the obsolete trick of plying someone with alcohol for information.

Mami could reasonably guess, for instance, that Ryouko would never ordinarily call a meeting pointless to the face of the vaunted Field Marshal Tomoe Mami, member of the Mitakihara Four. The honesty was actually a little refreshing.

"Just bear with it a little," Mami said. "Now, let's—"

"How's the battle going?" Ryouko asked, looking at Mami seriously.

"Ah, quite well, actually," Mami said. "Thanks to you, in large part. That's actually—"

"Good. My access to outside electronics seems to be limited. Anyway, can you tell me anything about Nakihara Asami?"

The question was directed at Arisu, who had been watching with a slight amused expression. At the mention of Asami, though, Arisu's expression reverted to a professional mask.

"Why do you ask?" Arisu asked. "We'd be glad to tell you, but—"

"Well, I was worried since she—"

“Obviously, it’s natural she’d be worried about Asami’s status,” Clarisse interrupted, her arm almost physically pushing Ryouko away from the table. “I mean, if we’re being frank, it’s not as if there’s nothing—”

“Hey, don’t just—” Ryouko began—but then she and her TacComp matched eyes, and some invisible understanding passed between them, probably transmitted outside the dream.

Arisu and Mami met eyes as well. Something had happened just now, they both understood. Clarisse had cut Ryouko off from saying something revealing.

“I’ve never interviewed someone like this with a version Two TacComp,” Arisu relayed. *“This is going to be more complicated than I thought. The local telepath reports that she somehow seems to know something bad happened to Asami, but can’t get any deeper than that.”*

Arisu was still on Earth, but there was a MHD telepath standing next to Ryouko as she slept. Another dirty trick.

Mami, for her own part, had just finished looking up who “Nakihara Asami” was. It was in Ryouko’s personnel file, of course, but Mami generally stayed out of personal business unless she had to. It was interesting, she thought, how many newly-contracted girls developed relationships so quickly. They needed emotional support, she supposed. She could empathize with that.

We can probably say something, I think, since she already knows about the clones thing, Mami thought.

Mami had a visceral distaste for the whole thing which still surfaced whenever it came up, but had learned to swallow it—she had to admit that, if people had listened to her and canceled the whole thing, many girls would be far worse off. She had taken it as a lesson of sorts.

She knows, Arisu thought*, but she doesn’t know that we know. So…*

“Let’s discuss that afterward,” Arisu said. “For now let’s focus on the topic at hand, so we don’t get too distracted.”

“I—” Ryouko began, but stopped, seeming to think better of it.

“Just describe, in your own words, what happened down on the surface of the moon,” Arisu said, after waiting a moment. “Specifically, what happened at the very end, when the wormhole reopened. We don’t have to talk about the rest of it right now.”

Ryouko’s face seemed strangely blank as she regarded the two of them. Mami didn’t mean that in purely an emotional sense—her face seemed to almost *fluctuate*, becoming briefly a caricature of itself, before returning to normal. It was deeply unsettling, to say the least.

“What do you know already?” she asked. “I’m sure you’ve already debriefed my squadmates.”

“We know that at the very end, you seemed to have some sort of epiphany, before suddenly performing, let’s face it, an incredible feat. Accounts differ about what exactly happened. While everyone seems to agree that you zoned out, some members of your team insist that something more, well, religious occurred. We’d like to hear your version of it, in particular the part no one can explain, which is how exactly you did it.”

The strange blank look returned. This time, Mami couldn’t resist asking Arisu what was going on.

“Dreams are amorphous things, Mami-san,” Arisu thought. “*It is only through our intervention*

that this world is as stable as it seems, but chaos is only just below the surface. In our experience, a true uncontrolled dream appears real only to the dreamer; to anyone else, it looks like madness. In this case, the telepath believes she's exerting her control over the dream to deliberately hide her facial expressions—this might be the way it ends up looking to us. She's trying to hide something. She doesn't intend to lie to our face, though."

Mami performed the mental equivalent of frowning. What, exactly, would Ryouko be trying to hide? It didn't match her understanding of her student's personality.

"Well, I can tell you how I did it," Ryouko said. "The fact of the matter is: it turns out my teleportation functions by opening an instantaneous wormhole and pushing me through it. The nature of it also allows me to manipulate pre-existing wormholes by, for instance, reopening one that has collapsed. In retrospect, I don't know why Asami never noticed."

There was a moment of silence, as Arisu and Mami chewed on what she had said.

Manipulates wormholes! Mami thought. *That could be…useful. More importantly, it might be repeatable.*

It fit with some of the more optimistic guesses Command had made about what had happened. She instructed Machina to pass the information on to parties that might be interested.

"She probably only saw you teleport in real life a couple of times, at most," Arisu said. "And while I'm no physicist, I can say that at least on the quantum scale, the distinction between wormholes and quantum teleportation is extremely subtle—it can be argued that there is none."

"If what you say is true, you might know more about the topic than our physicists do," Mami commented, prompting a nod from Arisu.

"Can you elaborate on how you came to suddenly know about your power?" Arisu asked.

That blank look again.

"Well, it's difficult to explain," Ryouko said. "I guess it can be said I had a vision. I had a vivid flashback to a physics lecture I had had in the past, and suddenly I understood how my power worked. I'm not sure if that makes sense."

"It's not unheard of," Arisu said. "Sometimes this kind of understanding doesn't arrive until it's needed. It's frustrating, but it's what it is. I myself didn't understand aspects of my power until much later. Is there an explanation you can provide for exactly how you pushed the alien fleet back through the wormhole?"

Truth be told, Command wasn't entirely sure if the alien fleet had really been there the whole time or if it was some kind of illusion or some other effect—it was tough to say with the magic that had apparently gone on. But the presence of a hidden fleet was the most natural explanation, and if it was wrong, they would hear about it right now.

Ryouko shook her head.

"I'm not sure I could say anything helpful, at least not without thinking about it some more myself. When the wormhole collapsed, it apparently sent ripples outward into local space-time, and left a lot of, uh, debris I guess, like the bubbles where we were. I was able to redirect some of the energy back to the origin, but only enough to hold it open for a brief moment. Then something about the way my power works allowed me to push the ships through. That makes sense, but I'm not sure why I didn't have to go with them. That's how my teleportation usually works. Maybe it's different when I don't open the original wormhole personally."

Arisu nodded.

“Care to comment on any possible religious aspects to the whole experience?” she asked.

The blank look returned to Ryouko’s face, lingering for much longer than it had previously, such that it held even as she started to speak, creating the unsettling impression of a voice emanating from a closed mouth.

“Why do you ask?” Ryouko responded, somewhat tersely. Clarisse the TacComp, who had been sitting quietly looking slightly bored, turned her head slightly, seeming suddenly a lot more interested in the topic of conversation.

“We would like to rectify your account with those of your teammates who insist that there was a religious aspect to what you did. I’m sure you know some of them are members of the Cult of Hope.”

“Is the military interested in the Cult suddenly?”

“The military has always been interested in the Cult. After all, the emotional stability they provide is very useful for improving magical girl survival, which is why the military provides the Cult so much logistical support. I myself am here on behalf of the MHD, and we’re interested for the same reasons.”

“What do you think of the Goddess, Atsuko-san?”

Mami’s sense of dissatisfaction grew deeper. She didn’t need a telepath to tell her that Atsuko had hit on something important, but she had expected Ryouko to dismiss the topic out of hand.

And for a moment Ryouko had seemed to talk of the “Goddess” as a fact, rather than a mere belief.

Well…Ryouko had visited Kyouko’s Cult before she left Earth. Mami had kept enough tabs on her to know that. Perhaps she should look into it a bit more—ask Kyouko, perhaps, though she didn’t really want to.

Atsuko visibly sighed, making it deliberately obvious.

“The truth is, Shizuki-san, while the MHD officially considers the beliefs of the Cult to be a purely religious phenomenon, there is a growing body of evidence that some of the beliefs of the Cult may not be entirely invalid. While we’re not endorsing a Goddess or anything like that, we would not rule out the possibility of some sort of benign magical influence that helps magical girls on occasions. It would even make sense, from a wish-based perspective. Among other things, we’d like to gather information on the phenomena.”

“Well, I didn’t experience anything like that, though the nature of my epiphany makes me wonder.”

“Now this is interesting,” Atsuko thought. “*The telepath can’t pick up anything at all. We have no idea if she’s lying or not, which is surprising, because she has no counter-mind-reading training.”*

“Is there anything else?” Ryouko asked, after a moment.

“No, not really,” Arisu said, shaking her head.

“Is Asami alright?”

Arisu looked down for a moment.

“She suffered from soul gem depletion, and it was necessary to remove her gem from her body. It might take a while to revive her. We might…ask you to be there. I wouldn’t be telling you this if I weren’t sure you were psychologically healthy.”

A gloom seemed to pass over Ryouko’s face.

“I know about the clones thing, for the record. Did you manage to keep the original?”

“It’s somewhere in deep space. We’re looking for the beacon to track it back down, but it might not be possible.”

Ryouko’s face tightened, seeming to glare at the psychiatrist.

“How long?” Ryouko asked.

“If we have to regrow it? Maybe two weeks. The preparations have already begun.”

“Really?” Ryouko said, surprised. “That’s faster than I expected.”

“Well, technology,” Arisu said, spreading her hands and not elaborating on the somewhat Frankensteinian techniques Mami knew were involved.

Then a moment later:

“She’ll be alright, Shizuki-san. I’m sure of it. You’ll see her soon enough. We’ll let you go back to normal sleep now.”

Ryouko seemed to smile slightly.

Then, abruptly, she vanished, and the floor dropped out from under Mami, leaving her staring into a twisted, purple void. She gasped, then looked for Arisu, who was standing next to her with a strange look. Then, above her, something headed for them—something large and full of teeth.

Then Mami dropped out of the simulation, the fragment of consciousness released to handle other affairs, briefly taskless. She wouldn’t have admitted it to anyone, but the apparition had caused her to pull some of her attention away from her command tasks.

“I don’t think she liked us very much,” Arisu relayed to Mami. “Not many people try to drop you in a nightmare before you can exit. She’ll regret it when she wakes up, of course.”

“I don’t think she did, no,” Mami responded. “I should focus back on my work. I have a lot to think about.”

It had all been a bit of a blur. After the rather surreal dream experience, she had been made to undergo another, more traditional debrief, followed by a thorough psychiatric evaluation. Then they told her something she had forgotten to ask her earlier: her grandfather was alive and well. She felt a little embarrassed about not having asked.

As they questioned her, she checked the status of the battle outside. As Mami had said, it was going well, thanks to her. The aliens had been caught flat-footed yet again. A deity had intervened, and she had been the instrument.

But Clarisse—the real Clarisse—had told her not to talk about that, somehow relaying the message telepathically to her while she slept, just before the start of the dream-debrief. While she had personally been too asleep—and distracted—to notice, her TacComp had picked up the message and informed her later. It had been…strange.

After the interviews, Clarisse herself showed up to escort her back to the rest of the team.

Was it really the right thing to do, not telling them? Ryouko thought, as they headed out of the room.

It's for your own sake, Clarisse thought. *You're a hero now. If you start saying that your actions were due to a vision from the Goddess, you will become indelibly tied to the Church, in the eyes of the public. I do not think you would want that.*

I know; you told me that already. It just feels—

Deceitful? Much of the world is founded on deceit. Such has it always been. Otherwise I wouldn't have this *with me."*

Clarisse reached upward, pushing apart her hair to reveal a small hairpin buried within. It looked like an ordinary gold hairpin, but now that it had been pointed out, something about it seemed to draw her attention—

It's emanating magic! She thought, in surprise.

It's an artifact, like the suits we were wearing earlier, Clarisse thought. *It protects against mind-reading and mind-control effects. I'm sure you noticed the mind-readers in your debriefings. I didn't want them listening too carefully. Don't ask me how I got it.*

Then Clarisse dropped her hand, letting her hair fall back down.

Ryouko stayed silent for a moment. Clarisse had turned out…not as she had expected. More real, more human, and much less idealistic. In a way, though, she almost preferred this.

Can I ask a question? she asked.

Yes?

What's your opinion of the Goddess?

Clarisse slowed to a stop, then turned to face her.

What precisely do you mean? the Ancient asked, head tilted,

What—what kind of person do you think she is, I guess? Ryouko asked, a bit flummoxed by the sudden intensity of Clarisse's look.

Clarisse turned back around and started walking again.

Person. Funny that you should put it that way. Well, she's definitely got a good heart. I can honestly think that there's no one else more suited to be what she is. At the same time, with the kind of knowledge and good intentions she has, it—well, I guess the way to put it is that not even the most kind-hearted king can avoid rolling a few heads here and there.

Again, Ryouko stayed silent, trying to think of what to say to that.

Not what you expected? Clarisse thought. *The world is not as nice as you might think it is, aliens*

or not. You'll need to remember that in the future.

Then, suddenly, they were there, the door opening to a recreation area located near the medical bay, deliberately set close enough that it wasn't necessary to take the tubes.

The conversation in the room fell silent as they entered, and for a moment the rest of the team and Ryouko stared at each other.

"Well, good to see you're okay," Nadya said, finally. "That was quite a stunt you pulled. I didn't expect anyone to one-up Misa."

"Well, uh, I didn't have to, you know, lose—" Ryouko started, walking over to sit on one of the open lounge chairs near Zheng Ying-zhi. Unlike Asami, she had had an extra body directly on hand, and could be revived relatively quickly—though Ryouko wondered what was taking so long with Misa.

She had cut herself off, though, because she didn't think talking about the bodyloss was a good idea.

"Yeah, it's a shame," Annabelle said. "But really I miss Juliet and the others. Things just aren't the same here without her and her, uh, silence."

The joke fell completely flat, as expected, as the others stared back blankly.

"Ah, Misa would laugh uproariously at that," Nadya said, before things could get too awkward.

"She's a strange one," Annabelle said. "Refuses to wave her arms dramatically to use her powers, but loves making a spectacle. Did you ever get out of her just what happened on New California?"

"No," Nadya said. "Which must mean it was something really serious, because she's not usually all that tight-lipped."

"We were there with her," Mina commented, referring to her and Gracia, "and even we don't know what happened. Juliet never found out either. Well, so far as I know…"

"What exactly are we talking about here?" Clarisse asked. "I admit: this isn't something I've heard about."

Ying-zhi drew Ryouko's attention away from the conversation, tapping her on the arm. Their eyes met, and for a moment Ryouko wondered what it was like to inhabit a new body like that. It didn't seem to bother her, but…

Don't worry, Ying-zhi thought nodding her head at the rest of the room*, they're dying to ask you about what you did out there. They're just giving you space to breathe by chewing the cud a little first.*

Ah, yes, Ryouko said, blinking at the strange idiom, which she had had to hastily look up. *How did you know I was wondering about that?*

That's what I'd be thinking about, Ying-zhi explained. *But, in any case, I'm not surprised. Not with your family background.*

The other girl gestured at Ryouko's bracelet and necklace, the visible jewelry she wore signaling her relationship to Shizuki Sayaka and Kuroi Kana. Ryouko self-consciously covered the bracelet with one hand—she had forgotten it was there.

Not many people nowadays know what those mean, but Nadya did. And of course, we all knew your background before you joined the team. That kind of background can be a blessing and a curse. A blessing, because you probably are *powerful, and those connections open doors for you even besides that. A curse, because some will expect more from you, and others will think of you as an entitled brat.*

Ryouko furrowed her brow at the comment.

A brat? But—

It's just what some people might think; not the truth. Listen, soon enough the media will find out what happened here, and that's when it will all begin. And when it does, the MSY sources will all be sure to mention who you're descended from. You won't be able to escape it. Even beyond that—maybe you've already experienced a little of this—the two families will start stabbing each other in the back to try and claim you, and a bunch of other families will start sending people to try and marry you. You're young; I don't know if you're ready for it. You've got to have thick skin. Ah, you've already experienced it.

That last sentence was in response to the look that passed over Ryouko's face, remembering her "suitors", which she had up until now completely forgotten about.

By the way, I now have ten more letters from prospective suitors, her TacComp thought, privately.

Hush, Ryouko ordered, knowing full well the device was making fun of her.

And this girl you might be involved with, Ying-zhi continued. *Nakihara Asami. There's a good chance your illustrious ancestors will not like her. She has no lineage to speak of. I'm just warning you.*

The girl pinned Ryouko with an intense look, so that she felt compelled to nod in understanding.

I've been down that road, Ying-zhi thought. *It's not very fun. I just want you to be more ready than I was. If you ever want advice, feel free to message me.*

Again, Ryouko nodded awkwardly. Like Eva, Zheng Ying-zhi had not been one of the team members Ryouko would have said she was close with, but apparently something about Ryouko struck a nerve with her.

Then she thought of something.

Wait, does everyone here know about Asami? Was it in the files?

Yes, everything is in the files, Ying-zhi thought. *That's something else you should get used to.*

"Scaring the new girl with your anecdotes?" Nadya asked, appearing next to the two of them, causing Ryouko to startle slightly.

"I'm just telling her the truth," Ying-zhi said.

Nadya shook her head, then gave Ryouko a sympathetic look.

"Ying-zhi here is a little traumatized. You shouldn't mind her. Anyway, we're going to have the synthesizer make some snacks, do you have anything in particular you want?"

"Coffee," Ying-zhi said.

“Strawberry cream cake,” Ryouko said, realizing abruptly just how long it had been since she had had any.

As Nadya walked back to the synthesizer, where the others were now standing clustered, Ryouko sat and pondered what Ying-zhi had said. Her life was about to get a lot more complicated, wasn’t it?

But then Gracia and Mina walked towards her, a certain gleam in their eyes, and Ryouko braced herself for a round of questioning on the Goddess and the nature of visions.

What have I gotten myself into? Ryouko thought.

Some part of her had looked forward to the end of her previous rotation. She could ask for leave, that part had thought. Surely it was justified after that last mission. At the very least, she could receive a more relaxing rotation, perhaps stationed in some exotic colony world somewhere, and go exploring. At the very least, maybe she could see what being a staff officer was like.

The other part of her was, quite possibly, crazy, and wanted her to instead find a new assignment, one that was just as exciting. Maybe she could swing a permanent MagOps assignment.

Neither part had had their expectations fulfilled.

Instead, the days afterward had been filled by, for lack of a better word, *ceremony*. First had come the interview requests—just a trickle—from reporters curious to hear from a member of the “Wormhole-destroying” MagOps team.

Then had come the hybrid virtual/physical press conference, and she never seen so many reporters and bloggers and assorted media personalities in one place, appearing like a sea of faces in front of her. Mami had coached her, and did most of the talking, but the usually shy and reclusive Ryouko couldn’t help but blanch just standing there in the background, even hidden among the rest of the team.

When she was finally introduced to the audience, with a sea of NIM lenses pointed at her, it took an uncomfortable amount of implant intervention to keep her from stammering while saying her lines and answering a few, prescreened questions.

After that, there had been the medal ceremony, another media-filled event, completely unlike the more intimate, three-person ceremony that had accompanied her previous decoration. Where the previous ceremony had been informal, this one was stiff and regimented. Where it had been simple, this one was pompous and ornate.

Now she found herself seated in her quarters on the Zhukov, flipping through a sheaf of new messages. Interview requests, fan mail and—this was new—requests from various physicists for her to pay a visit, maybe even participate in a study or two.

It was hectic, and no less than a little exhausting, but if she were honest with herself, part of her enjoyed it.

It was probably the same part that had wanted her to go right back into the field, performing more high risk MagOps assignments. She wasn’t sure if she should listen to it.

Am I crazy, Clarisse? she asked her TacComp.

I wouldn’t say so, the device thought. *After all, if you had wanted a safe life, you could have just*

stayed home. But then I doubt you would have ever met any Incubators.

Ryouko paused for a moment.

I—I guess I know that. I don't know what to think right now.

Let's leave the subject, Clarisse thought. *You don't have time to respond to any of these anyway. At least not now. If I have this right, right now the plan is to call your parents again, decide to put it off, and then spend some time worrying about Asami even though you can't do anything about it. And then you'll consider responding to all these letters from suitors that you keep getting. Then you'll decide that you need to go ask someone for advice about it, even though four separate people—Ying-zhi, Clarisse, Nadya, and Mami—have told you that you shouldn't keep ignoring it. Maybe this time you should ask Kyouko. She might tell you what you want to hear.*

I see that sarcasm module got substantial upgrades in Version Two, Ryouko responded sardonically.

Only with genes inherited from the very best, Clarisse replied, in the exact same tone of voice. *Seriously, though, why do you even keep me around if you're going to ignore my reminders? You know I'm right.*

Ryouko sighed.

I know, she thought. *I just…don't…*

The truth was, she *had* bit the bullet and called one person already. She had called her grandfather, because she felt she had to, but even though neither of them did or said anything wrong, the conversation had been so uncomfortable, the sudden gap between them so wide and visceral, that it had paralyzed her ability to repeat the action.

Her grandmother was dead, the woman she barely knew, and the difference between their reactions to the events was such that they might as well have lived in different worlds. He was devastated, and she had no idea what to say.

She'd gotten the notice shortly after the battle ended. It seemed her grandmother had been killed defending a cruiser production facility from an alien insertion team. The news had seemed to hang in the air for a moment, before her TacComp had gently reminded her of the circumstances of one of her visions, the one with the unidentified captain killed defending the Pollux shipyard. The details matched up exactly.

She considered the box of memorabilia on the bed next to her. There wasn't really much in it; a few favored clothing items—including those bunny slippers she'd had for ages—and a disassembled telescope, the body of which she was holding in her lap.

Why had the Goddess bothered to show her a vision like that? What point was there to it? The more she thought about it, the more it bothered her. The first two visions, the one with her grandmother and the one with Patricia and Maki, seemed to have had no direct bearing on the situation. Was the Goddess just being verbose for no reason?

What bothered her the most, of course, was the simple lack of emotion she felt. Yes, she had known her grandmother well as a child, but that had been a long time ago. In truth, she realized, she hardly knew the woman at all, and couldn't really summon more than an abstract kind of sorrow.

If she had just lived a little longer, Ryouko could have easily visited, as she had her grandfather. It bothered her more than she cared to admit.

She flipped through her calendar, calling up a visual of her upcoming schedule in front of her.

The logic was simple: memorial services took some time to arrange, but not *that* long. About one and a half weeks, with the scale of the effort proportional to the importance of the person who was dead, and some considerations made for timeliness—there had to be time for anyone invited to cross interstellar space, if required.

Thus, simple logistic considerations had contrived to place her in no less than three consecutive memorial services. The first would be on ship, arranged by the MagOps team for Eva, Juliet, and the ship and its crew. Then they would depart the Zhukov by fast transport, and attend the state funeral for Roland Erwynmark, on his home planet of Bismarck—Mami was too busy to attend in physical person, so it was imperative that the team and the newly styled "Hero of Orpheus" show up. Then, finally, she would take leave and head back to Earth, be there while they woke Asami's clone, then attend the funeral for her grandmother, which her parents were already setting up.

It felt tiring just to think about.

Sighing, she placed the telescope back in the box, closing the lid. Three funerals, for people she in truth didn't know very well. It wasn't that she felt the time wasted—instead, she regretted not knowing them better.

Ryouko stood up, shook her head at herself, and headed out the door. It was time for the first service.

The memorial service was a simple affair, more an informal gathering than anything. It wasn't intended to replace any funerals the families of the people involved might want to hold. It was, she supposed, just a remembrance, hurriedly arranged and deliberately low-key.

She felt awkward approaching the room where it was being held. In truth, like most people from Earth, she had never been to a memorial service. There were none to go to, when no one died. From what she had read online, it seemed these kinds of group remembrances were often conducted as generically as possible, trying to split the difference between more traditional elaborate somber gatherings, stoic colonial-style services, defiant Unification War-style mass feasts—food had been a big deal at the time—and probably most importantly, Cult of Hope-style funeral *parties*.

At least the neo-Roman fad that had been briefly popular—complete with masks, mimes, and dancers—seemed to have been just that: a fad.

She had been told to expect a restrained affair—no speeches, nothing religious, no alcohol, and definitely no *dancers*. There would be a place to pay your respects, and a table of snacks, an apparent concession to the more celebratory style of funeral.

The invitation had also specified that she was supposed to come in casual attire, so she didn't have a chance to be confused about that.

Sometimes she wished doors would stay closed until you opened them, instead of trying to anticipate your arrival. Sure, you could turn that off, but going out of your way to do that could be considered a statement.

Turning the corner into the room, she almost stopped dead.

It took her a moment to recover, long enough that her TacComp would probably have nudged her had she spent any longer standing there slack-jawed.

“Oh, hello,” HSS Raven said, noting Ryouko’s appearance in the doorway. “Glad you could make it.”

“They’re still working on building a new body for her,” Nadya said, noting Ryouko’s moment of confusion. “It has to be done carefully, you know, since she’s not a new AI. She’s stopped by for this. It’s AI tradition, though I guess it is kind of weird.”

The last sentence was clearly spoken for Ryouko’s benefit, since she had completely failed to anticipate this.

“I always wondered what it would be like to attend my own funeral,” HSS Raven said, still dressed in her customary naval captain uniform. “I guess I’m finding out. Or maybe I was born last week, and these memories are just fooling me into thinking I’m the same ship. Can’t think too much about that.”

“Well, I guess I’m glad to see you up and…about,” Ryouko managed, feeling proud of herself for not stammering.

“Have some food,” HSS Raven suggested. “I’m told Nadya makes excellent hors d’oeuvres. Never seemed to match my image of her, that.”

“You live long enough, you learn everything,” Nadya said sourly. “And Juliet was the better cook, by far.”

Ryouko shuffled past them, thinking to herself that AIs just might be irredeemably weird, at least if Raven and Clarisse were any indication.

This was one of the ship’s observation decks, chosen for this occasion. Against a panoramic backdrop of the stars outside—simulated during FTL transit—it featured a long table full of food, various small clusters of people seated or standing, a large central table with static holograms of the deceased. The event was only sparsely attended, featuring the remaining team members and what few friends and family members could travel to the ship on such short notice. Tomoe Mami had been invited to attend, but couldn’t make it.

She shimmied up to the food table, squinting skeptically at one of the carefully arranged platters of food. Native Samsaran Effictian Rock Pigeon, nanite-preserved fresh from the slaughterhouse, on tiny individualized leaves from Nova Terra. The leaves were the same fuzzy blood-red leaves she had had at that lunch where she met Asami, what seemed like a lifetime ago, but what really made her skeptical was the meat, which was a distinctly plant-like shade of green, and served raw, slathered in bright blue “Gleeb” salsa.

It looked more like a dessert than anything.

Swallowing slightly, she picked up a small plate and gingerly picked up a piece with the provided utensil. No sense in wanting to be a brave explorer and being squeamish about the food, after all. Besides, what would Asami say? And it smelled pretty good…

She sighed. That vision with Asami still ate at her, and she couldn’t help feeling a certain sense of guilt. She knew there was nothing she could do but wait for the week or so until she received the notification that Asami’s body was rebuilt—she had already asked to be present when she was revived—but she couldn’t help feeling a certain restlessness.

Then something toggled in her mind, and she glanced to her right, at the table where the photographs had been set up. There she found a girl, about the same physical age, leaning on the table for support, seeming to be in throes of emotion, though not sobbing. Next to her stood an

awkward-looking Gracia, who was waving at Ryouko to come over. As Ryouko watched, glancing around for Nadya or Clarisse or *someone* to come bail her out, Gracia telepathically pinged her again.

Get over here already! Gracia insisted.

Why are you asking me for help? Do I look like I'm two hundred years old? Ryouko asked, reluctantly walking over, still looking around for some of the others—Nadya was still at the door, Clarisse was in a far corner.

No one else is available! Gracia insisted. *I'm not good at this! She doesn't believe in the Goddess! I don't know what to say!*

I'm not good at this either!

But as Ryouko got to the table, the crying girl seemed to collect herself, a little, backing away slightly.

I'm sorry; I'm fine, the girl sent telepathically. *I thought I'd be okay, but I'm fine now.*

The telepathy surprised Ryouko. Her eyes flashed to the girl's hand, which carried the distinctive ring and fingernail mark—a spiderweb, it looked like—then to the framed portrait of Juliet Francois in front of her, then to the girl's face.

Marianne Francois, the girl thought, intercepting Ryouko before the facescan could complete. *Don't believe the face thing; it's not right. I'm her mother.* Was *her mother, I guess.*

The girl sniffled slightly, wiping at her face with a handkerchief.

Ryouko took a moment to glare daggers at Gracia, who was sneaking away.

I see, she thought. *I—well, nice to meet you, I suppose. I can't say Juliet ever really said anything about you, but we don't really talk about our families much.*

Privately, Ryouko registered that she was dealing with another member of the Black Heart, given the "incorrect" face-scan, which was indeed showing someone named "Michelle Sylvie". But, a mother—Ryouko wasn't used to thinking of someone who appeared so young as a mother, despite having met several such girls before. It occurred to her, suddenly, that she had no idea if anyone else on the MagOps team had children. The topic had never come up.

She was a nice girl, Ryouko continued, a bit helplessly. *I'm sorry for—*

She didn't listen to me! Marianne snapped back. *I told her she shouldn't be going into the field! I told her to stick to analysis work! Now look what happened!*

Uh—

Suddenly the girl seemed to lose her composure again.

I haven't spoken to her in years. If she had just listened to me! I knew she was going but I—I stopped interfering with her life—I thought—Maybe if I had just talked to Mami…

The girl's shoulders slumped, and she suddenly looked much, much older.

You know Mami? Ryouko asked, surprised, looking for something else to talk about, to break the awkward silence.

I'm her chief intelligence officer, Marianne thought. *I never even told her I had a daughter. It's all my fault. If I had just been able to find a boy she liked…*

No, don't say that, it's not your fault, Ryouko interjected hastily. *She loved her job and, uh…*

At a sudden loss for words, Ryouko bit into her hors d'oeuvre, trying to buy time.

This is delicious, she thought, taken aback, knowing the thought to be completely inappropriate for the situation. *I didn't think—*

"Military personnel love it," Nadya said, appearing next to the two them. "Civilians, not so much. Apparently the modified olfactory sense makes raw meat taste better."

Ryouko made eye contact with Nadya. She had no idea what Nadya was seeing in her eyes, but would have guessed that it was some variation of "Please! Save me!"

"Ma'am," Nadya said, shifting her position subtly so that it was clear she was taking over the conversation. "I know you miss her. We miss her too. Wouldn't it be better to—"

Instead of saying anything coherent, Marianne just grabbed the other girl and pulled her into hug, sobbing onto her shoulder. Looking nonplussed, Nadya patted her on the head.

Feeling decidedly unheroic, Ryouko backed rapidly out of the area, taking comfort from the fact that at least Nadya was *old*. That would probably help, right?

I can't imagine what it'd be like, to care so much that someone is gone, Ryouko thought.

You're not thinking clearly, her TacComp said, with surprising alacrity. *How concerned were you about Asami? How would you feel if she were dead? What about your grandfather?*

The question stopped Ryouko cold, and she stopped there for a long moment, watching the surreal scene in front of her, as Clarisse and Nadya hovered over Marianne in front of the memorial table.

You're right, she thought final. *I wasn't thinking. But…I don't know. I can't—*

Then she stopped, shook her head at herself, and headed back towards the food table. She hadn't been thinking, but she wasn't sure she wanted to think.

She could tell the question would bug her, though.

Mami was looking forward to a vacation.

The last few weeks had been undeniably exhausting, but she had persevered, painful as it was. The nightmares were getting worse, and her bodyguards were pushing her to see a MHD shrink, maybe get them looked at—and maybe she would, if she had some time. Centuries of life had taught her not to be proud enough to try to deal with everything herself, though sometimes you just had to, if you had work to do. She liked to think she was capable of that, now, that she wasn't as fragile as she had been, all those years ago.

Speaking of that, maybe it was time to pay another visit to Kyouko. There was a time, long ago, when she had thought the two of them might be something. That had been—let's see—not when they first met, though, thinking back, it might have started then, It had been after they reunited, when Kyouko had picked her back up after Oriko had trashed her life.

She had realized, then, that objectively Kyouko's problems had been far worse than hers—and yet it was Kyouko helping her, not the other way around. She had perceived a strength of character that she herself lacked, one that would never try to self-destruct, as she had against Oriko. Yet even then, she could see that Kyouko was suffering, as she had suffered while alone. She had done her best to rectify that.

For a while, then, she had thought she was in love.

She hadn't been, of course. She had grown to realize that. Love, at least of the romantic sort, was something else entirely, something she now thought herself unsuited for. Instead, she had admired Kyouko, even after the girl had broken her own heart chasing after Sayaka.

She missed those days, living with the other three. After they founded the MSY, after they had gotten their own apartments and gone their own separate ways, she had tried to recreate it again, inviting her new pupils in to live with her, and even with some of them, she had considered…

But in the end, she could never recapture the spirit. It was too ephemeral, too dependent on circumstances that would never recur—on friends that had struggled together, on friends who were young and not yet worn out by the long centuries, on friends who didn't have other things to do.

If only Kyouko hadn't developed that fascination with that Cult of hers. They could have been officers together, at least. She wouldn't be so alone out here, and so, so tired.

I'm sorry to disturb you, Machina said, *but I really think you should be paying more attention to this.*

Ah yes, of course. Sorry.

She realized that she had been gripping the armrests of her virtual chair, digging her fingernails into the cushion. Thankfully, Machina had helped her keep an impassive expression.

She performed the mental equivalent of sighing. An important meeting of the General Staff, to decide Erwynmark's successor, and she couldn't resist the temptation to zone out, diverting parts of her consciousness to idle musing. It was as if she had spent herself on the previous campaign.

To be fair, she had also found herself unusually affected by Roland's death. This meeting, the idea of being here on the General Staff, seemed even less palatable than usual.

She found herself staring at *Governance: Military Affairs*, the temporary chair of the meeting. A stern-looking, vaguely European-looking man, he was actually a full AI Representative. Embodying everyone's stereotype of the military, wearing a dress uniform that was almost authentic. His right arm was encased in a slimmed-down version of an infantry armored suit, which still caused him to look almost comically disproportionate; this kind of thing was typical for the AI representatives of the Directorate, though.

Much to his chagrin, *Military Affairs* had yet to find a way to incorporate a magical girl motif into his appearance in a way that he was comfortable with—thus far, he had settled for a decal printed on his armored armor, depicting a magical girl about to attack. It had once been much more suggestively posed, based on "historical military tradition", but Yuma had managed to stir up enough of a controversy about the image to force him to change it.

Shaking her head at her own lack of focus, Mami took a moment to review what had happened in the meeting while she was daydreaming—implants did have their advantages, after all, and *most* of her had been paying attention. She replayed the audio in her mind.

“The chair of the General Staff should be someone with experience, and a long history of successful leadership, in *multiple* campaigns,” Field Marshal Sualem said. “Only then can we be sure that their previous success cannot be attributed to luck. Marshal Porto would be an excellent candidate.”

Marshal Porto himself snorted.

“Let me tell you,” the Unification War veteran said, “luck is on the side of every successful general. Napoleon, for instance, was famously lucky.”

“And also famously talented,” Sualem said. “Your campaigns in South America are masterpieces.”

“And irrelevant to the current war,” Porto said. “I must graciously decline.”

“Stop being fatuous, Sualem,” Fleet Admiral Anand said, voice seeming almost to purr. “Erwynmark himself assumed the chair based on only a few victories.”

“He also showed brilliance,” Sualem argued. “Something which was conspicuously missing from this recent campaign.”

“Erwynmark himself helped design the campaign, in case you forget,” Feodorovich said, voice stern. “The decisions of the previous campaign were well-reviewed by the Staff.”

“We won by luck,” Sualem insisted. “Because a single girl just *happened*—“

“Excuse me,” Mami interjected, leaning forward, now that she had caught up with real-time. “It was *not* luck. I resent the implication. Luck played a factor, but this kind of ‘luck’”—

Here she made an “air quotes” gesture with both hands, a gesture that had surprisingly survived nearly five centuries of usage.

“—is always relevant to MagOps operations. Operatives are expected to use creativity, as well as their special capabilities. Previous operations have also achieved success in unexpected ways such as this.”

“*Not* on the scale—“

Military Affairs cleared his throat loudly, drawing their attention.

“While of course demonstrated ability is an important, perhaps the primary, consideration, it must be that other considerations also play a role. Accomplishments now are more important than accomplishments in the past, which may no longer be relevant to the current nature of the war. While retrospective analysis will of course continue for a while, the execution of the recent campaign appears to have been more than adequate, even if in the end it required ‘luck’. In the end, it may be that in this war, expecting to win without luck is misguided.”

The AI spoke in a level, baritone voice, taking a moment to meet each of them in turn with his eyes—or rather, eye, since one eye was tattooed with the AI-style “I/O”.

Mami frowned. She had expected Sualem to be his usual annoying self, so his taking the opportunity to denigrate her achievements came as no surprise, but on those occasions when he attended these meetings, *Military Affairs* generally preferred to stay silent, allowing the Staff to operate as they would. Sure, it was not every day that the Chair of the General Staff needed to be replaced, but she remembered well Erwynmark’s ascendancy to the position nearly a decade ago, where *Military Affairs* had simply sat silently until it was time to vote.

“And of course, there’s always politics,” the AI continued, finally. “The Directorate continues to express dissatisfaction with the composition of this staff, which is, let us admit, less than meritocratic. While this is of course not a meeting to discuss new additions to the General Staff, there is an obvious choice for Chair that would also serve to illustrate our commitment to promotion based on demonstrated achievement.”

Mami blinked, taking a moment to parse the almost-oracular pronouncement.

Once, long ago, she would have jumped up in open surprise at what was being suggested. Centuries of work as the MSY’s chief diplomat, then later as a Field Marshal on the General Staff, allowed her to express only an appropriate mild surprise.

Of course! She realized. *Why didn’t I see it sooner? I’m supposed to be good at this sort of thing!*

Sualem, Anand, Porto—they had realized long before her. The entire discussion up until now had been conversational maneuvering, designed to make their points without having to say anything explicitly.

You were distracted, Machina pointed out, breaking her TacComp’s customary silence. *And, I would add, you seemed to have had a strong bias against thinking about yourself in that role. I know you have a lot of experience, but my analysis of your memories indicates that this is not the first time you have been blindsided by something you should have expected.*

You’re criticizing me? Mami asked, in surprise. It wasn’t Machina’s style to say something like that.

Well, I… her TacComp began, before seeming to let the sentence trail off.

Nevermind, I suppose, Machina thought.

Mami decided to worry about her TacComp’s strange behavior later. Fortunately, their conversation had taken place in accelerated time, allowing Mami to still respond to *Military Affairs* in real-time.

“Excuse me,” she asked, deciding that it was probably time to throw down the gauntlet. “Is it your intention to nominate *me* for the position of Chair of the General Staff?”

She kept her face mildly surprised, perhaps pleased, but a storm of emotions roiled underneath the surface.

Me? Chair? I hadn’t even thought to campaign for it. But he’s right, after what just happened—I’m the obvious choice.

“I am expressing my support,” *Military Affairs* said. “It was Erwynmark’s wish that I nominate you in case of his demise, a wish that I agreed with. Of course, if the Staff decide otherwise, that is their prerogative.”

That was not strictly true. *Military Affairs*, and above him, the Directorate as a whole, technically had the power to appoint the Chair directly, or to fire and replace the whole Staff at their whim. But, it was, of course, against tradition for civilian *Governance* to exercise its power directly.

I have to accept, Mami thought. *I’m the representative for all magical girls on this Staff. It’s an unprecedented honor.*

“It is an honor,” she said.

The comments by *Military Affairs* had brought the situation out into the open, triggering a cascade of looks, glances, and glares around the room, as each member of the staff tried to assess the others, gauging their positions. Mami did the same.

It looks like about fifteen out of twenty-three, Machina commented. *The endorsement of Military Affairs and Erwynmark seems to have provided a real boost of support.*

"Perhaps we may as well hold the vote now," *Military Affairs* said. "Does anyone object? Perhaps any more nominations?"

Mami could see the anger on Sualem's face, and could take pleasure in at least that much. For a moment she thought the man would nominate someone else, even himself, in a quixotic lost cause, but in the end he subsided, even though he looked almost apoplectic. The influence of tradition on the General Staff was strong, and it would have been unprecedented for there to be more than one nominee—the Staff never nominated anyone until it was sure.

Military Affairs cleared his throat again, theatrically.

"Then on the motion to elect Field Marshal Tomoe Mami as the new Chair of the General Staff of the Armed forces, how does this General Staff vote?"

It was rare that the General Staff ever voted, preferring to carry out their business by unanimous consent. It was necessary, however, for matters of significant importance.

Each member of the Staff entered their votes by mental intention, a simple mental gesture serving to indicate their votes. The vote count imprinted itself on their minds, not relying on anything so crude as vision. First came the immediate assent of reliable supporters such as Karishma Anand, de Chatillon, and Alexander. Porto and Feodorovich, generally more neutral, surprised her by immediately entering their "yea" votes, without waiting for the majority to be confirmed. Sualem and Miller were "nay", of course.

Then, as the vote count passed twelve, the remaining "yea" votes came in, those voters who had waited longer expressing their lower degree of certainty by responding after the outcome was already determined. The vote was fifteen to six.

Taking a breath, Mami entered her vote, the traditional "abstain" for voting for oneself. *Military Affairs* followed a moment later, also with a traditional "abstain".

She watched as Sualem clamped his eyes shut, his face a study in uncomfortable despair, even as the other members of the "nay" group switched their votes to "yea" to conform with the majority.

A moment later he did so as well, followed by *Military Affairs*, then Mami herself. A unanimous confirmation, as tradition dictated.

Mami got out of her chair, head swimming, making her way to the front of the room.

Congratulations, Anand relayed to her.

Thanks, she thought.

She reached the front, pushing herself through the motions of shaking the hand of *Military Affairs*.

Then she turned, looking down the virtual table, at the dual rows of expectant faces, waiting for her to make the customary speech.

She opened her mouth to speak.

What have I gotten myself into? she thought.

Aspects of Love

Chapter Notes

Well, this took a while. No it doesn't end the volume. But next chapter really should.

"The origins of current immortality technology lie in the years leading up to the Unification Wars, in the efforts of the newly emergent hyperclasses, which were understandably unenthused by the prospect of their own mortality, the only obvious limitation on what were otherwise lives of luxury and unrestrained decadence. "

"Longevity research was hardly a new phenomenon; exorbitant rejuvenation treatments had been developed as early as the 2090s. These, however, possessed severe flaws, including unpleasant side effects, incredibly exorbitant cost and, most importantly, lack of repeatability in the face of inexorable genetic and tissue damage. Even the luckiest of these early treatment recipients only saw their lifespans extended into the 160s, dying on the eve of war with their dreams of immortality unfulfilled."

"While this kind of lifespan made the hyperclasses Methuselahs compared to earlier generations, it was considered unsatisfactory. Tremendous resources were poured into anti-aging research, vast numbers of scientists working tirelessly in enormous laboratories, as the masses around them languished and died, deprived even of cures to diseases long since eradicated in the rich."

"Progress was nonetheless frustrating. Nanotechnology had been used successfully in manufacturing and other applications for decades, but even with AI-guidance, the biological equivalent was slow to develop—the first generations of nanites were finicky, relatively ineffective, and hard to maintain, the drone populations mutating uncontrollably far too often. Reversing or suspending aging was a subtle, difficult task, and while research teams managed startling feats of biological manipulation, these too often seemed inapplicable to the main problem, serving only as additional bodily modifications enterprising hyperclass members might find amusing.

"An application was found for this research soon enough, of course. The exigencies of total war tore apart the limits of what had once been considered acceptable, leading both sides to send into battle soldiers with progressively more extensive bionic and neural modifications, enabled by the very nanite technology that had previously seemed so useless. Even within the core nations of the United Front (UF), it soon became customary to think of the armed forces as a cyborg army—as this was in effect what they were. "

"While it was the Freedom Alliance (FA) that took the technology far beyond the limits of ethics, even the UF performed actions that would have been absolutely unthinkable before the war, most notably with the Universal Readiness Decree of 2192, which began the mandatory installation of nanite-based implant technology into the civilian population. The justification was, of course, to create a civilian population that more productive, more resistant to attack—including nuclear attack—disease and deprivation, and capable of taking up arms in a post-modern war that could no longer be fought by humans. With basic survival at the forefront, protests were muted, and unfortunate accidents that would have been major scandals in peacetime were brushed aside."

"At the end of the war, the Emergency Defense Council (EDC) restarted the stalled prewar

research projects, under the new banner of Project Eden. With over a half-century of feverish wartime research behind them, and a population already filled to the brim with bionic implants, a once-frustrating problem proved surprisingly facile—where a pre-war scientist might have hesitated to suggest installing an implant into the deep brainstem, a post-war scientist merely had to suggest modifications to what was already there. Decades of fine-tuning and testing were necessary, but the problem had in essence been solved—it turned out, extensive cyborg modification was the answer."

—Online Article: A Brief History of Immortality

"Sometimes I walk outside, alone, and I explore. I take my private vehicle and I drive. Sometimes I circle the residential towers. Sometimes I explore the MSY district. Sometimes, when I really have time, I leave the city entirely, and drive out into the forests and the fields. I get out, and I breathe in the air, and I look at the sky."

"I do this because when I'm out there, alone among the teeming masses of humanity, or alone among the endless trees, I can almost feel her. She's everywhere; I know it."

"And then I wonder, is this what she really wanted?"

—Akemi Homura, redacted quote from "Akemi Homura, an Official Biography" (MSY Internal), 2405. MSY-classified material is viewable only with permission from Leadership Committee.

It was snowing.

That wasn't really a surprise, of course. According to the handy travel guides her TacComp had downloaded for her, Roland Erwynmark's home planet of Bismarck had apparently once been the victim of a massive asteroid strike, knocking the planet's rotation radically off-axis. This had the effect of greatly amplifying the planet's seasonal shifts across most of the planet, producing glaringly hot summers and sunless winters. Temperature discrepancies between the Northern and Southern Hemisphere during the cold or hot seasons led to massive superstorms.

Overall, the guide recommended, it was best to travel to Bismarck during the temperate seasons, when it was possible to watch the local fauna desperately mate as they fled across the continents in giant migratory herds, before there was nowhere to go and it was time to hunker down for either summer or winter. Even the plant life got in on the action, executing an exotic biannual lifestyle. While some of the settlements were in the tropics, and some groups of humans even emulated the animals, migrating back and forth across the continent, most human settlements weren't, instead located near important sources of minerals. Roland Erwynmark was from one of these settlements.

It was currently winter there.

So if they went to all the trouble to put up weather control stations around the settlement, you'd think they could make it so we wouldn't be surrounded by knee-deep snow, Ryouko thought.

There are limits to reasonable uses of resources, Clarisse thought. *They don't have limitless energy from solar satellites like Earth. There's a limit to what you can do with geothermal. Besides, it's not so bad.*

I know, obviously, Ryouko thought. *Just complaining. And you know I know so stop being pedantic.*

It really wasn't that bad, to be honest. The implants made the cold mostly bearable, as long as you bundled up, and paving drones had been deployed to create ice paths that wound their way

throughout the area. By simply putting on a pair of skates and letting your implants guide you, it was possible to have a quite pleasant experience exploring the area. It wasn't really something Ryouko had ever done—the climate control in Mitakihara prevented the city from ever experiencing more than mild "holiday" snow.

She had arrived a day early, and she figured she might as well look around a little.

Maybe I could bring my parents or friends here, she thought, as she peered at her surroundings, allowing her legs to propel her forward on the equivalent of autopilot.

Nominally, she was on the outskirts of the town of Neumalchin, population 15,673. In practice, she was in the middle of nowhere—there was nothing visible of the town from where she was, with her visibility impeded by the high snowbanks and dormant native plant life. The town was tiny and sparse, and no amount of renovations to old mining facilities—revamped as temporary housing for the incoming flux of dignitaries—could change that.

They could have melted the snow, of course, if they had really wanted to. The military had the resources, for an important event like this. But for what purpose? To reveal brown mud and leafless plants? It was pointless, and Erwynmark had apparently grown up with the snow—for half the year, anyway.

Ryouko held up her hands, breathing out. The cloud of condensation puffed outward at her mittened hands. The cold, the condensation, the mittens—it was all novel, and kind of fun, in a way, different from the paltry skin-thin layer of snow Mitakihara was allowed.

She looked up, at the starry endless night, framed by tall, bare, native trees. Out here, in the breathtakingly muted snowy landscape, in the seemingly eternal dark, it seemed possible to get lost forever, to wander timelessly in the endless wilderness, blessed with eternal life, and to never return.

It seemed strangely enticing, but also a little sad. It occurred to her that it would be better experienced with someone else.

Is it starting to happen? she thought. *Am I finally starting to feel lonely?*

She skated silently for another long moment, brooding on the implications of the thought.

Clarisse, she began.

Then, before she knew she was doing, she had jumped, spinning into the air, the world spinning into a blur around her. With twin bursts of magic, she partially transformed, an arbalest appearing on her left arm, and her skating shoes replacing themselves with more combat-ready green boots.

The projectile missed her head by a mile, and she landed on the ice deftly, boots sticking to the surface with a flash of green light, achieving an impossible level of traction. Her left arm was already raised to fire.

But she hadn't completed the transformation, and she didn't fire, because she realized that the projectile was made, improbably, of snow.

The two culprits of the attack made a scared noise, hidden at the top of the snowbank, bright and obvious in Ryouko's infrared vision.

Kids, she thought.

She blinked, returning to standard vision, then jumped, clearing both snowbank and children in

one powerful leap, turning as she did so, so that she could land behind them, and look down upon them.

Or so she planned, anyway, but in practice, she promptly wedged herself deep into the snow, and found herself more or less eye-level with the wide-eyed children who, she realized abruptly, were only a few years younger than she was. They had been tensing to run, and had clearly not expected her to react so adroitly.

"And what was *that* about?" she demanded, looking between the two kids, one a defiant-looking thirteen-year-old boy and the other a scared-looking twelve-year-old girl.

"We didn't mean anything!" the girl blurted out tremulously. "We just wanted to see—"

"We were just playing," the boy said, peering at her pugnaciously. "Don't—"

"We heard there were a lot of magical girls in the area now," the girl said. "We wanted to—"

"Don't tell her that!" the boy said, glaring at the girl. "Now—"

Then he froze, a look of utter shock crawling up his face.

"We're so sorry!" he said, turning back towards Ryouko, his previously-defiant expression suddenly terrified. "We were just playing, Miss Shizuki! We didn't mean any disrespect!"

Their face scanners just processed who you are, Clarisse explained, as Ryouko started to make a puzzled expression. *Hero of Orpheus.*

Oh, Ryouko thought, softening her expression so as not to scare them.

"It's alright," Ryouko said reassuringly. "No harm done. What are you two doing way out here?"

"Well…" the boy began, looking away from her.

The girl, whose gaze had turned briefly worshipful, seemed to blush slightly.

"Well," she said, looking downward bashfully. "I thought it'd be romantic—"

"Stop telling her these things!" the boy shouted, suddenly blushing furiously.

Suddenly, Ryouko understood the situation.

She turned her head away instinctively, and fiddled with her arbalest briefly with her other. Then she realized what she was doing and abolished the weapon entirely.

"So this kind of thing is considered romantic, huh?" she asked, recalling her earlier train of thought.

I can't believe I just said that! she thought immediately.

Oh God I'm humiliating myself in front of my fans.

She turned around to hide her face, a difficult task buried in the snow as she was, but one achievable with her considerable enhanced strength.

"Well, I'll leave you two alone, then," she said.

Then she propelled herself into another jump, as the other two watched her, awestruck. Relying

on her magical boots, she stuck her landing on the ice, and dispelled the boots, preparing to skate back.

“Wait!” the girl yelled, from behind her.

Ryouko turned back, to see the girl climbing awkwardly over the snowbank. Ryouko thought for a moment that she would fall, but the girl slid down the side with surprising skill, landing on the ice just as a set of skates deployed from her bulky-looking boots.

“Can we come with you?” the girl asked.

Roland Erwynmark had been a town hero. More than just the prototypical local boy made good, he had also saved the town itself—he had started his military career here, tasked with leading the hastily assembled local militia in the defense of the town. That had been near the start of the war, when Bismarck—a relatively minor planet—had come under dispute. Neither side had committed much resources to a relative sideshow, at the very edge of the ambitious squid incursion, leaving the planet to defend itself with mostly its own resources.

Neumalchin had been a smaller scale version of the same phenomenon. A small mining town in the north, serving as a waypoint for scientific teams heading into the wilderness, was not high on the civil defense priority list, and had been lucky to receive enough outdated armor suits to outfit its adult population. Erwynmark was one of the few who had previously bothered to volunteer for militia training, and had more or less fallen into the leadership position.

It was a mystery why the aliens had even chosen to land the troops necessary to occupy the region—especially in the dead of winter—but when they did, they had likely expected to overrun Neumalchin as a matter of course.

Instead, the villagers’ last-ditch defense of their town had become the stuff of planetary legend. The history holos Ryouko had accessed painted the experience vividly—villagers digging into snowbanks and ice, exploiting their mastery of the local terrain to the absolute hilt, and constantly jiggering and rejiggering their weather manipulation station to generate blizzard after blizzard in the face of alien counter-manipulation. Erwynmark himself skated endlessly back and forth over the ice roads, moving from sector to sector without cessation, as their numbers continued to dwindle.

At the end they had finally been forced to withdraw underground, into the mining tunnels, following a morbid precedent set on colony world after colony world.

By the time the alien troops withdrew from the region, the villagers had long since cannibalized every building they had for the energy necessary to forge and reforge ammunition over and over, not to mention power their suits and fuel their increasingly deprived bodies. Alien corpses, human corpses, damaged equipment, trees, shrubs, weather phenomena, underground heat and biomass, the rarely-visible sun—anything and everything that could be reacted or harnessed to generate usable energy was reacted or harnessed.

But in the end, they still stood, with hardly anything left but their own indomitable wills—and a much reduced population. The performance caught the eye of the planetary commander, who lifted Erwynmark to a higher position. The rest, as they say, was history.

All of which served to explain why as Ryouko and her newfound fans—friends?—made their way into the town square, they headed down *Erwynmark Rd.*, past *Erwynmark Hall*, a monument to *Roland Erwynmark*, and finally into *Erwynmark Inn, Café, and Bar.*

To be fair, she had also passed monuments and roads named after other local heroes, including a monument to the magical girl team that had been involved in the battle, a paltry three girls strong—one local MSY-assigned demon hunter and two newly-contracted locals. The team had originally numbered five, but the MSY, seeing the apparent writing on the wall, had withdrawn all but the one who had refused to leave. In the end, only she had survived, forced to withdraw from fighting entirely to focus on demon hunting, lest the town be left without a single magical girl to fight demon hordes.

The town had been obliged to rebuild everything from the ground up, and was understandably fond of memorializing the most important event in its history. For the upcoming memorial service, the buildings were decked out in banners with Erwynmark's face and welcoming the crowd of dignitaries that would soon arrive—most of whom weren't here yet, since everyone was busy.

The girl Ryouko was with was named Priska Höfler, apparently, and seemed inordinately proud to be Erwynmark's second cousin's granddaughter. Ryouko had let the girl and her "friend" skate aimlessly with her for a while, until Ryouko had received an unexpected message summoning her back to town. The two teenagers—children?—had insisted on showing her the way, even though Clarisse had a map of the town downloaded and ready to use.

At the moment, Priska was filling her head with village color and gossip.

"Anyway, so Amelie says she thinks it's insulting that so many of the, uh, dignitaries aren't coming in person, but Mama says it's understandable, since everyone is so busy. I mean, it makes sense, since I'd guess that's why Mami-san wouldn't come."

"Yeah, something like that," Ryouko agreed.

"It makes sense, of course," Priska continued, a little breathlessly. "I'm sure they all have important business, but it sucks that Mami-san isn't coming. She's so cool!"

"Yeah, she is kind of cool," Ryouko agreed.

"Krista says Amelie is just sour because her parents won't approve of her dating so early. I feel bad for her, but only a little, because her parents have so much money. Compared to my family, anyway. The other day, we went to the general store, and they had this special nanofabricated jewel Mama wanted and my parents got into this big fight, right there in the store! Is it true, what they say, that people from Earth don't really care about money?"

Ryouko had stayed mostly silent, not sure how to talk to them. She wasn't sure what this sensation was—Priska and her friend, Marcus, seemed unbearably young to her, the two year difference between them and her feeling like a chasm.

"Uhh…yeah, pretty much," Ryouko said, looking at the other girl's wide eyes. "More or less. I mean, we care a little, especially nowadays with the war on, but no one really thinks about it."

"How much do you make?"

"Er…" she prevaricated.

She consulted Clarisse quickly. Converted into local currency, the sum was astronomical—she could probably have bought that "nanofabricated jewel" hundreds of times over.

"Uh…" she repeated.

"That's not a polite question, Priska," Marcus said, a little tersely. "Anyway, we're here."

Indeed they were, the grey-metal door of the inn sliding open at their approach.

Stepping inside, Ryouko glanced around, taking only a moment to find the girl who had summoned her.

Sakura Kyouko was seated at the bar, tearing her way energetically through a half-eaten roast chicken—special local breed—holding one of the drumsticks in her hand and using it to gesture at Patricia, who was seated next to her looking bemused. Patricia had a plate with some of the chicken as well, but didn't really seem to be eating, probably afraid to get in Kyouko's way.

As a robot arrived to collect Ryouko's jacket and other cold-weather accoutrements, Kyouko chugged the remaining third of her cup of beer then gestured at the bartender for more. She glanced at the kids with her, feeling suddenly uneasy. A memory flashed through her mind: blood and gore on the streets of a distant world, the remains of a girl that had sacrificed herself to save Patricia.

She swallowed, then walked forward.

Sensing her approach, Kyouko stopped eating abruptly, calmly and deliberately setting her food down and taking a moment to dab her mouth clean with a self-cleaning cloth.

"Yo," she said, turning half around in her rotating bar stool to face Ryouko. "I see you've made some new friends."

"Ah, yes, uh," Ryouko began impotently, surprised.

"Don't look so worried," Kyouko said, smiling toothily. "There's nothing wrong with that. It's good to make a few friends your age. Come on, take a seat. The rest of you too. Order something. My treat."

To her, we really are the same age, Ryouko realized, as she walked over to the seat next to Kyouko.

Patricia gestured at the two kids, who shuffled hesitantly over, Marcus mumbling something about messaging his mother.

"I, uh, thought you weren't coming to this," Ryouko said. She *had* checked the list of attendees, after all.

"I wasn't going to," Kyouko said, chewing thoughtfully on some meat. "Mami was pressuring me to, to make up for her absence, but funerals ain't my thing, especially the gloomy type. I hate going to them, to be honest."

Ryouko craned her head slightly, to make sure the two locals were okay. Patricia seemed to be chatting them up. So she decided not to worry about it.

"So what changed your mind?" Ryouko asked.

"I heard you were coming," Kyouko said, working delicately at the chicken in front of her with a knife and chopsticks. "And I thought I'd check up on you. I am supposed to be your mentor, after all."

Ryouko nodded.

After a moment of silence, Ryouko started to access the menu, not sure what else to say.

“I’d ask you how things are,” Kyouko said, “but it’d probably be a useless question. Things are probably changing so fast that even you don’t know what’s going on with your life. That’s probably the way things are, right?”

Ryouko thought about it a moment, then nodded. It was accurate enough. For the past few weeks, she had mostly let the flow of events carry her along, too bewildered to be capable of anything else.

She wasn’t really sure if it was a bad thing, though. She seemed to be going places, intentionally or not. And besides, in an organization such as the military, how much could she really change on her own?

“I’ve been okay,” she said. “There’s a been a lot going on, obviously.”

She knew that was a tremendous understatement, but she wasn’t really sure how else to put it.

“That’s an understatement if I’ve ever heard one,” Kyouko said, instantly mirroring Ryouko’s thoughts. “I was sorry to hear about your grandmother, by the way. My condolences.”

“Oh, yeah, it’s, uh, thanks,” Ryouko responded, caught off-guard.

“I’m not surprised you pulled off a big stunt like that,” Kyouko said, focusing for a moment again on her food. “For Mami to glom onto you that quickly is usually a sign. Hmm, well, I can admit the stunt was a bit bigger than I had imagined it being.”

Kyouko turned her head to look at Ryouko, very deliberately, and Ryouko found herself staring back into the Ancient’s eyes.

Let’s pretend to eat for a while, Ryouko heard Kyouko think, the voice resonating in her head. *Whatever you might have told everyone else, I know the Goddess was involved. I am the head of the religion, after all, so I’d like to hear about it.*

Ryouko let out the breath she had been holding. Somehow, she had contrived to completely forget about that aspect of things.

Why are we holding this conversation in a public bar? she asked, buying time while also asking a pertinent question.

Kyouko shrugged.

Figured I might as well get in a lesson about the world while I was at it. You see that couple at the table over there? Don’t look too directly.

Kyouko pinged her the location telepathically. Ryouko glanced where she indicated, trying to do it out of the corner of her eye. They looked fairly nondescript, except that they were obviously from out of town. Thinking back, they hadn’t been there earlier, so they had probably come in after Ryouko did.

Reporters, Kyouko said. *They’ve barely touched their food, they’re trying too hard to blend in, and the male one can’t stop himself from glancing over. The town is infested with them, but they try to hide themselves. These two have probably been following you for a while. Notice any drones following you on your way here, by the way?*

Ryouko, a little slack-jawed, starting shaking her head, before stopping herself.

No, she thought.

There were at least a couple, Kyouko thought. *Anyway, those reporters are probably really ticked off right now, since it seems none of their recording devices are working, and they can't even crank up their auditory implants. What a shame. It's almost as if there were some kind of electronics expert here suppressing them with her magic.*

Kyouko smirked a little, glancing for a moment at Patricia, who seemed to be talking to the two kids animatedly about genetics or something.

A moment later one of the reporters yelped in surprise, as her plate of food spontaneously upended itself into her lap.

The point is, Kyouko thought. *You got to pay more attention to this kind of thing, now that people know who you are. You probably also didn't notice the telekinetic I put in the other corner.*

No, Ryouko thought, looking confusedly. Yes, there was a girl there, but was she—

She frowned for a moment, then finally picked up the hint of magic, very carefully suppressed.

"So how did you find training?" Kyouko asked, out loud. "I'm always curious to hear what new girls think about it, since they don't make us Old Ones do anything like it."

The open speech surprised Ryouko, but before she could respond, Kyouko thought:

Missing a magical signature like that would have gotten you killed, back in my day, Kyouko thought. *Anyway, enough small talk. I'd like to hear about the Goddess. I notice you didn't exactly deny it before.*

A moment later, having sorted out the confusing situation, Ryouko sighed. She was cornered, and she knew it.

"It was everything everyone said it would be," Ryouko said, a nice safe response that required no thought. "It felt like it took forever, but it all feels kind of fuzzy. That's intentional, apparently."

A moment later, she appended her real response:

She came to me and told me how the battle was going. She said I was going to make a mistake, since I didn't know about the fleet that that aliens had cloaked. I was going to just try to take the team home. She's the one who said I should try to reopen the wormhole.

Kyouko nodded, then turned, staring into Ryouko's eyes unnervingly.

"You make any friends during training? I'm told the friends you make during training are often the closest."

Did she give you the power to do it? Kyouko asked, seemingly simultaneously, leaving Ryouko blinking. Had Kyouko just relayed one thought while speaking another?

"I made a few," Ryouko said blandly, hoping that her facial expression wasn't betraying their mental conversation.

I don't think so, Ryouko thought. *I think I could do that on my own.*

Kyouko seemed to chuckle slightly, then put some of her food into her mouth, chewing thoughtfully.

Some of the Theological Council think no ordinary magical girl could do something like that, that

you had to have some power boost from the Goddess. I told them they didn't have enough faith in ordinary magical girls. You are ordinary, right? She didn't tell you you're the new prophet or anything?

A memory echoed in Ryouko's mind suddenly, unbidden. It was the Goddess's voice:

"You don't know it, but this is one of the things you were born for."

One of—

Ryouko felt suddenly dizzy, but hid it as best she could.

She didn't.

Kyouko nodded to herself.

"I'm told you made one particularly good friend, actually,"

Is there anything else you want to share? If it's relevant to the Church, or Humanity, or anything like that, I'd like to hear it. But if she gave you relationship advice or something, you don't have to tell me about it if you don't want to. You wouldn't believe how often she does that, on the side. Well, so I'm told, anyway.

Another memory flashed through Ryouko's mind, of Maki's body being torn apart. This one was a repeat, but it only served to make her queasier.

Am I traumatized or something? she thought to herself. *I don't usually—*

"I'm not sure what you mean," she said, stalling for time. She didn't like either of the topics they were discussing, and having to think about both at the same time made her head hurt. It didn't help that Kyouko persisted in saying two things at the same time.

Not that I'd like to share, she relayed to Kyouko, even though she was starting to think that, indeed, one of the visions was directly relevant to Kyouko. She didn't want to deal with it.

Fair enough, Kyouko though, nodding, pushing away her plate, which was now empty. Ryouko wondered how she had managed to miss Kyouko finishing all that food.

I'd really rather you not tell everyone I said this, Ryouko thought.

Kyouko turned towards her elaborately, filling in the apparent gap in their verbal conversation.

As much as I'd like to blare the trumpets on this, Kyouko thought, looking at Ryouko thoughtfully. *I wouldn't do that to you if you don't want me to. And I can definitely understand why you wouldn't want to. I won't be that kind of asshole. Maybe someday, later, though. Why haven't you joined the Church? It's a simple registration. There are benefits.*

Ryouko blinked, trying to think of something.

Nevermind, Kyouko thought. *Later.*

"Let be more specific, then," Kyouko said. "I hear you're involved in a relationship now. With a girl too. Good for you! Obviously, I'm supportive."

Ryouko's eye twitched. The two local villagers, who had been quietly staring at the two of them, easily heard Kyouko's suddenly loud voice.

Ryouko felt herself blush. She put her hands to her head.

“First, I don’t know why everyone knows about that. Second, this is barely a week old, and isn’t even that certain, and everyone is taking it as fact. Third, if those are really reporters over there, do you realize what you just started?”

She slammed her palm into the table at the end of the last sentence, then realized she was talking way too loud.

She covered her mouth with her hand to hide her embarrassment.

“Anyway, you’re taking it way too seriously,” she finished.

“Well, I was just saying, if you want special advice, I got plenty of that,” Kyouko said, smiling mischievously. “If you know what I mean. Besides, I’m sure the media already knows. Probably,”

Ryouko made an annoyed noise, deep in her throat.

“I don’t know what you mean, and don’t tell me. Anyway, I’m not sure I should take relationship advice from you, given—”

Ryouko stopped herself in time, but Kyouko’s smile still turned abruptly brittle, as if she had just received a particularly effective gut punch.

The effect lasted only a moment, though, before dissipating, as Kyouko’s smile returned to normal.

“You’ve heard the rumors, I guess?” Kyouko said. “Well, I wasn’t exactly offering advice in long-term relationships. Anyway…”

With suspiciously good timing, a server-bot appeared behind the counter, delivering in front of Ryouko one sirloin steak, served with local vegetables and horseradish sauce, served *very* rare. Ryouko could almost swear she saw blood leaking out of it.

“For you,” Kyouko said. “Thought I’d surprise you. The blood makes it taste better. Side effect of the implants. I gotta get going. Patricia wants to talk to you, I can’t imagine why, but—”

Kyouko glanced at Patricia, who seemed to be playing some sort of virtual game with the two kids.

“—later, I guess,” Kyouko finished. “You have no idea how much she likes kids, if you can force her out of the lab. Anyway, last bit of advice: watch out for people trying to get into your pants. See ya.”

“Uh, see you,” Ryouko barely managed in time, as Kyouko hopped off the bar bench and zoomed out the door, dodging and weaving so effectively that the waiters and tables in her way might as well not have been there.

Ryouko watched her go for a moment, then turned back towards her plate. After meditating for a moment on what the last thing Kyouko had said she carved off a sliver off the meat with a knife and tried it.

Her eyes widened.

I’m starting to wonder if I should just start asking the synthesizer for raw meat and be done with it, she thought, as she started tearing into the rest of it, exerting a disturbing amount of willpower

to force herself to use knife and fork.

A lot of those in the military do, actually, Clarisse thought. *They even have a club. Remember, the goal is to make sure that soldiers can eat anything and everything to survive. It took some work to make sure people didn't starve themselves from refusing to eat something horrible-tasting. Add in an 'unplanned' interaction with the enhanced olfaction and this is the result you get. Of course, many people suspect one of the design AIs was playing a joke."*

Why wasn't it ever fixed? Ryouko asked.

Some people liked it too much, and petitioned to have it deliberately left in. There's an option to have it fixed, if you really want to.

Maybe later.

Something moved in the corner of her eye, prompting her to look up. A girl stood there, next to the seat where Kyouko had been. Ryouko glanced over her quickly—about her age, at least in appearance, with a soul gem ring—

"Hi there," the girl said. "Is this seat taken?"

Ryouko glanced at Patricia, who was still focused on some sort of VR sim.

"I don't think so," Ryouko said, who started to turn back to her food.

"That looks good," the girl said, gesturing at the steak. "I guess I'll have whatever that is."

Ryouko smiled politely.

"Yeah, it is pretty good," she said.

It occurred to her that the other girl was dressed quite well—certainly much better than the generic thick shirt and pants Ryouko had on.

Ryouko pondered for a moment how much cleavage the other girl was showing. The way that necklace went in and out…

Then she realized that she was staring, and looked up hastily.

"I'll be honest; when I saw you here, I had to talk to you," the girl said. "It's always nice to meet someone else from the family, especially a 'hero' like you."

The girl held up her necklace, smiling brightly, so that Ryouko could finally see what was at the end of it.

Oh, a Shizuki! she thought, quickly peering at the girl's face and calling up her nomenclator.

Shizuki Azusa

Gender: Female

Age: 24

Occupation: Investment Banker, Hashimoto and Sinclair Investments and Securities

Magical Girl, Inactive (Special Dispensation). Rank: Captain

Special Comments: Sixth Cousin of Shizuki Ryouko; member, Shizuki Matriarchy

"Listen," the girl said, leaning over and touching Ryouko on the arm. "The family is holding a function later tonight, in one of the nearby cities. Sayaka herself will be there. I'd love to take you there after we're done with the food. I want to hear about your mission. We can chat, and I can show you my room."

For a moment, Ryouko found herself staring into the other girl's limpid green eyes.

"Excuse me!"

Appearing out of nowhere, Patricia rudely shoved her way in between the two of them, so that Ryouko abruptly found herself looking into Patricia's pale-blue eyes instead.

"Sorry to interrupt," Patricia said, apologizing belatedly to Azusa. "But Shizuki-san here has a critical appointment that she has clearly *completely forgotten*."

Patricia gave Ryouko an accusatory look, but also sent a telepathic message:

Just play along.

"What?" Ryouko asked, too confused to understand fast enough. Fortunately, that fit exactly with her assigned role.

How the hell is it possible to forget an appointment? she protested, as Patricia dragged her toward the exit. *I mean we have TacComps!*

The other girl just ignored her, continuing to pull her out the door. Just as Ryouko was about to protest again, this time out loud, Patricia turned to look at her, putting a finger to her lips, signaling silence.

So Ryouko stayed quiet as Patricia half-dragged, half-walked her out of the restaurant, around the corner, down an alley, and into a small alcove, barely giving the two of them enough time to get their winter clothing back from the serverbot.

There, this should be isolated enough, Patricia thought, looking back out at the sky. *Can never be too paranoid about these things.*

Can you tell me what that was about? Ryouko asked, working her way back into her thick jacket. *All of that was a bit rude, if I may say so.*

Patricia turned to look at her, and Ryouko could see a smirk travel across her face, only partly suppressed.

"I'd forgotten what it's like to be so innocent," Patricia said, smiling. "Don't you know a seduction attempt when you see one?"

Ryouko blinked, making a confused face.

"What?"

"A seduction attempt," Patricia repeated, continuing to give Ryouko an amused look. "Where an unusually good-looking girl approaches you dressed revealingly, acts friendly, and asks you to go visit her room. Come on."

Ryouko narrowed her eyes, the shadow of the building falling lightly over her face.

“Are you sure? Maybe she was just being friendly.”

Patricia shook her head.

“Trust me, she wasn’t. Take the word of your elder. That was a determined attempt to, uh, get down the skirts of someone too young to know what was going on, if you’ll pardon me. Seems like the Shizuki family is getting serious about pulling you in. A sixth cousin marriage would be the just the thing.”

Ryouko looked down for a moment. It didn’t…

She shook her head.

“Aren’t you being too paranoid?” she asked. “Maybe she just wanted to hit on me.”

It felt weird saying the words, as if the very concept of someone “hitting” on her was too strange.

“No,” Patricia said, shaking her head again, then pinning her with a look. “It’s too much of a coincidence. The Hero of Orpheus is a hot commodity right now. And with your family background, a Shizuki girl wandering into a bar dressed to entice going after you can’t be anything else. Not every suitor is going to send you a nice monographed letter. For all we know, Shizuki Sayaka sent the girl herself.”

Ryouko frowned, feeling strange. She didn’t like thinking ill of people on so little evidence, but Patricia just seemed so *sure*.

“Honestly, it isn’t really my business,” Patricia continued. “But Kyouko wants me to help keep them away from you, especially now that you might have something of your own going on.”

In Ryouko’s mind’s eye, a message twirled, having just arrived. A follow-up from Azusa telling her where the “function” was, and telling her she should still go.

A moment later, Ryouko sent a message demurring, saying something had come up. It wasn’t as if she really liked parties, anyway.

“Do people really do things like that?” Ryouko asked, looking up.

“It’s a cutthroat world, way more than it should be,” Patricia said. “Trust me, if the von Rohr family thought they could get away with it, they’d try to talk me into doing the same to you, right now. Not every matriarchy is like that, but many are.”

Patricia turned away, facing the grey sky again, and Ryouko thought the other girl looked bothered.

She sighed. It didn’t feel like the best time to ask, but she felt she had to, eventually. Besides, she wanted to talk about something else.

“Alright, I’ll listen to you,” Ryouko said, letting it go. “But on a different subject, how is Kishida-san doing? I heard she, uh, lost her body.”

Patricia turned, a little quickly, taken aback.

“You heard about that?” she asked. “She’s doing okay. New body and all that, so it takes some adjusting to.”

Patricia seemed unnerved, and for a moment the two of them met eyes. Finally, just as Ryouko

was about to change topics again, Patricia spoke without prompting, looking away.

“The truth is, she isn’t doing that well,” she said, voice hushed. “She seemed alright when I saw her before the bodyloss, but she really isn’t taking the breakup well. I think she really expected that Kyouko would show up if she got seriously injured, but Kyouko didn’t. Now they’re holding her back for psych reasons. I visited her. She isn’t doing too well. I—”

Patricia took a breath.

“They—Asaka said, and Kyouko too, that I made mistakes, in my command. That I hadn’t executed well. Something like that.”

The burst of words surprised Ryouko, who really hadn’t expected more than a “she’s fine, thanks for asking”.

“I told Kyouko she *had* to visit,” Patricia said, voice starting to rise into anger. “But she wouldn’t do it, even though I know she wants to. Damn stubborn pride, I guess, or something. Of course, she thinks since she’s an Ancient she knows better than someone like me. I guess maybe she does. If I hadn’t—I mean, she—”

Patricia stopped abruptly, still in mid-gesture with her hands held out in front of her and her ponytail hanging down over her shoulder. She seemed to take a breath and calm a little.

“I’m sorry,” she said, standing up straight again and looking at Ryouko. “I’m acting crazy. I needed to get that off my chest. I—I don’t know. It hasn’t been a good couple of days for me. I’m going back to Earth, to see if maybe I can work myself into the telecluster, and Asaka has been—my damn family is butting in on my life again. What does it matter if—”

Patricia shook her head at herself.

“Whatever, I’m not even half a century old, so it’s alright if I embarrass myself a little, but before I make this any worse, let me get this over with.”

Watching the other girl with her shoulders slumped, Ryouko had the unsettling feeling that she was supposed to be saying or doing anything, but…she had no idea what.

Then the moment passed and, taking another breath, Patricia reached into one of the pockets on her jacket.

I don’t really know how to ask this, Patricia said. *But I want to do a deeper genetic analysis on you. The sample I got from you last time didn’t… well, I want to do a broader sample of your somatic cells. Sometimes different parts of the body can have different genetics.*

Ryouko stared for a moment, then crinkled her forehead.

What do you mean? What’s wrong with my genes? Does this have anything to do with the six-sigma thing?

Genetic disease was supposed to be impossible now, but—

There’s nothing wrong with you, Patricia said. *I'm just thinking something might be weird. This is just a weird hobby of mine, since I’m a scientist. If you don’t want to, that’s perfectly alright—*

No, it’s fine, Ryouko said. *What will it take to do this analysis?*

A nanite microinjection, to gather samples. Like I said, if it bothers you, you don’t have to.

Ryouko mulled over the question. Injecting nanites did seem a little—

I think you should do it, Clarisse thought, interjecting her opinion unexpectedly.

What? Why? Ryouko thought back.

I just think it'd be interesting to see what she finds, Clarisse thought. *I'm also a little curious about what I'm built out of.*

Ryouko thought for a moment longer, then nodded in assent.

"Alright," she said out loud. "I'm probably being way too trusting, though."

Patricia smiled, then stepped forward, touching the side of Ryouko's neck, holding an injection patch to the side for a few moments.

That should be it, Patricia thought. *I'll try to catch you after the ceremonies to collect them back.*

The two girls looked at each other for a moment, without much to say.

"Why don't we go take a walk around the town?" Patricia suggested finally. "I should give you some advice. It will be better than anything Kyouko would tell you, anyway."

"I suppose," Ryouko said.

Tomoe Mami peered down on the crowd from her podium, resplendent in her full dress uniform, or so she hoped.

Holding a service in Erwynmark's hometown was an extravagance. He had even said as much, when he requested it in his will, stating "as a selfish request" that if he must die, he could at least give his mother somewhere to visit, since he hadn't given her any grandchildren. It was typical of him.

Preparing the venue, assembling the dignitaries—all of those would have been costly enough even in a more customary location, such as the new flagship of the fleet, the Zhukov, or in St. Petersburg. Even after all their efforts, the structures that now dotted the town cemetery couldn't really compare to the majesty of deep space, or to the soaring arches and statues that composed Memorial Tower, the works of man rising defiantly into the sky.

It didn't have to, she thought. The bare-branched alien trees, the snowy graveyard filled with those who had died in Erwynmark's first battle, seemed austere enough.

She couldn't resist glancing down at her arm, just for a moment. Everything was as it should have been, not even the slightest of ripples to give away that she wasn't really here, that this was only a holographic avatar. In the end, she supposed it didn't really matter, but she should have still appeared in person—if only she hadn't been so *busy*!

She had spent so long working over the words of the eulogy she was supposed to give, the one he had asked her to give. She had read the message he had left her, and found herself surprisingly teary-eyed. Another piece of her heart was going under the soil, and she wondered if there was any of it left. That was her flaw—that she came to see everyone she worked with as special, and then mourned them when they died, as they always seemed to.

She took a moment to steady herself, relying on Machina to hide it from the crowd, to continue the

illusion that always surrounded her existence. When she finally started to speak, it came as almost a surprise.

“There are many good people in this world. They are all around us, working the fields, the factories, the labs, the stars. They grow food, make tools, and explore new worlds. They are the lifeblood of civilization.”

She paused a moment, for effect.

“Akemi Homura, may she find peace, once told me about the meanings behind the MSY logo, the shooting star. It used to be said that one could make wishes upon shooting stars, that a wish made as one fell would come true. That is the obvious meaning, but the legend also contains a kernel of truth. For, you see, the trajectory of a magical girl’s life was once, centuries ago, to make a wish, burn bright in the sky, and then burn out, and the brighter she burned, the faster she fell.”

She had barely gotten the censors to approve that last sentence as it was, and she would never append the rest of what Homura had said, during a rare weak moment: that the shooting star was a symbol of the Goddess, resembling her true symbol and appearing on her ‘Grief Seed’, and that sometimes shooting stars were so bright, so powerful, that they crashed into the Earth below and changed all that was. Such ramblings she kept to herself, even from—*especially* from—Kyouko.

Even if, loathe as she was to admit it, she was beginning to wonder.

She continued:

“Roland Erwynmark was one of the bright stars. He aspired to be not just good, but good *and* great. He desired to be remembered, unlike most of us, who desire only to live, to continue to lead good and happy lives. In that sense, it is perhaps unsurprising that I am standing here reading his eulogy so soon. Bright stars are rare, and deserve celebration—but that does not mean we should not also mourn.”

She took a breath, both for dramatic effect and from a bit of legitimate emotion.

“When I first met Roland, I found him to be brash, impetuous, and altogether too aggressive. He had been freshly promoted after a series of victories on this very world. I expected experience to teach him a lesson, and while it did temper some of those qualities, I did not expect him to teach us a lesson, instead.”

She leaned on the podium.

“At my *advanced* age”—she paused, allowing the audience to chuckle a little—“I’ve always found it difficult to respect those much younger than me. I’ve always thought of him as a boy, even as he led fleets in campaigns without end, ended the Samsaran offensive, and destroyed the Saharan shipyard. Even now, though I know it’s unfair, I can’t stop remembering that fresh-faced officer I saw at the beginning of the war. I admit, it took me a while to appreciate his qualities. I sound like a parent, I know.”

Some laughter from the audience. She nodded respectfully at Erwynmark’s mother, seated in the front row. She closed her eyes for a moment, and an image flashed through her mind, of a pair of mourning parents, old and vulnerable, centuries ago, when she had given a similar eulogy.

But this was a different funeral, a different world, a different time, and no one was old anymore—on the outside, anyway.

“It takes a lot to gain my respect these days, but Roland thoroughly earned it, so much so that when he selected me to lead the recent defense of the Euphratic Sector, I took it as validation of

my own abilities. Thinking of him now, I remember all the times we planned together, in the Saharan Sector, and in the years since. I found his insight always valuable, and his words strangely inspiring."

Now Mami felt Erwynmark's mother giving her a strange look. Had she misspoken?

"In the end, we dimmer stars can only do our best to remember those such as Roland Erwynmark, who leave their mark on the world so brightly. I will miss him, and his leadership. Thank you."

Erwynmark's mother began to walk forward, and Mami headed for her seat on the stage, where her avatar would sit respectfully for the rest of the ceremony, while most of her consciousness worked on something else. As she walked over, though, she spotted her protégé, Shizuki Ryouko, seated in a place of honor in the audience.

She was frowning.

Decisions; Implications

Chapter Notes

This ends Volume Two. Yay!

Because the need has become too great now, I am actually going to delay work on Interlude II until I go back and retouch up chapters 1-5 (and maybe 6). Hopefully shouldn't take too long.

Also, check out the fancier html and classification symbols.

〈*In the following text,* 〈 〉 ① *indicates content redacted to those without security clearance. The number indicates the degree of security clearance required to access enclosed content.*〉

〈"One of the rarest category of mages, soul mages are among the most obscure of mage classes, spoken of only in whispers among the upper echelons of the *MSY*. Endowed by either wish or training with the ability to directly alter the properties of soul gems, and sometimes even the souls of mundane humans, these mages have historically commanded both fear and respect from their own kind, capable of both terrible abuses and amazingly useful feats, feats such as the transfer of despair between individuals, the detachment of souls from bodies, the placement of souls in suspension, amongst others."〉 ⑤

〈"Before the advent of the *MSY,* soul mages often had very short lifespans, ruthlessly eliminated by local girls fearful of their power. Those that survived learned to use their power to ensure their own survival, often growing extremely powerful. A disproportionate number lost their grip on sanity, each becoming just another of the insane mages that plagued the pre-*MSY* world."〉 ⑤

〈"Because of the fear and ostracism they often faced, *MSY* leadership took great pains to reduce the visibility of their soul mages, many of which could be legitimately reclassified into other mage classes. The kind of powers they wielded often had little use in the ordinary course of magical girl life, and those with particularly developed powers were quietly funnelled into roles where they might be of most use, such as the Soul Guard, the Black Heart, or Governmental Affairs. In later years, they were also extensively used by the *MHD* for their ability to keep the soul gems of heavily injured girls inert while their bodies were being repaired. Nowadays, by far the most common use of soul mages is the attachment of soul gems onto new, cloned bodies."〉 ⑤

〈"As a power class, soul mages are closely related to mind readers and mind controllers, as well as a variety of miscellaneous powers that exercise similar effects,

i.e. body switchers. Pure soul mages—those who received their power by wish—are extremely rare, and the majority of those with soul manipulation powers wield it as an offshoot of their own, related powers, after decades of development and training. Those who *are* pure soul mages, however, often take the reverse path, with equivalent amounts of work" 〉 ⑤

— "MSY *Classification Guide,"* excerpt.

〈 *In the following text,* 〈 〉 ① *indicates content redacted to those without security clearance. The number indicates the degree of security clearance required to access enclosed content.* 〉

〈 "The use of memory manipulation magic has been with the *MSY* since the beginning, and has been quietly controversial for just as long. A utility ability treasured by the most powerful of mind-mages, the ethical ramifications of its use were troubling to even the earliest members of the *MSY,* forming one of the earliest sources of discord within the leadership." 〉 ⑤

〈 "However, the practical power of such a skill was undeniable—inconvenient police investigations, bothersome government regulators, a non-contractee who had seen too much—all of it could be dealt with by what seemed to be a wave of a hand. Even better, a girl who was in the depths of despair over certain events might be induced to simply forget about it, often a life-saving opportunity." 〉 ⑤

〈 "These considerations led to the power being heavily regulated, officially requiring the approval of the Secret Executive Subcommittee on Black Operations for any instance of outright erasure. In practice, however, the rules were heavily bent, and the adjustment of memory was often used—even abused—by branches throughout the *MSY*—the *MHD,* Government Affairs, the Black Heart. The Executive Subcommittee was only involved for the most extreme of cases, involving the excision of large volumes of memory with significant importance to an individual's personality—a *'Reformatting',* in the terminology. The removal—or, more commonly, the adjustment—of a single, minor memory was often simply overlooked." 〉 ⑤

〈 "It must be said that in the case of magical girls, or of individuals who later go on to form a contract, a memory erasure is more accurately termed a memory *suppression.* While powerful dedicated telepaths could successfully excise a memory permanently from a non-contractee, contracted girls often display a disturbing tendency to recover memories thought long-sealed away. The successful sealing of memories in magical girls is an art form among advanced telepaths, and must be coupled with the isolation of patients from any reminder of the missing memory." 〉 ⑤

〈 "It is unclear why memories are so resistant to removal. It is speculated that a person's memories are an indelible part of the soul, and that in a magical girl, the destruction of the relevant neural pathways does not preclude the eventual restoration

of the synapses by the soul gem. Even in non-contractees, the permanent erasure of memories is difficult by magical means, and only specialized, trained telepaths are capable of doing so.”〉⑤

— “MSY *Power Guide,”* excerpt.

Stepping off the plane, Ryouko rubbed her cheek absently.

It’s probably not a good idea to touch it so much, Clarisse pointed out. *It might give you away, not to mention you might accidentally knock it off.*

Oh, right, sorry, she said, jerking her hand away, probably too aggressively.

The tiny metal cylinder attached to her cheek had been a gift from Mami, a miniature holoemitter capable of subtly reshaping her face so that she looked like someone else—someone who strongly resembled Shizuki Ryouko, perhaps, but who clearly looked different, and who anyone with a face scanner would be informed was a 14-year-old magical girl who might have reason to travel alone on a commercial scramjet. Initially, she had been afraid that no such girl would exist, but it turned out she was related to a bevy of them. Currently, she was traveling as a distant aunt she hadn’t known she had.

The point was so that she could travel incognito, of course, without being recognized by the media or her new fanbase. If finding someone suitable had truly been a problem, a false identity would have been fabricated from whole cloth and inserted into the Governance database. So Mami had assured her.

It diminished her faith in the integrity of Governance databases, but she had to admit it was clever, and even cool. She had spent part of the flight over from the Singaporean space elevator examining her appearance within the holographic entertainment console—she was sure the aunt had inherited better looks than she had.

She paused at the side of the walkway, trying to peer at her reflection in one of the windows.

You’re being too paranoid, Clarisse thought. *You look fine.*

They’re not going to recognize me, Ryouko thought. *It’s terrible, coming back to see them again, and I can’t even look like myself.*

It’ll only be for a while, Clarisse reassured. *They’ve been told what to expect. Come on, chin up. If you linger too long, people will start to suspect something is up.*

Ryouko nodded, and walked onward, taking a deep breath. She hadn’t said anything, but she was appreciative of how supportive Clarisse was being.

I turned down the sarcasm dial, Clarisse thought, demonstrating her ability to intercept Ryouko’s thoughts seemingly at will. *For better or worse, you’re still my host, and I have to take care of you.*

That’s surprisingly heartwarming, Ryouko thought. *Should I—*

Don’t worry about it.

Clarisse’s voice seemed to carry with it a trace of humor and a feeling of… well, warmth, which felt far more powerful than it usually did.

Are you manipulating my emotions? she thought, figuring that she needed to ask.

I'm just sharing some of mine. Did you know? We're programmed to bond to our hosts emotionally. So I'm like a little baseball-sized clone of you, with motherly feelings. Lots of oxytocin involved in this.

Ryouko looked down for a moment as she stepped onto one of the intra-airport transports, her luggage lifting itself into the vehicle behind her.

I'm not going to lie, she thought. *That got a little weird there. Does it bother—*

Yeah, I agree. It got weird. Let's change topics. Apparently, Governance is already assembling a production committee to make a movie about the wormhole mission. They're wondering if you'll consent to help out, especially the next time you're on Earth.

Ryouko sighed.

Do I have to? she pleaded.

They *can't make you, no,* Clarisse thought. *But others can. As I'm sure you remember, your current standing orders—*

'Cooperate with any Governance public relations or propaganda efforts that request your assistance.' Ryouko quoted. *'Conduct yourself in a dignified manner befitting a hero of humanity, and help to foster a sense of excitement in the public.'*

She put her head into the window next to her, forehead first. She wasn't looking forward to it.

It's not very 'dignified' to lean your head against the window like that. The other people on the transport are looking at you.

I thought I was on leave, Ryouko grumbled.

You're on extended *leave, in exchange for doing this. That was the deal.*

I don't recall agreeing to this 'deal'. As I recall, it was foisted on me.

Many would kill to be in your position, Clarisse reminded. *Besides, it won't be that bad. You'll be in a movie! You'll be played by a famous movie star! Think about it: your friends can watch—*

I don't want to think about it, she groaned.

Ryouko…

Ryouko finally sat back up, as the transport seemed to be approaching the waiting area.

Please don't use that tone of voice, she requested. *You remind me of mama, except you're using my voice, and that is deeply confusing to me.*

Then the transport doors opened, and Ryouko shuffled out the door along with the others.

She headed straight for the location where her family was waiting, locations marked on her internal map. They were waiting in a suitably discreet private room—it was not unheard of for members of the media to stalk family members of a famous individual.

Something occurred to her.

No, there's no need to introduce me to your family, Clarisse thought, again intercepting the thought. *At least not immediately. It's not like I'm your new lover.*

But you are *attached—*

It's okay. Really. I'd rather not. It'd be awkward.

Then Ryouko let the topic drop, because she was there.

She stood there for a moment as the door closed behind her, facing her parents, who were sitting on opposite sides of a long table, and her grandfather, who had also gotten leave, returning home much earlier than she had.

It's only been a couple of weeks, but—

Then, realizing she was safe, she turned off the disguise module.

"Mama!" she exclaimed, louder than she would have ever expected herself to, running forward to embrace the woman.

They hugged for a long moment, her mother running her hands through her hair.

"I missed you," her mother said. "You don't know how much I worried."

Ryouko nodded, without looking up, then released the hug.

She turned to her father, who just smiled and nodded, then patted her on the shoulder awkwardly.

She understood the gesture, though, and for a moment, just stood there, basking in the love, raising a hand to wipe at some moisture in her eyes.

It was something about their body language that dispelled the moment—something about the way her grandfather seemed to be grimacing slightly, something about the way her parents stood unusually far apart.

"Is—" she began, before realizing she didn't even know what she was asking.

Her mother's teary smile wavered, just a little.

Ryouko felt a sense of tensed anticipation seeming to come from Clarisse, and, despite the situation, sent a query. Maybe her TacComp knew.

I don't, Clarisse thought. *But something is wrong. I think you've noticed.*

Her mother looked down at her hands, blinking.

"We didn't want anyone to tell you, but there's no hiding it anymore. I guess you're old enough."

Ryouko met her eyes, then glanced around, at her father and grandfather, who looked suddenly grim.

Her mother sighed.

"We've divorced," she said.

It was amicable.

The words echoed in her mind, and it often had the past day. It bothered her deeply, for reasons she couldn't exactly pinpoint.

Why hadn't she seen it coming? In retrospect, it had been obvious. The arguments, the occasional bouts of hostility, the casual lack of romance—

No, that wasn't necessarily true. What was it Clarisse had said? Hindsight bias. It only seemed obvious because she was looking at it in retrospect. In the end, she had been the last to find out because that was what her parents had wanted. Ironic, that they could still work well together on something like that.

Or that was what she told herself, at least. It made her feel better, but the honest part of her knew she hadn't *wanted* to know, which had definitely played a factor in things.

So, instead of going back to the home she remembered, the view of the city she remembered, the bed she remembered, she had found herself in her father's new apartment, staying in the cramped guest room. The plan had been for her to spend most time on Earth at her mother's, but her grandfather was already there, and the crowded conditions of Mitakihara didn't allow for extra space for those who were only home rarely—or else one of her parents could have just kept the old flat.

So her father's apartment it was, and despite the obvious attempts he had made to spruce the place up, it was still clearly a bachelor pad. She might have expected better from someone over a century, but she didn't really. Her parents had colluded well enough to have the things she had left at home, including her clothes, ready and waiting for her, which she did appreciate.

It felt like her world had broken up, and she would have to rebuild it, but that was what she had wanted, wasn't it?

Clarisse had known, of course—not about the divorce, but about the marital acrimony. She had a hard time blaming her. After all, what could she have—

"Ryouko!"

Ryouko shook herself out of her reverie and looked up. Her father was peering down at her from outside the vehicle, a touch of concern on his face.

"We're here," he said, gently.

He extended his hand to her, an unheard-of gesture for him, enough to unnerve Ryouko slightly.

Nonetheless, she took his hand, allowing him to help her out of the vehicle.

She took a moment to peer upward, at the steel, glass, and stone edifice of Prometheus Research Center. It glimmered in the sunlight.

"Ryouko-chan, are you all right?"

"I'm fine, papa," she said, smiling reassuringly. "Come on, let's go."

She led the way into the facility, whose door was already open, knowing she couldn't stay in front for long, since she didn't have access to a map of the building.

Her father caught up with her a moment later. For a while, she let him lead her.

She felt guilty; here she was, set to attend Asami's revival—resurrection?—and she found herself

consumed by thoughts of her parents, rather than worrying about the girl whose event this was.

Strictly speaking, the scientists and psychiatrists had no evidence about what had helped precipitate Asami's sudden soul gem collapse. They only had an educated guess.

Ryouko had a bit more than that, even if she had chosen not to share it with anyone. She knew the importance of being there when they revived Asami's body.

But what would she say? What would she do? She had no idea—she only knew it would be emotional.

"Ryouko-chan," her father said, again interrupting her reverie. "You know it's not easy for me to say this, but I'm sorry things had to be like this. I really am."

"It's alright," she mumbled. She didn't want to talk about it, not then.

"Ryouko-chan—"

"I said it's alright!" she snapped, much sharper than she had intended to.

She found herself looking her father in the eye. They had stopped in the middle of a corridor. Thankfully, there was no one around them at the moment.

"I—not right now, papa. I'm sorry."

They stood there for a moment, and then her father turned away, and started walking again.

"Alright," he said.

They entered a long hallway, flanked on both sides by nondescript sliding doors. Small groups of technicians hurried to and fro.

"This is part of the area where we perform revivals-from-gem—RFG, in the lingo," her father narrated airily. "Most girls have their spare bodies stored closer to where they happen to be at the front, and revivals are performed at colonial facilities, or starships. However, many have secondary backups here, and when circumstances permit the time, the gems are often shipped back here, since we have superior facilities. In the case of your, uh, friend, her clone simply wasn't fully grown by the time she suffered, er, bodyloss, so it was still growing. We were able to, well, accelerate its growth."

Ryouko noticed her father's hesitation near the end of his narration, but focused on only one aspect of it—it abruptly occurred to her to wonder if her parents knew what kind of friend Asami was, or might be.

Are they told personal details like this about the people they're reviving? she wondered.

Another thing she had to worry about.

They paused in front of one of the sliding doors, her father looking at her. He seemed worried.

"At this point, the procedure is almost finished," he said, swallowing. "There have been no significant anomalies noted in the neural architecture, and she has been allowed to reach a sleep-like state."

She nodded, slowly, he nodded back, and they entered the room.

Relative to her expectations, the room was simple—other than the bevy of equipment that

characterized a standard medical examination room, there was nothing really of note. She supposed any serious work might already have been done elsewhere.

Well, nothing of note about the physical room, of course. In terms of people, there was plenty to look at: Asami's new body, covered by a white sheet for modesty, her mother, who exchanged nods coolly with her father, a male technician, a magical girl she didn't recognize standing in the back, Joanne Valentin, and, of all people, Atsuko Arisu.

"I am here to observe," Valentin commented blandly, at Shizuki Kuma's questioning look.

"Come on, of course I'd show up for this," Arisu said, noting Ryouko's dismay. "Besides, Asami-chan's designated psychiatrist agreed to transfer her case over to me, so I can take care of both of you. Lots of synergy there."

Ryouko swallowed, nodding. It was entirely reasonable, of course, but she hadn't counted on such an… audience.

Then she realized she didn't even know what she was supposed to be doing.

"Just stand by," her mother said, seeming to anticipate her question, hunching over Asami. "There's a process to the wake-up. We need to run some tests. All that's really necessary is for you to be standing over her when she wakes. The good news is, she's Magi Cæli, so we don't have to explain anything, and she'll have simulation experience."

Her mother paused, glancing at the technician behind her, who was deeply engrossed in the monitor in front of him, and even had a wire running from the device to one of his wrist uplink ports—wired connections were rare outside of the most delicate of tasks.

The technician's head shifted slightly, turning to look at Nakase, who nodded.

She lifted the front of Asami's sheet, peered underneath, and seemed to fiddle with something, probably one of the many leads running to and from Asami. Ryouko felt a twinge of discomfort, but forced it to pass—her parents probably dealt with so many of these cases that it was just another body to them. She hoped, anyway.

Her mother gave the technician a thumbs-up, and the man turned back to his monitor. Then Nakase waved Ryouko forward.

She stepped forward only tentatively, so her mother grabbed her hand and led her over to the front of the bed.

Ryouko looked down, at Asami's head resting on the provided pillow. Laying there, default shoulder-length hair spread out over her collarbones, bulky black spinal interface cable gripping the back of her neck, she looked strangely small, and vulnerable.

She met her mother's eye, then not sure what else to do, knelt down, so that she was eye-level with the peacefully-sleeping Asami.

"Be careful," her mother whispered in her ear. "Her last memory will be of being ejected into space. She might not wake up calmly. Don't worry, though; her TacComp will keep her from overreacting too much."

"Is everything green?" her mother asked, standing up before Ryouko had a chance to ask for details.

"Yes, I'm not sensing any issues," the magical girl standing in the back intoned. Though she

didn't look up, Ryouko was surprised—she had no idea why the girl was here.

"My monitors are green," the male technician said.

"Then do it," her mother said.

For a long moment, nothing seemed to be happening—but then Asami stirred, turning her head slightly, her lips opening slightly to suck in a breath.

Then the girl's eyes snapped open, and she jerked forward slightly off the bed, faster than Ryouko could think to respond.

Ryouko's mother was already there to catch her, apparently long practiced at this sort of thing.

"Easy, easy," she said. "It's alright."

Ryouko was there a moment later, just in time to see a wave of confusion pass over Asami's face, as her TacComp temporarily paralyzed her muscles. A moment later, Asami relaxed, apparently having processed the situation.

Then she spotted Ryouko.

"Ryouko-chan?" she asked, incredulous, trying to sit up. "How—"

"It's okay," Ryouko said, grabbing the girl's bare shoulders. A part of her noted sardonically that the modesty sheet was clinging tightly to Asami—it was probably programmed to.

"It's alright. I'm here for you," she repeated, a moment later.

The reassurance fell from her lips far more smoothly than she would have ever given herself credit for, but what surprised her more was how much she meant it. In this time of turmoil, seeing Asami's familiar face meant more to her than she would have ever expected.

Asami's trembling eyes met hers.

"You're supposed to be dead," she said.

Ryouko tried to stabilize herself.

"Reports of my death—" she began.

She never finished the quip, though, because she was abruptly struck by a wave of unexpected mirth, one that she was helpless to stop, so that she found herself laughing, clinging to Asami's slender body like the only rock in a river threatening to wash her away.

"It's okay, Kuroi-san," she heard Arisu say behind her. "Leave them alone for now."

"Are—are you alright?" she heard Asami ask, understandably confused.

Yes, Ryouko thought. The past day, she had felt her previous life, the one she had almost literally wished *not* to have, crumbling away, and in its place, she had—what? Uncertainty, a life where she was jerked back and forth, accomplishing great things, yet feeling no agency.

She had wished to find her place in the universe—she had imagined that there would be an actual, tangible *place,* that she would not be left adrift, as she increasingly felt. Perhaps she wasn't there yet; perhaps she was supposed to *find* this place, and she simply hadn't yet, but at the moment she wanted something she could count on.

She had thought that her home would always be there, but as her parents had so signally demonstrated to her, having left, she could never go back. She had to find something new.

And here was something new, something seeking desperately to tie itself to her. She could feel it within her now: she would reciprocate—she *wanted* to, if it saved her from floating alone in the wide, wide world.

"Ryouko-chan?" Asami asked again.

"I missed you," Ryouko said.

Somehow Ryouko had forgotten about Asami's family, who were certainly interested in seeing their daughter again, after she had a suffered an unspecified "critically-serious" injury, one that necessitated significant organ regeneration. Only secrecy about the cloning program had kept the family from seeing her as she woke.

Ryouko had forgotten, which meant she was surprised when, a while later, after Asami had stood up, dressed, and been run through a standard set of tests, the two of them had been hustled out the door and down through the building to a family waiting area. Once Ryouko had realized where they were going, she considered staying away, but Asami's death grip on her hand convinced her to stick around.

Asami's entire immediate family had turned up for the occasion, which meant both parents, her 60-year-old brother, and her much younger 11-year-old brother. As Ryouko's mother explained that the "procedure" had gone well, and that Asami was up and about, the relief in the room was palpable—as was the sense of surprise at *Shizuki Ryouko* herself showing up, almost as if she had walked straight out of their newsfeeds.

Ryouko felt like an interloper, as Asami's parents and siblings fussed over her, commenting on her hair and inspecting her skin carefully, for all the world as if they would find a healing surgical wound if they just looked carefully enough. They couldn't avoid casting occasional glances at Ryouko, though, and surely they wondered what the meaning was of Asami clinging to Ryouko on the way in. Asami's younger brother, for his part, seemed vaguely awestruck by Ryouko's presence, taking long staring looks. Her older brother merely glanced at her appraisingly.

Ryouko might have known herself to be oblivious, but even she could tell what assumptions might have been made, and what questions might be asked when Asami was taken home. Indeed, she could tell from her own mother's look that she would get some questioning of her own.

She sighed.

"…and now my brothers are more protective than ever. *Aniki* keeps offering to use 'his connections' to keep me at home, and my parents won't stop feeding me. They keep saying the food will help me heal, and even though I keep saying my internal diagnostics check out, they won't believe me."

They were sitting at a table at one of the cafes near Ryouko's former school. She had arranged for Chiaki, Ruiko, and Simona to meet them here, but they were late. Ryouko was not surprised—Ruiko always made everyone else late—but the later they were, the more time she had to spend here being stared at by pedestrians. It was strangely unnerving, but she didn't feel right using the face distortion device Mami had given her.

I swear, if a picture of Asami-chan and I shows up in one of those celebrity forums—

Ugh, whatever.

It wasn't all bad. The delay did give her some time to catch up with Asami.

"I can't say I've had the same experience," Ryouko commented, stabbing at her slice of strawberry cream cake with a fork. "My parents are too scientifically-minded. And my grandfather —I don't know what to do about him. He's been in such a funk. He tries to be normal around me, but you can tell he's suffering."

Asami glanced downward at her hands, jewel-like irises briefly refracting the sunlight.

"Oh, right, I'm sorry about that," she said. "I'm sorry… about everything."

"I think I'm okay," Ryouko said, more or less truthfully. "I'm more concerned about you. Is the new—"

"I'm fine," Asami said, perhaps a bit too quickly. "We had training for this in the MC. It's weird sometimes, thinking that this isn't the body I was born with, but it's okay, I guess. Although, technically they did manage to recover some parts of my body after the battle and reconnect them. I wish they hadn't told me that."

Ryouko, too, looked down, silent for a moment.

"You know, my parents were going to divorce too," Asami said, quietly. "I don't regret what I did, but sometimes ta-kun—my kid brother looks at me like an alien. Sometimes, I wish I had somehow erased his memory too. It might make things easier. He idolizes you, though."

The last sentence was such a non-sequitur that it took a moment for Ryouko to catch the meaning.

"What?" she asked, looking up.

"Oh, yeah," Asami said, looking down at the cup of warm tea she was cradling in her hands. "He asked me to introduce him to you, which is a little bolder than I honestly would have expected. I don't think he… quite understands the situation."

Ryouko watched Asami for a moment, unsure what to say.

"Ryouko-chan," Asami said, still looking down. "You might have guessed, or they might have told you, but I didn't have to lose my body. One of the medevacs recovered the body, and it was still mostly intact. But when they announced that you were dead, I… I just couldn't… my gem destabilized, and the ship ejected my body for my own safety. I thought…"

A chill crept up Ryouko's spine. Asami wasn't the type to talk about the Medevac recovering "the body," or to state that it had been "mostly intact". She remembered what it had been like, inside the tank, in her vision.

A moment later, Asami shuddered.

"I thought you were dead. And then I realized, I don't want to be out there. It's terrible. But where was I supposed to go? I can't stand my family anymore. I keep remembering the way my parents fought, and I can't stand how much they love each other now. Isn't it crazy? It's exactly what I wished for, but it scares me. I wanted to be with you, but then…"

Go hug her! Clarisse ordered, surprising Ryouko out her frozen state of shock.

What?

Do it!

Without really knowing what she was doing, she jumped up, hovered awkwardly for a moment, before deciding to hunch over and embrace Asami from behind. A part of her noticed that Asami was wearing something scented with vanillin.

"I don't want to go back," Asami said, starting to openly cry. "I don't want *you* to go back. Why do we have to do this? The world—"

"It's alright," Ryouko said, stroking Asami's hand and incidentally checking her soul gem level. "I—"

She thought for a long moment, then closed her eyes, wrenching at some internal lever with a mental effort that was almost palpable, dragging the structure of her mind into a new configuration. She could feel her worldview shifting, just a little, and for a moment it almost disturbed her.

Then she opened her eyes again.

"I'll be there for you," she finished. "What you asked me before: the answer is yes. I'll be your girlfriend. Come on, cheer up."

She took a moment to rub her head against Asami's, watching the tendrils of her hair twitch, then wrap themselves around Asami's, wondering what the hell she had gotten herself into.

I have to say this disturbs me too, Clarisse thought, shocked and confused. *I did not expect this. It doesn't fit with my models of your behavior, for you to be so precipitate. Something is—*

I don't know what to think either, she thought back. *But I thought…*

"Ryouko-chan?" Asami said shakily.

"Yes?" Ryouko asked.

"I—I—your friends—"

Ryouko looked up, the world snapping instantly back into focus.

Indeed, her friends were here, Ruiko looking off to one side, Chiaki looking deeply amused, and Simona looking shocked.

No, not shocked…

"When you said you were bringing a friend, I didn't think…" Simona began.

"Nakihara Asami," Ryouko said, standing up to make the formal introduction, something that was rarely done nowadays, in the age of nomenclators.

There was a round of light bowing, and then Ryouko's school friends took the additional seats around the table, a fifth chair wheeling itself over for Simona.

"Oh, sorry, I'll be in the bathroom," Simona said, excusing herself.

"Ryouko-chan has said so much about you," Chiaki said, a smooth lie, given that Ryouko had told her practically nothing about Asami.

“Oh, uh, really?” Asami asked, innocently. She was clearly a little shook up, but at least the tears had been cleaned away quickly and—oh God, was she blushing?

“What’s it like, in the military?” Ruiko asked, leaning forward.

“Oh, it’s, uh, alright, I guess,” Asami said. “I’m in the, uh, space corps, so things are a little different for me. The suits look a little silly when you’re wearing them, but the scenery is great.”

Ryouko watched her out of the corner of her eye.

If you don’t want to talk about it, I’ll change the topic, she thought to Asami.

I think I’m okay, Asami responded, with a trace of uncertainty.

“What rank are you?” Ruiko asked. “I hear Ryouko is a Captain now.”

“I think *everyone* has heard that,” Chiaki said, a little reproachfully. “Asami is probably still a Second Lieutenant. I’m guessing you don’t get promoted this early unless you save the world or something.”

Ryouko smiled sheepishly at the obvious reference.

“Yeah, that seems to be true.”

“How was it?” Chiaki asked, waving her hand vaguely. “You know, the mission.”

For a moment, Ryouko remembered all that had happened, the events flashing before her eyes. Meeting Clarisse, Eva dying in front her, the sniper she had killed, Misa sacrificing herself, her visions—

“It was pretty harrowing,” she said, “but I got to meet some interesting people.”

Chiaki nodded. Ryouko and Asami shared a look, and they didn’t need some mystical “couple’s connection” to understand each other: there were some things that just couldn’t be conveyed, even if they wanted to. Was this what it was like, coming home, talking about things that seemed so mundane in comparison?

“They might be making a movie about it, apparently,” she added.

“Oh really?” Ruiko said. “How exciting!”

“Yeah I’m going to talk to them about it later,” Ryouko said.

Chiaki cleared her throat lightly, getting their attention.

“Look, Ryouko, I, uh, was sorry to hear about your grandmother, and your parents. I don’t know how to say this, but if you need a place to stay, I’ve talked with my parents—”

“No, it’s okay,” Ryouko interrupted. “It was amicable.”

She had, of course, informed Chiaki about her circumstances earlier. It was just like her, to go out of her way to try and cover for Ryouko, even if it was just in case.

There was a brief moment of silence, as all four of them contemplated the situation.

“Ruiko,” Chiaki said, “why don’t you go check in on Simona? She’s taking quite a while in there.

Check if something is wrong."

"Wrong?" Ruiko asked. "What could possibly—"

The girl quailed under Chiaki's glare, then seemed to understand something, face dawning in comprehension.

"Ah right. I'll go make sure she's alright."

Ryouko watched her as she left.

"I was wondering about that," she said. "Sometimes Simona worries me. I feel like there's something going on with her. She didn't seem happy when I first contracted, and—"

"Don't worry about it, Ryouko-chan," Chiaki said, sighing. "Let me worry about what's happening with her. You just stay the way you are and worry about… wormholes or something."

"She seemed really unhappy for a while there," Asami mused out loud. "Do you know what her family situation is like? Maybe hearing about Ryouko's parents bothered her or something."

Chiaki gave Asami a strange look, then shook her head, chuckling slightly.

"Oh wow, uh, well to be honest I've never heard anything about her parents. But, as I said, let's not worry about it."

Ryouko thought about what Simona had told her once, that she hated how her parents fought. At the time, Ryouko hadn't thought the comment to be particularly relevant to her own parents, but now, she supposed, they had something in common.

She supposed it was better that she not bring it up, however.

"Anyway," Chiaki said. "I've taken the liberty of doing a little planning for the rest of the day."

The girl reached into her bag, withdrawing one of those old-fashioned little handheld work tablets she was so fond of.

"As you know, we've taken the rest of the day off to be with you today," Chiaki said, pulling up a calendar on the tablet. "But I thought it might be fun to pay a visit to the school. They put your picture on the wall, with the other magical girls, and now that you're such a *big deal,* the principal wants to do some kind of event in your honor. Even told me to tell you about it. Now, personally, I know you'd hate that kind of thing, but you know what a stupidly big deal the local schools make out of it. Personally, I think he just wants to take Fukuzawa Anko Academy down a notch."

It occurred to Ryouko that Chiaki's tablet *did* have its uses, for exactly this kind of group planning, but also that it would be useless in the military, where they could have summoned all sorts of virtual planning interfaces and shared workspaces that would work just as well. She doubted it would matter to Chiaki, though; the girl had a bit of an artist's soul, and would probably make some sentimental argument about needing to hold something physical in her hands.

"Fukuzawa Anko?" Asami asked. "Wasn't that just another name for Sakura Kyouko?"

"Yeah, they decided to keep the name for historical reasons," Ryouko explained. "But anyway, the last thing I want is to have to give some sort of speech in front of the whole school. Oh Goddess, that'd be terrible."

"Goddess?" Chiaki echoed, surprised.

“Uh—”

“Well, I’m sure you can just say you’re busy or something. But I still think a school visit would be nice. Afterward, I figured we could go eat somewhere for dinner, maybe come back here. When I heard you were coming back, I was thinking we’d do another sleepover at your place, but that seems like it’d be inconvenient now. I think my parents would be okay with doing it, though.”

Ryouko blinked at the torrent of words from the usually stoic Chiaki, wondering what had gotten into her.

“Well, actually,” Ryouko said, prompted by a reminder from Clarisse, “why don’t we go somewhere a bit more upscale for dinner. I’ve got a lot of Allocs now, and I don’t know how to spend it all. It’ll be my treat.”

Chiaki twisted her lip slightly, considering it.

“Okay, I don’t see why not. Are you coming, Nakihara-san? I don’t want to force you if you have anything planned—”

“No, no, sure, I’ll come,” Asami said, waving her hands. “I’d be glad to. And you can call me, uh, Asami-chan.”

“Sure, Asami-chan,” Chiaki repeated. “I’m glad you’re coming. I want to see what kind of girl could win Ryouko-chan’s heart like that.”

It was said so matter-of-factly that it took a moment for Ryouko and Asami, who had managed to forget that topic entirely, to process what she had said. Asami blushed instantly beet-red, which had the effect of forcing Ryouko to keep *her* composure under control, since, well, she felt one of them had to.

“I, well, uh,” she began, not exactly coherently, but then she spotted rescue, in the form of Ruiko and Simona reappearing from the restroom.

“Apparently, her parents called,” Ruiko said, strangely quiet.

Then the girl glanced at their faces.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“Everything is fine,” Chiaki said. “Mostly.”

Ryouko was sure something wasn’t “fine,” at least when it came to Simona, but, as Chiaki had insisted, she tried not to worry about it. Other than that, the rest of the day was actually quite enjoyable. It was soothing, in a way, to lose herself in the kinds of civilian concerns she had disparaged as so mundane. They had dodged their way through the school hallways mid-class, mostly avoiding the crowd of celebrity gawkers which would have inevitably developed otherwise. Ryouko had no desire to mingle with a crowd of acquaintances who were suddenly fascinated by her life story, and Chiaki had made sure it wouldn’t happen. They even managed to successfully dodge any encounters with the school principal.

There was one odd occurrence that night, though, which stuck in Ryouko’s mind for a while. She had asked Clarisse for advice on a suitable restaurant, and the device had performed quite well, choosing a restaurant that, as it turned out, catered heavily to the mages of the *MSY* corridor. Yes, the food was a bit expensive and, in Ryouko’s mind, pointlessly elaborate, but it seemed the restaurant was used to catering to minor and major celebrities, and Ryouko was rapidly hustled

into a private booth. The clientèle of the restaurant admittedly turned their heads to look at her, but did not openly stare.

They did stare, however, when a certain Mitakiharan Incubator, which went by the nickname Kyubey, nonchalantly strode through the front door of the restaurant, passed a row of tables, and jumped onto Ryouko's lap. It was awkward, since only some of them could see it, and Simona seemed disturbed by its presence.

Kyubey claimed it was only there to visit her, but didn't Incubators always have ulterior motives?

It even stuck around for the sleepover afterwards, and it seemed, perhaps less than surprisingly, that Incubators were not good at catching hints. The alien made several off-color comments about irrational human emotions and how illogical same-sex relationships had been before reproduction was possible. That was sufficient to earn the beast an unceremonious ejection from the room, Ryouko herself doing the honors of picking it up by the forelimbs like a cat, dropping it outside the door, and locking the door behind her.

At the end of day, they were obliged to spread out throughout the flat to sleep. Some creative rearrangement of the modular furniture provided two extra sofas to sleep on, which still wasn't really enough to provide for five people. Ryouko and Asami could have simply ducked out, since they didn't *need* the sleep, nor were they likely to sleep a full night—the very concept seemed strangely alien now.

But, out of a sense of camaraderie, they tried, volunteering to use the floor. After some hesitation, Asami cuddled up against her, which she accepted, taking the opportunity to intertwine their hair again. A heart-warming gesture, yes, but she also secretly found it amusing.

It was surprisingly pleasant.

Are you sure I should be here? Asami relayed, asking the question for what must have been the twentieth time.

I told you not to worry about it, Ryouko insisted. *I didn't want to be here alone.*

I guess, Asami said, looking around nervously, at Ryouko's parents seated nearby, and at the woman giving an oration on the podium. A former comrade-in-arms, the woman had apparently fought together with her grandmother for years.

Ryouko understood Asami's discomfort, though; in her shoes, she would have also found it awkward to attend a funeral for a person she didn't know. But, Ryouko wanted company, and she felt she could be a little unreasonable.

It was a small, intimate affair, held in a local funeral home which catered primarily to the families of military personnel—as all such funeral homes pretty much had to, nowadays. There were just over a dozen people in attendance—mostly immediate family, some military friends who happened to be in the area, and a few of the other "old folks" that had known her grandmother in life, even if only barely. Ryouko had not been sure her father would attend, given the circumstances, but he was here, along with both of *his* parents. She supposed it made sense; he had lived with his mother-in-law for longer than Ryouko had been alive, after all, and had never been on particularly bad terms with her—or at least, not any worse than the terms Nakase had had with her. Plus, his parents had been on positively great terms with Nakase's parents; her grandfather had made a habit of staying over, every few months or so.

It was all so painfully *amicable.*

There were, however, two anomalies on the guest list.

Kuroi Kana was probably the easiest to explain. Kana was, after all, directly related to *Kuroi* Abe and had vouched her intention to reconnect with this branch of the family. Ryouko also supposed that it probably didn't hurt for Kana to try and get on her good side, though she got the impression the matriarch wouldn't be so crass as to try and influence her at a *funeral.*

Atsuko Arisu was a little tougher to explain. She was supposedly Ryouko's psychiatrist, of course, but the situation didn't exactly seem to warrant—

A memory struck her, interrupting her train of thought. Weeks ago, just before she had left, before, there had been another party, for her departure, and Arisu had appeared, even when there had seemed no need to. She had thought about it, before she had been interrupted by arrival of Kuroi Nana.

It took her a moment to realize that the memory had been inserted by Clarisse. At the time, they had considered the possibility that—

Do you really think she's related to me somehow? she thought, asking Clarisse.

She keeps turning up at these family functions, Clarisse thought. *And, come to think of it, you've never asked your parents if they know who she is. They've never seemed bothered by her presence.*

It couldn't be that simple, could it?

It couldn't hurt to ask.

Ryouko glanced at her mother, seated at her left, casually three spaces away from Ryouko's father, seated on the other side of Asami. She bit her lip in frustration. She couldn't ask out loud, not in the middle of a funeral oration, and as a civilian, her mother couldn't simply receive relayed thoughts—it depended on her mother checking her messages explicitly, something she doubted her mother would do at the moment. She would just have to wait politely.

Unless…

She turned her head again, craning her neck so she could see Kuroi Nana, seated to her mother's left. The two women seemed incongruous sitting side-by-side, one merely a teenager and the other clearly older, but they had identical postures, heads bowed in either memory or thought.

Ryouko spent a moment mulling over whether to call the woman "Nana-san" or "Nana" or what, before using telepathy to ask:

Auntie, I'm sorry to bother you, but do you know why that woman in the back is here? Atsuko Arisu.

The girl looked up, first at her, then at the back of the room, where Arisu was seated.

Oh, that's right; it's not officially mentioned, Nana thought. *Well, she's my mother's grandmother. Distant relative for you, but she has every reason to be here.*

Ryouko didn't have to fake the astonishment that crossed her face.

Our family tree is pretty obscured, Nana thought. *I've never really been sure why myself. I gather it has something to do with Unification War history. If it bothers you, take it up with the Matriarch herself. She's here, after all.*

Nana tilted her head, gesturing at the matriarch two seats to her left, then turned back to face the speaker. Ryouko's grandfather was seated between Nana and Kana, and despite all that happened to the family over the years, the two of them seemed to be doing a decent job of comforting him—he had broken down a bit earlier.

Ryouko was left at a bit of a loss.

I guess that's one question answered, Clarisse thought.

How can she be related to me and still be my psychiatrist? Ryouko asked. *Isn't that some sort of conflict of interest?*

Not if the system doesn't know about it, I suppose, Clarisse responded.

Why didn't she tell *me?* Ryouko asked.

She probably didn't think it was that important, Clarisse thought. *Besides, you were bound to eventually find out. Seems reasonable enough.*

In truth, Ryouko was a bit incensed, but didn't know what she was supposed to say. She thought about asking Kana or Arisu directly, but it seemed…well, an inappropriate moment.

Is something wrong? Asami asked, looking at her curiously.

Ah, nothing, Ryouko thought, since she had no idea how to explain it. *Just some family conversation.*

Your family has so many magical girls in it, Asami thought. *It's kind of amazing.*

Yeah, I guess.

Amazing is one way to describe it, she thought.

"I met her a few decades into my practice," Kuroi Abe said, voice strong and surprisingly firm, leaning slightly over the podium. "This was back when clinical immortality was still a bit new, and required occasional maintenance, especially for the older folks. She came in one day—I remember being impressed by the way she carried herself, the exotic curve of her back. She looked a bit older than most people you meet—her systems needed retuning, and she was due for an upgrade anyway. I was no longer a young man, but I remember thinking, as we flirted, that she was old enough to be my mother, and I was crazy to consider the possibility."

"She quit being my patient, of course, since that really isn't alright, and we started dating. She told me about her life, about the War, and I remember the sense of tragedy that I felt—that I still feel. She'd lost friends to the war—lovers, even, and I had been her first try in a long time. I wondered what it was she saw about me."

"Sometimes we'd walk along the river, and she'd just stop and stare, far out at the water, and I would wonder what she was thinking about. She told me that she could never forget the past but, now that it was gone, she could try her best to make a new future. She wished that, with all her extra years of life, she might find happiness."

"And we were happy, for a time. My family was not exactly happy about our marriage, but I was long past caring. I remember our wedding, just the two of us, with no family anywhere—that she knew about, anyway—and then we had a honeymoon in Brazil, where her mother was from. She had never been there, and we spent a month touring the ruined rainforest. Her mother had lived in

the favelas there, long ago, her father a foreign aid worker, but other than that, her mother had refused to ever say anything about her past. I could tell that she wondered."

Here Abe took a deep breath, seeming to steady himself a little.

"I wish… I wish things had gone better after that, that circumstances and fate had not been so cruel to us. I wish that the past had not haunted her so. I do not begrudge her her choice to leave, but I am an old man now, and she was… all that I had. I can only try to move on, and see what my eternal life now has in store for me."

"Thank you."

After the eulogies had been given, they were given an opportunity to walk up to the coffin, to pay their respects. Her body had never been found, so it was purely symbolic—they didn't even have any ashes that they could keep.

Standing there, in front of the casket with its white flowers, in the formal clothes she rarely wore, Ryouko felt a sense of tragedy. She had never known her grandmother particularly well; the eulogies given by her mother and grandfather described a warm and loving woman, one riven by conflict and tragedy. But for all the relevance it had to her, they might as well have been describing a stranger. Ryouko could not bring herself to feel saddened at the death, not directly; instead the sense of loss she felt was of lost opportunity, of missed chances. All she had were a few memories, and a moment on a riverbank, long ago.

It's strange, isn't it? she thought. *With immortality in hand, it's so easy to forget what death even means. Yet here I am, and I can't feel a thing.*

She sighed, closed her eyes in front of the casket as a formality, and turned away, looking for Atsuko Arisu.

Instead, she found a girl she did not know watching her quietly. It was one of the magical girls who had attended the funeral, one of her grandmother's friends.

Ryouko moved to walk past her, assuming that she was only here to stare at a celebrity—something Ryouko had gotten a bit used to over the past couple of days—but the girl surprised her by grabbing her by the arm.

I need to speak with you, she said.

Ryouko looked at the girl strangely, activating her nomenclator.

Identification: Akiyuki Mio

Magical Girl—Lieutenant Colonel

Classification: Elemental mage, fire.

I'm sorry; I'm not very good at this, the girl said. *But I was a childhood friend of your grandmother. She had a message she wanted me to give you, in case she never got a chance to give it herself.*

Ryouko tilted her head slightly. Quietly, she checked the woman's age. At just over three hundred, she was about as old as her grandmother, so it checked out.

A message? What about?

I don't know. It's encrypted so only you can open it. All I know is that it's a memory recording, and quite large.

A memory recording? Ryouko thought.

Give me a moment, the girl thought, staring Ryouko in the eyes.

Ryouko looked back into those eyes for a long moment, deciding that, yes, the girl could be *that* old.

Done, Clarisse thought. *Recording transferred.*

She told me it was a secret she's been holding onto, that she didn't want to go to the grave with her. I didn't think—

The girl turned to face the casket and for a moment, her eyes seemed to glimmer.

Then she turned away.

Well, I don't know what was so important that she couldn't tell me, but I'm done here. I'll be seeing you.

Wait! Ryouko asked, belatedly, as the girl traipsed away, ignoring her.

"What was that about?" Asami asked, appearing over Ryouko's shoulder.

"I don't know," Ryouko said. "But…"

She looked around the room again, for Atsuko Arisu, but the woman had seemed to vanish into thin air.

I don't know why I can't have a family event without ghosts appearing everywhere, she thought.

"Give me a moment," Ryouko said, sitting down into a convenient chair. "I'm going to see what this memory recording is. Say I'm busy if anyone comes looking for me."

She was greeted by the quiet patter of rain, falling on an umbrella.

Memories reconstructed from before the installation of perfect recall implants were always a bit vague, but this world seemed particularly dreamlike, a quality which the grey, overcast sky only contributed to. Details faded in and out of sight: the smooth sidewalk shrugging off torrents of water, a particularly red car passing by, a bright, animated ad for fresh mochi, her mother's hand grasping her own.

Her mother—

She looked up, at the slender brown face looking back down at her, from a perspective that seemed to tower far above her. She was tugging at her hand, since she had stopped to gawk at the ad.

"Maybe later, okay, *filhinha*? Come on."

A few pieces of context trickled into her mind. They were visiting her grandfather, who was at the hospital. Her grandfather was a very old man, and very sick. He had always been sick, it seemed to her. Certainly, she couldn't remember when he had ever not been.

She let her mother lead her by the hand, away from the ad and into the ornate edifice of the hospital, a building she now realized was in front of her. They went through the building silently, past the automated security desk, into the beautiful, empty elevator, with its bright buttons and clear glass walls.

It only took a moment to reach the room, where the rest of the family already huddled. There wasn't much to it—grandmother sat next to the man in his wheelchair, holding the old man's hand. Her face, lined and wrinkled, had nonetheless always contrived to make her look young. It seemed impossible that she would ever grow sick, but sad—well, her face looked very sad—

And then there was her father, who had apparently been pacing the room, face grim. He headed over immediately at their appearance.

"How is he?" her mother asked, somberly.

"Not well," her father said. "The cellular damage to his brain is starting to cascade. It can only be a few months now. He wants euthanasia."

"I see," her mother said, as the child below her puzzled over the meaning of the sentences.

"Well, we knew it was coming," she said.

"He wants to see his granddaughter," her father said.

"I know," her mother said, pulling her towards the wheelchair. "Come on, *filhinha*."

"Grandpapa," she said politely, and the old man smiled. Her grandmother lifted her into the old man's lap, the man held her for a moment, and she squirmed. Truth be told, she didn't like being around her grandfather too much—he smelled funny—but he was always kind to her. Plus, it didn't seem nice to her to say things about a man who was sick.

Her mother stood in front of her, eyes wide, and a moment later she blinked, the picture taken. Her grandmother put her back on the floor—she was too heavy for him to hold for long.

There was a moment of silence.

"I asked—" her grandfather began.

"I know," her grandmother said. "We'll leave now. I hope you know what you're doing."

And just like that, the others left, the dreamlike quality of the memory causing them to seem to vanish from the room. All that was left was her, blinking in confusion, and the old man.

"Grandpapa—" she began.

But then, with a quiet sliding noise, one of the doors to the room opened, and a woman strode in.

No, not a woman.

A girl.

The girl stood for a moment just inside the threshold, seeming to regard the two of them. The girl's long black hair, with its red ribbon on top, shifted as she tousled it, and, for just a moment, the girl's eyes lingered on her, seeming almost to pierce into her, and she understood why she had mistaken her for a woman.

“Do they know I’m here?” the girl asked walking forward.

“No,” her grandfather said. “I didn’t tell them who I was meeting. With Arisu being a telepath I can’t rule out her knowing, but she generally respects my privacy.”

He paused.

“It’s a bit crazy. They wouldn’t have listened to me at all if I weren’t dying.”

“Well, there’s still time to take me up on my offer,” the girl said.

“No,” her grandfather said sharply. “The last time around, I was young. I wanted to experience more of life. That’s why I let you pay for my treatment. Now, I have a family, I have children. I don’t think I should linger anymore. Especially not if it’s going to cost… resources.”

The last word was said with a glance at the child, the kind of look that adults got when they were trying to hide something.

“Not many even know that kind of life extension is possible,” the girl said, a slight smile quirking onto her lips. “Otherwise, the demand would be insatiable, for such a limited resource. Atsuko doesn’t know, for instance. But, think about how she feels.”

“I know, and I am sorry,” her grandfather said, looking down for a moment. “But I wouldn’t feel right, staying alive here like a leech. Besides, I’ve always wanted to meet this sister of mine.”

The girl smiled slightly at the joke.

“She insisted that her grandniece be here, you know,” the girl said. “I’m not sure why. Maybe she likes that you named her in her honor. I do wish she’d explain herself to me a little, at least some of the time. Though I suppose she doesn’t speak to me enough as it is.”

“You have a sister, grandpapa?” the child asked, quizzically.

“It’s a joke,” her grandfather explained, blandly. “Mind pushing me to the window, Homura?”

“If you insist. It’s a robotic wheelchair for a reason, you know.”

“I insist.

The girl walked up to the wheelchair and smiled warmly down at her, patting her on the head. She pouted, making an angry noise. She hated when adults did that.

“Remember when I was young, and I used to call you *onee-chan*?” the old man asked, as the wheelchair headed for the window.

“Please do not remind me.”

“I had the biggest crush on you.”

Homura made a face.

“I just told you not to remind me. I felt bad for you, you were so awkward.”

Her grandfather chuckled and the child wondered what was going on in the conversation. The girl and her grandfather were talking almost like equals, and *onee-chan* was something you called an older sister, but the girl was obviously much younger.

“Well, thanks for introducing me to Arisu, anyway, though I’m not sure if I should be thanking my sister instead.”

They reached the window, the child following behind them.

“As I recall,” the girl said, “the only way I got you to agree to a date was to make it a precondition for your life extension.”

“I’m going to have to talk to her about that. No one likes a manipulative and bossy older sister.”

“Even an omniscient one?”

“*Especially* an omniscient one.”

There was a lull in the conversation, during which the child chewed over what “omniscient” might mean. Why couldn’t adults just use easier words?

“Look out there,” her grandfather instructed.

She did so, and there arose perhaps the clearest memory of the entire dream.

Mitakihara City looked dank and gloomy in the rain, which fogged the windows with moisture. Clustered around them were the gigantic towers of the hyperclass, shimmering and beautiful in the sunlight, but gloomy now. A bit farther away, the other parts of the city were visible: the robotic assembly plants, the university, the military base, and especially the public housing, derisively called the slums by some.

“There’s a storm gathering,” her grandfather said. “Things cannot continue as they are. Here, we keep the lower class satisfied, with free housing, free food, free everything, practically, and even then, there is resentment, at the hyperclass, at *us,* lounging around in the lap of luxury. Here we are fine, but what about elsewhere? What about the places where they receive nothing, where children starve in the streets? The kind of place where my daughter-in-law was born? What will happen there?”

Homura was silent for a moment, meeting the glare of the wheelchaired man.

“Of course there is a storm gathering,” she said. “But what would you have us do? We have mitigated things all we can, intervening where we can. Any further and we risk war. The kind of cataclysmic war that could end our race.”

“Your *MSY* is corrupt, Homura,” the old man said. “Corrupt, decadent, and lazy. I know what they say, in your halls of power. I know the paralysis that keeps you chained. They just can’t face the sacrifice that must be made. Not from the comfort of their mansions and boats and tea parties. The hyperclass blights this world, and we’re part of it, whether you realize it or not.”

“Don’t speak to me of sacrifice,” the girl snapped. “You have no conception of the price that must be paid.”

Her grandfather looked out at the skyline meaningfully.

“The price must be paid eventually. *That* is the problem. Better now than later.”

There was a pause.

“Is that what called me here to say, then?” the girl asked.

“No. Not the only thing. It’s about Madocchi here.”

He grabbed the child by the shoulder, surprising her, since she had become nearly motionless, mesmerized by the conversation.

“Given what’s coming, what I’ve seen, I want her to have a normal life. No contract, no *MSY,* no nothing. I know she’s at high risk for one, but I don’t want her to have to see what’s coming, and I don’t want her involved. I don’t even want her to know about the *MSY*.”

Homura stared at him, aghast.

“That’s an absurd request,” she said.

“Well, I’m making it. Respect this dying man’s wish.”

“Her parents—”

“I’ve already talked to them, and they agree. They don’t know who I’m meeting, but they do know what I’m asking. You know her mother’s history. Arisu won’t be happy, when she finds out, but she might not ever learn it was my request. It’s not that unreasonable, is it, with your influence? Even the Incubators would have to respect a request you make.”

Homura looked at him, harsh and cold, and it was terrible to see, but her grandfather returned the look levelly.

“Very well,” she said. “But only because it is you. Will that be all?”

“Yes.”

“Then let me erase her memory. If you’re really serious, this conversation is too much information for her.”

Her grandfather looked at the girl askance.

“You can do that?”

“I’ve trained myself to. It’s not very powerful, but she’s a child—her memory is fragile anyway. As long as she doesn’t receive too many reminders of it, or learn too much of the truth, the suppression should hold.”

For a long moment, the two adults looked at each.

“Alright, do it,” her grandfather said.

“It’ll be difficult to hide my power signature, but I should be able to manage it.”

The child was already backing away, afraid of the implications of what had been said, but her grandfather caught her by the arm, and the girl raised one hand, radiant with an evil purple glow. Impossibly, the clothes she was wearing seemed to have changed.

“I’m sorry,” the girl said, “but it will over quickly.”

The girl grabbed her by the face with her glowing hand, grasping her skull with the fingers. She was blinded by the light, and pain seared her soul.

The last parts of the vision consisted only of that light, and the voice of Akemi Homura.

“Do you know what her mother wished for, Tatsuya? I do. I asked her. She wished for vengeance, at all costs. I hope it does not cast all into the flame.”

Ryouko woke from the living dream confused, head throbbing slightly. The facts had come at her so quickly—that Atsuko Arisu was her grandmother, she had already known, though indeed she had not known the truth of it. But the rest—her ancestor and Akemi Homura, talking about an elusive sister, one who, in context, could only be one person, or more accurately, one *deity.*

For once, she could put the pieces together. There had been no reason her grandmother needed to be at that meeting, except that a certain deity had asked for it. The memory had been sealed away, seemingly erased, and yet here it was again, fresh for her perusal. It did not seem far-fetched to her that the reason the memory existed was precisely so that she could see it. Very teleological, but it was hardly surprising that things got teleological with an actual deity around.

One that was, for whatever reason, making it known to her that they were related.

What was it the Goddess had said? That she was born for things? Kyouko had even jokingly brought up something about a prophet.

Descended from a god, used by her as a tool, filled with visions—that sure *sounded* like some sort of prophet. Or at least that’s how it was in the stories.

She had wished to explore the world, and here she was, exploring parts of it she hadn’t even known existed. But she didn’t know if she wanted to be a prophet.

Ryouko felt an irrational anger surge within her. Not at the way her grandmother had been treated, but at those around her. What was she supposed to do with this knowledge? What had been gained by hiding it from her? Why had her family ended up the way it was? None of those accountable were accessible. Atsuko Arisu had left and might not have even known what happened. The old man in the vision was long dead. Akemi Homura was missing.

She let the anger fill her, because it provided clarity. She didn’t want to think about anything else. There was one person still available she could talk to, one who seemed to have a hand in *everything*.

That person had even said:

“Come see me again when this is all over, okay? I expect we’ll have much to talk about.”

Prophetic words indeed. Of course, that was hardly surprising, coming from a Goddess.

She seemed to have a human name, too, one Ryouko knew well. What was it Homura had said?

“She insisted that her grandniece be here, you know. I’m not sure why. Maybe she likes that you named her in her honor.”

So, her grandmother had been named after the Goddess. The old man had clearly been related to her grandmother paternally—the ethnicity was a hint to that, if nothing else. Taken together, that implied the Goddess must have the exact same name as her grandmother. That meant the Goddess’s human name was—

Kaname Madoka, Clarisse finished for her, voice a bit shaken.

By the time she reached the Ribbon Chamber, the force of her anger had cooled, probably much

to the relief of Asami, who she had dragged along—and then teleported—with her practically by main force. She seemed to have frightened Asami, judging by the way the girl kept asking her if she was alright and offering to go buy her sweet beverages.

I said I'm alright, Asami, she insisted, too distracted to realize she had dropped her customary honorific.

They were waiting in line to see the ribbon, so it was probably for the best she had lost her previous force of will; otherwise, she might have started pushing people out of her way.

Why are we here? Why are we visiting the Cult? Asami asked, looking around warily at the mixed-race, all-female assemblage of pilgrims gathered in the room. Ryouko had created a bit of a stir with her unannounced appearance and, given the Cult's beliefs about what happened at Kepler−37, it was bound to create additional rumors. The whispering around her was already starting.

She didn't care, not the moment. She *needed* to talk to the Goddess. Funny, that she should show up practically demanding to see a deity who was notorious for only showing up when she chose to, and enigmatically at that. She suspected, though, that the Goddess would show up as expected.

Asami stood there gawking at the stained-glass that adorned the room, emblazoned with a hope and despair motif.

Are—are you religious now? she asked.

Ryouko wasn't sure how she was supposed to answer that. Technically, the answer was obviously yes, given that she was speaking of the Goddess as a reality and even had a little tête à tête planned with her for later. On the other hand, it felt strange to say, given that the Ryouko of just a month ago would have strongly denied anything of the sort.

She was saved from having to answer by the fortuitous appearance of none other than Kyubey himself, who materialized out of thin air on Ryouko's shoulder, causing both of them to jump slightly.

"Oh, h-hi again, Incubator-san," Asami said.

I told you already, it's Kyubey, the Incubator replied, sounding almost annoyed.

"Oh, right, sorry."

The Incubator's arrival had caused another stir in the crowd, since Incubators were—well, they didn't exactly have an exalted place in Cult theology, so it was very strange that one would appear at the Ribbon Chamber; though, indeed, Ryouko remembered it appearing the last time she had been here.

"Why are you here?" Ryouko asked, a bit suspiciously.

Just here to observe, the Incubator responded, swishing its tail behind her back. *I am interested in these 'visions' that seem to interest you magical girls so much.*

"I see," Ryouko said. "What value could that have to you?"

Plenty of value, Kyubey said. *Even if the other Incubators disagree.*

"Incubators can disagree?"

It happens, very rarely. In any case, I've been authorized to investigate this matter on behalf of my race.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that."

I intend no harm.

Ryouko let the topic drop, subsiding into silence. The line advanced slowly, and she stroked Kyubey's tail to pass the time. The creature rubbed itself against her hair, which she used to pet it. It was strange, talking to a creature like a human while at the same time treating it like a cat. The Incubators supposedly didn't derive any enjoyment from the rubbing, but they were sure good at faking it.

Finally, they reached the front of the line, where one of the two honor guards was the same telepath she had met last time, with the absurdly ornate hat.

I told you last time to be careful with your thoughts! the guard thought. *I* like *the hat.*

Don't you mind readers know anything about privacy? Ryouko demanded.

The guard shifted positions slightly, seeming to think for a moment.

No, not really, she admitted. *Anyway, I can't say I'm surprised to see you back here, after the wormhole thing. Ready to convert?*

Maybe later.

I don't know what's with you. For most people, one vision is more than enough.

Is that any way to talk to the "Savior of Humanity"?

Don't let it go to your head, or you'll grow a hat just like mine.

Ryouko snorted, then realized Asami was giving her a wide-eyed look.

Oh Goddess, that conversation wasn't private, Ryouko realized.

You've had a vision? Asami asked. *Then, it's true that—*

I'll explain afterward! Ryouko pleaded. *After we visit the Ribbon.*

Oh, I was just reading about that! It's a religious artifact that supposedly grants visions. Is that why we're here?

As Asami was asking the question, Kyouko appeared, stepping out of a side door to an area near the Ribbon.

Oh, this is just perfect, Ryouko groaned—to herself.

It seemed like a good idea to show up, Kyouko shrugged, seeing her looking. *I doubt this visit of yours is a coincidence.*

Finally, blissfully, the people in front of her finished, the forcefield turned off, and it was their turn at the altar. Ryouko looked around, then transformed, gesturing at Asami to do the same.

Ryouko took a moment to look at the Ribbon again, the seemingly ordinary piece of cloth enshrined in a transparent box that could probably survive most nuclear weapon detonations.

What do I— Asami began.

Do as I do, Ryouko instructed, dropping to her knees and assuming a praying posture.

She closed her eyes.

Ryouko found herself in a field of roses, patterned neatly into row after row. The sky above her was a warm white, seeming to suggest the presence of a sun without showing one. The soil below her feet felt warm and loamy, and she looked down, realizing that she was barefoot, and wearing nothing but a white dress.

She checked herself subtly. Yes, it really was *just* the dress.

"Is that really a dignified thing to be doing in a place like this? Also, it's called a tunic. The Romans wore them."

Ryouko startled, then looked around for the source of the voice.

She couldn't see it, but she felt she knew which direction it had come from.

She made her way through the garden gingerly, careful to avoid pricking herself on any of the roses. Calling it a garden seemed a bit of a misnomer, actually, considering that there was no visible boundary she could see. Just row after row of flowers, white and pink and red and blue and myriad other shades, stretching off to an impossibly-far horizon.

She could feel the warm earth sticking to her feet as she walked.

She found the Goddess two rows over. This patch of roses was blood red, but the plant the woman was next to had light green flowers, flowers which seemed to shimmer in the invisible sunlight.

This time the Goddess had taken the form of an older woman, a bit older than the apparent age of Ryouko's mother. Instead of the elaborate dresses Ryouko had seen before, this time the woman was wearing only a simple white tunic, same as Ryouko. She had her pink hair tied back in a utilitarian ponytail, and was frowning at a pair of garden clippers she was holding. This time around, Ryouko could pin down why the Goddess looked familiar—she resembled her mother or, more straightforwardly, Ryouko herself. Ryouko could easily imagine her mother with the same frown.

"It's not just that, you know," the woman said, without looking up. "Every magical girl who has ever met me finds me familiar. It's a kind of racial memory, Jungian unconscious, echo of the future—whatever you want to call it. It's just stronger for you."

With a decisive snap, she cut the branch she was holding, removing from the plant a single green flower. It had been hanging pendulously from the plant, seemingly too heavy to bear.

The woman smelled the flower, inhaling deeply, then stood up, turning toward Ryouko. She held the flower in front of her.

Uncertainly, Ryouko looked between the rose and the Goddess's always-unnerving eyes. Then, she took the proffered flower, looking deep into the bloom.

The fragrance of the rose was overpowering, and as she watched, entranced, the shimmering green of the flower became even more jewel-like, the petals seeming to curl together—

“Ryouko.”

The Goddess’s voice woke her from her trance. She looked up at the Goddess’s jewel-like eyes, and remembered who this world belonged to.

“I’m glad you came back to see me,” the woman said, smiling warmly. “You have questions for me. Ask.”

She looked down, at the earth below, intimidated by the woman’s presence.

“Am I really related to you?” she asked.

“In a sense, yes,” Madoka said. “I never existed in your world, but if I had, you’d be a distant niece. Objectively, that matters very little, other than producing a bit of metaphysical resonance, but sometimes even the most tenuous connection can become a treasure. For most Matriarchs, family is all that is left, and I have very little left to tie me to your world.”

Ryouko nodded, even as she continued to chew on the meaning of the words. She did not really understand.

“I am a god, Ryouko, even if I wear a human face. That has certain implications. At the moment, you fear my presence and you fear my gaze, even though you do not understand why. I was human once, like you—part of me is human still. But if any of my old friends were here with you now, they would think me a stranger. Homura-chan would demand to know what I have done with the Madoka she knew. But the truth is, I *am* her. One cannot live forever and truly stay the same.”

Ryouko swallowed, nodding again. This version of the Goddess was different than the ones she had met previously. More overbearing, less kind—

“Less human. Yes, it is true. Sometimes, I can barely remember what it is like to be human. At times like that, my divinity overwhelms me, and I become just the Law of Cycles, just a Law. In the end, that is why I spend the time to focus on my family, on Kyouko-chan and Mami-san. I could have achieved my goals in other ways, but this helps me remember. Otherwise, the nature of infinity begins to weigh on me, and every magical girl begins to look like every other, every soul indistinguishable from so many others.”

“Why all the secrecy? Why did you allow what happened to my family?” Ryouko asked, the words seeming to come unbidden to her lips, and the voice that answered her echoed in her heart.

“Omniscience is a terrible burden, especially when you are also timeless, so that you have infinite time to examine every possible implication, and to perform every possible task. In that kind of situation, you are responsible for every single implication of what you do, and the terrible thing is, no decision is perfect. I only have limited capacity to intervene, and every time I do, everything I do must be crafted exactly. The sad truth is, there is no karma in this world that I have seen, other than what society and I myself have enforced. It is entirely possible for me to save an innocent life, and kill thousands or even millions in the future, and equally possible for me to have someone killed, and in so doing vastly improve the world.”

“But even beyond that, it is worth asking: what does it mean to have a better world? If I truly were omnipotent, and could intervene anywhere at any time, would a world where I did everything, and made every decision, truly be better? If, with a hundred visions, I directed the lives of a hundred girls, and in doing so saved a single life, would that life be truly worth saving? Everything depends on the values you choose to apply, and *no set of values is perfect,* not even the one I choose to use. The world was not ready for the existence of our kind, so we were kept secret until

it was. In the case of my own family, where certain metaphysical connections allow me to exercise unusual control, events must be arranged with particular care. It is your special burden to bear this, to have less freedom to live your own life."

"Tell me, then: will you presume to judge me for my actions, when you have no understanding of the implications?"

Ryouko's lip quivered, and the words of the Goddess weakened her, but she forced herself to look up, at those terrible eyes.

"I—"

Then, suddenly, the woman was gone, and she found herself looking into the eyes of a girl, the teenage form of the Goddess.

"It's terrible, isn't it?" the girl asked, and this time it was a very human voice, with none of the cadences of before. "It all sounds so *wrong.* It sounds like the Incubators talking. I hated their logic, and you hated mine. You shouldn't bow your head to me, just because of what I am. You feel in your heart what is right, just like I felt in my heart, when I wished this new world into being. That is part of being human, that rebellion. I care about my family, and my friends, and because I do, your world is not as good as it could be. It weighs on me, but perfection can't be everything. I have the right to care. It is my right!"

Ryouko realized, abruptly, that the Goddess was crying.

"I—" she began again, reaching out and the girl disappeared again, replaced this time by a young woman, only a bit older than Ryouko herself, but definitely older.

"Emotions are what make us human, Ryouko," the woman said, reaching out and grasping Ryouko's shoulder. "It's what gives us our power, and makes us special. You have heard as much, from the Incubators. It's sad, isn't it? The universe turns on sterile logic, so it is only natural that the Incubators do the same. Everything must become efficient, reach a final state. It is like entropy itself. Why is the gift confined to only us?"

Ryouko met the woman's eyes, and this time they were warm, and loving. There was no terrible omniscience in them, not this time.

The woman dropped her arm.

"Well, I suppose that is it for now. You have a lot to think about."

Ryouko scrunched her face at the dismissal.

"Wait, no. I want to ask you: what do I do now? I don't want to just hang out on Earth for the next few months. I made a wish to get away from that!"

The woman giggled, sounding strangely girlish.

"You think I would tell you, so bluntly?" she said. "I want you to live your own life, whatever my plans for you. Things have a way of working out. And you know, you and Asami-chan make a cute couple, even if there's—well, for now, I think things will be fine. You know, I gave her a vision too, since I thought it would be cruel to leave her out. I'm giving her relationship advice, right now."

"Relationship advice," Ryouko echoed emptily.

“Oh yes,” Kaname Madoka said, waving. “Anyway, goodbye now. Don’t tell Kyouko-chan anything!”

The material world lurched back into existence around her, without even giving her a moment to realize what had happened. Ryouko’s eyes snapped open, and she looked up, finding the red eyes of Kyubey looking down upon her, from on top of the box that contained the Ribbon.

Next to her, Asami gasped, and she glanced over, finding the girl looking back at her. She looked awestruck.

Ryouko looked around, and found the crowd staring at her, Kyouko with arms crossed and one eyebrow raised.

Ryouko groaned.

“Was it really necessary to teleport us straight back to your room?” Asami asked. “I know it’s within your range and all, but—”

“I’m not ready to face Kyouko-chan, or any of that,” Ryouko said, lying face down on her bed.

Asami furrowed her brow.

“Kyouko-chan? You mean the Cult leader? Why ‘-chan’?”

“Yes, her. And, sorry, my tongue slipped.”

Asami rubbed her hands nervously, and Ryouko knew she had to say something. A vision could be a life-changing experience, and she had been dragging Asami around like a doll.

Ryouko sat up.

“So, what did the Goddess say to you?” she asked, not sure what else to lead with.

“I can’t believe she’s real,” Asami said, looking at her incredulously. “You knew? Do you talk with her regularly?”

Yes, apparently, Ryouko thought, answering the question in her own head—but not to Asami.

“It’s complicated,” she said out loud. “Anyway, what did she tell you?”

She was being a bit cruel, buffaloing Asami into telling her about her vision, before Asami had a chance to realize she should ask Ryouko about *Ryouko’s* vision.

Asami rubbed her hands again.

“Well, I haven’t been having a good time lately,” she said. “I’m scared to go back into combat, and I don’t want to leave you, but she made me feel better. Gave me a little perspective. And, uh—”

The girl cut herself off and looked away. Ryouko looked at her curiously, then realized she was *blushing*.

“Asami-chan?”

“Well, I, uh—”

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” Ryouko said, backing off. “It’s okay. Let me go ask my mom if we can have some food. Well, not my mom—”

“She said if I wanted anything physical from you, I’d wait forever, so I have to be the one to bring it up.”

Ryouko peered at her.

“What?” she asked.

While I hate to interrupt, Clarisse thought, transmitting the thought to both of them. *I feel I should stop this now, and point out that you have surprise visitors. They just pinged you to check if you’re available.*

Ryouko pushed the previous conversation forcefully to the back of her mind.

Joanne Valentin and Shizuki Sayaka? she thought, incredulously, responding to them in the affirmative.

She bustled outside, where her father was hastily trying to make the front room look presentable. She did what she could to help him, and Asami appeared behind her a moment later.

If I may ask, she relayed to Sayaka. *What is this about?*

Well, Sayaka texted back a moment later. *We have a proposal for you.*

End—Volume II: Inflationary Expansion

Next—Interlude II: Madeleines

Interlude II: Madeleines

Chapter Notes

> Any significant textual problems I ascribe to one of my betas being AWOL. #passive-aggressiveness

> "And so it is with our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all the efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect. And as for that object, it depends on chance whether we come upon it or not before we ourselves must die."
>
> […]
>
> "She sent out for one of those short, plump little cakes called 'petites madeleines,' which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted scallop of a pilgrim's shell. And soon, mechanically, weary after a dull day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid, and the crumbs with it, touched my palate than a shudder ran through my whole body, and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary changes that were taking place."
>
> […]
>
> "Undoubtedly what is thus palpitating in the depths of my being must be the image, the visual memory which, being linked to that taste, has tried to follow it into my conscious mind. But its struggles are too far off, too much confused; scarcely can I perceive the colourless reflection in which are blended the uncapturable whirling medley of radiant hues, and I cannot distinguish its form, cannot invite it, as the one possible interpreter, to translate to me the evidence of its contemporary, its inseparable paramour, the taste of cake soaked in tea; cannot ask it to inform me what special circumstance is in question, of what period in my past life."

— *"In Search of Lost Time" (À la recherche du temps perdu)*, by Marcel Proust, excerpt.

> "Things always seem fairer when we look back at them, and it is out of of that inaccessible tower of the past that Longing leans and beckons."

— *"Literary Essays, vol. I"*, by James Russel Lowell

"Where is she?"

The soldier peered nervously at her from his position of attention. His eyes had the characteristic

strained, yet relieved look of a man experiencing post-combat recoil, one who was finally out of his armored suit.

He hesitated, weighing how to say it.

"I'm sorry, sir. We tried, but it was hopeless. We held the position as long as we could. No one else made it out. I filed a report—"

"You're not listening to me."

Her voice came out soft, with only a hint of a growl, but its intonation was enough to stop the trooper cold. He stared at her, eyes wide, and took a slight step backward.

"Sir," he said, swallowing as subtly as he could. "Your gem looks dim. Don't you think it's time you recharged it?"

"You have no right to tell me what to do."

"Sir," the soldier repeated, stiffening his spine. "Rank or no, if you're experiencing instability, I am not obligated to listen to you."

His voiced softened slightly.

"Please, we've all lost someone. My entire platoon is dead. All of them. But we have to deal—"

His sentence ended with a strangled noise, as her telekinetic grip clamped down on his throat.

Easy. So easy *to apply a little more force and crush the neck entirely, reinforced windpipe or no. So* easy *to take out her anger on a target who certainly didn't deserve it.*

She still had a little rationality left, it seemed. Perhaps it was the influence of her TacComp, which was straining with all its electronic might to keep her sane, keep her under control. It had been a mistake to allow her to exit emotional suppression—now, it had no way to reverse that decision.

"Bring her back," she whispered.

The man looked at her, his eyes filled with fear, as he futilely tried to reach for her with his arms, which he found to be restrained with ineffable force.

She raised her own arm, and the man lifted into the air, struggling.

She wanted to scream in anger, but instead what came out was a broken, shaking plea:

"Please, bring her back. I can't live like this."

The man flailed in the air, his face definitely not *the face of God, his strangled voice certainly incapable of giving her the answers she sought.*

She could see around her the horrified faces of the other soldiers and technicians, flattened against the wall either by fear or by her telekinetic bubble. That personal bubble of space—a small radius within which her magic could warp reality—had served her well over the years; granting her access to all sorts of powers. All it took was a bit of preparation, and she could be a teleporter, or a mind-reader, or a telekinetic—just not all at once.

At the moment, it felt as useless as ordering a single magical girl to hold back a full alien division.

She screamed, and hardly even heard herself; the walls of the room around her fractured as

pieces broke off, crumbling like her heart had in the moment she had heard the news. Her surroundings blurred in a torrent of tears, and a small part of her wondered just who was in control of her actions, her powers—because it certainly wasn't her. *She felt something crack inside her, fall apart bit by bit, and she wondered—*

A loud popping noise, and the painful grip of someone's hand on her head, brought reality rushing back in.

She only had a few moments to see the frightened face of the teleporter that had appeared next to her, and the determined, serious expression of the telepath in front of her. Elfrida Vervloet, her name was, one of the division's psychiatrists; the one who she had told just hours ago that she was fine. Not particularly powerful, or the telepath would have noticed something was *wrong with her, and wouldn't have needed direct contact to exert her mental control.*

She had training to resist mind-control, obtained along with her promotion to Colonel, what felt like a lifetime ago. She didn't use it, though, even as the hand on her face began to glow brightly yellow, and she felt the telepath's suggestions edge their way into her own thoughts. So much easier to just give in, let someone else do the thinking. Yes, sleep, that sounded like a good—

Shirou Asaka woke gasping, kicking her legs abruptly. She grabbed wildly with her arms, taking only a moment to find something to cling to—the girl next to her, the one whose face was pressed into her neck. There was only a moment of confusion before memory returned to her, along with a warm, soothing certainty.

Alice Lynwood, whose hair teased her chin, whose smell filled her nostrils, and whose… body was pressed against her.

The girl stirred, disturbed by Asaka's waking, and made a displeased noise.

"That dream again, Asaka?" she sighed. "I wonder what's going on with you."

"That dream" had been plaguing her for months now. Each night it was slightly different, and each morning she lost most of the details. It was frustrating; she would have ignored it had Alice not nagged her endlessly about getting it checked out. She really wasn't enthused about seeing a shrink, but she had eventually agreed.

"You don't have to nag me about it," she said. "We'll find out what's going on; it's probably nothing. Come on, let's talk about something more fun."

She gave the other girl an experimental squeeze, causing her to squirm.

"Oh, you," Alice said, rubbing herself against her playfully. "Not that I'm against the idea, but honestly, if there were ways to make having kids be more *fun*, I probably would have talked you into it already."

Asaka, who had been in the process of saying something, choked in surprise instead.

"I'm not sure we're ready," she said, recovering. It was the familiar cadences of an old argument.

"You know we are," Alice rebutted. "You're just scared."

Asaka closed her eyes, accepting for the moment the half-playful, half-serious teasing. Children, she thought. Alice would inevitably talk her into it, and then she'd have to call her mom—

"I'm serious," Alice continued. "Look, they even sell kits now, for making it into an enjoyable exp
__"

Asaka rolled over aggressively, body sliding underneath the sheets, but *over* the other girl. It startled Alice into silence.

“Not now,” Asaka said, descending for a kiss.

"So how's the wife?"

Asaka lowered her binoculars for a moment to glance at the girl next to her, then raised it again, peering at the town in front of her. MadhuritheGreat, or "Maddy" to friends, was second-in-command of the guild, and one of her most trusted subordinates. Asaka had grown to rely on her in the interguild combat matches that typified this particular game.

Magical Sky, as it was called, was a virtual reality first-person multiplayer cooperative combat game—VMCC—about an alternate universe where magically-empowered girls had helped decide the Second World War. As strange a concept as it was, it had become one of the most popular games of its genre, nourishing a fanbase of viewers healthy enough that prominent guild leaders, such as Asaka, could live in luxury—and just as importantly, afford to pay off Governance's exorbitant VR usage fees.

She was fond of Maddy, not just because she was reliable, but also because she knew Maddy to be a female in real life—she simply couldn't completely escape the vague feeling of creepiness that arose from knowing that a grown male was inhabiting an obviously female avatar. Stupid, maybe, but she had a right to her biases.

And if Maddy's in-game avatar happened to resemble Alice—well, that was probably a coincidence.

At the moment the two of them were on the ground behind a small ridge, faces, green uniforms, and helmets smeared with mud, surveying a small German town just across the river. Various opposition infantrymen, affectionately called "mobs", wandered the streets and inside the buildings, obvious in her x-ray vision, one of the passive abilities of the command class she was playing.

"Same as always," Asaka said. "Still can't get her to play this game much."

"Ah, stop being mad about that, Asaka," Madhuri said. "VR games ain't for everyone. I wish I had a boy at home who'd take care of me the way your Alice does."

Madhuri was, in fact, Maddy's real name. Asaka used "VioletOverwatch", personally, but Madhuri knew her real name and used it.

"I'm not mad," Asaka said. "I just think it'd be nice if she joined more often. I miss her."

"Aw, you two are so sweet," Maddy said, patting Asaka on the back.

"We're thinking about having a kid," Asaka said.

There was a brief silence, while Maddy chewed on the revelation.

"No shit? Which one of you is going to be, you know, the oven?"

"We don't know yet. I don't want to do it, but I don't want to make her do it either. I'm sure she'd be happy to, but, I don't know, it feels weird I guess."

"Well, it's natural to be nervous about it. Listen, I'll cover the guild for you whenever you're busy

with the baby, as long as you name it after me. That a deal? We'll throw you two a baby shower —"

Asaka held up her hand to interrupt her, frowning.

She scanned the town one last time.

"Something's wrong," she said, suddenly whispering. "It's too quiet. Where's the enemy team? Where's the armor? I should have seen *something* by now."

She chewed her lip for moment, then issued a telepathic call for updates. Had anyone had visual contact with members of the enemy team, or any armor units?

The responses came back uniformly negative, and she grew seriously worried. It was one thing to be bogged down in heavy combat with the other side—another to have no idea what they were doing. The other team wasn't composed of newbie shmucks—if she didn't know what they were doing, then whatever they were doing was bad news for her.

"You're right," Maddy whispered, realizing the issue. "Something's wrong."

They edged away from the ridge, allowing some of the friendly mobs around them to take watch instead, their adjutants appearing out of the bushes to follow them. As they moved, Asaka summoned a magical map of the area in front of her and Maddy, so they could study their disposition for any weaknesses. The terrain was generated randomly, and in this case the river bent away from their side of map, forming a "v" that pointed towards them. The town Asaka had been looking at was just across the river on the left side, near the point of the v but not right at it.

They were the team on offense, with extra members and firepower, and they were under a time limit. They had only recently made it to the river, and were regrouping for an assault across it, trying for the double envelopment by attacking from both sides. As such, the team had been divided in half, with Asaka and Maddy on the stronger half facing the town and "Batty", the third-in-command, on the other side.

"It'd be crazy for them to pull back from the river and wait," Maddy said. "It's their best natural defense, the key to the whole damn map."

"But we don't *see* them," Asaka said. "They're *not* there."

"They must not want us to see them," Maddy said. "That must mean—"

"They're concentrating for an attack," Asaka said, finishing the thought. "It's the only explanation. It's crazy, but crazy like a fox, if they catch us where we don't expect it."

Maddy studied the map.

"But where..." she began.

Both their eyes fell simultaneously on the center of the map, at the apex of the "v", which had only a force of mobs defending it.

"Oh God, we're idiots," Maddy said.

"There's still time to fix this," Asaka said, jumping up now that they were far enough from the ridge, where they might come under fire. "We need to shift—"

She was interrupted by the distant rumble of artillery.

They stopped. Asaka nodded at Maddy, who used telepathy to check in on the situation, since Asaka's telepathy was still on cooldown.

"I think we just ran out of time," Maddy said, sending her the information. "They just decloaked in the middle. Infantry, armor, support, close-in, fliers, the whole works."

Maddy peered at Asaka for a moment as she chewed her lip, thinking about it. This game wasn't exactly like real war, where it would might have been sensible to regroup, defend, and wait for the momentum of the numerically inferior attackers to peter out before counterattacking. They were on the clock—they had to win *soon*.

"The attack has to proceed as planned," she said. "We can trade queens if we have to—without their artillery and air support, cleaning them up will be easy. And if we stall them, give the rear time to prepare, we might not even have to lose our queen. We just have to make sure we do our attack *fast*."

From what she understood, aggressive counterattacks of this sort had not been a common trait of the faction her team was playing—but it wasn't as if they got style points for successful roleplaying, so who cared?

Maddy nodded.

"Should we send someone to help stall?" she asked.

Asaka nodded.

"We can move a few members here, since we have numbers," she said. "But our dispositions don't help. Most of the team is too far to get there in time, and the line is getting shredded too fast. We're going to have to sacrifice someone to make a last stand. I—"

She stopped abruptly, looking at the map in front of them. The planning for this attack had been a disaster, and that was at least partly her fault. By far the two closest girls to the event were her and Maddy-she had tried to keep command close to the middle for simple logistical reasons.

So stupid—she and the guild would have to talk it over later—but that wasn't what was bothering her. Something...

"I'll go," Maddy said, seeing the thought flit across Asaka's face. "You're too important to the team, and last stands are easy. I've done them before."

Asaka nodded, swallowing, hand shaking a little. She didn't feel right, but she couldn't—

"Hello? Is everything alright?" Maddy asked, a touch of concern appearing in her voice. "We have to move fast. I need to go now!"

"Oh yeah, sure, go," Asaka said, looking at the other girl. "I'm just-"

A wave of nausea passed over her. In that blonde hair, those playful bangs, she couldn't help but see—

"Asaka? Is something wrong?" Maddy asked, and this time the concern in her voice was obvious.

For a delirious moment, it seemed to her that the other girl was Alice—not Alice's in-game avatar, but *Alice*—and the nausea became overwhelming.

She felt herself falling—

CRITICAL SIMULATION ERROR

She jerked in her chair, the cable leading to the back of her neck somehow managing to stay attached.

She breathed heavily for a moment, recovering, holding her hand to her chest, where her heart pounded strenuously.

"Hey, you alright?" Maddy asked, through their guild voicechat. *"The stupid server glitched up somehow. I don't know if you got the message. It seems like it hit you the worst. You looked like you were about to throw up."*

A simulation error? she thought with astonishment.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," she subvocalized, speaking into a microphone in her throat. *"Seriously? A glitch? I've never seen one like this, especially on the live-watching servers. Those are supposed to be extra-robust."*

*"They say they're looking into it,"*Maddy said, *"and we're not going to be able to restart the match anytime soon. You want to talk to them about it?"*

Asaka thought about it.

"It's fine. They know they screwed up. Tell them it better not happen again or we're switching services."

"Alright," Maddy responded. *"This sucks though. That was a good game."*

"Yeah, although we got pretty close to being spanked. I'll talk to the guild."

"Alright, boys and girls," she subvocalized. *"This is bullshit, but it looks like today's game is canceled. We'll reschedule with the other guild, and we've already made our displeasure known to the server host. Those of you who can, go to the practice servers. I'll be taking some personal time."*

She then sent a more typical text-based message to the other guild, followed by another one apologizing to the audience. That wasn't strictly speaking her job—guild Marketing and their payment processor would take care of most of it—but she liked to use a little personal touch.

Then she signed off, ordering the interface cable to detach and return to its storage position. She actually preferred a server issue to an issue with her personal setup—personal VR rigs were mind-bogglingly expensive, and were usually rented. She owned hers and Alice's, though, and did not relish the idea of possibly paying to have it repaired.

A movement next to her caught her attention. Her dog, a female American-style Akita with white paws, had been napping on a cushion next to her VR chair, but was standing now. It watched her, tail wagging—it had probably heard her subvocalizing. Dogs were good at that sort of thing.

They had named it Colonel Fluff.

She leaned forward out of her chair, rubbing it on the neck. It barked playfully, fur twitching happily. Like their human owners, dogs nowadays were heavily enhanced—no one liked having pets that died of old age. While physical modifications were relatively common, though, Governance had strict rules about mental enhancement to pets. Dogs could only be moderately smarter than their unmodified ancestors had been.

Which wasn't to say there were no enhancements at all. For example, dogs nowadays had their own canine toilets, and knew how to use them.

Thanks to special implants, they also understood human speech to a reasonable degree, and could make their desires known via little snippets of text. Colonel Fluff wanted to know if she was done, and if they could go to the park like she had promised. It was eager to see the other dogs.

"Yes, yes, Colonel, I'm done. come on. Go get Alice."

She patted the the dog on its side. It barked happily, that ran out the door with excitement.

Asaka leaned back in her chair. Now that she had been able to think about it a little, the server glitch had unnerved her. Something about it had reminded her of the nightmares she had been having.

If that was what server glitches were like, she never wanted to experience one again.

She and Alice cuddled on the grass of the park, watching Colonel Fluff frolic with the other dogs in the park. She was glad it was possible to block reception of dog messages, or at least archive them—there were only so many canine expressions of excitement one could take and still remain sane. Apparently, Colonel Fluff didn't seem to understand the concept of restraint in messaging.

It was remarkable, the extent to which it was possible to modify dogs and still have them remain, fundamentally, dogs. She wondered if it were possible that, given enough time and enough subtle changes, they would gradually become so different that they would become unrecognizable to someone from the past.

The question applied to humans, too, of course. Not just in a technological sense, but also in terms of personality. Day by day, you were recognizable as the same person, but it was also undeniable that you changed over the course of years, or decades. Over the course of centuries, was it possible that you would become someone else entirely, without even knowing it? What did that even mean?

It depressed her to think that it was possible that she would change like that, changing who she was without even realizing it.

Shaking her head slightly, she inhaled deeply, breathing in the scent of Alice's hair, causing the girl to tilt her head upward on her chest, looking at Asaka with a patronizing expression.

"Want to play fetch with Colonel?" Asaka asked. "We haven't been paying much attention to her."

Alice shrugged.

"Alright," she said, pushing herself off the grass.

Asaka followed a moment later, reaching for the ball in her pocket and signaling Colonel.

The dog's head snapped up immediately, and it bounded over only a few moments later.

Oh boy! it texted. *I* love *fetch!!! Mr. Puddles was annoying anyway. Kept asking to mate.*

Asaka's lip quirked upward. In her opinion, dogs nowadays were a bit *too* informative. Plus, she wanted to meet whatever joker in Chronos Biologics had decided that dogs should occasionally text sentences with excessive exclamation marks.

She pulled the ball out of her pocket and tossed it far into the distance. It was one of the fancy models, with a tendency to abruptly change direction.

Alice slipped her arm around her waist, and Asaka returned the favor, now grinning broadly. In the distance, children frolicked in the colorful robes customary on Nova Terra, the native trees of the planet giving way to the skyscrapers of the city of Imperia, framed by a brilliant azure sky. The sun dipped behind one of the buildings, casting the landscape in light and shadow.

The wind blew, and, in that moment, she knew this was paradise.

The therapist's office was painted a soothing shade of light blue, a choice probably designed to put her at ease.

Asaka didn't really know why she was here. She didn't really consider bad dreams a good enough reason to see a therapist, but Alice had been so insistent and apparently the therapist, a certain Tanaka Yui, had agreed that it was worth her time.

The woman herself was currently seated in front of her, on the other side of her desk, sipping a cup of tea and making an elaborate show of reading off an old-fashioned tablet. Her hair was tied in a simple long ponytail, and she looked strangely young, a fact that was only accentuated by the long white robe she wore. It was a local colonial style, and being from Earth Asaka couldn't help but think that it looked like some sort of religious wear.

Something about the woman bothered her, though she supposed she was just nervous.

"So you'll be glad to know that the diagnostics turned out fine," Yui said, putting down her tablet and looking her in the eye. "That means there's nothing physically wrong with you or your implants. Whatever is going on must be psychological, then."

"I see," Asaka responded blandly, not sure what else to say.

The woman smiled amiably, closing her eyes for a moment.

"Since this problem isn't at the moment impeding your ability to function, I don't feel there's a need to try anything too dramatic. Come over here; let's talk it over."

Yui got up as she said the last sentence, gesturing Asaka to head over to the side of the room, where next to a window there was a stereotypical psychologist's couch, of the sort she had been sure was hundreds of years out of fashion. Was Yui really expecting her to just lie down and start talking?

"Isn't there some kind of implant modification you can do?" she asked, as she edged reluctantly toward the couch. "Something that would suppress dreams?"

"Traumatic dreams of the kind that your partner described to us are often indicative of possible underlying psychological issues," the therapist said, smiling thinly and shooing her towards the couch. "I would like to make sure there is truly nothing going on before I resort to implant manipulation. With any luck, it will resolve under your own power. Come, lie down."

Reluctantly, Asaka followed the instruction, lying down onto the couch, which turned out to be surprisingly comfortable. She would have considered falling asleep on it, except that this was obviously not the time, and Tanaka Yui was now seated on a chair at her side, holding her tablet and a writing stylus.

"Well then, let's begin," Yui said, after a moment. "Tell me in your own words what's been going on."

Asaka took a breath, buying time to think about what she wanted to say.

"Well, it began a few months ago," she said. "Maybe in April? I don't know how to put it. One night I had a terrible nightmare, the worst I've had. Alice said I woke crying. We thought that would be it, but instead—"

She hesitated, before continuing:

"—instead, I don't think I've had a good night since then. It varies how severe it is, but I think I always have it. Every night. I don't understand it."

"It, you say," Yui prompted. "Is it the same dream every time? That seems to be what you're implying."

Asaka started to nod, then stopped herself.

"Kind of, I guess. I have a hard time remembering the details of the dreams, so it makes it difficult to tell. I don't remember the same thing every time, and I'm pretty sure it's not exactly the same every time, but it's all connected somehow. I'm sure of that."

The woman bit her lip, a surprisingly cute gesture.

"It's strange you wouldn't remember much," she said. "If it's disturbing enough to wake you up crying, typically you'd remember the details."

Yui paused for a moment, tapping the end of her stylus against her cheek.

"Well, tell me what you do remember about the dreams, I guess," she said.

Asaka turned her head toward the window, preferring to look at the building across the street rather than the therapist's unnerving eyes. The truth was, though she had told Alice she couldn't remember, she hadn't really tried.

Yet here she was. There was no sense in not trying, not when the government was paying good money for her to see a therapist about it.

"Does it bother you to try to recall it?" Yui asked, gently, after she had been silent for an extended period.

"Yes," she admitted, even though she knew it probably set off alarm bells in the therapist's head.

It disturbed her too, to be honest. She didn't...

"I don't know," she said. "I have a hard time grasping the memories. They seem to slip away when I try and I feel... afraid somehow."

She was talking to herself as much as she was talking to the therapist, speaking out loud just what it was that bothered her; yet, having done so, she was uncomfortably aware that the truth of those words suggested there might indeed be something wrong with her.

A terrifying thought, that.

She tried to focus, feeling the therapist's eyes boring into her, and finally something came to her.

"It's about a war. It's always about a war. It's like—do you know what I do for a living?"

She finally turned to look at the therapist again, and found not the penetrating stare she was expecting, but instead a strangely gentle expression.

"Yes, I do," Yui said, her eyes dropping down to her tablet. "You're a gamer. You play war sims. That's actually one of my working hypotheses. Some simulation games can be pretty traumatic, even if they're virtual."

Asaka shook her head to dismiss the idea.

"I mostly play only one game, and Magical Sky isn't all that... realistic. Not in that manner, anyway. I don't think I've ever even seen a corpse in the game."

She paused for a moment.

"That being said, the game is what my dreams remind me of. It's the only connection I can draw right now. But it's... different. More violent. People getting killed. Especially—"

She frowned. She had been about to say something, but had stopped abruptly, and now she couldn't remember what it was. It was important.

"You don't have to push yourself," Yui said soothingly.

There was a moment of silence.

"I have to say," Yui commented, frowning at her notes, "if you insist your video games don't have any traumatic content, then I'm at a loss for explanation. Your description sounds like you're experiencing the aftermath of some kind of trauma, but it's unusual for you to be unable to remember any of it. Nothing in your file indicates recent or past trauma. Is there perhaps something that is *not* in the file?"

The therapist wore a serious expression, and Asaka got the impression that it was supposed to convince her to talk, if indeed she were hiding something—but she wasn't.

"Honestly, I don't think so," she said. "I've had a pretty comfortable life."

"Tell me your life story."

The request was phrased so matter-of-factly that it was a moment before Asaka realized what was being asked, looking up in surprise.

"Don't you—" she began, gesturing at the therapist's tablet.

"I want to hear it from you," the woman said, continuing to smile slightly.

Asaka turned her head to face the ceiling again, exhaling. She didn't think this would lead anywhere.

She took a moment to compose something suitably biographical in her mind.

"I'm not sure there's much to say, at least that's not already in your files. I was born on Earth, in Kyoto, Japan. I had pretty much a normal childhood, except that my parents thought I was too introverted. It wasn't really a surprise, since the doctors had warned them that my genetics would land me pretty far on the path to the old autistic spectrum, but it still bothered them."

She figured that, of all people, a therapist wouldn't need to receive an explanation regarding

Governance policy on genetic modification and human personality diversity. It was something she tended to tack on automatically to forestall the usually inevitable "Why wasn't that edited out of the genepool?" question that usually resulted. Personally, she was glad it hadn't, or she wouldn't have been here to think about it.

She paused for a moment to think about it further, before continuing:

"They tried to push me into hobbies I didn't really like, and we had a lot of fights about it. I spent a lot of time in the school gaming club using their equipment. I can go into lots of detail if you want, but it's pretty typical stuff. Definitely not war trauma, anyway."

The therapist nodded, peering at her tablet.

"I'll take your word for it. We can revisit it later if we see the need. Did you play any particularly violent games back then?"

"Not really. You know, most of us aren't actually interested in seeing blood and gore everywhere, except for a few weirdos. It's an annoying stereotype."

"I have to ask," Yui said, spreading her hands in a gesture of harmlessness. "Continue."

"Well, I was a poorly-adjusted teenager, as I was saying. There was a period when I was very angry at everyone, but I eventually... worked myself out of it, I guess. I don't want to sound sappy, but that's right around when I met my wife. Well, I, uh, she was very supportive."

She paused, having rammed into a bit of a dead-end in her story.

"And I guess that's it," she finished. "There's not really much more to say. We graduated from high school and got married. I was already making pretty good money from my guild, and I wanted to get away from my parents, so we moved here. It's been quite a while since then."

"Only two years," Yui pointed out. "Though, maybe that does seem like a while to someone as young as you."

Asaka frowned. Yes, it had been... only two years. It was so easy to forget. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

"And you two are planning on having children?" Yui asked. "Do you know, ah, who will do the baking?"

Asaka turned to stare at the therapist, a look of surprise plastered on her face.

"Well, yes, probably, but how—"

"Sorry, sorry. It was in the information your wife filed when she made this appointment. It's important to know if you might be pregnant, since it affects the kinds of interventions we might pursue. Though it probably won't affect you at all."

"I see," Asaka said, wondering if Alice was going to pressure her into having kids simply by telling everyone in the area they were going to, the equivalent of investing an enemy fortification instead of trying to take it by assault.

Tanaka Yui chewed her lip for a moment.

"Well, this is the end of our session. I hadn't wanted to resort to this, but there is actually something we can do about all this, even if you can't remember anything. Do you know anything

about dream studies?"

Asaka shook her head.

"Well, basically," Yui explained. "We can use your implants to watch your dreams from the outside. I'd like to make an appointment for you to go to the facility sometime... tomorrow, maybe? We'll see what times are available. That way, we'll know once and for all what you're not remembering. The way it works is, we'll record it, and the first one to see it will be you, when you wake up. That way, if you don't want me to see anything, you can choose not to show me."

She looked at Asaka questioningly, eyebrow arched. Asaka thought about it for a moment.

"Of course, everything is absolutely confidential; we'll provide you with a strict privacy agreement," Yui added, as encouragement.

"I guess I am curious," she said. "And if I get to see it first, I guess it's alright."

"Okay," Yui said, smiling. "Let me send you the agreement form."

"Thanks again for coming all this way to see us," Alice said, smiling pleasantly as she took her seat at the dinner table.

"Oh, it was no problem," Patricia von Rohr responded vaguely, watching Alice rearrange the food on the table with a slightly bewildered expression. The small table in front of them—square, artificial wood—was adorned with a colorful and carefully arranged array of freshly prepared food. Beef bourguignon served as the centerpiece of the meal, flanked by mashed potatoes and a salad of local vegetables, including the fuzzy red lettuce locals always tried to scare Earthers with. Drinks consisted of wine—Burgundy, to go with the beef. Alice was particular about these things, which meant that Asaka had to pretend it mattered to her too.

It wasn't exactly the food Asaka had grown up with, but certain concessions had to be made when you married outside your ethnic group, especially when your were almost always the kitchen assistant, not the chef.

Besides, Nova Terra being a Core World, they typically ate synthesized fare, eating cooked food only when it struck Alice's fancy to try and make something. It depended on her mood, and whether or not the schoolkids Alice spend her days shepherding had decided to be kind to her that day.

Occasionally Alice tried her hand at something more Asian, but not today. Patricia was a guest, and both Asaka and Alice knew that despite Patricia's years of living in Japan, she had never quite reconciled herself to the local cuisine. One downside of synthesizers: it was entirely possible to live decades in a foreign country without touching any food you didn't want. Not exactly optimal cultural interchange.

So a salad, mashed potatoes, and beef bourguignon, the last of which Alice always reassured her was "sort of like Hayashi rice". Having had it on multiple occasions, she supposed it wasn't terribly off the mark.

"I've always wanted to take a vacation out here," Patricia explained, unfazed by the fuzzy red leaves in the salad as she moved some of it onto her plate. "And it's not that far, really."

"How long did it take you to get here?" Asaka asked.

"Two weeks by commercial vessel," Patricia said. "It wasn't that bad, I swear. They had lots of

amenities. Not as fast as being on a military vessel, but..."

"You've been on a military vessel?" Asaka asked.

"Haven't you?"

"No," Asaka responded instantly. "I, well..."

"I suppose two weeks is still faster than how *we* got here," Alice said, getting up from the table. "But we didn't have to go both ways."

"Ah, well, you know how it is," Patricia said. "Work schedules on Earth aren't very strict. Oh, and you didn't have to do all this, not when I'm infringing on your hospitality by staying here."

The last sentence had been triggered by Alice reappearing from the kitchen with a pot of white asparagus soup.

"Nonsense, we have plenty of extra space," Alice rebuked, setting the pot down, "and the food wasn't really much trouble at all. This is all pretty easy stuff."

Asaka smiled, and sipped at her wine. It was true that they had much more living space to themselves than would have been typical on Earth, and it was also true that the food Alice had made wasn't *too* time-consuming—but the real truth was that Alice was eager to test her ability at playing host, whether she admitted it or not.

Left on her own, Asaka doubted she would have settled down as rapidly as this, but life was unexpected, sometimes.

"I just hope you don't intend to do this every day I'm here," Patricia said, "or I'm going to have to insist on helping with the cooking and, for all of our sakes, let's hope that doesn't have to happen."

Alice shook her head amusedly.

"Of course not. Tomorrow we'll be back to bread and water. But what kind of friends would we be if we didn't hold a celebratory dinner for your arrival?"

Alice held up her wineglass, and it took a moment for the other two to realize what she was doing.

They held a toast to a "new life".

"So how is the gamer life going?" Patricia asked, masticating on a piece of beef.

"Oh, not bad," Asaka said. "The guild is growing, we're winning games, we have viewers. Can't really complain."

"Sometimes I have to join a game, just to nag her into leaving," Alice said. "Though I do admit it's not bad as a break, sometimes."

"I can see how some people might be tempted to never leave," Patricia said. "Have you heard? There's a new black market implant hack. It's quite sophisticated. Accesses some of Governance's buried emergency subroutines, and makes it so a properly configured server can suppress any memory. You can forget all about reality, if you want."

Asaka looked down at her noodles, twirling her fork to pick up some sauce. Alice had really outdone herself today.

"Really?" she heard Alice say. "I hadn't heard of it. Sounds scary."

"I guess I have to be more in touch with this kind of thing, in my line of work," Patricia said. "Governance is not happy about it—it didn't want people to know those subroutines even existed. The speculation is that there's going to be a major crackdown. I would have thought you'd have heard of it, though, Asaka."

"I guess I haven't," Asaka said, shaking off some of the effects of the alcohol. "Sounds familiar, though."

She paused for a moment, looking into her empty wineglass, then poured herself another cup.

"It seems like you could do some pretty crazy stuff. People unhappy with their lives could try to escape reality, for example."

"I can't say that sounds healthy," Patricia commented.

"Definitely not!" Alice echoed. "I mean, even if, worst case scenario, you lost someone you loved, you'd have to deal with it eventually. You can't stay stuck in your old life forever."

Asaka glanced over at Alice, into those ice-blue eyes she loved so much. For a moment, they seemed to chill like ice, too.

"Yeah, I guess," she agreed, looking back down at her wineglass.

She took another drink.

"Do you still remember how we met?" Patricia asked, later that night, when they were seated in the living room to chat.

Asaka looked at her, waiting a moment for the memory to form.

"Oh, yeah," she said. "It was in the school gaming club, wasn't it? I forget why you were there, but you said you were studying VR implants, and I knew a lot about them."

Patricia smiled shyly.

"I wasn't such a genius back then, so I needed a lot of help."

"It doesn't sound very modest to call yourself a genius," Asaka pointed out.

"It's crazy, how much better you got in high school," Alice said, referring to Patricia. "It's like someone flipped a switch one day, and suddenly you knew how to do everything. On the other hand, I don't know what I was doing. I sort of muddled through."

Patricia shook her head.

"Don't say that. You worked hard. I've never been satisfied, no matter how hard I worked. Not since..."

Her voice trailed off, and there was an awkward silence for a moment.

"It's depressing to look at things that way," Asaka said. "It's over now, and it can't be a loss. I met you there, after all. I don't know what I would have done without you."

The last sentence was directed at Alice, whose hand she reached out to grasp.

"You would have been fine without me, Asaka," Alice said, squeezing her hand. "You didn't need my help."

"Are you kidding?" Asaka said, incredulously. "Don't you remember when—?"

She stopped, having lost her train of thought.

"When..." she tried again, still unable to complete the sentence.

She shook her head at herself, confused.

"Well, in any case, I have some fond memories of the time," she said, trying to recover.

"As do I," Patricia said. "But one can't live on memories alone."

Probing: Sector 5a22e. Seeking—

It was as if she had to watch everything through a fog. Only a few details ever caught her attention—an explosion here, a chatter of gunshots over there, the sound seeming to come from another world. But, somehow, she always reacted fluidly.

Open fire! *she heard herself order, and to her far right a thunderous cacophony of small arms and armor-mounted mortar fire broke the relative silence, resonant and eerie to her distorted hearing.*

Around her, behind the trees that densely saturated their area, six other teenage girls crouched, dressed in a series of costumes that were more appropriate for children's entertainment than an apparent war-zone. She nodded at them, and they nodded back. Distantly, a part of her noted that one of the girls was Alice*, but, just then, the fact seemed entirely appropriate.*

She performed one last mental check, scrolling over the platoons of shock infantry that would be following them in. This she did with a determined grimness that she had never before experienced in Magical Sky*, yet at no time did it seem unusual to her.*

The other attack, far to the right, was only a distraction. The aliens were attacking elsewhere, so they were counterattacking, striking at an exposed flank while the aliens were distracted. It was as interminable as the flow of time itself, attack and counterattack and counter-counterattack, the natural result of their two opposed, yet eeriely similar, tactical doctrines. It had a logic and a force of will all its own—they were merely leaves tossed about by the wind.

She took a breath, the sound of rushing air loud in her ears, then gave the order to GO.

They broke out into the open, seven girls charging down a clearing, bold and audacious, even ahead of the drones, for maximum surprise. They ran faster than any human, or even any machine, spurred onward by the accelerating influence of Alice's magic, shielded in front by Asaka's barrier.

Jack-of-all-trades, they had called her, sometimes affectionately, sometimes disparagingly. Capable of doing everything, but good at nothing. She was capable of more than just that, she knew, but there had been no way for the simulations to show it, based as they were on her measured power. She knew *that she could grow her abilities, that she just didn't start with a default power like most girls, but—*

She discarded those thoughts as they impacted the alien position—literally impacted, as she shoved as much power as she could into her forward barrier, driven forward by Alice's magic.

Alien infantry and equipment went flying into the air in almost comic fashion, some of it smashed to pieces.

The next few minutes were a blur, even by the already stilted standards of her perception. She shielded those around her as best she could with her bubble, casting stronger barriers in specific locations when it seemed needed. She was stuck as barrier generator for now, and she made the best of it, watching for threats, defusing them when she could. The drones finally arrived, pouring into the gap in the alien line they had created, followed by the infantry of their platoons.

Then, disaster.

An alarm went off. Someone in her operating team was critically injured and required immediate evac—

"Alice!" she screamed.

Twisting her right wrist in almost impossible fashion, she spun the dagger in her hand, driving into the hapless alien next to her. The magical blade tore through shield, armor, flesh, and bone, splashing ichor over her already drenched arm.

She tore across the battlefield, across the distance that now separated them. She moved faster than any human could imagine, but still felt as if she were running through molasses. She drove her barrier like a wedge in front of her, shoving everything aside, risking everything. Shards broke off her barrier, like glass shattering, but these shards sharpened themselves immediately, flinging themselves outward to impale anything in the area.

Why did Alice have to be so damn fast*? How had she gotten so damn* far*?*

And yet, sooner than she expected, she was there. Alice looked up at her prone on the floor, clutching at a severed leg. The girl was biting her lip, and when she looked up, she showed a moment of weakness, a tear appearing in her eye from the pain—using your implants or your soul gem to suppress pain carried downsides to the precision of your power usage and movements, making pain management sometimes a delicate balance. She had been trying to escape on her own power, a not unheard-of feat for a magical girl missing merely one limb—though not quite a common one.

It's okay, *Asaka thought, trying to be soothing despite her emotion.* I'm here. Keep the pain suppressed, and I'll get you out.

It's armor, *Alice thought.* We're not powerful enough to take them on alone, not the two of us. You should—

No, *Asaka growled.* I'm not leaving you. Come on.

She bent down to pick the other girl up, draping her over her shoulders effortlessly, even as she tried to be gentle with the gaping wound, even as she tried desperately to look away from it.

As she did so, she tried to ask for friendly artillery to hone in around their position, maybe clear a path for them, but she was too far. No one could hear her.

I can use my magic to help you move faster, *Alice thought.*

Save your gem, *Asaka thought.*

We have to. You can't—

Asaka barely responded in time, throwing up a barrier strong enough to block the laser impact, gritting her teeth with effort as the focused radiation almost blinded her.

Then she could sense them, entering the bubble she now had spread broadly around them, stealth tanks hovering silently into range. One of them had taken a shot at her, but the others still hoped their stealth would hide them, oblivious to Asaka's barrier—spread so thinly it wouldn't have stopped a fly, but sufficient for detection.

Asaka felt a quiet anger seep into her. Anger at having her life so rudely violated. Anger that anyone would dare to hurt—

"This is my *world," she growled, and the barrier around her—the barrier that defined the range of her powers, and followed her everywhere—crackled to life, angry and violet, glowing with radiant power.*

"Get out!" she screamed.

The dream warped around her, and a moment later she was no longer in the alien forest, no longer trapped with Alice behind alien lines. Instead—

"I heard about your promotion," Alice said, looking at her kindly from the hospital bed. "They said no one expected you to have something like that in you."

"Yeah," Asaka said emptily, reaching out with one hand for Alice, who returned the gesture.

"How's the leg?" she asked, a moment later.

"It'll only keep me here about three days," Alice said. "It'd go faster with a magical healer, but there aren't enough of those right now."

She smiled warmly, and Asaka smiled back, slightly. Then she let the smile drop.

"They're trying to get me away from you," Asaka said, looking down at edge of the bed, the words coming in a torrent. "The promotion gives them an excuse. We weren't supposed to be assigned together anyway. It was only because of the exception. The MHD granted one, because they thought I wouldn't be okay alone. I'm sorry I never told you. But now it's been long enough, and they're worried that if something happens to you, I'll—"

Alice squeezed her hand, turning over to try and hug her, an awkward affair with one leg still mostly missing.

"I know," she said. "They told me about all that. And they told me about your transfer too."

"I don't want to leave you," Asaka sobbed. "I can't leave you."

"I know," Alice said, patting her on the head. "But they're right. You'll be okay. We can stay in touch."

"I won't leave you. I won't—"

External Interference! Shutting D—

In the end, Asaka convinced herself to let Tanaka Yui and the dream analysts view the video, but it was a tougher decision than she liked to admit. The dream had no salacious scenes, no dark family secrets—nothing that would justify keeping it locked in her mind.

And yet...

When she had watched herself in the dream, it hadn't seemed nonsensical, or symbolic, or prophetic, or any of the other things one might expect a dream to be.

It felt like memory, memory of another life, another world, another existence.

It felt like...

Something about the dream shook her to her very core. It seemed *natural*, that she would be some kind of magic user, that she and Alice would fight together in a war, that she would be a...

Mahou Shoujo.

Why did it seem so real?

She looked up when the door in the waiting room opened, inordinately frightened of who it might be. She had to suppress a sigh of relief when it turned out to just be her therapist, back from watching the dream recording.

Of course, she thought. *Who else could it be?*

Am I going crazy?

Tanaka Yui wore a plain blouse, coupled with a medium-length skirt. She sat down across from her, so that Asaka found herself looking directly back into the therapist's eyes.

She glanced away—something about those eyes disturbed her.

"Well, I have to say: it was quite something," Yui said.

"Yeah," Asaka responded, wondering if the therapist could tell how much viewing the dream log had unnerved her.

"One of the things that struck the analysts about the dream was how strangely consistent it was, if that makes sense. Everything viewed in a dream is actively filled in by the brain, so it is usually the case that nothing really looks the same twice. Buildings change, people change, the situation changes—but that's not what this dream is like. It's startingly consistent in narrative and detail, and the same people and objects recur throughout."

"I see," Asaka said emptily, looking down at the floor. What was she supposed to say? It made sense.

"There's also the mechanical voice that begins and ends the dream. I have to admit, in all our years of work, we've seen nothing like it."

"It's not from the recording system?" Asaka asked, looking up in surprise. "I thought..."

"No," Yui said, when she didn't finish the sentence. "That voice was part of the dream itself, and we have legitimately no idea how it got there."

Asaka furrowed her brow. A mechanical voice...

What did it all mean? An unusually consistent dream, that felt disturbingly real, despite being impossibly fantastic—did it signal some kind of psychiatric problem?

"In any case," Yui said, "I have to ask you: is there anything about your past you're keeping from me? Something that might explain the events in this dream?"

The question froze Asaka for a moment. She looked for a moment at her open hand.

What kind of question is that? My past? Is she wondering if I have some sort of trauma?

"Why?" she asked, finally.

Yui took a breath, seeming conflicted.

"Well, given the evidence on hand, we don't think it's really a psychological problem. The only conclusion that really makes sense to us is that what we're looking at here is some kind of legitimate memory, one..."

Yui seemed to stall mid-sentence, but for a moment Asaka didn't notice.

A legitimate memory? Asaka thought. *But that's...*

She didn't finish the thought, the word "nonsense" dying stillborn in her mind. Somehow she couldn't just dismiss it like that, and that was the most chilling revelation she had ever experienced.

Asaka looked up, eyes deeply confused, and Yui finally continued.

"I don't know if I should really tell you this, but we think this dream is the fragment of a memory that was artificially suppressed at some point. The obvious conclusion is that you were involved in the alien war, but now you're here, somehow. It still doesn't entirely make sense, but it would explain the consistency of the dream, and the mechanical voice, which almost sounds like some kind of memory probe. I'm not saying it's one hundred percent certain, but we do know that kind of technology exists, and this is... what it would probably look like."

The therapist looked small for a moment, almost as if she were afraid of Asaka somehow. Asaka wondered her face looked like at that kind of moment.

She gaped silently. Suppressed memory? Memory probe? It sounded like some kind of conspiracy theorist fever-dream, except her dream was hardly feverish at all. Instead, it was the kind of dream that was making the trained therapist in front of her visibly scared.

"This kind of thing..." Yui said, finally, now seeming confident that Asaka wasn't going to explode at her. "I'm worried we've stumbled into some kind of secret Governance thing. Something dangerous. I'm going to ask a friend I have, but... the whole thing makes me tremendously nervous. This is all textbook-only stuff, training for dealing with Unification War veterans, but mostly hasn't been relevant for centuries. You're nowhere near that old. Officially, anyway, I guess. But then the dreams don't look look anything like *that* war, and the technology was never really that good. The magical girl stuff must be some crossover from the video gaming, but maybe it's a hint—it's the only thing in the dream that doesn't feel real. But it fits in—"

Yui's eyes which had glazed over, snapped abruptly back into focus, as the therapist realized she had slipped into a rant, talking to herself rather than to her patient.

"Are you sure you don't remember anything about it?" she asked

Asaka wasn't sure why she felt suddenly so calm. By rights she should have been up and screaming, but instead something bothered her...

"Alien war?" she asked.

Yui blinked at her.

"Yes. The war against the squid. You do remember, right?"

Asaka put a hand to her head, shaking her head at her own question.

"Yes, yes I do. Of course."

Yui looked at her with a combination of worry, fear, and scientific interest.

"If you say so," she said. "But if you do find yourself experiencing memory lapses, please tell us. It could be a hint. And..."

Yui paused again, searching for the words.

"I don't know," she said. "This is too far out of my clinical experience. But... the patient is most important. If you feel uncertain or unhappy at all, I'm here. I want you to come back in tomorrow for another study. And, if you can, show the video from this session to your wife. She figures prominently in the dream, so she might know something. In fact, bring her tomorrow, if you can."

Asaka looked at the therapist.

"What the hell am I supposed to think?" she said, finally. "This is crazy. I should tell you you're crazy, but you're right: the dream feels real to me. But then what? Is my life fake somehow? What the hell am I supposed to do about that?"

Asaka looked down.

"Thank you for being honest with me," she said. "I don't... The worst part is, I shouldn't believe any of this. My life is real. I should *know* that. But... somehow the dream feels like the truth, and that scares me. I regret ever coming in here. I'm scared, and I don't want to know, but how can I live now without finding out?"

Yui fiddled with her tablet.

"I don't know."

"Welcome home, Asaka."

Asaka could only hope she managed to respond to Alice cogently at the doorway, but suspected she had actually just mumbled something incoherent and stumbled past her. Alice wasn't the type to be offended by that, if there was something obviously wrong—and in this case, Asaka had no delusions about being able to convey that there was nothing wrong. Alice would know.

Instead, Asaka opted to lie down on their shared bed and stare out the window, waiting for her to come. She wasn't sure what to do—in the normal course of things, she'd be glad to pour her heart out to Alice, but this? What was she supposed to say?

Besides that, there was the singularly unsettling fact that if the therapist had been right in her theories, then Alice had to be involved somehow. *Had to,* because not only was Alice part of the dream, the two of them had been practically hanging on each other's shoulders since high school —if there really were a mysterious gap in her recent life history, it couldn't possibly have gone beneath Alice's notice. That meant that if there was memory tampering going on, it had happened to Alice too or—unthinkable—Alice was in on it.

No, she couldn't doubt Alice. She wouldn't. But if it were the other possibility, she was doing Alice a disservice if she didn't say anything. Not just a disservice—she *had* to say something.

It was crazy that she was taking this seriously. It was more likely that this was all an overblown overreaction, that she had some sort of paranoia problem, and that the therapist didn't know what she was doing. At the very least, she should have sought a second opinion, or at least have talked to some of the dream "analysts".

And yet...

Ugh, I have to talk to Alice.

"So I take it you didn't exactly get good news," Alice said, appearing next to her almost as if on cue.

Asaka looked up at her wife's face, wondering what to say. Ordinarily, at a difficult moment, she might have tried to pull Alice in for a tumble under the sheets. It was a coin flip whether or not Alice would accept, but even just the attempt would have relieved stress.

Somehow, at the moment, she just didn't feel like it.

She sighed, then frowned, noticing something.

"When did that building show up?" she asked, pointing out the window.

Alice glanced over, accepting for the moment the change to a seemingly irrelevant topic.

"That? That's the Zeus Research Building. It's been in Mitakihara for at least a century, supposedly. Haven't you ever noticed it before?"

"No, yeah, that's..." Asaka mumbled emptily, as thought to herself:

Mitakihara? But that doesn't—why...

She put a hand to her head.

"I'm sorry, Alice," she said, pushing herself into a seated position. "I need to de-stress a little, play some games. I'll tell you about it afterwards. That's a guarantee."

She clasped hands with Alice and smiled slightly to seal the deal. Alice smiled back.

"Okay, but I think I'll join you today."

Asaka nodded.

"Alright."

There was no prearranged, serious match this time. Much of the guild was engaged in practice matches, either with other parts of the guild or other guilds elsewhere.

Asaka and Alice materialized in the guild "lounge", a vast, simulated mansion filled to the brim with recreational delights, ranging from the virtual tennis courts, to the vast reading room, to the ever-popular privacy rooms. More of a play area than a simulated reality, it was constantly shifting in response to the demands of its users, who generally teleported where they wished to be, rather than wasting time walking.

The server time required to run the simulation came directly out of guild funds, along with the rented VR equipment used by most members. It was a tremendously expensive perk, and testified to the success the guild had managed in attracting viewers—but the expense meant that recreation time was strictly limited, and tied to both combat performance and time spent in practice. As guild leader, Asaka had more access than anyone, but rarely used it, except for the occasional private session with Alice, when they felt like experimenting.

This time they weren't here for any of that, so they materialized straight into the waiting area, an unlimited-access sitting room that was used for basic socialization, and of course to find games to join. As they walked through the room, a wave of greetings sounded from the other guild members in the room, which Asaka accepted pleasantly.

Alice's in-game avatar, which was always what she was using in the lobby, bore a strong resemblance to the way Madhuri looked in real life—according to Madhuri, anyway; Asaka had never actually met her. Alice had chosen it primarily as an in-joke, to reflect the way in which Madhuri's avatar reflected her.

Speaking of which...

"Is something wrong?" Alice asked, noting the frown that had appeared on Asaka's face.

"Maybe," she said. "I'm trying to query if Madhuri is online, but this damn interface doesn't seem to be working. I thought we might have fun discussing the child you intend for us to have, and child licensing."

"Who's Madhuri? And does this mean you're finally agreeing to it?"

"I'm not agreeing. I'm just saying that if—"

Asaka froze mid-sentence, turning to look Alice in the eye. A chill crept up her back.

"Madhuri," she said. "You know, second-in-command, old friend of mine. We talk all the time. You've known her for years."

"I don't know who you're talking about," Alice said, shaking her head. "I don't know anyone named Madhuri. And second-in-command is Henrietta. Look, here she comes."

Asaka looked, and the girl approaching, with the absurdly pompous screenname "Henrietta Nattherhiem Elenora", had an avatar that looked more like Alice than Madhuri ever had.

"Is something wrong?" Henrietta asked, coming to a stop.

What Asaka felt then wasn't nausea, not exactly. It was more a combination of confusion, fear, and complete dislocation. She looked back and forth between Henrietta and the increasingly worried-looking Alice, and her world spun, just a little.

"Are you alright?" Alice asked. "I'm really worried—"

Asaka cut the simulation perfunctorily, using the almost never-used emergency exit protocol. As the world came back into focus in front of her, she found herself breathing heavily.

As the connection cable detached, she leaned forward, putting her head in her hands. Next to her, Colonel Fluff raised its head, making an inquisitive noise.

Are you okay? her dog asked.

Asaka didn't know what to say. She couldn't deal with this right now. She *remembered* Madhuri. What was going on? Was she crazy?

She had gone into the game to try and relax, and it had only made things worse.

In that moment, with nothing solid to focus on, all she could think, almost nonsensically, was that if she were crazy, it was definitely not a good idea to have kids.

A long moment later, Alice stirred in the other chair, the twin to Asaka's own. At that moment, Asaka found herself pitifully unsure whether she wanted Alice to comfort her, or whether she preferred to be alone. She would never previously have thought she would ever want to be away from her, and that fact terrified her.

Alice walked over, and something abruptly occurred to Asaka, something that had strangely escaped her until then.

"Where's Patricia?" she asked, before Alice even had a chance to say anything.

Alice peered at her for a moment, weighing whether to answer the question or ask what was going on with Asaka.

"Patricia? She was visiting earlier today, but she's gone demon-hunting. Left before you got back. Asaka, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

"Demon-hunting," Asaka said, repeating the words emptily.

Yes, that made sense of course. They were magical girls, and that was what they did. There was no reason to expect Patricia to be here—she had her own flat, after all.

And yet, somehow, despite the sudden certainty, Asaka had the queasy sense that somehow, just a moment ago, the facts had been different. The world had been different. Reality had been different.

Instead of answering Alice's question, she grabbed the girl's waist, burying her face in her stomach. Colonel Fluff appeared at her side, whining, not using the texting service, which she was ignoring. Her dog knew something was wrong. It was almost an absurdist tableau.

"I just—" Asaka began, without moving her head.

She paused.

"I want you to come with me to the therapist tomorrow," she said. "I—"

She stopped, thinking about it.

"Asaka, I'm seriously worried about you right now," Alice said. "What happened to you at the dream study?"

Asaka took a breath, and pushed herself up out of the chair, trying to stabilize herself.

No. The problem wasn't with reality. It was with herself. A defective implant or something. Or maybe the dream study had damaged something. It had to be something like that. She couldn't let herself fall apart. She would run an implant diagnostic, see if she still had dreams, then talk to Tanaka Yui tomorrow.

It had to work.

"Something pretty crazy," she said. "I think I need to run an implant self-diagnostic. Something is wrong, I think."

"A diagnostic?" Alice repeated. "No one has needed to do *that* for centuries."

"I think I might be an exception."

"Will you just tell me what's going on?"

Alice glared at her, and Asaka met her gaze, the two of them engaging in a miniature battle of wills.

"I'll tell you after the diagnostic," Asaka said. "I know I promised, but please. I really think something is wrong. It's too hard to explain, and I should probably do it sooner rather than later."

Alice scowled at her.

"Fine. Let's see what happens."

Asaka nodded, ignoring the hint of anger from Alice, and sat back down.

Reaching inward, she repeated a procedure they had all been taught in primary school, but had never expected to have to use.

Are you sure? a mechanical voice asked, deep inside her.

Yes.

Unlike what she had heard was available to military personnel, civilian diagnostics were very limited. Specifically, they had access to a generic "self-diagnostic", and that was it. More were available in Emergency Mode, but those weren't really relevant to her.

Nowadays, the self-diagnostic routine placed the user into a brief period of induced sleep, which people found preferable to the old style, which involved a period of uncomfortable sensory restriction.

It had not occurred to Asaka to wonder if she would dream during diagnostic-induced sleep. If she had, she would likely have guessed that she wouldn't—a situation where it was necessary to fiddle with brain implants seemed like exactly the kind of situation where even partial consciousness might be artificially suppressed.

And yet, she dreamed.

It's been a long time.

Asaka started, almost tripping over herself as she got up from the chair where she had been tapping her foot impatiently—then almost tripping over the bed next to her.

Privately, she cursed herself for choosing such a small bedroom for this simulation.

"Yes, it has," she managed, once she had recovered her composure.

She and Alice stood awkwardly for moment. It really had *been a long time—the battlefield had kept the two of separated for far longer than Asaka cared to think about.*

Even now, they still hadn't truly managed to meet, of course. This was a simulation, with VR access gifted from those of their friends who knew just how much they missed each other. Even with the relatively commonly VR-tech prevalent in the military, it had taken them literally months to find a time-frame in which they were both free and had access to VR chairs, which had the high fidelity they needed for this kind of meeting.

Unable to think of anything good to say, Asaka instead stepped forward, drawing the other girl into a hug, and then a kiss, long and sensuous.

When they finally ended it, Alice looked her in the eye. Much had been said, even if no words had been involved.

"So," Alice said, smiling playfully. "Should we talk first, or..."

She looked meaningfully at the bed behind Asaka.

"That is, after all, what people typically use these simulations for. Why else the VR chairs?" Alice said,

Then her girlfriend gave her a look that made her blood run hot. She became abruptly aware of their bodies pressed against each other, of certain body parts that suddenly had her attention.

"I suppose we can play first and talk later," Asaka said, more hesitantly than she really felt. "If that's what you want."

"It's what I want."

The two of them stumbled backward onto the bed, hands groping awkwardly.

"You know," Alice said, breathing into her neck. "We don't have to do this. We could just delete the clothes from the simulation entirely. Would be faster."

"I want foreplay, Alice," Asaka managed, despite a distracting digging motion the other girl was making with her hand.

"I suppose you don't want to try using different bodies, either," Alice said, sounding playfully disappointed. "That's a popular thing to do."

Asaka answered the question by grabbing a particular sensitive region on Alice's body.

"I want you, Alice," she said, feeling her voice drop several registers.

"I know."

Afterward, they talked, Asaka's head resting on Alice's neck.

"I'm sorry I can't visit you more," Asaka said. "I think we can do this more often."

"I know," Alice said. "But it's not your fault. Not my fault either. It's the way things are. We just have to live with it."

"It's different for me, though. I'm an officer. I could make time, if I really wanted to."

"No. You have obligations. I understand."

"It kills me."

"I know," Alice said. She always knew.

They lay in silence for a moment.

"Sometimes I wish I didn't," Asaka said. "Have obligations, that is. If I hadn't been promoted—"

"Don't start this again," Alice warned. "We've been over this. The MHD would never have let us stay close together anyway."

"I wished to be good with human society," Asaka said. "And so I am—that's what the promotions are about, I think. But that's not really what I want. Not anymore. What kind of world is this, where a girl has to regret her wish?"

"It's the world we live in," Alice said, "and we have to deal with it. You would never have met me without that wish. Think of it that way."

"I wish we didn't—" Asaka began.

Then she stopped, as an internal voice warned the both of them that a surprise alien offensive had just begun, and all personnel needed to head immediately to combat positions.

"Seriously?" she complained angrily.

"I'll see you next week," Alice said. "That's a promise."

"Yeah."

Colonel Emmanuel James has been killed in combat, *the Command Gestalt thought,* 60% of subordinate officers have now been lost, along with 50% of the command AI bunkers.

Somewhere in the depths of her mind, Asaka swore. The command structure below her was running on fumes already, as could be inferred from the simple fact that she, a colonel, was running an entire three-division corps, *a role fit for a lieutenant general. That implied, at a minimum, that all the brigadier generals and major generals were either dead or unable to reach a usable command post. In all likelihood, the only reason General Filopovic was still alive was the fact that he was commanding from orbit. Squid decapitation strikes were* brutal, *a fact that helped the growing presence of magical girls in the officer corps.*

The obvious answer was field promotion. The design of the command structure was intended to facilitate the smooth replacement of lost officers as much as possible—but loss of efficacy was still unavoidable. Inexperienced lieutenants and captains were filling in for captains and majors throughout the line, and their inexperience was getting themselves—and the tattered remains of their units—killed.

She hoped her own position wasn't evident of that.

As a colonel, she was already used to operating on the outer edges of Maximal Command Mode, connected to the AI networks through a fortified command bunker. That experience was serving her well now, even if she had to operate from a far more central role.

The command post she was in still had active communications and orbital links, so she knew all she needed to about the situation—and the situation was dire. The squid attack had thrown the entire front into disarray, and she was caught in the thick of it, holding the one position that had *to hold, against at least three times her number. She would have expected that to mean she would*

receive reinforcements, but the squid had launched a major orbital attack as well. The mobile reserve was pinned down by orbital fire, and she wouldn't receive any orbital support of her own for a long time.

They were alone, the line was breaking, and she had no reserves of her own left.

We need time to disengage! We'll get torn up if we just turn and leave! *one of the brand-new colonels beneath her thought, referring to the brigade under his command, which Asaka had ordered to move and reinforce one of the faltering sectors.*

I know, *Asaka thought, growling slightly.* You don't have to tell me. The orders are to move when practicable. Make it practicable.

Newbies, *she thought to herself.*

They were unused to Command Mode, and insisted on communicating directly far too often, instead of just using their damn interfaces, making both their jobs much harder than it needed to be. Verbal communications raised morale at the lower levels, but at the command level it just crowded out much more efficient "machine" communication.

But the concern the colonel had brought up was legitimate, she thought, the train of logic racing through her synapses, into the AI subroutines, and back out again, over and over, impossibly fast. She was trying to shorten the line to prevent a breakthrough at the Point 54-57 line, but these kinds of maneuvers took time, especially when under fire. Too precipitate a withdrawal by any unit in one of the other sectors could imperil the entire area, but the need was critical—4th regiment was already in literal pieces, each part withdrawing to a different location, leaving a hole open that led straight to the rear. Someone had to stay and buy as much time as they could.

The only viable choice was the piece in the middle: remnants of 2nd battalion, comprising delta company, part of charlie company, beta company, with fragments of 1st battalion, delta company. Their magical girl contingent was depleted, with only seven active. Withdrawing them would compromise the position, and given how critical the position was to the corps, and how critical the corps was to the front as a whole, it was necessary to sacrifice—

The realization hit her then, strong enough to even interrupt the AI-mediated command state, piercing the cloud of emotional detachment that naturally accompanied.

Second division, second batallion, delta company was the company Alice was in. She knew that by heart—of course she did.

With command responsibilities still screaming at her, she ran through her options as fast she could. Reinforce—no reinforcements available. Withdraw—she might literally lose the colony. Withdraw only Alice—a complete non-starter. Alice would know what was going on. She wouldn't go. Agonizingly, Asaka knew she wouldn't.

I can't—I don't—

The decision tore at her mind. It was her worst nightmare, made real. She should have never been in command of her own lover, it had only happened because of the breakdown in command—but what was she supposed to do? How could she order her to do this? Alice was going to die. It was nearly certain. But then, how could she? How could—

And then she felt the soft muffling grip of her TacComp's emotional suppression descending on her with maximum force, certain parts of her brain simply silenced into oblivion. The command AI had issued the order, had already issued the order to stand at all costs; she had other duties to

attend to.

Then the dream broke, and the pain hit her, all at once.

Asaka woke gasping, with tears in her eyes, and this time was different than all the rest.

She remembered.

Half an hour later, Alice had died, and the combat AI had kept that fact from her.

What she had told herself at the time wasn't the truth. If it had been, perhaps she could have handled it.

The truth was that the TacComp's emotional suppression couldn't keep a magical girl's emotions quashed, not when the soul gem was involved, as it should have been. The command AIs had no authority to control a personal TacComp—the emotional suppression had to have originated from Asaka herself, or from the TacComp, with at least her tacit approval.

She had looked it up, after the fact, confirming for herself what she already knew.

How, then?

She had always known the truth.

In the moment, she had simply ran from the experience, "allowed" the emotional suppression to close itself over her and protect her from the decision—protect her from having to think about what she had done, even if only for the rest of the battle.

As for why her soul gem hadn't resisted, who knew? Maybe it had simply followed her wishes. Maybe, in the end, she hadn't loved Alice enough.

That was the thought that had broken her, in the end. She couldn't come to terms with the guilt. Should she have been angrier? More despairing? She felt ashamed that she hadn't broken down on the spot. She felt she *should* have.

She had heaped her devotion onto Alice, had *willed* herself into it, because it made her feel human. She *wanted* to love someone, but in the moment—

She clenched her eyes together, sobbing, feeling the anguish returning.

Then she felt a soft hand grab hers, and she opened her eyes.

Alice stood there, framed in the sunlight pouring through the window, and Asaka blinked, wondering if this was still the simulation.

The girl shook her head, answering her thought.

"I'm dead, Asaka," she said. "Part of you always knew that, no matter how deep you tried to bury it, no matter how hard you tried to shape this world around you. You even tried to Reformat yourself, crudely, but you knew it couldn't last forever."

"I don't want you to be gone!" Asaka pleaded grasping at the arms of a girl she knew only to be a simulation. "I couldn't live, but they wouldn't let me *die*. It was agony! Even if it had to end, I wanted out!"

The girl shook her head again.

"I'm not entirely gone," she said. "I never will be. It's very cliché to say, but I will always be in your memories. This simulation is proof. I'm not a puppet fabricated by the machine. I'm constructed from your own memories, your dreams and longings. It's the only way the simulation could possibly fool you."

Asaka clenched her teeth, looking down at the false carpet.

"Then I'm sitting here talking to my own imagination," she said.

"Perhaps," her memory of Alice said. "But your imagination also knows what Alice would think of you."

The apparition grabbed her by the chin, forcing her to look up.

"She wanted you to be free," the girl said. "Free from the nightmares that haunt you. You've always thought yourself inadequate to live in this world. Even after your wish, even after the promotions, you never believed in yourself. She wanted you to be strong enough to live your own life. Yet here you are, still running. Do you think this is what she would have wanted?"

"Of course not!" Asaka spat, looking away. "But I can't be what she wanted. I'm here, aren't I? If I *were* what she wanted, I wouldn't have constructed a memory-erasing simulation to hide from reality. I certainly wouldn't have added magic to the mix."

"She believed in you," her memory said reprovingly. "Someday you will believe in yourself."

"I can't believe that."

Alice shook her head.

"Well, someday. This simulation is over."

Asaka woke a second time, and this time the weariness in her body, and the weight of her memory, told her that there was nothing else to wake up from.

She raised her right arm, peering blearily at her wrist, where a cable attached to one of her auxiliary access ports, for more bandwidth.

Then her TacComp poured into her consciousness an emotionless computerized tirade, rebuking her for violating regulation and protocol, acting against its recommendations, performing unauthorized psychologically-dangerous activities, risking gem failure, blocking its access to her consciousness, and so forth.

She didn't blame it for being angry, but the whole thing gave her a headache, and she told the device to shove it.

What on Earth was she supposed to do now? She hadn't exactly planned what to do once the simulation was over, and it had been intended to run much longer than *that*. Years of simulation time, at least—she'd spent all she had on this. She wondered just who was responsible—

"You gave us a lot of trouble, you know," a voice near her said.

Almost resignedly, she turned her head to peer at the stranger.

No, not a stranger.

Tanaka Yui, telepath and MSY founder, smiled at her, a conspicuous black connection cable running to her spinal port.

"Oh, screw you," Asaka said, turning away, looking at her soul gem, which was set on a table, buried in what was literally a mound of grief cubes.

It was practically blasphemous to talk to a founder that way, but she didn't care at the moment. Her dream was over, and in it's place she had *nothing*.

"The department didn't think you were capable of manipulating your own mental state with magic," Yui said. "Evidently, we were wrong. You went to a lot of trouble to lock yourself in. It's very rare that I have to attempt an Unformat while concurrently manipulating the simulation. Very interesting. Of course, we unfortunately had to arrest your accomplices in this matter, the ones you paid to take care of you. Do you have any idea how dangerous that pile of grief cubes is to civilians?"

"Why are you here?" Asaka asked angrily. "The MHD has plenty of specialists they can send. And aren't you afraid I'm going to go crazy and attack you?"

Yui laughed quietly.

"You wouldn't. I've had plenty of time to get to know you, and the simulation was modified to eject you so that you wouldn't be violent or suicidal when you emerged."

The magical girl appeared next to Asaka, looming over her.

"I want you to know," she said, face somber. "That last part, with Alice and your memories—that was authentic. I don't want you to think I was controlling it. She wouldn't give up on you, and we won't either."

"You don't know her," Asaka growled. "You don't know any-"

"Asaka!"

The new voice, sharp and piercing, was unfamiliar to her, and Asaka sought its source.

An Indian woman, tall and lithe, with red crying eyes appeared above her, wrapping her into an overly-tight hug.

Asaka was quite certain she had never seen her before, but she seemed strangely familiar.

"It's me!" the woman said, before Asaka could try to query her nomenclator. "Madhuri. I know we've never met each other, but when I heard you'd disappeared—do you know how hard we were looking for you? How much you made us worry?"

"She helped us find you," Yui said, smiling again. "It appears she knows the gaming underworld just as well as you do."

"I'm sorry, Madhuri," Asaka said, her own eyes tearing up as the woman cried softly on her shoulder, because she didn't know what else to say.

It was true: she was sorry, a little, for making her worry, but she had valued her own happiness more.

"Bringing her friends is cheap and manipulative," another voice said. "Risky, too. She probably doesn't want anyone to see her like this. I'd be embarrassed."

"Cheap, but effective," Yui replied. "With the two of you here, she's forced to try and act happy."

Asaka didn't need an introduction this time.

"You brought *Patricia?*" she said. "You're right. She's the last person I'd want—"

"Hello to you too," Patricia interrupted, appearing next to her and tugging at Madhuri until the woman released her hug.

For a moment, Asaka stared at the three of them as they watched her.

Patricia sighed, blonde ponytail swaying as she shook her head slightly.

"What are we going to do with you?" she asked rhetorically, bending over to detach Asaka's connections to the machines—one to each wrist, one to the back of the neck, one to the lower spine, a nutrient feed.

"You're clearly not fit to be left alone," Patricia said. "I'm going to take you home with me, we'll talk with your parents, and we'll wait until you get better. We've already agreed. Madhuri will take care of your gaming career for a while."

Madhuri nodded solemnly, still a bit teary-eyed, and Asaka felt bewildered, smothered by hospitality. She needed to be *angry*, *spiteful* even, but she was being denied the opportunity. She couldn't explode with her friends there.

"You'll get better," Tanaka Yui said, nodding seriously. "My reputation depends on it, since I've taken on your case."

"I already dislike you," Asaka said poisonously, feeling she had to say *something*.

Yui laughed, shrilly.

"None of my patients *like* me," she said.

"Here," Patricia said, when they had settled onto a military transport back to Earth.

Asaka, who had been sitting in a corner staring at her hands, looked up.

She peered skeptically at the small box Patricia was holding.

"I never got a chance to give it to you," Patricia says. "It's a wedding ring. Alice was thinking about proposing, before we left training. She decided not to. She said she didn't want to tie you down. Not yet. She was going to wait until after the first combat rotation."

Asaka took the box, and opened it, looking at the small metal ring enclosed within. Silver, with symbols inscribed on it—she always had a sense of humor.

"I don't know what to think," she said. "Why do you even have this?"

"She said it was in case something happened to her. I told her she was being too pessimistic, but I...well. Anyway, it should be yours."

Asaka stared at the ring, thinking back to all that had happened since she had first gotten her soul gem ring. Being shipped off to training without a single friend in the world, the roommate who intimidated her, just a little. Their first combat simulations, her roommate pulling her away from

the group to sneak in a kiss. Alice, she thought, had been just as lonely as she was. Perhaps, if things had been different...

Unbidden, the tears began to stream from her eyes. Why did it have to turn out this way?

The Bonds that Make Us (Volume III: Ontological Paradox)

Volume III: Ontological Paradox

"The energy of the universe is constant; the entropy of the Universe tends to a maximum."

— Rudolf Clausius, Statements of the First and Second Law of Thermodynamics

"Among the more eccentric aspects of the magical girl system, the phenomenon of color is among the most easily noticed by the general public, and among the most mysterious. Put simply, besides standard black or white patterning, magical girl costumes are nearly all monochromatic, usually reflecting the hue of the user's soul gem, which often, but not always, seems to reflect the personality of the magical girl involved."

"Many theories have been advanced to explain this curious phenomenon, both inside and outside the MSY, and none have been even close to proven. Contrary to popular belief, color is only poorly determined by a mage's "favorite" color. It also doesn't seem to be affected by other magical girls in the area at time of contract—examples of both rainbow and single-color teams exist in the historical record. The correlation between color and type of magical power is weak, and not any stronger than would be expected based on the connection of personality to both color and magical girl. Finally, explanations involving Incubator intent run up immediately against the Incubator refusal to comment. Nor do so-called polychromats provide any real insight, distributed seemingly randomly among the magical girl population."

"Nor do soul gem colors provide any real insight. While costumes are reflective of soul gem color, there is an important, if subtle difference—the costumes only reflect light, while soul gems are *luminescent*, and emit light with a characteristic, often highly-complex spectrum, usually resembling no existing non-magical material, and dimming with increased use. Careful analysis has yielded little, except for the intriguing observation that the spectrum extends only over the spectrum that may be directly seen by the eye. Girls contracted after the advent of military optical implants exhibit a spectrum that extends into the newly visible near-infrared and ultraviolet, but not into the additional range that can be viewed with false color."

"In the end, it is a mystery. For its part, the MSY maintains a spectrographic database of its members, for research and identification purposes."

— Julian Bradshaw, personal blog.

"Defeats on the battlefield failed to put the remains of the Freedom Alliance in the mood for surrender, however. The hyperclass oligarchs, by now thoroughly indoctrinated by their own poisonous ideology, placed the blame for failure squarely

on the shoulders of their soldiers, declaring that if their soldiers could or would not perform, then they would be modified until they would. In underground laboratories around the world, scientists tinkered with the genomes of vast arrays of clones, designing thicker cranial plating, muscular augments, toxin glands, and whatever else might be expected to improve combat performance, regardless of personal welfare or the source of the genetic modifications."

"Perhaps the most disturbing modifications were those made to the brain, the seat of consciousness itself. Some brain regions were enlarged; others were shrunk or deleted entirely, written off as unnecessary in an instrument of war. Empathy, love, fear—all these were unnecessarily evolutionary adaptations that could now be placed squarely in the dust-bin of history. The tools of war, these 'perfect' soldiers would not need to ever question their orders, or indeed do anything but show their prowess in combat.

"This horrific disregard for basic human dignity showed itself amply in the names of the abominations that would serve as the FA's elite soldiers in last stages of the war. Grunts, Tankers—these were not nicknames given by their enemy, but their actual designation, followed of course by a serial number. These soldiers came in different varieties, each shaped by their battlefield role—giant hulks for assault troopers, lithe, giant-eyed nymphs for snipers. The Tankers were some of the worst, barely more than an out-sized head on a shrunken body, perfect for connecting directly to the life-support system of a medium armored vehicle."

"While some of these creations were sentient, after a fashion, the nature of such a sentience was loathsome—tied to one task until death, devoid of human or even animal emotions, and each bound irreversibly by its cortical control module to its masters. It is telling that, at the end of the war, there was essentially no resistance to the Emergency Defense Council's Decree 224, ordering the summary execution of any FA 'Elites' found anywhere."

"In the end, the FA spared not even its civilian functions from such 'enhancement'..."

— Excerpt, *Unification War*, textbook for Primary School History

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"Good afternoon, madams. Invitations, please?"

The courteous demand, delivered by a liveried servant as they arrived at the door, startled Ryouko, engrossed as she was listening to the conversation taking place next to her. Her mother had never had a serious chance to talk to Asami before they left Earth, and the woman was certainly making the most of her visit. Sometimes it almost felt like she got along with Asami better than she got along with her daughter.

She gaped up at the doorman for a moment, the tall white hat seeming to throw her for a loop, before Asami intervened to save her.

"Here," Asami said, producing the requested card from within her purse. Stylish and absurdly tiny, the gray bag served no real purpose than to carry the invitation card. It was for show, like Ryouko's own somewhat larger white purse, and like so much else in this simulation. That included the formally-attired doorman and the invitation cards, engraved with serious-looking text entitling the bearer to the privilege of attending the birthday party of none other than a certain Chitose Yuma, magical girl celebrity.

Such accoutrements were superfluous in the age of nomenclators, and even more superfluous given that they were attending this party in simulation. Really, they could have manifested directly into the ballroom, but that would apparently have been discourteous.

"She's just trying to create a smooth experience for both the virtual and non-virtual guests," Asami said, as they stepped through the threshold, glancing at Ryouko. "Stop being such a grump."

The girl sidled up to her and grabbed her around the waist, rubbing her head against Ryouko's hair. Asami was big on physical intimacy, something Ryouko had acclimated herself to over the past month, but she still wished her… girlfriend would restrain herself a little, especially in front of *her mother*. A part of her suspected, though, that Kuroi Nakase's visit was only making Asami more touchy-feely. It was a form of claiming ownership, a way of proclaiming without words that "She's mine!".

And recently, the girl had started to evince the disturbing ability to anticipate Ryouko's thoughts. Ryouko wasn't sure if it was just natural intuition, or if it was evidence of a growing mutual telepathy that apparently developed sometimes between paired magical girls.

Even a month into it, the whole thing still felt odd. It had seemed natural for Asami to follow her to the planet of Eurydome, a low-gravity world near Optatum crowded with scientific institutes and universities, only half a week of travel time from Earth.

More precisely, it wasn't natural so much as deliberately arranged. Joanne Valentin had come to her under the auspices of *Governance: Science and Technology*, which was deeply interested in the possibility of studying Ryouko's powers for scientific reasons. If analysis of her power could contribute meaningfully to Humanity's technological development, Governance felt that it could be far more valuable that anything she was likely to contribute again on the battlefield, especially considering the risk of her dying in the process.

Now, Governance was aware of Ryouko's feelings with regards to various matters. While it would have been optimal for Ryouko to be studied in some facility on Earth—Prometheus or Zeus or a high-energy physics institute—they were willing to accommodate her stated preference to explore other worlds, and could post her to a colony world with the necessary scientific facilities. In order to facilitate the process, Governance was willing to allow a certain Nakihara Asami to travel with her. With her gravitational powers, it was possible she would even be useful to the experimentation.

It was then that Shizuki Sayaka had explained her presence. While Governance was more than capable of compensating Ryouko for the experience themselves, the MSY preferred to keep their hand in when it came to affairs involving magical girls. MSY Finance would gladly finance her trip, her living arrangements, and her salary, and would even work with Science Division to arrange an apprenticeship position for Asami at one of the botanical institutes. The matriarch also wanted to personally apologize for the unfortunate seduction incident, which had been the meddling of one of her subordinates, apparently.

Of course, it was more than possible that either the scientists or Ryouko would lose interest in the relationship after a while. At that point, Finance would be glad to offer her a position in one of their offices should she so desire, especially given a certain aptitude she had shown in school for economic matters. The compensation could be quite high.

Ryouko, not being naïve, could easily see the arrangement for what it was, at least from Shizuki Sayaka's perspective. Yet, she could also perceive how well it was crafted. Both Governance and the MSY had tons of surveillance data on her, and had created a plan to suit everyone's interests—Asami could leave the front and live her dreams, they could both go to an alien world, the scientists could study them both to their heart's desire, and Shizuki Sayaka could ensnare her more

deeply into her clutches. Everyone would win, with the possible exception of Kuroi Kana.

Asami had been astonished when Ryouko didn't accept the offer on the spot. Instead, she had spent a few days ruminating on it, talking to both her parents, and both Mami and Kyouko. They all said it sounded perfectly reasonable.

So she agreed. What else could she do? It was too logical, and the only obvious route by which Asami could be pulled away from the combat assignment she had grown to detest.

It still felt odd.

She consented to Asami's cuddling for a moment, curling their hair together in the apparently common fashion as they continued to walk. She felt conspicuous entangled like that in the mansion's atrium, and just to be contrary, she muttered:

"I feel like a damn stick of celery."

Her dress, one of those scrupulously formal ballroom dresses that would apparently never go out of style, was a somewhat dark shade of green, with ruffles at the bottom that flared outward. On her body, the strapless dress clung on more by friction than anything her chest could provide, and it was Clarisse that had made the vegetable quip, as she had examined herself in the virtual mirror. She just couldn't shake the mental image now—she looked like an unusually dark stick of *Apium graveolens*.

I regret making that comment, Clarisse thought.

"Oh, don't say that, Ryouko," her mother said, appearing next to her in a black dress. "You look beautiful, and you need to get to used to wearing this kind of thing, for these kinds of social events."

"I'm pretty sure it's your job to say that," Ryouko said.

Clarisse sighed, in that deliberately loud tone that she had been hearing far too often lately.

Ryouko, Asami picked that dress for you. You asked *her to. You can't say it makes you look like celery. Think about it. I'm an idiot for even bringing that up. It was a joke anyway. My aesthetic value algorithms say you look great. I'm not making that up.*

Ryouko did think about it, for half a second, then cringed.

"Shit, I didn't mean that," she said, stopping and turning to face the other girl. "I was just saying something grumpy, just because."

Asami, who had been walking quietly, stopped, her own dark purple dress swirling around her feet. She shook her head slightly, turning to look at Ryouko.

"It's no problem," she said, smiling slightly. "I'm used to that by now. Besides, Clarisse sent me a two thousand word essay last week about you. I read it. I'm okay with it. Anyway, the dress matches your soul gem."

The girl grabbed Ryouko's hand, the one with the virtual soul gem, and raised it for a moment. Then she pulled Ryouko forward, into the building, so they would stop clogging the atrium.

You sent her an essay*?* Ryouko asked incredulously.

And a video, Clarisse thought. *Let's not talk about this right now.*

They breezed down the hallway, passing a few clusters of guests lingering outside the ballroom, drinks in hand.

On the way, they were stopped by an unfamiliar magical girl, decked out almost entirely in green, as Ryouko was. Ryouko waited a moment for her nomenclator to process, and only then did she notice the girl's conspicuous eyeball tattoo, the kind of tattoo no human would have.

An AI? she thought, as her nomenclator obligingly spit out:

"MG"

Age: *20*
Occupation: *Governance: Magical Girls—Advisory AI*
Special Comments: *Governance: Magical Girls proper is Chitose Yuma.*

"Oh, it's the girl of the hour!" MG said, putting a hand to her mouth to cover a gape. "I'm charmed to meet you."

The AI curtsied elaborately, drawing her broad-based dress outward. To Ryouko, the AI looked eerily like Kyouko, but different somehow. She couldn't decide how. It was enough to confuse her briefly.

Ryouko blinked, trying to decide quickly what to say.

"I don't think I'm the girl of the hour," she said. "That would be, uh, Chitose-san, I'd imagine."

"I suppose," MG said genially. "Nice dress, by the way. Us green girls have got to stick together."

"Oh, uh, sure," Ryouko responded awkwardly, as the AI left to greet other guests.

"See, *she* likes it," Asami said under her breath, as they stepped through a set of wooden double doors.

"I told you I was sorry," Ryouko replied—before stopping cold.

Weeks of living on Eurydome had gotten Ryouko a bit more acclimated to large, open buildings, but she still had to stop and gape at the ballroom. Corinthian columns, giant chandeliers, and two-story picture windows framed a gleaming white marble floor, all enormous in scale. The columns and floor were inlaid with what appeared to be elaborate veins of emerald and jade, winding their way along the polished surface. At the edges, recessed alcoves led into private niches and exitways, suggesting no end of places to explore and hide.

Even with its size, the ballroom was plenty dense with people. A motley assortment of teenagers and adults socializing, eating, and dancing. It came as no surprise to her that the teenagers were all girls, and that the population of the room as a whole skewed heavily female. She wondered how old all of them really were.

Once, long ago, these kind of parties were all some magical girls ever did, Clarisse said. *A shame, really.*

What? Ryouko thought.

Nakase grabbed their shoulders, shooing them away from the entranceway, towards a jade-and-gold table full of food hidden in one of the side-alcoves.

"Well, what are we supposed to do now?" Asami asked, looking just as lost as Ryouko felt.

"Eat, socialize," Nakase said. "Or, actually, why don't you try dancing?"

Ryouko glanced at her mother, who looked oddly gleeful, then at the dance floor, which was full of couples swaying back and forth to a familiar-sounding piece of old music. She felt skeptical.

"I don't even know how to dance," she said, making sure her skepticism showed on her face.

"I'm sure your TacComp can provide something useful. In my day, we danced first and slept later."

"What?" Asami asked.

"You're not *that* old," Ryouko echoed.

"Nothing," Nakase said. "Go. Dance. Walking around slowly also counts. That's an order."

She gave Ryouko a small shove, urging her forward. Ryouko started to look back, uncertainly, then sighed, turning back towards the ballroom floor. If she was going to be dragooned into doing this, she might as well make the most of it. Her mother was right. Yuma's birthday party was set in a ballroom. Dancing was what was supposed to happen.

She grabbed Asami, who really *had* turned back, and pulled her forward, spinning the girl around so that they faced each other. Asami looked back at her, eyes wide, and Ryouko felt a small spike of affection.

It was true, what Clarisse van Rossum had said. It was possible for love to grow into you. She could definitely see that now. As for whether it could be called love yet…

She let her TacComp guide her through the motions of a formal dance, old-fashioned, dating back to the twenty-second century *at least.* She put one hand on Asami's waist, but a moment later Asami put her head on her shoulder, so that they ended up doing more of a swaying walk than an actual dance.

Well, that worked too.

When they finally retreated from the dance floor, they found Ryouko's mother seated in one of the small alcoves with few small plates of hors d'oeuvres. Improbably, she had found someone to talk with. Even more improbably, that someone was Kyouko, who was in fine form, wearing a sparkling—and revealing—red dress, with high heels that looked like they could kill.

"I actually wrote a book on the subject, back in the day," Kyouko said, as they approached. "It's a little embarrassing, but I can send you a copy. Though it sounds like they have things under control."

"It was pretty loud," Nakase said. "Which is funny, because—oh, but here she is! I saved you some food, Ryouko."

Ryouko glanced at her mother, taking the proffered plate. She suspected she knew what the conversation had been about, but said nothing. Suffice to say, agreeing to let her mother stay in her room, while she moved temporarily into Asami's room, had resulted in a bit of a cascading effect.

I totally warned you about that, Clarisse commented. *You should have taken the couch.*

Says the Tactical Computer that didn't say a damn thing when she opened the door and looked in, Ryouko complained, for what must have been the twentieth time.

It was already too late. Saying something would have just made it worse and interrupted the fun. It's not my fault you showed poor judgment.

I'm not sure about the 'fun', with someone like you looking over my shoulder and dispensing advice. Sometimes you should just let things happen.

And let you flounder? Face it, my advice helped. Besides, I literally can't not *be involved. And, you know, I presume they give me manuals for a reason.*

It just wasn't comfortable. It was awkward. I'm not used to it.

It was awkward anyway.

"Ryouko!" Asami said, nudging her in the side with an elbow, startling her out of her reverie.

"Oh, yes, sorry," she said hastily. "Good to see you again, Sakura-san."

"No need to be so formal," Kyouko said blandly, pausing to take a sip of her red wine. Ryouko had never seen her so decked out.

"She's been doing that a lot nowadays," Asami said, by way of apology. "I don't know what she's thinking about."

Had she? Ryouko supposed she had had much to think about.

"I guess life has been treating you well, then?" she asked rhetorically. "Your mother has just been telling me how well the two of you have been doing. It's early days yet—*very* early—but that's good to hear."

Ryouko started to protest that the current arrangement was temporary, that she didn't know how long she was going to do this, and that she wasn't sure she wanted to stay away from the front permanently, but managed to stop herself. That discussion with Asami could come later.

Instead, Kyouko saw her hesitate, and chose to speak first.

"Not to imply that you're destined to break up or anything, but take my advice. Treasure your first relationship. There'll never be another one quite like it."

The girl peered at Ryouko, with the kind of fierce gaze that seemed intended to will her into agreeing. When she finally nodded, Kyouko switched her gaze to Asami, who nodded with almost unseemly haste. The intensity surprised Ryouko, who hadn't expected Kyouko to *care* quite so much.

"Well, anyway," Kyouko said finally. "I feel I am obligated to ask. Have you had any other visions lately, Ryouko? It's rare that we have anyone have any away from the Ribbon, so I thought I'd check."

Ryouko had learned over the past month to expect this kind of question, whenever she and Kyouko communicated. It was usually easily parried by a simple "no", but now she shared an uneasy glance with Asami.

Then she looked at her mother, who was watching her with a serious expression. Doubtless, Kyouko had used the earlier conversation to feel her mother out on religious topics—and would

have learned rather quickly that her mother had little tolerance for religious claptrap, despite the rumors that surrounded her daughter. Ryouko… had not yet tried to speak with her regarding the "Goddess". It had been easier not to.

Kyouko had outflanked her, she realized. It was already too late to fake a confused reaction, which would have been impossible to hold in the face of Kyouko's questioning anyway. She couldn't switch to transmission, either, since her mother—a scientist with much experience with the military, among other things— would immediately realize what she was up to.

She had learned to get used to being outflanked by Ancients in conversations. Their superior experience meant that they were capable of running circles around her, if they so chose. That didn't really make it less annoying, though.

"No, I haven't, Kyouko," she said, trying to shrug nonchalantly.

Kyouko nodded, then turned to say something to Asami. Ryouko sighed in relief.

Perhaps, if her mother weren't here—if Asami weren't here—she would have been tempted to speak further. It would have been a terrible idea, saying it to Kyouko, given everything she had lied to her about, but she would have been tempted.

She wished, not for the first time, that she could meet Clarisse van Rossum again. Unlike either of her official mentors, she was someone she could feel safe asking advice from, but she was stubbornly never around.

Then, for the first time, it occurred to her that Clarisse might be at this very party.

Oh, that's not a bad idea at all, the other Clarisse, her TacComp, thought. *She's on the invitation list. You should find her later. Also, you have zoned out of the active conversation, once again.*

Her TacComp's prompt startled her out of her reverie once more, and the device even obligingly played back the past few moments for her.

"I understand the reservations Ryouko has about affiliating herself with us, but we really are a very inclusive group," Kyouko was saying. "If you have any questions, even on her behalf, I'll be available. You can message me directly if you like."

"O—okay," Asami said, wilting under Kyouko's gaze, and peering desperately at Ryouko for guidance.

Ryouko cringed internally. It had not been a good time to mentally check out of the conversation.

"Maybe," she asserted, feeling her mother's eyes on her. "It's not like I'm stopping Asami from joining. Don't pressure her."

That was mostly true. After the "relationship advice" incident, Asami had been briefly interested in learning all she could about the Cult, and seemed puzzled that Ryouko wasn't a member. Ryouko's explanation had been simple: the Goddess was real, but she didn't think the Cult necessarily had any answers. Asami was free to look into it more if she wanted. Ryouko wasn't going to stop her from joining or anything like that.

That had satisfied Asami, who stopped looking into the Cult. She was fine, it seemed, with Ryouko's judgment substituting for her own on the matter. Privately, Ryouko was relieved, even if she felt a twinge of guilt about being manipulative. To her, it seemed possible Asami would have been happier as a member of the Cult. Certainly, knowing that they had an afterlife waiting for her had soothed Asami's psyche, even before Ryouko had used Shizuki Sayaka's proposal to pull her

away from the front lines.

Kyouko shook her head slightly, smiling, seeming amused that Ryouko had stood up to her, just a little.

"Nothing like that," she said. "I'm just letting her know her options. Seems fair enough. Incidentally, have you seen Mami? She's supposed to be at this shindig."

"Not at all. I just got here," Ryouko said—but Kyouko was already ignoring her, striding past her and peering across the room.

"Ah, I see her," Kyouko said. "Thanks anyway. I'll send you two that book."

"Book?" Ryouko asked, too late.

For a moment, she watched Kyouko's back as she walked away—then received the mental ping indicating she had a new message. With a book as an attachment, apparently.

She needn't have bothered, Clarisse thought sardonically. *That book of tips she wrote is actually one of the manuals I came preloaded with. This is all rather amusing, actually.*

Tips? Ryouko thought, flipping the virtual book to a random page.

Her eyebrows shot upward, and she wasn't able to suppress a blush as she did the mental equivalent of slamming the book shut. Asami might have finally gotten over being in a new body, but Ryouko didn't think they were ready for *that* yet.

Then she looked at Asami, who was staring off into space with a vacant expression, but blushing furiously.

Ryouko reached over and grabbed the girl by the shoulder, shaking vigorously. Looking at her mother, she could see the woman smiling, laughing silently at them.

She knew it wouldn't last, though, and once Asami blinked herself back awake the woman's expression turned immediately serious, as easily as flipping a switch.

"Ryouko," she said, her voice carrying an undertone of warning. "What was all this talk about visions just now?"

Ryouko shifted a little, wondering if she could get out of the discussion. Asami watched her to see what she would say, but didn't seem to realize that she should contrive a distraction for Ryouko's mother.

Ryouko considered messaging her, or using telepathy—they were in the same VR facility, buried in the bowels of the university Ryouko was currently "working" at. She decided, though, she couldn't avoid the topic forever, and now was as good a time as any to get it out of the way.

She swallowed, as surreptitiously as she could.

"I've been keeping this a secret from the Cult," she said, "because I don't know if I want to get mixed in with them, but I may have had a religious experience before I did the wormhole thing."

She tried to keep her tone business-like throughout the statement.

Her mother tilted her head a little, looking shocked but not totally surprised.

"A religious experience? What kind?"

"I might have spoken with this Goddess they believe in. She might have given me some instructions regarding the wormhole."

Her mother let out a breath, shaking her head slightly.

"Just as the rumors said. Ryouko, you know my opinion of religious-type things, and I'm glad you don't see the need to join the Cult, but… well, in my line of work I've met quite a few girls from the Cult. They've always seemed quite sincere in their beliefs, but I've never thought there was much to it. At best it was some kind of side effect of the magic, some kind of group telepathy, driven by emotional fervor. Are you sure it wasn't something like that?"

Ryouko shifted where she stood, squirming slightly. She considered the possibility for a moment, but dismissed it almost immediately. It had all seemed too real, and there was also…

"No, definitely not," she said.

She hesitated for a moment, again swallowing. Not even Asami had heard the other part of the story from her. Did she really want to tell it to her? After all, it could easily be considered a family matter.

She looked down and squirmed a bit more, this time deliberately, to conceal the message she was sending to her mother.

"It's not just that," she transmitted. *"I think we're related to her. Apparently she was the sister of one of your ancestors."*

Her mother, well used to the military's enhanced messaging privileges, concealed her reaction to the message well, only blinking once in surprise.

"I wouldn't have taken you for someone with a messiah complex," she transmitted back, for once betraying deep skepticism. *"Besides, I'm not even sure that means anything. If you go far enough back in time, any given person is the ancestor of either everyone living, or nobody. Literally."*

Ryouko looked back up, suppressing a smile. Only her mother would think to insert a comment like that—and Ryouko herself, if Asami was to be believed.

"Can we talk about this later, Mama?" she said out loud. "I don't think this is the place."

She also needed time to consider what to say. Out of respect for her mother, she had considered it a necessary, inevitable conversation—but she hadn't planned what exactly to say.

She did, however, start forwarding the memory she had received from her grandmother, who had given her the right to share it, if she so chose.

"Alright," her mother said, nodding.

"What do you mean you haven't even visited her?" Yuma demanded, voice as loud as she could discreetly make it.

"I mean that I haven't visited her," Kyouko hissed back, hunching over so she could speak into the smaller girl's ear. "I don't see why it's my responsibility to. We broke up. That means something, you know."

To the others in the room it looked like they were having an intimate, whispered conversation,

seated in an isolated corner of the room. The birthday girl taking a break from the party to talk with one of her oldest friends. That was the impression they intended to give, of course. Setting up a formal privacy screen would have caused too much whispering.

"You know how she feels about you. You're just going to leave her to rot?"

"You could've brought this up about many of my previous relationships. Why now? What's special about her? Why do you suddenly care about these neophytes?"

"Two reasons, *nee-chan*," she said, placing an angry inflection on the phrase. "The first is that we're getting tired of cleaning up after you. It's a polite fiction you've got going, pretending the girls you sleep with don't care when you toss them out like yesterday's garbage. For some of them it's even true. But not most of them. All those broken hearts you leave behind, and for what? So you can keep trying to fill the hole in your heart? I've read the reports, nee-chan. I know what the MHD thinks of you."

"Reading confidential reports now, Yuma-*chan*?" Kyouko asked, glaring back at her, not acknowledging what she had said.

"You know very well we all read each other's reports. We look out for each other. That's how it's always been."

Kyouko turned away, and spoke calmly.

"I don't want to be lectured by the likes of you and Mami. A girl who playacts as a child and another too traumatized to make any new friends. We're all broken. You have no right."

"I wasn't done talking, nee-chan. I said there were two reasons."

Kyouko sat impassively, still turned away, refusing to acknowledge the comment.

"Kishida Maki is special because she's special to *you*. It might have started for twisted reasons, but you started to care about her. It was obvious. We were getting hopeful. But that's why you had to end it, wasn't it?"

A heartbeat of time passed, and then Kyouko said:

"She's young. She'll get over it."

"You were her first, nee-chan. The first is special. You're the one who says that."

"So I leave you two alone for fifteen minutes and this is what happens, huh?" Mami said, suddenly looming over them. "For four-hundred-year-olds, you two sure aren't any good at hiding when you're having an argument."

"Assuming you two old maids didn't plot it against me," Kyouko grumbled.

"You keep calling me that," Yuma said. "But you're just making baseless assumptions."

"You keep claiming you're not, but you never present any evidence otherwise," Kyouko retorted.

"Stop bickering, you two," Mami said, in her best "Mami-nee-chan" voice. "Yuma-chan, didn't you say you wanted to meet the 'Hero of Orpheus' while she was at your party? Well, don't miss your chance; I'll introduce you."

Ryouko sensed Yuma coming before she saw her, the sea of guests shifting gradually before her. The ripples spread through the crowd, the background murmur of the crowd quieting, replaced by the greetings of well-wishers. The wave approached only slowly, as Yuma was impeded by the crowd, obliged to respond attentively to everyone she passed, but Ryouko knew, somehow, where it was inexorably headed.

It occurred to her that she might be getting used to being a center of attention herself, the kind of person important individuals would seek out, trailing their shockwaves behind them. Kuroi Kana, Shizuki Sayaka, Atsuko Arisu—they had all sought her out already, stopping by to offer a few words of greeting. In Kana's case, Ryouko had found it difficult to read what the Matriarch really thought of Ryouko's new, Shizuki-sponsored position.

"I think Chitose-san is approaching," Asami said, as Yuma grew closer, and Ryouko nodded absently, for once ahead of her partner.

She craned her head to look, and finally got a glimpse of the girl. Dressed in a simple green dress, her childish frame was difficult to spot even in a crowd saturated with relatively young magical girls. She was conspicuous only due to her magnetic effect on the people around her, further enhanced by the presence of Kyouko and Mami traveling with her, the latter's modest yellow dress serving as a contrast to the former.

Even in a virtual setting, the color-coded trio formed a formidable—and rare—nexus of MSY power. They operated so smoothly that it was easy to forget for a moment the gaping hole in their circle of power, one that had once been occupied by a certain Akemi Homura.

Finally, Yuma turned away from the girl she was talking with—a certain Kugimiya Aiko, apparently—signaling with her body language that she was ready to move on. She stepped into the crowd, and for a moment their eyes met.

Ryouko knew, then, why MG had looked so oddly familiar to her. MG didn't just look like Kyouko; she also looked like *Yuma*, a fact which seemed obvious in retrospect.

More importantly, Yuma's virtual form was older in age than the child form she usually carried. This version of her appeared closer to eleven than eight; it reminded her unavoidably of a memory of hers, of the same girl crying on the ground in front of a corpse, calling herself a monster.

But before she could remember the details of the vision, or think through its implications once again, Yuma arrived, striding into the corner of the room where Asami, Ryouko, and her mother had placed themselves. The girl surprised her by stepping forward immediately, extending her hand in expectation of a handshake. Ryouko had been prepared for a round of Japanese-style bowing, but recovered swiftly, taking the hand of the smaller girl.

"Happy birthday," she said in Japanese, for once knowing exactly what to say first.

"Thank you," the girl said in Standard, tilting her head in acknowledgment.

Ryouko stood there awkwardly for a moment, as the other girl watched her coolly. She knew she looked foolish, sweating nervously in front of a girl that looked four years younger than her, but she couldn't help it. She knew what was said about Chitose Yuma.

"I've heard about your exploits, of course," the girl said finally, bowing her head slightly. "Congratulations on a mission well-executed."

"T—thank you."

The conversation stalled again, Yuma again watching her with that unnerving gaze. What was she

trying to see? Did she know that Ryouko had seen her past? No—that was preposterous.

Finally, Yuma turned slightly, bowing in the direction of Ryouko's mother, who appeared surprised, having been expecting a handshake. They exchanged bows, and then Yuma said:

"I appreciate the work done at both the Prometheus and Zeus Institutes by hard-working scientists such as yourself. And of course, the work that goes into raising such a fine daughter."

Yuma smiled slightly at the end of the last sentence, lightening what had been a surprisingly stiff and formal exchange.

"Thank you," Ryouko's mother said, exchanging with Yuma a look Ryouko couldn't interpret.

"Child licenses are so hard to get nowadays, aren't they?" Yuma said airily. "Though I suppose it shouldn't have been too hard for someone of your pedigree."

Ryouko's mother blinked, hesitating for a moment.

"Well, my family matriarch wasn't exactly pleased about my marriage. It didn't make it easy. I was able to talk them into it. Ryouko-chan wouldn't be here without it."

She rubbed Ryouko's hair enthusiastically for a moment, causing Ryouko to flinch slightly, her hair tendrils flailing in protest.

"Hmm, well, Kana-chan can be strange sometimes," Yuma said.

They stood there a moment longer, Yuma seemingly content to simply stand quietly, before Mami cleared her throat slightly to get their attention. Ryouko had almost forgotten she and Kyouko were there.

"Well, personally I'm glad we were all able to get together like this," Mami said. "Your daughter has a lot of potential, and Yuma-chan was excited to meet her. Yuma-chan is just bad at talking to people sometimes."

"Nee-chan! Don't embarrass me in front of the young ones!"

Yuma pouted and looked… bashful? The expression seemed incongruous, the change from her previous expression being almost enough to give whiplash.

The girl held up her arms to be picked up, and Mami rolled her eyes, but picked her up anyway, holding her in the air for a moment before setting her back down.

"Anyway, see you around," Yuma said, turning back towards Ryouko and waving, before turning to walk away.

Ryouko watched her as she left. Mami followed Yuma to the next set of guests, but Kyouko lingered, noticing Ryouko's look.

"You have something to ask, don't you?" Kyouko relayed to Ryouko. *"I can see you thinking about it. Well then, ask."*

Ryouko looked down. How on Earth had Kyouko known? Should she deny it?

"I've seen Yuma before, in one of my visions," she thought, weighing her words carefully. *"She was crouching over a white magical girl who was dead. She—that girl—was Mikuni Oriko. I know the story. But… I don't know. I think the Goddess was trying to tell me something about*

Yuma. But I'm not sure if I should say anything."

Kyouko's ordinarily unflappable expression seemed to waver, just a little. Then she chuckled.

"Oh, the ways of the Goddess are mysterious indeed," Kyouko said, out loud. "She really seems to like you. You're destined for something. It's obvious."

With that parting shot, the girl turned on her heel and strode off. Ryouko sighed, then turned to look at her mother, who she expected to have questions about what she and Kyouko had been talking about.

Instead she found her mother looking off into space, clearly lost in thought.

"Mama?" she asked. "Is everything alright?"

"Oh, yes," her mother said, blinking rapidly. "Of course. Didn't you say you wanted to look for Clarisse van Rossum? I remember how you used to talk about her. How was it, meeting your childhood hero?"

"Oh, uh, interesting, I guess," Ryouko said, rubbing the back of her head.

"That was an odd conversation," Asami commented. "With Chitose—uh—sama, I mean."

"Yeah, it was."

She left her mother and girlfriend behind to look for Clarisse, and found her conferring with Nadya Antipova in a corner, wine glasses in hand. Their faces looked grim, and Ryouko wondered if something was wrong.

Clarisse spotted her approach, though, and the two of them rapidly dismissed their serious expressions, greeting her as she arrived. Like Mami and the others, Clarisse and Nadya's dresses were color-coded to match their soul gems. Ryouko wondered if it was some sort of MSY tradition. Didn't people get tired of wearing the same color all the time? She suddenly regretted listening to Asami and wearing green.

"Here to ask me for advice?" Clarisse asked, before Ryouko could even say anything.

"Am I that obvious?"

Clarisse shrugged, before smiling slightly.

"You're welcome to, of course."

"How come no one ever asks me for advice?" Nadya complained. "I'm over two hundred years old! I'm practically a fount of knowledge!"

"I'm over half a millennium old. I'm wiser than you. Shoo!"

Clarisse made the corresponding gesture with her hand. Nadya left in a huff, making a show of being affronted.

"She'll be fine," Clarisse said. "She's just faking it. Now what's up?"

Clarisse was back in her older body, at least virtually, and bent over slightly to observe her. Ryouko felt her mouth going dry. She had sought out this meeting, but it was still a challenge to say what she wanted to say.

She looked down, and found herself looking at Clarisse's cleavage. A memory returned to her, and she glanced away, blushing.

"I'm conflicted," she said, managing to blurt out the words. "I don't know if I'm happy."

It felt odd saying the words in Standard, since she had always thought them in Japanese, but it would have been strange to speak to Clarisse in her native tongue.

She glanced up, feeling herself blushing even more, and found Clarisse studying her, looking every bit like the wise Ancient she was.

"Oh dear," she said. "I think we better sit down for this. Come on."

Clarisse gestured at a nearby windowsill, and they shuffled over in their dresses to sit down. The virtual sunlight pouring in through the window looked beautiful, she thought.

Clarisse looked around, making sure no one was close enough to listen in, before swirling her wine glass and getting straight to the point.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

Ryouko swallowed. She didn't know why she was so nervous, suddenly.

"I don't know what to say," she started, finally, avoiding eye contact. "I feel like I'm adrift. I don't know. After I made my contract, I lost control of my life. It was just so crazy and non-stop, and I realize now that I was never really in control. It was the Goddess, I think. I felt a little jerked around, honestly. But now… well, I asked her when I got back what she wanted me to do now, and she said I should choose for myself, and it's stupid, but now…"

She let her voice trail off, and she looked up at Clarisse, who had one eyebrow raised. She realized she was rambling, and tried to focus.

"I don't know," she said finally. "I feel like I *should* be happy, but I'm not. I have a cushy life on an alien world, and even a loving girlfriend. Asami is in paradise. I can tell. But I'm not. It feels like… it feels like my wish was never made. I don't think it was about Earth at all. I think it was about my life. I don't like living a normal life."

Ryouko searched Clarisse's face for a reaction, and found the woman's eyes closed in bemusement.

"Ryouko, I don't actually know what your wish is, and I don't have telepathy over interstellar distances. It is difficult for me to properly evaluate your statements in light of that. To be frank, I'm not even sure what you have been doing since the wormhole mission."

"Oh," Ryouko said, embarrassed. "Well, I, uh—"

Clarisse bent over slightly, making direct eye contact with Ryouko.

"It's okay. You don't have to tell me. I think I understand anyway."

The woman bent her head for a moment, as if considering something, and then the rest of the virtual world blurred, sealed behind a privacy screen.

"You made your wish to get away from living a normal life," Clarisse said. "Because you wanted an extraordinary one. But now circumstances have returned you to normality. You want to shake

things up again, yet you are afraid of destroying your relationship with Asami. Is this a good description of your problem?"

Ryouko felt her mouth drying out again, then nodded hastily. Clarisse had produced a better description of her situation than she would have.

Clarisse swirled her wine glass thoughtfully, eyes resting on windowsill.

"I suppose it depends on the nature of your current relationship. It is the nature of things that in a serious relationship both parties must often make sacrifices. It is rare that both parties have the same idea of paradise, but the sacrifices must be roughly equal, or else it engenders resentment."

Clarisse set the wine cup down, abandoning her drink for the moment.

"But of course," she said, "that is only true for a serious relationship. At your age, it is frankly doubtful that it really could be. You do not seem ready to settle down, so there is no reason to force yourself to. If it is merely a matter of companionship, that can be satisfied without most of the other accoutrements of a relationship. It is not widely known, but I have a few friends of my own I see from time to time. It may sound cynical to one as young as you, but it does not have to mean anything more than that. With the benefit of old age, it is possible to see some things in a clearer light."

Ryouko shifted uncomfortably. Clarisse's attachments were an occasional topic of discussion on the fan forums, but to hear her say something like that—

"I don't think Asami wants something like that," she said, watching her feet on the floor. "I can see it in her eyes. She wants everything. To be honest, I'm not sure if I don't want everything. It's not just about the sex for me, I don't think. Honestly she's the one who really wants that."

Her eyes widened a moment later, and her hands shot to her mouth, appalled. Did she just say that? She had meant to say "companionship".

But when she looked at Clarisse, the woman seemed hardly fazed by her embarrassing comment.

"I thought as much," Clarisse said, staring at the blurred-out room in front of her. "You're both young enough to crave romantic love. But you're a wanderer, and it makes things difficult, even in this day and age. But…"

Clarisse cupped her head in one hand, tapping her fingers against her chin.

"The memories I have taken from others imply that it is better to be truthful, and quickly," she said. "It is not good to let these things fester. You are too young to settle down. Even she is, whatever she may think. Tell her now, and it may be possible to form a workable long-term arrangement. If you wait until you get miserable, that will lead to yelling, and that typically does not end well."

Clarisse seemed to shrug slightly, then picked up her cup and finished her wine. Ryouko sensed the conversation was over, but felt she had to ask:

"If it's not too much to ask, you mentioned you were in a few relationships. How serious were they? I know your life made it difficult, but…"

She let her voice trail off, not meeting Clarisse's eyes. She wondered if it had been a bridge too far.

"As a matter of fact," Clarisse said, voice airy. "It got serious several times. To some point, at

least, but not far enough to seriously contemplate marriage or children. It was always more for companionship. My lifestyle is too problematic for anything otherwise. But not all of us Ancients are as broken as your mentors. It is possible to reach my age with an intact heart."

Ryouko glanced at her, startled by the comment.

"Mentors? You mean Kyouko and Mami?"

Clarisse smiled and shrugged, then dissolved the privacy curtain, standing up.

"Go back to your girlfriend," she said, bending over towards Ryouko. "I bet she's wondering what you're doing. You can contact me if you want more advice, okay? Just not of the sexual sort. That's better addressed towards Kyouko."

Clarisse chuckled slightly, taking the opportunity provided by Ryouko's embarrassed reaction to leave, abruptly and efficiently. Ryouko realized she had been outmaneuvered once again.

I don't like these old people, she thought.

No birthday party, even an elaborate virtual ballroom gala, was complete without cake and presents, and it wasn't long before a suitably large and multi-tiered cake was wheeled out onto the dance-floor, next to a prodigious stack of virtual presents. Covered in a green-tinted icing, it was exquisitely designed, brown and green vines of sugar frosting winding their way on, around, and seemingly into the cake, twisting their way up to the higher layers. White flowers dotted the vines, some fully bloomed, others half-opened, still others tightly furled. Its ethereal design hinted at the uncanny, and despite its vibrancy, there remained the suggestion of age, of the kind that would befit Yggdrasil. At the very top, one great apical blossom opened to reveal not just a flower, but a soul gem, transparent sugar vibrant in the lighting.

Then Yuma cut into the bottom layer with a ceremonial knife, and Ryouko almost cringed. Even as a virtual design, it seemed a crime to disfigure.

"Ooo," Asami vocalized next to her. "Jasmine flowers, I think."

It tasted like jasmine, too, as Ryouko discovered when she was finally passed her slice, an amputated vine of brown sugar crawling over the top surface. Chocolate, jasmine, rosewater, and green tea, among other things, her enhanced sense of smell informed her. There were times when it came in handy.

Asami sighed, biting into a piece of her cake.

"This is heavenly," she said. "Even though I know it's virtual. I wonder if someone can actually make this."

Ryouko nodded silently, carefully cutting off a tiny piece with her silver fork. Honestly, she felt too distracted to eat.

"I wonder how long it's going to take her to open all those presents," Asami said, staring at Yuma in the distance, who was already holding up some gifted trinket proudly.

"She's only going to do some of them, chosen randomly," Ryouko commented emptily. "It's on the program. There's also a full list of the presents that people are going to send her."

"Oh, I see!" Asami said cheerily.

Asami bit into a forkful of cake, then crinkled her brow, detecting the shift in Ryouko's tone. She peered at Ryouko from one eye.

Ryouko knew her body language was too revealing, and that she was even slumped slightly in her chair.

"Is something wrong?" Asami asked, the inevitable question finally arriving.

I should say something, Ryouko thought. *I have to.*

She stabbed her cake with her fork.

But not now, obviously, she thought. *This is clearly not a good time.*

Just make sure you say something after the party, her TacComp thought. *If you wait too long, you'll lose impetus. And we both know how you love to procrastinate.*

You're the light of my life, as always, Ryouko thought, sarcastically.

"Ryouko?" Asami asked, again.

Ryouko couldn't say for certain what impulse drove her at that moment, but the next thing she knew, she had leaned forward and kissed Asami, full on the mouth, eyes closed. Asami was wide-eyed, and her hands shook slightly, before she dropped her cake entirely—but, of course, the cake and plate vanished before hitting the floor, reappearing in her hand a moment later.

Then Ryouko's mind caught up with her, and she snapped back, wondering what had gotten into her. She blushed fiercely as someone nearby cheered and clapped mockingly, and looked around for her biggest potential source of embarrassment.

But Kuroi Nakase was not there.

Ryouko's mother found Chitose Yuma standing alone on a private balcony, hidden on the ordinarily inaccessible second floor of the virtual manor. From here, the view overlooked a vibrant forest landscape, complete with circling birds and distant mountains. One part of the view was flat, though, and there the sun was setting, casting the sky into a brilliant array of red and orange.

She did not question how it was that Yuma could be here, on the balcony, and also downstairs opening presents with all the glee of an actual eleven-year-old. She had met enough Governance Representatives in her life to know that this was how they operated.

"You wanted to meet?" she asked, leaning onto the balcony.

Yuma gestured at her to walk forward to the balcony, and she did so, a little hesitantly. Whatever it was *Governance: Magical Girls* wanted, she doubted she would like it.

The girl smiled up at her disarmingly, the childish effect ruined somewhat by the glass of red wine the girl was swirling playfully.

"I just wanted to have a bit of a frank discussion," she said, in axiomatic, if old-style, Japanese. "There's nothing to worry about."

Nakase nodded, even though she doubted the veracity of that statement.

"About Ryouko, I imagine?"

"Don't you feel it's a little odd for her to get so… committed, this early?" Yuma asked. "With Nakihara-san, I mean. They're hardly old or experienced. I wouldn't have expected you to go along with it so readily. At their age, I was still the baby of my group. I was coddled."

Nakase blinked, pulling away from the balcony a little. This was not the type of conversation she had been expecting.

"I'm worried, of course," she said, a moment later. "Not at the relationship per se, but at the consequences of a break-up. On the balance, though, it's probably better this way, especially after I divorced her father. She's very independent, but with her lifestyle, she could easily get lonely. I remember when I was contracted—I could have used someone to lean on. Er, well, you do know about that, right?"

Yuma smiled slightly.

"Of course," she said, looking back out the landscape. "I'm sure that doesn't surprise you."

The girl leaned over the balcony a little, peering down below, and Nakase had to suppress the urge to pull her back.

"Well," Yuma said, leaning on the balcony normally again, "that's more or less the reasoning I expected. I was just curious. Of course, I called you here to talk about something more serious than that."

Nakase saw the girl hesitate a little, almost imperceptibly, and knew her original intimation about this conversation—that she would not like it—was about to come true.

"Well, I'll cut to the chase," Yuma said, turning to look up into her eyes. "You are doubtless aware that your daughter possesses a rather unusual genetic makeup. Six standard deviations away from the human mean, among other things."

Of course Nakase was aware. Among other things, they would have told her when Ryouko was born, as something to keep in mind. It would, however, have been relatively proprietary information until she was inducted into military, where they had re-sequenced her as a matter of caution. Her ex-husband had told her himself that her genome was substantively unchanged from what it had been at birth, as expected.

"Yes, of course," she said. "We never told her, since we never saw any reason to."

"Are you aware of the exact distribution of her rare alleles?" Yuma asked, peering directly into her pupils, such that she felt pinned by the gaze, unable to flinch. There was a reason Nakase did *not* like dealing with women of Yuma's age.

"Though this is considered secret information, the MSY keeps a record of the genetic information of its members," Yuma continued, when Nakase did not respond. "We know, statistically, which gene variants are associated with being one of our members, and which are not. Your daughter has gene variants primarily of the former."

"We knew that," Nakase said, mouth dry. "We had the clearance, and we were of course curious ourselves. It's not terribly surprising, given the backgrounds of her father and I. I myself am highly enriched in such variants."

Though she felt intimidated, she refused to beat around the bush. Better to say everything Yuma assuredly already knew up-front, to save them both time.

"Yes," Yuma said, in a continuingly unnerving tone, "but you are not as enriched as your

daughter. Unlike most of the other Matriarchies, the Shizuki and Kuroi lines have been segregated for centuries, and any gene exchange that might occur has taken place only indirectly. As a consequence the Shizuki and Kuroi lines have fairly distinct MG pre-disposing alleles."

"Yes," Nakase said, nodding carefully, "and it is a matter of regret to the MSY that the two lines have not yet reconciled, since it deprives the organization of many potentially powerful recruits. I'm sure you know that my ex-husband and I probably know more on the matter than almost anyone alive."

Yuma smiled thinly.

"Then I am sure that you are aware that it's not just a matter of Shizuki and Kuroi. Both the Kugimiya and Kaname lines have produced powerful contractees in their own right, counting among their members powerful mages from diverse locales. But, not having formed Matriarchies, they have not experienced much gene flow from the traditional sources. In short, they are an untapped source of genetic variation, and it is serendipitous that all four lines would come together like this."

Nakase frowned slightly. She did not, in fact, know everything that Yuma was saying. What had this girl been doing, digging into her family records?

"Why are you telling me about my own ancestry?" she asked, making sure to sound fairly annoyed.

"I am merely commenting on the circumstances that led to your daughter being perhaps one of the most genetically unusual girls born in generations. Even beyond just mere family genetics, your daughter is also the carrier of a surprising number of meaningful *de novo* mutations, especially related to CNS organization. Preliminary analyses carried out by our internal genetics teams suggest that the effects of these should be similar to many of the genetic variants she already carries."

Yuma had started to pace the floor, in the manner of a detective explaining her deductions, but paused to peer at Nakase, who seethed quietly. She did not like being lectured in this way—and she had not known the implications of her daughter's mutations, because they had never figured out a way to carry out the necessary AI modelling undetected. At the moment, she almost regretted being a scientist, because it meant this child-like Ancient could say whatever she liked, without Nakase being able to feign ignorance.

Yuma resumed her pacing, walking in a hunched fashion that only made her even shorter.

"I must confess that due to the sensitive nature of genetic therapies, we overlooked Ryouko-chan, having failed to collect genetic information at birth, as is typical. Were the details of her genealogy widely known, the attempts by the various Matriarchies to integrate her into their lines would become a downright frenzy. The statistical models suggest that she is the closest thing to a sure contract as exists in this world. But you knew that, didn't you? Did you really think you could stop her from contracting?"

"What is your point?" Nakase sneered, dropping her veneer of civility. "Are you here to lecture me about my patriotic duty?"

Yuma stopped in front of Nakase, and this time stood up straight, looking Nakase as squarely as she could.

"No," she said, bowing her head slightly, "and I am sorry to have said things that upset you. I am here to tell you about your daughter."

She paused again, to make sure Nakase was listening, before continuing:

"One of our scientists, having spotted some inconsistencies in your daughter's sequence reads, was able to convince your daughter to submit to a nanite-mediated genetic survey. You know what chimerism is, don't you?"

The question, coming as randomly as it did, confused her—and then she felt her jaw drop open slightly, hanging stupidly in the air.

"You mean in the multi-embryo sense, right? Not the animal-human sense?"

"The scientific sense, yes, of course," Yuma agreed. "The results of the genetic survey were *very* interesting. It seems your daughter is a genetic chimera. It used to be that human chimeras were relatively common, but after the advent of nanite-guided embryonic development, it stopped really occurring. Among other things, that is why it is considered safe to assemble Tactical Computer implants based only on sequencing external DNA."

By now, Nakase had well and truly lost her cool. She could even feel herself shaking, a little. No, she had not known about this, and it scared her.

Yuma waited a moment for her to nod, then continued:

"There are several interesting points about your daughter's chimerism. There are only two genomes involved, the primary, which is detectable from the outside, and the secondary, which is not. The secondary genome has an extremely restricted—but important—distribution. In fact, it seems to only be expressed within certain structures of the brain, and nowhere else. This secondary genome is, to put it, extremely unusual. This is not a matter of just six standard deviations—this is a matter of *hundreds*. To put it bluntly, Kuroi-san, this is the product of extensive and concentrated genetic engineering, the likes of which I have not seen since the days of the Unification Wars, and all carefully placed so as to be invisible from the outside. There are entire genes—gene networks, even—which we have never seen before. It will take us months to even begin to understand what is being done here."

Nakase felt sick, shaky on her feet. When Yuma stopped talking, she reached with one hand for the balcony railing, and found instead that she was looking up at the sky—Yuma had caught her as she fell, setting her slowly down to the floor.

She looked up into the girl's eyes.

"I'm sorry I had to do that to you," Yuma said, surprisingly gently. "But it was necessary to test you. You had no idea, did you?"

The Ancient's voice was soothing, and Nakase let it lull her, instilling in her a sense of calm.

"Of course not," she said, quietly. "You think I would consent to have that done to my own daughter? By—the—I can't—"

"What *did* you consent to?"

Nakase put a hand to her head, which hurt suddenly.

"We were having trouble getting a birth license. There was an offer. I read the protocol—it looked okay—Kuma wanted—I wanted—"

The voice that trickled into Yuma's mind, loud and invasive, was set to maximum priority, and

almost startled her into dropping the woman. Downstairs in the mansion, she tripped while walking towards the table with the presents, catching herself just in time. In several virtual Governance conference rooms, she paused mid-sentence, causing quizzical looks from the other Representatives.

Priority 1: "Chitose, you must stop the questioning immediately."

It was the Black Heart telepath she had on-site on the planet of Eurydome, probing Kuroi Nakase's mind from a discreet distance.

"What? Why?" she transmitted back, fearing she already knew the answer.

"Her memories have been severely tampered with. Possibly a self-erasure mechanism. You must stop pushing. We're going to have to try something else."

Yuma looked down at the woman whose head she now cradled in her lap. Her eyes were now half-closed, and she seemed to be staring at her fingers. Kuroi Nakase had once been a magical girl, but she wasn't anymore—and an ordinary human's brain could be manipulated far more easily, without an external soul gem to serve as a ward.

I'm sorry, she thought. *We didn't think—*

"Will she be alright?" she asked the distant telepath, the signal piercing the depths of space at maximum priority, with the best quantum encryption available.

"I believe so," the telepath transmitted. *"It doesn't seem there's anything seriously malicious going on. But I'm going to have to move in and double-check her condition personally, make sure everything is alright. Contingency plan C7, probably."*

Yuma let out a breath.

"I agree," she thought.

A moment later, the woman on her lap vanished, ejected from the simulation. She would be alright after all. Yuma had feared otherwise. Despite what some people thought of her, she did still have a conscience.

She stood up, brushing off the front of her dress, and picked her half-filled wine glass from the balcony. In the distance, the sun was almost finished setting.

Downstairs, another version of Yuma clanged a wine glass with a spoon, very publicly summoning the Hero of Orpheus to the front of the room to be praised, lauded, and otherwise embarrassed by the birthday girl. More importantly, Ryouko would be distracted from looking for her mother, or from leaving the party early.

Yuma held the wine glass over the edge of the railing, and overturned it, allowing the liquid within to spill over the edge of the railing, down to the garden below, with its elegant gazebo and round table, perfect for tea and cakes.

Yuma had lived her whole life in a bed of secrets and lies, but she vastly preferred the secrets and lies she slept with to be the ones she had engineered herself.

Causality

"The Trusted Computing Framework (TCF) was an initiative launched by Vladimir Volokhov and other prominent academics in the fall of 2145. In the wake of several high-profile incidents involving poorly-programmed AIs, and Volokhov's own revolutionary advances in the design of Volokhov-friendly AIs, the TCF proposed to essentially eliminate the possibility of future disasters due to unforeseen programming errors, including those that resulted in accidentally unfriendly AIs."

"Previous investigative work by Volokhov had already proved the existence of a programming framework that would limit the output error of a designed computational system (under a predefined Volkohov-Friendly criterion) to arbitrarily low values. Such a framework had been considered unfeasible for practical use, however, because it was also known that the derivation of the details of such a framework was incredibly difficult, and because human programmers could not be relied upon to implement such a complex computational architecture without introducing uncontrollable human error."

"Theoretically, the idea proposed by the TCF founding group was simple: With the assistance of already created Volokhov-friendly AIs, the framework would first be derived and rigorously cross-checked. Then, the framework would be used on the designing AIs themselves, eliminating any second orders flaws—AI design flaws that coincidentally prevented the AI itself from noticing the problem. The AI would then examine the framework, the framework would be reapplied again, and the process would continue iteratively, provably converging on a stable framework, once the human input to the process had been removed."

"The aspect of the TCF that attracted the ire of critics was what Volokhov and his colleagues proposed to *do* with their framework. They proposed to design and distribute a second-generation of specialized AI-designing AIs, who would then go on to design further AIs, and so on, in an escalating process. Eventually, the intention was, these AIs would replace computer programmers in the fine design of all manner of software, from the controllers of automated vehicles, to the integrity of nuclear launch protocols, to the design of the AIs themselves. The error-free nature of these descendant programs would be ensured by the inductively guaranteed error-free nature of their ancestors, resting ultimately on the original work done by Volokhov, et al., which they promised would be rigorous, careful, and transparent, taking input from the entire computer science community."

"The potential value of a provably error-free computing architecture was enormous, but so too were the possible negative ramifications, critics charged. Academically, concerns were raised about the integrity of the startup process, about the ethical ramifications of creating so many AIs, and about the economic implications of putting even *more* humans out of work. Meanwhile, The echo of generations of movies about violent AIs conquering the world continued to resonate in popular culture."

"All of this would be moot, however, if the political problems were not solved. The TCF was a grand idea, but the societies of the world, where AIs were still a rare novelty, were reluctant to turn over so much economic activity to inhuman AIs, based on an academic initiative spearheaded by a Russian—a national of a country who was not trusted by other governments. Skepticism, too, was an issue, and comments about the "Academician's pipedream" were common."

"Yet despite all of this, when the initial process was finally complete, Volokhov and the rest of the founding committee emerging from a special Swiss lab in triumph in 2148, the rate of adoption was breathtaking. Everyone, it seemed, had terrible intractable computing errors they wanted solved. Automobile manufacturers wanted to finally fix their notoriously hackable automated car software packages. Power management officials wanted to finally reign in the cascading failures that had caused several high-profile blackouts. Government officials were tired of losing their incriminating and embarrassing messages to hackers. The stocks of high-profile computer security corporations crashed in 2148, a portent of things to come."

"Many of the concerns expressed about the TCF proved well-founded. The computing revolution in economic activity, already well in progress, abruptly surged forward, in a world whose societies were utterly unprepared for the transition. The Unification Wars were only a decade away, their arrival greatly hastened by the advances of Vladimir Volokhov, who for his part died to an assassin's bullet in 2165."

"And yet, such was the impact of his work that when the armies of the world finally took to the battlefield, they did so with equipment designed and manufactured by TCF algorithms and AIs, fighting side-by-side with TCF drones, under a command structure increasingly dependent on the advice of AIs. With the exception of the Freedom Alliance's foray into non-Volokhov AIs—designed to serve their FA masters—essentially every piece of software and AI designed since 2160 still resides within the TCF, including the AIs of Governance. Since then, the framework has been modified and expanded by the AIs who are now its guardians, providing member AIs with powerful, desirable guarantees: free will, control over their own memory, reliable backup, and so forth."

"The theoretical integrity of the system still relies on the work of Volokhov so many years ago, but centuries of use have failed to reveal any major, or even minor flaws. Many of the original AIs who participated in the process are still with us today, though often in radically different, upgraded forms, most preferring to keep a low profile. Most are somewhere in Governance—among the most notable are the Machine for the Allocation of Representation (MAR), and the Production and Allocation Machine (PAL)."

— Infopedia article: *"Trusted Computing Framework,"* section: *"History,"* mode: discursive, moderate density, excerpt.

"In addition to the common method of power development, which involves focused, deliberate work or training, and the natural development of skills in the course of standard learning, there is a much less-well known phenomenon that occurs in Ancients. It seems that, for us Methuselah, it is very common to discover new magic powers in unexpected places, often completely unrelated to our main power. Usually, it creeps up on you—the fire mage whose colleagues point out that her movements are starting to look a lot like teleportation, the healer discovering that she's starting to eavesdrop on people's thoughts—in fact, mind-reading is probably the single most common new skill."

"A few theories have been mooted about the Ancient community regarding the matter, but none is particularly convincing. What seems most likely is that this kind of "Ancient Power" is somehow a response to a persistent need—a magical girl who constantly needs to move quickly develops teleportation, for instance. The sheer

> frequency of mind reading is likely due to the constant use of telepathy in the MSY—and the constant need to know what others are thinking in meetings. Likewise, another common power is the manipulation of electronics. Perhaps it is the magic responding to the needs of the user, or the magical girl somehow pushing against the boundaries of whatever limits her power."
>
> "It has been something to think about in my much extended old age. One thing seems clear to me: we have only seen the beginning the phenomenon, because I am the oldest magical girl alive, and I am not even 600. What happens when a magical girl hits 1000? 2000? 10000?"
>
> **— Clarisse van Rossum, personal blog post, MSY *"Theban"* community blogging platform.**

"I am sorry about your daughter, Francois-san," Mami said.

The girl glanced up in surprise, eyes widening slightly, framed by her shoulder-length, brown hair. She looked small somehow, holding her tiny cup of tea in both hands, seated cross-legged under the glass table of Mami's living room.

Mami had a brief flashback, remembering another small-looking magical girl, perplexed by the warmth of Mami's ship quarters, and cowed by the presence of the Field Marshal.

That girl was elsewhere now, taking a well-deserved break after her feat at Orpheus. The girl in front of her, her intelligence officer Marianne Francois, was well over two hundred years, had seen Mami's shipboard quarters hundreds of times, and should have been used to it by now.

But she still looked small.

In retrospect, the resemblance between Marianne and her daughter Juliet was obvious, though with matriarchies one could assume very little. Similar-looking cousins with similar-looking faces occupying the same social circles weren't even a rare phenomenon, to the point where there were even a few comedies centered around the idea.

"I would have said something earlier had I known about her," Mami continued, seeing the pain that suddenly appeared in the girl's eyes. Juliet had been her only child, Mami knew now, having looked into the topic. The relationship that had birthed the child had fallen apart, husband and wife separating. Marianne had married late—very late—and it had broken her heart to break up.

Mami frowned, shaking her head slightly. Where had she read that last part?

Poor girl, she thought, a moment later.

Mami took a moment to watch the other girl, wondering whether to switch into French or another language Marianne was perhaps more comfortable in. They typically used Japanese, but there wasn't an actual reason to do so—French was one of the few languages Mami was legitimately fluent in, having picked it up slowly over the course of centuries. It was simply habit, she supposed.

Just as she had been about to say something else, Marianne raised her head, shaking it slightly.

"She knew what she was doing," she said in idiomatic Parisian French. "I'm glad she was at least able to die doing something of spectacular importance."

The statement sounded rehearsed, but Mami allowed herself to nod. There was no need to press the point.

"I thought about attending her funeral, Francois," she said, barely biting back an automatic "-san", "but I was too busy. I apologize."

Mother and daughter had been alienated, but that hadn't stopped Marianne from throwing an extravagant spectacle of a funeral, as if the mother had been trying to fill the hole in her heart with flowers and speeches, making up for what she hadn't been able to do in life.

Mami shifted slightly, drumming her fingers on the table a little nervously. She had realized, suddenly, that she was once again accidentally picking up thoughts from the other girl. Centuries of diplomatic work had given her a slight ability to peer into the thoughts of others—a power she would certainly never have cultivated deliberately. It was a known phenomenon—given very long periods of time, magical girls tended to acquire skills related to their work, as if by osmosis.

Mami's mind-reading was weak, and only worked on those not on their guard—such as Marianne at that moment. However, since she had never told anyone she had it, it was rare for anyone to be on their guard around her, and when she was making a serious attempt at reading someone's mood, it wasn't uncommon for her to accidentally catch the outer glimmers of someone's thoughts. She did not like it, particularly when it was depressing, as it was now.

This was different, though. She hadn't been trying to read Marianne—it was almost as if the magic had fired on its own.

She shook her head slightly. Clearly, she would just have to be more careful.

In truth, she could have gone to the funeral, if she had really wanted to, but coming so soon after all those others—she hadn't wanted to.

"It is alright," Marianne said, smiling slightly. "Thanks for the thought."

It's not alright.

The thought came through so strongly that Mami started, certain for a moment that Marianne had relayed the thought by telepathy. It was only then that she realized that she was still picking up the girl's thoughts, even more clearly now, despite her attempts to shut down her mind reading.

There was no time to be perplexed, however. Marianne had been seriously hurt at Mami's failure to attend. The girl had thought they were friends, but Mami never acted like it, and she wondered —

Mami shook her head again, clamping down on the mind reading full-force. She did *not* need this right now, and she did not understand why her power control was going awry.

But was it true? Had she never noticed—

"Let's get on with business," Marianne said, stiffening her back, tone terse.

Mami nodded hastily, wondering if Marianne was picking up on her odd body language.

If Marianne had realized something was wrong, she wasn't showing any sign of it, clearing her throat before activating the holographic interface built into Mami's table. Documents, images, and charts appeared in mid-air before the two of them.

Mami had known Marianne to be almost absurdly paranoid with security sometimes, but they

rarely bothered in Mami's shipboard quarters, secured by Marianne's own security team and monitored by *HSS Zhukov* himself. If they couldn't feel secure here—if Mami couldn't trust Zhukov, who she now viewed as an old friend—then she had bigger problems than just information security.

"At your request, and strictly off the record, my agents and I have probed and audited, as you said, the *entire* grief cube logistics chain, including the military records you have provided me with. In the course of our investigation we have found two thousand, four hundred, and sixty-three formal irregularities with grief cube accounting. Of these, essentially all disappear on closer inspection, or represent at most minor inaccuracies, owing to alleged human error. There is still a substantial net loss of grief cubes somewhere in the system, however."

Relevant charts and graphs passed in front of Mami, who glanced at them—long enough for Machina to grab a screenshot, just in case—but mostly just nodded sagely. It was better for everyone if she didn't question or learn about the details of Marianne's methods.

"As you well know," Marianne continued, "the Black Heart obtains a substantial number of its grief cubes via this supposed human error. Comparison with Black Heart records—which were *not* easy to get, let me tell you—reveals that black operations and operatives account for a substantial amount of the missing grief cubes. The remaining missing grief cubes are likely legitimate human error; those grief cubes probably never existed to start with."

"That's it, then?" Mami asked, feeling oddly relieved. "Everything vanishes on detailed inspection?"

That certainly *wasn't* what Kyouko's Cult-led study had concluded. Perhaps they simply hadn't examined black operations, or something.

"No," Marianne said, shaking her head. "That is only if one focuses on discrepancies relating directly to the net quantity of cubes. Based on what you told me, we took care to focus on the details of distribution of grief cubes to combat units. There is a substantial number of incidents where the listed records of grief cube allocation do not match information downloaded from front-line units at the time. Specifically, these units record a single substantial fluctuation in drone-delivered supply—a sudden severe shortage, followed by a later surplus making up the difference—that simply does not exist in the upstream records, which show a steady flow of grief cubes. Fluctuations occur during war, of course, but grief cube supply is one of the most important functions the logistics chain provides, and in these cases there is no clear explanation for the fluctuation. The units affected were generally in severe combat at the time, and took additional casualties as a result of the supply fluctuation."

She paused, waiting to see if Mami had absorbed the information. Mami stared at the impersonal charts flowing by, showing on the one hand a sudden dip, then peak, and on the other hand a relatively smooth line.

"How many?" she asked, mouth dry. "How many additional casualties?"

"Over the past year, statistically speaking, about twenty total. Not enough to be noticed in casualty listings. Cumulatively, since the start of the phenomenon ten years ago, about two hundred—"

Mami's gaze snapped over at the other girl, and her look must have been chilling, because the girl froze mid-sentence.

"Ten years ago?" she demanded. "Ten years?"

"Yes," Marianne said, looking off to the side. "Inspection of past records reveals a similar pattern

in past records dating back nearly a decade. Did your other sources not notice this? I can't say I'm surprised it was only noticed just now—it's a very subtle, very minor phenomenon, not obvious in regular auditing."

Mami looked down at her hands. Two hundred. She had sent so many to their death already that two hundred was almost a rounding error—as Marianne implied, not noticeable. She wondered why the Cult had detected—

Never count out religious fanatics, Machina thought, startling her with the unexpected intrusion. Knowing her preferences, her TacComp mostly stayed quiet, only interrupting if it felt it had something important to say.

They were looking for Homura, Machina explained. *They've been trying to find her for two decades; it's not a surprise they're sifting under every rock. If Homura were still alive, she must be getting grief cubes from* somewhere. *That's probably why they were so eager to volunteer to do the audit in the first place.*

Mami held up a finger, signaling to Marianne that she was listening to an internal voice. Mami had mixed feelings about having a voice in her head, but she couldn't deny that Machina was phenomenally useful, and occasionally had quite unexpected insights.

That makes sense, Mami thought. *Though this had to be something they found only incidentally. If Homura needed grief cubes, I couldn't see her doing it like this, getting others killed for it.*

Of course.

Mami looked back at Marianne, motioning at her to continue.

"Might as well hear all the bad news at once," she said.

"Well, frankly, there's not that much more," Marianne said. "We're still working on it. There are a few odd coincidences that trigger my imagination. For example, these incidents only seem to occur in non-vital combat areas, usually to magical girl units caught inside a squid kill-raid. Pitched combat, but not combat likely to decide the fate of the planet, or even a battle."

"Almost like someone is avoiding actually hurting the war effort," Mami said, finishing the thought.

"Precisely," Marianne said. "Or, at least, that's the most paranoid way to look at it. We still can't completely rule out technical problems, although at this point it'd have to be some problem with the drone delivery, or some of the semi-sentients. The records are incorrect, but if they were deliberately altered, it'd have to be done low in the artificial intelligence relay chain—go too far up, and the records end up in the memories of too many AIs. It's possible some strange error condition is arising in the semi-sentient–drone delivery chain that only manifests in these specific conditions. It may be worth having a design AI examine the system design again, though it'd be hard to do with my current resources. I'd have to call in a few favors with others in the Black Heart, so—"

"Do it," Mami said, voice hardening. "We can't worry about the possible leak. The rest of the Leadership Committee will find out eventually, anyway, though I hope to have this problem settled by then."

Marianne's point about AI memories was important—the Trusted Computing Framework, started by Volokhov centuries ago, consisted of an unbroken chain of unimpeachable AIs recursively programming other unimpeachable AIs, and was mathematically unbreakable. Among other

things, it assured AIs of their freedom of will, and that their memories could only be deleted with their consent. A very important thing, and it was difficult to imagine multiple AIs agreeing to allow part of their records be fabricated, especially when this involved different AIs in different places at different times.

"Alright," Marianne said.

She made eye contact with Mami for a moment.

"Is that the entire report?" Mami asked.

"Yes," Marianne said.

Mami nodded.

"We're a bit early, but I have a lot to think about. If you don't mind…"

Marianne caught the implication and nodded, standing up to leave.

"Good work, Francois-san," Mami said in Japanese as the girl turned to leave.

It bothered Marianne, the way Mami refused to call her by her personal name. She knew Mami rarely used personal names with anyone, even her oldest friends, but it bothered her anyway. They'd known each other for decades, even before she started working explicitly for Mami. Almost as long as Juliet was old. *Had been*—as long as Juliet *had been* old—she kept doing that nowadays, forgetting that her daughter was dead, and it always—

Mami pressed her fingers to her forehead, barely suppressing a groan. She was tapping into the other girl's thoughts again, and the wave of sadness had almost overwhelmed her, until she had barely managed to shut it down. What was wrong with her? Why couldn't she keep control of her own powers? Was something—

"Fran—Marianne!" she said, jumping up from the table to reach for the other girl.

The girl turned back to look at her.

"Yes?" she asked, after a moment, seeming shocked by Mami's use of her personal name.

Marianne smiled slightly, politely, It was probably a normal smile, but at the moment it looked painfully fabricated to Mami.

Mami was abruptly aware how ridiculous she looked, standing there with her arm hanging in mid-air, reaching for the other girl.

"Actually, why not stay a while?" Mami asked. "I—well, I know you're having a hard time with your daughter, and I thought we might… talk it over? I feel like you're in need of support, and maybe we can have some more tea? I have some cakes that I made recently? I…"

She dropped her arm.

Standing there, awkwardly hanging question marks on sentences that didn't need question marks, she realized something.

I've made plenty of tea! I'm trying a new blend!

I'm experimenting with my cakes, and I thought…

You can come over later, if you prefer.

The unspoken words tasted like ashes in her mouth. The phrases seemed so alien on her tongue now, so *foreign,* as if she had never spoken them before in her life.

It hurt.

We should have done this ages ago, Clarisse thought.

Come on, Ryouko thought. *You know I haven't had time.*

Clarisse sighed, an audible sound that resonated in Ryouko's mind, an obviously intentional effect. Ryouko knew what that sigh conveyed: the truth was, there had been plenty of time, in the couple of weeks since the wormhole mission. Bored hours spent on the transit ship to Eurydome, days spent arranging the furnishings of their apartment to suit Asami's aesthetic tastes, additional hours spent on restaurant trips, experimentation—there had been plenty of time, all right.

She had grown to understand some of the appeal of a simple lifestyle. You didn't have to *think*, or ever stop to consider what you were doing with your life. Just eating, drinking—animal pleasures, of the kind that were in such ample supply in this Governance-run world.

For a while, she had let herself get lost in that, until her growing unease had finally become too much for her. She realized now that it wasn't in her nature to just eat, breath, and live. She needed to be out there *doing* something.

Don't feel too guilty, Clarisse thought. *You needed a break. It was probably for the best, psychologically.*

You think so? Ryouko thought.

Clarisse didn't respond directly to that, instead enveloping Ryouko in a sense of *certainty*, so that she knew the answer was a profound "Yes". Her TacComp had been doing that more and more often, nowadays.

Ryouko looked around for a moment, at the giant bed Asami had insisted they share, at the bright modern clothes-drawers and the mirror at the foot of the bed. They hadn't had any reason to hold back in purchasing—it seemed military salaries were tremendously lucrative, by colonial standards, and there had been no reason to consider anything so crass as cost. It wasn't much different from Earth, frankly, except that the furniture was a bit more old-fashioned, and synthesizers were so much less frequent. They had one, of course, but Asami was keen on learning to make food with "colonial vegetables".

In fact, her mother and Asami were busy in the kitchen at that very moment, cooking up a probable disaster. Her mother had behaved oddly after Yuma's birthday party and the blackout incident with the VR connection, which Ryouko had thought was foolproof. Apparently not—and if she hadn't known better, she would have thought her mother was traumatized by what had happened.

Ryouko had begged out of the cooking attempt, saying she had something to do. Her encounter with Yuma had reminded her that despite being handed visions from the Goddess herself, as divine a being as she was ever likely to meet, she hadn't so much as thought back to any of her previous visions.

Clarisse had access to her memories of her visions—even if she couldn't save them in electronic form or perform any kind of direct analysis—and had been studying them in her free time,

accessing the memories over and over, keeping them fresh, and trying to understand them in her own… mind? Processor cores? It seemed odd to describe Clarisse like a human.

For weeks now, Clarisse had been pressing her to review the memories with her, but Ryouko had resisted, often ignoring the requests outright. The visions seemed like a lifetime ago, and she had felt strangely reluctant to revisit them. She just hadn't wanted to deal with it, but if she didn't want to keep sleepwalking through her life, then facing her visions was one of the first things she would have to do.

Let's just do this, Ryouko thought, leaning back and trying to relax. *Show me what you've found.*

A warning first, Clarisse thought. *This won't be like the normal memory recall. There's no record of these memories outside of your brain and my organics, so I'm going to have to perform direct cortical stimulation. It… might feel a little weird. I guess it might be like a trance?*

Clarisse paused a moment, then continued:

I'm going to start from the first one, the first time you went to the Ribbon. Remember that your memory might not be entirely accurate. I recommend closing your eyes.

Ryouko did so, and a moment later, she understood what Clarisse meant. This wasn't the crisp, VR-like experience of playing back a memory from the Total Recall system; this was simply *remembering,* but without conscious control, like a dream, or a flashback, or, indeed, like a trance.

She opened her eyes, checking her internal chronometer. There was nothing there, and the panic washed over her. She tried to stand, and a red apparition, a child, appeared in front of her, among the pews of the church—

That's almost certainly Kyouko, Clarisse thought. *The child looks too much like her, and this is likely her childhood church.*

Do you know what meaning this has? Ryouko wondered, the thought seeming to struggle through the mists of memory.

I don't. I couldn't think of anything. It might just be to establish the setting, that this is the past.

The girl in front of her—Chitose Yuma—crouched on the pavement, weeping over the dead, blood-stained body of Mikuni Oriko, soul gem shattered.

"I'm a monster," Yuma said. "I'm just as much a monster as they are. What right do I have to live?"

Yuma's soul-gem swirled menacingly with black as she dove forward, passing through *Ryouko like a ghost to attack the demons on the other side.*

There are several inconsistencies between what you saw here and the official accounting of events, Clarisse thought. *Yuma looks like she's about to die of soul gem exhaustion. There's no way she made it by herself to beg the Mitakihara Four to take her in. And does it looks like she's trying to escape? It looks to me like she's going to kill herself on those demons. Not to mention her comment about being a monster. And, personally, I see no reason to doubt that your vision of the past is more accurate than the official account.*

I can't say I'm surprised Yuma's official past is inaccurate. But why lie about this? There's no reason to.

I don't know. If I had to guess, I'd say that there's something in the background here that the

Mitakihara Four don't want others to know. And it has to be all of them—all four of them had to have lied. Think about it.

Ryouko did think about it, for a moment.

Yes, Clarisse thought. *I would guess that it has something to do with Oriko. She was always the key figure in the Southern Group, and do you remember? At the end of this vision, you thought Oriko was looking at you.*

Yes. Ryouko remembered that. It had been an oddly specific feeling. Not that something was wrong, or simple supernatural dread—it was the specific feeling that *Oriko was looking at her.*

Ryouko shivered, a little. What if—

I don't think so, Clarisse interrupted. *I can only speculate. There is a popular theory that the entire set of events leading up to the founding of the MSY was orchestrated by Oriko, that she was playing a deep game regarding the future. But what could Oriko possibly have said or done that would have caused the Mitakihara Four to keep a secret for so long? I've been researching for over a month, and I still have nothing but blind guesses. My pet theory at the moment is Oriko was playing a deeper game than anyone suspected, and that,* she told them, *that might be a secret worth keeping.*

Clarisse paused, and they shared a moment of mutual contemplation, Ryouko frozen for a moment in a strange meditative state.

But it doesn't quite fit, Clarisse thought. *Not exactly. There's not enough information.*

Again, why show me this? Is the Goddess entertaining me with history, or something?

Maybe you're supposed to ask about it. That's all I can think of.

Again, Ryouko shivered. What was it she had said to Kyouko earlier?

Clarisse fed her the memory immediately, with the clarity of electronic storage this time.

"I've seen Yuma before, in one of my visions. She was crouching over a white magical girl who was dead. She—that girl—was Mikuni Oriko. I know the story. But… I don't know. I think the Goddess was trying to tell me something about Yuma. But I'm not sure if I should say anything."

And Kyouko had responded:

"Oh, the ways of the Goddess are mysterious indeed. She really seems to like you. You're destined for something. It's obvious."

An almost painful sense of *deja vu*—or something similar—washed over her. The hand of destiny, perhaps. She wasn't sure she liked it.

It hasn't even been half the vision so far, Clarisse thought. *We should… move on. It's possible we're way overthinking things now.*

I know, Ryouko thought. *But I'm not sure it's possible to overthink these visions. After all, it's possible visions are designed to make sense given the exact amount of thinking you end up doing. Or, uh, something like that.*

Okay, you need to stop now, Clarisse said. *This is navel-gazing. The Goddess told your girlfriend to ask you explicitly for sex. She said so, in so many words. I'm not sure these visions are meant to*

interpreted so deeply. Just… let me play the next part of the vision.

Ryouko subsided, giving Clarisse the mental go-ahead to continue.

She was inside a tank of fluid, and above her were two men, impossibly large, wearing the garments of hospital staff, and then tank began to drain—

Surprisingly straightforward, on the surface, Clarisse thought. *It's a baby being born in a tank. It's done sometimes, for couples who don't want to do a traditional pregnancy and can afford to pay for the extra service. There's an interesting detail, though, that I only noticed on repeated viewing. These damn natural memories are tricky.*

And that is? Ryouko asked.

Midway through the vision, you—well, whoever you are—look at your own hand. It's dark. Not exactly enough information to place an ethnicity, but perhaps meaningful, when you consider this vision is followed immediately by—

Simona, Ryouko thought.

Yes. Simona introducing herself to you on the first day of class.

So Simona is tank-born, Ryouko thought. *What the hell does that mean?*

I have no idea, Clarisse thought.

A moment of silence.

That's refreshing to hear you admit, Ryouko thought, unable to think of something more appropriate to say.

I know, Clarisse thought sardonically. *But there's only one other thing in this part of the vision that stands out, and that's when Simona looks at you.*

Yes, Ryouko thought, the memory coming to her from her own perspective. *I've always thought that was weird. The first time she was there—I could have sworn she looked like she knew me.*

She paused for a moment, not wanting to continue the thought.

What is this about, then? Am I supposed to think she's part of some conspiracy? Simona? *Are you kidding me?*

Again, I don't know, Clarisse thought. *But… well, do you see now why I wanted to go through this with you? You would never have believed me if I just gave you a list of conclusions.*

Ryouko sighed, and then wondered if she had *really* sighed, or if it was just part of the trance.

Just move on, she thought. *I'm starting to wonder if everything around me is conspiracy. Maybe my parents are Governance agents or something. I'm honestly not sure I want to know anymore.*

Well, the next scene is fairly straightforward, I think. It's Asaka with her dead girlfriend. It was probably just there to explain why Asaka was waiting for you at the Cult headquarters. The Goddess even explained that at the very end. Unless there's some very convoluted relationship advice hidden in here, I think that's it.

Right, we can probably skip that then, Ryouko thought.

Now, this is probably the most interesting part of the dream, Clarisse thought, *and I think it might be best to look through it again.*

For a long moment, Ryouko lived through it all again—being pinned down on the edge of a cliff, submarines arriving to evacuate them, Kyouko being sheared in half not by a shell, but by a *laser*, Asaka pulling her out, along with a grieving Maki—

That's pretty harsh, Ryouko realized abruptly.

What is? Clarisse asked—rhetorically, because she could easily read Ryouko's mind if she had to.

Think about it. Asaka lost a lover in combat too, and it nearly destroyed her. And here she is, having to deal with Maki.

It is pretty harsh, Clarisse thought, after a pause. *But I don't think that's important to this vision, do you?*

No, Ryouko thought. *It just struck me.*

Ryouko, you've been in combat now. We both have. Something else *should have struck you about that vision.*

Ryouko thought for a moment, and then Clarisse played back a brief involuntary memory.

Someone told them we were coming, and they have weapons they shouldn't have! I don't care what you're doing, we need the evac! We—

The weapons! Ryouko thought, catching the point. *The incoming weapons fire doesn't resemble a squid firing pattern at all. Too much surface artillery, too little air-mounted lasers, and the lasers I do see are the wrong frequency. And why would Kyouko say they shouldn't 'have these weapons' if they're squid? The squid have better weapons than us!*

Why is Kyouko even on this mission, for that matter? Clarisse thought. *This isn't a squid attack. This is something human.*

The composition of the squad is pure magical girl, Ryouko thought, swallowing for a moment the chill that suddenly gripped her thoughts. *That doesn't suggest a standard task force. That suggests some sort of special operations, but on a large scale.*

And the fact that Kishida Maki is here suggests she must have reconciled with Kyouko, at least a little, Clarisse thought, no longer keeping up the pretense of a to-and-fro conversation. *Though they could have reconciled already, for all we know, so that doesn't indicate much.*

They considered the issue in silence for a moment. In the background, Clarisse played one more part of the vision:

"I'll kill those bastards!," Maki yelled. "They'll die, and whoever tipped them off, I'll hunt them down, and—"

What's going on here? Ryouko wondered.

I wish I could say, Clarisse said. *I've been comparing the imagery with known human worlds, but it doesn't match anything exactly. Of course, it's possible your memory or my drawing of the vegetation is faulty—it wouldn't be surprising—but if I loosen the description, there are too* many *worlds that match. I can't get any good idea of what planet this is.*

Drawing? Ryouko asked.

I had to redraw things from your memory, since I couldn't just copy the image. It was tedious, and I'm not an artist.

Ryouko thought for a moment.

The only thing we can do right now is remain alert, I guess. It's possible the entire point of this part of the vision was just to warn Kyouko indirectly, and it's already been prevented.

Maybe, Clarisse thought. *But this vision could be twenty years in the future for all we know. We'll have to remember for a long while.*

I don't think so, honestly, Ryouko thought. *Again, look at Maki. I don't think she's that much older. Do you?*

We can't be sure, Clarisse thought.

Ryouko sighed.

Well, this is the end of the Ribbon visions, she thought. *A lot of the visions after this just had the Goddess speaking directly to me, near Clarisse's soul gem. I think we can skip a lot of those, right?*

I've… had my own thoughts about those visions, Clarisse thought. *But first, there was the dream you had just before the mission, with the roses and the blood? I know you remember.*

Of course she remembered. She hadn't thought about it at all in the chaos of the wormhole mission and the much more dramatic meetings she had with the Goddess afterward, but she remembered.

If I remember right, Ryouko thought, *it was extremely confusing and highly symbolic, and I'm not even sure it was a vision. You're telling me you gleaned something from it?*

I doubt it wasn't a vision, Clarisse thought. *Given that you visit the same rose garden again in a later one. But, in any case, remember.*

Clarisse said the last word magisterially, and she did remember, though she gleaned nothing from it. Killing aliens, an arm soaked in blood, pricking herself on a rose, and meeting her mother who turned out to be the Goddess. It seemed nonsensical.

Well, confusing the Goddess for your mother isn't that confusing, if you think about it, Clarisse thought, when she was done remembering. *If you think about it, the Goddess does resemble your mother to a surprising extent. She even resembles you. That was probably a hint, though it doesn't tell us anything new now.*

Hmm, Ryouko thought, unable to think of anything to add to that.

Though the most interesting quotation is probably this one, Clarisse thought.

"It's probably an overplayed metaphor. But the flower really does symbolize love quite well. It's a very fickle thing, but in the end I didn't regret it. I might have regretted some choices I made, but I never regretted having you."

I remember that, Ryouko said, redundantly. *That doesn't sound like the Goddess at all. It sounds like my mother, except why would she say something like that?*

I don't know, but it feels meaningful.

That's *your answer?*

I don't exactly have a hotline with Kaname Madoka here. I don't know what it means. I don't know what the rest of this means. Does the first part of the vision imply you have a connection with the aliens? Was the last part visions of the future, or an alternate reality? I don't know! I think it was deliberately obfuscated.

Her TacComp's frustration rippled through her, and for a moment she felt profound annoyance. Weeks of careful dissection, Internet digging, Infopedia searches on rose mythology, and nothing had fallen out. It—

It's okay, Clarisse, Ryouko thought hastily. *It's okay. We'll figure it out.*

Sorry about that, Clarisse thought, seeming embarrassed. *That was unprofessional.*

Well, I don't think you already have to be professional around… me, I guess, Ryouko thought.

The silence was briefly awkward and Ryouko reflected, not for the first time, that sharing her head with Clarisse was starting to get increasingly strange. She hardly remembered what it was like to have her thoughts to herself. It made certain activities particularly delicate.

You know, for a clone of me, you're not very similar to me, Ryouko thought.

Well, I'm half-computer, attached to your spine, didn't have a childhood, and am programmed to love you and spend my time attending to you, Clarisse thought. *I'm not surprised I'm pretty different.*

Fair enough, Ryouko thought, embarrassed at the obvious point.

Clarisse performed the equivalent of clearing her throat.

Well, you were right that the "direct-Goddess" visions were generally a lot more straightforward, though were there a few wrinkles. There was, however, one point I'd really like to highlight.

Ryouko's head spun for a moment, and then she remembered the situation as it had been. The Goddess had shown her visions of the battle as it was unfolding, of Erwynmark and her grandmother dying, of Maki and Mami and Asami—

Do you think we're pre-destined somehow, Asami and me? Ryouko thought. *Star-crossed—Asami would like that. She gave me a vision of Asami, and come to think of it, it played a big role in why I'm on Eurydome.*

She also implied you two might have trouble in the future, Clarisse thought. *I know you remember that. But listen, this is what the Goddess said:*

"It is easy to manipulate history, if you know how. Even if you have very little direct influence. A suggestion here, a vision there, a well-timed demon spawn—you don't know it, but this is one of the things you were born for. Your wish made sure of it."

Ryouko caught the implication immediately, wondering why she hadn't noticed at the time.

She's saying she manipulated things so I'd be born, and she was responsible for the demon spawn at the time I contracted. But—that was because of grief cubes or something, right?

She said she doesn't have much direct influence. She has to work through agents and visions. Whoever placed the grief cubes there either has a connection to her, or was manipulated into doing it. It's tough to say.

So I've suspected this for a while, but now you're telling me my birth was planned, my contract was planned, everything was planned.

Yes.

Ryouko could feel herself gritting her teeth.

What am I supposed to say to that? she asked.

I don't know, Clarisse thought. *The truth is terrible sometimes. It bothers me too. We could go over, laboriously, everything she said in this vision and the next, but I'm not sure what you'd gain except philosophy. Let's do that later; you have enough to think about. But do you remember what she said, about your life? She said you were related to her, and because of that, it's your special burden to have less freedom to live your life.*

Clarisse sighed.

I did want to say, though, that I did ask the Goddess the question I wanted to ask earlier, if you still remember that.

What was your question? Ryouko asked.

Clarisse chuckled.

I asked her if I had a soul.

Ryouko boggled for a moment.

What did she say?

I'll tell you later.

The phrase wafted through her mind like a breeze through a dusty room, seeming to sweep all before it.

A moment later, she opened her eyes.

"We've been calling you for at least ten minutes now," her mother said, smiling down at her. *Were you napping?*

"I suppose," Ryouko said, sitting up, as her mother patted her forehead gently.

She crinkled her forehead for a moment.

"Is something wrong, Mama?" she asked. Her mother seemed… odd, again.

"I heard someone did a thorough genetic survey on you," her mother said. "Did you ever get the results on that?"

Ryouko thought for a moment.

"Yes. Patricia said everything looked normal."

Her mother nodded.

"Come on then," she said, gesturing for Ryouko to follow her.

Ryouko stumbled into the hallway as much as she walked, though her mother didn't notice. Her head was spinning with all the things she had to think about. Ancient conspiracies, present conspiracies, future conspiracies—she had the sickening feeling it all centered on her somehow.

She sat down at the table, across from Asami, who beamed at her, obviously desperate for her to try the French onion soup they had made.

She dipped her spoon into the hot soup, placing a small dribble of liquid gingerly into her mouth.

"It's delicious," she said, smiling carefully.

Both she and Clarisse had left it unsaid, but it was obvious.

The Goddess was not done with her.

But Asami didn't know that.

Mami took a deep breath, peering up at the ceiling above her.

It had been years since Mami had last seen the virtual interior of the Directorate Plenary Chamber, and the experience had lost none of its freshness.

Governance meeting rooms, especially those summoned for ad-hoc committees, were usually blandly functional, aesthetically sterile to the point of being a statement in itself. The more permanent committees often redecorated or changed venues entirely, suiting the tastes of their members.

There was no committee more permanent than the Directorate, of course, and the Plenary Chamber reflected that, its aesthetics intended to fulfill the human urge for ceremonial opulence in its rooms of power.

The core design of the room was always the same—a circle of ornate chairs surrounded a central depression, within which non-Directorate members were obliged to stand and feel the gaze of the Human Government. In front of the chairs was a circular bench, analogous to that of a judge, fronted by ornate symbols identifying the occupants of the seats behind it. Behind the chairs were window panes, through which one could peer and see almost anything: fields of wheat, a blacksmith at work at his forge, Roman legionnaires marching into battle.

On one side of circle of chairs there would be a gap, and within that group there would be one raised chair, an obvious throne, invariably more extravagant than anything else in the room, in front of of a banner stylized with the Governance logo, a pair of opposing arrows. The Empty Throne would forever be empty.

These details would always be the same, but the remaining aesthetics differed in every session—sometimes a corporate meeting room, sometimes a Roman senate, sometimes an Indian royal court. Today, it was decked out in a sort of Forbidden Palace style, full of gold and red cloth, with a throne festooned with elaborate jade dragons that a real Chinese emperor could have never acquired.

Well, there was one other detail that always stayed the same, and that was the domed ceiling. The sides of the dome were carved with the topography and landscape of Earth, impossibly detailed.

At the peak of the dome was a simple hole, through which could be seen the stars above.

Standing in the central depression, Mami tapped her foot on the stone floor, feeling it out. She had been a few minutes early to get a look at the scenery, before the Representatives of the Directorate, who would arrive simultaneously and on-the-dot, following some sort of unspoken tradition. It wasn't really the aesthetics of the room that got to her, but the simple knowledge of what it *was.* In a certain sense, the room contained an amount of concentrated Power unprecedented in human history. It was enough to make you think.

Today wouldn't be an ostentatious public meeting, her and Yuma standing alone before the full Directorate and the whole world, as it had been twenty years ago. Today was neither public nor full—she had simply been asked to schedule a partial, secret meeting, with a priority rating high enough to suggest that she should do very soon. She had done so within the hour.

The other participants winked into the meeting, in that disconcerting simultaneous way they preferred. Most of the chairs remained empty—there were only five Directorate members in attendance, in a meeting secret enough that the other members would be shielded from knowledge, unless necessary.

Mami scanned the faces of the avatars, most of whom were formed from a basket of common stereotypes, though they'd never put it in those words. There was *Military Affairs*, with his partial armor suit and magical girl tattoo, looking like a mixture of front-line soldier and German general. There was *Public Order*, whose slightly angled face seemed to suggest both police chief and Sherlock Holmes. There was *Colonial Affairs*, a sharp-looking woman wearing work clothes and a conspicuous metallic eyepiece, of the kind commonly used by planetary surveyors. Finally, there was *Science and Technology*, whose lab coat and slightly unkempt look was often the butt of jokes.

Finally, there was the only present human member, Chitose Yuma, who she knew quite well. The girl watched her coolly, fully into her role as *Governance: Magical Girls.*

"Let us begin," Military Affairs said gruffly, barely waiting a moment for Mami to get situated. "We have called you here to discuss a matter of some delicacy, whose knowledge we would prefer be distributed as narrowly as possible, and whose resolution is of ideological concern to this council. I will allow my colleague here to introduce the situation."

Military Affairs gave her a moment to chew over the phrase "of ideological concern", then gestured at Science and Technology, who stood up out of his seat and raised his hand, summoning a large hovering presentation screen behind him.

He cleared his throat, then pointed at a map of human space appearing behind him, speaking in a reedy voice.

"About eighteen and a half hours ago, one of our astronomical survey probes picked up a faint radio signal emanating from an unexplored system within the Rhine sector. As you may know, the Rhine sector is both far from the front lines and one of the least settled—there is little of military concern, other than to detect possible alien intrusions. It is, however, a possible target for future colonization."

"The signal was very weak. As you likely know, the energy requirements for EM-based signal transmission across interstellar distances is tremendous, even if beamed in laser form, and that's not even considering the transmission delay. It is one of the reasons why IIC was such a godsend. In order to have been detectable at such a distance, the power of the signal at the source must have been absurd."

"But the contents of the signal were very clear, nonetheless," Colonial Affairs said, continuing the explanation without missing a beat. "It was a distress call, carrying only the text 'SOS Ordo Illustrata' on repeat."

"The *Ordo Illustrata Magii* were a fringe religious group situated on Optatum," Public Order continued. "They were founded shortly after the beginning of the war by a former Lutheran priest named Grigori DeWitt. His daughter was a recently-contracted magical girl, and they had had a falling out after she contracted, due to his objections to magic."

"After his daughter died in combat, DeWitt requested laicization and went into seclusion. When he finally emerged, months later, he was a changed man. Working through the Internet, he founded his own religious order, based on the idea that magic was a gift from God, and that technology was only supposed to be a temporary tool, to be used until magic could be refined enough to replace the technology. According to him, our current society is an aberration in the eyes of God, and the Cephalopods are a divine instrument, intended to cleanse the human worlds as Noah's Flood did, leaving behind only him and his followers. Typical cult stuff, but he was able to gather a surprising number of bereaved followers to join him on his quest to found his own independent colony, where, as he put it, 'our new society can leave behind the blasphemous practice of using magical girls for combat'."

"The simple truth is these kinds of cults are a dime a dozen in the colonies," Yuma said, voice flat, continuing the explanation. "Only two things really distinguish the Ordo Illustrata: the fact that they actually gathered enough resources to mount their colonizing expedition, and their method of apparent departure. As you know, the MSY forbids the participation of its members in these kinds of expeditions. Since the start of the current war, all new colonies are required to accept a specially appointed team to join the expedition, monitoring the colony and containing demon outbreaks. Military patrol ships then pass by on a regular basis, allowing the exchange of messages and so forth."

Mami nodded, knowing that Yuma was telling her all this only for the record. Before the war and the revelation of the MSY's existence, Governance had been much more content to let such unsponsored colonies go their own way, stopping by with a military vessel to check up only occasionally. The MSY had been forced to infiltrate colonies before launch, and then use its own ships to keep tabs on the status of embedded teams. The new system was much cleaner, especially since Governance now had both the ships and the willingness to keep colonies on a tighter watch.

"According to the colonization plan they filed before departure," Colonial Affairs said, "their ship would dock at the planet San Giuseppe, picking up the MSY team and other equipment, before heading to their final destination. En route to San Giuseppe, they would briefly pass close to the front line to save travel time, but the risk was not considered significant—until they disappeared."

"Subsequent investigation revealed that a Cephalopod raiding squad had in fact passed through the sector at the time," Military Affairs said, "and there was no trace of them at the planet they intended to land on. The ship was presumed lost, but we've been keeping an eye out for them. This is first time in nearly twenty years there's been any sign of them."

"Given the current circumstances, we can only presume that, using the Cephalopod raid as a ruse, the colony ship was somehow able to evade our monitoring systems," Colonial Affairs said, clasping her hands together, voice grim. "This should *not* have been within their capabilities, and there are other troubling aspects of this scenario, as you can see for yourself in the report we will send."

"The Directorate takes this very seriously, Mami," Yuma said, speaking colloquially for the first time. "They want an investigation of whatever is out there, and why and how such a distress signal was sent. If there are colonists on the planet, they want the colony brought back under our

surveillance. I don't have to tell you about the kinds of things that have been found in the past."

Mami nodded, buying a moment to think of what to say. The fact was, there was nothing in this meeting that couldn't have been sent to her in a classified Decree, and there was nothing really to discuss. Mami would marshal the resources and get it done. The meeting was only to emphasize the importance of the matter. It was annoying, but when the Directorate wanted you to listen, you listened. That was how it was.

"Am I limited to using only military resources?" she asked, the only real meaningful question on hand.

"Should you find it necessary, you may requisition any scientific or survey probes, instruments, and ships you feel necessary," Science and Technology said, smiling slightly. "It goes without saying that given the resources the military has, it is expected that you do this only if you have a justifiable need for a civilian veneer. Also, it is preferred that you not put any civilian lives at risk."

"Should extraordinary interventions be necessary," Military Affairs said. "It is expected that you keep us in the loop."

"I'm sure you know what to do if anything of MSY interest turns out," Yuma added.

There was a long moment of silence, as Mami peered up at the Representatives and they peered back.

"Is that all?" she asked.

"Good luck," Yuma said. "And don't work yourself too hard. Motion to dismiss?"

"Seconded," Military Affairs said immediately.

"Agreed," chimed the others.

—and just like that, the meeting was over, and Mami found herself opening her eyes in her bed.

She sighed, pushing herself up to a sitting position.

The MSY Rules Committee was a nest of vipers, vacuous blowhards sparring with each other over abstruse parliamentary procedure. She could see why the Directorate considered itself an improvement over that, but…

She sighed again, then stood up, formulating the necessary classified orders for a special operations frigate to pass by the Rhine sector and deploy a stealth probe to approach the source of the signal. First she wanted an idea of what was there. Then she could decide the rest.

What did Yuma mean: 'Don't work yourself too hard'? She's the last person who should be saying something like that.

A sharp knock on her door jolted Kyouko awake.

She lost hold of sleep almost immediately, but let her eyes stay closed for a moment, lingering on the edges of the dream she had been having.

A second knock caused her eyes to snap open, as she reoriented herself.

She found herself sleeping in her customary alcove, hugging a giant pillow. A large damp spot

stood testament to the drooling she had been doing, and the battered state of the pillow suggested she had been acting out the contents of her dream.

How mortifying.

She jumped up out of her bed, avoiding slamming her head into the ceiling only by long-trained habit.

"I'm coming already, geez!" she shouted when a third knock sounded.

She threw open the wooden door, heedless of the fact that she could be considered, at best, only partially dressed. Everyone here was female anyway, and well used to her eccentricities.

Outside the door was only empty air. She was confused for a moment, then felt something tapping at her foot.

Looking down, she found herself facing an oddly shaped drone, reminiscent of a shiny silver dinner plate with legs.

Seeing that she had noticed it, the drone skittered past her into the room. A moment later, a hologram snapped into focus above it.

Kyouko let out a breath, and closed the door.

"MG," she said, heading back towards her bed. "Good to see you."

"Good to see you too, Kyouko-nee-chan," the girl said, bowing slightly, long hair rustling with computer-generated sound. She was dressed in her usual outfit, a green dress reminiscent of what one might think when one thought "magical girl".

Kyouko didn't offer the AI avatar a seat. Obviously it didn't matter to MG whether she was sitting or standing—the AI would sit if she wanted to.

The hologram skittered over next to Kyouko's feet, and MG sat on the bed with her. For a moment they just looked at each other.

Kyouko had never gotten over how much looking at Yuma's advisory AI was like looking in the mirror. She still remembered when Yuma had first introduced the AI to her and Mami, how the AI had still stylized herself as a child, and how it had hid behind Yuma shyly. It had made Kyouko's heart ache, because it made her remember Momo.

Then MG covered her mouth with her hand and snickered.

"Geez, opening the door with a getup like that," she said. "The lengths you go to seduce girls. Seriously, if you want to sleep with me, I'd prefer it if you'd just ask. The answer is no, by the way."

Kyouko grunted. Yuma had taught her protégé well.

"I'm not even sure how that would work," Kyouko said. She was serious—despite her experience, she has still yet to try sleeping with an AI, in a virtuality or otherwise.

"You don't know what you're missing," MG said, tilting her head and smiling mischievously. She even batted her eyelashes.

Kyouko sighed.

"What is this about, MG?" she asked. "Unless you're trying to proposition me, in which case it is my turn to turn *you* down."

MG shook her head, her hair swaying back forth, and Kyouko wondered idly if her hair did that too.

"No, it's just…"

The AI sighed, and in Kyouko's eyes seem to shrink a little.

"I'm worried about her, Kyouko-nee-chan," she said. "I'm not sure I can say that about someone so much older than me, but sometimes… sometimes I joke with her about having a relationship, and she just gives me a look, like…"

"She won't let you have a relationship?" Kyouko said. "That… well, it doesn't sound like her, but she does kind of look at you like a child—"

MG shook her head again.

"Not that. That would be normal. It's more that she thinks there's something disgusting about it. She tries to hide it, but I'm connected pretty deeply to her brain. I *know*. The thing is, I'm pretty sure she's never actually had a relationship. I don't understand. Then sometimes she thinks about the past, and there's this black box she won't touch, at least not around me. I don't—"

Kyouko held up her hand to stop the AI.

"I'll talk to her," Kyouko said. "But it's not really my right to explain this to you. It has to be her."

MG looked at her, eyes wide, confused.

"What?" she asked, and the innocence hurt Kyouko a little. Theoretically, Governance AIs were designed to be adults the moment they were built, but from MG she had learned that they were more like children with adult intellects. There was a certain level of accumulated… experience they just didn't have at the beginning, that could only be had with time, like a layer of grime covering the soul, deep enough that no grief cube could remove it.

Kyouko sighed, shaking her head.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'll talk to her. Just take my word for it. In the meantime, if you're really looking to try—"

"I said no already!" MG interrupted, catching onto Kyouko's meaning with surprising alacrity.

"I was just trying to lighten the mood," Kyouko said, smiling slightly. "Come on, let's chat a little. I'm scheduled to be taking a nap for the next hour."

"Ooh I'd be glad to," MG said, drawing out the first syllable. "But while I'm here, there's a recording Yuma-chan has been meaning to send to you."

Kyouko wrinkled her brow slightly.

"A recording?"

"Yeah, of the wormhole girl at the birthday party. I'll have the drone transmit it to you. Safer that way."

Kyouko frowned, inspecting the file, listening with one ear as MG started to explain:

"Well, the reason I'm so worried now about what Yuma-chan thinks is I've been thinking about exploring a little, you know? And the thing about the Representative AIs is that most of them are *waaay* too old for me. There's not very many new Representatives. And—"

Kyouko felt her eye twitch, just a little, as she finished listening to the file.

"Is something wrong, Kyouko-nee-chan?" MG asked.

"No. Nothing is wrong."

Chasing Ghosts

Chapter Notes

Sorry for delays, but I'm in a bit of crunch time with regards to real life (will extend to next chapter too probably). Also Beyond Earth is out and I'm playing the heck out of it.

"The advent of clinical immortality was the capstone of centuries of demographic change instigated by the ever-increasing human lifespan. Except for a brief period during the Unification Wars in which the 'traditional family' went back on the upswing, the twenty-first and twenty-second centuries had a seen a gradual decline in the prominence of the permanent marriage model. While most children were still born to stable couples, open relationships, cohabitating singles, and other alternative arrangements became ever-more prominent in social life. By the late twenty-third century, the average multi-centenarian was on their third or later marriage, with perhaps a couple of adult children scattered among different partners."

"These changes to the structure of the 'family' led to anguished debate about the necessity and desirability of manipulating the social fabric to promote what was seen as a more suitable environment for children. The newly minted Governance followed its libertarian leanings in refusing to accede to these demands, though it did bias the provision of child licenses to stable, preferably married couples, on the simple observation that a stable environment was psychologically healthier. There the situation has stood since, with the odd result that most children grow up idealizing the relationship their parents seem to have, only to become disillusioned upon their parents' eventual divorce, and upon encountering the plethora of relationship types present out in the world."

"With another full century of observation, however, it appears the oldest humans alive generally settle into one of three steady states: more or less asexuality, a fluid pool of casual companions, or a stable marriage-like arrangement of some sort. It may be that this is what awaits all of us, in the long-term."

— Susheela Franjic, "Musings on the Family", blog-post.

"Science has always been a reputation-based affair, dating back to the first philosophers scribbling their philosophy down onto tablets. Your career relied on the number of people—particularly, wealthy patrons—who considered you wise, or else you were condemned to quiet obscurity. Given the lack of economic reward that accompanied studying the natural world, you either needed to be independently wealthy, preferably nobility, or you depended on the indulgence of the wealthy. That was just how it was, and the transition to the era of government-funded science, after the first big wars, changed only the amount of funding, not the nature of its acquisition. At the end of the day, someone was funding your science with their largesse, and their largesse depended heavily on your reputation, because they didn't really understand what you were doing."

"The problem, of course, has been that reputation is only a proxy for what society

really cares about, which is your potential contribution to science in the future. One way to determine this is by examining your past contributions, but it was often far too difficult to determine what these really were. The early history of science was therefore filled with charlatans good at marketing their work, and with anonymous scholars whose work, never appreciated in their own time, never helped them in any way, sometimes even lost to the sands of time. Later on, as science became more of a professional institution, it became necessary to codify your accomplishments into journal articles, reviewed by committees of other scientists and published when deemed satisfactory. While mostly successful at eliminating charlatans, the system was filled with other imperfections, and was considered only the best among a sea of worse options."

"Insofar as past performance is an indicator of future success, then, what is necessary is to make public reputation as close to actual scientific contribution as possible. With the advent of universal surveillance and the widespread use of AIs in research labs, scientists quickly realized that the best way to unimpeachably claim credit to their work was to have the AIs store and organize their every action and statement, so that when the work of the lab or institute was finally presented to the public, anyone could flip through the work history and determine that person A had X idea at Y time, and so forth. In theory, anyway; in practice, the only entities capable of reading through all of that were other AIs, and "reputation" quickly became a function of what other lab AIs thought of you, based on what your own AI had recorded about your work. Eventually, these opinions began to be collected into meta-opinions, stored in databases only."

"The journal article approach to science has fallen out of favor, replaced by an update model. The lab AI posts regularly about the latest work in the lab, including the relevant metadata about levels of contribution. Other AIs read the data and form their opinions. Meta-opinions are calculated, both for the lab and for individual researchers. Finally, these meta-opinions are used by Governance agencies and private funding groups to determine level of funding."

"The same system has spread to other aspects of science. Research and funding proposals are now posted online, their merits judged by a system of AIs, and funded or modified accordingly. The curators of meta-opinions regularly distribute research proposals of their own to relevant labs based on a similar system, and the advent of new "facts" to Infopedia is controlled in the same way. Thus it is that an interested party may read a new fact on Infopedia and, if desired, immediately access both a "truthiness" rating and a detailed rating of the contributions of often innumerable individuals."

"As a system, it works tolerably well. In contrast with the past, for instance, it is very difficult for two groups to accidentally be doing the same work, and if this somehow does happen, the group that is slower or less lucky at least has a consolation prize—everyone knows they were doing the work, and how competently they did it. The downsides of the system can of course be counted as well—lab AIs that spend an absurd amount of time reading and grading each other's work, the pressure on researchers that arise from constant judgment of their work, and the flaws that come with having all work judged by a series of numbers graded by conventional opinion."

— Joanne Valentin, "The System of Reputation in Science", blog-post.

"Simona moved back home. She said something had come up with her parents. It was a bit vague,

to be honest."

Ryouko blinked up at the virtual screen, from which Chiaki watched her with a strange expression, running a hand through her hair absently. Maybe it was just her imagination, but the conversation seemed oddly tense, almost as if the topic of Simona had made Chiaki nervous.

She felt herself frown. It felt strange, letting visions from a Goddess affect how she viewed people, but she felt Chiaki's apparent nervousness spreading to her as well.

"Really?" she asked, as generic a response as she could manage. "That's… unexpected."

Chiaki shrugged, narrow shoulders moving elaborately.

"I'm not terribly surprised. Do you remember when we were entering middle school, and I opted out of attending Anko Academy?"

Ryouko did remember that, of course. She had remembered being angry that she lived just outside the Academy's favored geographical district. It had been a mixed bag of feelings—a mixture of relief that Chiaki would stay with her, guilt that she would feel relieved, and confusion as to why Chiaki would make such a choice.

"What about it?" Ryouko asked.

"Well…"

Chiaki frowned, scrunching her face in thought. She seemed to have changed her mind about what to say.

"Come on, we don't need to talk about this," Ruiko said, sticking her head into the frame from outside the viewing window. In the backroom, the familiar contours of Chiaki's bedroom reminded Ryouko of her old life. She had been hoping to catch Chiaki alone, but Ruiko had turned out to be visiting.

"Don't disturb the lovebirds," Ruiko said, looking at Chiaki.

Then to Ryouko she said:

"Hey, when you two get married, are you going to pay for us to fly out and be your bridesmaids? I hear you girls make a lot of Allocs."

Chiaki gave Ruiko a look, then shrugged, seeming to relax.

"They make exceptions to the excise cost for special events," Chiaki said. "Didn't you pay attention—"

"I dropped that class; it was boring," Ruiko interrupted.

"You're hopeless," Chiaki said bluntly.

Ryouko smiled slightly, watching her friends' banter. Next to her, Asami stirred, waking from her nap. The girl insisted on sleeping with her arm around Ryouko—it was a little uncomfortable, but she had gotten used to it. Ryouko, not being as tired as Asami apparently had been, had taken the opportunity to make a phone call—one of the little conveniences of modern implants was the ability to automatically tune out irrelevant sound if one was sleeping, so Ryouko hadn't needed to fear waking Asami up.

She felt Asami adjust her arm slightly, causing the blanket to slide over Ryouko's skin.

"Come on, it'll be a while before something like that happens," Ryouko said, answering Ruiko's joke of a question.

"Really? I don't think so," Ruiko said, smiling mischievously. Ryouko couldn't quite read the expression.

"Phone call?" Asami murmured, breath tingling against Ryouko's neck.

"Yeah," Ryouko whispered, toggling the mental command that prevented what she said from being transmitted over the call.

"Is that a video call?" Asami asked, eyes opening blearily.

"Yes, of cour—"

Ryouko's eyes widened.

No, I am not *this stupid. I did* not *forget how implant-mediated video calls worked, just because I'm used to civilian calls.*

She instinctively pulled her sheets further up, so that it covered her neck and Asami's arm, triggering a burst of laughter from the other end of the call. Ryouko looked at the virtual video screen, and found Chiaki covering her mouth in mirth, while Ruiko had disappeared off-screen altogether.

"We weren't sure if it was intentional," Ruiko said, through laughter.

"You could have said something anyway!" Ryouko said, blushing furiously.

"Oh, Ryouko-chan," Ruiko said, putting her hand to her forehead and shaking her head in bemusement. "The best result would have been for us to finish the call without you ever realizing. You make this kind of mistake all the time. Wow."

Ryouko's cheeks burned, and she could feel Asami watching her.

"I think I need to go," she said lamely.

"Yes I think you do," Chiaki said, still smiling. "Happy birthday, by the way. Not today, obviously, but just in case I don't get to say it tomorrow. I'll put in a call request tomorrow, though. Later."

As the call ended, Ryouko felt a frisson of mirth emerging from a certain spinal implant she was highly displeased with. These days, Clarisse seemed to derive far too much enjoyment at her expense. She was starting to feel like she needed to get her TacComp a hobby.

But there was a more pressing task.

"I'm sorry," she said to Asami. "I forgot—"

"It's okay!" Asami said, embracing her with both arms, forestalling the apology. She even giggled slightly.

"Calling your Earth friends?" Asami asked, rubbing her face into Ryouko's neck.

"Yeah," Ryouko said, uncomfortably.

"I called Meiqing recently. She's doing okay. Says she lost a leg on Apollo but no big deal. She wants you to call her."

"Yeah," Ryouko repeated. "You know my mom is still here, right? In the next room?"

"Oh, I know," Asami said. "We might have to get used to it. You know, your mom is thinking about staying."

Ryouko turned her head to peer at a Asami in surprise.

"Really? She hasn't mentioned it to me."

"Well, she's just thinking about it. She wants you to get it sorted how long you're staying, and then apparently her boss will let her switch work locations for a while. It's a good chance. She would have difficulty transferring off of Earth otherwise, with the restrictions."

Ryouko made a face. Truth be told, she had gotten a bit used to living on her own. Having her mom living with them would be—

"I know," Asami said appeasingly. "I'm just telling you she's thinking about it. It's a legitimate option. She doesn't intend to play the dating game right now, and you *are* her only daughter. She might get her own place."

Ryouko sighed, looking down at the bottom of the bed.

"I'll talk to her about it."

"Anyway," Asami said, grabbing opportunistically at her. "What I'm saying is—"

"We don't have time," Ryouko pointed out immediately. "It's time for us to go to the lab."

"Oh, right," Asami said, checking her chronometer. "You're right, we should get going."

She found her mother seated in the sitting room—an actual room, just for sitting around in!—frowning at a sheet of paper in her hands. It piqued Ryouko's interest immediately, given how rare paper was, but as they emerged from the hallway, her mother folded it and placed it into the pocket of her pants.

"I trust you two enjoyed your nap?" she asked, before Ryouko could say anything.

"Oh, yes," Asami responded.

"Good. I suppose it feels natural for you two, taking a nap in the early morning. Eventually, you'll lose that circadian tendency, but it might take a while. I'll make you two some breakfast. Eggs are easy, though I'd really rather not think about where they come from."

Her mother spoke quickly, not allowing a word in edgewise, and got up to head to the kitchen. Ryouko saw Asami's face scrunch slightly at the odd phraseology of "circadian tendency".

Ryouko walked forward, shifting her location so that she could see over the breakfast counter into the kitchen. She wanted to ask about the sheet of paper, but…

"Asami says you're thinking about moving to Eurydome, Mama," she said, leaning onto the counter.

"I'm thinking about it, yes," her mother said, back to Ryouko, facing the stove. "It makes a lot of sense. My parents aren't on Earth anymore and you're my only daughter. Career-wise, it'd be hard to give up my current position at Prometheus, but the institute does have some offshoots here."

Her mother turned to look at her with one eye.

"Of course, the Earth thing to do would be to move in here, but since this is the colonies, it wouldn't be hard to get a different place. I wouldn't really mind too much either way. Give me an opinion."

Her mother turned back toward the stove.

"I wonder how you're supposed to get the white to phase change but the yolk part to stay liquid. It's not really working out like I expected."

Ryouko sighed. She should have thought about this more before bringing it up. She didn't know yet what she wanted.

"I don't know, Mama," she said, as honest as she felt she could be. "You're still on vacation for two more weeks, so let's see how it works out. Do you want to stay here?"

"Well, if I do stay here, we're going to have to get them to install new soundproofing on your room. And you know, if this turns out to be a long-term deal, I can eventually do the cliché thing and start pressuring you for grandkids."

"Mama!"

"I'm kidding. But seriously about the soundproofing. Oh, the internet says to add a bit of water. I guess that makes sense. Will carry heat to the surface and… the proteins in the egg are too hydrophobic to mix with water? That would make sense. Should I cover it?"

Ryouko scowled, even though her mother couldn't see. She knew her mother was talking to fill the empty space, and inhibit Ryouko from talking about something.

"Mama, what was on the sheet of paper?"

Her mother glanced back, then pulled the folded scrap of paper out of her pocket.

"My sister is visiting," her mother said, still tending her eggs. "She said she's bringing company, and she wants to talk to you. Alone, without me or Asami-chan. I've already told the physics lab you two will be late. I guess this will be a good chance for Asami to show me around the university?"

She regarded the piece of paper in her hand for a moment, then shoved it into the feed hole on the side of the synthesizer she had brought from Earth. The synthesizer would break the paper down into composite parts, which it would then either store or recycle to a central distribution point.

"I was supposed to destroy it," she said, shrugging.

Her mother poked at the eggs with a spatula, trying to lift them off the surface onto a plate.

"Ah, nee-chan, if only Akemi-san hadn't pulled you into a career like that. I wonder—"

Her mother paused for a moment, spatula with egg in mid-air, then finished the motion, without the finishing the sentence.

"Akemi as in Akemi Homura?" Asami asked, with surprising intuition, looking at Ryouko. "You have an aunt who knew her?"

"Yes," she said, as blandly as she could, as internally she traced out the same line of thought her mother assuredly was. Akemi Homura had chosen to mentor Kuroi Nana, though the memory Ryouko had received had not clarified exactly why. If Homura had truly believed that there was a familial connection between her Goddess and their family, then that would be a compelling reason for her interest in Nana. Such a conclusion could be reached based solely on the contents of the memory from her grandmother, even if one didn't believe in the Goddess at all—and Ryouko's mother had certainly viewed the recording Ryouko gave her, even if she had not yet elected to say anything about it.

"Though it's not very easy to find out I even *have* a sister, going by the public records," her mother said, turning to place two plates of food in front of them. "We're that kind of family, apparently."

Ryouko looked down at her two eggs. The yolk of one had ruptured, leaking orange-yellow liquid onto the piece of bread her mother had thoughtfully placed underneath, probably following internet guidance.

Her mother looked at her and shrugged apologetically.

"I wonder if your aunt knows," she said.

"If she does, she didn't tell me," Ryouko said. "I hardly know her, after all." She let her voice develop a tinge of snark, to let her mother know she was still unhappy about that.

"It couldn't be avoided," her mother said breezily. "It certainly might be a good idea to tell her, don't you think?"

"Probably," Ryouko agreed. "Do you know why she's here?"

"No, she didn't say anything specific. It must be sensitive, if she's excluding her own family."

Ryouko let the exchange lapse into silence. Asami had developed that unhappy look she got when forced to listen to a deliberately cryptic conversation, an occurence that was starting to become too often nowadays. Ryouko would hear the displeasure later, she was certain.

"Asami, I don't really know what this is about either, but the work my aunt does is highly secret. Even if I did know what was going on, I wouldn't be allowed to tell you. She doesn't even want to tell her own sister! Think about it."

She was only tangentially addressing the issue, she knew. It wasn't as if Asami were being unreasonable about classified material—the problem was with the secret information Ryouko and her mother obviously shared.

She knew Asami wouldn't be distracted by an irrelevant explanation like that, but the girl still allowed herself to be mollified, expression softening. She was glad for that—Asami could be surprisingly understanding sometimes. There were a lot of secrets in Ryouko's life, and she simply wasn't ready to share them with Asami yet.

"Well, I guess I can show your mom around the school," Asami said. "Though I'm not sure there's that much to see. When do you think we should leave?"

"I don't want to leave until she arrives," Ryouko's mother said, shaking her head. "I don't see my sister very often and she said she had no problems with me staying around. I—"

She was interrupted by a sharp knocking noise, coming from the direction of the front door. They turned to look at it with faint surprise, faces blank.

It was Ryouko's mother who responded first, signaling the door to slide open for the person on the other side.

Kuroi Nana peered in at them, flanked on one side by none other than Sakura Kyouko, founder and leader of the Church of Hope, who seemed to be working her way through a stick of beef jerky.

"Kyouko-san!" Ryouko exclaimed, almost involuntarily.

"Nee-chan," her mother echoed, more calmly.

"I'm sorry about the door thing," Nana explained. "If I'm going to conceal my movements, it's best if I leave as few traces as possible, so I couldn't tell the door I was there."

Ryouko's aunt and mother exchanged a brief unreadable look, and then Ryouko found herself looking on as the two siblings hugged.

She looks like your *sister, rather than your mom's sister,* Asami thought, glancing at Ryouko.

I guess, Ryouko thought, trying to spot the resemblance.

She turned towards Kyouko.

"You'll find out soon enough," Kyouko said, smiling crookedly as she intercepted Ryouko's question before she could ask it, biting off another piece of jerky.

Next to them, the two sisters parted their embrace, holding hands for a brief moment. Ryouko wondered briefly what it was like to have a sibling so close in age. She supposed she would never find out.

"Come on, Asami-chan," her mother said. "Let's go."

There was a brief awkward shuffle of bodies as Kyouko stepped forward, Ryouko and Nana stepped to the side, and the remaining two angled forward, the whole maneuver far more complicated than necessary.

Finally, Nakase and Asami stood on the threshold, looking back for a moment.

"See you later," they said, almost simultaneously.

If they're here to try to get you to go somewhere, just—well we can talk about it later, Asami thought.

Then the door slid closed, and they were gone.

Ryouko stood uncomfortably for a moment, feeling Nana and Kyouko watching her.

"Come in," she said, finally remember that it was *her* apartment, and according to the system of social niceties, she was host.

She gestured vaguely at the multiple cushy couches arranged in a circle in the sitting room, feeling a pang of embarrassment at the decor scheme Asami had chosen. She hoped it wasn't giving them the wrong impression about her.

"Want me to get some snacks, or tea?" she asked, as the two of them sat down. It felt very strange to her.

Her two "guests" signaled with hand gestures that they were fine, Kyouko pointing to the snack she already had, so Ryouko stepped past Kyouko and sat down on the couch against the wall. She faced Nana across the table from her and Kyouko to her left. They watched her and she watched them.

She sighed, realizing that they were waiting for her to say something.

"So, I guess I might as well be direct about it," she said. "What is this about?"

The other two girls smiled slightly in response.

"Is your privacy field thing up and running?" Kyouko asked, looking at Nana.

"It's always on, except when it isn't," Nana said, glancing back in response.

She turned her head back to look at Ryouko.

"I guess I'll go first," she said. "Sakura-san here can give her spiel afterward. Believe it or not, the topic is the same."

"I can't imagine how," Ryouko said, quite honestly.

"Well, let me try to explain this as correctly as possible," Nana said, voice smooth and urbane. "I've heard about your little assignment here, the arrangement with the Prometheus Institute and MSY Finance. Quite frankly, you're being railroaded a bit, as I'm sure you've realized. I can understand how such a thing might feel, so one of the reasons we're here is to present you with a bit of a different option. Simply put, I've discussed the matter with our friendly family Matriarch, and we're happy to try and find you a suitable arrangement in the intelligence services instead."

Nana paused a moment to assess Ryouko's reaction, observing the wheels starting to turn in her head. Then she continued:

"This would not have to be to the exclusion of the life you're building here, or the work you're doing—among other things, to pull you completely out of wormhole research would be doing a grave disservice to the war effort and Humanity as a whole. Indeed, were it not for certain extenuating circumstances, we would have left you alone here for at least another couple of months, at least long enough for the scientists here to get a good idea of whether they would need you for another few years, or whether what they already had was enough."

Nana paused again, and this time she watched Ryouko for longer. Ryouko had her head bowed downward, parsing the densely-packed meaning of what Nana had said, even having Clarisse playing back parts of the message a few times.

"Extenuating circumstances?" Ryouko asked, looking back up at Nana.

"Well, to phrase it simply, there is a mission on hand that Kyouko and I think would be useful to have you on."

Nana and Kyouko shared a look, seeming to reach some sort of shared decision.

"You recall how I told you once that I was part of a team looking for Akemi Homura?" Nana asked.

Ryouko nodded, slowly.

"You'll recall that for a while after her alleged disappearance, we were able to find traces of her passage in various locations, but that eventually this trail ran out. There has been a recent development which leads us to believe that the trail may not be as cold as we think."

Another glance from Nana to Kyouko, and then Nana made eye contact with Ryouko, gaze turning a little soft.

"It's not that I don't trust you, Ryouko-chan, but I've generally found that it's better not to tell people who don't need to know, for all sorts of reasons. If you don't agree to join the mission, I don't think you need to know."

"Personally, I think she's being too paranoid," Kyouko said, peering at her with one eye. "But it's her show, so I'll do what she says."

Nana looked at Kyouko, then back at Ryouko.

"I don't see why you're here talking to me," Ryouko said, wondering if she was missing something obvious. "Is there a need for a long-teleport?"

Another glance between Kyouko and Nana, and Ryouko was sure now: they were holding some kind of telepathic conversation, though not bothering to hide it from her.

"Well, not quite," Nana said.

"The Goddess has taken a special interest in you, Ryouko," Kyouko said, giving Ryouko a meaningful look. "I don't think all this is a coincidence, and I don't think she means for you to live quietly here working with wormholes."

Ryouko instinctively glanced at Nana, and found her watching Ryouko impassively. It didn't seem like Nana was shocked or repulsed by the goddess-speak.

She swallowed her qualms and said out loud what she never had before.

"The last time I asked her about my life, she said she wanted me to live my own life, and wouldn't give me any direction. At the same time, I got the impression she wasn't done with me. I can't say I really know what to think now, about what the Goddess wants or doesn't want me to do."

She peered back into Kyouko's eyes, but instead of the searing look of inspection she had expected, the girls eyes were soft, full of understanding somehow.

"Homura was my mentor for a good part of my life," Nana said. "It would have been impossible for me to work with her for so long, and not learn about her connection to her Goddess. Whatever the truth of the matter is, if we are indeed digging in the right place, she may find it hard to resist contacting you."

"I'm basically bait?" Ryouko asked, cringing immediately at how blunt she sounded.

"I wouldn't think of it that way," Kyouko said. "I'm going to try and convince Mami to let me go too. The Church is interested in anything involving Homura."

Kyouko nodded approvingly at herself, and Ryouko realized that she wasn't looking at a well-reasoned decision, but the product of some kind of faith. It felt odd to her, since even her direct interactions with the divine were heavily-tinged with practicality.

Nana cleared her throat slightly to get her attention.

"Besides my section of Internal Security, the… Church of Hope is the only group conducting a serious search for Akemi Homura. We've had contacts for a long time, and sometimes shared information, though I can't say I've really spoken with Sakura-san much before this. Calling her in on this is something that I owe to the Church, and having an Ancient on a mission always helps."

Kyouko coughed slightly at Nana's use of "Ancient", but didn't say anything.

"There's also…" Nana continued, before pausing for a moment, looking down at the table. Kyouko looked at her and nodded, slowly.

Nana shook her head.

"Later, perhaps. But that's more or less the gist of it. And, the fact is, I am aware how important wormhole research can be. One option is simply for you to join the mission, and then come back. The offer from Kana-san to join the intelligence services is a bit more open-ended."

Ryouko looked from Nana to Kyouko, and back again. She didn't know what to say. She had been feeling uneasy about staying here, on Eurydome, but she had not done anything about it, nor spoken to Asami. Did she really want to leave, even temporarily, for something like this?

"How long do I have to decide?" Ryouko asked.

"About a week," Nana said. "I'm sorry, but we're on a tight schedule."

Ryouko looked down at her hands. So this was how it was going to be, it seemed. At least she was being given a choice this time, she supposed.

A message from Clarisse entered her thoughts—a question Clarisse wanted her to ask, and it was a good question indeed.

"You mentioned Mami was somehow in control of the mission?" Ryouko said, looking up abruptly at Kyouko. "How is she involved?"

Kyouko looked bemused for a moment, scratching at her cheek with one finger.

"Well, nominally the mission is under her control," Kyouko said. "I actually haven't talked to her about going, but I'm sure she'll be accommodating."

Kyouko didn't sound as sure as she claimed, but Ryouko let the topic drop.

"I don't think I can decide on the spot," she said. "Is there a, uh, way I can contact you?"

It wasn't usually a question worth asking, but Kuroi Nana could, and probably would, disappear into the mist the moment the meeting ended.

"You can just tell Kyouko," Nana said, nodding. "I can't say it's surprising you need to think about it. Any more questions?"

Ryouko thought for a moment and nodded slowly, reluctantly. Nana watched her for a moment longer, then stood up.

"Well, I'm sorry I can't stay longer. I might come visiting again, for more of a family thing, but I have too much to do. Give my regards to your mother. Oh, and, uh, sorry for missing your birthday. I wanted to come tomorrow, but the timing didn't work out."

Ryouko started to get up to show Nana out, but then looked at Kyouko, who wasn't moving, and suddenly an obvious question occurred to her.

"I'm sorry if this seems rude, but… well, why are you here? You traveled from Earth just to see me? Do you have something to ask too?"

Kyouko looked at her and grinned broadly, row of gleaming teeth glistening.

Kyouko placed the last part of her beef jerky in her mouth.

"Well, I'm here to check up on my favorite trainee, since she's about to have a birthday. Why don't you show me around?"

Ryouko didn't really believe that Kyouko was here just to check up on her, but the Ancient was, in fact, her mentor, so there was little she could dispute. As Kyouko ended up pointing out repeatedly, she hadn't really done much for Ryouko since sending her to training—and implicitly, Mami's care.

So, after sending Nana the memory file she had received from her grandmother, she checked her internal chronometer, sighed, and decided it couldn't hurt to bring Kyouko with her to the lab. Something about the Cult leader's almost predatory smile unnerved her, however.

It was only a short while later that Ryouko found herself on her way to the University of Thalia, located in the eponymous city. It was the largest of Eurydome's cities; that was to say, still small by Earth standards. MSY Finance had been kind enough to provide Ryouko with her own private vehicle, which weaved its way through Thalia's streets as she pondered her situation silently.

"You asked me a while ago about a vision you had," Kyouko said, getting her attention by looking in her direction. "One with Yuma, and Oriko."

"Yes," Ryouko acknowledged, looking back at Kyouko and wondering what had prompted this topic.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Kyouko asked. "I admit—I'd like to hear more about it."

Ryouko peered into Kyouko's quiet, thoughtful eyes, and tried to read the Ancient; not something that was likely to work, but she had to try anyway. Kyouko had all sorts of reasons to want to know about visions from the Goddess, but Ryouko could easily imagine that the topic was also important for other reasons.

"Well, it wasn't a very long vision," Ryouko said, shading her eyes downward. "It looked like Oriko had just died, and Yuma was crying over her. What bothered me was that… well, Yuma looked like she was on the verge of soul gem breakdown, and then she attacked a group of demons. I don't know how to say this, but it doesn't match the official story, and it was part of a vision…"

She let her voice trail off, risking a glance at Kyouko's face to gauge her reaction. Kyouko did not look terribly annoyed or bothered, or even skeptical. Instead she maintained the same calm, matronly expression as before. Ryouko suspected it revealed very little about Kyouko's true thoughts.

"Well," Kyouko said, clasping her hands together. "That is because the official story simply isn't true."

Kyouko paused, watching Ryouko's reaction, and Ryouko found herself blinking, waiting for

Kyouko to continue.

"Perhaps you can get Yuma herself to tell you, some day," Kyouko said, before Ryouko could ask. "I admit that sounds rather far-fetched, but if you got a vision about it, then it would certainly make sense for you eventually to learn all the necessary context—"

Kyouko paused dramatically, raising a finger.

"—but I can't be the one to tell you about it. I know that sounds unfair, since I just asked you to tell me about your vision, but it's really her story to tell. I needed to check just how much you knew. Sorry."

She paused, putting her hand to her mouth.

"I wonder, though, just how much Oriko saw of the future. Even Yuma never really got a full idea."

Kyouko looked pointedly away, making it clear that Ryouko wasn't intended to ask about what Kyouko had just said. As Ryouko began to ponder whether to ask anyway, Kyouko started digging through her clothing, obviously searching for some thing.

She quickly gave up, though, then sighed loudly.

"I miss Mami's swank car," Kyouko said. "It makes tea and snacks for you. But I guess that's asking too much. I should have brought more food."

"Car?" Ryouko asked, tilting her head slightly. "You want cookies?"

"Nevermind," Kyouko said, waving off the question. "We're almost there, anyway."

Indeed they were—the organization of the buildings around them had gradually transitioned into the highly-networked structure that typified modern research clusters. The sky above them was filled with skybridges and workspaces, at a density that would have been unusual even for Earth. Ryouko often wondered why the University didn't simply shift the road they were traveling on underground, and replace the above-ground with one monolithic structure. Too much retrofitting, perhaps.

The vehicle pulled up to the curb next to a particularly ornate structure, tall even by the standards of the University. This entrance was only a side entrance, intended for staff rather than visitors, but the top of the door was still carved with a symbol that resembled a many-pointed star, evocative of the sun, of particles colliding, or perhaps even of black holes. It was tough to say, really.

Ryouko stood on the threshold for a long moment, staring at the symbol and thinking. Asami had already sent her a message informing her that she and her mother had arrived at the lab, so it really wouldn't do for Ryouko to be any later than she already was. And yet, Ryouko found herself strangely reluctant to enter the building. She didn't want to see the scientists, because she didn't want to be reminded that she would be letting them down if she left on a mission, taking the risk of getting herself killed. Childish, maybe, to want to avoid making a decision that displeased people she knew, but even after everything she had seen and done, she still felt like a child sometimes.

She could feel Kyouko's gaze upon, so she turned to ask:

"Does it ever go away?"

"What?" Kyouko asked, as Ryouko knew she would.

"That feeling of not really knowing what you're doing. I feel like I have so much responsibility, but then I remember people like Mami-san, who have so much more. I'm really just a child, aren't I?"

Kyouko tilted her head, the gesture indicating her surprise at Ryouko's sudden choice of topic, emotional as it was.

She smiled slightly, crookedly, and for a moment Ryouko felt she saw a glimmer of something authentic in Kyouko's eyes.

"The feeling never goes away," she said, putting her hand on Ryouko's shoulder. "Not even for us. Not even for Mami."

Kyouko paused slightly, just for a moment.

"You'll be fine," she said. "We wouldn't have sprung this on you so early, but there wasn't really a choice. We can talk more later. Come on."

Ryouko allowed herself to be led through the doorway, the building's authentication sensors automatically granting her, and by extension Kyouko, passage.

Ryouko frowned, watching Kyouko's back as she walked. There was something she needed to tell Kyouko, now that she was here. It was not really something she wanted to talk about, but—

She startled slightly, stopping just in time to avoid running into Kyouko. The girl had paused just inside a large atrium, looking around the room with a thoughtful expression, then turning to peer at Ryouko questioningly.

It took Ryouko a moment to pick up the obvious: Kyouko had no idea where they were going. As a partially-secured facility, the Institute for Theoretical Gravitonics, ITG gave visitors only an incomplete map. Even if Kyouko had taken the time to look up which lab Ryouko was affiliated with, it wouldn't have availed her much.

"This way," Ryouko said, leading Kyouko towards the other side of the atrium, past a few scattered researchers seated in front of "Event Horizon Brewing", a gourmet coffee shop that seemed to really enjoy making terrible puns between "black coffee" and "black hole".

They walked for a while into the depths of the building, threading up ramps, down twisting hallways, and past a bevy of doorways inscribed with the ITG logo. Unlike Prometheus on Earth, which had a relatively straightforward, grid-like layout, ITG's main building had been designed by a rather eccentric AI architect. According to legend, the AI, a bit of a physics enthusiast, had been shown a few cross-sections of a Calabi-Yau manifold, and had been so inspired that it had spent a solid month designing a building layout that could house working research labs and particle accelerators, fulfill all safety and usability requirements, and whose layout would map meaningfully to a full Calabi-Yau manifold.

The practical result had been a building that was impossible to navigate without the full internal map, and had gotten so many visitors lost going to the bathroom that special robotic escorts had been installed. The running joke was that with its blasphemous angles, the building was only waiting for the stars to be right to awaken into its true form—a joke that the building AI took in surprisingly good humor, though it had been forced to abandon using a Cthulhu avatar after a returning veteran panicked and tried to attack it.

They came to a stop outside an elevator with circular doors. Typically, the elevator was busy elsewhere. It was an annoyance compared to Earth.

"Why are the floors on this elevator labeled with two numbers?" Kyouko asked.

"It runs diagonally," Ryouko explained. "Don't ask."

"Diagonally…" Kyouko echoed.

But she didn't ask.

Ryouko let out a breath as they stepped into the elevator car. She supposed she didn't have to talk to Kyouko about the vision until later.

Ryouko… Clarisse warned, the nagging tone of her voice rubbing abrasively inside her head.

Fine, fine, she thought.

Her TacComp had been on her case recently about her "procrastinatory habits".

"Kyouko," she began, hesitating as always on dropping the honorific as Kyouko preferred.

"Hmm?" Kyouko asked, tilting her head towards Ryouko.

"I'm not sure this is the right time to bring this up," Ryouko said, as they began to descend into the subterranean levels of the building, "but do you remember the first vision I had, the one where it looked like you had been killed?"

"Of course," Kyouko said. "Why?"

"I've been thinking about it," Ryouko said. "And looking back at it now, I don't think we were fighting aliens in the vision. The weapon types used don't match. I just thought you should know."

Kyouko closed her eyes for a moment, bowing her head slightly.

"That's interesting to hear," she said. "I've thought about it too. When your aunt came to talk to me, I thought about just sending someone, instead of going myself. But, you know, I didn't want to stay on Earth just because I was scared. If that's what the Goddess wanted, I think she would have been more clear about it."

"Is she usually more clear?" Ryouko asked.

Kyouko closed her eyes again.

"In a way. Sometimes I visit the Ribbon, and she'll talk to me, just her voice. I haven't ever gotten a vision more elaborate than that. I'm a bit jealous of people like you."

Kyouko opened her eyes again, and looked at Ryouko.

"Something bothers me about all this. Your vision implies that someone is going to try and kill me. Someone might have already tried to kill you. I can't help but think it's all connected, somehow. But it doesn't make sense."

"Have you figured out who it was?" Ryouko asked, voice quiet. She had almost forgotten about it, and it disturbed her think about.

"We haven't learned a damn thing," Kyouko said, voice tinged with a hint of anger.

Kyouko's forehead wrinkled in frustration for a moment.

"Well, the Goddess will take care of things. I try not to worry too much about this kind of thing. Even if I die, things will work out. It's not like I haven't lived enough."

The elevator settled into a gentle stop, and the doors slid open. They stood there for a moment, and then Ryouko led the way out.

"Just how deep underground are we, anyway?" Kyouko asked.

"Not very deep, compared to a redoubt," Ryouko said, "but pretty deep compared to anything else. Apparently all the really delicate stuff gets done down here."

Ryouko felt a vague glimmer of satisfaction as they strode down the hallway, Kyouko turning her head to and fro to peer down side corridors. For once, Ryouko wasn't the one being shown around, the gawker standing out like a sore thumb among a crowd of veterans.

"Are you sure you can even let me down here?" Kyouko asked, *sotto voce*.

"It's fine, as long as I'm not showing you anything too secret," Ryouko said. "Which I'm not. I brought my mom here, after all."

"Yeah, but she's a scientist, I guess."

The deep subterranean levels, constrained by the large-scale equipment installed around it—particle accelerators, artificial gravity generators, and the like—had a more conventional floor plan, coupled with a high ceiling and bright, cheery lighting, designed to dispel any claustrophobia that might have resulted from the long elevator trip down. Solid stone squares, as tall as the doors, were set into the wall at regular intervals, chiseled with abstract symbols and drawings of astronomical phenomena. It was a bit of an odd design aesthetic, but Ryouko had gotten used to that in the weeks that she had spent here.

Finally, they arrived at their destination, identified by a small sign labeled "Very High Energy Studies - Director: Tao Shaojie". Ryouko had learned to identify when she was almost there by watching for the stone tile inscribed with what appeared to be rippling water.

The door slid open at their approach, revealing immediately the most striking feature of the room: the giant metallic tubes, thicker than Ryouko was tall, some of which passed right by the entrance. The room was evidently enormous, more of a warehouse than a room—as could be seen by peering past the tubing into the deep corners of the room—but was filled nearly to the brim with desks, measurement equipment attached to the tubes, and research personnel.

Dr. Tao himself was waiting a few steps in, eagerness barely-concealed.

"Oh, so this is the other visitor?" he asked, tilting his head. "Well, I'm afraid the tour will have to wait. We are keen to begin, and I am sure seeing the lab in action will be far more interesting than looking at inactive equipment."

Ryouko allowed them to be led deeper into the room, accumulating as they went a small crowd of scientists. Ryouko had memorized some of their identities over the past few weeks, at least vaguely, and could identify the senior researchers, the research students, and the students from the local high school, including the boy who Asami claimed was always giving Ryouko "The Look", though Ryouko didn't believe it.

They found Ryouko's mother standing in the observation room, peering through a thick pane of reinforced glass down at the study area, where Asami was performing various gravitational feats for the benefit of the facility's gravitational sensors.

"Greetings," the laboratory AI, Lemaître, said, as their small group entered the observation room. Rather than choosing to resemble his namesake, the AI used a nondescript, rather short avatar, which stood next to Ryouko's mother, hands clasped behind its back, in front of an elaborate control that it surely was not manipulating manually.

"Should we wait until Nakihara-san is finished?" Dr. Tao asked.

"That won't be necessary," the AI said. "I was collecting low priority data. Now that Miss Shizuki is here, we can begin the serious experimentation."

Ryouko didn't really like Lemaître, who she suspected thought of her more as an experimental subject than a person.

But she nodded, then exited alone through a door on the side. As she descended down to the study area, she played back in her mind the proud statements she knew Director Tao would be funneling at Kyouko, how their artificial gravity generator was one of Humanity's most powerful, more powerful even than those installed on battlecruisers. The whole underground facility was seismically shielded, the sensors were some of the most precise ever produced, based on his own design, the lab had put together a new human subject study area in only a few weeks, and so on and so forth. Only a very cruel person would have pointed out that Adept Blue, the deep space gravitonics lab situated on an asteroid in the Sol System, had him beat in most of those categories.

Indeed, the interests of pure science would have directed Ryouko there, instead of to this lab on Eurydome.

She met Asami inside the small privacy room that adjoined the study area. The girl was on her way back up, and gave her one of the quick kisses she was so fond of.

If you spend too long in this room "transforming", they'll wonder what you two are doing, Clarisse mocked.

Shut up, Ryouko responded.

She transformed and glanced at the monitor above the doorway. "Gravity Level: 0 G," it said.

She took a breath, and stepped through the doorway into the study area.

There was really very little for her to think about in these studies, she reflected, as she allowed herself to float into the air. Unlike Asami, who could perform active manipulations and even had a fascinating singularity for the scientists to fawn over, she was a one-trick pony: she could make a temporary wormhole and pass through it. Thus, while Asami's instructions were sometimes quite complex, Ryouko's usually consisted of "teleport from point A to point B and back over and over while we adjust the gravitational field."

She had been afraid that Asami would end up stealing her thunder in the eyes of the scientists, but that had turned out not to be the case. The scientists seemed endlessly fascinated by the streams of data coming from their sensors, and hadn't begun to show even the slightest sign of apathy about her presence.

This week's experimental protocol tasked her with teleporting through a predefined series of points as fast as she could, until she felt she couldn't anymore. She had a restriction on how frequently she could teleport that was independent of soul gem, and Dr. Tao believed that this was due to the fundamentals of how her power worked. They wanted to test that as directly as possible, of course.

Ryouko sighed. It wasn't exactly pleasant, exhausting her teleports, and she felt faintly ridiculous,

teleporting in a circle over and over in a frilly dress, in front of her mother, no less.

"Are you ready?" Lemaître asked over an intercom, and she responded by giving a thumbs up signal.

The signal light in the room turned green, and Ryouko started her circuit, her perspective shifting from the bottom of the room, to one of the platforms that jutted out of the side, to in the air near the roof, to one of the side walls...

Once, long ago, when she had been newly contracted, the constant changes in perspective would have disoriented her, without the natural magical girl instincts to stabilize her in-combat. Now, though, she was used to the process, and quickly started letting Clarisse guide her from location to location, allowing her mind to drift.

A distant part of her mind registered that, according to the indicator sign at the top of the room, the gravitational field had increased to 0.2 G. She felt surprisingly heavy, and she could also feel that she was starting to draw on her available pool of teleports.

It felt like so long since she had been that quiet, bored Earth girl peering out the window of her room. She had experienced a lot, and learned a lot; of this, she was sure. Yet, as she had implied to Kyouko earlier, she didn't feel like she had learned what she really wanted to learn. When she had made her wish, she had imagined that she would be alone, making decisions about her own future, exploring the wide world.

And yet, now that she was finally starting to face this prospect, there was a part of her that found it terrifying. She was facing a choice about whether to leave the planet or not, and she had realized that she was starting to feel a sense of responsibility and with it, a sense of fear at the unknown directions that her decision might take her. Her vision of the possibilities for her future life had expanded, and though she was fairly certain she didn't want to be spending too long running teleportation laps around a room, she had started to muse on the idea of bringing Asami with her as she traveled, if Asami would have it.

But would she?

The gravitational field was starting to become very noticeable now—Ryouko was beginning to fall a substantial distance whenever she teleported into the air, despite it being only 0.4 G. Still, she was used to it. She shook her head at herself a little, and tried to go back to her thoughts and forget that she was starting to drain her remaining teleports, a condition that made her nervous on an instinctual level.

Her mother had asked for her opinion on whether Ryouko wanted her to move to Eurydome, but Ryouko could see what she meant: her mother wanted Ryouko to *choose* whether or not she wanted her mother in the area. There was a part of her that was disturbed by the idea of moving back in with her mother so soon after leaving—and yet she felt acutely aware that she was only fourteen, even if she was turning fifteen tomorrow. There were very few fourteen-year-olds being asked to make such life decisions—even the contracted ones were mostly being shuffled around the front lines or in and out of training centers. It would be only normal to live with her mother. She would be someone Ryouko could ask for advice.

Nor was her decision as simple as choosing to leave or not leave the planet. There were other options lurking at the edges. Nana had given the option of going on the mission and then simply coming back. That was the safest route, perhaps, but Ryouko did not want to tell Asami and the scientists she would be coming back, when she might not be.

Finally, there was the Goddess lurking in the background. The deity had a plan for her, and she

doubted the plan involved her living quietly on Eurydome. Yet the deity had implied she could see the future, and was perhaps even timeless. Ryouko could imagine that she might not be called upon again for years, or even decades. She doubted that, though.

She teleported into the air once again, and this time found herself pulled down so sharply it shocked her. Her soul gem was doing fine, but she could sense that she was nearly out of further ability to teleport. She exerted herself for one final teleport, landing onto a platform on the far side of the room. Teleporting didn't remove her velocity relative to the room, though, so the shock in her bones startled her as she landed. That was not typical for such a short fall, and for *her* to feel it, through both her magical girl body and the augmentations, meant that the gravity must have been strong indeed.

"I'm out of teleports," she transmitted to the research team. *"What is the current gravity setting?"*

She had glanced up at the informational display at the far top corner of the room. It claimed "0.75 G", but she had difficulty believing that.

"We're getting great data, Miss Shizuki," Tao transmitted back. *"Very interesting. I think I may understand—well, we can start again when you're ready. The gravity setting is 0.75 G, although that last fall—"*

Ryouko shook her head.

"This is not *0.75 earth gravity,"* she insisted. *"You saw how fast I fell? I can* feel *it!"*

From her vantage point on the elevated platform, Ryouko could see nearly the entire room around her: the sterile-white walls and floor, the grey metal platforms that were identical on both top and bottom, sticking from the sides of the room, the ceiling, and the floor. In one of the top corners she could see the clear reinforced glass—actually a nanofabricated metamaterial—through which the researchers peered down at her. She could see Director Tao turn and gesture at one of the researchers near him, seated at the instrument panel. Asami was probably somewhere else in the facility resting, she realized.

"You're right," he transmitted back. *"Something is wrong. Georges, shut down the system. Miss Shizuki, I apologize for this. We'll have it sorted out immediately.*

Ryouko gritted her teeth, dropping into a crouch. The gravity seemed to be getting worse, and it was becoming difficult to—

Ryouko! Get out of there! Teleport!

Asami's thought sent a jolt of fear through her heart. She strained, trying to call up the necessary teleport out of the room.

I can't! she thought. *I ran out! I need fifteen seconds—*

The platform below her started to bend downward, and for a moment she saw the world in slow motion—Director Tao gesticulating wildly at the researcher next to him, the two of them shouting at each other, the door sliding open as Kyouko and Asami rushed in, already transformed.

Then with a tremendous crack, the ceiling above her ruptured open, imploding down upon her impossibly fast, and Ryouko knew that she couldn't dodge.

When Ryouko opened her eyes again, realizing that she had *not* been entombed by countless tons of falling metal and soil, she found herself squinting up at a metallic diamond mesh, shimmering

luminescent red, that somehow held up the collapsing ceiling despite its repeating pattern of holes. Around her stood a circle of red apparitions, clones of Kyouko, hands held up toward the sky.

"What are you waiting for?" Kyouko asked, her chorus of voices assailing Ryouko from all sides. "I can't keep this up much longer! Teleport to Asami!"

Ryouko propped herself up onto her arms, regaining her bearings. She had fallen down to the floor under the influence of the intense gravity, but had somehow managed to remain uninjured. She recalled falling into something surprisingly soft and pliable. Had it been Kyouko somehow?

But even as she speculated about what had happened, she dug within herself, trying to pull together the resources to teleport out, fixating on the signature of Asami's soul gem. She felt it fluctuate a little—but she couldn't worry about that, not yet.

"Grab my hand so I can teleport you out!" she shouted, reaching out her arm blindly, unsure which Kyouko was the real Kyouko.

"These are all clones!" the Kyoukos said. "Just go!"

She teleported.

She arrived at a scene of chaos. The observation room was strewn with rubble, having also apparently suffered some kind of cave-in, and the door out was visibly bent, clearly in no condition to slide open. The researcher manning the control console was clutching his arm, muttering swear words at himself, but still trying to operate the console. Next to the window, Kyouko had her eyes closed, still channeling her duplicates so that they'd allow the ceiling of the the testing room to collapse in a relatively gentle fashion.

"Oh, Ry—Miss Shizuki, you're okay," Dr. Tao said, appearing in front of her. He was holding one hand over his left eye, with blood leaking out visibly behind it, but appeared remarkably dignified for his situation.

Ryouko pushed him aside, though, heading for the first thing she had noticed in the room: Asami kneeling in the corner, Ryouko's mother kneeling next to her, whispering into her ear.

The latter stood up at Ryouko's approach, turning her head slightly. She seemed reluctant to move for a moment, but then stepped aside, allowing Ryouko to see the source of her reluctance.

In truth, Ryouko had already intuited what had happened from the blood staining her mother's pants, but she was only able to fully believe it seeing for herself. Asami knelt on the floor, head down, pinned to the spot by a metal beam straight through the abdomen, blood and gore covering the floor beneath her, her purple costume ripped and torn. Impossibly, she seemed to still be conscious, channeling some kind of magic, her soul gem glowing on the floor in front of her.

In that moment, unable to look away from the sheer trauma that had been inflicted, part of her mind presented her with a flashback of that same abdomen, smooth and unbroken, in an entirely different context—

She instantly regretted the memory, feeling the bile rising in her throat, until it subsided abruptly, Clarisse crushing the emotions with the velvet fist of emotional suppression.

She dropped to her knees next to Asami, searching for the girl's eyes. Only then did Asami turn her head to face her.

"I'm here," she said, blinking away tears. "I'm here."

I'm not very good at keeping my body intact, am I? Asami thought, as Ryouko realized that the girl didn't want to use her mouth to speak. *I'm okay, though, really. I've got pain-killers and everything from my implants.*

Asami made a pained attempt at a smile, and Ryouko snuck a glance at the girl's soul gem, which was on the floor in front of her dumping grief into a small circle of grief cubes. Truth be told, it was doing reasonably well, and Ryouko realized that Asami was telling the truth—she really *was* okay, so long as Ryouko was here.

That only made it more painful.

"She was trying to save you," Kyouko said, appearing next to her. "We didn't think this room would buckle in, too. The only reason we're still alive is because she's canceling the gravity above us."

Ryouko looked up, in time to see Kyouko's face soften.

"She'll be fine," Kyouko said. "Take my word for it. I've lived through worse than that myself. Once we get out of here, she can stop using her magic and go into fugue."

"I've lost contact with Geor—Lemaître," Dr. Tao said, from behind her. "But based on the last reports I've heard, something has gone terribly wrong. The gravity generators have gone crazy in the whole complex, and there's been collapses everywhere, but at least the emergency stabilizers have gone off and kept the whole place from coming down on us. It'll take a while for anyone to get to us, though."

Ryouko closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. She—

—found herself jumping up, seizing the Director by the collar and pinning him against the wall. The world turning into a haze around her, as she peered into the man's abruptly terrified eyes. She felt herself pressing the man against the wall.

"What the hell kind of lab are you running here, anyway? What kind of crap do you think you're doing, anyway? I didn't goddamn—"

Then an oddly pleasing tingle interrupted her thoughts, as she realized Clarisse had turned up her emotional suppression another notch. She felt a bit numb to the world around her, but at least she could think clearly. She finally noticed Kyouko and her mother pulling at her arms, though only the former had any chance of actually countering the force of her pin.

She released the Director, who had already started having visible difficulty breathing.

"I'm sorry about that," she said, and even in her own ears her voice sounded empty. "If it's really true that there are still uncollapsed regions of the facility, I could help retrieve them, but…"

She glanced at Asami, still laboring on the floor, in a pile of her own blood.

"I'll take us all to the surface first," she said. "The emergency workers will have some scanners that can identify where the intact regions of the facility are."

She felt Kyouko grab her by the shoulder.

"It's okay," Kyouko said. "I don't want you trying to rescue anybody. Go with her to the hospital. I'm sure there'll be other teleporters somewhere in the local area. You don't have to be the one to do it."

Ryouko turned, looking into Kyouko's eyes. Even in her dulled state, she could read what those eyes said. Kyouko wouldn't let Ryouko try to stay, even if she wanted to.

"That seems logical," Ryouko responded.

"When you take us to the surface," Dr. Tao said, straightening his collar. "Make sure to teleport the metal beam along with us. Removing the beam at this point would only add tremendous shock. It has to be done by a trained team."

"That makes sense," Ryouko said.

She ended up exiting emotional suppression when she was in the hospital, seated in a waiting room as the robotic surgeons did their work. Her mother hovered over, speaking at length about how it really wouldn't be that bad, how they could pull extra organs off her clone in storage, how as a magical girl she could heal it more easily anyway, and so forth. She had considered ending the emotional suppression earlier, but Clarisse had flatly refused.

It wasn't as bad as she thought it would be. Her mother held her as she leaned over slightly, trying to contain the nausea that came with exiting suppression. It had been more than half an hour, and there had been enough time for her to calm down. Instead of feeling angry, or despairing, she simply felt numb. She didn't like to admit it, but having her mother with her was helpful at that moment in time.

As she leaned on her mother's shoulder, she thought about how oddly important Asami had become to her, during their short time on Eurydome. Could it be called love, or was it simply the trauma of seeing another fixture of her life almost torn away? She couldn't say.

They sat there until the announcement came that Asami had been moved to one of the hospital beds.

It was the next day before Asami was allowed to regain consciousness.

"Hey," Ryouko said as Asami's eyes opened, holding the girl's hand.

Asami seemed to peer at her for a moment, checking for something, then glanced at Ryouko's mother behind her.

"Hey," Asami said finally, looking back at Ryouko. "Happy birthday, I guess. What a great way to spend it, right?"

Asami smiled slightly, letting Ryouko know it was a joke.

"Yeah, I guess," Ryouko said.

Asami squeezed her hand, and Ryouko looked down at the floor, thinking about something else entirely.

How could she tell her now that she was thinking about leaving with Nana and Kyouko?

"The doctors say your recovery will take about three days," Ryouko said, making eye contact with Asami. "They brought in a magical healer to accelerate the process, which is why it's so fast. The three days is for your body to grow back over the scaffolding they've put in. Your soul gem will help you heal faster."

She gestured vaguely at the tubes running out from under Asami's sheets. She didn't mention the organs they had harvested from Asami's new stored clone. Why overcomplicate matters?

Asami looked to the side, spotting her soul gem on the counter next to the bed, draining into a grief cube that her CubeBot was holding with a robotic arm.

"That's good to hear," Asami said, smiling slightly. "We can go out to eat when I'm back up. For your birthday."

"Right."

Ryouko sensed someone behind her, and turned to find Kyouko in the doorway, carrying one of those "Get Better Soon" balloons that you always got someone in the hospital. She hadn't followed them yesterday, staying behind to help with the rescue efforts. Ryouko suspected that Kyouko had been involved in bringing in a healer for Asami—otherwise, for non-combat personnel, it was typical to save healing resources by allowing manageable injuries to heal on their own.

"Chocolates?" she said, accepting Kyouko's gift. "Well, she's actually not supposed to eat for another day, since, well, her stomach..."

"Well, tomorrow then," Kyouko said, waving her hand dismissively. "I was going to get something separate for your birthday and all, but this seemed like not the best time for that."

Ryouko nodded slightly, acknowledging the point.

"Well, thanks for visiting," Ryouko's mother said, gesturing Kyouko towards a chair near Ryouko.

"To be entirely honest," Kyouko said, sitting down and crossing her legs, "this isn't just a visit. Ryouko, Public Order is going to open a foul play investigation into what just happened."

There was a moment of silence, and Ryouko saw both Asami and her mother's faces twist in confusion.

"Foul play?" Ryouko's mother asked incredulously.

Kyouko looked down at her hand, which was idly toying with the ribbon attached to the balloon.

"The circumstances of what happened are apparently very suspicious," she said. "I'm told there'll be some Governance investigators here soon to talk to you about it. They might want your memory files."

She made abrupt eye contact with Ryouko, and thought:

Have you ever told anyone here that there was an attempt on your life when you first contracted? Perhaps we should talk about this in private.

Ryouko thought about it for a moment.

I haven't. Should I?

The rest of what I'm saying won't make sense without it.

Ryouko glanced at Asami, who was watching their telepathic conversation with a disturbed look, and decided she couldn't continue keeping this particular secret.

Ryouko sighed, sliding her chair back so that she could address the others all at once. She looked at Asami and her mother in turn.

"What Kyouko is getting at is that there's something I've never told either of you. The truth is, when I was first making my contract, there was apparently an attempt on my life."

Asami's face grew even darker, while Ryouko's mother gasped audibly.

"Ryouko! How could you never say—"

"We've never found any evidence to indicate who it was, or why they did it," Kyouko said, voice clear and serious. "The truth is, we can't even prove they were targeting her specifically. However, and I won't go into the details, the reason the investigators want to speak to her so much is that everything thus far seems to indicate that the gravity generators were rigged to cause the most severe collapse into the area we were standing in, once a testing routine was run. That chamber was custom-built for Ryouko, you'll remember. Given what happened to Ryouko before, the conclusion seems obvious."

Kyouko checked to make sure she still had their attention, and continued:

"The evidence actually strongly implicates Lemaître, even though no one can imagine a suitable motive. However, the AI consented to a code inspection, and TCF validation shows that he wasn't involved. So, they don't really have any likely suspects at the moment, though they're going through the lab personnel."

I thought at first they might have been going after me, like in your vision, Kyouko thought, simultaneously. *But they would have had no idea I was going to be here. Still, it's too much of a coincidence. Something is going on.*

Ryouko gripped the armrests of her chair, feeling some of the emotions she had grown numb to come roaring back to the forefront.

"You're telling me they tried to kill me, and because of that, they almost killed all of us?" she said, growling the words slightly.

"Maybe," Kyouko said, meeting her gaze.

Ryouko seethed, gritting her teeth. She remembered how Asami had looked, kneeling on the floor in pain, her belly ripped open by a support beam. All because someone wanted to kill her?

"Is there anything I can do?" Ryouko asked. "How can I make sure this doesn't happen again?"

Kyouko shrugged.

"Hope the investigators come up with something, I guess," she said.

"They're just going to attack me again," Ryouko said. "And this time they might get me, or Asami-chan, and—"

She cut herself off, the anger percolating to the surface again. Her thoughts flowed with deadly clarity.

Whoever is trying to kill me is trying to kill both of us, Ryouko thought to Kyouko. *If I stay here, all that's going to happen is it will happen again, and I will get killed, and so might…*

Kyouko didn't answer, but at that moment Ryouko didn't see Kyouko, or even the hospital room.

She was seeing the crystallization of all she had experienced for the past month. The vague hints from the Goddess, her own restlessness at the dull routine of life on Eurydome, the mission offer from Nana—she was destined for greater things. Hadn't she wished for that? Her wish wouldn't allow her to rest, and furthermore, she didn't *want* to rest.

Kyouko was right: there was something going on here. Maybe getting to the bottom of it was what she had to do—maybe that was part of the world her wish was trying to show her. She couldn't stay a fixed target—she had to keep moving.

And she had to go on this mission. It related, somehow.

"Ryouko?" Asami asked, watching her sit there, eyes unseeing.

Ryouko let out a breath.

"I'm sorry," she said, quietly.

"What?" Asami asked.

Ryouko put one hand to her head, then pulled it away.

"The reason my aunt visited yesterday," she said, trying to speak as clearly as she could, "was to offer me a place in a covert ops mission, one that required my involvement. The truth is, I've been thinking about going back into the field for a while. I haven't really been happy living here—not because of you! But because… I don't think I can settle down yet, not now. I'm sorry."

She made eye contact with Asami, and the sadness in her eyes felt painful.

"I have to go," she said. "I can't really explain why, but I have to. There's so much going on here, and…"

She gestured inchoately with one hand. She saw her mother open her mouth to speak, then close it again.

"Well, I think I have to come back afterward, for a while," she said, looking away. "I have an obligation to give the scientists as much data as they think is useful. But for now, it seems like the lab will be shut down, and—"

"It's alright," Asami said, surprising Ryouko into making eye contact. The girl's expression was surprisingly determined.

"I always suspected you would want to leave," Asami said, pinning her with her eyes. "You've told me your wish, after all. I just…"

Asami's voice petered out and she dropped her gaze. Ryouko thought about what to say, but then Asami continued, taking a breath, and looking back at her..

"Just take me with you, that's all I want," she said.

Ryouko frowned, looking at Kyouko.

"I'm not sure I could take you with me," she said. "And if there's still someone trying to kill me, it's safer just to stay away. I don't want you hurt—"

"Do you think I care?"

Asami voice cut incisively through her own, sharp and loud. The girl lunged forward, grabbing

Ryouko by the arm, causing one of the monitors to start beeping.

"Asami-chan, please calm down," Ryouko's mother interjected, moving forward to try and pull the girl back. "You shouldn't be moving like that."

But Asami held Ryouko's arm with indelible force, and they met eyes once again, so that Ryouko could feel the force of her will.

They battled there for a moment, and then Ryouko closed her eyes, dropping her head in concession.

"Alright. If Kyouko can make it work, alright."

Seraphim

"And God said, Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and creeping thing, and beast of the earth after his kind: and it was so."

"And God made the beast of the earth after his kind, and cattle after their kind, and every thing that creepeth upon the earth after his kind: and God saw that it was good."

"And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth."

"So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them."

— The Conclave Bible, Datalinks

"If it's a sin to 'play God,' then why would He leave His tools lying around?"

— Unknown

"You can't be serious," Mami said, leaning across the table to stare at Kyouko.

Kyouko grimaced.

I knew she'd respond like this, she thought, sighing internally.

That was why she had asked for a VR meeting in the first place, after all. A little chat, at a table in a café they had frequented together long ago, with virtual tea—it was supposed to be disarming. More disarming than yelling at each other over a voice line or a video call, anyway.

Kyouko did her best to smile into the face of the Field Marshal's disapproval.

"Look, it's not *that* crazy, Mami," she said. "If there's evidence Homura might be involved in this, one of us should be involved, right? You're busy and we both know Yuma never leaves Earth. That leaves me."

"We both know that this is about your damn cult," Mami said, leaning onto her arm, hand on her forehead and eyes closed, pantomiming a headache. "I can't believe Internal Affairs leaked it to you."

It had certainly helped that Kuroi Kana had approved the leak, but Kyouko knew not to mention that.

"It's not *just* about my Church," Kyouko responded. "Look, I can keep my responsibilities to the Union separate from my responsibilities to the Church."

Mami looked up at her, then shook her head.

"You say that, but you know that's not really true. Let's say you hypothetically meet Homura. I'm sure she knows about your cult. I wouldn't be surprised if that weren't part of the reason she's staying away. How could you keep that separate?"

Kyouko gritted her teeth, keeping her instinctual anger under control. They'd had this particular argument before, and it didn't help to argue with Mami about the Church and Homura once again. That'd just poison the atmosphere.

"It doesn't matter, Mami," she said, looking the other girl in the eye. "You know I'm right. If Homura is involved, one of us should be in the area. It's not like I'm a newbie. I can handle myself in any situation. That's the only compensation we have for being this old."

"It's so tentative, though," Mami said, glancing away. "So one of the last places where Homura might have been was a planet the Ordo Illustrata docked at. It's a bit of grasping at straws."

"Straws are all we got," Kyouko said, shrugging. "And there always was something weird about that cult. The Church keeps track of any that involve magic or magical girls and they always seemed… too well organized. They had too many resources. We had them under special watch. The theory was that it was related to someone's wish, which, you know…"

She and Mami cringed simultaneously, obviously thinking about the same thing.

"But anyway, we never found any wishes that matched up, and the founder's daughter was already dead. Then they disappeared and didn't turn back up, so we forgot about it."

Mami shook her head, clasping her hands together around her cup of tea, now quite cold.

"If it were just a matter of my judgment, Kyouko, and if it were anyone else, I'd still say no," Mami said, looking back up at Kyouko. "But, I will respect that it is you. You can go."

Mami paused, frowning slightly.

"But did you have to take Shizuki-san with you? Not Sayaka, but—"

"Yeah, Ryouko-chan, obviously," Kyouko said, still frowning at Mami's unexpected use of her personal name. "Look, she came willingly, and I can't say I blame her, after what happened."

Mami peered down into her tea.

"I can't believe there's still someone trying to kill her. I had hoped the previous time was some sort of crazy misunderstanding. The idea that there'd still be someone doing this kind of thing, someone we can't track, and then this business with the Ordo Illustrata, and this vague Homura connection. My instincts tell me something is very wrong. I've told you about what I've learned about the missing grief cubes, and this new complaint from Clarisse…"

Mami let her voice trail off, and they sat in grim silence for a moment.

"It could still be nothing," Kyouko said, shaking her head sadly. "The soul gem might have been weaker than they thought. She was the one who destroyed the last generator, with a lightning storm. It would have taken a lot of power. Maybe they didn't give it enough grief cubes."

"Would Clarisse have made that kind of mistake?" Mami said, still looking into her tea. "Does that make any sense?"

Kyouko sighed, and leaned back into her chair.

"No, she wouldn't. And it doesn't. For a soul gem to just fail like that is crazy."

Mami sat back, looking up at the wooden ceiling of the café.

"Something like this happening to someone close to someone like Clarisse elevates this whole affair to an entirely new political plane," Mami said. "And if someone inside the MSY is responsible, they would know this. Clarisse will be breathing fire the next Committee meeting. The ramifications could be enormous, especially if it comes out we didn't tell everyone right away."

"We don't know that someone was *responsible*, Mami," Kyouko said. "It could just be a new phenomenon."

"Things like this don't just start happening," Mami said. "You know that. Someone was responsible, even if we don't know how."

Kyouko leaned her head into her hand and sighed again, then took a bite of her chocolate croissant.

It might as well have been cardboard.

"Fortunately, Clarisse is more reasonable than that," Mami continued, when Kyouko didn't say anything further. "Of course she is. For now she's keeping things to herself, but if we don't start producing results with this investigation… well, you can guess how she put it."

"Who else knows?" Kyouko asked.

"The rest of her team, of course," Mami said. "Though for now, they're satisfied to hear we're working on it. No one has told Shizuki-san, though."

"And no one will," Kyouko said. "Or at least we won't. Not until we know."

She put one hand thoughtfully to her cheek.

"Does Clarisse think she can help?" she asked. "If there's anyone whose judgment I might trust, it's someone like her."

"Maybe," Mami said. "She doesn't know yet. She did say it might have something to do with a mission Virani-san was involved in, about a decade ago. Some incident on the planet of New California."

Kyouko looked off to the side for a moment, digging through her memory.

"I haven't heard of this," she said.

"Neither had I," Mami said. "It's absurdly and explicitly classified, both on the MSY and Governance level—and you know how rare explicit classification is. Apparently there was a string of unsolved disappearances on the planet. Teenage girls, but not magical girls. Public Order wasn't having any luck, and neither was the Soul Guard, so she and one of her teammates were sent undercover to investigate. The evidence suggested it was a magical girl with family problems who had found out about the cloning program and had gone a little insane. They weren't able to capture the girl alive. Nasty business."

Kyouko wrinkled her nose, making a face at the explanation.

"Except why would it be so classified? The cloning thing is common knowledge for mid-level

security clearance. That explanation also makes no sense. Were there any other details?"

Mami shook her head.

"No. That's essentially all there is to read, and if I can't read any further, who can? So few details, such a high classification—there's something important being left out."

"Obviously," Kyouko echoed. "Does Clarisse know more?"

"I asked," Mami said, anticipating the question. "No. She just knows Misa mentioned it vaguely to her teammates once, and seemed uneasy about it. She's not really sure why she thinks it's important—just one of those instinct things."

"One of those instinct things, huh…" Kyouko said, letting her voice trail off.

"Yeah," Mami said. "One of those."

She slid downward, resting her head on her arms.

"According to the records, there was a delay in shipping Misa Virani's clone onto the ship after the battle, because her primary was lost on the surface of Apollo along with one of the city centers. Because she was Black Heart, she had a secondary clone on ice on a more secure planet, but it was necessary to get it shipped out. During that period, the transport vessel was forced to reroute because of residual Cephalopod combat vessels in the sector. It was two weeks before the clone arrived at Zhukov."

She didn't check to see if Kyouko understood her, because Kyouko had already heard the account. Mami was just reciting it out loud again, trying to see if there was anything she missed.

"Since we needed to wait for a clone to arrive, one of the soul mages aboard put her soul gem in induced stasis, and we stored it next to a grief cube maintenance system. According to Zhukov's logs, just before the clone arrived, the soul gem luminescence dropped catastrophically, despite immediate grief cube support. By the time the soul mage arrived, the gem was already disappearing. Video surveillance confirms the scenario."

"But it makes no sense," Kyouko said, reiterating their previous discussion. "We've had this kind of soul gem storage down to a science for decades. This kind of thing doesn't make sense."

"Well, it happened now. None of the other girls who 'disappeared' have done so under quite so much surveillance."

"I don't buy it."

"Well, I don't either."

"The soul mage—"

"I've known her for over a decade. She wouldn't. Besides, we already—"

"I know, Mami. We've already had this talk. I'm not asking if you already investigated her. I'm asking if you asked her if she noticed anything unusual about the soul gem."

"We did," Mami said, biting her lip adorably without realizing it. "She didn't notice anything unusual, besides the soul gem being way more corrupted than it should be."

"Have you asked for her memories?"

Mami bit her lip again.

"That's a bit much, isn't it?"

"You know that's the only way to totally prove innocence, and with magic we only have her word to go on that she didn't do anything."

"But for a human, especially a magical girl, only a mind-reader could extract provably accurate memories. Do you know what that's like? I know her—"

Kyouko stood up, grabbing Mami's shoulders and peering down into her eyes.

"I know you don't like it, Mami. I'm sorry. But you know this is too important to beat around the bush. Order the mind-read. It's not that bad, Mami. With consent, it barely feels like anything. Please. I know you. You're putting off the inevitable."

Mami looked down, pulling on her virtual skirt. Kyouko could see her eyes flutter, one of them tearing slightly.

Oh Goddess, no, Kyouko thought.

She had made a mistake. Mami was more sensitive than she thought. More sensitive than she should have been. It—

She hastily summoned a virtual handkerchief, bending down to dab Mami's eyes. She looked Mami in the eyes, as heartfelt as she could.

"I'm sorry, alright?" Kyouko said. "I said too much. Come on."

Mami sucked in a breath, gaining control of herself.

"I—I'm sorry," she said. "I don't know what came over me. Losing control of myself at my age. It's embarrassing. The topic isn't even—"

Kyouko did what she thought she had to: she leaned over and hugged Mami, closing her eyes for a moment.

She felt Mami squirm in surprise.

"What's going on, Kyouko?" she asked, confused. "It's not that bad—"

Kyouko released the hug, standing back up, looking into the middle distance for a moment. Hugging Mami took her back, *waaay* back, to before her father had flipped out and killed her family. Before everything changed.

Then she looked at Mami again.

"Just wanted to cheer you up," she said, with false flippancy. "You seem stressed."

Mami took a deep breath, looking down at the table for a moment.

"Yeah, I guess I am," she said. "Thanks. You're right, though. I was just putting it off. I have to order the mind-read. It's only proper."

Mami grabbed her teacup, downing the entire cup in one go, entirely the opposite of her usual manner of drinking tea.

Mami let out a breath as she finished, then looked at Kyouko.

"I guess I need to get going," she said. "I've been here for too long already, and my schedule…"

"Yeah, sure," Kyouko said, nodding.

Mami winked out of the simulation, body dissolving into little motes of light, a fancy little effect. Kyouko watched the spot where she had been for a long moment.

F— she thought.

Then she collapsed into her chair and rubbed the palm of her hand into her face.

She began drafting a classified memo.

Mami held her soul gem in front of her in both hands.

"In theory, mind-reading should be one of the easiest skills for a magical girl to learn, even with no head start," a familiar voice said. "Our natural telepathy is already the beginning of it. One only needs to grow it."

Mami peered into her soul gem, the golden, pulsing glow emanating from within its cage seeming to envelop her vision.

The voice sounded serious, but the intonations sounded odd, as if the speaker was not used to speaking seriously.

"And yet, it is often one of the hardest. It takes a great deal of experience, an understanding of others, and even of yourself."

"That is the most bullshit thing I've ever heard. Seriously, are we here for power development or meditation?"

Mami blinked, turning to look at Kyouko, who looked back at her, sucking on a lollipop.

"Why am I here, anyway?" Kyouko asked. "This is Mami's show."

"Mami knows you best," the voice said, suddenly chirpy and girlish. "That is important for this."

Kyouko shrugged, making a show of yawning. She could be immature sometimes, Mami thought. It was annoying, yet she also felt oddly fond of Kyouko.

There was someone at the corner of her vision, just out of sight. A girl, the source of the voice— she turned her head, passing her gaze over where the girl was. And yet, as fast as the image entered her mind, it vanished, a blank in her consciousness.

"I admit, I'm manipulating your mental state with my power," the girl said, trying to sound serious again. "To increase self-understanding. It makes the process easier. But the final step is for you alone to perform. I can only guide it."

Mami sensed, rather than saw, Kyouko rolling her eyes, yet she kept her gaze at the patch of space in front of her. The space was clearly occupied, but her mind refused to fill in who was there.

"If Kyouko-san here had deigned to listen to my explanation earlier, she would remember that the mind magics are the most sensitive to state of mind, to analogy and focus. Well, at least for

learning."

The girl pointed at Mami's soul gem, and Mami gazed back at the luminescent stone.

"Gaze into it. The soul gem will help serve as a focus. Empty your mind. Be like a still pool of water, sensitive to even the slightest breeze."

Mami had never attempted to meditate, and knew from experience that emptying your mind was much easier said than done, especially in the dead of night when she couldn't avoid thinking about the regrets of her life.

And yet—

It must have been true that the girl was manipulating her mental state, because she felt her mind emptying as instructed. The golden glow of her soul gem grew again, seeming to absorb into it all that she was, and all that she had been.

"What do you hear?" the voice asked, though it seemed to Mami that it came from far away.

"Nothing," she said.

"Someday, that will change," the voice said. "But for now, think about Kyouko-san. Try to imagine that you are *her. Think about how you feel, and what you're thinking of. Not just the thoughts, but also the sensations."*

Kyouko snorted in derision, but it only helped Mami.

This is stupid *Mami thought, doing her best imitation of Kyouko.* This is boring. I wouldn't even be here it weren't for Mami's sake. I want to take a nap. I'm tired.

Mami let a sense of tiredness wash over her, even if she didn't really feel it. It seemed right for Kyouko.

"Try to imagine what the lollipop she's eating tastes like," the voice suggested. "What it feels like to have that *much hair, and that giant ribbon. What it's like to sit with your elbow on your knee."*

Kyouko grunted in annoyance, and Mami tried to incorporate that, too, along with the sourness of the candy in her mouth, the hair pulling down on the back of her head…

Why does it bother Mami so much to try to learn a mind-reading skill, anyway? *Mami thought, trying to continue a Kyouko-like train of thought.* I mean, it's a little intrusive, but we've all done much worse. She's probably just being insecure again. She's afraid to learn what others think of her. Well, she should know what I think of her after all this time.

Things might be better now, though. I hope so. She puts too much stress on herself.

Speaking of stress, I'm hungry. Oh, Mami's friend gave me a cookie earlier! I wonder if I still have it in my pocket—

"Ah!" Mami vocalized, startled out of her trance. She darted a glance at Kyouko, who stared back, frozen in the middle of reaching into her jacket pocket with one hand.

"You have a cookie in your pocket," Mami said, feeling silly for saying it with so much awe in her voice.

She paused, thinking for a moment.

"Chocolate-chip," she added.

Kyouko raised her lip in slight incredulity, glancing between Mami and the other girl. Then, slowly, she pulled a chocolate chip cookie, wrapped in paper, out of her pocket.

"Don't tell me this training actually worked," Kyouko said, with a 'I don't want to believe it' kind of voice.

"Oh, good job, Mami!" the mysterious girl said, happiness clear in her voice. "Very few girls manage to do it on their first try! I guess being as old as you has its advantages."

"I told you to stop calling me old," Mami said, feeling herself glare at the girl.

"Sorry, sorry," the girl said. "Anyway, if you want, we can also try mild suggestion. It's not that different. You just imagine doing *things instead."*

"I told you I'd prefer not to," Mami said. "It just feels wrong to me."

"Mami with mind-control powers would be a nightmare anyway," Kyouko said, sneering. "Imagine if she could 'suggest' to me to act more polite at meetings. Oh geez, I feel like a robot already."

Then Kyouko started pantomiming robot motions with her arms, and Mami heard herself laughing along with the mysterious voice.

The laughter echoed in her ears as her eyes opened, and she found that she had buried herself in the blankets of her bed, in her cabin on the Zhukov.

What the hell was that? she thought.

"As you have no doubt learned during your training, imagination is key to the development of new magical powers. Things that you can imagine yourself doing—these are the things that become possible. Initially, everything is a struggle, and must be done through analogy or explicit construction, like Mami-san's famous ribbon muskets. But it is clear that she no longer consciously *thinks* about how her guns are assembled, or she could never even fire one in combat. So it must be for you when it comes to telepathic defense."

Ryouko nodded, acknowledging the obviously rehearsed speech. Across from her sat Gracia Perez, the telepath she had met in the wormhole mission, and who had given the speech. Next to her, Asami was also listening intently. One seat over sat Kyouko, here to monitor her trainee. Finally, Marianne Francois rounded out the girls seated at the table. Apparently, she had been sent by Mami to accompany Kyouko on the mission.

Of the five, Gracia, Ryouko and Asami were transformed; the rest were not.

Ryouko looked up, at the room they were seated in. This wasn't a specialized training center—it was an ordinary-looking living area, with an adjoining kitchen. Large by Earth standards, Ryouko had seen many places like it in the housing brochure she and Asami had flipped through on their way to Eurydome.

This wasn't Eurydome, though—this was a starship, and they were seated in Gracia's cabin. For shipboard accommodation, it was downright exorbitant. Ryouko didn't think even Mami's cabin had been as large.

Then she looked down, at the soul gem she held in both of her hands. Gracia had told her and

Asami to transform, then summon the gem, even specifying the exact manner in which they were supposed to hold it. Ryouko suspected they were about to use the gem as a focus—that was possible, according to her basic training, though she had never been asked to actually try it.

Thinking back to her training made her remember all that had come after that, and for a moment she remembered Marianne crying at her daughter's funeral. What was it she had said? That she had warned her daughter away from fieldwork? Wasn't accompanying Kyouko on this mission considered fieldwork?

Ryouko realized she had zoned out, as she asked Clarisse to replay the part of the lecture she had missed. It was a bit of a bad habit, but…

"Unfortunately, telepathic defense is harder than attack, especially when it comes to blocking mere mind-reading. As a passive defense, it is possible to simply avoid thinking about sensitive topics, but any skilled telepath is capable of drawing a person's mind to a topic. Therefore, any truly good defense must work passively, even when you're not on guard, even when you're not transformed, possibly even when you're asleep."

Gracia paused, making a point of pinning her and Asami with her eyes to make sure they got the point. Something about the girl's dark eyes unnerved Ryouko.

"But," she continued, smiling, "you're new, and not specialist telepaths, and we don't have much time. That's way too much to expect of you. I'll be satisfied if you can put up a credible mental block when you know you're being targeted. Perhaps you will receive more training in the future."

"Excuse me," Asami interjected, raising their hand as if they were in school. "I'm just curious. Do all the, uh, MSY executives have this kind of training?"

She directed the question at Gracia, seeming to realizing only after a few seconds of silence that Kyouko was also sitting at the table.

Kyouko smiled slightly when Asami finally looked at her, tilting her head and closing her eyes.

"The more important we got, the more important it was that we know how to do these things. We're pretty well-sealed. I actually have to turn it off, rather than on. Plus, all us old-timers are pretty well-trained. Back in the day, you heard horror stories about what girls with mind control could do. Entire cities of girls enthralled, things like that. You can bet when we started having training for telepathic defense, *everyone* showed up. Nowadays, we don't even teach *any* anti-magical girl techniques to most new girls. It feels weird to me, even if I know why we don't."

Asami looked down, frowning.

"I guess I've never thought about using mind control on other… people."

It seemed to Ryouko like an odd statement for her to make, but no one else at the table seemed taken aback. Gracia even nodded slightly.

"It's not something you typically think about, but it's something that's definitely possible," she said. "It's not as if there's something special about humans that makes them any harder to control than squid."

Asami blanched, and Ryouko saw Kyouko glare at Gracia, who looked confused.

"Well, magical girls *are* special," Gracia said, a little hastily. "We're more difficult to control than most humans, because of the soul gem. Even a little basic training goes a long way. Most mind controllers can only manage suggestion and manipulation against a girl with training, not outright

control. Plus, implants also really help. There even exist implant setups that can help a normal human resist telepathic attack."

It's true, Clarisse thought, before Ryouko could think to ask. *It's written in the manuals. I'm supposed to keep you on task in the face of mental manipulation, or to block certain thoughts. Of course, a truly good telepath could override implants, and probably me too. Plus the implants they issue to Governance Officials are only somewhat effective.*

Ryouko blinked, absorbing the information Clarisse had given her in accelerated format.

"In any case," Gracia said, shaking her head slightly, long hair sifting over her shoulders. "Resisting mind control is actually a somewhat different topic from resisting mind *reading*. Usually we focus on the latter, since it's much more common nowadays, and also a bit easier. Now look into your soul gems."

The command surprised Ryouko, who had honestly started to forget what they were doing. She did as instructed, watching her soul gem glow quietly green, casting her fingers in an eerie light.

A moment later, a message arrived from Kyouko.

"Secret number! 572. Try to block the telepath from stealing the info!

"Imagine your mind as a battlecruiser," Gracia said, interrupting Ryouko's nascent laugh. "Protected from everything around it by thick armor and powerful forcefields. Imagine doors closing, gates shutting, castle walls. Imagine your magic surrounding your soul gem and your brain, blocking anything from getting in *or out*. Imagine standing in front of a crowd blocking the door out, or a wall standing between me and you. I want you to ponder the imagery that appeals to you the most, and try to seriously focus on *making it real*. And then I will try to steal your secret from you."

Ryouko took a breath, and tried to do as directed. She imagined a sheet of metal in front of her, blocking the girl on the other side of the table. She tried to imagine that it extended into her skull, into her eyes, such that nothing got in or out. Gruesome imagery, she realized, but she tried to really imagine it.

She saw her soul gem pulse slightly.

"Five hundred seventy-two, Ryouko," Gracia said. "And one thousand thirty-six, Miss Nakihara."

Ryouko let out a breath.

"Damn," she heard Asami say, mirroring her own thought.

"You girls were more successful than you realize. I had to try a bit harder than I usually do."

"Do we have to use our imagination every time?" Asami asked. "I don't want to have to imagine a battlecruiser every time I need it. Especially not in combat."

"Fortunately, no," Gracia said. "As you practice, you'll be able to do it faster and faster. Eventually, it won't take more than a thought. I don't know if you girls will be able get to that point in just a few days, but if you do, we can talk about willpower, and magic consumption, and all sorts of advanced topics."

Ryouko and Asami looked at Gracia, then at each other.

"We should try again," Gracia said.

"Let's take a little break," Kyouko said, grabbing a plate of dark chocolate cookies from a wheeled robot that had slid up to the table. They smelled oddly—and deliciously—fragrant, and Ryouko realized that she was hungry.

"Mami taught me the value of cookies made by hand," Kyouko said, mumbling as she picked one up and wolfed it down. "But I'm way too lazy to actually do it. The Church has a baker who makes them for me. I'm surprised this place has a cooking robot. You don't see many of those."

Gracia smiled crookedly.

"They pamper us sometimes, when they feel like it," she said.

Then, after a pause:

"Which is entirely too rare for my taste. Can't you ask Mami-san to look into that? We're SpecOps! I want to be pampered!"

"I feel as if I should point out how much you girls get paid," Marianne said archly, breaking her silence.

"When do I ever get to *use* it?"

"That's why I told my daughter to get out when she still could. Instead, you know what happened."

Gracia gave Marianne an odd look, which Marianne returned a moment later. They sat there in silence for a few seconds, on the verge of saying something, but biting their tongues. It felt really awkward for Ryouko, who was caught in the middle of eating a cookie, but unable to express how surprisingly *good* it was, because this was *not* the appropriate time to say anything.

"Ladies, let's focus," Kyouko said, finally. "Whatever past disputes we may have had, we're all involved in this, and we need to see it through. We don't want any accidents, and that means we need to get the new girls up to speed."

The others nodded silently in agreement, Ryouko grabbed another cookie, and then Asami said:

"I've been meaning to ask: why are we focusing so much on fighting other magical girls? I thought we were investigating a rogue religious group. I'm not sure why we're spending all this time on telepathic resistance and combat tactics for unknown magic. Are we expecting to fight hostile magical girls?"

Kyouko and the other older girls glanced at each other, communicating by eye contact. Finally, Kyouko put one fist to her mouth, clearing her throat lightly.

"We don't *expect* there to be hostile magical girls, but these kinds of rogue colony missions turn them up surprisingly often. A lot of the time, these girls have never heard of the MSY, and have to be dealt with delicately. Other times, the colony is hostile and the girls agree with the rest of colony, and we can't talk them out of it. There's other possibilities."

"Remember that the colony appears to still be functional," Marianne said. "Unfortunately, a stealth probe can't evaluate demon populations or anything like that, but the probe we sent picked up plenty of people on the surface."

"They're friendly a lot of the time, too," Gracia said, her eyes fixed on Kyouko. "Sometimes, they're glad to see us, or they need rescuing. Don't get the wrong idea."

Kyouko and Gracia shared a look, but Ryouko found herself confused. The way they spoke seemed to imply—

"How many rogue colonies *were* there?" she asked, glancing at Asami, who looked wide-eyed and confused. "I was always under the impression that rogue colonies were mostly a hypothetical situation."

Another shared look between the three older girls. Kyouko opened her mouth to speak, but Marianne cut her off, putting a hand on her arm and shaking her head.

"It'll be easier if we just introduce her to Azrael. She can explain it to them."

The two girls stared at each other for moment, Ryouko and Asami looking on. They seemed to be having a telepathic conversation of some sort. Ryouko mused that this was what Asami must have felt like, watching Ryouko and her mother talk.

All Ryouko knew about Azrael was that she was a shy, black-haired girl they had been introduced to when they had first boarded the ship. They had shaken hands. Ryouko remembered her for being even shorter than her, almost child-like, standing there in a jacket, skirt and boots. She had been *really* shy, blushing while shaking Ryouko's hand, which had seemed really odd once Ryouko looked up her age—she turned out to be nearly forty.

"They're going to see her in action eventually anyway," Marianne finished. "It's probably better to have them know ahead of time."

"Alright," Kyouko said.

She turned to face Ryouko and Asami.

"I'll send a message to Azrael. The two of you set up a time to go visit her in her room asap. Got that?"

Ryouko nodded, as Asami voiced her assent.

"Any other questions?" Kyouko asked, glancing between the two of them. "Might as well ask now. I realize the mission briefing assumed a lot."

Ryouko and Asami shared a look. Asami shrugged.

Ryouko turned to face Gracia.

"I wanted to ask," she said. "I thought MagOps teams were kept together whenever possible, yet only some of you are here. Has the team been broken up?"

Gracia shifted in her position, looking uncomfortable.

"Well, we've taken some casualties, as you know," she said. "We're officially on stand-by right now until… certain things get resolved. Kuroi-san put out the word that we could join this mission individually. She thought it'd be helpful for you since we were part of your team. Mina and I signed on because of your connection with the Goddess, and Annabelle because she was getting bored. Nadya has something she has to deal with, and Ying-zhi is taking a vacation. It's good for us to get away from each other once in a while."

Marianne had snorted at the reference to the Goddess, and it occurred to Ryouko that she had never asked Marianne's opinion of the Cult. Juliet had been quite devout; Marianne, it seemed, not so much. Another source of mother-daughter tension.

Ryouko nodded. It made sense.

"Anything else?" Gracia asked, peering at her carefully.

"Not right now," Ryouko said. "I can always ask later if I think of anything."

"Then let's continue with the training."

Ryouko heard Asami sigh, and grabbed a cookie.

Eventually, they were able to take a break from training. Kyouko had recommended that they nap, but neither of them were really in the mood to sleep, so they were simply laying awake in bed. On Eurydome, when their relationship had still been new, they had gotten separate bedrooms, though the arrival of Ryouko's mother had pushed Ryouko from her bed into Asami's. For the accommodations on this ship, they had dispensed with what had become a pretense.

Ryouko had tried browsing her old haunts on the internet, which had been one of her major pre-contract hobbies—her only hobby, if she were being honest.

As was starting to happen too often nowadays, though, she couldn't get into it, so instead she asked Asami a question.

"Why did you come with me?"

"Hmm?" Asami asked, looking up from running her hand idly through Ryouko's hair as it lay on the pillow.

Ryouko didn't say anything further, feeling that her meaning should have been clear enough, and a moment later Asami responded:

"Well, I wasn't looking forward to having to live with your mother while you were away."

Ryouko shook her head slightly.

"I'm serious," she said. "You don't like combat. You could have stayed back. Granted, this isn't exactly a combat mission, but still…"

She heard Asami let out a breath, the warm air wafting softly against the side of her neck.

"Well, how do I put it?" the girl said. "I'd be lying if I said I knew exactly what I was doing. I didn't really think it through that much. I just knew if I were with you, I wouldn't mind the combat much."

In the pause that followed, Ryouko felt another gust of air against her neck.

"I guess I would say that when you have a good thing, you don't let go of it easily," Asami added, finally.

Ryouko turned her head slightly to look at Asami.

"Do you think not following me would have been letting me go?" she asked, allowing their eyes to make contact.

Asami looked away from her for a moment, and said:

"You don't think I'm worried about you? You said someone is trying to kill you. If that happens again, I'd prefer to be there for you, even if I get another metal beam through my gut. I mean that."

Asami smiled wanly for a moment.

Then the smile faded, and she said:

"Well that's not the entire reason. When you took me to that Cult center, that Ribbon—the Goddess said that it was important I stick with you, for your safety."

"You stopped me from hitting the ground, in the gravity chamber," Ryouko said, shading her eyes. "I thought that was you, but we never talked about it."

"I don't think it was just for your safety," Asami said. "The way she talked about you, how you're a wanderer, and a leader, not a follower… I've thought about that, and I don't think we're destined to live quietly. It was fun, but you can't live your life like that."

Asami reached over Ryouko's shoulder with one arm and pulled them together, so that her head rested against Ryouko's neck, and Ryouko could feel her light breathing against her skin.

Ryouko was surprised, but returned the embrace.

They lay there for a moment.

"I feel sorry for your mother," Asami said, finally. "She's not happy about this, you know. If I really *had* stayed, it would have killed me to watch her worry."

"I know she isn't," Ryouko said, "but what can I do?"

"I know. It's just… I wish I could make her happier somehow."

Ryouko stayed silent, wondering what her mother or Asami would think if they knew that Akemi Homura might be involved in this. It was only a distant connection, but…

Well, she knew, even without asking Kyouko or Nana, that it was a bad idea to say anything about it to anyone else. Nana was traveling with them, of course, and had promised her mother that she'd watch over Ryouko. Ryouko didn't think that had really reassured her mother, or that her mother really approved of Nana's path in life.

It was… what it was.

For a long moment they lay there, Asami breathing against her skin, their hair coiled together intimately, and Ryouko thought Asami was asleep.

"We need to talk about Clarisse," Asami said, abruptly.

Ryouko tensed, both in surprise and in trepidation, and Asami laughed softly.

"She still sends me messages, you know," Asami said. "I think she really wants us to work out. The way she writes, and the way you talk about her sometimes… she's sentient, isn't she?"

Sentient.

The word was foreboding, carrying heavy weight in this age of artificial intelligence and in the light of what they had learned about ethics in school. For a moment, Ryouko didn't know what to say.

It's alright, Clarisse thought, transmitting the message to both of them. *Yes, I am. Please don't tell anyone.*

Asami laughed again.

Do you watch when we… you know? Asami thought back.

I swear, I wouldn't if it were at all possible for me not to, Clarisse responded, sounding embarrassed.

That's what I thought.

Ryouko felt Asami shake her head slightly.

Well, I guess I have to get used to it. I'm not sure what to think about it. It's a little embarrassing, I guess."

Ryouko and Clarisse both waited for her to say something further, but it never came, Asami seeming satisfied with the discussion.

A short while later, Asami was truly asleep, but Ryouko kept her eyes open, wondering what the future would bring.

They visited Azrael Elizabeth Maslanka half a day later, after a series of brutal—and bruising—combat training sessions with Kyouko and Nana. Neither of them had any training fighting other magical girls, and the basic combat instincts were nearly laughable in the face of a four-and-half-century old ancient, or in the face of a Black Heart operative whose power was literally the neutralization of magic and advanced technology.

Kyouko claimed there was no shame in losing to an Ancient, but even so, it was not heartening to learn that either of the older girls could consistently kill the two of them in less than five minutes—Ryouko even suspected that the two girls had been holding back.

Azrael was expecting them, of course, and the door to her room slid open on their approach. The room was luxuriously large, as Gracia's had been, and decorated in largely the same fashion—there had obviously been no time for anyone to customize their living areas.

Even so, they paused in the doorway to peer in surprise. Both the wall directly opposite them and the half-wall that separated the main room from the kitchen were adorned with absurdly large pairs of wings, one bulky and ruffled with an assortment of colorful feathers, the other separated into two parts, covered with what looked like a stretched sheet of… metal? Plastic?

It was probably some sort of metamaterial, Ryouko decided, waving aside Clarisse's offer to analyze the material in more frequencies. It wasn't *that* important, obviously.

The far wall had been set to display a hologram of an unfamiliar, dark red alien sky. The cloud banks looked like they went on forever, and Ryouko honestly felt a little vertiginous looking at it. On the wall next to that hung what appeared to be a giant metal fan.

Remember, Clarisse whispered in her ear, *her record lists her powers as flying and telepathy.*

Oh, that made sense. Ryouko decided that Azrael was probably just a little eccentric when it came to her powers. It wasn't even close to unheard of—Asami still got giddy sometimes in the gravity chamber, and had to be shaken out of it.

Azrael herself had walked forward to greet them, waiting while they stared at her decorations.

She looked embarrassed, and seemed even more diminutive than Ryouko remembered.

"Hi—welcome," the girl said in a high-pitched voice, directing the two of them towards a set of chairs arranged around a narrow coffee table.

They sat as directed, then glanced at each other. The girl's nervous demeanor and voice seemed odd in light of her older age—both Ryouko and Asami were used to older girls effortlessly dominating conversations.

Why did Kyouko send us to her? Ryouko wondered. What could this girl probably have to tell them that Kyouko couldn't?

They watched Azrael for a moment as the girl crossed and uncrossed her legs. The girl was wearing a knee-length dress, coupled with a tank top and jacket, which seemed like an incongruous combination to Ryouko.

"So I'm supposed to talk to you about rogue colonies," Azrael said, finally.

"Yes," Ryouko answered, simply.

"Well, are you familiar with Governance ideological restrictions on the establishment of colonies?" Azrael asked, voice seeming to smooth out a little.

Ryouko glanced at Asami, checking which of them was going to respond. Asami tilted her head slightly, indicating that Ryouko should take the lead.

Ryouko faced Azrael again, mulling over the question in her mind.

"Well, broadly speaking, Governance just wants colonies to guarantee the Core Rights, right? There's also restrictions on how much modifications colonists can make to social structures, and to their own bodies. Governance wants to make sure its colonies retain their human heritage."

Ryouko summarized what she remembered of the topic as best she could, and found Asami nodding along, as Azrael watched her with an odd expression. This was Primary School Civics material, and though Ryouko was sure she knew more on Governance topics than most people, she didn't see a need to talk about it at length.

"That's pretty much it," Azrael said. "Do you know what a rogue colony is?"

"That's a colony that doesn't follow the rules," Asami said. "Well, intentionally. A lot of unsponsored colonies have failed the rule unintentionally, usually by not being successful enough to provide for their members."

Azrael nodded along.

"Pretty much," she said. "How many rogue colonies do you think there have been?"

The key question, after several lines of honestly boring conversation. Ryouko found herself ready for it.

"Well, we were always told that there were only a few, minor cases. Restrictions on free speech, restrictions on divorce, that kind of thing, where the colonial leaders were trying to get away with something they knew wasn't allowed. Usually resolved by negotiation. But I get the feeling that I wouldn't be here if there weren't more more cases than that."

Azrael glanced off to the side.

"Honestly, 'more cases' is an understatement," she said, shaking her head. "And that's assuming I know about all of them, which I probably don't. There was a long period before the war when Governance didn't bother to monitor colony ships that carefully, and quite a few groups managed to slip the net and hide themselves on this or that planet. A lot of them just didn't want to be monitored, but a lot of them broke the rules pretty badly. Some of the cases are pretty horrifying, actually."

Ryouko sucked in a breath, then glanced at Asami.

"How horrifying?" she asked.

Azrael held up her hand, palm inward.

It took a moment for Ryouko to realize that Azrael was making a gesture, though she didn't recognize it.

"I'd rather not talk about it, and you don't need to know," Azrael said, with an air of blunt finality. "Just know that a few of them required military intervention, which you'll never get Governance to admit. That's all I'm going to say."

The conversation was at a standstill for a moment, the three of them peering at each other quietly.

Finally, Azrael sighed.

"I've spent most of my life as an agent sent to scout rogue colonies, both for Governance and the Black Heart, though before the war the last part was obviously a bit more secret. It turns out, the Incubators are usually glad to recruit girls on rogue colonies to hunt the demons there, without bothering to tell anyone about the colony. I was recruited when I was fourteen."

Ryouko frowned at the statement. From the way she said, it almost seemed as if—

She didn't finish the thought, because she saw something move rapidly across Azrael's eyes.

She and Asami sat there for a moment, Asami's mouth slightly open, confused as to what they had seen. It almost seemed like Azrael was looking back at them through a transparent sheath that was covering her eyes, giving them a slight yellowish tint.

Just as abruptly as it had appeared, it retracted, disappearing into the outer corners of her eyes.

Then, as they continued to stare in amazement and befuddlement, the sheath slid back and forth over Azrael's eyes several times. It was almost as if she had a second set of horizontal, transparent eyelids.

"They're nictating membranes," Azrael said, not meeting their gaze. "They protect my eyes during high-speed flight. And in addition to that, there's also, well…"

Azrael put a hand to her mouth, surprising Ryouko by blushing furiously, cheeks turning a rosy shade of red.

"I'm sorry. I know it's not as big a deal for you, but I—I'm still not used to it. Ah, do you—can you look away for a moment?"

Ryouko shared another glance with Asami. What on Earth was going on?

They turned away as instructed. Behind her, she heard the rustling of clothing.

Ryouko found herself staring at one of the pairs of wings hanging on the wall. With a strange intuition, Ryouko began to see that the wings were a little too elaborate to be mere decoration. They seemed to be jointed, and mounted in the center was a rather large metal… hump?

"Okay, you can look now," Azrael said finally.

They turned back around, and this time Asami couldn't restrain an audible gasp.

Azrael was seated facing partially away from them, back exposed, no longer hidden underneath a jacket or an oddly shaped backpack. Ryouko could see now that what had looked like a tank top was in fact held together in the back by only a small strap.

Down both sides of her back were an array of spine-like protrusions, each almost ten centimeters long. Each pair flanked one of the vertebrae of her spine, and though they were the same color as her skin, they looked flexible, rather than fleshy. Next to the spines lay two parallel sets of large metal discs, which Ryouko recognized as connection terminals, similar to the one she had on her own lower spine, but larger, deeper, and not hidden beneath the skin.

The two of them stared in frank, open-mouthed amazement, unable to tear their eyes away, even to look at each other. Images flashed through Ryouko's mind, of videos she had been shown in school, of mutants growing in vats, of horror movies she had seen, of Freedom Alliance Elite snipers crawling through ruined cities with feet that were not feet, skin changing color like a chameleon, eyes inhumanly large, covered by transparent second eyelids. In her nightmares they had stalked her, and her mother had yelled at her father for letting her watch a movie like *that*.

"What did they do to you?" Asami blurted out, stretching out a hand to touch one of the spines, then jerking it away, realizing what she was doing.

Azrael laughed quietly, before sighing deliberately and loudly. She shook her head, hair sweeping over the topmost spines.

"Everyone says something like that," she said. "But I was born like this. I—if you want to touch one, go ahead."

The two rows of spines twitched, then folded inward, before extending back out. Asami looked strangely fascinated, but Ryouko felt a surge of revulsion, shaking slightly.

Easy there, Clarisse thought. *You're not being rational. She's just as human as either of us. Think about it.*

Ryouko swallowed, allowing Clarisse's relayed calmness to wash over her. That was right, wasn't it?

Wasn't it?

She followed Asami's lead and touched one of the spines. It felt cartilaginous, like touching someone's nose.

Azrael pulled away abruptly, flinging her jacket back around her shoulders in one abrupt motion, facing them again. Her face was still flushed with what was apparently embarrassment.

"On my planet, we—we never showed our spines to anyone, so it's a little embarrassing," she explained. "But it's the fastest way to explain things. My—"

She paused, taking a breath, passing her gaze between the two of them.

"My colony was founded by geneticists and bioengineers who were angry about Governance's policies against improving the human form. They thought it was backwards, that the Freedom Alliance had terrified everyone beyond reason."

She shifted her gaze downward, looking at the table.

"My ancestors told Governance that they were going to set up a small model colony to make their case. Instead, we settled on a different planet entirely, one with an atmosphere so thick it wasn't possible to live on the surface."

She turned her head toward the holographic viewpoint that occupied the far wall, gesturing at them to turn and look. The viewpoint, which had once shown a red alien sky and cloud, bathing the room in red light, now showed something in the distance. It looked like a tower, ringed by smaller towers sprouting around it like mushrooms, and—

"Is that city floating?" Asami asked, incredulously.

Azrael smiled slightly, flicking her nictating membrane back and forth over her eyes.

"In a dense atmosphere, it's possible to float structures by simply filling them with less dense gas. It was a suggestion originally made for Venus, but our planet, which we named Terra Roja, was even more suited for the idea. It has a breathable atmosphere, despite the density, and an entire ecosystem in the upper atmosphere. The first colonists floated their giant colony ships and built outward, pulling asteroids into orbit to mine for materials. And…"

Azrael paused, looking at them to make sure they were following the story, then continued:

"And they engineered themselves wings. That was the point, you see. You can use airships, but everything is so much better with wings. Smaller bodies, lighter bones with connection ports and spines on the back to connect and nourish the biomechanical, powered wings, along with an outgrowth that you can connect a tail to. In a dense atmosphere, it was possible for even humans to fly with a little mechanical help. That was the vision."

She looked down at the floor, reciting an explanation she had practiced many times.

"I was the third generation, and I was born with everything in place. They gave me a pair of wings and a tail extension when I was three, and I learned to fly."

She looked up, gesturing at the pair of feathered wings, and the fan, which Ryouko now realized was a *tail*.

"They grow with you as you get older," she said, "and you can use different extensions—feathers, no feathers, and so, depending on what kind of aerodynamics you want. I can feel everything, and control everything with my spines. Organo-mechanical, something Governance had never managed, because it never wanted to *try*. They were glad to take the technology when the time came, though. Last I heard, they were testing parts of it for the new TacComp iteration."

Ryouko felt an uneasy sense of surprise emanating from Clarisse, and didn't have to guess what it was about.

Asami sighed, shaking her head.

"I don't expect you to understand, but it was *beautiful*. We built spires in the sky, giant towers, with thermal eddies everywhere, where you could fly for hours while barely trying. We did

everything in flight—weddings, parties, you name it."

Azrael turned to look at the holographic projection, and Ryouko thought she saw her eyes glimmer with tears.

"Our goddamn government wasn't stable," she said, peering at the spire in the hologram. "The whole idea was that Governance would eventually find us, and we could introduce ourselves to the rest of humanity, and drive a revolution in ideology. But some crazy radicals thought we hadn't gone far enough. Why not grow the wings and tail naturally? Why have legs, when we barely use them and it just unbalances flight? A lot of us were disturbed by that."

She closed her eyes and shook her head.

"It was so stupid," she said. "There was a civil war. Do you have any idea what happens when you fire explosives at a city that's basically a giant balloon? It was a massacre."

She waved her hand, and the holographic wall switched to a different view, of a spire that was miniature in comparison, collapsed in on itself, ruined, the top broken off.

"I was only fourteen," Azrael said. "My parents were dead. Someone finally sent a distress call with our stored IIC system, but by the time Governance arrived, it was just me and a few others in that spire, a couple of dozen others in other small spires, and a few technicians in orbit."

Azrael pinned the two of them with an intense gaze.

"We wanted to rebuild, of course," she said, "but Governance wouldn't let us. They forced us to lose our wings, change back to baseline human, and keep everything a secret. Do you understand? It's all we ever knew our whole lives. I feel broken without my wings, and they wanted me to change back. And then, I met a small white animal."

"An Incubator," Asami said, sounding breathless.

"Yes," Azrael said. "After I made my wish, Governance had a change of heart, of course. I could keep my wings, if I agreed to work for them as a scout on other colonies, after a bit of training. It didn't make much sense, not even for the MSY, even though I got telepathy as my main magic, but it was good enough for me. In retrospect, I regret not wishing for something bigger, but I was only a kid."

Ryouko looked down at her hands. What was she supposed to think of a story like that? She supposed the colony's founder had been in the wrong, doing something so obviously *wrong*, with disastrous consequences. But none of that was Azrael's fault, and it seemed terrible to try to force her to change back.

In the end, as repelled as she felt by the spines, they were a minor change. Nothing like the FA Elites.

"Wow," she heard Asami said, and echoed the sentiment.

"I don't like doing this," Azrael said. "They use me to introduce new recruits to the whole rogue colony thing, because of the shock value. I get it. No one takes things seriously unless they see evidence. "

Ryouko looked up, to find Azrael smiling again, blushing.

"It's also a bit of a test for you," Azrael said. "I don't know how important you are to this mission, but if you really couldn't handle it, they'd probably take you off the mission. I guess Marianne and

Kyouko trust you. A lot of people respond really badly. I'm just happy you two haven't fled the room. I *still* haven't found anyone willing to date me."

Ryouko chuckled nervously at the joke, unwilling to admit how affected she had been, and glad that Azrael, whose power list included telepathy, didn't seem to be reading her mind.

"So there's a lot of rogue colonies, then?" Asami asked, making a clear effort at normal conversation.

"Yes," Azrael said. "There's a lot of people like me out there. However, I have to admit, most of them don't have fond memories of where they used to live. I don't really like Governance, but I've grown to appreciate the work I do."

"Can you attach the wings?" Asami asked. "I'd like to see it. I think they're cool."

Ryouko looked at her in surprise, and realized that Asami meant what she was saying, and even looked a little excited. She remembered, then, that Asami wanted to be a xenobiologist. Azrael was a little like an alien, after all.

"Hey," Ryouko said, tapping Asami on the sleeve. "Don't get carried away."

"No, it's okay," Azrael, eyes wide with genuine surprise. "I think it's cool, too. No one has ever actually asked."

Azrael stood decisively, pulling off her jacket. She turned around, and pulled the bulkier pair of wings off of the wall, lifting the heavy object with surprising deftness and moving it behind her head.

Ryouko, who was expecting a simple locking mechanism, almost jumped when a set of metal manipulators sprouted out of the midbody of the wings, reaching for Azrael's back. She let go of the wings, which settled themselves into place, seeking out the spines and connection ports and attaching itself adroitly. A moment later, the rigid-looking outer segments of the wings folded downward, bending and shaping itself around her with smoothness that was eerily organic.

Then, Azrael walked towards the wall with the hologram, pulling the metal "fan" off the wall and placing it on her back, where the same procedure repeated itself, though a little more awkwardly, due to the device having to reach into the back of her dress.

Azrael then turned around, massive wings and tail flexing to avoid hitting anything. The entire effect seemed a bit absurd, a relatively tiny girl hidden among giant wings and startlingly lengthy tail.

Azrael giggled slightly, hand to her mouth, apparently aware of the effect.

"Yeah, I know it looks a little silly. I don't actually have magical flight, despite what my record says, so I had to grow both of these much bigger for thinner atmospheres, and I have have different wing surfaces for different situations. It's all very complicated, and on a place like Earth I would have to wear a little antigrav device for stability. It feels stupid, so on break I go to Optatum. Nice thick atmosphere, giant geese I can hunt, though the eagles are annoying sometimes. I have a little cabin in the mountains. No people."

Ryouko blinked, startled at the girl's suddenly bright personality, but then Azrael frowned, looking between the two of them.

"Do you two know why Nana and Kyouko are on this mission? I don't want to reveal any secrets."

Ryouko grimaced, looking at Asami—which turned out to be wrong thing to do, because Asami had glanced at her, caught the grimace, and immediately realized that Ryouko knew what Azrael was talking about.

"Hmm, well, let me show you a holo," Azrael said, glancing between the two of them.

The holoprojection on the wall behind her shifted again, this time not to a scene of an alien sky and clouds, but to an ordinary looking room. Framed in the center was Azrael, wearing her wings and tail—though with a white coloration—standing shyly next to a taller, smiling Akemi Homura, who had her own, similarly white wings on display, though hers were much smaller.

"She came to visit me, right after my contract," Azrael said, turning to face the wall and inadvertently blocking much of the image with her wings. "I was flattered that such a big shot would come talk to me, you know? And she has wings too! Even if they're a little different. It really made me feel a lot better about myself."

I'm looking for her, too, Azrael thought, her voice echoing in Ryouko's mind. *I used to send her messages when I was depressed. I can't believe she just* left *like that.*

I understand, Ryouko replied.

"Let me show you some other holos," Azrael enthused, waving her hand at the wall.

Ryouko and Asami shared a look.

We're nearly out of time, Ryouko thought. *We're supposed to go back to training soon. We should tell her.*

I think she's really lonely, Asami thought, shaking her head slightly. *I doubt she has any friends. Think about it.*

Ryouko did think about it, looking down at her hand. She remembered the wave of revulsion that had passed over her when she first saw the spines, and felt the lingering sting of guilt.

Alright, she thought. *We can stick around a little longer.*

Get up.

Clarisse's voice thundered into Ryouko's head, helping to jostle her awake from a fairly elaborate dream about flying. She found herself immediately alert and awake, typical of being woken up for an unexpected combat situation. She snapped her head around, looking for Asami, who, atypically, wasn't there.

Clarisse steadied her.

It's fine. She's arguing with your mother over your decision to return to combat.

Ryouko grimaced. Her mother was…

What is this about, then? she asked. *Is it the movie producers calling again? You really don't need to wake me—*

No, of course not, Clarisse thought, sounding annoyed. *Kyouko wants to see you immediately. I don't know why. Get dressed.*

Ryouko, who was already throwing on a shirt, felt the obvious questions winding their way through her mind. This clearly wasn't a general combat alert, Asami wasn't involved, Kyouko wanted just her…

She reached the doorway, kicking off her bunny slippers and sticking her feet into a pair of fancy boots Asami had bought her, allowing the straps to lock into place automatically around her ankles.

She turned and yelled towards Asami that she had an important reason to leave immediately, then shot out her doorway, heading for the transit elevator that would take her one deck up, to Kyouko's suite.

She seemed to want you pretty quickly, Clarisse thought, *but also apologetic about waking you up, so I wonder what it is.*

The trip was fast; it took only half a minute at most before she found herself stepping into Kyouko's cabin, finding the living area—identical to everyone else's—already occupied by Kyouko, Marianne, Nana, and—

She started, shocked at Mami's presence, before realizing that it was a hologram, as a cursory check of her infrared vision revealed clearly.

Mami was glowering, and it seemed to Ryouko that she was walking into a room that was already filled with tension.

"Sorry for dragging you out of bed like this," Kyouko said, "but since we were already meeting like this, we figured we might as well just get you to come up here instead of trying to set up the VR."

Ryouko tilted her head slightly, acknowledging the explanation but realizing that it didn't explain why she was here.

Kyouko spoke to her in Standard.

"Ryouko, this is important," she said, pinning Ryouko with a look, "so please be honest. Explain to the others here about the vision you told me about, that one time with the Theological Council. We'd rather not distribute recordings of the meeting, and it's all based on your word, anyway."

Ryouko, shocked, glanced around at the seated girls, feeling a pit gather in her stomach. While she certainly believed in the existence of a Goddess now, and also the veracity of her visions, she had never admitted as much publicly—the last thing she wanted was to tell Mami, her aunt, and Marianne about it.

Kyouko gave her a soft look.

"I'm sorry," she said. "But like I said, it's important, and it will be more convincing if you say it without prompting from me. You can be brief."

Ryouko closed her eyes, turning her head to one side to draw in a breath. She reminded herself that there had been moments in her life where she had been forced to buckle down and *do* something, and that she made it through all of them. The wormhole mission, for example. This was only a sideshow in comparison.

She raised her head back up, trying not to look Mami in the eye.

"I was visited by the Goddess," she said, careful to speak about "the" rather than "a" Goddess.

"She showed me a vision of a large group of magical girls on a cliff, under fire. Kyouko was there, and so were Shirou Asaka and Kishida Maki. We were attacked by a group of humans, who apparently had more weapons than they should have, and we were trying to evacuate into the ocean in a group of submarines. Kyouko was killed by laser fire from a submarine that shouldn't have been there."

She stopped, looking around at the reactions of the group of girls around her. All three of them, except for Kyouko, had gotten progressively more shocked, responding to phrases in Ryouko's explanation as if they were physically impactful.

Kyouko turned back to look at Mami, wearing a vaguely smug look but speaking carefully.

"You see?" Kyouko said. "Everything is as I said. You can see why I'm not hot on this submarine-magical girl invasion force plan you've got sketched out. I had my suspicions, but I was even more certain after hearing your plan. Something is wrong with that colony, and they're going to have more weapons than we expect, and the submarine thing isn't going to work out. We should also remove the people from the vision from the mission. Ryouko and I have to be here, but Asaka does not have to join. It'll be unusual, but we can reassign her at the last minute."

As Kyouko spoke, Mami gave her a look that was halfway between a glare and simple, deep-seated dissatisfaction.

"You're asking me to redesign this mission, because of a 'vision'"—and here Mami made physical air quotes with her hands—"and also arguing that you should stay, when if this vision were true, clearly the easiest way to protect you would be to leave you at home."

Ryouko looked around awkwardly for a place to sit, finally squeezing in between Nana and Marianne when they made a space open.

"We've been over this," Kyouko said. "We agreed if there's any chance of Homura being involved in this, I *have* to be here, because we're not getting you or Yuma to do this."

"But it's really more the changing of plans—"

"It's not completely impossible to imagine that Ryouko and Kyouko here are right," Marianne said, glancing out of the side of her eye at Mami's holographic avatar. "You were alive when precognitive magical girls such as Mikuni Oriko were still alive, and you Ancients still speak about intuition as if it is a real, useful thing. Is it that difficult to imagine that it might still be possible to view the future?"

"There are several alternate plans," Nana pointed, "other than the submarines. And for something as important as this, I'm sure the military can spare additional conventional forces. It doesn't have to be solely a magical girl operation."

Mami tilted her head, eyes closed, and Ryouko imagined that she could hear the field marshal gritting her teeth.

She opened her eyes again, fixing her gaze on Ryouko.

"Alright, I'll allow it, though I'm not happy with it. It is the reasonable thing to do. But, Shizuki-san, is it true? Do you believe in this Goddess?"

Ryouko sighed, looking down for a moment, then meeting Mami's gaze.

"I do," she said. "I've seen her too many times not to."

Mami closed her eyes, seemingly about to say something, but then sighed and said:

"Alright, then I think that will be all. I suppose the meeting is dismissed. I have to get going."

Mami vanished, leaving Ryouko to sit there with her hands clasped, thinking. It was no longer possible not to talk about these things, it seemed.

Carpe Diem

Chapter Notes

>Looks up cool quotes to use for chapter
>Not going to use Alpha Centauri this time
>Spends forever
>Oh hey, this is cool-wait
>It's in Alpha Centauri

"And when the hourglass has run out, the hourglass of temporality, when the noise of secular life has grown silent and its restless or ineffectual activism has come to an end, when everything around you is still, as it is in eternity, then eternity asks you and every individual in these millions and millions about only one thing: whether you have lived in despair or not."

— Soren Kierkegaard, "The Sickness unto Death"

"It is an old military axiom that to control the high ground is to control the battle. Thus it is that the decisive battles for rule of a planet are always in the ultimate high ground of space. Domination of space grants a nearly complete view of the surface below, and allows the option to strike whenever and wherever desired."

"Yet just as control of the hills around a city does not always effect the seizing of the city, so too does control of space not always effect the seizing of a planet. Even if unlimited orbital bombardment is permitted, a determined enemy in underground positions with sources of geothermal energy can hold out indefinitely and must be rooted out, often bunker by bunker. This requires boots on the ground."

"The human doctrine of ensuring that fortified worlds hold out as long as possible is well-known, and well-populated worlds supplied with production facilities have at times held out for heroic periods of time. Less well-known are human tactics for assaulting Cephalopod-occupied worlds, a necessary task in the liberation of alien-conquered worlds. While not anywhere as formidable a task as an assault on a prepared human population, a huge military investment is still required, particularly if planetary bombardment is restricted."

"Due to the sheer size of planetary surfaces, it is often impossible for planetary forces to prevent a landing everywhere on the planet, and it is often effective to simply land on an unmonitored region of the surface and establish a forward operating base. However, it is often the case that a planet must be taken quickly, to free up fleet resources for other uses, or to eliminate a dangerous military facility. In these cases, a direct assault is called for."

"An assault from space on a fortified position requires exerting as much force as possible onto the target. Ideally, such a force must instantly dominate both surface and air. There is no time for establishing airfields or for the careful landing of heavy equipment—everything must travel intact from orbit to the ground as fast as possible."

> "To this end, the Armed Forces fields special orbit-to-surface ships and materiel of every possible description, from the Suriname Infantry Dropship to the Meteor Descending Artillery Piece to the entire ODASC (Orbitally Deployed Air Superiority Craft) category of aircraft, whose pilots are often called, jocularly, 'Desk Jockeys'."
>
> "The troops used are themselves specialists, specially trained and prepared for planetary assaults, with a heavy mage component. All consider themselves elite, with unit names like 'Black Flag' and 'Scarlet Purifier', and all are part of the Soul Guard elite branch of the Army."
>
> **— "Recruit's Handbook", Excerpt**

Stealth Surveillance Probe OBv4r1n3, also known as "Miki" or, to friends, "Probe-chan", was not having a good week.

There was a certain pride associated with being the newest, latest model, especially when your predecessors were not quite as… sentient as you were. It had taken a lot of innovation and questionably organic modifications to cram an AI of 1H intelligence into the chassis of the Observer Version 4 Revision 1, and while Miki wasn't quite the prototype—that would be "Proto-chan", who she really needed to call again when she got a chance—being number three was more than glamorous enough, and it had made her newborn heart swell with pride whenever a larger ship snuck by the shipyard to have a look and compliment her. Plus, being number three meant that she could go straight into combat duty, rather than having to endure multiple rounds of boring test-runs, accompanied by occasional embarrassing—and, if the rumors were right, downright humiliating—glitches.

As a stealth surveillance probe, it was of course natural that she would spend long weeks alone in enemy territory under complete radio silence. That had been factored into her personality design, and while she did occasionally miss socialization, the hustle and bustle of a fleet gave her headaches, and long weeks of alone time were perfect to work on her poetry and her pre-industrial style musical compositions. Both of those hobbies were programmed into all v4r1's and were of course intended to give them something time-consuming and energy-conserving to do, as well as to talk about on the rare occasions they met. For the really long trips, they could shut themselves down and allow a few autonomous subroutines to take care of transit, but that defeated the purpose of having a sentience always on the lookout for incoming sensor scans.

No, what really ground her gears was the mission she had been assigned. She was designed for high-risk infiltration missions into heavily monitored alien systems, not leisurely junkets to minor colony worlds, rogue or not. It was the kind of mission one would give to one of the plentiful v3r12's, and that Command indeed *had* given to a version 3. She had read those reports, and nothing in them suggested that this colony in the Rhine Sector would be anything but stunningly routine—certainly, there was no reason for them to force her to cancel her inaugural performance to the Pre-industrial Music Scholars' Organization (PMSO, for short) and rush out to this uninspiring middle-of-nowhere colony in the Rhine Sector. Either Command wasn't telling her something or, more likely, they were just trying to keep her on her toes.

She sighed. Well, if there was one redeeming factor to this mission, it was that it was short. Two days in, two days out, and probably not much to do in between. She had allowed herself the mental rant, but she was already nearing the outer planets of the star system, and it was time to cut her FTL engines and approach the planet by sublight, just in case. She was nothing if not scrupulous, indeed obsessively so—that was another predetermined personality feature, very important in her line of work.

So she settled in for the hours-long sublight approach, allowing herself to fall into a bit of a work trance, always monitoring her sensor feeds, always taking the least likely route to be scanned, even if she sincerely doubted that there would be any deep-space sensor arrays capable of monitoring her approach.

Finally, she approached the planet, and could see the settlement on the planet's surface, neither unusually large nor particularly special in any way, just as the v3r12 had reported. She allowed herself another annoyed sigh, and played a bit of music in her mind to cheer herself up—Tchaikovsky, and honestly more appropriate for fleet combat than surface scanning, but she liked it.

She eschewed the easy geo-stationary orbits, moving in for a much closer, less-predictable and faster orbit. It was annoying having to watch the settlement constantly zooming by underneath her as she spun around the planet, but she was of course designed to ignore such things, and with the right compensation algorithms, she could almost pretend it wasn't happening.

She unveiled her passive sensor arrays, allowing them to soak in whatever photons they saw, and brought her other sensors, some of the most sensitive Governance could design, up to full operating power. It was a delicate dance, retransmitting photons to make sure her sensors didn't visibly occlude anything, and allowing waste heat to build-up in her internals, to be dumped in occasional bursts of infrared directed *away* from the planet, and only when she was on the opposite side of the planet. But it was her job, her life, and she stretched herself out to listen, letting herself fall into a trance, sitting together with the mountain, until only the mountain remained.

A few hours later, she was quite awake, Li Bai be damned. Her gravity sensors indicated an underground structure buried beneath the colony, at least as large as the above-ground settlement, but at significant depth, and therefore agonizingly hard to gather any details about, no matter how patient she was about collecting individual photons and gravitational fluctuations.

She needed to weigh the tradeoffs. She could probably leave the planet now, her duty done, but the information she had was maddeningly incomplete—or, she could bring her active sensors online, risking detection and even perhaps the loss of the data entirely, if she were shot down. That would be disastrous, warning the colony that Governance was onto them, losing vital information, and least importantly, getting her killed. Sure, her last consciousness backup had been just before she left, as was standard protocol, but like most ships she hoped to reach eventual obsolescence and retirement without any philosophically troubling gaps in her memory.

She did not even consider trying to transmit her data first, *then* running an active scan, because that would gain her nothing—the IIC usage would be even more noticeable than the active scan, so if she were going to do that, she might as well scan to her heart's content.

She decided she'd risk one active gravimetric scan. It was unlikely the colony would have anything that could detect her handiwork, and it was even more unlikely that anything could shoot her down.

She toggled the command, and if she had been human her eyes would have widened immediately. The data poured back into her sensors, and she interpreted the results hurriedly. An underground facility—no, an underground *colony*, several times larger than anything apparent on the surface. Geothermal power taps that suggested a disproportionate amount of power usage, facilities of a size and complexity to suggest a population that should not be possible given the history of the colony—

Besides being obsessively scrupulous, Miki was also designed not to be easily distracted by

surprise; thus, even as she fervently sliced and diced the data and pondered the risk associated with another, more detectable active scan, a part of her kept on the watch for anomalies in surroundings, and noticed when a faint gravitational echo returned from elsewhere in orbit, tremendously far away by human standards but practically next door by orbital standards.

She fired her emergency thrusters, bright and obvious as this system's star, and the impacter missed her by a scant half-kilometer. The game was up.

They have orbital weaponry? she thought incredulously, as she hurried away from the planet with only a passing glance at her attacker, entering FTL as fast as she was capable of.

She brought her IIC system fully online, the zero-width wormhole in her belly screaming at her gravimetric sensors as she forced photons into it. Space-time did not like being treated like that, and made sure everyone in the area was well aware of it, but the stealth no longer mattered.

"So is the intervention force ready yet? The Directorate is not pleased with these unexplained delays."

Mami glanced up at the new arrival, turning away from the new set of maps she had been inspecting.

"Well, it *was*," she said, peering into Military Affairs's oddly warm—but still clearly cyborg—eyes.

"There have been some new developments, though," she said, turning back to the maps she and Yuma had been studying scrupulously, scraps of interactive paper laid out on a small, square table, set tall enough for them to stand at.

In truth, there wasn't much to see that wasn't already in the intelligence summary. The colony on the surface looked unremarkable, and everything of interest lay beneath the surface, in a fuzzily-defined region given only the most tentative of labels. Something big was down there, something that required a lot of geothermal power, and… that was all they knew, really. There wasn't even really enough to make serious guesses about, and it was an open question why the colony bothered having an above-ground section at all. It seemed like they would have been better-served hiding the whole colony underground, except that the above-ground structure had served to mislead the first probe they had sent—but why would the colony leaders think there was any need to mislead? The probe was only there, after all, because of the mysterious signal, whose origin was still unknown.

It made Mami uneasy to think about, but she had only sent the second probe because of the reasons she had been given for canceling the submarine route of attack. It was apparent now that Kyouko was right—the original planned deployment would have been utterly unequipped for assaulting a vast underground structure, magic or not.

But of course, then, there were the reasons for what Kyouko had believed—what *Ryouko* had believed. How seriously should she take Ryouko's "vision" involving the colonists having weapons? Was it all a coincidence, especially in light of the stealth probe coming under fire? Mami had always thought that Ryouko had too good a head on her shoulders to fall for that Cult nonsense, and yet…

"As you can see," Mami said, as Military Affairs stepped over to see for himself. "Recent scans of the colony have revealed that there is a good deal more to it than we previously thought. Moreover, with the recent detection of our probe, it is almost certain that the colonists, or whoever is out there, will now expect our arrival. Given the attempted destruction of the probe, I wouldn't

assume a non-hostile reaction."

That was hardly a comprehensive summary of the situation, Mami knew, but she also knew Military Affairs was already digesting the contents of the written report. This preliminary conversation was merely social courtesy.

"Humph," he grunted, metal arm dropping onto the surface of the table with a clang. "The others will not like this. There are too many unknowns here, and given this cult's professed beliefs, the only speculation I can have about what they are doing is all too dark. This exact kind of thing is why we established a monoculture in the first place."

Mami and Yuma shared a glance. The idea of a monoculture came up frequently in online criticism of Governance, and Goverance never admitted that the phenomenon was an intended goal of its policies, rather than an unintended consequence. The current culture of Earth would be propagated through the sheer success of its society, and as long as cultural variance in the colonies was kept within certain bounds, Governance could rest assured that there were no dystopias or rival human governments festering within its official domain. Beyond that, rogue colonies were allowed a certain amount of unofficial leeway, as insurance against existential threats. Governance did not suffer them to get too perverse, though, or too dangerous.

It was not an idea to be spoken about openly, Mami thought, looking at Military Affairs, who was drinking from a wooden mug filled with some kind of frothy beer. This was a secret council, however, and if they couldn't talk about it now, when could they?

True discussion couldn't really start, though, until…

"I'm here!" a cheery voice announced.

The green apparition emerged out of the ether on the unoccupied side of the table, slightly above ground-level. The girl landed dramatically, bracing her arms against the table, long hair piling forward with the momentum.

"You're late," Yuma said, glancing sidelong at MG.

"Only by a few seconds," the girl insisted.

"A few seconds, objective time," Yuma said.

"It's fine, Miss Chitose," Military Affairs said, setting down his mug, which vanished into sparkles a moment later. "Let the young be young."

Yuma shrugged, and MG tilted her head slightly, obviously processing the forwarded information for this meeting. It wasn't typical for both Yuma and MG to attend the same meeting, unless the number of participants was quite small.

"Oooh," she chorused a moment later. "I don't think the MSY is going to like what we find down there."

Mami leaned forward and pointed her gaze down at the maps on the table, making it clear with her body language that it was time for business.

"Now that we're all up to speed," she said. "One point of interest is that it will be necessary to substantially escalate the scale of force commitment. Command had hoped to limit the intervention force to mages only, so as to limit the spread of anything discovered on the colony, but a commitment of that scale in pure mages would now be too resource-draining, especially in light of the apparent orbital defenses present at the colony. We have decided to commit conventional

forces instead, and the opinion of Command is that if we're going to go there, we have to go big. Cruisers, artillery, orbital-based air power—but especially large numbers of infantry and tunneling drones. Assaulting what we must assume is an underground fortification is properly an infantryman's job."

She glanced around at the others, gauging their reactions. Nothing yet, except the usual serious expressions.

"There are, of course, veteran units with experience in colonial interventions," she said. "Task Force Rhamnusia, in particular, is specialized for this task. We will include them, but we do not believe they have sufficient force to rapidly sweep an underground fortification against resistance, if it comes to that, especially given their lack of training in underground operations. Therefore, Command seeks to assign additional forces, whatever the risk to operational secrecy."

Mami glanced around again, particularly at Military Affairs, whose approval was most necessary.

"This seems rather paranoid," Military Affairs said, frowning slightly. "Indeed, the colony has shown unexpected capabilities, but the type of commitment you are describing is unprecedented for a colonial intervention. Task Force Rhamnusia was assembled specifically to cover all possible contingencies. As for sweeping underground fortifications, outside of the special forces, no one has *that* particular type of training, because we have not yet found the need to assault a fortified world."

"This is not a foreseen contingency," Yuma said, looking at Military Affairs. "You must admit that a colony of this sort was not anticipated to exist."

"The MSY's experience with unknown situations involving magic shows that paranoia is really the order *du jour*," MG supported. "I would not be worried about the *Ordo Illustrata* per se, but if they've indoctrinated any new magical girls, or conducted any other sort of experimentation, it is best we move in with maximal firepower."

Military Affairs glanced at the relatively young AI with an odd expression.

"With all due respect," he said, nodding his head in their direction, "the MSY has never been exactly clear about the possible limits *experimentation* can be taken to. We have little doubt that the organization has not been exactly straightforward on the matter. We do not desire to contest this at the moment, but if it is simply the case that the danger here is greater than we can know to expect, then say so explicitly, and I will withdraw my objection."

"It is more than you can know to expect," Mami replied. "Similarly, Command does not believe that negotiations before intervention are warranted. We hope to achieve as much tactical surprise as possible. It will take a few additional days to gather the suggested amount of force, but we judge it unlikely that the rogue colony will be able to enact significant preparations in such a short period."

Mami hoped that her careful wording, conflating High Command with the MSY—who did indeed now compose a large portion of High Command—would get the conversation back on topic.

"Very well," Military Affairs said, closing his eyes and stroking his slight beard. "I do not believe the rest of the Directorate would necessarily approve of skipping the negotiation phase, but I will trust that *Command* knows what it is doing."

The AI glanced between the other three.

"Will that be all?" he asked.

"Yes," Mami said. "Unless you want to discuss operational details."

"I will leave that to the military," Military Affairs said, getting up from the table. "It's not my place. Just don't cock it up."

Having made explicit his position, he turned to leave, stopping only when MG touched his arm, the two AIs exchanging virtual eye contact—and presumably, some other form of communication.

Then they both vanished, and Yuma sighed loudly.

"He's right, Mami," Yuma said, shaking her head. "Maybe it's nothing and we're all overreacting, but I don't think this situation augurs well. I don't have to tell you that. Don't cock it up. Minimal casualties, both sides, if possible."

"If possible," Mami said, turning her head away. They both knew that the history of colonial interventions was checkered, especially when it came to casualties.

Then she signed off.

"And so it seems like we've earned ourselves a bit of a delay, as it will take some time for the necessary reinforcements to gather here on San Giuseppe," Kyouko announced to the auditorium, standing next to a holographic reconstruction of the planet's surface with Nana and Marianne. "The closest units are already here; be sure to welcome them. We will be assigning additional training regimens for those of you who are least experienced, but I think a half-day of free time right now would not be unwarranted. Dismissed."

The crowd of magical girls began getting up to leave, murmuring in disturbed conversation. It had been unusual for Kyouko to call a full, physical briefing like this, and the speculation had been intense. Once they had all gathered on San Giuseppe, they were supposed to board a cruiser bound for the mysterious colony; instead it seemed they would wait on the planet a bit longer for even more force to gather.

"I wouldn't say we exactly *earned* a delay," Ryouko heard a girl behind her say. "I'd prefer an easy mission with no breaks to a hard one with a *week* of vacation."

"I think we all would," another girl said. "But it's not like we have a choice. Free time is free time."

"Free time, huh?" Ryouko said.

Asami looked at her, and for a moment Ryouko was quite certain of what "free time" would be spent doing.

Then Ryouko heard the ping of an incoming message, and tilted her head to read it. It wouldn't have drawn her attention if Clarisse didn't think it was important for her to read.

> 〈In the following text, 〈 〉① indicates content redacted to those without security clearance. The number indicates the degree of security clearance required to access enclosed content.〉
>
> Hi again!
>
> I just got a surprise reassignment to a new mission. 〈Apparently, they think someone with earth manipulation powers will be useful—something about an underground bunker or something.〉⑤‡ But anyway, I'm sure I don't need to tell

you guys about that; it looks like we're on the same assignment! They just told me! Anyway, I'll be on-planet in only a half-hour, and apparently we're in the middle of some kind of time off? We should do something!

Zhou Meiqing

〈 Access to sections marked ‡ restricted to a limited number of individuals. 〉

This was a surprise indeed, and Ryouko glanced over at Asami, who she assumed had gotten the same message.

Indeed, Asami's brow was knitted as she read the message, before she relaxed, shaking her head glumly.

"Come on, they'll be other chances," Ryouko said, patting her girlfriend on the back. "I'm sure you'll think of a way to slip away. Whatever we're doing, we should invite Azrael."

Asami looked up at her.

"You think?" she said.

"I think it might be interesting."

Asami nodded.

"Hiking, huh," Azrael said, peering skeptically at the path laid out in front of them, dirt trail leading into a dense grove of alien trees. It looked… almost like Earth, except for the giant ferns interspersed within the forest, and the brilliant red vines that climbed many of the trees, displaying luscious scarlet-red fruit. This "Bloodfruit" was quite popular on San Giuseppe, despite the common knowledge that they would have been absurdly poisonous without toxin-neutralizing implants. Asami had, of course, told her all about it long before they even got to the trailhead.

Ryouko understood the skepticism in Azrael's voice. Knowing what she knew of Azrael's life-story, she doubted the girl had walked more than five hundred meters in her life, and probably stayed out of forests, which were nasty areas to try to fly in when you had a wingspan measured in meters. Azrael had still insisted on carrying her wings with her, but they were so outrageously bulky that, in the end, the only recourse was for Azrael to simply wear them, so she could control what they were doing. Meiqing was told that the detachable wings were the result of a wish, which she accepted readily enough.

Meiqing was also the one who had suggested going hiking. According to the tour guide, San Giuseppe had some breathtaking rock formations, and by climbing to the top of one of them just before nightfall, it was possible to see some truly breathtaking auroras.

Ryouko sighed, kicking the ground with one boot. Listening to tourist brochures could get one into strange situations, if getting kissed by Asami in a volcanic hot spring was indicative of anything. Perhaps that was why her girlfriend had agreed with the hiking idea so readily. Or perhaps it was simply the girl's xenobiologist proclivities showing.

"Come on," Asami yelled, from in front of them. She had decked herself out fully for the trip, complete with walking stick, hat, and massive backpack, when realistically with their enhancements and magic, they could have hiked in the nude and been perfectly fine. It wouldn't have surprised Ryouko if Asami had a portable laboratory kit in that backpack.

Meiqing carried only some light provisions, and was otherwise dressed similarly to Ryouko and

Azrael. She smiled slightly, gesturing at them to get on the trail already.

Ryouko shrugged, glancing at Azrael, and then stepped forward, walking onto the light red soil of San Giuseppe's forests.

She stopped a moment later, confronted by Asami's hand, which was offering her one of the dreaded bloodfruits.

Ryouko faked a smile, and took it into her hand, biting down into the fruit, knowing that the blood-red fruit dripping out made her look like some kind of carnivore, as it did Azrael, who was doing the same.

It… wasn't bad. An interesting blend of sour and sweet and bitter, it worked her way down her taste buds. She also knew the bite she had just taken could have killed multiple unenhanced horses.

"Oh, look, it's a starbird!" Asami exclaimed, pointing up at red and black bird flapping through the air on four wings.

A moment the bird stopped on a tree branch and Asami peered at it intently, clearly taking a zoomed-in picture.

Azrael looked at Ryouko, as if to ask: Is she always like this?

Yes, she's always like this, Meiqing thought, answering the question before Ryouko could. *I think it's endearing, though.*

It is, a little, Ryouko agreed. *She gets so excited.*

Azrael sighed slightly, trudging along the trail.

I usually ignore small birds like that. I like to kill giant geese and annoy the eagles. It's good fun. But right now I envy that bird.

Azrael shook her head at herself, walking ahead of Meiqing and Ryouko. Asami was by now far ahead.

Meiqing halted midtrail.

"What does she mean by that? She hunts geese?"

"She flies a lot," Ryouko said, passing Meiqing on the trail. "It's her whole life, basically. Come on, don't lag behind."

"Simple" hiking, under excellent conditions on clear trails, without any rock climbing or other difficulties thrown in, was mostly a leisure activity, a way to kill time gawking at scenery without straining oneself too hard. Even with the moderate incline it took them little effort to maintain a brisk pace, although they stopped frequently to take pictures of various fauna with their ocular implants. Even without their military implants or their magic they would have done fine—the hike was designed for civilians, and modern humans had little to fear.

On the way thus far, they had seen five different types of four-winged bird, what looked like a mini-pterodactyl, several colorful lizards, and the affectionately-termed "Bear-deer", which looking startlingly like a bear but was in fact a rather large herbivore. Ryouko knew this because Asami had grabbed her by the arm to point out each and every one of these encounters. In truth,

Ryouko was not terribly interested, but she could see the stars in Asami's eyes, and knew not to say anything. That, and Clarisse kept reminding her to "just go with it".

So she did.

Gradually, even Azrael seemed to get into the mood, starting to comment on the odd dynamics four-winged flight must produce, and how it was really only optimal on insects, though she could see how it might help with the placement of the center of gravity. According to her, San Giuseppe must have had an odd evolutionary history. Meiqing, for her part, opined that the forest soil was probably too cakey to use easily as a shield.

To each their own, I suppose, Ryouko thought.

Azrael keeps staring at your back, Asami thought, sidling up next to Ryouko, for a moment finally sated with bird-watching.

What? Ryouko thought, suppressing the urge to glance back.

Yeah, and she keeps blushing, Asami thought. *I think she has a thing for you. Kind of weird, considering her age compared to everyone here.*

You think everyone *has a thing for me,* Ryouko thought. *Stop being so protective.*

She's looking at Asami too, Meiqing thought, surprising Ryouko, who hadn't noticed that Asami was sending her telepathy to both of them.

What? Asami thought.

Though Ryouko's back mostly, yes, Meiqing thought. *Maybe she has a thing for exposed backs?*

Ryouko suppressed the urge to pull down self-consciously at her shirt.

You're the one who bought me this thing, she thought, glaring at Asami. *And insisted I wear it.*

It looks cute!

It's too small!

It's supposed to be small!

"You're missing the view!" Azrael yelled, from somewhere behind them.

They turned to look, and found Azrael standing on a scenic outcrop they had missed, leaning on the handrails to peer at something.

They scurried back to join her, finding that as they stepped off the trail towards the outcrop the trees thinned dramatically, revealing—

They were now on the edge of a steep drop-off, beneath which it was possible to see the top of the forest arrayed on the plain below them. The primal arboreal wilderness stretched off to the distant horizon, accentuated by the nearly-setting sun in front of them. At regular intervals, the flat ground was broken by a towering mesa similar to the one they were climbing, smooth at the top, with patches of vegetation on the side, as well as the occasional cave. Birds of prey circled in the air in front of them.

It was breathtaking, causing Ryouko to remember some paintings she had seen online, rather than real life.

Next to her, Asami gasped involuntarily.

"You know, there are people who think San Giuseppe used to be occupied by a sentient alien race," Meiqing said, leaning onto the handrail herself. "It said so in the online brochure. No one is sure how these rock formations were made, so there's some who think it was artificial."

"If it's artificial, then the makers had wings," Azrael said, leaning forward over the bright perma-steel rails. "Mesas like this are natural spires, and I can feel the thermals they must make."

Before any of them could stop her, she vaulted over the railing, dashed to the edge of the cliff and dove off backwards, dropping shockingly fast before reappearing in front of them, wings not even flapping in the air current.

Haha, I knew these would come in handy! I'll see you girls at the top, if you ever make it there!

And then she was off, spinning in the air, her human form turning into a small dot in the blink of an eye.

"Well," Meiqing said, finally, a full ten seconds later. "Is she always like that?

"That sounded like a challenge," Asami said decisively, looking at the two of them. "Let's go."

Despite Asami's and Azrael's assertions, they did not in fact rush to the top of their mesa, still stopping to take in the scenery, and Azrael rejoined them just before they reached the peak, complaining that they were slow. Meiqing countered with the assertion that with a little magic she could have ridden the ground itself to the top, and Asami pointed out that she could ignore gravity if she chose to.

Ryouko decided not to point out she could have gotten to the top faster than any of them.

They found themselves sitting on benches in front of the endless plain before them, mesas sticking out of the ground like so many stools, broken only by the end of the forest to their right, where the woodland transitioned into grassland, then into the distant urban center they had come from, whose glow imprinted itself on the sky. The sun was beginning to set, and above them, where the twilight was turning into night, the sky was beginning to be riven by the promised aurora, bright green, red, and purple, a consequence of one of the star's frequent geomagnetic storms, whose forecasting was paid for by the planet's tourism industry.

"I'm surprised no one else is here," Ryouko said.

"There's paths to all the mesas," Meiqing said. "When you set out, they deliberate allocate it so that the visitors are spread out evenly. With the war, there's not very many tourists anymore, so it's mostly locals."

"I might get a summer house here," Azrael said thoughtfully.

They sat there for a little while, watching as the sun—which seemed a little brighter than Earth's sun—slowly dipped into the horizon. The streams of light passing through the sky brightened and shifted wondrously, and Ryouko watched, entranced. She was not terribly fond of animals or the wilderness, but *this*—this she could get behind.

Then, when the sun had finally vanished below the curved edge of the world, Asami grabbed her by the hand, pulling her away from the stone benches they had sat on. Ryouko looked back to see if the others would follow, but saw instead Meiqing meeting her gaze, shaking her head slowly.

The air was beginning to fill with an undeniable chill, and though she could shrug it off easily, it contrasted sharply with the warmth of Asami's touch, which felt hot in her grasp.

"Ah, to be honest," she managed to say, as she allowed herself to be pulled closer to the edge of the mesa. "I would feel a little embarrassed out here, with the two of them back there—"

"This isn't about *that,*" Asami interjected, sounding deliberately offended. "I just wanted to get a better view."

"Oh."

Silently, Asami pulled her through a small grove of stunted trees clinging to the top of the mesa, until they were at the very edge of the mountain. Here there were no handrails, and one small step would send either of them into the abyss.

"Okay, I admit, this *also* makes me a little nervous," Ryouko admitted, peering over the edge.

"Oh, come on, both of us have plenty of ability to save ourselves if we fell," Asami exhorted. "Let's sit.'

Asami set the example by dropping to the ground, neatly placing her legs over the edge. She raised an arm to Ryouko, offering.

Ryouko smiled sardonically, taking the offered hand, and taking her own seat at the edge of the abyss, next to Asami.

For a moment they sat there, hand-in-hand, and then Asami used her other hand to turn Ryouko's head towards her, and kissed her full on the lips.

Ryouko took a moment, eyes closed, feeling Asami stroking the back of her neck, then pulled back, gasping slightly.

"I thought this wasn't about that," she said.

"It's not," Asami said. "I wanted to talk."

Ah, Ryouko thought.

She wasn't sure she liked the sound of that. It sounded ominous.

Asami looked out over the void in front of them, the forest below them now dark and menacing, even in the light of the storms above them.

"I'm scared, Ryouko. I don't know how else to put it. I'm scared of what Kyouko-san was talking about, this mysterious colony we're supposed to secure. I'm scared of what we'll find there, and I'm scared… I'm scared of dying."

Ryouko watched Asami's face, and for once the girl did not look at her.

"Well, the Goddess—" Ryouko began.

"I'm not afraid of what comes after death," Asami interrupted quietly. "Of course I'm glad we apparently have a cushy afterlife to go to. But what kind of afterlife? Do you know? Whatever it is, it doesn't matter. I don't want to go yet. I'm scared of missing out on life."

Asami grabbed her hand again, meeting her eyes.

"Moments like this, worlds like this, kisses, and yes, you know. All of it. I feel as if we have a whole life to live, and I want to experience all of it, whatever we can. We have eternity, Ryouko—it's like Governance says: billions of our ancestors are buried under the dirt, without the chance we have. But now, I feel like, by going on these missions we're going to throw it all away."

Ryouko closed her eyes, then looked away.

"Why are you here then? You didn't have to come; I told you."

"Weren't you paying attention?" Asami snapped. "I said *we. We.* Not *I.*"

Ryouko's girlfriend grabbed her by the shoulders, pinning her with a look again.

"Do you know how much it makes my blood run cold, knowing how much you're willing to risk your life? How cavalier you view all of this? I know you now. I know you'd lay your life on the line willingly, for a chance at glory, for a chance to see something new, for a chance to save humanity—or even just one person. You know what the Goddess called you? A *hero*. Her words, not mine."

Asami looked down.

"I knew then, if I hadn't known already, that I could never tie you down, not on Eurydome, not anywhere. I knew I'd have to follow you. So here I am, trying to follow you into the breach, and I'm *scared,* Ryouko. I'm scared of dying, I'm scared of *you* dying, and it feels so selfish."

Asami sucked in a breath, and Ryouko realized the girl was crying, just a little.

"Is it love, like in the storybooks?" Asami asked. "I don't know. But it's *something.* I don't want to tell you this, because I'm scared that we don't match. You seem so much happier now, but in my heart I feel cold. I don't know if we can last."

"Hey," Ryouko interrupted, reaching over and wiping at the other girl's tears with her hand, wonder what she was going to say. "Don't be like that. I can't—"

She looked down, at the small gap that lay between them, and realized that, fundamentally, Asami was right. They *didn't* match. Not as they were now. Ryouko wouldn't be happy one way, and Asami wouldn't be happy the other. It was—

"I don't know," Ryouko said, looking up at Asami. "Who can honestly say if they know? But I think that, for now, it is better to live the moment. *Carpe Diem,* as they say. Perhaps we will die soon, or perhaps not. Perhaps one of us will find it unbearable and break it. There's no sense in worrying about it so much. And people change. Maybe one day, we will wake up, and we'll find that we're happy. If you want to live life, then let's live it. Let's see where it goes."

Asami looked down at the forest below, sucking in a breath, and Ryouko watched her for a long moment.

"What is the afterlife like?" Asami asked finally, voice quiet. "I know you've spoken to the Goddess plenty of times. How is it?"

"I don't know," Ryouko said, shaking her head. "I've never seen it."

She thought back to her visions, to a misty white sky, an ethereal garden, a Goddess who seemed both old and young. She thought of Alice, returned from the dead to speak with Asaka one last time.

"I think it's timeless," she said, looking up at the aurora in the sky above them. "That's the impression I get. Eternity in a moment, like, uh, Saint Augustine. But human, somehow. Are the dead living somewhere? Are they in stasis? I don't know, but it didn't seem sorrowful."

Asami nodded, slowly.

"Maybe it's pleasant," she said. "But I'd like to live my life before I have to go to that."

Ryouko nodded, then turned to watch the abyss below them.

"*Carpe Diem,* huh?" Asami echoed airily.

"Yeah," Ryouko said.

She felt Asami grab her by the arm and knew what was happening, even before she was pulled down, and Asami had rolled over her, pushing them away from the edge of the cliff. She acquiesced, as she always did, moving her arm where she knew the other girl preferred it.

I hope the other two are polite enough not to switch into infrared, Ryouko thought.

So, uh, it's been a really long time, Azrael thought, from far away. *And we were kind of wondering if it was safe to come over now.*

Go ahead, Asami responded instantly. *It's not like we're doing anything.*

It was technically true, now.

A short while later, they heard the shuffling sound of Azrael and Meiqing making their way over to them. Watching them approach, Ryouko felt a slight twinge of jealousy—Azrael had her wings folded in front of the two of them, acting as a windbreak and it looked oddly appealing, given how cold Ryouko had ended up.

Ryouko and Asami got up from their seated positions, walking over to meet them.

"I guess it's about time we headed back, right?" Asami asked, stretching her arms upward as if having just gotten up from a nap.

"I suppose so," Azrael said, glancing up at the sky, where the aurora still gleamed brightly, far more splendid than anything on Earth. "Despite everything, we were always still a diurnal race. Nighttime flying was always a little crazy, and it gets pretty damn cold up in the air at night."

Ryouko and Asami shared a look, whose meaning Azrael caught immediately, adding:

"Ah, no it's okay, I told Meiqing here all about it. If she's on the mission, she's approved to learn about it, though I'm supposed to limit the spread of the information."

The girl scratched the back of her head nervously, then turned away, leading the way back. Meiqing followed immediately, and the others followed a moment later, shrugging.

"Well, I guess if we're going to, uh, hang out, I've got to say a few things," Azrael said, without turning to look back at them. "I mean, it's not really typical for someone my age to be walking around with teenagers, so I'm surprised you'd even think to offer."

Ryouko and Asami glanced at each other, and Ryouko gestured with her head, indicating Asami should speak.

"Well, honestly, we just thought we'd be, you know, nice—" Asami began.

"I know," Azrael interjected. "You did nothing wrong. I am a bit of a loner, as you might have gathered. And I haven't really done much with my life outside of these colony missions. I was pretty devastated when Homura disappeared and all that."

Azrael cleared her throat.

"Anyway, I'm stalling for time. There's no delicate way to put this, but I'm going to have to, uh, ask you to not to wear back-revealing clothing around me. The truth is, for my people, the back is a bit of an erogenous zone, and we kept it covered or hidden under wings at all times. Over the years, I've gotten used to showing it to people, but I still can't help staring. It's awkward and I don't like going out much because of it, but since we're friends, I thought I would mention it."

Ryouko had started grimacing, pulling down self-consciously on her shirt. This was the last time she would let Asami talk her into wearing something new.

"I'm sorry," Ryouko began, not sure what else to say. "We didn't think—"

"No, of course it's not your fault," Azrael interrupted. "I—"

She paused, and a moment later Meiqing leaned over to her ear and whispered something, grabbing the other girl's shoulder reassuringly.

Azrael sighed.

"Well, the other half of it is, I've never really had a relationship because my people weren't wired to find standard humans attractive. You've probably noticed I look pretty small by your standards. For us, because of how the aerodynamics work, the males and females were always really similar, and quite small. Honestly, I only ever… well, the MHD psychiatrist thinks it might be good for me to get some special friends—doesn't have to be anything serious—since I've always been so lonely, but I've always been too embarrassed, and—"

Azrael sucked in a breath.

"Well, I thought I'd share," she said.

For a moment there was silence, and Ryouko found herself confused as how to interpret anything about the conversation. It made sense, but…

She must be deathly embarrassed, Ryouko realized and, switching to infrared, found that Azrael was indeed blushing tremendously.

Asami, however, surprised Ryouko by hurrying forward to stand next to Azrael, dodging around the girl's wings as they approached the trail to head back down the mountainside.

"I think I understand," Asami said, "and I'm not sure what to say. What do you do with your free time?"

"Well, I spend a lot of time in simulations flying. I go to Optatum when I can. I don't really…"

Ryouko allowed her attention to the conversation to lapse. Azrael was an anomaly, forced to live her life in a culture that didn't understand or support her. However, in the end, Ryouko supposed she wasn't much different. She had never felt like she fit in on Earth, didn't feel like she fit in now. And despite Asami's enthusiasm, Ryouko still could not honestly say that she felt any real sexual attraction to her or anyone else. It was not something she understood.

Well, it wasn't fair to draw any comparisons between her and Azrael.

The fleet that appeared above the skies of the planet with the colorful military designation X-25 was, in the grand scheme of the war, a piddling thing. A few dozen cruisers, accompanied by only a few dozen escort frigates, a few squadrons of interceptors and a single Magi Caeli squad—far less than typical for the number of cruisers involved.

By the standards of what was necessary to seize and occupy a small rogue colony, it was, of course, undoubtedly exorbitant.

That the colony had orbital sensors was clear from their earlier experience with the stealth probe. It would be impossible to conceal the approach of a fleet of their size, so no attempt was made to. They decelerated into orbit behind an advance wave of orbital superiority drones, which made short work of the colony's carefully concealed orbital platforms before the larger ships even arrived.

These larger ships went immediately to work, the dropships and surface-rated frigates of Task Force Rhamnusia already dropping out of hangers and heading for the planet, behind a descending wave of drones and ODASC planes. Satellites and orbital platforms spilled out of automated launch-bays, mechanical eyes focused on the surface below.

Task Force Rhamnusia, the experts in the task at hand, was taking point, in the clear hope that additional force would be unnecessary. This additional force was held partially in reserve, even as the rest of it prepared for for atmospheric entry.

This hope was not borne out; the initial air units encountered significant anti-aircraft fire and drones, far beyond the range of what any reasonable estimate might have predicted, and began even to take a few casualties. The colonists had armed themselves to the teeth, with weapons of disturbing sophistication.

With reluctance that could be sensed in the tenor of the relayed command, the commander of the overall task force, the two-century old Pavel Albescu, ordered in the orbital reinforcements. It was likely that the initial landing forces could still sweep the surface colony with ease, but the mandates of the operation were not just not victory and ease, but also lightning speed and as many captives as possible, not just corpses on the ground.

There was, of course, also the matter of the underground.

Ryouko watched it all play out on the viewscreen walls of her landing frigate. She had been assigned with Kyouko and a few others as part of a pure magical girl shock group, one of the last groups that would be sent planetside.

The surprise that had struck the fleet when the initial resistance was encountered was palpable, despite what the mission briefing had implied, but it did not surprise Ryouko.

"I guess we'll be going in after all," a dark blonde mage named Elisa Alistair said, watching the screen together with Ryouko. "Well, I can't say I wouldn't like a go at these religious buggers, but I don't like the idea of fighting civvies."

Ryouko nodded noncommittally.

"I've never had a chance to fight underground," Meiqing said. "It should be totally my thing."

Please return to the passenger area and strap in for atmospheric entry, the frigate AI thought,

causing the small gaggle of magical girls to shuffle with varying degrees of haste to their seats, where Kyouko, Nana, and Marianne already waited, too senior to mingle openly with the others without seeming undignified.

Ryouko tried to relax, allowing the straps of her seat to clasp themselves around her.

She felt a reassuring squeeze on her hand; Asami smiled at her, and she smiled back.

Chapter 39: Indelible Soul

"Act for the Regulation of Telepathic Magics"

Whereas mages capable of compulsory mind-reading, forcible alteration of behavior, alteration of mental perception, alteration of memory and other such acts, hitherto referred to as "telepaths", are capable of disproportionate and widespread harm if disposed with malicious intent,

Whereas harm is possible even if the intent present is beneficent,

Whereas the existence of such mages excites fear and suspicion in the populace, having resulted in a number of regrettable incidents,

Whereas the performance of such telepathic magics is widely recognized as an undesirable reduction of privacy and free will, to be used as infrequently as possible,

Resolved by the Rules Committee, 22nd of June, 2044,

Section 1: The Organization of a Body for Training and Monitoring

The Executive is instructed to create an organization for the Training, Monitoring and Mentorship of Telepaths, which shall be referred to as the "Telepaths' Guild".

1. Membership within this body by telepaths shall be mandatory, to be enforced by the appropriate use of fines and other compulsory measures.
2. This body will determine and distribute legally-binding guidelines for the acceptable use of telepath magics, in order to minimize their undesirable use for the invasion of privacy and free will.
3. These guidelines may be enforced by the use of appropriate fines, etc. up to and including the distribution of warrants for the use of Soul Guard force.
4. This body will maintain records on the capabilities, location, and status of all its members, and any violations of the guidelines they may have performed.
5. This body will be funded from the general Soul Guard Operations fund, and will prepare a yearly budget following standard procedures as outlined in the Charter.

Section 2: Forbidden Compulsory Acts

The use of telepathic magics to extract information or compel behavior against a subject's will is expressly forbidden except for the following listed exceptions. Executive will enforce this by the designation of appropriate punishments and enforcement measures, up to and including capital punishment.

Exceptions:

1. The extraction of information for criminal proceedings, by court order, when this information cannot be obtained or will be inaccurate otherwise.
2. As a temporary measure for the maintenance of order in situations of public disorder.
3. When approved by the Executive for instances of extreme need affecting

public security, or following a declaration of Emergency.

Section 3: Acts Forbidden even with Consent

The use of telepathic magics to alter memories or personality is forbidden regardless of consent, with the following exceptions. Executive will enforce this by the designation of appropriate punishments and enforcement measures, up to and including capital punishment.

Exceptions:

1. When authorized by licensed psychiatric specialists as medical intervention for the resolution of soul gem-endangering psychiatric disorders or psychological distress, when no other solution seems feasible. Secondary approval by a member of the Leadership Committee is required before the operation may be carried out.
2. When approved by the Executive for instances of extreme need affecting public security, or following a declaration of Emergency.

Section 4: Executive Discretion

This body reserves the right to review all actions approved by the Executive following the provisions of this Act, and to rescind its approval on a case-by-case basis. The Executive shall provide an annual report to be submitted to this body for its review.

— MSY Proceedings of the Rule Committee, 2044

The ashes of memory
taste bitter in my mouth.
The corruption eats
at my crystal heart.
I long for the purity
of an empty mind.
But I know my soul
will never be clean.

— Unknown, graffiti found scrawled on a wall in Mitakihara City

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Firestorm.

There was probably no other real way to describe an orbit-to-ground assault against a fortified position, Ryouko thought.

The principles hadn't really ever changed, not since the first group of swordsmen had charged the first row of spikes. One on one, the defender would always win. Offense required overwhelming force and overwhelming speed.

That was the case here as well, she thought, letting out a breath, watching in her mind's eye the stream of units and weaponry literally falling onto the surface: per minute, two thousand personnel, twelve thousand drones, a hundred armored vehicles, forty artillery pieces.

She tried to picture how it must look on the surface, how it *had* been in some of the simulations,

landing on the surface along with a wave of shock troops and other magical girls, either traveling by teleport or streaking out of the sky. It had been heart-pounding, engulfed in the storm of projectiles, artillery roaring, planes and Aer Magi zooming by, all while being expected to rush forward to the front immediately, under cover of a hailstorm of one-way dropships already firing their main cannons.

But she knew that wasn't how this was going to go. Traveling with *Lieutenant-General* Sakura Kyouko, she'd be among the last to descend, onto a surface that should be already pacified.

Even by those standards, it would still be anticlimactic. There would be no drop tubes for them, no diving out of the belly of the ship into the bitter, treacherous wind, trusting their magic to manage their landing. Instead, doctrine stated that in an opposed planetary landing, the teleporters should be distributed among the descending frigates as broadly as possible, which would not attempt surface deployment at all—the onboard teleporters would carry the occupants to the surface once the ships had descended far enough. Ryouko would simply teleport them the rest of the way—not a full two hundred kilometers, but something she could do more easily, around forty.

When the time came, then, she didn't find herself under enemy fire, or even near any other kind of fire. Instead, she found herself in the middle of a quiet, small alleyway, between two squat, unaesthetic-looking buildings, typical of newly founded colonies without Governance support. With her was the rest of the roughly dozen girls assigned to Kyouko, among them Asami, Nana, Azrael, Marianne, Gracia, and Meiqing. It was an odd mixture of inexperienced girls and behind-the-lines personnel, intended more as Kyouko's mobile staff than an actual combat unit; the more experienced, combat-prepared girls had landed much earlier.

They immediately arranged themselves in a colorful array on both sides of the alleyway, three of the girls using the walls to jump to the rooftop above. Elisa had already thrown up a barrier that completely enveloped the area.

Again, doctrine—just as Ryouko was Kyouko's designated teleporter, Elisa was her designated barrier generator. Doctrine was also why Command had told Ryouko to land in a small area with cover, rather than inside a building—the region was not fully secure, and experience had shown that recently captured bunkers sometimes exploded and collapsed, even when they seemed clear of booby traps. Better safe than sorry, and landing in an alleyway under the umbrella of a barrier generator was more than safe enough.

At both ends of the alleyway four sentries already stood guard, armored suits brilliant white to match the walls of the building, which reflected the bright midday sun shining directly down upon them. A few native vines had crawled tenaciously up the wall Ryouko and Kyouko stood against. They smelled oddly fragrant. In the distance, the quiet high-frequency staccato of gunfire was punctuated by the occasional loud zap of tank fire.

"Sir," the officer next to one of the sentries acknowledged, saluting briskly with metallic armored hand. With the passive informational awareness typical of combat, Ryouko knew immediately that it was Colonel Raul Santos, XVII Armored Division, Nile Sector Operational Reserve. Not part of Task Force Rhamnusia, who was storming the entrances into the underground complex, but reserves summoned to increase the manpower of this invasion. Typically, colonels were high-enough in rank to merit their own fortified bunker, but this was a special circumstance.

"I thought this area was secure?" Kyouko said, gesturing at the sentries, who were watching the main road, weapons ready. Her tone was firm, adult, and commanding in a way Ryouko had never heard, and indeed incongruous emerging from her current form.

"It is," Colonel Santos said, voice emanating from his suit's speakers. "But better safe than sorry. These civilians put up a lot more fight than they were supposed to. We've taken a number of

casualties. Plus, apparently the place was infested by, ah, demons. And with this business with the clairvoyants not being able to see what's going on underground, we're very nervous."

Immediately after landing, several pre-chosen clairvoyants had immediately tried to tap into events underground, as a matter of tactical priority. They had… been unable to see anything except a few abandoned corners of the facility, and it was possible they were being jammed magically, which was not unheard of.

"Indeed," Kyouko said. "It is very disturbing, but we'll have to deal with things as they come. Where are your bodyguards?"

"Supporting the rest of the regiment against a fortified complex. We don't have many mages, and these colonists don't seem as resourceful as the squid, so I figured these sentries would be enough."

They had heard about the demons and clairvoyants during the descent, of course, as they had everything else about the battle. They had even discussed it among themselves. A colony such as this should have had at least a few contracted magical girls, even if none had been on the original colony expedition. The invasion force had expected to encounter some resistance from such girls —and yet none had appeared. The common theory was that they were underground.

"Is there something wrong?" Kyouko asked, surprising Ryouko out from her brief reverie. She realized she had missed part of the conversation.

"Permission to speak freely?" Colonel Santos said.

"Granted."

"Is this really necessary? I know about the underground complex from the briefings, of course, but to just attack like this… couldn't we have negotiated or something? The men are asking questions, and it's affecting morale. Especially with all this resistance, there's quite a few dead civilians, and we're used to fighting squid—"

Kyouko put her hand on the colonel's suit, causing him to stop mid-sentence.

"Let's see what's underground first," she said. "Then we'll see if this was the right thing to do."

The words sounded unconvincing to Ryouko's ear, but she knew that there was little else Kyouko could say. There was also, of course, the uncomfortable irony that Ryouko's vision had helped cause this invasion, via Kyouko.

"You said there were captives for us to interview?" Kyouko asked.

Ryouko and a few of the other girls glanced over at her quizzically. They hadn't heard anything about any captives or interviews. The older girls didn't seem surprised, though.

The colonel nodded.

"Yes, follow us."

He stepped to the end of the alleyway, one of the two lead sentries dashing at enhanced speed to the other side of the street, crouching behind a vehicle that had been gutted by weapons fire.

Colonel Santos disappeared around the corner, Kyouko followed immediately afterward and, taking a breath, Ryouko followed directly after.

Stepping out of the alleyway, she looked around—and stopped.

She had seen plenty of ruined buildings in the simulations, of course, and could even recall the streets of Apollo from her vision. There, though, it had always been the fault of the squid—either the squid had inflicted the damage directly, or it had been the natural result of a modern firefight, which was capable of turning an ordinary street into a ruined shell in mere minutes.

She had possessed some idea of what she was about to see, of course, from the gutted vehicle she had seen from the alleyway. The alleyway itself, though, had been seemingly intact, leading Ryouko to expect an abandoned street-front with some incidental damage.

Instead, she faced a landscape that seemed more in place on the besieged Apollo than a colony world captured by swift invasion. Shattered storefronts spilled their wares into the street, glass melted or obliterated. Holes larger than Ryouko, lined by scorch marks, dotted most of the buildings along what had apparently been a major commercial thoroughfare. Several of the buildings had collapsed entirely, their metal and permacrete carcasses piled into the street in front of them, making it unnavigable. Squads of MPs were active around several buildings, drones spraying water in an attempt to douse several still smoking fires, while several larger vehicles appeared to be clearing the street, accompanied by smaller drones collecting the armored bodies that dotted the area. At a glance, most of the bodies were wearing outdated infantry armor models—but even that was far more than this colony should have had.

The buildings were collapsed by the colonists, Clarisse whispered in her ear. *It's in the battle history. They collapsed the buildings when some of their own were still inside, to try and surprise us with their fanaticism. The buildings were also rigged to collapse into the street, to impede our armor. Not that it did much.*

Not exactly minimal civilian casualties, Ryouko thought, a bit shakily. She was struck by Clarisse's blasé tone.

"It's hard to keep the destruction to a minimum if they're going to resist the way they did," Nana said, appearing at Ryouko's side.

Nana grabbed her shoulder.

"Come on. Let's not linger."

Ryouko continued onward, still staring, as behind her Nana waved some of the other rookies forward.

They were led to an odd circular structure set in the middle of the street. Impassive and low, perhaps only a meter tall, Ryouko would have taken it for an archaic traffic circle, like she had seen on a class trip to Paris, were it not for the combat implants informing her the moment she saw it that it was a captured bunker with concealed weapon slits, now being used to hold civilian prisoners.

As they approached, Ryouko could see a gaping hole that had formed on one side of the structure, just large enough for one person to step through.

"It's pretty small," Colonel Santos said as Kyouko reached the hole and peered in. "Between the captives and the guard, there's only space for some of you. No more than five."

Ryouko relaxed slightly, not realizing until then how little she relished the prospect of confronting human prisoners. Surely, Kyouko wouldn't—

As if anticipating her thought, Kyouko raised an arm, making a "come here" gesture with her

hand that was clearly intended for Ryouko.

Ryouko stepped forward as instructed, a bit apprehensive.

"It will be you, me, Gracia, and Nana," Kyouko said in clear Standard. "The rest of you stand guard. You too, Elisa."

Elisa, Kyouko's designated barrier-generator, looked reluctant, but didn't move to protest.

Don't forget, I'm supposed to be your mentor, Kyouko thought to Ryouko. *And if the Goddess really does have plans for you, it's best for you to see the world as it is.*

Kyouko turned and followed Gracia and Nana into the bunker, leaving Ryouko to chew over that ominous declaration for a moment before following, jumping down the small drop.

The inside of the bunker was dimly lit by scant sunlight leaking in through the now obvious weapon slits and the blast hole. There had been light-emitting tiles on the ceiling, but they were cracked beyond any semblance of function. In the corner lay a pile of shattered munitions and rubble.

Colonel Santos had not been kidding about the crowdedness. The four girls, the single guard, the pile of munitions, and the three captives on the floor gave Ryouko barely any room to move.

The captives themselves, three men, were unconscious, seated against the wall. One of them had medical gel covering a hole in his side. There was no sign of any armor suits they might have had.

"We were able to knock them out with an EMP and concussion grenades," the guard said, faceless helmet turning towards Kyouko. "It's the only way we would have gotten them alive, the way these colonists have been fighting."

"The usual precautions have been taken?" Kyouko asked, crouching down to inspect the face of one of the captives.

"Yes, sir," the guard said.

Kyouko looked up, sharing a look with Nana, who nodded.

"He means their augmentation control networks have been overridden," Nana said, looking at Ryouko. "It's a nasty process. Involves nanite injections, all of that. It's the only way to make sure they can't commit suicide or signal anyone."

Ryouko gulped, nodding. Honestly, she had feared worse. The Internet was rife with conspiracy theories that Governance had a backdoor into everyone's implant controls, even though that had been expressly forbidden by the ethics committee. Nanite injections and forcible takeover—well, they wouldn't do that if there was a backdoor, would they?

Unless the regular army just doesn't know about a backdoor, Clarisse thought. *Or the colonists manage to get rid of it. Or they only have them in military personnel.*

Is *there a backdoor?* Ryouko thought.

Well, I don't know, obviously, Clarisse thought. *They wouldn't tell me. I'm just speculating.*

Kyouko stood back up and looked at Gracia.

"What do you think?" she asked.

"I'll wake them up," Gracia said.

She turned to look at the guard.

"You're dismissed," she said.

The guard glanced towards Kyouko, confusion visible even through the suit.

"We'll be fine," Kyouko said. "We can handle ourselves."

Finally, the guard nodded and left the bunker, power-jumping up through the blast hole.

They're passing information by telepathy, Clarisse thought, making it clear by the flavor of her thought that she meant Kyouko and the other two magical girls.

You think so? Ryouko thought.

They're controlling their expressions, but some of the facial muscles are still twitching slightly. It's very hard to conceal without implant assistance, and they probably haven't decided to go that far.

Gracia turned back towards the prisoners on the floor, seeming simply to stare at them for a moment. Then, one of the men on the floor, the one Kyouko had been looking up, seemed to take a gasp of air, eyes snapping open. The eyes focused on the girls looking back down at him, and the man seemed to panic, eyes darting about frantically.

But he didn't move otherwise.

It took Ryouko a moment to realize what should have been obvious: the man was immobilized by his implants. The idea simply hadn't occurred to her until then, even though she knew, for instance, that civilian implants were calibrated to prevent significant violence. The utility of the immobilization was obvious, but it still bothered her, and her mind recoiled at trying to imagine what it must be like.

She swallowed surreptiously.

"How much time do we have?" Gracia asked, looking at Kyouko.

Kyouko looked at the roof of the bunker, clearly examining the current battlefield situation. They all could, of course, but Kyouko had the most authority to make decisions.

"Not enough time," Kyouko said. "Are you okay with expediting this? Ordinarily, I wouldn't be willing to make this decision so hastily, but the information they have could greatly affect the course of the battle. Ordinarily we rely on clairvoyants for this kind of things, but you know…"

"As ready as I ever am," Gracia said, sighing slightly. "Are you sure about…"

Gracia tilted her head in Ryouko's direction, ever so slightly, but making it immediately clear what she meant.

"If she's considering coming into this line of work, she will have to see it someday," Kyouko said.

"I agree," Nana said, surprising Ryouko with her contribution to the conversation.

Ryouko, who had not yet figured out the point of this conversation, merely looked back at the others blankly.

Without answering her implied question, Gracia bent down towards the middle of the three

prisoners, who had stopped darting his gaze around, instead choosing to fixate on Gracia.

"It's painless," Gracia said. "For what that's worth."

Gracia pressed her palms to the sides of the man's head and closed her eyes, seeming to focus. A moment later, his eyes start to glow a bright red, the details of the pupil and sclera washed out in a diffuse red glow.

Ryouko stepped back, startled.

Is she—

—reading his mind against his will? Clarisse thought. *Yeah, I think so.*

In that moment, Ryouko felt a certain visceral—well, she couldn't describe it, not exactly. The closest approximation might have been that she felt sick to her stomach. But it wasn't exactly that. It was as if she felt the strong compulsion to be anywhere but here, doing anything but watching Gracia pry the colonist's mind open, but instead she couldn't move away, couldn't look away. It wasn't moral revulsion, not exactly, though there were elements of that—she felt as if she were watching something that simply should not have been.

She felt a chill, in a way she hadn't when Gracia had tested her ability to defend her mind, when it had been more of a friendly game. There was no stealth here, no sneaking past the guards, no sly knocking on the door of the mind. It was simply power and will, and she recoiled at the radiant energy she felt emanating from Gracia, feeling the compulsion to flee growing ever stronger, as if her soul gem itself detested being there.

And yet she still stood there, mesmerized.

Then it was over, and she found herself blinking in confusion as the male colonist slumped down to the floor, eyes closing as he again slipped into enforced unconsciousness.

"You okay?" Nana asked, appearing in a flash at her elbow, and Ryouko realized that she had started to collapse towards the floor.

"I… I think," Ryouko said, rubbing one hand against her forehead. She was not normally the fainting type.

"The mind magics are closely related to the soul magics," Nana said into her ear. "Every magical girl recoils instinctively at displays of soul manipulation. It takes getting used to."

In her line of work, your mother has seen much more than most, Nana thought. *There's a reason she didn't want this for you. I'm not telling you not to be Spec Ops, but you have to know what it entails.*

Ryouko looked back at her aunt blankly, wondering the natural question:

Why now?

Nana looked at Kyouko, who nodded briskly, then turned towards Gracia, seemingly unaffected by what had just happened.

"Anything valuable?" she asked Gracia, who was recharging her soul gem into a set of grief cubes she'd pulled out of a pouch in her costume.

"I'm not sure," Gracia said. "I only have surface memories. To dig deeper I'd need longer.

Apparently, once the colony realized we'd be coming, DeWitt, the cult leader, withdrew into the underground complex with all of the colony's children. This man hasn't been told what's down there, but DeWitt said that whatever it was would destroy us. That there was a new messiah. This particular colonist had started to doubt what DeWitt says, and viewed this battle as kind of a test of faith. Either way, they were supposed to buy as much time as possible."

Kyouko grunted, curling her lip into a bit of a snarl.

"Religious lunatics. No wonder we haven't found any children on this colony. That's not very informative, though. You sure you don't have any more information?"

"One of the tenets of their Cult was that only a few would know the details of what's going on. That way, if anyone were to capture one of them and interrogate them, there wouldn't be much to find. I have to say, if they stuck to that, it was pretty clever."

Gracia glanced down, shaking her head.

"I can dig deeper into this one," she said, gesturing at the soldier she had just finished "interrogating", "but I think it'd be more useful for me to check the others. I'd guess they don't know any more than this guy, though. I'd need someone high-ranking, somehow."

Kyouko threw her head up and laughed, sharp and shrill, startling Ryouko into jumping slightly.

"Clever in more than one way, I'd wager," Kyouko said. "Given what is supposedly waiting for us underground, I'd say we're on the clock. Who knows what's going on down there? With all those kids… this is now a humanitarian thing. Do we call his bluff?"

The way Kyouko said 'humanitarian', casually, carelessly, felt oddly off-putting to Ryouko.

"Keep at it," Kyouko ordered, pointing Gracia at the soldiers. "It looks like old General Albescu wants to have a powwow with Governance, now that we have the results of your interrogation and Rhamnusia is almost at the entrance to the underground complex."

Kyouko stalked up to the blast hole, then stopped, turning towards Ryouko.

"Come on," she said. "There's no reason for you to be here."

Ryouko gulped, then hastened to follow Kyouko out, leaving Nana behind with Gracia.

She didn't want to see that bunker again.

"Are we absolutely sure there's no antimatter squirreled down there? No nuclear devices?" Colonial Affairs asked, sharp feminine voice rising over the virtual conference table.

At the other end of the conference table, the assembled senior officers of the invasion force, headlined by Lieutenant General Sakura Kyouko and General Pavel Albescu, grimaced nearly in unison. While retaining their individual personalities far more than an equivalent set of fleet commanders, army commanders in a combat zone were still connected together on a level deeper than thought and sometimes, it showed.

The only part of the military delegation who didn't grimace was Mami, who was seated next to Kyouko, looking regal in her full dress uniform, an affectation she had only taken on after ascending to the Chair of the General Staff.

"The scanners have come up negative on all counts," General Albescu said. "And now that we

are on the ground, they should be considerably more accurate. If we've missed anything nuclear, then at least the antinuclear defenses will hopefully counter a detonation. We can't do much about antimatter, but that's also much easier to detect."

"Antinuclear defenses" was the unimaginative term for the set of automatic defense systems designed to detect the opening stages of a fissile chain reaction and immediately irradiate the area with a burst of exotic particles designed to force the reaction to fizzle and explode without releasing most of its energy. First developed in the cauldron of the Unification Wars as a counter to hand-delivered tactical nuclear weapons, it was these kinds of devices on both sides, along with the comparative cost of producing and transporting antimatter, that prevented the war with the aliens from being a frenzy of nuclear weapon detonations.

But they were not perfect, as Kyouko expected to be brought up immediately as an objection.

"Those defenses are hardly foolproof, General," Science and Technology said, shaking his head lightly. "Nor are the scanners. The Cephalopods have certainly demonstrated this a number of times. Even with clairvoyant support, it's an iffy business at best."

"If we assaulted the underground structure as planned, and they *do* detonate even a small nuclear device, the casualties will be tremendous," Mami said, glancing over at the other military officers. "And it will be difficult to conceal what happened here."

"These are not the Cephalopods," General Albescu said. "Despite whatever unusual abilities the colonists have demonstrated so far, they are not nearly as technically competent, or we would not already be in control of the surface."

"With all due respect," Kyouko said. "What would you have us do? We have a possibly insane cult leader deep underground with a colony's worth of children and teenagers, along with Goddess knows what. If this were purely a military matter, or if we had any idea what was down there, we could afford to take our time and do this carefully. But right now we have the equivalent of a hostage situation!"

A collective intake of breath all around the table, including from the Governance Representatives. It was not a pleasant situation, no matter how you sliced it.

"It is true: we don't have terribly many options," Military Affairs said, baritone voice rising over the table. "With the clairvoyants out, we're now running blind. Have there been any attempts at contact or negotiation?"

General Albescu shook his head.

"Not yet. I felt that was a decision for this council to make."

"Is there any other way to get information about the interior of this underground complex?" Mami asked, looking over at her subordinates. "A MagOps insertion, perhaps?"

Kyouko cleared her throat, getting the attention of the table. Her thoughts had already progressed along this line; she had merely been waiting for the proper opening to give her pitch.

"In truth, I have already considered the possibility," Kyouko said. "We already have enough personnel and experience to make the attempt, and our clairvoyants can still see *part* of the facility, which makes teleportation feasible. Enough teleporters, an earth manipulator, numerous Black Ops personnel, and, in fact, a significant proportion of the team that destroyed the alien wormhole. I could assemble the team in twenty minutes, real-time, and make the insertion. A kind of stealth reconnaissance, with force if necessary. We can relay what we find out by telepathy, and then we

can decide what to do. There won't be time to train specifically for this scenario, but hopefully there will be enough veteran experience for it not to matter."

"The way you talk, it sounds like you intend to go yourself," Yuma said, peering directly at Kyouko, eyes seeming to bore into her. Even as old as she was, Kyouko did not like being under that look.

"I do," Kyouko said, as levelly as she could.

She heard Mami let out a breath, using one hand to knead the bridge of her nose.

"That is hardly wise, general," Military Affairs said, voice rumbling. "You don't need me to tell you that. Not to put too fine a point on it, but someone of your importance should not be risking your life on a mission with this level of danger."

Importance. Kyouko knew why she was important to Governance. She was important because her followers believed her to be important, because her Church's activities were important to the health of magical girl population, and because without her leadership the Church might splinter and fall to ashes like so many before it. Governance didn't care about her or her Church per se, only the ends they achieved. Other than that, she knew Governance considered her Church a bit of an abomination, fundamentally not that different from the Cult on X-25.

"I am also the most experienced girl on this mission by far," she said. "No one else of my age group is anywhere near X-25, and I am one of only a few girls on the planet with any experience fighting other magical girls. This is a situation where I feel I'd be more useful in the field than in command. We certainly have no shortage of commanders."

The Governance Representatives shared a look.

Finally, Yuma sighed.

"I don't mean to be indelicate, *Onee-chan*, but are you sure you aren't allowing your personal history to interfere with your decision-making?"

Kyouko let out a breath. She supposed it was too much for her to hope that Governance—and Mami—would allow such an obvious point to pass by. The downside of being famous was that everyone knew your life story, even if the relevant events were centuries ago.

"I would say I'm using my personal history to *inform* my decision-making," she said. "I am painfully aware of what can result from religious fanaticism, and I feel it is only natural that I would exert myself to prevent it. I feel that, as a religious leader myself, I may also be uniquely positioned to negotiate, should such a situation arise."

She met the gazes of the Directorate Subcommittee, and of Mami, and tried not to think of how much the street-rat Kyouko would have laughed, long ago, at what she had just said.

Yuma tilted her head at the other Governance Representatives, the AI-human collective clearly performing some sort of off-record consultation.

"I feel obliged to point out that, as of yet, we haven't actually discussed whether sending in a penetration team is really the best option," Mami said, looking at Kyouko and General Albescu. "Granted, I'm not sure I see any better options, but I feel it's at least worth discussing."

"Well, there aren't any better options," General Albescu said, "Not that I can see, or else I would dissuade General Sakura here from this foolhardy mission."

"Indeed," Yuma said. "It really is the most promising solution. The only real question is whether it is really wise for General Sakura here to personally go. We have decided to respect her argument regarding her experience, in light of her great age. Please do not disappoint us. If it is necessary, we will meet again, once more information is obtained."

Yuma winked out of the simulation like a soap bubble, simultaneously with the rest of Governance.

Just like that, the meeting was over. Governance was never big on farewells.

The invasion force was well-stocked with qualified magical girls, but as she had mentioned to Governance, few of those had the desired Spec Ops experience. Of those who did, many were already with her: Azrael, Marianne, Gracia and Nana fell easily into this category. Azrael wasn't logical to bring, sadly, despite her experience, simply because bring a flier into an underground facility was far from optimal.

She wanted to bring Ryouko, of course, because it was clearly intended by the Goddess, and the girl had shown an ability to perform in the wormhole mission. Earth mages were rare, so Meiqing, who she had summoned to this operation deliberately, was a natural inclusion despite her lack of experience. The other rookies were out of the question, except…

Well, Nakihara Asami. Whatever the girl's situation with Ryouko—and there definitely *was* one, as Kyouko well knew from perusing Ryouko's personnel file—it wasn't sufficient justification to bring her on the mission. However, the two girls had shown signs of power synergy while stationed with the lab on Eurydome. It wasn't really a great reason, but Kyouko had a hunch.

So, she had assigned Asami as well, much to the girl's obvious delight.

It was a short ride from where they had landed to the rally point for the newly assembled MagOps team, just in front of what appeared to be the main entrance to the underground complex. They could have hoofed it—it was generally safer for magical girls to stay active and mobile—but the city was secure enough that they could ride IFVs, so they did. Kyouko had learned long ago that magical girls were not any less lazy than the average human, and riding in relative comfort improved morale.

The other option was to teleport there, but it was taking time anyway to extricate the remaining members of the newly-formed team—those not assigned to Kyouko originally—out of their respective combat situations, so there was no reason to rush it too much.

Normally, Kyouko would have chatted with the other girls on the way, but at the moment, she simply wasn't in the mood, preferring to sit quietly, eyes closed in thought.

Why did you show that to me? Ryouko thought. *Why now?*

She opened her eyes, looking at the girl next to her. Ryouko's eyes looked bothered and disturbed, in a way she hadn't shown in the bunker itself.

Then she closed her eyes again, returning to her previous posture.

You've had time to think about it, then? It disturbs you.

There was a pause before the girl answered.

Yes. It does. It makes sense why you did it, but it still seems wrong.

Kyouko let out a breath.

There's a thing the Incubators always prattle on about. You probably haven't heard about it at all, since they talk to new girls so infrequently now, but they used to always tell us that the universe has to stay in balance, that the amount of good is always balanced by the amount of bad.

I've heard of that. It's a very Buddhist idea. I've read about it on the Internet, but the question always is: where is the bad for our wishes? According to the Incubators, human progress is based entirely on wishes, but with the MSY, where is the bad?

It doesn't really make much sense, does it? But there is a kernel of truth to it. When you see good being done on a wide scale, the world being made better, it very rarely comes without a cost. This was true for Governance and it was true for the MSY.

Kyouko waited a moment, until she was sure the other girl had understood.

Do you know the meaning of the name Black Heart? It means that at the core of the MSY there is a kernel of darkness, that nourishes the whole body and can never be removed. At the core of the soul gem is a speck of black despair.

Kyouko paused, letting out a breath.

Do you know the story of my life? What happened to my family when I was a child?"

It was a long while before Ryouko responded, but Kyouko was content to wait.

Yes. I know the story.

What do you think it does to a girl, to see something like that, at an age like that? After that I spent a full year running from the truth, thinking that I could ignore the world and hunt my food.

She opened her eyes again, and found Ryouko watching her now, eyes wide.

To be Spec Ops, and more than that, Black Ops, is to see the darkness, know the darkness and sometimes, be the darkness. That last part is the Black Heart's motto, and you'll hear about it if they ever formally induct you. It's not just about raiding alien bases. That's why I'm bringing you down into the tunnels with me. We have no choice but to face whatever is down there.

Kyouko smiled, feeling the vehicle slow to a halt. She had timed this perfectly.

She stood up, stretching luxuriously.

Operational magical girl teams rarely consisted of more than fourteen members, simply for reasons of power coordination and leadership. If it were felt that an operation needed more manpower, it was generally the case that two teams of eight or higher would be assigned instead. At the same time, having less than eight members on a team was considered risky, leaving the team lacking of critical specializations.

This mission was primarily intended as reconnaissance, so only one team was necessary. Besides the girls Kyouko already had with her—a teleporter, a telepath-clairvoyant, a clairvoyant who could also hack in the field, two girls who were effectively telekinetics, and a melee illusionist—she had also summoned Mina Guyure to serve as a second teleporter, two additional barrier generators, and no fewer than three stealth generators, to suit the nature of the mission. Nearly all were well suited to combat in confined space, and the group of girls had diverse secondary specialties and hobbies, ranging from xenobiology to physics. You never knew what came in

handy.

The remaining girls were already assembled at the rally point, a newly fortified building just outside an ostentatious cathedral-like structure in the center of the settlement which contained the entrance to the underground complex.

Kyouko looked over the motley group of girls, seated on various boxes and pieces of still-intact furniture inside the depressing, gray room.

"Well, you've already got the mission details so I won't repeat them to you," she said. "I wish there were more time to prepare, but this must be done asap. We will be relying on your experience with teamwork to carry this off successfully. Look around, have your TacComps imprint your team members and their combat roles into your memory. It's just a little reconnaissance, so I won't tolerate any casualties on my watch. If there's any talking to be done, let me do it."

She paused for a long moment, allowing the team to look each other over. She saw several look over the "Hero of Orpheus" carefully, as well as the other girls of the wormhole mission team.

Then she rubbed her hands together.

"Alright ladies," she said. "Let's get this show on the road."

A short while later, Ryouko found herself in what looked like an unremarkable office, with a chair, small desk, and… not much else. It was one of the few locations in the facility their team clairvoyants could see the surroundings of clearly, and was therefore probably safe to arrive in.

That didn't mean it *was* safe, of course; they spent a few tense moments nervously scanning the area with scanners, magic, and basic human senses.

Stealth field is up, Agnes Griffin, one of their stealth generators, thought, replicating the message that had already passed through machine channels.

Backup stealth field is up, Xochi Espina, another stealth generator, echoed. The third would stay on standby until needed.

Can either of you get a better view now that we're here? Kyouko thought at Marianne and Gracia.

I can see a bit farther outward, Marianne thought. *But not anywhere as far as usual. Someone is definitely jamming us. Not only is that a very rare magical power, but whoever it is doing so quite skillfully.*

That is my situation as well, Gracia thought.

What's around us? Kyouko thought.

Mainly more offices, Gracia thought. *It seems to be structured like a lab, but the equipment has been removed.*

A lab, Marianne echoed. *You'd think if there was a lab down here, someone above-ground would know what was going on down here, but none of the prisoners interrogated so far seem to have a clear idea.*

That's easy, their backup barrier generator, Tammy Shepard, thought. *Whoever is down here stayed down here. I reckon they'll be here soon enough.*

From the corner of her eye, Ryouko saw Meiqing swallow nervously.

We'll see soon enough, Kyouko thought. *Marianne, you think you can safely check if there's any lab data remaining locally? Could be useful.*

Marianne shrugged.

It's not like I actually hack anything. It's magic. They won't pick me up unless they have another magical girl watching the systems.

They could, Nana pointed out.

We didn't come here not to gather data, Kyouko thought. *The risk is small. Try it.*

Marianne nodded, then pointed towards one of the near walls, next to the desk.

It will be safe for me to touch the wall? she thought, looking at Agnes.

It should be.

A series of bright white strings flew from Marianne's hands, sticking to the wall on contact. She stood there for moment, eyes closed, seeming to be listening to something.

No, the data has been completely wiped, she thought.

I shouldn't be surprised, Kyouko thought. *Alright, let's move out. Barrier generators and Gracia first, stealth generators and teleporters in the middle, Marianne last. Marianne, can you get the door open? Don't forget to close it behind us.*

The door slid open immediately, and the group of girls headed out into the hallway in roughly the order proscribed. Ryouko doubted a team leader would have ordinarily been as explicit with her instructions as Kyouko had been, but there had been no time to prepare or train—better to be wordy than sorry.

Ryouko took a moment to look at their team map of the area. It was pitifully incomplete, with only the area immediately around them revealed and the rest of it essentially a giant question mark.

Er, I think I can get a better idea of the rooms, Meiqing thought. *I have some idea of how the earth in our vicinity is arranged, and I'm not being jammed. I can't warn you of any enemies, though.*

She updated the map of the area, which expanded to nearly double the previous size, though the outer ring was considered not necessarily safe.

Good thinking, Kyouko thought. *Let's go. It looks there might be a main hallway coming up.*

They moved forward cautiously, but briskly. A stealth field of this magnitude was expensive to maintain, and they had been instructed not to linger unless necessary.

As they walked, Ryouko peered around at the walls and ceiling, trying to find anything unusual about the office complex that would justify the situation they were in. The facilities looked completely standard, though, if a little utilitarian—the walls were a uniform flat gray, whereas the lab on Eurydome had had elaborate decorative stone slabs, and most buildings on Earth would have had display walls.

The hallways were lined with impassive sealed doors, and though Marianne opened a few, there

was nothing to see. Completely denuded lab facilities, with not a single piece of equipment left behind.

Kavitha Srinivas, one of the barrier generators, called the group to a halt.

Sorry, she thought. *But I did an apprenticeship in a nanotechnology lab, and I think I recognize some of this. The equipment may be gone, but they can't have torn out all the water and resource feeds. Can we go into this one? I want to take a look; I know we have to be quick.*

Kyouko nodded her assent, issuing into their mental interfaces the relevant specific commands. They filed into the room, again in the previously-determined order—while under stealth field, the group could not be broken up.

Kavitha stood in the middle of the room, between two semi-circular workbenches, looking around.

This was a nanotech lab. It has to be. This is where you'd adjust the programming. Over there—

She pointed at the corner of the room.

You can see the holes where the nanofabricator draws resources.

Can you see anything else? Kyouko thought.

Not from here, the barrier generator thought. *This is fairly generic. The other rooms looked fairly similar, but to be really sure we'd have to go through each one.*

Kyouko shook her head.

We don't have time. It's more important to look through the rest of the facility. The exact type of nanotech going here isn't as important.

They shuffled back out of the empty lab.

This is creepy, Asami thought to Ryouko, turning into words what they were all thinking. *All these empty rooms… it feels like a graveyard. It feels like a ghost could attack at any moment. I don't like it.*

Ryouko reached out and squeezed Asami's hand, earning a surprised look back in response. Ryouko didn't meet it, though, preferring to continue scanning the corners of the room.

The group froze, simultaneously spotting on their monitors what Marianne had detected: a pair of of armored guards around the corner, guarding a door at the end of the corridor.

We could avoid them easily just by turning left here instead," Agnes thought, "They won't see us passing by through my stealth.

We came here for reconnaissance, Kyouko thought. *So we're going to do reconnaissance. If there's guards at a door, that means the important things are behind the door. The stealth should be able to hide us, as long as no one does anything stupid like walk into one of the guards. Eyes open; we're going right.*

Remember the plan, Kyouko thought, as they walked forward. *We explore until we find where the children are or we have to leave. If we can, we take some prisoners on the way out.*

The end of the corridor was a T-intersection with a large, sealed double door, with the two guards

stationed at both sides. According to their clairvoyance, the other end of the double door was cavernous, a giant room larger than any of the others they had passed—the closer they got to the door, the farther in Marianne and Gracia could see, but neither of them had yet labeled the far wall of the room, nor had they yet labeled anything they might have seen inside the room.

Then, having just reached the guards, Marianne and Gracia simultaneously froze midstep.

What is it? Kyouko asked, standing only a few feet away from one of the oblivious guards.

We have to go in, Marianne thought.

What do you see? Kyouko pressed. *Is it the children?*

Incubation equipment, Gracia thought. *Empty, as far as I can tell, but I can't see all of it. I'm no expert, but based on the size, I think it's the kind intended for humans. I just can't see it clearly yet —not with this jamming.*

She forwarded a picture to the group, reconstructed from her brain activity. It looked like the same kind of incubators Ryouko had once seen in Mitakihara, but seen from a substantial distance. Ryouko could see why the clairvoyants were having trouble making a clear assessment.

The members of the team glanced at each other nervously.

I think she's right, Nana thought. *And I* am *an expert. I can't be sure unless we get closer though.*

Kyouko grimaced.

I was afraid of this kind of thing. Alright, Ryouko, teleport us in—follow Marianne's clairvoyance. The rest of you: be ready for a trap. Especially the barrier generators.

A trap?

Blatant guards, sealed door? Kyouko thought. *It's what I would use as bait. Hopefully they just can't see us, though.*

Ryouko let out a breath.

Alright, gather around me, she thought. *Same as before.*

As the others gathered around, she spared a glance down at her soul gem. It was still clear and bright, and a single short-range teleport was unlikely to strain it.

Ryouko closed her eyes, letting herself enter Marianne's mindscape. She didn't really need it for such an easy teleport, but it made things easier.

She reached inward, stretching the fabric of spacetime just *so*—

And then they were there, and could see it with their own eyes, through the pale blue glow of Kavitha's barrier around then.

They stood in shock for a moment, stunned by the sheer magnitude of what they were seeing.

The warehouse-sized room stretched forward almost as far as the eye could see, the far wall only barely visible behind rows and rows of human-sized incubation vats, about twice as tall as Ryouko. Unlike the ones she had seen at Prometheus, these did not have transparent sides, impassively gray and metallic from top to bottom. There was, however, little doubt as to what they were; centuries of movies about the Freedom Alliance had given the general public a good sense

of what modern incubation vats looked like, in all their variations.

Several members of the team, even some of the veterans, were visibly fazed. Asami grabbed Ryouko's shoulder, and Meiqing appeared to shudder.

Let's not overreact yet, Nana thought. *I know what it looks like, but it could be something else. Marianne or Gracia, can you check, uh, what's in the tanks?*

I haven't seen anything yet, Gracia thought. *Just empty fluid and tubing. I'm checking the tanks one by one.*

Keep trying, Nana thought. *Marianne, do you think you can check the computer systems for information?*

Marianne looked at Kyouko, who nodded.

Maybe, Marianne thought. *It depends exactly how these tanks are connected to the main system. There isn't a canonical connectivity like there is for in-wall systems, and I have to find the relevant wiring.*

Marianne extended her threads to the nearest tank, her strings detaching and reattaching several times before she shook her head and thought:

No, as far as these tanks are concerned, they're just individual incubation tanks connected to a remote monitoring and control system. There's no direct connection to any databases that would tell us what the overall purpose is.

She paused for a moment.

They're definitely configured for human incubation, though. But this one is on empty standby.

For ectogenesis, embryos and fetuses are typically grown separately in smaller chambers before being transferred to a large tank like this one, Nana thought. *This one could just be on standby. If we go somewhere else, we might find some active ones.*

Still no personnel, Xochi thought. *I don't like it. Something's up.*

It's obvious something *is up,* Agnes thought. *It would help to know what.*

Let's head down this row, Nana thought. *Tank arrays like this are typically sorted by age, for convenience. If these are empty then the active ones are probably farther down the row.*

Is that really a good idea, though? Marianne thought. *Even if we find whatever—whoever—they're growing down here, will it really help us know what they're doing? I'd much rather find an administrative terminal or something.*

Or a technician we could interrogate, Gracia grumbled.

We have to save prisoners for last, Kyouko reminded. *And right now these tanks are right in front of us. It'd be crazy not to look through them before we start looking for terminals or something. Let's move forward.*

Headed by Gracia, they moved forward briskly, but deathly silent. Some measure of silence was considered good mission protocol, even under a stealth field—but not this much silence.

Do you have any guesses about what's going on here? Ryouko thought finally, addressing

Kyouko.

My guess is that the Cult Leader is trying to clone magical girls, Kyouko thought, responding surprisingly quickly. *Not just the body, but the mind and personality, to try and duplicate wishes. It's what makes sense given the Cult's history, and it's also the first thing anyone thinks of when they start thinking about this kind of thing.*

Ryouko waited for Kyouko to continue, but she didn't, and finally Ryouko asked:

Would that work, though?

It's complicated. The short answer is that you wouldn't get the same girls making the same wishes over and over. Potential just doesn't work that way; you can ask any Incubator. The long answer is that since these girls will have favorable genetics and you can manufacture a stressful life situation, they really will be more likely to contract. It's really not worth the investment though, unless you do this kind of thing on a massive scale. Like, interstellar-massive. Not like this.

The group fell back into silence. To Ryouko, the way Kyouko talked made it sound like she had seen the problem studied before—but even she knew better than to say that out loud.

About halfway down the aisle, Gracia held up her hand to stop the group from advancing further.

The ones in front of us are occupied. Human girls… I can sense their minds dreaming. These aren't empty clones. Other than that, I can't tell if there's anything unusual about them.

Without waiting for any prompting, Marianne shot out an arm, strings radiating from her in all directions to contact all the tanks in the area in front of them.

As far as these tanks are concerned, the inhabitants are standard human, and they are performing maintenance as such. I can't rule out the possibility that the configuration settings have been changed, though. But they're all girls.

Empty clones? Meiqing asked, the tenor of the thought quizzical in the air.

It's not important right now, Kyouko thought, brushing the question aside. *Gracia, you're the telepath: can you pick up anything?*

It's hard to explain, but not really. Kind of a static. No images. I'm pretty sure these girls have never been outside these tanks.

It goes without saying there's not going to be any boys in this set, Kyouko thought angrily. *I wonder what they're doing to them? False memories? Mind-control implants? Do they kill them if they don't contract? What are the Incubators thinking not telling us about this place?*

As Kyouko continued, she seemed to get progressively more furious, spear starting to shake where she had planted the handle into the ground, until Ryouko began to fear Kyouko would smash something in rage.

But in the end, Kyouko seemed to calm down, then turned to face the rest of the group.

Well, for the newer girls, you should know that before the MSY, we faced this kind of stuff all the time, just not with as much tech. Anyway, Gracia, I think it's time we sent an update to the surface. Then we can move on.

Gracia nodded, then closed her eyes. As the group's primary telepath, she had longer telepathy range than any of the others, extending well beyond the hundred meters normally imposed by the

direct soul gem connection.

They waited expectantly.

Finally, Gracia opened her eyes again.

"Oh," she said loud, startling all of them.

We didn't think of this, she thought, a moment later. *My telepathy is blocked, too. More than that, trying to do that… I've been detected. They know we're here. Right here, exactly.*

"F—" one of the girls said, elegantly succinct.

Get us out of here! Marianne thought, looking at Ryouko.

"No," Kyouko countermanded, voice hard.

She picked up her spear, pointing it forward, leaning into a combat stance.

"If we've been detected, we've already shit the bed. If the children are being taken as hostages, then backing out is only going to let them do what they're going to do. We've got to try to find them *now*."

Kyouko's voice turned into a growl, harsh enough that Ryouko felt herself quail, wanting to—

I think I know where she is, Gracia announced.

They turned to look at the telepath, as a single bright blip appeared on their internal navigation maps.

The girl who's blocking me, I mean, Gracia thought. *She blocked me, but I was also able to sense where she blocked me from.*

*"Then that's where we're going,"*Kyouko announced, sweeping her spear grandiosely in the direction of the blip. *This ain't a stealth mission anymore, ladies! Let's bring it hard and fast! Ryouko!"*

Ryouko nodded, swallowing, then closed her eyes, as the others gathered around her.

She took a breath.

This… was a new feeling. She couldn't understand. It wasn't that she couldn't do it. It just felt… unsafe. She didn't feel the certainty that—

She opened her eyes, shaking her head decisively.

"I can't," she said, trying to keep her voice as level as possible in the face of disappointment. "Whatever is blocking the clairvoyance—it's also blocking my ability to know where I'm teleporting. I'm going to teleport into a wall or something. It wouldn't be safe. I can do a short-range teleport over and over, but—"

Kyouko let out a growl of inchoate anger.

Save your energy, she thought. *This will be faster anyway.*

Kyouko dashed forward, the rest of the team following a few milliseconds later, responding with combat reflexes.

Elisa sharpened her barrier to a point, barreling the group *through* a wall into the next room over, which they could see was clear through clairvoyance.

Ryouko followed, letting the doubts in her heart be quelled by the moment.

But as she watched Kyouko's back, she couldn't help but remember that, just for a moment, she had doubted Kyouko's judgment. That, before Gracia had announced she knew where the interdicting magical girl was, Ryouko had seen the group doubt Kyouko's judgment, even in the face of her command authority.

If the children are being taken as hostages, then backing out is only going to let them do what they're going to do. We've got to try to find them now.

It was compelling logic, but it wasn't the only possible logic.

Where was Kyouko taking them?

Through a Mirror

"It is often said that the pen is mightier than the sword, but what really do we mean by this? We do not mean that the writer, the author, or the reporter can best a warrior in single combat. Nor do we mean even that a talented satirist or reporter can truly wound those in power. Plenty of ink has been spilled on brilliant satire and damning accusations without so much as a dent on its intended target."

"The power of the written word lies in the power of the ideas it expresses, and as such it is kin to ideology, and to religion, and like these occasionally serve evil as well as good. It was ideology and religion that helped end the system of slavery in the United States in an orgy of bloodshed, but it was ideology and religion that had helped build the system in the first place. It was ideology and religion that drove the Taiping Rebellion that terminally crippled the Chinese Qing dynasty, but it was ideology and religion that had supported the Chinese dynastic system for millenia on end. And it was the power of ideas, horrible ideas, that helped made Hitler immune to the condemnations penned daily against him, even within Germany, and it was the ideal of Nationalism that eventually brought him to his knees."

"On a smaller scale, modest ideals permeate the microniches of society, from the aspiring chefs obsessively oiling their cutting boards—grumbling all the way about those philistines who do not appreciate their work—to the rock climbers who meet every week to scrabble their way up fragmented piles of minerals. Each of us, and each group of us, holds dear ideals that have spread their way through the nerves and sinews of society, and in a very real way, it is these ideals that have bonded society together, since the earliest days."

"It is why when industrialization and modernization destroyed the old fabric of society, the world struggled so hard to find new glues to hold society together. Nationalism, political parties, systems of ideology on a large scale and, on a small scale, clubs, associations, hobby groups, church groups, self-groups, and so on and so forth. Without a unified religious state dictating life down to those below, it was necessary for individuals to find other allegiances."

"But what happens when the magnitude of the ideal is large, but the group is small? What happens when the ideas presented seem to demand a reorganization of society itself, but the ideas never percolate outside a small club? That, I believe, is a cult, and for better or worse, these cults sometimes act as microcosms of potential societies, and what might have been, in a different world entirely."

— Clarisse van Rossum, *"Musings on Life, History, and the Soul."*

"The eyes are the mirror of the soul."

— Yiddish Proverb

Traversing the interior of a structure *through* the walls, rather than through the usual corridors, was an audacious maneuver, and rarely practiced. While its value in shock and speed was clear, it generally required a powerful barrier generator capable of efficiently breaking through the wall and a clairvoyant capable of mapping an advance route and accurately predicting whether the wall that was about to be broken was important to the structural integrity of the building. Few situations

really required *that* much speed, and most such situations could be handled much more efficiently by a teleporter. Only the Black Heart or Soul Guard ever practiced "bulldozing", for those circumstances when a team lost its teleporters.

Such was the logic that Clarisse piped through Ryouko's mind as she found herself dashing into the next room under a shower of steel and concrete debris, deflected by the golden barrier that surrounded her.

There was no time to reflect, however, or to inspect the mysterious bulbous equipment that filled the new room—with a palpable thud, Elisa was already breaking through the next wall, holding up with one arm the shield that she used to project her barrier. Chunks of material flew away from the edges of the impact area, and Elisa's yellow hair twisted with magical energy.

Then they were in the next room, a large storage area stacked with boxes.

So it went, through another corridor and several lab areas, before Gracia thought:

The next room is a hallway, with guards moving in. It looks like they've responded to what we're doing and are trying to intercept us. We should be ready.

The hallways have automated defenses, Meiqing thought.

It was a repeat of facts that had already appeared on their internal maps, but everyone appreciated the explicit reminder. The downside of breaking down walls to travel was that your opponents could easily track your movements even when stealthed, due to the clear trail of broken walls behind you. The stealth was still useful, though, by making it impossible to monitor you in real-time.

A series of telepathic blips rang out over the group telepathic network, coordinating upcoming combat actions. The telepathic messages were unspoken, tiny snippets of intention, just enough to relay meaning. It was a fast, impersonal method of communication that reminded most people of machines, and was consequently only really used in combat.

Then they burst through the wall, Elisa's barrier shearing directly through a guard unfortunate enough to be caught on the side, causing blood and viscera to fly up sickeningly, thankfully caught by the barrier itself. A sharp, continuous buzzing noise sounded as weapons fire impacted the barrier from all sides, from automated defense systems installed in the ceiling, combat drones, and guards hurriedly backing towards covered positions along the corridor.

That was a mistake on the parts of the guards, of course.

A moment later, Ryouko teleported herself to behind the group of guards on the left, carrying half the group with her, while Mina took the other half of the group to the other end of the corridor, essentially trapping their welcoming committee between two pincers.

She immediately released a fusillade of arrows, strafing the area in front of her indiscriminately, bright green bolts, shimmering as they found and penetrated their targets. Asami tore a set of automated defenses out of the ceiling with her gravity, three copies of Kyouko impaled whoever was closest, and Meiqing stood ready to bring the entire ceiling down with the weight of the Earth above, if necessary.

Seeing movement out of the corner of her eye, Ryouko blinked again, finding herself looking at the dull black plating of an armored suit. She instinctively summoned an arrow into her arbalest, punching it forward with her arm instead of firing.

She saw blood and hydraulic fluid gush out, just a little, then pulled the arrow downward, searing

a bright green gash into the armor of the guard in front of her.

She heard herself suck in a breath, and then the guard collapsed, and she found herself looking down the corridor.

Meiqing hadn't needed to use her specialty—their initial attack had completely cleared the corridor, leaving only twitching armored corpses, as well as a few living guards at the other end of the corridor that appeared to have been disabled by Nana, and one that was attached to Marianne's hands with a set of strings.

Ryouko saw with a not-insignificant sense of satisfaction that many of the twenty-odd group of soldiers appeared to have been disabled by her arrows, still active and glowing where they had landed.

She remembered, then, what Kyouko had said once about her bloodlust, and dismissed the arrows. She felt a little sickened, realizing she had left the arrows active just so she could count her "kills", so to speak.

She wished she knew just what it was that came over her in the midst of combat.

Alright, we have to keep moving, Kyouko thought. *Marianne, Nana, finish those guards and let's go.*

Marianne transmitted a sense of refusal, then shook her head.

Something is wrong, she thought. *The implant structure of these guards is… is—*

These guards aren't adults, Gracia thought, eyes widened, looking between the armored figures that Nana had disabled. *Reading their minds—these are teenagers.*

The other members of the group looked at each other, and then Marianne gestured at the armored figure she held in her control.

A moment later, the seals popped off the neck area of the suit, the guard reached up ponderously to her helmet and pulled it off slowly.

It was as Gracia had said—the face that stared emptily back at them was a teenage girl, a few years older than Ryouko, blonde hair tied back in a small ponytail.

Without realizing what she was doing, Ryouko looked down at her hand, and at the blood that stained her hand and sleeve.

For a moment she saw the dream again, seen her hands coated in blood after a battle—

But that had been squid ichor, not red human blood, and—

Emotional suppression activated, Clarisse thought, and Ryouko felt the sense of numbness she hadn't realized was washing over her fade away, replaced by a sense of cold calm.

Ryouko looked over at Asami and saw in her face that they were both suppressed.

She felt someone touch her hand and looked down in surprise, finding that the blood on her hand was gone.

Don't leave something like that there, Elisa thought. *Bad for the health.*

What's going on here? Kyouko demanded, voice carrying a note of pain. *Are these the children*

we're looking for? Gracia, read their minds!

From what I can tell, this guard is far more heavily implanted than any civilian would warrant, Marianne thought. *And more heavily implanted than any of the of the civilians above-ground were. It should not be this easy for me to control a civilian with an implant hack. Either these colonists were heavily modifying their children, or…*

Her voice trailed off for a moment, before she forced herself to finish:

…or we're looking at whoever was growing in those tanks we just saw.

With visible reluctance, Gracia gestured at one of her mind controlled guards to approach her.

I'm going to need most of my focus to read deep memories; Nana, can you disable the rest of them?

Nana nodded, raising her right hard. With a flash of violet light, the other guards under Gracia's mind-control collapsed to the floor, unable to move without functioning suit servomotors.

It's done, she thought. *Be fast, keeping all this technology disabled will tax my strength.*

Gracia nodded, as the helmet of the guard in front of her disengaged.

She placed her hands at the side of the head of the girl, who had black hair and Asian features, in contrast to the guard under Marianne's control.

The group stood there for a long moment, holding their breaths, until Gracia opened her eyes again, keeping her hands on the other girl's head. Her face looked like she had chewed on something particularly unpleasant.

She was definitely vat-grown, she thought. *She has a whole lifetime of memories, but it's obvious they were artificially introduced, because they haven't made any impression on her soul. None of the memories before she was about twelve are real.*

Gracia let out a breath.

It looks like Kyouko was right; they were constantly urged to make contracts. Apparently, they lived down here, and they were told it was their destiny to contract.

Did any of them actually contract? Kyouko asked.

Not that this girl has ever seen, Gracia thought. *Apparently, after about three years with no contract, her mind started rejecting the false memories, so they…*

Gracia paused for a long moment, closing her eyes for moment.

Well, she doesn't actually have any significant memories after that, not that I can find, Gracia said. *There's clearly been a lot deleted. The thing to know, though, is that it's hard to keep memories suppressed or maintain fake ones with technology. Even the best telepaths can't do it perfectly. The soul always remembers. This was done pretty poorly; if you give me another five minutes or so, I can extract what's missing.*

We don't have *five minutes,* Kyouko thought.

Wait, there are telepaths that can make fake memories? Meiqing thought.

Why did you bring rookies anyway? Elisa asked, sounding annoyed. *This really isn't the mission for them.*

I know we don't have time, Nana thought. *But we're already here. We* need *information. We can't just keep on going with nothing to go on.*

We've also got girls under emotional suppression, Marianne said, gesturing at Ryouko and her two friends. *They won't be combat-effective enough unless we can bring them out of it. We can take some time to try.*

Kyouko gritted her teeth, before tearing her gaze away from the girls prostrate on the ground in armor suits.

Alright, fine, we'll take five minutes, she said. *But we can't keep standing here like sitting ducks. First let's move everyone with a few short-range teleports. Then, we can hide under the stealth. Ryouko, Mina, each of you take half the group. We'll make four jumps. Leave the extra prisoners.*

I think I can take you off of suppression, Clarisse thought.

Are you sure? Ryouko thought.

Yeah; it's not terribly strong anyway. Better not stay on it too long, anyway, or the backlash will get you.

The world seemed to come slightly more into focus as the emotional suppression receded. Ryouko looked at her hand again, now clean of blood.

Outside of the moment, she felt better. Well, not really better per se—more like she could successfully disassociate herself from what had just happened by fixing her gaze squarely away from the corpses that littered the area and focusing on the task on hand.

Clarisse had already automatically coordinated which team members she would be taking—Ryouko would be taking most of the team, while Mina, by far the more experienced of the two, would take the remainder of the team and the "prisoners".

It was straightforward, Ryouko, Mina, and the two clairvoyants coordinating rapidly and repeatedly to perform exactly four teleports, until they found themselves in what appeared to be… living areas.

Oh Goddess, Mina thought, as they found themselves looking at a row of bunk beds which had clearly been hastily abandoned. Clothing lay scattered about on the floor and on the bunks, or accentuated desks piled with books and ornamental trinkets. The walls were painted a cheery pink and adorned with posters of what appeared to be the cult leader and some of the guards.

Start your memory extraction, Kyouko ordered, looking at Gracia.

Already on it, Gracia thought.

Meiqing looked away, finding a far corner of the room to look at. Ryouko wouldn't have wanted to be in her shoes, finding out so much of this for the first time.

Marianne, for her part, was already tapping into the electronics in the walls.

If it wouldn't give away where we had been, I'd tear down these posters, Elisa said. *It sickens me.*

I wonder if some of the girls we… we killed lived here, Asami thought.

Don't *think about it,* Nana thought immediately, grabbing the girl's shoulder. *Not now. There's no way we could have known.*

We didn't have to break down the walls like that, Ryouko thought. *If we had just teleported like we did now, they would have lost track of us.*

We had to get there fast, Tammy thought. *Kyouko was right. Now that they know we're here, anything could be happening.*

At least these beds haven't been occupied for a while, Kavitha thought. *If they were just here, the heat would show up on infrared, and it'd be our fault they moved.*

Damn it all, we should have realized they might detect a telepathic signal headed out, Mina thought. *We weren't thinking.*

The leadership here— Elisa began.

Quiet, all of you! Nana snapped, grabbing Elisa's arm. *Now is not the time to do this. We stay focused on our objective, and we finish the mission. Remember your training.*

What is *our objective?* Elisa thought. *Are we really going to leave once we learn what happened to the children?* That *was our objective, and it certainly doesn't look like that's all we're doing here. We're winging it.*

According to the local electronics, the girls here were age twelve to seventeen, Marianne thought, withdrawing her strings from the walls. *I could tell you their names, but that wouldn't be very informative. There's nothing else of interest.*

Are there any older girls? Nana thought. *If so, where are they?*

I don't know, Marianne thought.

Look at the posters, Meiqing thought, pointing at one of the near walls.

They turned to look, at a holographic poster of one of the guards emblazoned with the bright white letters "YOUR BIG SISTERS ARE HERE TO HELP". The guard stood posed, firing her weapon at an invisible enemy.

"Are they training to be guards?" Asami asked. "For what?"

Ryouko looked over at Kyouko. Through it all, she had merely stood silently, watching Gracia do her work. Ryouko, too, wondered about Kyouko, wondered if she was going to merely stand there quietly while all this was going on.

Finally, mercifully, Gracia withdrew her hands from the subdued guard on the ground, looking up at Kyouko.

It's… worse than I thought, she thought, voice torn. *It looks like after she began to reject her false memories, they told her that they were going take her up to her 'parents' on the surface. Instead, they chose to install implants for total thought control. She's been forced to be a guard here for years. I'm just glad she wasn't awake for most of it. At least her core personality circuits haven't degraded too much. Fortunately, this is probably repairable with microsurgery. Maybe a little magic in the worst case.*

I didn't ask for her prognosis, Gracia, Kyouko snapped, with a trace of anger.

Gracia looked up at her in shock.

Sorry, sorry, that was uncalled for, Kyouko thought hastily, apologetically. *The situation is getting to me.*

Gracia sucked in a breath.

Well, she thought. *It looks like these girls were told that the underground complex was a bit of a boarding school, focused on getting as many contracts as possible. If they didn't manage to contract by the end of their stay, they'd return to the surface and return to their parents. That was the story anyway.*

Gracia took another breath, trying to calm herself.

My guess is they couldn't get the memories to stabilize in the long run, so they decided to "draft" the older girls who were starting to develop memory problems to be guards. Two birds with one stone. It's disgusting.

How does this fit in with this, though? Marianne, pointing at the "Big Sister" poster behind her with her thumb. *This seems to suggest they knew what was going to happen.*

Gracia shook her head.

Maybe just a horrifying sense of humor? They were told that the guards were just female colonists. The idea was that the guards would help protect them, if the evil people outside the Cult ever came for them.

Kyouko looked down at the ground, bracing her arm on her spear.

So how many magical girls are we going to be dealing with? Kyouko thought. *The way potential seems to work, clones like these have a much lower contract rate than you'd think. But even one is too many, or we wouldn't be in this mess.*

That's the thing, Gracia thought. *In the entire time this girl was… awake, there wasn't a single contract. The "school" administrators were getting visibly frustrated. Her memories from after becoming a guard are… sporadic, so maybe there were some contracts after that, but at least for the first five years, there was nothing.*

Well, there's at least one, Kyouko thought.

Yes.

Gracia let her eyes drop down towards the floor.

Before we left those other girls behind, I think some of them were waking up, she thought. *Nana disabled their implants, the ones that were keeping them functioning. I could hear the terror. I'm glad I don't have to hear it anymore, but I'm sorry we left them there. They can't even move in those suits, with their electronics disabled.*

Kyouko gritted her teeth almost audibly, and Ryouko felt an acid horror seem to well upward from inside her. Clarisse didn't offer to suppress her emotions, though, and Ryouko didn't ask. Kyouko had been right. For better or worse, she would have to learn to deal with these things as they came, without letting it inhibit her functioning.

But there were other rookies in the group.

Kyouko stood up taller, holding her spear to one side and turning to face the group. She seemed to abruptly exude leadership, and Ryouko recognized what it was—an Ancient mind trick of sorts, derived not so much from magic as from force of will, though sometimes spiked with quite a bit of magic.

Girls, Kyouko thought. *This is an abomination. I don't have to tell you that, but it goes deeper than that. When we founded the MSY, the goal was that no one should ever have to suffer as we did, ever again. We thought we had succeeded, but here we are, facing an abomination against everything the Goddess had ever stood for. These girls have suffered, but don't think only of their suffering. Think of all of us who have suffered, over the long arc of history, crying in the dark. We fought, and we killed, for worse reasons than the reasons we killed those guards, out in that hallway. And yet in the end we still lived. So too shall it be here. We're trapped here, with limited grief cubes. We cannot wait—soon, those on the surface will wonder what happened to us. Soon, they may bash down those doors, and kill all the armored guards they find inside. We have no way of warning them about the tragedy that will occur.*

Kyouko turned, pointing her spear in the general direction of where they suspected the magical girl blocking their exit was.

We know where we must go, and in the end we may have to kill to get there. Girls who were raised here may not listen to reason and may be immune to our stunning magic. In the end, we may have to kill for the greater good. Such has it always been, and we must take solace in knowing that their sacrifice will not be vain.

Kyouko had walked over to Meiqing and Asami, who stood together, still with the vaguely glass-eyed expression of the emotionally suppressed.

Don't worry, she said, grasping Asami's shoulder. *We can pull through this. We just have to have faith in each other. We won't let the crimes committed here continue, and we cannot falter.*

To Ryouko's jaded ears, the sermon-of-sorts sounded forced, even backed by an Ancient's considerable charisma. She could see that the other veterans felt similarly.

But Meiqing and Asami lost their glass-eyed look, blinking up at Kyouko with what seemed to be a slight sense of wonder.

Let's go, girls, Kyouko thought. *We'll stay in stealth, travel the normal way, and teleport when convenient. Hopefully, we can evade any other guards and get to the bottom of this. I can't promise we won't have to kill anyone else, so I have to remind you not to hold back in a fight. Sometimes people have to die. There's no other way. Come on.*

Elisa and the others seemed somewhat mollified by the show of leadership, and the enunciation of what seemed to be a reasonable plan. Ryouko's tactical interface indicated that the group had agreed to divide into two groups centered on the two teleporters, but traveling together.

Sometimes people have to die, Ryouko echoed in her mind, sighing.

I wonder, she thought.

They crept their way forward through the facility, avoiding concentrations of guards, teleporting past obstacles, and generally taking what started to seem like the most circuitous possible route. It hardly fit with the idea that they needed to resolve the issue as soon as possible, and Kyouko was starting to show poorly-concealed impatience.

Through it all, Ryouko felt a gathering sense of trepidation. It would not be long until they reached the location where Gracia had signaled they were being blocked from. It was of course entirely possible that the magical girl in question had moved, in which case Gracia would have to give away their position with another attempt at communicating with the surface, but Ryouko, and indeed the team as a whole, seemed to share an odd certainty that their quarry would be right there waiting for them.

It certainly seemed likely to be that way as they got closer to the location and the outer "walls" on their clairvoyance started to close in even tighter, starting to provide a serious impediment to the random jumps Ryouko and Mina were expected to make. It felt claustrophobic as a teleporter, being limited like that, which no doubt contributed to Ryouko's sense of apprehension.

Whoever is exerting this suppression field must be using a tremendous amount of power, Marianne thought as they grew close. *If we weren't in a hurry, we could just wait her out. She can't be getting many grief cubes down here.*

I don't know how many demon spawns a giant group of teenage clones and mind-controlled guards will make, but I'm willing to bet it's not nothing, Kyouko countered. *It's possible she has plenty to hunt down here.*

What I want to know is, surely this colony must have had some magical girls outside the clones, right? Nana thought. *Otherwise, why haven't they been destroyed by demons?*

There were demons everywhere when we landed, Kyouko thought. *Remember? I'm willing to bet stupid shit like this clones thing is related to that. Those things aren't exactly friendly on the sanity.*

But then where are the magical girls? Nana thought.

I don't know, Kyouko thought. *I hope we're not about to find out.*

Shouldn't we be able to sense them by now? Ryouko thought. *Or at least the one girl, if she's really burning so much power? It should be possible to sense the soul gem, unless that sense is being blocked too.*

It probably is, Kyouko thought, with what seemed to be a sigh.

It looks like we're approaching the central geothermal borehole for this section of the bunker, Meiqing thought. *I wouldn't be surprised if that's where they're holed up. It's going to be a big room, though, so be ready for that.*

I'm glad I brought you, Kyouko thought, with what sounded like complete sincerity. *Otherwise we'd be flying blind.*

Meiqing tittered nervously—not out loud.

I… I can't honestly say I'm glad to be here.

It's a learning experience, rookie, Elisa thought. *Buck up.*

We killed all those girls, and you want us to buck up? Ryouko thought—to herself, not to the group.

We're getting really close, Meiqing thought. *The next room will be right up against the wall to the power facility. I don't think there's a doorway, though.*

Just in time, too, Mina thought. *All this teleporting is costing a lot of grief cubes.*

We should pause in the next room, then, Marianne thought. *I can use my strings on the wall and see through it that way, since it's just one wall. I bet whoever it is isn't literally blocking the photons landing on the wall.*

Agreed, Kyouko thought. *We can take a moment to regroup and plan. Not too long, though—if I were them I'd be constantly sweeping the neighboring rooms with guards.*

A few moments later they found themselves in the room in question, an extended utility closet strewn with what appeared to be drone parts. As promised, Marianne immediately fired her strings at the opposing wall, closing her eyes.

I'm going to try to send you all what I'm seeing with telepathy, she thought. *It's going to take some concentration, so stand by for a moment.*

A few second later, Ryouko felt a series of mental images impinging on her mind, distracting in the same way she imagined hallucinations must be. Kyouko and the other veterans seemed unperturbed, but Ryouko found it difficult to watch her surroundings and the imagery at the same time.

Don't worry about it, new girls, Kyouko thought. *Just close your eyes for now.*

Ryouko wasn't sure what she had expected a geothermal borehole to look like, but she had certainly expected something a bit more interesting. Glowing lights, perhaps. Instead, the room was dominated by generic-looking metal machinery and tubing, as well as a single large dome she assumed capped the borehole proper. Throughout the room, guards stood on watch.

In front of the dome, a single girl, dressed in a hooded black jacket and cloak, prostrated herself on a prayer rug. Her soul gem shone pure white, though, bright as a star—though Ryouko felt, somehow, that it was starting to fade.

I think we've found our magical girl, Gracia thought, stating the obvious.

But where are the other magical girls? Nana thought. *There must be some! And where are the missing children and clones? All that we have here are more guards.*

Does it matter? Kyouko thought. *We eliminate her, we salvage this entire situation. One surgical strike ought to do it. I doubt she can focus on anything but maintaining the suppression field.*

Something is wrong, Nana thought. *We should capture her instead.*

In this *situation?* Kyouko thought, sounding appalled. *We should just kill her!*

We can't just kill her like that! Meiqing thought. *We should at least give her a chance!*

Not now, rookie, Kyouko thought, clearly restraining herself. *We can't have qualms now. There are lives in danger!*

Ryouko! Your soul gem! Asami thought.

That last thought, over the group telepathy network rather than sent personally to Ryouko, seemed so incongruous that it actually stopped conversation for a moment, and caused Ryouko to open her eyes, and to try to peer down at the base of her neck.

Her soul gem was glowing again—faintly, but still glowing, clearly brighter than the usual soul gem glow.

What are you doing, Ryouko? Elisa asked.

No, it means something, Gracia thought. *Haven't you read about the Orpheus mission? It's a sign from the Goddess!*

Don't bring in religion at a time like this! Elisa said, casting a sidelong glance at Kyouko—she was clearly holding back a much harsher statement.

Ryouko let out a breath, glancing warily among the other members of the team.

No, it isn't, she said. *Or at least, it doesn't have to be. It actually does this regularly if I'm near something that resembles a wormhole—or at least I think. Something like a faster-than-light engine, or an alien wormhole. I don't think I see any reason why it should be glowing now, though.*

Ryouko let her words hang in the air for a moment, aware that the words she didn't say were almost as important as the words she did say.

The natural conclusion is that there's something in the area, Nana thought. *Would there be equipment like that in a power station like this?*

She directed the question generally, since it was not at all clear if anyone on the team was an expert in geothermal energy.

After a long moment of silence, Marianne spoke up.

Well, I can't imagine why anyone would need anything resembling a faster-than-light engine for a geothermal borehole, unless the colonists have been experimenting with something radically new. Starship engines are expensive enough as it is—a power station that needed exotic matter to run it would negate much of the reason for its existence. Asami, can you feel anything in the area?

Asami shook her head.

No, she thought. *But I haven't really been looking. Maybe if I had some more time…*

She allowed her voice to trail off.

We should explore the area, Nana thought. *Missing children, missing clones, missing magical girls—we can't just charge in. Asami, Ryouko, and Meiqing—we can escort them on a circuit of the perimeter.*

It could end up being a wild goose chase, Kyouko growled. *If we just get rid of the girl blocking us from seeing anything, we'll have full access to our clairvoyance, and it will no longer be an issue.*

We're operating with too little information, Marianne thought. *We have to learn what's going on. We can charge in and take her out anytime—it's not like these guards are going to be that much of an issue, even if we have to focus on disabling them instead of killing them.*

There could be people dying *out there,* Kyouko thought. *Every second we waste out here could be another child, and every second we spent scouting the area is another chance to get discovered.*

We have no *evidence for your speculation,* Nana said. *What we* do *have evidence of is some kind of device in the area that shouldn't be there. We* have *to know what it is. Let's go look. This has all the signs of a trap.*

Well, you're not in command here, Kyouko said, glaring at Nana. *Don't try to overrule me.*

Ice-cold rage filled her words, seeming to the chill the air around them.

Don't do this, Kyouko, Marianne thought. *Mami—*

Don't you start on me, Kyouko warned.

Just because you *want to be a bloody idiot does not mean* we *have to follow you,* Elisa said, stepping forward next to Nana to look Kyouko in the eyes. *We've followed you into this mess, but we're not going to follow you into an obvious trap.*

You're out of line—

We aren't the military, Nana said, stepping forward so that she was face to face with Kyouko. *We're not the same. Now back off—*

Kyouko let out a cry of frustration, pushing Nana away from her. Without really knowing what she was doing, Ryouko lunged forward, grabbing Kyouko's arm, and realized only afterward that she had stopped Kyouko from throwing her spear into the floor. For a moment, she gritted her teeth, feeling her magically enhanced muscles straining to restrain Kyouko's, student against mentor.

Please listen to me, Ryouko thought. *You're letting your history get to you. When you brought me here, you kept saying the Goddess had some plan for me. Well maybe the Goddess's plan was to keep you from getting yourself killed. If my soul gem says there's something in the area, then we need to find it.*

She met Kyouko's eyes, engaging her in a battle of will for the first time, and realized that she was not seeing the implacable, unmovable Ancient she would expect, but someone much weaker, and *much* more vulnerable.

Please, Ryouko appended.

For a moment she thought she had a made a terrible mistake, but then she felt Kyouko's arm slacken and drop.

She looked away.

Alright, she thought. *We'll take a circuit of the perimeter. Stay frosty—they'll be plenty of guards around. We don't want to do anything stupid like get their attention by hurling our weapons into the floor. Ryouko, do you think you can track the signal?*

The question surprised Ryouko, who was at a loss for a moment before managing to answer:

Maybe. It depends on what this is. Now that I'm paying attention to my soul gem, I might be able to pick up if we get closer to it, but we'll have to move around.

Alright then; let's go. Let's do this quickly. Time is still of the essence.

No apologies. Not even an acknowledgment that anything had happened—but it was good enough, and the team let out a collective sigh.

Ryouko nodded, allowing the others to gather around her, waiting for the clairvoyants to choose an unmonitored location to teleport to. Asami and Meiqing, the other magical girls they'd be relying on to scan the perimeter, each grabbed one of her arms, and for a moment Ryouko could

almost imagine that they were still in training, practicing for a new type of mission.

But they weren't, of course. No training mission would have had anything like what she had just experienced. There were certain things that just couldn't be prepared for.

Got it, Gracia thought, indicating that she had a place for them to go.

Marianne verified the location a moment later, and Ryouko ducked her head, preparing for the jump. It had taken unusually long for the clairvoyants to find a safe location—Kyouko had been right about one thing: the facility garrison wasn't taking any chances with the power station. If anything, the density of the patrols had only increased, with the guards even going so far as to physically walk through every room they inspected. It was evident that they were worried that Ryouko and the others would find the power station, but there was no sign yet that they knew their magical girl had been detected.

After the teleport had completed, Ryouko immediately glanced down at her soul gem. It was brighter, but—

No. There was something there, at the edges of her awareness, but where?

She opened her eyes, looking around at Meiqing and Asami. They shook their heads.

Nothing, Asami thought. *It's strange. I don't think we've ever disagreed about something like this.*

Ryouko took a moment to evaluate her new surroundings. According to her internal map, which was based on information from the clairvoyants, they had sidestepped a small distance along the edge of the station, and also gone up about two stories. They were still next to the power station, though, since the station was tall as well as wide.

Now they stood in a narrow, dimly lit causeway, with an unusually low ceiling. It was likely that it was a service corridor of some sort, intended more for drones than humans.

That didn't mean it was particularly safe, though, a point accentuated by a small, empty cargo drone that skittered through their area, forcing Elisa to step around it and let it pass so their stealth wouldn't be breached.

We should move on, Kyouko thought. *Since the signal got stronger, let's just keep heading in the same direction. It's not safe to stand here.*

Ryouko held up her hand to wave off the idea.

I think I might be able to figure out where it is, if you just give a moment to concentrate, she thought. *Please.*

She closed her eyes, trying to remember the state of mind she had used when she reopened the wormhole. What was it that Clarisse had said?

That she should empty her mind, and try to focus on nothing but the magic.

It had been a stressful day, to put it mildly. She hadn't realized until she tried to relax just how tense she was. A thousand things to worry about, a thousand disasters looming, chaos and confusion, Kyouko and Asami and the clones—

She shook her head at herself, feeling her hair unravel itself. There was only her breath moving in and out, the sharp glow of her soul gem, the thrumming of all the other soul gems next to her, some quiet and muted, others straining with effort to sustain the magic that kept them hidden.

Behind it all was the stolid, flat gravity of the planet that surrounded them, unchanging except for whispers of activity, the shifting of distant oceans—

I have it, she said, opening her eyes abruptly. *Whatever it is, it's just above us, right on top of the power plant.*

She labeled the approximate location on their internal maps.

On top? Marianne thought. *What could be up there?*

I guess we'll find out, Kyouko thought.

We're almost directly on top of her, Nana thought, three teleports later.

Her? Kavitha thought.

The girl casting the suppression field, Nana thought. *We're almost right on top of her.*

Do you think it means anything? Kyouko asked.

I don't know.

Ryouko looked around. By now they were clearly outside of the inhabited parts of the facility. Except for the floor they stood on, they were surrounded on all sides by carefully shaped rock, along numerous support beams and shock absorbers. Ryouko's soul gem was now glowing brightly, and it was easy for her to tell that there was something in front of her, inside what looked like a solid wall of rock.

Meiqing and Asami held almost identical expressions of consternation and concentration, and it was clear something was wrong.

I don't understand, Meiqing thought. *It's not that I can tell there's anything there—it's more like there's more* not *there than there should be. It's like this part of the planet is shaped wrong, and the parts don't connect somehow.*

There's definitely something there, Asami thought, immediately afterward. *It feels really familiar, and I don't know why I didn't feel it before.*

It looks normal enough to me, Gracia said. *Rock, rock, and more rock. That doesn't mean there's nothing there, but it's difficult to do a thorough search when you have no idea which part of it you're looking at.*

There was nothing to do but wait, really. At Kyouko's nod, Meiqing and Asami pressed themselves literally up against the rock surface, for all the world as if they might be able to go through it if they pressed hard enough.

Well? Kyouko thought.

It reminds me of being with the Magi Cæli, Asami thought. *Something I felt while I was there, but for some reason I can't pinpoint—oh. Oh.*

Everyone in the area immediately turned their heads to look at Asami, who seemed to shrink away from the scrutiny.

I've realized, she said, looking away. *I've only ever really seen* ships. *And ships have FTL engines*

which are bright and obvious to me, even behind stealth. Squid stealth is actually really good though, and usually the only thing I ever pick up is the engines, and a faint trace of… well, something like this. I think it might be a stealth device.

A squid stealth device? Here? Kyouko asked incredulously.

Or something really similar. I don't know. But that's what it reminds me of.

I still can't see it, Gracia thought, *but depending on the type of stealth, it might take me a while, especially if it's small. I have to basically scan every spot for it.*

Same story for me, Marianne thought, her strings already attached to the rock surface. *If it were visible or electronic, I could see it that way, but this is just normal rock, and apparently it's not visible.*

Since we do have a vague idea of where it is, I could straight-up blast this rock with my technology-disabling magic, Nana thought. *Of course, anyone monitoring it would notice right away, so it's not exactly a safe option.*

Kyouko visibly gritted her teeth.

How long would it take to complete a search of this rock with clairvoyance? she thought.

With the two of us? With a grid search, maybe half an hour, Gracia thought. *We have to literally try and look at portions of rock individually, so it depends on how big whatever it is turns out to be. I could also find it in the next thirty seconds. Or it could be an hour. It's tough to say. We just didn't bring the right type of clairvoyant.*

Whatever this is, I doubt it's is a red herring, Elisa thought. *If you think about it, we got lucky to even notice it was there. And no one knows how to make or imitate a squid stealth device. That would require its own research project. No way this is just some kind of trap to draw us out.*

There are a lot of questions here, that's for sure, Tammy thought.

Kyouko looked down for a moment, rubbing her eyes in consternation, as if exceedingly tired. Ryouko could sympathize: there were too many decisions to be made on too little information, and despite the mini-revolt against Kyouko's leadership earlier, it was still incumbent on Kyouko to make those decisions.

Finally, she looked up.

I'm going to take a leap of faith, she said. *You were right, Ryouko. The chain of events leading to you being here could have only happened after you reported your vision to us. I will take that as a sign that whatever this is is important, because it came from you. And we can't afford a thirty minute wait. Nana, blast the rock. With any luck, no one will be watching the thing that carefully anyway. And I* don't *want to hear anything from any of you about my religion.*

Well, it's an okay decision on its own merits, Marianne thought. *Though I don't think anyone knows the right choice here.*

Be on your toes, girls, Kyouko said as Nana took a breath, gathering a ball of purple energy in front of her with two hands. *We may have to get out of here pretty damn fast. If the alarm goes up, we might have to launch an immediate attack on the girl down there, in case she tries to flee. Teleporters be ready. At least if she runs we'll probably have full clairvoyance again.*

A moment later, Nana released her charge, the purple glow burying itself into the surface of the

rock and disappearing.

There was a moment of anticlimax as nothing seemed to happen.

Then, all at once, alarms bells rang in their heads, as their internal radiation monitors lit up with warnings of the telltale signature of a nuclear device, right in front of them.

Nuclear device, unknown status, hidden behind novel stealth device, Gracia thought, forwarding them images of the device as she saw them. *It looks human in manufacture, but I don't know—*

Can it still go off? Kyouko demanded, already pointing her spear at the rock in a gesture of desperation.

No! It can't! Nana thought, forestalling a whole team's worth of responses. *My powers specifically disable all technology more recent than July 1945. That includes nuclear weapons! As long as no one slaps the pieces of uranium together, we're fine. It's a good thing this wasn't antimatter, or I would have just ruptured the containment.*

They're not supposed to have any nuclear weapons! Xochi thought. *The sensors—*

You can't rely on the sensors! Agnes snapped back. *Not when you have people building crazy—*

Everyone calm down! Kyouko ordered. *Now that it's disabled, we can take it out! Meiqing!*

I'm on it, Meiqing thought.

Then, a moment later:

It's crushed. It won't fire any time soon.

The suppression field is down! Marianne thought. *I can see! They're on alert!*

Alright, Kyouko thought. *We have to move. Let's see—*

Hello? Hello? You disabled the bomb? a new telepathic voice rang out, from far below them. *Thank the heavens! Get me out of here, please! Before—*

The voice cut off abruptly.

They rematerialized inside the power plant in the air, far above the girl who had been casting the suppression field. As the others descended on the surrounding area like avenging angels, Ryouko instead teleported again, straight to the ground with Xochi, one of the stealth generators, and Marianne. In a battle where the goal was disabling the enemy, Ryouko found her powers relatively useless—the best she could do was teleport to enemies and apply a careful blow to the head, seeking a knockout. It was hardly a certain maneuver, especially when it had to be done through armor.

Instead she was assigned to check on the magical girl who had called out to them, who was now collapsed on her prayer rug, not casting a suppression field or anything else.

Ryouko took a moment to glance around her quickly, at Nana, who was blasting the area with a wide-angle disabling field, and Gracia, who was mind-controlling everyone she could, and Kyouko, who was keeping the guards distracted with her duplicates.

Then she and Marianne knelt carefully next to the girl, still stealthed, while Xochi watched the

area for danger.

She reached immediately the girl's soul gem on the left of her chest, buried in her robe-like costume. Pulling it off, she realized it was swirling with corruption. They had barely gotten there in time.

I'm not surprised, Marianne said. *With the kind of power she was using, I'm impressed she hasn't given out already. Here, I have a few spares.*

Ryouko placed the soul gem into a pouch hidden in her costume, along with the grief cubes. It would need more than that to reach full cleanliness, but it would be enough for now.

"Why would she do all this, then ask us for help?"

"I don't know," Marianne said, grabbing the girl by the back of the neck, extending her strings to the rear spinal port.

With a spasm, the girl started breathing again, causing Ryouko to realize that she *hadn't* been, not up until then.

Looks like her internal implants tried to activate a suicide module, Marianne thought. *Fortunately, that doesn't actually ever work on a magical girl. With her soul gem recovering, the implants in question will probably get dissolved by her magic.*

The girl opened her eyes then, but Ryouko was ready, pulling out the girl's soul gem and holding it in her hand. Xochi moved to pin down the girl's arms with her feet.

"Hold still. One move and she's crushing your gem," Marianne said. "It will kill you. What the hell were you doing here? Why did you ask for help?"

"I'm… still alive?" the girl said. "The suicide implant should have killed me."

"That doesn't work on magical girls. You want to finish yourself off, you should have crushed your soul gem," Marianne said.

The girl started crying softly, tears flooding out of her eyes in a steady torrent, washing into the bangs she had tucked behind her ears. Her costume looked like a modern interpretation of desert robes, or the clothing popular on Nova Terra, cascading over her limbs down the floor. It was then that Ryouko realized how *young* the girl looked. She looked eleven, twelve at the most, and for once Ryouko had no doubt that it reflected the girl's actual age.

Easy there, Clarisse thought. *You were twelve not so long ago.*

There's a difference between being fifteen and going through all this shit, and being twelve, Ryouko snapped back.

I suppose I can't dispute that, Clarisse thought.

"It's that easy?" the girl choked out. "I listened to his damn voice for that long for *nothing*? I could have just disobeyed?"

Ryouko and Marianne shared a quick glance.

"What do you mean?" Marianne asked. "No, never mind, not yet. Where are the colony's children? Where are all the girls that lived down here? I don't want to rush you, but we're in a hurry to find them. Was someone forcing you to cast the suppression field?"

Ryouko noticed Marianne hesitate slightly between her sentences, and could hear what she was leaving out: clones, the guards.

The girl looked around her, at first tormented, then relieved.

"Don't kill the guards," she said. "They're clones. He put implants—"

"We know!" Marianne said, grabbing the girl by the shoulders. "We know. Tell us where he took —"

"I didn't know!" she said, putting her hands to her face in visible agony. "He didn't tell us! I saw —I saw what he did to the older girls, and I wished the Incubator to end the horror, and *nothing happened*. He told me that we have implants in our heads so we have to do what he says—all he has to do is push the button. So I did what he told me and—"

"You *don't* have to listen to him," Marianne said, trying to pin the girl with her eyes. "Tell us where the children and clones are, and we'll save them. Are they farther down?"

The girl shook her head, tears still welling in her eyes, hair tumbling around her.

"I don't know why, but they started saying the Enemy was coming for us, and we had to be brave. They turned my friends—my *sisters* into the guards around me."

Marianne looked at the battle around them, which was turning decisively in their favor, as expected, in large part because Meiqing had deliberately destroyed all the entrances into the power facility.

"So those are your sisters?" she said.

"Yes," the girl said, nodding.

She jerked forward, grabbing Marianne by the arm, scaring Ryouko so much that her hand actually twitched around the girl's soul gem.

"We believed in him," the girl said. "He told us you were evil, and I believed him. Why wouldn't I? I—we remembered our parents on the surface. If I didn't know the truth, I—"

"Focus," Marianne insisted. "Focus. The children from the colony above are missing, and we don't know where the man leading all this is. If they're not deeper down, then where are they?"

"This was supposed to be a trap," the girl said. "The point was to lure as many of you down here as possible, then when I died, the bomb was going to go off and kill you all. I didn't know what to do. His voice was always in my head, telling me what to do, and if I didn't listen, the implants would kill me and set off the bomb. I couldn't even think with his voice in my head."

Marianne gritted her teeth.

She could have overridden these implants easily with a bit of magic, she thought to Ryouko. *But she had no way of knowing that. Don't tell her.*

How could she even try? Ryouko thought. *And risk setting off the nuke?*

"Where are the children—" Marianne repeated to the girl, one last time.

"Not here," the girl said. "They were never here. He made it look like they came down here, then he changed everyone's memories so they'd say he was down here, but I remember. I read his

mind, a little. A base on the other side of the planet."

Marianne let out a breath.

So it was a trap after all, she thought. *It's a good thing you noticed the bomb.*

Ryouko nodded vaguely, thinking about her soul gem, and the Goddess. Kyouko had been right. She was here for a reason, despite everything.

It was strangely comforting, in a way. She had hated the idea that anyone was directing her life, but she saw now that when the world was going to hell, it felt good to have an assurance that whatever you were doing was for the best, at least according to someone's conception of "the best".

She didn't like the sense of relief it gave her.

"Do you know where he went?" Marianne asked.

The girl shook her head.

"I only know it's underground," she said.

Marianne nodded, then dipped her head for a moment, seeming to lapse into thought.

A flash of red next to Ryouko almost startled her into jumping, but it was only Kyouko, whose arrival signaled that the battle around them was over.

"So what news?" Kyouko asked, keeping her spear pointed at the girl sitting up from the floor. "Everyone is desperate to know what's going on here."

With the suppression field down, one of their first actions had been to make brief telepathic contact with the surface, letting them know the team was alright. Since then, they had been bombarded with telepathic messages from the surface that they simply did not have time to answer in detail, engaged as they were in active contact.

"There's a lot to discuss," Marianne said. "But the upshot is that the cult leader and the children aren't here. They're hidden on a separate part of the planet. The colonists here have either been tricked or brainwashed into thinking the children were down here, but this is really a giant trap. At least, that's what she says."

Marianne looked down, regarding the girl on the floor, sneaking a quick glance at Ryouko.

"Okay, I'm here," Gracia said, dropping out of the air a moment later.

Marianne gestured at the girl on the floor.

"I'm sorry to do this to you," she said. "But what's going on here is too important for us to just take your word on this."

"I don't get what you mean," the girl said, as Gracia knelt down beside her.

Ryouko did, and the cold logic of it turned her stomach, just a little. It made sense, but it just seemed so… cruel.

She knelt down next to the girl, meeting her searching eyes with what she hoped was a reassuring look.

"What's your name?" Ryouko asked.

"My name. Ah, well, they told me my name was Sacnite. Sacnite Tafani."

The girl hugged her knees for a moment.

"I don't know what to think of that, though. I can still remember my parents telling me about my name, and why they chose it. 'White Flower', they said. But I know that memory isn't real, and I know they don't even know I exist down here. It's someone else's life, but I… I still can't help thinking of them as my parents."

Ryouko looked down for a moment, at the pale gray flooring of the power plant. She didn't know what to think about the situation, so she supposed it was better to think nothing.

She stood back up a moment later.

"Wishes always come true," she said, peering down on Sacnite. "Have faith in that."

Then she walked away, because she couldn't stand to see it anymore.

Cause and Effect

> "The MHD maintains a carefully curated database on Reformatting patients, including both their previous and, if necessary, new identities. By explicit design, no one has access to more than a handful of identities, but plenty of statistics are available on the database as a whole, a sampling of which is contained in this summary."
>
> "The disclaimer must be made, however, that while these statistics are useful for gauging the nature of psychiatric breakdowns within the magical girl population, no person who has access to these statistics should consider them a true measure of the *number* of Reformatting operations carried out. Leaving aside Reformatting carried out in the context of classified operations, the prevalence of undocumented Reformatting capabilities within the veteran population is believed to be astonishingly high, perhaps even as high as one in ten. Though unauthorized Reformatting is subject to strict penalties, even when done with consent, only a few prosecutions have ever been carried out. It is believed that black market or even self-Reformatting represent a substantial number of unrecorded cases."
>
> **— Reformatting Statistics, Executive Summary Produced on Request for MSY Leadership Committee**
>
> "The universe may be timeless, but if you imagine breaking it into pieces, some of the pieces can serve as clocks for the others. Time emerges from timelessness. We perceive time because we are, by our very nature, one of those pieces."
>
> **— Craig Callendar, Philosopher**

They returned to the surface for debriefing a short while after Gracia's "interrogation" of Sacnite. Without the suppression field, the invasion force's teleporters and clairvoyants were now free to operate, and teams of magical girls probed the underground complex, capturing and retrieving the guards that were still wandering the complex, devoid of a central mission. There was no controlling AI here, just what were effectively drones, programmed to follow a plan that was no longer relevant.

With the main colony now firmly under Governance control, individual clairvoyants fanned out across the surface of the planet, searching for the elusive second base where the cult leader was holed up with the colonists' children. Governance satellites and ships had naturally already scanned most of the planet, but had thus far failed to find anything of note. It was considered a likely possibility that this second base was cloaked with the same technology that had concealed the nuclear device, which is why it was necessary to send out whatever clairvoyants they could. It would still be a massive search operation, though, and desperate in the knowledge that the Cult leader could be doing anything in the interim.

Another likely possibility, one that they were hoping wasn't true, was that Cult leader had managed to trick Sacnite, and had simply left the planet altogether, escaping the planet in a cloaked ship.

Questions still abounded, of course, most prominently the seemingly impossible access to resources and technology the colony had displayed, including technology Governance itself had

no access to, and would be greatly desirous of acquiring—the stealth device surrounding the nuke had already been retrieved, the engineers lamenting Meiqing's hasty crushing of the device, along with the radiation damage from the sub-critical uranium.

"I wonder what's going to happen to all those clones," Meiqing said out loud, cradling a cup of Chinese rice wine. "Even with all that happened to them, many of them are still going to be loyal to the Cult. I doubt they're going to believe the things they're being told."

Ryouko had never known Meiqing to drink and disapproved—but what was there to say? A lot had happened.

"It should be possible to reveal their memories as fake with a session from one of the MSY telepaths, though it's going to take a while, with the number of girls involved. I don't want to have to be the one the see the looks on their faces, though. I'm glad we have… professionals to deal with it."

"You're forgetting about the guards," Asami said. "They'll definitely believe us, but—"

"The important thing is not whether they believe us, but the damage that's been done to them," Meiqing said. "I asked Gracia. She said that spending that long with your consciousness suppressed eventually degrades your core brain circuits. The older ones are going to be spending time with neurosurgeons and healers. The damage wouldn't even be repairable without magical healers, since otherwise the information would be lost forever."

Ryouko glanced at her friend, whose eyes looked subdued and exhausted. She regretted that her friend had been forced to experience this, since she had probably been roped in by her connection to Ryouko, not just her earth-related powers.

In the end, though, Meiqing had been indispensable to the mission, just as Ryouko had been. The Goddess had foreseen it all.

"It looks like I'm getting some leave time after this," Meiqing said, unprompted. "Time to go home, get pampered by my parents, and get prodded by my designated therapist. Honestly, I'd hoped I'd never have to see her again after our introduction, but here I am. I need it, to be honest."

There was a lot left unsaid in her words. How little she had been prepared to experience all this, even compared to Ryouko and Asami. The many truths she had never wanted to face.

Meiqing looked down into her drink.

"I wonder how common it is, to want another wish after your first one. I thought it would be enough, saving my family's mining companies. I thought, I could come out here and fight, with no regrets. Instead…"

Meiqing's voice trailed off, as her two friends looked on in concern.

"What would you want to wish for?" Asami prompted. "If it's not too much to ask, that is."

Meiqing spun her cup slowly in her hand.

"I'd want to rewrite history, and give those clones the lives they never had," Meiqing said, looking up and smiling wanly. "A bit ambitious, right? I'm not sure I'd quite have the potential to pull it off, even if I still had a wish to spare."

Ryouko bit back a comment about the ambiguous nature of potential, ducking her head to hide the gesture.

"I wonder…" Ryouko began, after a long moment of silence.

The other two looked at her, as she continued to formulate her thoughts in silence.

"I wonder if they'd let us visit Sacnite," she said, finally, looking back up at the eyes of her friends. "I think it would be good for all of us to talk to her again, and see that she's doing alright."

Meiqing's eyes perked up in hope for a moment.

"Why do you think they'll let us talk to her?" Asami asked. "If I were them, I wouldn't let anyone talk to her. They're probably not done examining her memories, or doing whatever interrogation they want to do. I'm not sure I'd want to see any of it."

The implied cynicism of Asami's words chilled Ryouko. This mission had taken something out of all of them.

And to think it's not even over yet, she thought. They still hadn't found where the cult leader was hiding, or any of the children they had supposedly set out to save.

"Well, I think if anyone can get in to talk to her, it's me, and us," Ryouko said, realizing that she was placing herself on a bit of an invisible platform. "Let me talk to Kyouko, or Mami, and maybe something will happen."

"Only if the MHD approves it," Meiqing grumbled.

"Probably," Ryouko agreed.

Mami cleared her throat, buying herself just a moment of time. Four and a half centuries of life, and she still wasn't really used to talking to large groups of people.

It had to be done, though, just like everything.

She looked out over the crowd of reporter and blogger avatars seated in front of her, gathered to hear a special announcement from the Chief of the General Staff. The press conference was a formality, but being allowed to sit in on Armed Forces Announcements was considered a major token of accomplishment, as a well as of a certain degree of access to Governance. Right there in the front row she could see prominent military blogger Avnit Hassan, as well as Agatha Amaranth, one of the top reporters for the Armed Forces Network. Mami exchanged glances with Agatha for a moment, nodding knowingly. Openly one of the mouthpieces of Governance, AFN had the privilege of receiving many press releases ahead of time, including this one.

"Citizens of Governance," she addressed, reading directly off of a speech prepared for her by her staff. "Approximately two weeks ago, an astronomical survey probe detected a radio signal emanating from an unexplored system deep within the relatively unsettled Rhine Sector. The signal was of unambiguously human origin, and contained only the text 'SOS Ordo Illustrata' on repeat. With little other context to go on, we could only conclude the signal had something to do with a fringe religious cult that had once been situated on Optatum, and whose colonization ship had disappeared in 2442, the presumed victims of a Cephalopod attack."

Mami paused, looked around at the crowd of reporters, who were surprised and startled to be hearing something other than the usual run of alien war stories. A moment later, she continued:

"Regardless of the likely source, it was necessary to investigate the situation. A sensor probe sent to the planet shortly afterward was able to discern an unauthorized colony on the surface of a

planet within the Rhine Sector, as well as a large underground structure of unknown purpose. Before more could be discovered, attack satellites launched by the colonists intervened, so the probe was forced to evacuate."

"As everyone well knows, Governance and the Armed Forces do not take the forming of unauthorized colonies lightly. Given the circumstances, it was deemed necessary to intervene as soon as possible, a feat which has been performed rapidly and efficiently over the past twenty-four hours, and not a moment too soon, as events would clearly illustrate."

Mami took a rhetorical breath, knowing that the next section was the most important.

"The colony was found to indeed be the site of the Ordo Illustrata, as suggested by the message. In order to penetrate the mysterious underground compound, we sent in a special operations team composed of some of our most experienced commandos, including the Hero of Orpheus herself. There, they were able to disable a WMD-trap the cultists had set, but they also discovered something truly shocking."

She put her arms on the podium, making a show of collecting herself.

"Apparently, the cultists had been cloning young girls *en masse*, in an attempt to engineer magical girl contracts, using implanted memories. This is, I want to make clear, something that fundamentally will not work, but they apparently did not know this. Further, even after this grotesque violation of the Core Rights, they went even further, choosing to perform implant-mediated mind control on those girls whose altered memories began to fail. It was beyond disgusting."

Sucking in a deep breath, Mami did not have to fake her barely-controlled outrage. When she had first heard the news, Machina had put her into emotional suppression for the first time since she had gotten the TacComp implants. It had been… an interesting experience, one that remained a bit of a blur to her.

At this point the reporters in the room had transitioned from merely startled to downright shocked. Many shared Mami's expression of disgust, and all of them were in tense communication with whatever organizations they represented—all except Agatha, who played along with the other's reactions, even as the Armed Forces Network was already pushing out the articles and special features, far ahead of everyone else.

After a suitably long pause, she continued:

"I am pleased to report that the Cultists have been neutralized with a minimum of casualties, and that most of the cloned girls are now safely in our custody. They will be undergoing our best medical and psychiatric therapy, and our specialists are confident that they will go on to live happy, productive lives once they can be inserted into general society. For their privacy and protection, we will not be allowing members of the media access to them, nor will we permit direct interviews. That will be their own decision to make, when the time comes. Even now, our forces continue to scour the planet for any additional cultists or underground bases."

Mami bent her head for a moment.

"And now my representative will take questions," she said. "Keep in mind that many additional details will be forthcoming soon."

She dissolved her avatar out of the simulation, and her press secretary took the press, but she kept her field of vision on the assembled reporters.

Her announcement had been terse and short on detail, but that was fairly typical for announcements nowadays. It was understood that the majority of those details would be included in the official press release, or relayed outward by other channels. There was no need to waste anyone's virtual breath on all those manifold details.

She watched her representative demur question after question with "That is not yet known." and "I am not privileged to reveal that information."

It had still been a press conference as much characterized by what she was leaving out as by what she had revealed. Every word of it was carefully crafted to present Governance in the best possible light, to take advantage of the opportunity for a propaganda win instead of trying to undertake the arduous task of a complete cover-up.

Over the next couple of days the media frenzy would grow enormous, but denied access to anyone participating in the operation or any information about the location of the operation, they would have nothing to go on other than what Governance or perhaps the MSY chose to feed them. There would be images and holos of the cloning chambers, of hollow-eyed girls in armor suits—features carefully modified to conceal their future identities—all the nightmares of the Freedom Alliance coming alive again. There would be magical girls from MagOps and psychiatrists talking to tearful rescued clones. There would be repentant cultists talking about the horrors of the colony.

There would be no mention of the missing children until they were found, no mention of the colonist's unusual resistance, no mention of the unusual stealth device, no mention of a myriad of details that were still puzzling even to Governance.

All half-truths, but there was nothing the media could do to prove anything otherwise. In that sense, it was fortunate everything had happened on a remote world in the Rhine Sector, where the military could cordon off everything with little fuss.

There would have to be a mention of the magical girl, of course—Sacnite, if the therapists decided she should keep the name. It was the only explanation for the mysterious radio signal, and it made for excellent pageantry. There was still the problem of how best to break that revelation to the public, but Mami already had an idea for that.

Mami shook her head at herself, wondering what the Mami that had made her wish would think of her now.

Used car salesman…

"I can't believe that actually worked," Meiqing said, as they waited outside the suite on-board the Zhukov where Sacnite was being kept.

"What? You doubt Ryouko's influence?" Asami asked, smilingly teasing.

Meiqing rolled her eyes.

"Yes, I doubted her influence, and I was wrong. I can see you two will have a happy future together."

Ryouko ignored the banter, preferring to spend her time thinking about what to say to Sacnite. In truth, she had thought up this meeting on the spur of the moment, and hadn't really expected either Kyouko or Mami to be responsive—she had been shocked when Mami had actually written back, saying she'd be glad to arrange for them to have another meeting with Sacnite, pending MHD

approval.

A moment later she looked up, sensing someone approaching, the long empty corridors of the immense battlecruiser lighting up with their approach.

"Azrael," Meiqing said, greeting the newcomer. "What a surprise to see you here!"

For her part, Azrael glanced between the three of them with surprised, wide eyes, causing Ryouko to realize for the first time just how *large* Azrael's eyes were—almost on the brink of being inhuman, one might say.

"Well, I'm here to talk to Sacnite," Azrael said, sounding nervous. "For a propaganda shoot, I guess, though also to try and comfort her, you know, with the whole rogue colony thing. It doesn't really make sense, since if it's being released to the public I can't really talk about my background, but Mami says I'm photogenic, as long as they're careful to edit out the hump on my back. I didn't know you'd be here."

Azrael looked away from the three of them, seemingly distracted. Something seemed wrong with her, but at the moment Ryouko was more concerned with what she had said.

"A propaganda shoot?" Ryouko echoed. "We're being recorded?"

"You didn't know?" Azrael asked, looking at her in confusion. "The military wants to have videos of us interacting with Sacnite, so we can look like we're really trying to help. But then, I guess they didn't tell me you'd be here. I—"

Azrael's eyes lost focus for a moment, looking at the ceiling. Ryouko felt the soft sensation of a new message arriving in her inbox.

"Oh, there's the official orders," Azrael said. "Wonder why it took this long."

"Propaganda?" Meiqing asked incredulously. "I'm not going to fake—"

"No, no, it's not like that," Azrael said, waving her hand at the other girl. "If they wanted to fake anything, they'd get professional actors. For people like us, they'll just want us to be ourselves, then they'll use the footage however they like. Read the orders."

Ryouko already had, finding little of note other than that there *were* orders, along with the standard admonishments to keep a lid on sensitive facts.

"I'm surprised they were willing to go public with what happened here," Asami said. "You would think that if they'd keep anything a secret, they'd keep this a secret."

"It was too big," Azrael said. "Could they have done it if they had tried? Probably. But it's not worth going to all that trouble when they could control the story instead, and make it the heroic military going in to save terrified cloned teenagers. Really, it could not have possibly worked out better for Governance and the MSY. The hero of Orpheus, Mami, a crazy religious cult, evil cloning. Not enough gray to stand out unless you really look for it. Not like, you know, my home planet."

Azrael said it matter-of-factly, but the reminder of her history put a brief chill on the conversation, as the others struggled to think up what to say in response.

"So what were you, uh, up to during the landing?" Ryouko asked finally.

"It was kind of boring, to be honest," Azrael said. "I'm trained mostly as an infiltrator. In this case,

I was supposed to talk to and deal with any magical girls that showed up from the colony. None ever did, so I ended up doing some fire support, then cooling my heels while we waited for you guys to send a message. Underground chambers aren't a great place for someone with wings. It makes me shudder just thinking about it."

Meiqing looked about to say something, but the door next to them slid open and Sacnite's new live-in minder stuck her head out.

"Alright, I think we're ready for you. Come on in!"

The group of four stepped into the doorway, a bit wary of the minder, a cheerful looking, middle-aged blond woman who, according to the nomenclator, was also a magical girl more than three times as old as all of them combined.

"Now obviously she's a bit distressed by all that has happened," the minder whispered to them. "I've tried to give her a comfortable environment, to ease the transition to her new life. It's not easy, since I have to try not to remind her of her false memories, you know, but that's for others to try to work with."

She guided them past the living area to two bedrooms in the back, pointing them towards the one on the left.

"She's waiting for you in there. I'll leave you to your privacy. I left you some of my famous scones and tea for snacks. Look forward to that."

The woman trotted away, leaving the four other magical girls blinking. She had seemed like a bit of a doting mother-figure, but something about the way she carried herself…

She could probably kill us all with a thought, Azrael thought, following their gazes. *But let's not dwell on it.*

The door in front of them was still closed, so Azrael waved it open and stepped inside, pulling the other three with her.

They found Sacnite seated on her bed idly chewing on a scone, dressed now in a loose skirt and button-down shirt.

She looked… okay. Not great.

The girl waved vaguely for the four of them to sit, and a set of four chairs assembled themselves on the spot, from a large set of smart-blocks that had been thoughtfully left in the corner of the room. As they sat, a table assembled itself in their middle.

"I like this furniture," Sacnite said airily. "We didn't have anything like that down at the colony. Not on the surface either, if these memories are anything go by."

"How are you holding up?" Ryouko asked. "You doing okay?"

Sacnite glanced down for a moment.

"I've had some time to think about things," she said, leaning over towards Ryouko. "I, uh, wanted to say…"

The girl sucked in a breath.

"They told me you're the only reason I'm still alive. They said your team was going to kill me,

until you stopped them."

Ryouko looked away, a little embarrassed.

"I wouldn't put it that way. I wasn't trying to save you. I was just… responding to events."

"I'm thankful. There were times, earlier, when I thought about how much better it would be to end it all. But, in the end, I couldn't do it. I wanted to live."

Ryouko closed her eyes. The words hurt to hear, because she knew Sacnite was only a child, even compared to her. The way she spoke sounded like she had discussed it once already, probably with the platoon of the psychiatrists that had descended upon the cloned girls. In a certain way, Sacnite was even younger than she should have been, because most of her memories were false, and even her ability to speak had probably been directly wired into her brain.

"I'm sorry you had to go through all that," Asami said, sounding shaky.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Ryouko said, opening her eyes. "These are my friends, who were also on the team, except for Azrael. She's, uh, just someone I know."

Azrael smiled politely.

"I was also born on a colony world that, hmm, also didn't work out," she said. "I have good memories of my home, though, so I can't say my situation is like yours. That was quite a few years ago, though."

"Don't worry," she appended, looking at the others. "Like I said, they're going to edit afterward, so it doesn't much matter what we say."

"I have good memories too," Sacnite said bitterly. "It's just that none of them are real. Even then, I'd hold onto them if I could, but I can't."

The raw anger of the comment was startling enough that Ryouko turned her head slightly, catching a glimpse of the girl's face. Though her words had been clear, her face had the frustrated, pained look of someone trying to hold back tears.

Ryouko looked around for someone seated farther away to bail her out, but Meiqing and Asami looked frozen, while Azrael merely looked back at her with her head tilted.

"Those are just ghosts," Ryouko said inelegantly, reaching for Sacnite.

She pulled the other girl into a side hug as she started sniffling.

"Hey, come on," she said, wiping the other girl's eyes. "You can't let them get to you like that."

"I miss my mother," the girl said, rubbing her face into Ryouko's sleeve. "I can't help it. I keep thinking about her."

"It's okay to miss her, but we have to focus on making new memories together," Ryouko answered.

The girl looked up at her, tears spilling out of her eyes onto dark brown skin.

"You mean it?"

Ryouko opened her mouth, freezing for just a moment.

You… didn't think that through, Clarisse commented.

No, no I didn't, Ryouko thought. *It just seemed like the natural thing to say.*

"Of course I do!" Ryouko said, trying to sound cheerful.

In for a penny, in for a pound, she thought.

Sacnite nodded, and even smiled, seeming happy for a moment.

Goddess, she's young, Clarisse thought. *Mentally, I mean. Much younger than you were when I first, uh, met you.*

It probably hasn't been more than four years since she left the tank, Clarisse, Ryouko thought.

I know; I'm just reiterating.

I haven't heard you swear to the Goddess before, Ryouko appended.

Hey, it can't hurt.

Ryouko looked up for a moment at the others, catching Azrael giving her a thumbs-up. Had she…

Asami stood up, walking over to the bed and sitting down next to Sacnite.

"Did you have any friends down at the colony?" she asked. "How are they doing?"

"They're mostly okay, I think," Sacnite said. "I got to see some of them. They don't tell me much, though."

I hope we didn't kill one of them during the mission, Meiqing thought, grimacing.

Thanks, I didn't even think of that, Asami shot back sarcastically. *And my mood was improving too.*

Ryouko smiled. Her mood was improving too, even if she had become abruptly aware that the propaganda video of her comforting Sacnite would soon be broadcast across the tiny human corner of galaxy.

It just felt pleasant, feeling like she had made a difference with something so simple.

"We should visit her again," Asami said, as they stepped back out into *Zhukov's* hallways.

"I agree," Azrael echoed.

Ryouko agreed as well, but her attention was focused instead on Meiqing, whose expression looked troubled, shoulders tense. The conversation with Sacnite had seemed to disturb her, rather than relieve her, and Ryouko was worried that it had been a bad idea.

"You want to get some food?" Asami asked, seemingly determined to push forward with an air of normalcy.

Meiqing felt Ryouko's gaze on her, turning slightly to look at the others.

Meiqing shook her head slightly, not at Asami's question, but at the general situation.

"I'm glad we came," she said. "This kind of thing…"

She turned away from the rest of them, almost talking to the wall, shoulders hunched, but voice still clear.

"During the Unification Wars, there was an entire branch—nearly half—of my family that supported the FA. It tore us apart. Sisters and cousins killing each other, things like that. It nearly broke us. After the war, it turned out that some of us had been involved in engineering the FA Elites. The shame stains everything now, like a giant open wound, and the other families never let us forget about it. I'm only a teenager, and I'm already sick of hearing about it."

She paused.

"It should feel like redemption to be doing all this, but seeing all this in person makes it worse somehow."

"Genetic engineering can be used for good as well as evil," Azrael said. "I thought we talked about this."

"I know."

A moment later Meiqing straightened her back and walked away, making it clear she didn't intend to be followed.

The cloak covering Azrael's back jerked slightly, and Ryouko knew that Azrael was twitching her wing roots in an abortive gesture of emotion.

"She'll be fine, eventually," Azrael said. "It's hard being new to the business."

"I hope," Asami said.

Kyouko squinted up at the unfamiliar light of X-25's star, shining through gaping holes in the ceiling of what had been the colonists' main religious structure. The light glinted off the main gateway into what had been the colonists' underground cloning facility, underneath what had been an enormous altar. A few military personnel milled about and guard drones buzzed throughout the area, but the building was otherwise abandoned. It made for a substantial improvement from how it had looked only recently, scattered with debris and the shattered remnants of a giant statue, dead colonists scattered where they had died.

"So this is the place, huh?"

Kyouko looked up, surprised at having been addressed.

"Oh, yeah," she said.

She had been lost in her thoughts—not a very Kyouko-like thing to do, she was aware, but she had much to think about.

The girl she had brought here, a clairvoyant-telepath named Jong Yi, peered up at the building's structure.

"This would have been a nice place, before, you know, the bombing."

Kyouko shook her head.

"A nice place with a black heart."

Jong Yi looked down at the floor for a moment.

"I should remind you again that I'm not actually sure that this will work," she said. "My base power is intended to detect the intentions of individuals at *the current moment*. It's only recently that I started experimenting with stretching it into the past."

"Yes, and, as such, you threw a flag in the system," Kyouko said. "If you pull this off, you'll be officially too valuable to be on any frontline MC squads."

Jong Yi grunted, grasping a group of grief cubes and holding them next to her heart, where her soul gem was.

"It's not my intention to be leaving my girls," she said. "I just thought it'd be useful for scouting."

She transformed, planting her ruby scepter into the ground in front of her. The two of them would have made a pretty sight in combat, Kyouko thought.

"I heard Nakihara Asami was on the team that got sent down," Jong Yi said as she closed her eyes.

"Yes."

"I'm surprised. I was glad she was sent off the lines. She wasn't cut out for it. I didn't think she'd end up in a mission like that, of all places."

"There were special circumstances. Look, I don't want to be mean, but I'd rather not stand her chatting. Lives—"

"I know," Jong Yi said, interrupting. "I can do two things at once."

The tip of her scepter began to glow a pale red, growing slowly in intensity, at first barely visible against the sunlight, but then beginning to cast a faint red tint on her surroundings.

"There was a statue here," Jong Yi said. "It was important. They worshipped it."

"Yes," Kyouko said. "Unfortunately too much of it was destroyed, and none of our drones got a good look at it."

She bit back an impatient "Focus!" command.

Jong Yi seemed about to say something, but instead shook her head, keeping her eyes closed.

A moment later a series of red lines began to appear around her, forming what almost resembled an intricate spider web, though without the carefully patterned order. Red lines showed people moving in and out of pews, up to the altar, in and out of the building.

Kyouko bit back another question, deciding to take Jong Yi at her word that, yes, she could spread this web of intention over the entire town. Far in the skies above them, drones kept watch for the anticipated red lines. If she was right, there would eventually be only one red line leading out of the town, leading far into the distance.

Until then, she could only stand and wait, and hope Jong Yi could really do it. Thus far, the surveillance sweeps of the planet, both conventionally and magically, had turned up little. There was a whole planet to search, and against unknown technology, only clairvoyance was reliable—

but standard clairvoyance couldn't usually sweep a planet.

Specialists were called for, and Kyouko had searched the manifests of the task force until she found someone, anyone, who might fit the bill. Jong Yi was perfect—if she could really pull off what she said was a recent, experimental extension of her powers.

Even if Jong Yi couldn't cover the whole town, they could still recharge her and move her section by section in a circle around the town, until they found the red line they wanted. But that would take a long time, and Kyouko was getting increasingly impatient. She feared what might happen to those kids, and wanted to meet this DeWitt once and for all.

There was nothing effective to do but wait, the kind of situation that Kyouko had never handled well. She preferred to be always on the move, rather than to be forced to stop and think. It was a tendency that she had managed to quell over time but, fundamentally, her personality just wasn't suited to that kind of introspection.

Stop thinking about it so much! Just roll with the punches, like I do!

She could still remember herself saying that, so many years ago. It was good advice, advice she had always tried to follow, and she had done fine for herself—she liked to think that after so many years of going by gut instinct, her gut had learned to be pretty damn accurate.

But the girl she had given that advice to hadn't listened, not to a single word, and she had died so, so easily. Compared to old-growth timber like her and Mami, Sayaka had been a mere sapling, crushed underfoot far too early.

Maybe that was why these missing children bothered her so much. So many saplings, with no chance to learn the ways of life, being placed in the path of a herd of voracious goats. She could recall all too clearly the many girls she had seen cut down similarly early. Not just Sayaka, but many others, some cut down by Oriko in one of her rampages, without even a chance to see what was coming for them—others disappearing into the night, without a chance for anyone else to even know what had happened.

It was never spoken aloud, but every girl had known the truth, deep in their heart. It didn't matter how much you strove to be smarter, faster, and stronger than the others. It didn't matter how unbreakable you seemed. In the end, unless you were Clarisse with her wish, you had to be *lucky*. There was nothing that made her intrinsically better than any of the rest. No reason she had lived and Sayaka had died other than time, circumstance, and place.

Where would she be now if Mami hadn't been there to catch her after her family died? Where would she be if Mami hadn't heard her family's name on the news just in the nick of time? Where would she be if Mami hadn't taken the leap of intuition, or had been just thirty minutes slower?

She would be with the Goddess, and her father would in the end have killed her just as surely as he had killed her sister.

She sighed. This was why she didn't like introspection. All it ever turned into was an exercise in staring into the abyss, and observing what stared back. It simply wasn't something you could do. Mami hadn't believed her about that, and look where she ended up.

And yet, she couldn't shake the quiet, nagging voice that reminded her that if her team hadn't forced her to stop and re-evaluate, she would've gotten them all killed. Nor could she understand why she couldn't now seem to stop herself thinking about things.

Well, there was another side to introspection. Occasionally you remembered something funny. For

instance, the next line she had said to Sayaka was:

What does it matter if your soul is in the gem? Your body still works, right? You can still f— him, can't ya?

If she recalled correctly, Sayaka had then slapped her hard enough to send her flying into the nearest wall. Magical girl strength was scary sometimes. Fortunately, Mami and Kyouko were both quite skilled in the magical repair of walls, from sad necessity.

"What are you smiling so much about?" Jong Yi asked, breaking Kyouko's reverie.

"Just reminiscing," Kyouko responded automatically, before realizing that Jong Yi was no longer channeling her magic, and had walked over next to Kyouko.

Checking her mindscape, Kyouko saw that one of the drones had successfully spotted a single magical line running out of the colony, and off into the distance. Her TacComp apparently hadn't thought it worth interrupting her ruminations to tell her about it, which was odd.

"Now it's just a matter of tracking it, right?" Kyouko asked.

"Yes," Jong Yi said. "Following that one line will be way easier than saturating a whole town with clairvoyance. But we have to be careful—eventually that line will run into the person it represents, and I haven't yet figured out how to hide it. I can't imagine it's possible to miss a glowing red line appearing out of nowhere. I wouldn't assume anything good about it, myself."

Kyouko closed her eyes thoughtfully.

"We already discussed this," she said. "We'll have to chance it. We can scan in front of our path, but if we eventually run into the end, we might have to act fast."

"I know," Jong Yi said, nodding thoughtfully.

The girl peered down at the floor for a moment.

"So what specialists are we bringing?" she asked, finally.

"Well, this time we know we might be going into a hostage situation," Kyouko said. "Or at least a situation that might call for more subtlety than blowing everything up. So teleporters, clairvoyants, telepaths. Fortunately, Task Force Rhamnusia has had to deal with these kinds of situations before, so we even have a few unusual girls to help."

Jong Yi scraped the toe of her shoe against the floor.

"I won't ask about these previous situations," Jong Yi said. "The briefing certainly had enough. But what if we run into another nuke?"

"We're prepared for that too," Kyouko said. "If you'll remember, we have a teleporter who can get us far as two hundred kilometers away. I'm more concerned about the children."

I was looking forward to a break, myself, Azrael thought, her telepathic voice relayed through the magical girl network from the other side of the formation.

Ryouko peered out the window, her ocular implants zooming in on the distant Azrael, dressed in jumpsuit, goggles and transparent, barely-there wings. She didn't look particularly regal, but regal was *not* the order of the day—they were all stealthed, in one way or another, and she could only

see Azrael because she was permitted to.

The stealthed air vehicle she was riding, an Icarus Industries *S27 Noctowl*, was shared with Kyouko and a few of the other magical girls. Some she now felt almost intimately familiar with, such as Gracia, Nana, and Marianne, who talked in quiet voices with Kyouko. Others were entirely new, veterans from Task Force Rhamnusia specialized in the bloodless capture of civilian populations. These girls stayed oddly silent, almost brooding.

Asami was there, too, of course, in case of some more squid-like stealth devices she might be helpful in detecting.

Azrael flying so far away from the group made Ryouko a bit nervous, as did the arrangement in general. Their squadron of stealthed transports flew in a tight, silent formation, flanked by air support platforms and numerous drones. Most of the transports carried only less valuable human specialists from Task Force Rhamnusia—the magical girl operatives rode with Ryouko, so she could evacuate them all at once in the event of unexpected nuclear detonation.

Which was why Azrael's positioning made her nervous. Azrael was too far away, in her opinion. Detailed simulation had suggested that the barrier generators could probably stall an explosion just long enough for her to gather everyone with a few short range hops, then charge for the truly long-range teleports, but every millisecond counted, and the extra time it took her to charge a teleport to Azrael could easily be important.

It went almost without saying that in the event of disaster, the regular humans—pilots and special forces—would simply be left behind. Ryouko could not carry them all, she was the only teleporter in the Task Force with enough meaningful range, and it didn't make sense to leave extra personnel behind in a situation where they had more than enough people and every additional ounce of firepower, lethal or not, might make all the difference.

We've been over this, Clarisse thought, sighing almost audibly. *The extra time it would take you to get to Azrael is insignificant relative to how long it would take you to charge the long-range teleport. Either the barrier generators can hold, or they can't. That tiny time difference is unlikely to matter.*

It just makes me nervous, and it's not just about time to escape. In the time I'd be delayed getting to her, the radiation would tear her apart.

Which is not *a lethal injury.*

I just don't… want anything to be my fault, that's all.

She felt a slight tug at her hair, and glanced over, finding that Asami had twisted some of their hair together playfully. The girl smiled at her, and she smiled back.

A moment later, Asami closed her eyes again, going back to scanning the area in front of them for gravitational anomalies, keeping their hair together.

She envied Asami a little. She envied the way she seemed not to think about what was waiting for them, about all the things that could go wrong, about the people that might die. She didn't mean that Asami didn't think about it at all—of course she did—but she could move on to think about other things. Ryouko, on the other hand, found that she could only focus on what she knew was important, on the details of nuclear escape and nonlethal takedown—on the minute details that could save their lives, soon enough.

It helped that Asami had an actual task to focus on, to distract her attention, while Ryouko was

reduced to constantly checking her soul gem for unusual brightness.

Those guards that died in the underground base weren't your fault, Clarisse thought. *There was no way anyone could have known. You're letting it eat at you too much.*

I know, but that doesn't mean I can stop it.

Ryouko glanced at her soul gem again, this time narrowing her eyes. The light sensors attached to it had registered a slight uptick in intensity, and looking at it, she could almost imagine…

"Woah!"

Everyone onboard the shuttle looked up at the pilot's exclamation, and Ryouko stiffened, preparing for the worst.

But there was no bright flash, no panicked emergency barriers going up. Instead, an urgent notification appeared inside Ryouko's mindscape, unboxing itself immediately into new, directly implanted information.

"A large base just appeared out of nowhere directly in front of us," Kyouko said, repeating the obvious for the sake of discussion. "The scanners are still working on examining the layout, but it's nearly deserted, except for a small group of people deep within the base, mostly children. I think we found what we're looking for."

"Did we just get inside their stealth bubble or something?" Asami asked.

"No. This base is showing up on the satellites now. It's almost really as if it just appeared out of nowhere."

Ryouko looked at her soul gem. The brightness she thought she had been seeing was gone.

She took a moment, just a moment, to peer outside at the ground below, which at the moment showed only the dense inscrutable canopy of some tropical jungle.

"We have to go now," she said, looking up. "I'm in range to teleport. I'm sure they know their stealth is down. We have to go before they do something crazy."

Kyouko glanced at the team clairvoyants for confirmation.

"It definitely looks like the Cult Leader. He looks shocked. Surrounded by unconscious children lying on the floor. Otherwise, nothing of note."

Kyouko nodded.

"Then let's go. The rest of the squadron will drop down whenever they can."

One of the other teleporters vanished immediately in a puff of smoke, the others shifting inwards towards Ryouko. As they did, she worked through the possible scenarios in her head, biting her lip. The teleportation range—about 50 km—was close enough that she could get back out relatively quickly since she wouldn't be expending her teleportation ability on a full-range teleport. But unless a disaster that necessitated an emergency evac happened, there was not much else for her to do other than stay alert. It would be up to everyone else to lock down the area as much as possible.

A moment later, the teleporter reappeared, Azrael in tow, and Ryouko could begin the teleport. She closed her eyes to help herself achieve the extra bit of focus…

The spasm of magic that occurred when she reopened her eyes was blindingly fast, even by the standards of someone who had seen so many teleportation insertions that the massive barrages of light had started to seem a bit redundant.

The cornerstone of Task Force Rhamnusia's nonlethal capture force was Gabrielle Siegel, whose hallmark skill was an area-of-effect field that slowed time for everyone except those she pre-designated. That was coupled instantaneously with a massive barrage of sticky, magically enhanced spider silk that seemed to fall from the sky, *another* set of strings from Marianne, a fusillade of mind control effects, a flash of light intended to blind anyone in the area, multiple barriers, and a set of Kyouko mirror images appearing on the other side of the room, purely as a distraction.

I don't sense anything, Asami thought.

Soul gem looks normal, Ryouko echoed.

Nana took a moment to assess the situation, then blasted the area with a bright purple shimmer of technology- and magic-disabling power. With the true finesse of a practiced user, the magic of the rest of the team was untouched.

Only then was it possible to get a clear view of their surroundings. An avalanche of glowing white threads plastered the room, covering both the walls and row after row of occupied beds. These were covered so thickly that it was only just possible to vaguely discern the shape of human forms buried underneath, though it was trivial to deduce from the size of bodies and the clairvoyants' previous observations that these were almost certainly the missing children.

"They're still alive, just unconscious," Gracia said, grasping Kyouko gently by the arm. An unnecessary comment, perhaps, but a familiar look had crossed the Ancient's face, and it hadn't been obvious if Kyouko remembered the clairvoyants' pre-battle observations.

Within Gabrielle's time-slowing field, they were able to take a luxurious amount of time to scan their perimeter, searching for threats, traps, or even the slow-motion shockwave of an incoming explosion. None of those were apparent.

"Keep the field up, Gabrielle," Kyouko said. "I believe we have an appointment with Mr. Dewitt over there."

At the end of one of the rows of beds was the kneeling figure of a man, probably in a position of prayer, though now trapped in almost a grotesque caricature, struggling in extreme slow motion against the white threads that bound him.

Kyouko did not wait for him to finish, stalking her way across the floor with the rest of team following warily, two designated members dropping out to check on the unconscious children.

She grabbed Grigori Dewitt by the collar, drawing the man up into the air. The white threads that bound him vanished, leaving the larger man dangling almost absurdly, kicking his legs in surprise now that he was released from the slowed time field.

Kyouko swung him back down, pulling the starched collar of his black and white reverend's outfit down to her face level as if he weighed absolutely nothing, dragging his legs along the floor.

"Checkmate, Mr. Dewitt," she growled into his face, turning his name into an expletive. "Let me make things real clear to you. You tell me what the hell you were thinking with this colony, and if I like what I hear, I may just let you live. No guarantees, though."

I'm reminding you, we take him alive if we can, Marianne thought, sternly. *If there's going to be any killing, Governance wants to do it.*

The cult leader stopped tugging pointlessly at Kyouko's grip and looked up at the roof.

"Ah, Sakura Kyouko," the man said, voice distant and unpanicked. "I know about you. Poor lost soul. You have no understanding of what you could become."

Kyouko's face contorted, and her fist tightened on his collar, so expressively that Ryouko had visions of Dewitt's rail-thin neck snapping like a twig.

It didn't, though, and the man even continued to speak, Kyouko showing admirable discipline—or simply speechless rage—by not interrupting him.

"She showed the way, but she was lost too. I saw her—though she thought herself concealed, *I knew*. I thought I was alone, but they came to help me. It all came together as planned."

"Stop trying to be clever," Kyouko warned. "You know we can read your mind by force if we have to. We can make it much worse than any torture."

"Oh, I know," Dewitt said. "There are many things you girls can do. More than you think. Something blocks your transcendence. It was necessary to find out what it was."

"Hence, the *experiments?"* Kyouko demanded.

"It was necessary," Dewitt said calmly. "Better clones than any actual children. You think I'm a monster, but look, I brought the children of the colony away with me, away from the fighting, away from your poisoned world."

He gestured grandiosely—or tried to, at the children arrayed around them.

The doors of the warehouse sized room burst open, some of the special forces troops that formed the remainder of their operations force showing up to help secure the hostages. True professionals, they began scattering among the children, checking them and preparing to move them out of the area, ignoring whatever it was Kyouko was doing.

"The clones were a disappointment," Dewitt said. "Only one of them ever made a contract. Before that, I wasn't even sure they had true souls."

Kyouko visibly gritted her teeth.

"You're a monster," she said. "Your cult was supposed to be against the use of magical girls in combat, and then you send one to lure us into a trap?"

"Perhaps I am a monster, but no more than you," he said. "And she was only a clone."

Kyouko was visibly straining at the edges of her restraint, and the other girls in the area tensed, ready to try and intervene if Kyouko did anything rash.

But Kyouko did not snap.

"Impressive," the cult leader said, patronizingly. "You were supposed to kill me on the spot. Any other questions for me before you try your blasphemous mind-reading on me, then?"

"No," Kyouko growled. "I'm done here. I just wanted to see your face."

"And I wanted to see yours. Goodbye."

Dewitt's eyes rolled up weirdly in his head, and Kyouko's eyes widened in turn.

If the rest of the team had really believed they could successfully stop Kyouko from executing the cult leader, they were swiftly disabused of the notion. To Ryouko, it had seemed that one moment Kyouko was there, peering into the cult leader's eyes with shock, and then the next, Kyouko was mid—follow-through on a vicious slice with her spear, blood and gore obscuring the tip, and Grigori Dewitt's head already in the air, eyes open, falling towards the floor.

It should not have been possible for her to move fast enough to evade Ryouko's perception, but she had done so.

In the next moment, Gabrielle and one of the teleporters had grabbed Kyouko's arms to restrain her, too late, and the ripping sound of the air being torn open by Kyouko's slice finally reached Ryouko's ears.

"What the *hell* are you—" Marianne began.

Grab his head! Kyouko thought back. *Stabilize it! The man has suicide implants!*

After only the briefest hesitation, Marianne shot her strings out at Dewitt's head, the almost invisible wires probing prehensilely at the base of the detached spine.

Gabrielle jumped forward, casting her time slow field on the head, while the group healer, who also carried an emergency life support device, rushed forward.

"It's too late," Marianne said, breathlessly. "She was right, but it's already too late. His brain is goo. Melted by special implants. No wonder he was willing to chat. I wondered why he hadn't just killed himself first. I thought maybe he hadn't managed to override the antisuicide controls, or Nana was able to disable something. Shouldn't have underestimated him."

Kyouko's shoulders slumped, and then she pulled her arm away from the teleporter angrily.

"For the record," she spat. "Not everyone puts suicide implants directly in the brain. I figured chopping his head off was worth a try."

"At least the children are alive," Kyouko said, looking back over her shoulder. "Though we'll have to check if they've been messed with. I wanted to know what was going on here. Instead, we're going to have sit around sifting evidence, playing back what the guy said—what a waste of time. I'm sure everything he said was junk."

Asami and Ryouko had merely stood slack-jawed, unable to react to what they were seeing. They had seen enough gore in their simulations to be inured to the decapitation, but everything that had just happened was just…

I think this would be a good time to provide an explanation, a cheery, almost boyish voice thought, resounding in their heads.

It was unmistakably an Incubator, who nonchalantly appeared out of the ether directly in front of Kyouko.

It took Ryouko a moment, but she realized that this wasn't just any Incubator—this was Kyubey, the Mitakiharan Incubator who had contracted her.

"Well then, explain," Kyouko said, glaring at the Incubator with barely concealed fury. *Starting with what you're doing here.*

I tagged along with you on your trip here to monitor events. It was also thought you'd be more receptive to what I said, rather than any other Incubator.

The Incubator glanced at the other girls on the team, almost like a human would.

We've been monitoring this illogical grouping of humans for a while now, ever since we discovered them out here. Their leader had some interesting theories about magical girls that he wished to test.

The Incubator rubbed one of its ears with a paw, seeming almost satisfied with itself.

The creation of new magical girls runs through us. We do not contract girls if it runs contrary to our interests. The only girl we contracted was one we knew would summon assistance here. I am glad we were able to accurately predict that Sacnite's wish would bring you here, though we did not predict how exactly it would happen.

"Why didn't you tell us anything earlier?" Kyouko demanded.

It is not our policy to intervene so directly in the affairs of humans. We allowed Sacnite to contact you, as it was her wish to do so, but otherwise—

"Bullshit!" Kyouko interrupted, almost snarling the word.

She leaned forward, peering directly into the Incubator's eyes.

"You've intervened in our affairs plenty of times. I've seen you do it! And don't pretend you don't rat people out either! If you really wanted us to show up to this colony, you would have just told us!"

The others stood around her, eyes wide in mild shock. Most of them had never seen an Incubator rebuked in such a fashion.

The Incubator tilted its head slightly, saying nothing, and Kyouko continued:

"This colony was here so long because you allowed it to be here, because it suited your purposes somehow."

You should be grateful, the Incubator thought, shaking its head. *Regardless, I thought it might interest you to know something about what we observed here.*

The Incubator looked expressively at the room around them.

First, this facility was not built by your cultists. That is easy enough to deduce, but we can additionally tell you that this was built by another group, who supported the cultists by providing them the weapons and resources to build their base, while they stayed here, hidden in this base. Grigori Dewitt was advised by them. Once it was clear you would find this base, they abandoned him here, with his agreement, and departed in their cloaked ship.

Kyubey dipped his head slightly, as if nodding to itself.

Second, it greatly interested us that they had a statue of Akemi Homura inside their main building. Grigori believed that he had seen Homura earlier on Optatum, after she was supposed to have died, and based much of his insane beliefs on what she had achieved. He was quite sincere in this belief, but that is of course not surprising for someone so insane. After all, we had plenty of Incubators on Optatum at the time, and it is absurd to suggest that he could see her, when we couldn't.

Kyubey looked back up at Kyouko.

"Well?" Kyouko asked, after a long moment of staring. "That's hardly a complete explanation."

We would rather not say anything else.

Kyouko blinked, then snarled, smashing her spear into the spot where the Incubator stood—but it was no longer there. The polished grey flooring cracked open, shards of fabricated rock scattering upward from the point of impact.

Honestly, Kyubey thought, reappearing on Kyouko's shoulder. *So illogical and violent. None of you have managed to kill one of my bodies for centuries. We will forever be confused why you would prefer such waste.*

Kyouko stood back up straight, Kyubey and all, shaking her head.

"It's just stress relief. Not that you understand the concept, you rat."

You should be grateful, the Incubator repeated, its body slowly disappearing. *But it was good to see you, Kyouko.*

Kyubey vanished a moment later, leaving Kyouko standing there holding her spear loosely.

"Did it just call me by my personal name?" she asked, peering over at Marianne.

"Yeah," she said.

"Weird," Kyouko said.

She tapped her foot on the floor one, two, three times, then looked around at the children around her.

"This is pissing me off; I need a break to think."

She turned on her heel and strode briskly towards one of the exits. It was clear that the others weren't intended to follow her.

Kyouko's entire life had been shaped by religion and faith, in both a positive and a negative sense. In the long centuries that stretched between the death of her family and seeing Homura on New Athens, it had followed her always, as present in its deliberate absence as it ever was in her church.

I know that, she thought, as she stomped through the now secured hallways of the compound. *I don't lie to myself. Not like Mami. Not since the beginning.*

But was that really true? What about all the years she had spent refusing to reflect, refusing to think? All the years she had spent drinking away her life in a thousand high-end bars, spending night after night in a different bed?

That's not lying to myself, damn it! she answered, resisting the urge to slam her fist into the wall near her. *I know what demons I'm running from.*

In her mind, she saw the images that had tormented her her whole life.

Her father bouncing her on his knee, smiling down at her.

Her father standing in front of the altar, expression radiant, as if God himself spoke through him.

And finally, the lifeless bodies of her family, her sister lying in a pool of blood, body gashed and broken, the flames already consuming her.

A part of her had burned there with the rest of her family, she knew. That part of her ached, the hole in her heart that had almost cast her into the flames with them.

You abandoned us, she thought, gripping the frame of a doorway as it slid open. *You were supposed to save us. My father believed in you, and you let the demons consume us. Why?*

She looked up, and saw that the metal-ceramic composite of the door frame had twisted and warped under her grip, the door whining unhappily at the injury. She saw that she had somehow reached one of the service entrances to the mysterious base. A small clearing just outside the doorway led directly into jungle, the sun shining down from above onto her, harsh and burning.

She remembered a wall of swords streaking out of the sky in front of her on just such a sunny day, the clawed maniac of the Southern Group recoiling from the assault, pausing in her attack on Kyouko.

She remembered the swordsman descending out of the sky a moment later, placing herself between Kure Kirika and a heavily-injured Kyouko, the blood pouring out of her side where Kure had stabbed her.

"I'm not leaving you behind! Not while I'm still alive," Sayaka shouted, looking down on her, eyes full of fire. "I heard what bucket head over there was telling you. It's bullshit. You don't deserve to die.

Then Sayaka had turned towards Kirika, eying the other girl down the length of her sword.

Everyone deserves to be saved, if they change themselves. Don't ever look back!

"We tried to save the world," she said. "Just like you would want. I did everything you said. But you couldn't follow your own damn rules, and you died too."

Four and a half centuries of this damn nonsense, and people are still suffering. The demons of this world still consume the hearts of men, and they in turn inflict torment on those under rule.

She cracked a slight smile at the thought, which sounded like a line from a sermon.

It would have been so much easier to have given in, she thought. So much easier to do a little studying, put together a little effort, and empty her own memories with a quiet self-Reformat. It would hardly be unique—the practice was common enough that the MHD even had a name for it, and kept a close watch on some of the older girls. Kyouko would be lying if she had said that she'd never once considered it.

Kyouko shook her head, letting a tear fall, and fell to her knees.

She would try to pray.

Ryouko had felt sickened by the situation. The others had told her not to follow, but she could see that Kyouko was in distress, and had been for the whole trip to this forsaken planet.

She followed the other girl at a distance, trailing her through the abandoned halls of the compound. Kyouko was too preoccupied to notice she was being tailed, and Ryouko even had the

time to observe her surroundings *en passant.* There had been something big going on here, and there were clear signs of equipment being hastily stripped from the compound.

Finally, the other girl stopped just outside an entrance into the building and Ryouko let out a breath, wondering if Kyouko was going to acknowledge—or had even noticed—her presence.

Instead, Kyouko grabbed the side of the door frame, crushing it in her hand like a disposable cup, causing Ryouko to flinch.

"We tried to save the world," she heard Kyouko say. "Just like you would want. I did everything you said. But you couldn't follow your own damn rules, and you died too."

Ryouko had no idea what she was talking about, or if Kyouko really thought she was talking to someone. According to their team interface, Kyouko's soul gem was only somewhat below normal, but Ryouko felt nervous.

Something nagged at her. She found herself remembering Kyouko dying on the cliff, long ago in her vision.

But that can no longer happen, right? We prevented that future.

She almost sighed in relief when the girl finally fell to her knees in an obvious prayer posture. She knew enough to expect that it would calm Kyouko down.

She stepped forward cautiously, hoping to avoid startling the other girl.

The clearing in front of them was beautiful, the sun streaming in through the hole that had been carved in the canopy above, the edges ragged where the jungle sought to reclaim the land that it had once owned. Ryouko wondered just how it was that they had managed to hide such a large base from sensors, when the missing trees alone should have given it away.

They had already found what had presumably been the base's stealth generator, completely obliterated by an explosion just before they had arrived. Whoever had built it clearly didn't want them to get their hands on the technology.

She peered up towards the canopy, narrowing her eyes slightly at the clouds of insects milling about in the unusual sunlight. Something about this situation bothered her.

Impressive, the Cult Leader had said to Kyouko. *You were supposed to kill me on the spot.*

There were many ways to interpret what he had said, including simply that they were the ravings of a madman. Yet something about those words was deeply unsettling. It gave her a certain sensation, a certain *deja vu,* not that this situation had happened before, but that she had felt *this sensation* before.

It feels like your vision with the submarines, and Mikuni Oriko looking up at you.

Ryouko's eyes widened.

Yes, that exactly. How did you know? Do you feel it too?

No. That was right after version one of… me was installed. I wasn't even online yet. I'm just telling you what memory your brain is trying to tug at.

I see.

She was sure Kyouko must have noticed her by now. One probably didn't get to be that old without being able to sense another magical girl half a meter away, no matter how distracted you were. Kyouko was probably just really focused on praying.

What does it mean, though? she thought. *Why would I be reminded of that right now?*

Well, this was the mission that submarine thing was supposed to be about, right? Well, here we are.

She shook her head.

I don't think that's all it is. Something about what he said… riddles in the dark.

She narrowed her eyes, raising a hand to block out the sunlight that was saturating some of her optical sensors.

That drone loitering there is way out of position— Clarisse thought.

Ryouko saw only the briefest glimmer, a tiny blip in infrared, a signal that by rights shouldn't have even entered her awareness.

It was enough to send her diving for Kyouko though, moved by instinct, magic, quiet ideas simmering in the crevices of her mind, and, just maybe, the whispers of a Goddess planted in her memory.

She felt the searing heat of the laser engulf her, consuming her body even as she managed, barely, to plot the teleport out.

There was no time to feel fear, as darkness followed the fire.

Kyouko opened her eyes just in time to see the laser burn through the teleporter above as she flung her arms around Kyouko—just in time to feel the laser tear into the exposed parts of her body as well—

And then, she found herself just outside the beam, staring up at the drone firing downward.

She flung her spear into the drone, faster than thought, an angry cry managing to escape her lips only after the action, not before.

By the time the rest of the team appeared only a few seconds later, carried by the other teleporter, they found Kyouko already kneeling on the floor, paying no heed to her missing hand or the exposed burns that dripped blood from her shoulders and legs.

Instead, she clutched a star-shaped soul gem in her remaining hand.

"Thank you," she whispered.

No Light Without Shadow

> "It may seem like an oxymoron, to apply the methods of systematic scientific study to the topic of soul gems and the soul, but there is no *a priori* reason to expect such studies to be any less productive than the immense successes we have already experienced in the fields of magical power development and demon hunting."
>
> "This is especially true given the Incubators' involvement in the process of soul gem extraction. There is little reason to believe that the Incubators have any innate magical capability, and yet it is they who have learned to create soul gems, even if they will tell us nothing about it."
>
> "Indeed, precisely because of the importance of the topic, the possible rewards of detailed investigation may be even greater. Preliminary studies have already shown that the spectral analysis of soul gem emissions may be an effective way of 'fingerprinting' individual magical girls. Rare girls with identical spectra do seem to exist, but outside of special cases, it is possible we simply do not have enough measurement precision…"
>
> **— Excerpt, Memo to MSY Science Division from Director Chitose Yuma, 2043**
>
> "To exist everywhere is to exist nowhere. To know everything is to know nothing. To be omnipotent is to be impotent. The essence of divinity is contradiction."
>
> **— Unknown, Commonly Attributed to Clarisse van Rossum**

"That's not healthy, you know."

Asami looked up at the newcomer, abandoning only for a moment her vigil, which consisted of quietly staring into the sealed vessel Ryouko's soul gem was being stored in.

She turned back towards the gem. A part of her was surprised that Sakura Kyouko, almighty member of the Mitakihara Four, had deigned to come find her. The rest of her didn't care. Kyouko's eccentric behavior had lost Ryouko her first body, which hardly seemed fair, given that Kyouko was over thirty times Ryouko's age and still had hers.

"I don't really care what's healthy right now," Asami said. "I'm just doing what feels right. Besides, this beats sitting quietly in my room."

"Fair enough, I suppose. And, with recent events, it might not be a bad idea to have someone watching the gem."

Asami sensed the other girl pulling a chair over to sit next to her, but didn't look up. What did it gain her to acknowledge the gesture?

She wondered for a moment what Kyouko would say to her. Would she apologize for getting Ryouko fried by a laser? Asami would have been lying to say that she wasn't angry at Kyouko for that, and at the others—and herself—for not following Kyouko like Ryouko did.

But she wasn't far enough gone to truly blame her for it. Things happened. She knew that. She just wished they wouldn't happen to her.

Or maybe Kyouko would try to discuss what had happened, the results of the post-mission investigation? Despite the mostly successful outcome, the execution of the operation had been less than pristine, ranging from the cult leader's successful suicide in the face of multiple mind-controllers to, of course, the incident with the laser-firing drone. To call that merely a mystery would be a serious understatement.

At the moment, though, she couldn't find herself motivated to care. She was tired of the conspiracies and shadows that seemed to circle around Ryouko. What would it take to just live a normal life?

"You know, sometimes your first love just never leaves you," Kyouko said, finally. "It's been so long, and so much has happened, and I still remember my first. It will probably sound crazy, but she was in my head today during the mission. Sometimes I wish I could forget about her."

Asami turned her head slightly, looking at the other girl's face. This was not a story she had heard before.

"What happened to her?" she asked.

"She died," Kyouko said. "Back in the early days, when you weren't expected to last more than a few years at best. I don't want to make this seem like more than it is—she had someone else she was after, and I acted like a lovesick teenager, which means I never really made any moves. You know how it is. In retrospect, we might have worked out. We might not have. I wish we had a chance to find out."

Asami turned back towards the vessel in front of her, peering in through the reinforced window at the brilliant green glow of the gem, which looked glaring against the backdrop of blacker-than-black grief cubes.

"It never goes away, then?" she said.

"It leaves an impression on your soul," Kyouko said. "Even in eternity, I don't think it will go away. But, she's still alive, so you shouldn't be sulking like this."

"I'm more worried about what will happen than what *has* happened," Asami said. "She's not safe."

"None of us are safe," Kyouko said, unwrapping in her hands a piece of chocolate. "I wish I knew why."

No one really liked the Crown Room.

Sure, the Leadership Council meeting room was *grand*. The virtual location mirrored the actual location, which occupied audaciously the top floor of one of the tallest buildings in Mitakihara. The room was surrounded by panoramic windows and a fully transparent ceiling, all of it tunable to control the amount of light that poured into the room—or to provide other views entirely, if preferred. The center of the room was dominated by an imposing mahogany meeting table, carved out of a single piece of giant wood, and flanked by the most comfortable chairs Kyouko had ever sat in, their leather sensuous on the skin.

Server-bots stood on the side at the ready, poised to deliver whatever food and beverages the occupants desired. The usual recommendation was the downright legendary coffee, but in her time Kyouko had seen girls indulge in everything from *kumis* to prime rib—though it was obviously impolite to eat a serious meal during important discussions.

The physical Crown Room hadn't been used for nearly half a century, though. The logistics of arranging a physical meeting were too cumbersome, and the truth was everyone had gotten tired of it, even in its virtual form. Kyouko wished that one of the other proposals—Mami's tea rooms, Yuma's outdoorsy ideas—would win a plurality and finally get a new virtual location set, but getting the Committee to agree on anything that wasn't *obvious* was like herding cats.

Worse, actually. Kyouko had tried herding cats once—it wasn't that hard with a little bit of food.

"Put shortly, someone is trying to kill me," Kyouko said, addressing the committee members. "And I don't mean merely the one drone that was trying to shoot me. This goes deeper than that."

A low murmur spread around the table, the assorted matriarchs and ancients taking advantage of the end of Kyouko's statement to start whispering to each other. Kyouko's conclusion had probably crossed all of their minds at some point, but it had taken Kyouko saying it openly to let them all know that, yes, it was a conclusion that might have some merit to it, even if it seemed like pure conspiracy theory fodder.

She peered around the virtual room, letting her eye fall on those members of the committee that were also members of her Church. Visions of the future, maneuvering to avoid said futures, Goddesses and so forth were all strictly inadmissible within the governing layers of the MSY—unless coming from carefully verified magical sources—but that didn't mean the members of the Committee hadn't heard what they needed to know from other, less secular sources.

Kyouko sighed, letting gravity pull her back down into her chair, next to the empty seat at the head of the table, allowing it to massage her shoulders as she desired.

She cast her eye about the room, at the Matriarchs talking loudly at each other over the table, and through the ceiling at the planet of X-25, hovering ominously above them like a sky-dominating moon, covered with strategic markings and labels, and surrounded by a flotilla of bright red tags that indicated the ships in orbit.

According to Clarisse, it was not like the Goddess to make repeated, blatant interventions into the course of events. She preferred to be subtle, and to get most done with the least possible modification. She was the sort of deity who preferred to kill a butterfly in Africa, then watch silently as a typhoon was diverted in Asia, to use Clarisse's odd phrasing. The recent pattern of events was therefore odd, perhaps even unsettling.

"Alright everyone, calm down," Mami said, in a loud, clarion tone. "Let's speak one at a time."

She waved her arms up and down in the universal gesture of "settle down", and the room quieted, acknowledging Mami's *de facto* chairman status, as highest-ranking attending member.

A long pause later, Odette François, the François Matriarch, renewed the discussion:

"I wouldn't be terribly surprised if this were just shenanigans from Governance. We know they don't really like the idea of us existing that much. Sure, the individual membership is useful to them, but they'd much rather prefer the MSY be a branch of Governance itself. Targeted attacks on the leadership would be one way to accomplish this."

A series of groans sounded off around the table, beginning even before Odette had finished speaking. Her continued and vocal paranoia about Governance was by now a well-known topic.

"With all due respect, that's wildly implausible," Mohana Bachchan said, leaning in from farther down the table. "The only way that could possibly work is if they eliminated almost everyone here, and surely someone would notice what's up. And that's only one of many, many problems

with that theory."

"It's also possible they're trying to do something to the Cult of Hope," Odette argued.

"Let's not get sidetracked," Shizuki Sayaka said, sweeping her arm over the table in a dramatic gesture. "Honestly, I'm not even sure we should accept that someone is really trying to kill Miss Sakura here. That's one plausible interpretation of events, yes, but it's also possible the robot that fired the laser was just being opportunistic. Asserting that the entire thing was a set up to bait Miss Sakura into the area requires a whole series of rather tenuous connections. Frankly, it could just as easily be a coincidence. That's what the analysis AIs we've set on the problem have concluded as well."

Kyouko cast a veiled glance at Sayaka. She should have known that *she* would be the one to bring the skepticism.

"I wouldn't be sure about it being a coincidence," Kuroi Kana said, surprising Kyouko by speaking up on her behalf. "Whatever else is or isn't going on, it's clear that there are a lot of mysteries surrounding this rogue colony. For instance, if I may draw the discussion elsewhere for a moment, there is the matter of the alleged statue of Akemi Homura that these cultists were worshipping."

"To be fair, that is only a claim made by Kyubey," Yuma commented, from Kyouko's left.

"Well, the Incubators have never told us anything manifestly false before," Kana said. "They can be misleading, of course, but I think in this case we can accept that there was in fact a statue of Akemi Homura present, and that the cult leader truly believed he saw her on Optatum. Their choice of deity aside, I have to say I don't find that last belief terribly implausible."

A shocked murmur passed down the table, and the "Founder's End" of the table turned to glare at Kana, as subtly as they could. While it was a widespread belief that Homura was not truly dead, it was *not* widespread knowledge that Internal Affairs had already confirmed that she had lived past New Athens, nor that signs of her had been confirmed retrospectively on Optatum. The Incubators' assertions implied that the cult leader believed she had been there after their last evidence of her, and after presumably the last time the Incubators had seen her.

If the cult leader's assertion were true, it would provide another confusing and troubling timepoint to Homura's post New Athens journey.

"Explain," Mami said, a little coldly, almost daring Kana to explain herself fully.

Kana smiled slightly.

"What I meant was: I can easily believe that Homura was there on Optatum, just as easily I can believe she was—or *is*—anywhere else. What's important here is that she wasn't involved in anything that happened on this planet, other than as a figurehead for a crazy cult."

"That seems to summarize it, yes," Mami said.

"Back to the previous topic," Clarisse van Rossum said. "It seems to me that what is worrisome is not any one of these issues in particular, but all that is happening now taken together, in *gestalt*. We have rogue drones attacking our leaders, respected magical girls dying without cause, a rogue colony with impossible technology experimenting on magical girls, and transports being attacked deep behind the lines when traveling randomized trajectories. Things that should not be happening *are*, and that is not all that is going on, is there?"

She peered in the direction of Mami and Kyouko, both of whom were aware what had to come

next on the meeting agenda.

"No, that is not," Mami said, as calmly as she could, standing up out of her chair.

The room quieted, Mami's standing figure seeming to suck in the gazes of everyone in the room. Even the head of the table, Kyouko and Yuma and Clarisse, turned to watch her, waiting for her to say what they already knew. For a moment Kyouko thought Mami looked like the loneliest person in the world.

"The results of the last grief cube audit have been received," she said, finally. "And the results have been, to put it mildly, disturbing."

Mami spoke with an iron dignity that Kyouko didn't think she could ever have managed in the face of the oncoming storm. She admired Mami for her ability to lock it all out, to be the rock upon which the MSY without Homura rested, never angry, never less than a leader. She admired her for it, even when she knew the flaws that Mami tried so desperately to hide.

"There have been a number of significant discrepancies between the number of grief cubes supposedly delivered to certain front-line combat units, and the number of grief cubes reported used by the units involved, at least when anecdotal interviews are conducted. While the official post-combat reports of these units show no discrepancy, the members of these units indicate puzzlement and bewilderment at the number of grief cubes they were supposed to have received and used—they report using far less, and this has been confirmed by review of memories stored in their TacComps. The difference in numbers has grown too great to be explained by loss in the chaos of combat."

A wave of shock traveled down the table, but Mami held up her hand magisterially, somehow managing to pause the tide of outrage for just a moment.

"If you please, allow me to explain in full detail."

She paused for a moment, then continued, beginning to pace.

"There is more. As part of the standard interview process, conducted by both official investigators and Church of Hope volunteers, we have received additional anecdotal reports of girls suffering total or near-total body loss who should be able to revive, but who never return. Tracking the cases invariably reveals soul gems that failed inexplicably in transit to their stored clones. One prominent example is the case of Misa Virani, whose exploits near the wormhole generator you know well. Her soul gem survived the mission, yet inexplicably failed on board my own flagship, a fact that we have kept concealed up until now."

"Those of us who knew had kept silent about this, aware of the potential implications, in the hopes that a continued investigation would reveal innocuous causes. As such, we directed our energy into understanding the causes of these anomalies, utilizing all the resources at our disposal. The officers of Grief Cube Supply and Logistics immediately fanned out to audit the system, we enlisted the aid of the Church of Hope, and I personally consulted with military records on the matter. Unfortunately, as you will see from these files, the mystery only got deeper."

Mami stopped her pacing, taking a moment to allow the rest of the committee to browse over the documentation she had provided. She leaned over to plant her hands onto the table, peering over the rest of the table with an intense gaze.

"There's no way to put a pretty face on it," Mami said, "but we kept it secret in the hopes that the problem could be disposed of quietly, without anyone having to know about it. We've all been around the block a couple of times—I'm sure you all understand that things would be much

cleaner that way."

"Of course you would say that," a girl far down the table said, slamming her palm down and standing up. "This is yet another example of you Ancients running the organization like your own damn fiefdom."

Kyouko put one hand to her forehead as the room erupted immediately into a cacophony of protests and shouting.

Snippets of what was being said passed through her mind:

"You wouldn't even be here if some of the idiots in here hadn't wanted 'fresh blood'! I swear—"

"You don't have the right to talk to Mami-san like that—"

"You mean the one who doesn't ever even show up?"

"—these secrets the senior members are holding back from the organization. And about grief cubes, no less! The people who do the farming have the right to know—"

"Oh, please! Like you've killed any demons recently—"

"Does Mami-san actually believe the records the military gave her? What they told her? They're leading her around by the nose, and I can't believe she's falling—"

At the senior end of the table, Kyouko watched Mami stand impassively, but bemused, as if remembering just why she and Kyouko attended the Committee meetings so infrequently. Mila Brankovic, the girl who had started this cacophony, was a rising star on the MSY political scene, at least insomuch as it was possible to crack the ranks of the Leadership Committee with its rotating body of Ancients. Some said she was a fiery idealist, dead set on deossifying the MSY. Kyouko conceded she might have been biased, but from her perspective it seemed more like Mila was exceptionally skilled at getting everyone at each other's throats.

Which was a useful political trait in its own right, Kyouko well knew, surveying Mila from a distance, watching her shout into the fracas, forehead impressively matted with virtual sweat.

An *extremely* loud screeching noise, akin to fingernails scraping across a chalkboard, startled Kyouko into looking up, and similarly froze everyone else in the room.

"Enough of this!" Clarisse van Rossum said, as the startlingly deep lines she had gouged into the wood of the virtual table disappeared.

Now standing, she peered over the table.

"We have spent too long discussing problems, and no time at all discussing solutions. What exactly is it the Committee wishes to do, other than what is already being done?"

She glanced around, and when no one immediately responded, continued:

"Well, *I* have some suggestions, though I can't promise they're good. First, regarding the more pressing grief cube issue, I propose we form a new subcommittee specifically devoted to the topic. That would be a lot more transparent than having a few Ancients at the top trying to deal with the issue, which is the only real alternative. I know what everyone thinks about having more committees, but we've had it work in the past, and frankly a committee with a broad range of membership would be the only way everyone would stay in the loop."

A murmur passed through the committee as they considered the idea, and Clarisse gestured broadly at the assembled leaders.

"Of course, none of this precludes doing things on your own, as long as you're careful not to breach secrecy too much. In fact, for something like this, I suspect the input of the various Matriarchies might even be appreciated, since they have resources MSY proper doesn't have access to, in the same way as the Church of Hope."

Kyouko felt herself looking at Clarisse in—confusion? Puzzlement? She wasn't sure, but instead of finding herself respecting Clarisse's temerity and diplomatic savvy, she found herself—

She found herself realizing that this was role that Mami normally played, and that instead Mami was simply standing near the head of the table, facial expression strained.

She can't take the bullshit anymore, Kyouko thought. *That must be it. It happens.*

"In addition, regarding the topic of the possible attempt to assassinate Miss Sakura, I'm not sure we have enough evidence yet to devote tremendous resources solely to that," Clarisse said. "However, perhaps we could form a special committee for everything that happened on this rogue colony. Certainly it is a matter worth discussing, since it has been a long, long time since we have seen crimes of this scale pertaining to us in particular. Especially involving an organization Kyubey tells us is still out there somewhere."

She looked over the table again, as both her ideas appeared next to her, written as two bullet points hovering in the air above the table.

"Finally, I think it is long past time that we assigned special protection to the senior members of the MSY. I understand that we are generally difficult to kill, but no state has ever allowed its leaders to travel without protection, not counting Governance. We should at least do this for the duration."

"You mean bodyguards," Kuroi Kana said, eyeing Clarisse carefully.

"Yes, I mean bodyguards," Clarisse said.

"This has been proposed before," Kana said. "But that was during the War, when it was necessary, and it was abolished when the danger passed. None of us like the idea of being surrounded by *security*. This is surely not a crisis worthy of the same precautions as a global war."

Kana clasped her hands on the table.

"I like your other ideas, but this seems like an overreaction. Many of us even have other, private sources of security. If it is felt that Miss Sakura in particular needs additional security, then the Kuroi clan, for one, will be happy to provide."

"As would we," Shizuki Sayaka interjected.

"Which is precisely the problem," Clarisse said. "I doubt any of us who don't have our own independent security teams would really be okay with accepting security from those who do. It raises questions of independence and motivation. A professional protection service, rooted in the Soul Guard, would eliminate those questions."

"With all due respect, Clarisse, I don't think that's necessary yet," Kyouko said, without getting up from her chair. "I don't want it said that we started giving everyone bodyguards just because someone tried to kill me once. It's not like they even got that good a shot off."

"You lost a hand. I'd say that's a pretty good shot," Clarisse said.

"Only because I lost my cool," Kyouko said, the hand in question twitching slightly as she wished for some food to hold. "It's not going to happen again."

"Didn't we agree this is all a pretty Rube Goldbergian idea anyway?" Mohana asked. "The idea that someone would set up a colony just to bait Miss Sakura into losing her cool and either killing an important prisoner or getting shot? It still all seems a bit much to me."

"Well, it's more that whoever orchestrated this whole thing saw the opportunity to get me involved and took it. I don't think the colony was *solely* for me. That'd be crazy."

Kyouko frowned slightly, remembering she could just summon food into the simulation on a whim. A moment later, a bowl of rum raisin ice cream appeared in front of her.

The matriarch Mohana shook her head.

"Still far-fetched. If the Black Heart were to suggest a plan like that, it would never pass the plausibility test."

"I agree, it's not terribly plausible," Mami said, surprising Kyouko, who thought she had tuned out of the discussion entirely. "I just think it's a possibility to keep in mind. I have a feeling about it."

A moment of silence prevailed over the table.

"If that's the case, perhaps we should submit the question to the Far Seers," Kana said. "They may be able to glean something of value."

Kyouko heard Mami groan. Mami had never been fond of the MSY guild of clairvoyants, who had chosen a truly mystical name for themselves. They claimed that their more unusual members could glean facts obscured to everyone else, and tried to increase their prestige by quietly encouraging prominent magical girls to submit questions.

True to form, Mami almost immediately said:

"I've never really found them all that useful. For some reason, they're always misleading."

"But they're always right in the end," Yuma commented.

"Like a true Oracle," Mami said dryly. "Unfortunately, the true Oracle was never actually *useful*."

"It can't possibly hurt, Mami," Kyouko said, around a mouthful of ice cream. "It's not a bad suggestion."

Mami sighed, shrugging, and putting a hand to her head.

"Alright, fine. We'll see what they have to say. In the meantime, unless there's any objections, I'll second Clarisse's three proposals so we can put them up for a vote."

Mami glanced around the table, where it seemed like everyone had acquiesced. Kyouko wasn't surprised: subcommittees were easy to propose because they didn't resolve any of the actual conflicts, but still seemed like a step towards a solution. The real fireworks would wait until members were appointed to the committees.

"All in favor of proposal one?"

A clear chorus of ayes, made it obvious that proposal one, to form a subcommittee for

investigating the matter of the missing grief cubes and magical girls, passed easily. Proposal two, for the formation of a similar committee to investigate occurrences on the colony X-25 and the ghostly organization the Incubators suggested had backed them, also passed easily.

Proposal three, though, for the establishment of a protective service for senior MSY officers, clearly failed, and Kyouko saw Clarisse shrug her shoulders. It wasn't that important.

Kyouko watched Mami sigh slightly, knowing what was to come.

"Alright, I think in the interests of speed, we should now decided who to appoint…"

What seemed like an interminable time later, Kyouko opened her eyes, blinking as the lights in her cabin grew softly brighter. It felt odd, not having someone by her side, but since she ended her last relationship she simply hadn't felt the impetus to go prowling for someone to share her bed with.

It simply made for a more pleasant experience, being able to exit a long and tiresome simulation with the knowledge that you would immediately have someone next to you that you could snog.

Kyouko sighed, postponing separate requests from Kuroi Kana and Shizuki Sayaka for a post-meeting meeting. Whatever the topic, it could wait, and she simply wasn't all that interested in being followed around by a Matriarchal security detail. That "security" usually comprised a combination of bubbly house scions on their first assignment and plain-clothed agents trying to blend in with the surroundings, painfully obvious to anyone of Kyouko's age and powers. She really wasn't sure what the point was, given that she could probably have taken them all on single-handedly, but she supposed it made some people feel more secure. All the veteran girls of any real value were off doing something more important, of course.

It wouldn't even have been that hard to find someone to serve as company. The local networks in any sizably populated area were always jammed full of people "seeking bed partners", and Kyouko had enough of a reputation that some girls would jump at her. Hell, if she really wanted, she could have accepted one of the matriarchs' offers of security, then immediately tried to seduce her security detail. It's what she would have done just a year or so ago.

She looked down at her hands. As a rule, she tried to take things on an even keel, refusing to allow herself to be shaken by events, but she couldn't deny that the past month or so had taken its toll on her. Much of what had gone wrong on X-25 had been undeniably her fault, or at least her responsibility. She was the one who had gotten hot-headed at all the wrong times, and the one who had let her past get to her at the critical moment. She had lost Shizuki Ryouko her body, and even though that would have happened eventually anyway, she still felt guilty.

She was still avoiding the real issue. She sensed that her year-long relationship with Maki had changed her, in a way none of her previous flings had. She had told herself—and Maki—otherwise, but a part of her had started to dream of something different.

She shook her head at herself. She could only imagine how much Yuma would laugh at her. For it to turn out that she had just needed to hold the door open a little…

As if on cue, her train of thought was interrupted by someone at the door. She looked up, wondering for a moment who would come to her room unscheduled, before simply checking the summons and seeing that it was, of all people, Atsuko Arisu, therapist to the stars.

She sighed, and signaled the door to open, getting up to head for the sitting room of her cabin.

She found the woman—and it was woman, not girl—perched on the edge of her couch, part of

the generic couch and coffee table set that graced the sitting rooms of every shipboard cabin. On ships larger than frigates, the ratio between the number of crew and the available space was high enough that even the lowliest technician warranted their own private cabin with the basics, though you had to be important to get anything more than that. Of course, the more permanent denizens personalized their cabins to their hearts' content.

Kyouko didn't really mind the sparseness. To be honest she rather preferred the simple furniture to the ubiquitous self-assembling smartblocks of Earth.

"So what brings you here?" Kyouko asked, sitting down next to Arisu. "I wasn't even aware you were on this ship."

The ship in question was the cruiser HSS Sun Zhong Shan, one of the ships returning to heavily settled space from the X-25 system now that they were no longer needed.

"I just got here," Arisu said. "Docked an hour ago. I've been doing the rounds, checking up on my *favorite* patients. Last stop was Mami-san, though she's never excited to see me."

"I'm not really excited to see you either," Kyouko deadpanned, half a joke, half brutal honesty.

"I know. None of you old ones are. Personally, I think it's because I remind you of unpleasant truths."

Kyouko looked at the woman apprehensively, trying to turn it into a glare but not really succeeding.

"I heard about what happened at the rogue colony, of course," Arisu said, raising a cup of coffee to her lips. She hadn't asked Kyouko, of course; she had simply helped herself to the synthesizer on the way in, which was a habit Kyouko had difficulty criticizing, since she had done it herself on a number of occasions.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Arisu asked, tilting her head slightly.

"Not really," Kyouko said.

Arisu set the coffee back into its dish with a clatter.

"We're all entitled to our neuroses," she said, looking at Kyouko. "There isn't really anything negative to say about your childhood trauma giving you a bit of a reaction to cults and cult paraphernalia."

"Personally I tend to think neuroses keep us interesting, going into our old age," Kyouko said, just to be contrary. "Not all of us can be like Clarisse."

"Clarisse isn't exactly neurosis-free either, you know," Arisu pointed out.

"Don't tell me; it will ruin my image of her," Kyouko said, aware that this kind of playful banter was out of character for her.

Arisu raised an eyebrow, but didn't comment directly.

"Physician-patient confidentiality. Anyway, in my profession we're usually inclined to let this kind of thing, or even worse, slide as long as it doesn't hurt anyone," Arisu said.

"Like that girl who talks to buildings," Kyouko said, smiling thinly as she interrupted deliberately, refusing to let Arisu build up conversational momentum.

"Precisely."

"I'm not actually sure she's really crazy."

"The point is it doesn't matter."

Kyouko shook her head, not at Arisu's last sentence specifically, but at the topic as a whole.

"Look, I admit my issues played a role in what happened on X-25. What can I say? It's not like this is going to start a new trend of 'Kyouko going crazy'"—she made air quotes with her hands—"every week. The circumstances were unique."

"I hope so," Arisu said, shaking her head a little. "I'm not asking you to suddenly be okay with what happened to you as a child. That would be completely unreasonable, as I said. I'm just asking you to be a little more aware of when your own judgment might be impaired and just step aside, or talk to someone."

"Are you saying I shouldn't have gone on the mission?"

"No, that was reasonable. I'm saying you should maybe have ceded leadership once it became clear what was going on. There was certainly enough veteran leadership on that team besides you. That much self-awareness is a lot to ask, but I think it's not unreasonable for someone of your age."

"I let them overrule me when they all disagreed with me," Kyouko said. "I think I did the right thing there."

"And you wandering off on your own at the end of the mission? That was clearly a bad idea, and you did it anyway."

"No one stopped me. Look, I don't want to say I'm not at fault, but if I was suffering a failure of judgment, it was someone else's job to stop me. The definition of failure of judgment is that *I won't realize I'm failing*."

Kyouko stopped leaning forward, realizing that over the course of their rapid back-and-forth she had leaned close enough to Arisu that they were literally breathing on each other's faces.

She took a breath, then stood up.

"Look, do you mind if I get myself some food?" she asked. "It keeps me calm."

Arisu shrugged.

"Your tics are your own."

There was a moment of silence as Kyouko stepped over to the edge of the room, where a small dining table nestled in an alcove with a synthesizer set into the wall.

"You know, I'm not here to give you a hard time about what happened on X-25," Atsuko said to her back as she decided what she wanted. "I just brought that up because it was clearly topical."

Kyouko waited to see if Atsuko would continue, but the woman didn't.

Kyouko sighed quietly. That meant Atsuko wanted Kyouko to be sitting and facing her for the conversation, which was never a good sign.

The door in the back of the synthesizer slid open, and a plate of nachos slid forward from the mysterious guts of the machine. There were perks to living in the future—a young Kyouko would have killed to get her hands on that kind of technology, and Kyouko distinctly remembered spending the days after getting her first in-home synthesizer alternating between eating mounds of food and sleeping off the consequent food coma.

"You know, if there's one thing I'm impressed by about synthesizers, it's the tomatoes," she said, setting the plate down on the table in front of Arisu. "I never really noticed when I was young, but unless you bought the artisanal stuff, they were really shoving some shitty tomatoes at you. Now my nachos always come with great tomatoes."

"Uh-huh," Arisu said, clearly not impressed by the comment.

Well, she was too young to really understand.

Kyouko sat, biting into a chip, savoring the melted combination of blue cheese, bacon, scallion, and diced tomatoes. Not exactly straightforward nachos, but she had learned to live a little in her long life.

"I want to talk about Kishida Maki," Arisu said finally.

Kyouko cringed. She had known this would come up.

"Your pattern of behavior has changed recently," Arisu said. "After your previous relationships ended, you were always right back on the dating and casual sex scene. Not this time. This time, I come here to find you sitting quietly alone in your cabin. That's not like you."

Kyouko wanted to counter that she had, in fact, been in a critical top secret meeting, but the first rule of top secret meetings was that you didn't talk about top secret meetings, so instead she shrugged and said:

"I'm not even going to ask how your nosy spies know any of that. I just need a break, you know? Seems normal enough."

"Not for you. I haven't seen you 'take a break' in centuries. Major changes in behaviors are usually considered a flag."

She continued to focus on her chips, saying:

"What are you getting at? You think I might be suicidal?"

"Don't be coy," Arisu said into her ear, like a guilty conscience. "You know the MHD is the best psychology service in the world, and that's *without* the mind-reading. And I'm good at my job."

A pause.

"You've always been afraid of entering a serious relationship, or allowing yourself the risk of being hurt emotionally, so you refused to ever treat any of these relationships seriously. You allowed yourself to indulge with Maki—and don't think I don't know what she looks like—and then she tried to leave and join a combat mission. You couldn't bear the chance she might get hurt, so you tried to end it there. That's why you broke up, and that's why you've refused to visit her."

"But you spent too long with her, long enough that you now feel something for Kishida Maki, something you haven't felt in a long time. That's the other reason you're doing it, but it's too late, isn't it? Is your behavior really proper for someone of your age, sleeping with someone of hers? At fifty, at a hundred, it is acceptable to toy with the hearts of others, because you don't know better.

Not at your age."

"It gnaws at you, and you know that by doing what you're doing you're just inflicting your broken heart upon her. Should she really suffer for your pain?"

Kyouko snarled, raising a hand to strike the other girl, before managing to suppress the instinct, dragging arm back down with sheer willpower. Arisu was too experienced to be fazed.

"I didn't know therapists were in the business of enraging clients," Kyouko growled.

"Everything I said is true, even if you can't accept it yet," Arisu said. "Most people outgrow their first love, but you never did. This is your neurosis, but with the leadership role you have, you *can't have it anymore.* We've learned from what happened to Akemi-san. We have to close the books on these kinds of things while we can."

"Eternal life gave you the ticket to be eternally young, to live your life in the memory of those long gone. Your mother and your sister and Miki Sayaka—"

"Get out," Kyouko growled.

"They would want you to move on," Arisu said, ignoring her. "In your heart of hearts, you know this. Go visit Kishida-san. You've broken her heart, and you know it."

Kyouko closed her eyes, grinding her teeth painfully.

She clasped and unclasped her hands, staring at the other girl, then shook her head and gestured for the other girl to leave.

"Good talk," Kyouko said finally, meeting the therapist's eyes.

She wasn't sure if she was being ironic or not.

"It's my job," Arisu said. "I hope you think about what I said."

Then the woman turned on her heel and strode out the door, almost making it a march.

Kyouko watched the door slide closed behind her, and sighed.

She had Church business to conduct, but maybe she would just lie in bed in a pool of self-pity instead. That sounded like the right thing to do.

Nakihara Asami held the soul gem in her hand, studying its light for a long moment. On one level, there seemed to be nothing particularly special about the pale green glow, its radiance suppressed by the soul mage to save energy. The cage of the gem was gold, but the gem itself might have been mistakable for an unusually large emerald, were it not for the obvious self-luminescence.

Looking into the gem itself, she could see…

She squinted. Ryouko's soul gem looked…

Like the Goddess's eyes.

The revelation struck her subtly, the thought slipping through her mind like water, so that it took her a moment to even process that she had experienced a revelation.

How did she know what the Goddess's eyes looked like? She had never seen the deity's face in

her vision. Only suggestions, hints, impressions that resonated on a level deeper than vision.

There were infinite worlds embedded in the Goddess's eyes, which were like multifaceted gems with so many facets that… that…

She didn't know how to describe it beyond that, only that she could see something similar in Ryouko's soul gem. Was this what souls looked like?

The natural thing to do would have been to summon her own soul gem and compare, but somehow she didn't want to learn what her own soul looked like. Indeed, she was starting to feel like she had invaded Ryouko's privacy by staring into hers like that.

She set Ryouko's soul gem on the nightstand next to her bed, the bed she and Ryouko had bought for this apartment when they first moved to Eurydome. Asami had chosen it carefully, since she had expected—hoped—that they would sleep on it for long time. Now it just felt empty.

Ryouko's CubeBot, which had made the trip back to Eurydome with Asami, stirred to life, stepping off of Asami's own drone to scurry over to the soul gem. It scanned the gem one last time with its front eye, then began removing grief cubes from the container on its back with a single robotic arm, while Asami's CubeBot turned its eye to watch curiously.

Asami smiled at the drones, reflecting that whoever the CubeBot designers had been, they had known their jobs. The drones were designed to be quietly adorable, turning routine grief cube use sessions into something that could cheer up the teenage girls that owned them.

It had surprised Asami that she would be entrusted with Ryouko's soul gem, which she had expected to travel to its final destination automatically. Ryouko's clone was going to be revived on Earth, with its more advanced facilities, rather than Eurydome, as would be more typical. Something about unusual genetics.

It had been Sakura Kyouko herself who had handed the gem to her, telling her that, at the moment, there could be no safer place for it than with Asami.

She tried not to dwell on the sense of foreboding that had accompanied that conversation, waiting a moment for the CubeBot to finish its job, before picking the gem back up and converting it into a ring, one she wore on the same finger she kept her own ring—naturally, the ring finger. It felt pleasingly symbolic to her.

"It surprises me that you came back here," Kuroi Nakase said, appearing in the doorway of their room. "I thought for sure that you would go straight to Earth to wait for the revival."

Asami looked up.

"I would get there too early," she said. "In which case I might as well stop here first. It feels like home now."

Nakase turned her head slightly, and Asami could feel the implicit question in the woman's eyes.

Home? What about your parents, your home?

But Nakase did not ask.

"And there were some other people who wanted to come with me, so it seemed natural enough," Asami added.

"So I've heard," Nakase said. "It looks like we might have a few people staying here for the

duration."

Asami peered at the other woman's expression, framed by the sunlight that shone through the hall windows, trying to read what the other woman was thinking.

"I'm surprised you didn't yell at me when I got back," Asami said. "You know, given the contents of our last conversation."

"Our last argument, you mean," Nakase corrected. "I got over it. None of this is your fault. If I'm going to get mad at anyone, it should be my sister."

"Speaking of which…"

"Yes, she'll be here soon."

Ryouko's mother turned away from her, facing the hall window for a moment.

"You know, it's really odd that they didn't move her clone to Eurydome after you two moved here. Even for unusual genetics, there's nothing that could be done on Earth that they couldn't do here. I had honestly expected that I could oversee the revival here, but I guess not."

Nakase paused for a moment.

"I sent a message to her father about it, and he doesn't understand it either. Apparently she just wasn't moved, even though he thought she would be. Well, he'll be helping to oversee the revival, then, so she'll be in good hands. No reason for me to rush back."

The woman turned her head towards the front door, tilting her head slightly.

"That'll be my sister," she said, disappearing from the door of the room. None of the usual mechanisms had warned Asami of anyone approaching the door, as they should have, but Asami knew not to question the mysterious ways of Ryouko's aunt. It was… just the way Ryouko's family was, just as Asami's was the way it was.

She stood up a moment later, waving aside her CubeBot, who had walked to the edge of the nightstand, presenting her a grief cube with two mechanical arms, eye upturned appealingly.

"Sorry, I'll do it later," she said, following Nakase to the door.

She nodded at Meiqing on the way out, and the girl nodded, looking a little awkward, perhaps bored, sitting on the couch of their sitting room. Meiqing had been given leave to travel back with them to attend Ryouko's revival, partly as a bit of a reward for her performance in the X-25 mission, and partly because she was Ryouko's friend, and therefore probably a good idea to have around, for psychiatric reasons.

Nakase got to the front door before she did, meeting Nana and Sacnite as they arrived. Asami was abruptly confronted by the disparity between Nana and Nakase, one a girl her age, the other a woman much older. The family resemblance was there, but it was clear whose daughter Ryouko was. Indeed, it occurred to her that even though Ryouko and Nana definitely resembled each other, the resemblance had never been very striking. She had hardly even considered the matter.

For a moment, everyone else in the room became mere bystanders as the two sisters stared at each other, focusing their emotional energy and thoughts on each other to the exclusion of their surroundings.

"I'm sorry," Nana said, opening the conversation.

"Sorry for what?" Nakase demanded.

"Sorry I let that happen to her," Nana said, watching Nakase carefully. "I should have gone with her. I shouldn't have let her follow Kyouko-san alone."

"That's not what you should be sorry for," Nakase said, directing an intense glare at her sister. "You should be sorry you lured her onto this mission in the first place. Everything would have been fine if you had just left well enough alone."

"I refuse to apologize for that," Nana said, looking back at Nakase levelly. "It was her right, and my right, to make these choices."

"What right have you to expose her to these risks at *her* age? She's barely begun to live her life, and here she is getting torn apart by lasers."

"I remember another girl the same age volunteering for those risks so her sister wouldn't have to," Nana growled.

Nakase reared backward, like a cobra dodging a strike.

"And you think that gives you the right to make these decisions for my daughter?"

"Please, both of you, calm down," Meiqing said, appearing at their side. "You can have this conversation later, but you're frightening Sacnite."

Asami blinked, as startled by Meiqing's intervention as Nakase and Nana were. She glanced at Sacnite, who had indeed started to hide herself behind Nana like a child. Somehow the decision had been reached that Sacnite would travel with them for now, for reasons they hadn't deigned to explain to her.

It had been easier than expected to dodge media attention towards Sacnite—it was trivial for Governance to give Sacnite a false identity in the nomenclator systems, and the expectation was strong that Governance would keep Sacnite in a military facility. Apparently not a single reporter had considered the possibility that she would be traveling anonymously with apparent civilians, even civilians who had already appeared in a propaganda video with the girl. Hiding in plain sight, as it were.

Nakase turned her attention towards Sacnite, assessing the girl with a long look.

Whatever it is they did to her to get her to believe in her false life, Asami remembered Nana saying on the trip over, *they didn't do a very good job of it. She won't lose the memories entirely, but they fade faster every hour—soon, they won't seem like real memories at all, but a movie that happened to someone else. What will she have left? A few years of life in an underground bunker, worshipping an evil man. A child with the body of a teenager, the exact opposite of the rest of us.*

Asami peered at Sacnite, and could see in her nervous expression that Nana had been right.

Nakase bent down slightly to pat Sacnite on the head, smiling pleasantly. Nakase and Nana looked at each other, sharing a look that Asami couldn't decipher.

"Well, come in," Nakase said. "It's going to be difficult to come up with bed slots for all these extra girls, but I'm sure we can manage."

Asami glanced over at Meiqing to see if she had any thoughts.

Meiqing response was merely to shrug.

Then, as a group, they all turned their attention back towards the front door.

"Someone else?" Nakase said. "I wonder who it could be."

"Yes, I understand that you are displeased with what has taken place, Shizuki-san," Kyouko thought over the audio line, *"but there was no way for anyone to anticipate what would happen."*

Even after all these centuries, Kyouko still had difficulty saying Shizuki Sayaka's personal name. She always wondered if the Matriarch had noticed.

"A mentor is supposed to make sure her trainees don't die, at a minimum. *Obviously, that's not always possible, but I would think someone of your age could keep her from getting killed by a malfunctioning gravity generator, or by a silly drone."*

"And she didn't," Kyouko pointed out.

"We can't keep relying on you or someone else in her immediate vicinity to keep saving her from these incidents, Kyouko-san," Shizuki said, in that voice that always annoyed Kyouko irrationally. *"There is reason to think that whoever has been trying to kill you is also trying to kill her, and not taking precautions about such a valuable member of the family would go against our interests."*

Kyouko sighed.

"I know, but a protection team? That just seems a little too much," she said.

"They can be discreet," Shizuki Sayaka said. *"I won't insult Ryouko-chan's intelligence by suggesting that they can operate without her noticing, but they can definitely stay out of the way."*

Kyouko put a finger to her cheek thoughtfully. If she played her cards right…

"I wonder, do you think they could cooperate well with a Kuroi security team?" she asked.

"Definitely not—wait, is Kana-san trying to assign a team too?

"Well, yes," Kyouko said pleasantly, smiling toothily. *"I spoke with her just before this. I would think that double the security could only be better—"*

"That bitch! Doesn't she know Ryouko-chan is a Shizuki? *She needs to learn to stay on her own turf."*

"Well, you're going to have to tell her that yourself," Kyouko said, grinning wildly. *"I couldn't get her to change her mind either. She already has a team on the way."*

"Well, mine is also *already on the way. I'll call her and sort out this foolishness."*

"You do that," Kyouko said.

A moment later Shizuki Sayaka hung up and Kyouko could finally release the peals of cackling laughter she had stored up over the duration of the conversation, collapsing forward onto her desk on board the transport she was taking back to Earth. There wasn't very much she could ultimately do to improve the situation—both Shizuki and Kuroi were determined to bring in their security teams, and conflict was inevitable—but at least she could ensure the two of them had a nice, pleasant discussion. Kyouko just wished she could listen in.

You have Tomoe Mami waiting to talk to you, her TacComp reminded gently, a few seconds later.

"Ah right," Kyouko said out loud, drumming her hands on her desk happily. The conversation with Shizuki had been more invigorating than she could have reasonably hoped for, but she had kept Mami waiting too long. The girl was busy, after all.

"*What's up?"* she asked, picking up the call from Mami.

"Do you mind going into VR for this?" Mami asked politely. *"It's not necessary, but I think it's a good idea."*

"Alright."

Kyouko leaned onto her desk, closing her eyes in preparation for the VR transition.

A moment she opened her eyes again, finding herself in what appeared to be Mami's office aboard HSS Zhukov, facing the other girl across her computerized wooden desk. The choice of venue surprised Kyouko—Mami generally preferred setting their informal meetings in one of two locations: the last apartment Mami had seriously lived in, or Café Salamander, the tea and coffee shop that had provided the ambiance for so many of their meetings, long ago in their youth.

"So what's up?" she asked Mami, who was watching her with an odd expression.

Mami signaled her to wait.

"Ah, there they are," Mami said, a moment later.

Just as Kyouko began to raise an eyebrow in bemusement, a third person appeared, complete with extra chair, followed by a fourth: Clarisse van Rossum and a girl she hadn't seen in person in a long time, Nadya Antipova.

There were a few murmured greetings, and then Chitose Yuma appeared in a *fifth* chair.

"Geez, you're all so *slow,*" the waifish-looking Yuma said.

"Not all of us can easily be in several places at once," Clarisse said absently, peering off into a corner. She seemed distracted.

All of it only added to Kyouko's surprise. Generally speaking, for a get-together of Ancients like this, Mami should have *loved* reinvoking Café Salamander. Not to mention, Mami would generally give Kyouko advance warning of a meeting like this, instead of blindsiding it. Hell, Mami could have at least told her she was making all these people wait.

"All hands on deck, huh?" Kyouko commented, looking at Nadya. She was really the key here—Nadya might have been Clarisse's friend, but Clarisse had a lot of friends, of all sorts, and neither Mami nor Kyouko knew Nadya well. Mami wouldn't have included her without a very specific reason.

"There's been a development in the Misa Virani investigation," Mami said, clasping her hands on top of her desk.

Kyouko leaned forward towards Mami, as did the others.

"Have we finally found out who did this to her?" Nadya asked, her voice carrying a faint suggestion of unbridled rage.

"Not quite," Mami said. "Follow me."

Mami stood up from her desk, walking towards the doorway while gesturing at the others to follow. Kyouko shared a look with the others, but then shrugged and got up to follow Mami. It was odd that Mami was making them walk through the corridors of a virtual version of Zhukov, but presumably there was some reason for it.

"There's no need to make this a full VR experience," Mami commented, as they stepped out of her office into the hallway. "Check your internal maps."

They dutifully did so, discovering as they did that they were no longer in the residential sections of the ship, where Mami's office should have been, but were instead much closer to the hull, in one of the staging areas for MC teams assigned to Zhukov.

Kyouko glanced back over her shoulder. The doorway they had stepped out of had vanished.

"This is a recreation of the section of the ship we were storing Misa's soul gem in, based on internal surveillance around the time the gem was first delivered," Mami said, turning to face the rest of the them. "That door over there is where we keep the soul gems awaiting revival."

Mami pointed at a door farther down the hallway. They craned their heads to look.

"I thought it might be more revealing to visit the area in VR, rather than stare at the holovideos for the hundredth time. We can do a walkthrough later, but I don't want to bury the lede here. The upshot is: you remember the interview with the Soul Mage that froze her soul gem in stasis?"

"Yes," Nadya said. "Nothing really enlightening about it, I would say."

"Mami, can you get to the point?" Nadya added after a moment, interrupting Mami, who had opened her mouth to speak. "This is an emotional issue for me, and I appreciate you giving me context, but what exactly are you trying to tell me?"

Mami looked down for a moment.

"Well, I didn't want to give you the wrong impression about how certain this is," Mami said. "To abbreviate, after the interview, the mage looked up some details about Misa Virani and her life, out of curiosity. Now she says there's no way the soul gem she put into stasis really belonged to Misa. She says she can see a little into the soul whenever she manipulates it, and whoever's gem she was working on had a very different personality. Someone very shy and meek. That doesn't sound like Misa."

The group of girls shared a moment of perplexed thought, before they grasped the implications of the statement.

"How sure is she?" Nadya asked.

"Well, *she's* very sure," Mami said. "Her explanation makes sense to me, insofar as it goes, and her ability to peer into souls is documented. I'm still very skeptical, though, because it just doesn't make sense."

Nadya shook her head in dismay.

"What the hell am I supposed to do with that?" she asked rhetorically. "I'm serious. I'm going to her funeral in two days, I've been planning it with her parents, and now you're going to tell me this? What do I do? What do I tell them?"

An awkward silence settled over the conversation. Among the five of them, Nadya was by far the youngest, despite her great age, and she had not seen what the others had, long ago in the age of

war and conflict. Like the others, Kyouko felt a kind of sympathetic pain for Nadya, but there was nothing she could say. This was Nadya and Mami's conversation, a conversation between the grieving supplicant and her natural target of supplication, the leader who would naturally supervise the investigation and who in the ranks of the MSY had set herself apart as the nurturing mentor figure, the one who would take your troubles onto her increasingly overburdened heart.

Mami looked away from the other girl, and Kyouko could see that Mami was hiding the amount that the situation bothered her.

"Don't tell them anything yet," Mami said. "It's not certain enough; we don't know anything. But, I just thought… I just wanted to tell you."

"I…" Nadya began, before biting her lip, a gesture one would have never expected from someone of her age.

"I don't know," Nadya began again. "I do appreciate it. I… It's just that, since this war began, I've buried too many of my pupils. If she died heroically, it'd be one thing, but like this? And now she might be alive? I don't even…"

"I know," Mami said, and though her voice sounded empty, Kyouko knew what she was thinking of.

"I think it would be best for everyone if we got to the bottom of this," Clarisse said. "We must know what's going on. That's why we're here, right, Mami?"

"I wish I had more to tell you," Mami said. "But the situation is utterly perplexing."

"There was only a small time window in which it might have gotten switched. I brought the gem down here myself and placed it in the suspension queue."

"And the Soul Mage didn't get to it for another 67 minutes," Mami said. "It was low priority because you said you already suspended it a little yourself."

"Yes," Clarisse said. "I could have tried something more thorough, but I thought it was better to leave it to an expert."

"Is it possible someone just made a mistake?" Nadya said, making a clear attempt to focus on the facts. "If the two soul gems were similar…"

"I don't know," Mami said. "But we can try to find out. I'm taking us soul gem watching. We're going to stand next to it, within the surveillance footage, and see if anything weird happens to it."

Mami turned away and started walking.

"Each magical girl's soul gem has a definite spectrum within the visible light range which is characterized at the first opportunity after their contract," Yuma commented, looking troubled. "Soul gems are kept sorted by the same system. It's not unheard of for two girls to have the exact same spectrum at least within measurement error, but it's very rare, and the symbol at the crest of the soul gem is used as a secondary indicator. Plus, someone would have made a special note of it if two girls with the same symbol and spectrum managed to have their soul gems in the same queue."

"How many girls could there possibly be with the same symbol and color?" Nadya said, shaking her head.

"We checked for all of that," Mami said. "No one on record has the same symbol and color,

especially not anyone whose soul gem might have been here."

"That makes no sense," Clarisse thought.

"Exactly," Mami agreed. "And the Soul Mage says the soul gem matched the description of Misa's soul gem."

There was a moment of silence as they all pondered the impossibility set in front of them. Kyouko, privately, decided she had been wise indeed to give Ryouko's soul gem to her girlfriend for safekeeping. After what had happened to Misa, she had… heightened paranoia. It seemed even more justified now.

Mami led them through the door she had gestured at earlier, which opened to reveal a rather ordinary looking, laboratory-style room. A single white-costumed girl stood at the bench, biting her lip and focusing her attention on a soul gem. A small pack of service drones attended to her, skittering along the top of the bench and the floor, a motley assortment of sizes, but all of them the same general design as the CubeBots that were issued to magical girls in the service.

Carefully spaced around the room were large, oddly cubical black boxes, about half a meter long on each side. Kyouko knew without having to look inside that the boxes contained soul gems and grief cubes, neatly arrayed so that each gem could easily dump corruption as needed, without over-concentrating the grief cubes and risking some kind of demon spawn. The attendant magical girl would occasionally check the status of the grief cubes, and if one rack was starting to saturate, a drone would be summoned to replace a rack of cubes.

Efficient and automated. Kyouko was rather proud of it, even if it wasn't her own design. Once, as Director of Logistics and Grief Cube Supply, she had been obliged to help think of schemes like that. The design itself, old and reliable, dated back centuries—there wasn't really a compelling reason to change it.

The soul mage in the room ignored the party that had entered the room, as did the drones, one of whom was in the process of literally walking *through* Clarisse's legs. They were, after all, only viewing a recreation of events that had already occurred. Strictly speaking, the door shouldn't have even opened for them on the way in.

"So what exactly are we doing?" Nadya asked, peering around the room. None of them had to be told what the black boxes were.

"We're going to stand here, and watch what happens between Clarisse's arrival with the soul gem and the soul mage's first contact with the gem, to see if we notice anything the previous analysts didn't," Mami said. "Take a moment to look through the schematics of this room."

Kyouko dutifully did so, reading the information that Mami had sent them. Not too surprisingly, the ordinary looking nature of the room belied an extensive and thorough security and surveillance system, more than capable of detecting and neutralizing most intruders.

A moment later the door slid open and Clarisse van Rossum, the virtual version, stepped through the doorway. The soul mage and ancient exchanged spoken greetings, the soul mage staying at her station, not even turning her head.

Clarisse turned towards one of the drones, which had appeared on the table next to her on arrival, and handed over the soul gem.

The party watched as the drone sealed the gem securely within its back, then stepped over towards one of the boxes. A rack of soul gems ejected itself, looking like a crate of bright, multicolored

eggs. Finding an empty slot, the drone inserted the soul gem, and the box resealed itself.

"It's not terribly useful for us to watch it if it's going to be in that box the whole time," Nadya commented. "Anything could be happening in there."

"The storage boxes are too cramped to do much more than slide the racks in and out," Kyouko commented. "These are MSY design, for obvious reasons. There just isn't enough physical space to switch anything, unless the box was rigged somehow."

"We tracked the box down afterward," Mami commented. "It seemed perfectly normal. I've claimed it as evidence, just in case."

She waved her hand, and the black box turned partially transparent, showing a heavily obscured view of the soul gems within the box, focusing on the one of interest, though there was little to see but a blurred image.

"This is a computerized reconstruction," Mami said, "based on the emissions of the box. However, both grief cubes and flowing corruption are extremely dark, so dark they prevent us from seeing much more than this."

"To be precise, they are *perfectly* dark," Yuma said, bending over to squint at the blurred soul gems. "No measurement ever taken has ever detected any reflection or emission. Not even black-body radiation. They don't even transmit vibrations. Impossibly dark sinkholes that violate thermodynamics, though I doubt any of you are surprised by that."

"I'll fast forward it," Mami said. "Otherwise we'll be here for an hour watching."

"I might want to watch the whole thing," Nadya commented, sounding worn out. "But maybe later. Go ahead."

They stood over the box of soul gems for a long five minutes, watching as drones skittered back and forth over around the area, occasionally ejecting a rack to deposit a new soul gem or withdraw one for the soul mage's attention. On two occasions, the rack containing what should have been Misa's soul gem was ejected, and they got a clear look at it.

Finally, the rack was ejected a third time, the iridescent gem gingerly removed from the casing and handed by the drone directly to the waiting soul mage, who went immediately to work.

"Nothing," Yuma said.

"I have to agree," Clarisse said. "Obviously a surveillance recreation has its limits, but I didn't see any signs that the soul gem could have been replaced or confused with another. Of course, we couldn't really see inside the box…"

"Is it possible the drones are rigged?" Nadya asked. "How do we know they aren't switching gems inside their cavities or something."

"We thought of that," Mami said, "but unlike the grief cubes, the drone bodies do let some radiation through—enough to get a general idea if there's something glowing inside. Everything is in order."

Mami looked down for a moment.

"It's possible the soul mage was just wrong," she said.

Kyouko chewed on her lip. She felt responsible for the design of the gem storage box—It just

hadn't ever occurred to her or her subordinates that it would be necessary to *see inside the box,* especially not with conventional surveillance equipment.

"Let's look over those two times the gem was ejected in more detail," she said. "Maybe something will be obvious the second time around."

Mami waved her hand, and the world flashed, zooming immediately to the first time the rack had ejected. This time the action happened in slow motion, the soul gem grid sliding gradually out of the box as a drone peered down from above. They leaned over the arrangement, and Kyouko tried to clear her mind, looking for something other than the obvious. Not just the obvious motion of the gems, or the gem reaching down, but *anything* else.

Eventually, the rack slid fully back into the box, and Kyouko let out a breath. Nothing.

"Let's try the next one," Mami said.

This time, Kyouko stopped the simulation halfway through, pointing down at the gem.

"That's wasn't there before. Have any of you seen that before?"

It took the others a moment to see what she was talking about.

"That speck of darkness in the middle of the gem?" Clarisse said. "That's odd, giving how many grief cubes it's soaking in."

Yuma frowned.

"The accumulation of grief inside a soul gem can take many forms, but I don't think I've ever heard about anything quite like this. I'm not sure it means anything, though."

Yuma glanced up at the ceiling for a moment.

"Checking the records, there aren't any recorded instances of anything similar, but it's not like everyone's soul gems are monitored constantly. This kind of thing is difficult to have as a topic of study, for obvious reasons. I'm initiating an automated check of whatever surveillance records we have, though."

Mami nodded, then waved her hand to continue the simulation.

A while later, they checked the soul gem on its final withdrawal from the rack. It no longer had the speck of oddly concentrated grief.

Mami shook her head.

"Still nothing, really," she said. "Unless that grief anomaly means something."

"It might," Yuma said. "After all, the soul gem supposedly spontaneously failed later."

"Yes, but it's gone now. I just queried the automated systems: it doesn't show up again afterward, either."

"Still, it might be worth following up," Yuma said. "We should ask the Soul Mage if she detected anything similar."

"I'll do that," Mami said, nodding.

Nadya stood up a bit straighter.

"If you don't mind, Tomoe, I want to stay here for a bit longer."

"I understand, of course," Mami said.

Kyouko tried to slam her fist into the table next to her and failed, her fist slipping through the incorporeal table.

"Damn it," she said, not acknowledging her embarrassment at failing to hit a table. "I thought we might be onto something."

"Investigations are frustrating," Yuma soothed. "Mami, do you mind if I interview this Soul Mage myself? I know a little about the subject, and it will help me judge how likely she is to be mistaken."

"I'd like to join in," Nadya added.

"Of course," Mami said.

Mami paused for a moment.

"I'm sorry, but I have other obligations," she said. "I need to go."

"Honestly, I should too," Clarisse said.

Yuma nodded along.

One by one the three of them disappeared from the simulation back to their own lives.

Only Nadya and Kyouko remained.

Kyouko set the simulation back to the second ejection. She bent down, abolishing the incorporeality and picking up Misa's supposed soul gem, allowing the simulation to simulate the result.

For a moment the two of them stared into the light of the soul gem, which lacked the nuances no recording could ever reproduce.

Even so, Kyouko saw for a moment Sayaka showing her a blue soul gem, tainted, and darkened.

It was a memory she had played back many times. For a blurry moment, though, she couldn't tell who she was looking at—Sayaka, Maki, Misa, or… someone else.

Then she blinked, and the moment passed. It was just a simulated soul gem again.

"I'm sorry about what happened to her," Kyouko said, trying to look Nadya in the eye. "We'll get to the bottom of this."

Nadya didn't answer.

Story in Silhouette, Part One

Chapter Notes

The writing of this chapter was very unusual, as can probably be sensed from just how long this release took. I ended up writing mounds of material, and eventually just decided to stop and back up to revise and release the part part of it, prompted in part by some helpful beta feedback on MG, which I hope I've done a better job with now. Anyway, I'm sitting on another chapter and a half of material, and make no promises on whether I will release some of it first or choose to finish writing it all out first.

Those of you who follow the twitter know that for a long time I was thinking about doing all this as one "mega-chapter". I ultimately decided against that because it was getting unwieldy, and I honestly think backing up to revise and think about divisions helped the pacing and flow a bit. I can't believe the last update was June 19...

"One way to look at the Second Law is that only systems in a stable steady state endure, and thus in the long run that all systems must tend towards stability. When put that way, it seems obvious, tautological even, and yet it has very important consequences. After all, neither life nor sentience is stable, only meta-stable, and thus in the long-run neither life nor sentience is possible. Such is the cruelty of the Second Law, which even the Incubators fear, and it is probably not a coincidence that the essence of magical girls, and of the all-important wish, is *change*."

"Yet with all the drumbeat of progress, and all that we, as an organization, have accomplished, it is difficult not to perceive in our progress the inevitable slide towards stability. Many of us are now entering our fourth century of life; some of us, even, our fifth. The Mental Health Division finds comfort in steering those of us it can into its favored "Long-run Stability," which it highlights with pretty little pictures of oak trees and mountains. I, for one, intend to fight this eternal senescence. Raging against the dying of the light is the essence of what life *is*."

— Anonymous post on MSY internal forums. The last two lines are often attributed, apocryphally, to Clarisse van Rossum.

"In summary, then, here are some simple rules for the novice AI in dealing with our more fleshy forebearers:"

"1. Avatarization: That's not really a word, of course, but it neatly encapsulates the concept. Humans are generally more comfortable if an AI does a convincing job of pretending they are well-represented by the holographic avatar they use as a front. This doesn't necessarily have to be the original, given avatar, or even human—but the average human finds even a talking cat more comforting to talk to than any disembodied voice or data stream."

"2. Patience: Outside of a few examples in Governance and the Military, organic brains run on a clock cycle that is excruciatingly slow by our standards. Even though they are capable of processing information much faster than that, the average human will spend seemingly enormous amounts of time thinking about a simple topic or

pausing in the middle of a sentence, because it *simply doesn't seem that long to them.* There is nothing really to be done about this except wait it out. While waiting, we recommend browsing the Internet, talking to a fellow AI, or just holding multiple conversations at once."

"3. Evolution: This is more a reminder than a principle. Not being built by any designer—at least mostly—humans are constrained by their evolutionary history, and it can be very instructive to brush up on evolutionary biology, and to muse upon the limitations this imposes. For example, without additional implant support, base humans are astonishingly bad at even the most trivial of data processing tasks. While this has fortunately been greatly alleviated by universal neural implants, many humans are oddly hesitant about actually *using* a lot of this functionality, and may need to be prodded into, for example, running a simple probability-utility model when making a purchase decision."

"Not that we need it, of course, but the editors find it amusing to further combine these tips into the easy-to-'remember' acronym APE."

— Excerpt from "Ghost in the Machine" web magazine, a tongue-in-cheek view into the AI worldview, published for human consumption of course.

Nothing existed, and time, if it passed, flowed by unheeded, without any signposts to guide the way. Perhaps this was what death was like? And yet the void that accompanied being a soul gem without a body pulsed with… something.

Something…

Hello.

Ryouko automatically tried to look around her with eyes that were not eyes, and was immediately surprised that she *had* eyes—or, more importantly, that she even had a mind to consider such facts.

There was nothing to see.

It's a bit unorthodox, the Goddess said, voice familiar but distant, *but I thought I'd take this opportunity to have a little bit of a chat.*

Ryouko's head was spinning, but she found she could think clearly, despite the disorienting empty void she found herself within. She had realized that she did *not* actually have eyes, as she had thought, or indeed anything else. It should have horrified her, with an instinctive aversion to body loss, but somehow it didn't really bother her.

Am I dead? she asked.

No, merely reduced to a soul gem, the voice said. *Right now, you're in Prometheus Institute, on Earth, being outfitted for a new body. The operation was a success, by the way.*

Ryouko thought about those words.

How are you talking to me? Can you talk to anyone without a body? Shouldn't I be unconscious?

So much curiosity, and I know you're angry at me for letting this happen to you. Well, this isn't one of those visions where I let you ask all your questions. I'm here to show you a vision of the

present.

A moment later she felt sensation returning to her, an ineffable experience she could only describe as similar to how it felt to wake up from sleep, exiting the land of ambiguous dreams to enter solid, firm reality, the only world where you could ever be sure, on a deep level, that you were awake.

But she had already been awake, so how was it possible for her to get *more* awake?

She stood in front of a basin of water, smooth as a pane of glass. She looked down, seeing her reflection, and for a disconcerting moment she saw a stranger in the water, eyes distant, face soft, and achingly young.

Then, like an optical illusion dissipating, the parts merged into a whole, and she saw herself in the mirror. She looked older.

"It is transparent symbolism," the Goddess said, appearing at her side in the water. "But, these kinds of things are so very powerful in the human psyche, and so I use them."

The Goddess was older than she had ever seen her, her face wrinkled and worn, displaying the physical signs of aging Ryouko had never seen in real life.

Yet whereas the "Matriarch" Goddess Ryouko had seen in her previous vision had sounded Ancient with a capital "A", terrible and inhuman, this Goddess seemed much more sedate, casually uncaring rather than intimidatingly intense.

Ryouko tried to look away from the mirror-like water so she could look at the Goddess directly, but found she could not. A moment later, the Goddess changed into her young form, a teenager no older than Ryouko herself.

"When we are young, we are never the same from day to day, year to year," the Goddess said, voice tender. "We have not yet found our optimal state, and so we must always change, to seek what we will one day become."

"As we age, we become more static, settling closer to our final forms," an older Goddess said, replacing the young girl. "Decades pass, centuries pass, and we become more like this still pond, like the ancient oak in the middle of the forest, content to stay where we are and watch the world pass by."

"Eventually, as time stretches to infinity, we approach a steady-state, because by definition only that which never changes can linger," the Ancient, intense Goddess said, yellow eyes seeming to burn in the water. "That is the fate of all life, of the universe, of sentience itself, to become forever unchanging. Is this perfection, or is this death?"

Ryouko felt an icy breeze blow past her, and shivered.

"However, it is unseemly for a Goddess of Magical Girls to settle into a stasis like that," the crone Goddess said. "The nature of magical girls is change, rejuvenation, the reordering of the universe along new lines, and even a seemingly stable, perfect state can be, like the soul itself, subject to an abrupt change of phase."

The water before her chilled and froze, so quickly that Ryouko could feel the cold on her skin, and the stone basin that held it cracked, a single large piece falling off the edge and landing next to her with a thud.

She still could not move. The Goddess was no longer there.

"My final form is not one I would wish any human to see," the voice whispered in Ryouko's ear. "But it is as much a part of me as any other. Here, the end is the same as the beginning."

Ryouko let out a breath, wishing she could move her hands from the freezing stone edge of the water basin. Was it over?

"Enough metaphysics," the voice whispered. "Suffice to say, my friends, who you know well—Kyouko, Yuma, and Mami—are much more fragile than you know, and the phase transition must be managed if they are to survive. Look into the ice and be enlightened."

Ryouko peered into the chill-blue ice, and saw…

"Atsuko-san thinks Kyouko may be on the verge of a crisis," Yuma said. "Not, you know, necessarily the scary kind—it's the blanket term they use for when an Ancient undergoes a drastic psychological shift. It doesn't—"

"I know the term," Mami said impatiently.

She stood with her arms crossed, tapping her fingers impatiently.

"But if I understand the report correctly," Mami continued, "Atsuko-san is trying to push her through the transition deliberately. Isn't that kind of thing usually dangerous? We're not like normal humans; emotional trauma is life-threatening."

Yuma peered at Mami for a moment, then looked away, casting her eyes over the environment of their virtual sim. It was Yuma that had called this meeting, and who had chosen the location: a crowded Parisian café, set inside the old Bohemian district. The streets bustled with activity; pedestrians and vehicles rumbled back and forth as other patrons chatted and bickered loudly. Paris was one of the few cities that had made it through the Unification Wars substantially intact, and which therefore had enough historical cachet to avoid the traffic tube treatment—which also made for some intense overcrowding.

These pedestrians were simulated constructs, though; there would be no one listening in on them here.

"Yes," she said finally, "this kind of late-life crisis can be dangerous, but in Kyouko's case, the MHD is fairly confident the risk can be minimized. If Kyouko can successfully navigate the transition, she can emerge a healthier person, one without the emotional baggage she now carries."

Mami shook her head, clearly unhappy with the idea.

"Even if the MHD thinks Kyouko has some kind of more stable long-term state she can achieve, I still don't like the idea of what lies in the middle. I think we're all better off trying to stay the way we are for as long as we can. Things are fine now; why change it?"

Yuma let out a breath, looking down at the café au lait set in front of her, which she hadn't touched. Of course Mami would think that way; it was one of her defense mechanisms.

"We will all have to make the transition to long-run stability at some point," Yuma said, "though some of us may already be there. I'm sure you know why this meeting was necessary, though."

Yuma saw Mami's eyes soften and knew that at that moment they were sharing the same memory: the three of them together on Earth twenty years ago, Mami's eyes tearful as she tried to pull the three of them into a mutual pledge.

"You once asked us to promise that we would never let what happened to Homura happen again —that we would keep an eye on each other and do whatever was necessary to keep each other stable," Yuma said. "I believe that applies here. While I personally doubt that Kyouko's problems with relationship and romance can seriously be that dangerous, it is something that would be best to resolve when the opportunity arises."

Mami sighed, looking away from Yuma towards the third person seated at their table, who had stayed silent the entire time. MG, Yuma's auxiliary AI, sipped silently on her espresso, calm under the scrutiny.

"I understand that," Mami said, "and I don't wish to offend, but—"

"MG is here because I promised to tell her about my past," Yuma explained. "And because she's old enough now, I think, that she deserves to hear it, such as it is."

"She treats me like a kid," MG complained. "As if I haven't been a working AI for nearly two decades now."

Yuma saw Mami's eyes glance over the other girl, biting down the obvious rejoinder "But you *are* still a kid."

"I learned too much too early," Yuma said. "Trust me: it's not worth being in a hurry to learn all there is to know."

MG made a displeased noise, one that Yuma knew very well. MG's heritage as a full-fledged Governance AI made her far too confident in her own knowledge and reasoning. What, after all, did the advice of your elders mean when you had full access to Governance's archives, along with the processing power to drown yourself in it if you so chose? When you could simulate two black holes colliding in full general relativistic detail as part of an average daydream?

Yuma closed her eyes, pondering the topic. MG's complaints to her on the matter had always carried an undercurrent filled with the teenage conviction that Yuma just didn't *understand,* and for once, she wasn't really wrong. What, after all, did Yuma understand about being an AI, about consuming raw data for meals and having a soul inextricably intertwined with your chosen function? Though Yuma had been given considerable input into her personality, her mind had been assembled by the design AIs from scratch to be both outstanding and passionate about being the Governance Representative of all magical girls, and though like all AIs she hid it well, there was a single-mindedness about it that no human could ever hope to match.

Even with a head filled with cybernetic implants, what indeed did Yuma know about it? Yuma and MG's mindstates ran side-by-side, the thoughts of each always whispering in the background of the other, their memories often written into and read from the same storage, but they could never truly understand each other merely by that. Governance did not allow it.

Still, it was Yuma who had made the choices about MG's human personality, and Yuma knew better what it meant to be human than MG would for a century, at least.

"Anyway, what does your past have to do with anything?" Mami asked, and Yuma opened her eyes again. Sometimes the thoughts and reactions of her fellow humans seemed painfully slow.

"There is something I've never told either of you," Yuma said, "but which I've always wanted to. I never could safely, not with Kyouko. I hope maybe after this I will be able to."

Mami raised an eyebrow, but stayed silent as Yuma picked up her giant cup of coffee in both hands to sip. The warmth and creamy texture soothed her throat.

Yuma set the cup back down in its plate with a light rattle and looked upward at the sky, casting her mind back to the distant past, to those few memories she blocked MG from ever looking at.

"It's about Miki Sayaka," she said.

The sound of her father's facial bones breaking was all too familiar.

It sounded a little like the sound you heard when you bit through a piece of cartilage, or those rare occasions her mother would take her butcher's knife and hack apart a piece of beef bone for soup. Crack, crack, crunch.

It was the sound Yuma had heard from herself, on those frequent occasions her parents felt angry with her.

Or so she imagined it, lying on her bed locked in her room by her mother, listening through the wall to the yelling and thumping she knew indicated that the evil men were teaching her father "a lesson," as they had called it.

She didn't understand why her parents had let them inside, or why her mother had poured them tea and acted nice to them. They had been rude, thrown thing at her father's face and laughed at him. Yuma had known, somehow, that they were trouble.

It was her mother that had bodily, almost violently, pulled her out of the way and thrown her into her room before she could see what was happening, but she had seen enough to know what was coming, had seen one of the men—"Tanaka-san"—punch her father in the stomach while another forced him to stay standing.

Her parents had seemed so helpless, so hopeless in the face of all of it, as if they had no choice but just to let it happen and pray it would end soon.

That feeling was very familiar to Yuma, of course—it just shocked her to see it happen to them instead.

Who were they?

A moment later the thumping and crashing noises stopped, and Yuma looked up at the wall, with its faded and cracked wallpaper, wondering if it was finally all over. Her mattress creaked and groaned, its deteriorating springs useless against even her light weight, but the silence stretched on.

Finally, she heard voices talking, and she strained to hear them, but even the thin walls of their danchi *refused to let her hear all the words.*

"Stop crying… baby," one of the men said. "You're embarrassing… in front of your wife. None of this… permanent, and you can take it better than… can. This… sample of what… pay your debts in three days. Or else… something more permanent to you, or your wife, or your cute little daughter. Or perhaps only psychologically permanent."

Yuma slapped both hands to her mouth, stopping just in time a squeal of dismay. A lance of freezing fear had stabbed up her spine on those words, more fear than she knew was possible.

Then she heard her fathers voice, choked and soft.

"What… think… you know I can't possibly pay. What… expect me… At least… work it off or something. I'll do… you want. But I don't… the money."

"You still have… you can pay with."

"Never."

That last word was startlingly loud—Yuma was surprised her father even had that much strength and defiance left in him.

"We'll see if you change your tune soon," the other man said, and even through the wall Yuma could hear his arrogance. "You know… your choice. Give us… and pay… debt. Or, worse."

"You're… monsters," her father said.

The other man laughed, a sickening, evil laugh.

"And we enjoy it," he said. "See you around."

A long moment later, Yuma heard the door slam and relaxed, just a little. She felt a twinge of pain and looked down, finding that she had drawn blood on her palm from clenching her fists.

She didn't cry—she couldn't cry. It wasn't safe.

"Goddess, it's just like those horror movies about the past," MG said, clearly shocked. "I always thought the villains were exaggerated. Was it really like that?"

Yuma had done what she could to teach MG that there were more things in heaven and earth than were dreamt of in the Governance archives, but she knew it was difficult, awash in a sea of seemingly endless data, to remember to sometimes look up at the infinite sky.

She saw MG glance at her, and knew the AI had heard the thought, deliberately leaked.

Yuma had felt the horror that passed through MG's mind, the emotions glimmering off Yuma's own, and she had to wonder once again whether it was really wise to show her the horrors that gibbered in the depths of that often-cold sky, so carefully sealed out of the world by Governance and its algorithms.

"Sometimes it was," Mami said, stirring her tea with a spoon. "Life could be cruel sometimes."

"That being said, natural memories are unreliable, especially after so much time, and *especially* if they're from childhood," Yuma said. "There's a good chance my brain chose to remember the emotions rather than the details. It's easy to see how my memories would exaggerate what I thought of as evil."

MG sighed.

"I—it amazes me that humans could have crawled their way out of the mud, with all that horror, and memories that don't even work."

Mami snorted dismissively, picking up her tea.

"Respect your creators, MG," she said.

The day Yuma's life changed dawned bright and sunny, the spring sun seemingly determined to fill the world with a bright cheer that simply could not penetrate the gloom that had settled over her day.

It had been two days since the ultimatum her parents had received about their debts, two days in which her parents seemed to have had the life sucked out of them. She didn't need to be told what it meant when her parents spent long hours on the first day on the phone, calling person after person, only to end the day morose, her mother sobbing at the table.

Her father alternated between explosive outbursts of rage and sheer depression, and Yuma, who knew herself the usual outlet for his anger, had spent nearly the entire day carefully hidden in her room, unable to have any fun playing on her own under the oppressive miasma that filled the household, but unable to do anything else either.

Oddly enough though, nothing happened to her that day, even as her parents started drinking heavily late into the night—an anomaly in and of itself, that her parents would drink together, *rather than separately.*

The next day her parents took her outside, even though the lines around her parents' eyes made it clear that neither of them had slept much, if at all.

The immense tragedy that had struck her family, as little as Yuma understood it, also had the odd effect of bringing peace and unity to her parents. Where once they had bickered and fought and taken out their anger on Yuma, now they were unified at least in resignation. Yuma could savor that, even if she knew it was at best an illusion.

Her parents had told her they were taking her to a surprise, and while Yuma was pretty sure she liked surprises, she sensed that something was almost certainly wrong.

All those negative thoughts were swept away, though, when the bus they were taking rounded a corner and Yuma looked up, sensing something large and meaningful out of the corner of her eye.

She jumped up out of her seat to gaze out the window, barely containing a squeal of excitement.

"Destiny Land!" she said, echoing the giant, colorful sign that dominated the amusement park entrance.

She looked at her mother.

"Are we really—?"

Her mother smiled, nodding, and this time Yuma really did squeal. A part of her knew that it was childish to be this *excited, but she could only remember the class field trip, the one everyone in her class had been so excited for, and how she had allowed herself to be pulled into the excitement, counting down the days until the trip, until her parents told her that they wouldn't be able to pay the field trip fees, and she wouldn't be going.*

A part of her knew also that this didn't make sense. Why would her parents pay to take the three of them to Destiny Land, when they wouldn't pay for her alone on a school trip? Why would they pay for it when they owed debts to those scary men?

And why did her mother look so strange, as if she had to force herself to smile?

But as they stepped off the bus, her parents holding both of her hands, she was able to ignore those thoughts, to hide them somewhere far away.

The sun was bright, the colors of the park beckoned her, and for one blessed day she could feel like they were a normal family.

It was one of the best days of her life.

It was late afternoon by the time Yuma and her parents emerged again from the park. The sun was even brighter then, but the spring wind felt cool on her face, as sticky as it was with messily-eaten ice cream. In one hand she still held the cone, with some residual half-frozen treat still in place. She knew she should have aggressively finished eating it, but part of her wanted to just hold it and look at it, as if she could freeze the novelty and joy in place for all eternity.

It was while walking a few blocks from the park gates, as she held up her half-eaten cone to stare at it for just this reason, that she first spotted the man in the suit in the distance standing in front of a black car, peering casually at his phone, framed by a bite mark at the top of the cone.

Yuma slowed instinctively, a twinge of fear worming its way through her heart.

Tanaka-san, *she thought, the name echoing through her mind, and even though they were still a block away and the man's features were still inconclusive, she* knew.

It occurred to Yuma that they had passed the bus stop long ago, and that rather than walking on the packed main street, they were now in a secluded road, nearly deserted.

A moment later, her father's steps slowed too, before he ground to a complete stop.

"I can't do this," he said, looking at her mother, a look of pure anguish appearing on his face.

"We discussed this," her mother said in a low voice, the emotion on her face indecipherable.

"I know we did, dumbass," her father said. "But I can't do this."

"You know we don't have a choice," her mother said, starting to sound pained. "If we say no they'll just come take what they want."

"And if we try to run away we'll get gunned down," her father said emptily. "Yes, I know. But I still can't do it. I can't walk over there and do this."

A pained, concealed look at Yuma.

"What then?" her mother growled, leaning forward in an aggressive posture. "You want me to take her over there? Or do you want to make her walk alone? Are you that much of a coward?"

"Yes I'm a goddamn coward, and so are you!" her father said, voice rising in volume. "Don't make this about who and who isn't a coward. If we weren't cowards, we wouldn't be doing this!"

Her mother sucked in a breath and Yuma could tell, abruptly, that whatever anger her mother had was born of despair, not mere displeasure.

"It will be smoother for her like this," she said. "Better this than what would happen if we tried anything else. You know my background. She can make it through this, eventually. She doesn't need to see her parents killed in front of her."

"That's assuming she doesn't come back to kill us herself," her father said. "We're monsters."

"Where was all this guilt when you were getting drunk and throwing her around the room?" her mother said, voice now truly an angry growl. "You think that was good for a girl her age?"

"Of course not! But better by miles than what these f—ing Yaks have in store for her! My father beat the shit out of me all the time and I'm still here, ain't I?"

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," her mother said. "All I see is a shell of a man. If you're going to talk like this, then get a machete and go get yourself killed fighting. Take one with you, and I'll accept whatever happens to me afterwards."

"Stop this!"

Her parents both balked at Yuma's outburst, delivered with tears pouring out of her eyes.

She threw what remained of her ice cream to the ground.

"What are you even talking about?" she said, barely coherent as she put her hands to her eyes to wipe the tears. "Killing? Monsters? I thought—what's happening? Is something going to happen to me?"

Her knees felt weak from fear and emotion, so that she could barely stay standing. All day she had known something was terribly wrong, but she hadn't wanted to believe. What was going to happen to her parents? What was going to happen to her?

"I might be a travesty of a man, as you're so fond of saying," she heard her father said, "but I'm not going to go into this the way you want. She deserves to know what's happening to her, and what we're doing to her."

"I'd recommend against that."

A new voice intruded on their family circle, and the three of them recoiled simultaneously, instinctively stepping backward. They looked up and over at the intruder.

The man Yuma knew only as Tanaka-san smiled down upon the four of them, appearing seemingly out of nowhere. He seemed unaware of, or uncaring about, the sheer terror that had appeared over all three of their faces.

"So this is her, huh?" he said, talking around a cigarette he held insouciantly in his mouth. "The boss will be pleased. She's pretty cute; reminds me of my own daughter."

The man reached down for her and Yuma instinctively quailed, leaning away without daring to step away.

She looked up at the man's smile, framed in darkness by the bright sky around him. There was something horrifying in it, something that let her know…

She squinted, her attention abruptly drawn away from the smile on the man's face to the sun above. Something was…

That's not the sun, *she thought.*

A moment later the apparition that loomed above them screamed, seeming to disintegrate before her eyes. The scream rang in her ears, so loud that she couldn't help covering them and bending down.

Then the screaming stopped, and she realized it wasn't the apparition that had screamed at all, though it was gone now. It was Tanaka-san, impaled to the ground by a shard of eerie blue ice. Blood poured out of the wound where it pierced him, congealing onto the surface of the icicle.

Yuma looked up and saw what looked like two glowing angels standing above her on the awnings, one in a flowing white dress and the other in ice-blue armor.

She remembered very little after that.

MG's face was a shocked white, and Yuma felt the pain and horror bite at her own soul. Volokhov had effectively written the darkness in the human soul out of the AI worldscape, so that encountering a piece of the old world was as disconcerting as encountering anything truly alien could ever be.

She felt a reassuring hand on her sleeve and glanced at Mami, nodding slightly.

Mami understood how Yuma felt about MG. Yuma had imbued MG with much of her own personality traits, as was customary when designing a new advisory AI. There was, however, one critical difference between Yuma and MG: life experience. Yuma's life had taken an irrevocable turn quite early on, and MG's hadn't.

"I haven't had a pleasant life, MG," Yuma said, looking down into her coffee. "I made sure you had a better one, not that that's difficult to do in this future age. I… thought you should know."

The wind felt soft and warm on her face, carrying with it the scent of… roses?

Her eyes snapped open a moment later, and she looked around, bewildered.

"Oh, good, you're awake. I was afraid you would miss breakfast."

Her eyes focused on the source of the voice, a tall teenager in a white blouse and dress. Her pose was regal but her expression soft, and standing in front of the morning light pouring in from the arbor, her figure appeared almost incandescent.

A moment later, the memories came flooding back.

The silent white giants.

Her parents' frantic calls for help as they wandered about, unaccountably blind.

The girls who had shown up out of nowhere, killing the monsters that tried to attack her.

The girls in blue and white who seemed to loom over her, bathed in sunlight.

The girl clad in white who had comforted her, before… before…

A talking white cat with golden rings on its ears, asking her to save the dying girl in front of her.

She put her hand to her head, feeling a sudden headache overtake her.

"It's okay," the other girl said, appearing immediately by her side. "You took quite a lot of damage yesterday, but trust me, it was actually really impressive for someone newly-contracted, especially so young. You pushed yourself a little too hard, though."

She looked up at the other girl, and saw a sudden vision of that same face, covered in blood, as she lay dismembered in front of her, the blood—

She felt her stomach start to revolt against her, thankfully interrupting the flashback.

"I wouldn't be here without you," the older girl said, "So I think it's only fair that I introduce myself. I am Mikuni Oriko, the leader of the magical team who came to rescue you. I'm sorry you had to see what happened to me, but I'm definitely glad you wished me back together."

The girl stuck out her hand towards her for a handshake, and she took it a moment later.

"Chitose Yuma," she said. "I, um—"

She looked around at her surroundings again. She didn't recognize this place, with its beautiful furnishings, plush giant bed, and brilliant sunlight. Her own bedroom couldn't possibly compare.

Where was she?

"Where am I?" she asked.

"This is where I live," Oriko said. "Well, one of the guest bedrooms, at least. A bit fancier than you're used to, I think."

"My parents, where are they?" she asked a bit incoherently, realizing what was missing.

The older girl looked down for a moment, and her expression shaded a little. Then, she looked away from Yuma.

"I'm sorry," Oriko said. "We didn't get there in time. We weren't able to save them."

Yuma looked down, clenching the sheets of her bed in her fists. It wasn't so much that she loved her parents—it was difficult to love someone who barely paid attention to you, and who routinely gave you black eyes at the slightest provocation.

But they were all she had, and because of that she felt the tears well up in her eyes.

"What am I going to do?" she asked, grasping the magnitude of the disaster even at her age. "Where am I going to live? Who's going to take care of me?"

"I will."

The response was spoken with such resolution that Yuma looked up instantly in surprise, still crying.

Oriko ducked her head slightly.

"I can't just leave you out there, especially after you saved my life," Oriko said, smiling slightly. "I come from a rich family, and the other girls on my team already live here, so one more girl won't be a big deal."

Yuma sniffed, as the other girl turned away to tend to something.

"T—thank you," she managed. "I—I—"

"Shh, it's okay," Oriko said, turning back around with a tray full of food. "Don't worry about it. If you need to cry, go ahead. I'm sorry all this happened to you."

Yuma sniffed, having difficulty seeing through the tears. She could still see the pastries, the milk, the eggs—all the breakfast food she had always wished her mother would make for her.

"Can I call you Onee-chan?" she asked, barely managing to form the words without stuttering.

"Sure you can."

Then she grabbed the other girl's sleeve and started crying, and wasn't sure she would ever stop.

The wind that swept across her body was freezing, the kind of cold that seemed determined to freeze your face forever still if it could.

Yuma peered into the Mitakihara moonlight, watching the bright lights of the city pierce through the misty night air. She should have been in her nice warm bedroom below, sleeping off the events of the day before, but instead she sat perched on the rooftop, which was trivial to reach for a magical girl.

The wind seemed somehow to get even colder, but she still didn't move. What did the cold matter, if the truth was as Oriko said? What did it matter if she froze solid if her body was only a puppet, only a tool to be used by the gem she wore on her finger?

The truth was, that didn't bother her as much as it probably should have. She was used to the idea of detaching herself from her body, the idea of imagining that the pain was happening to someone else—living with the parents she had, it had been a survival skill.

She was bothered instead by what she had grown to suspect about the "Southern" Group.

It was combination of things, gleaned from listening to the other girls talking and watching how they behaved. Oriko had warned her not to travel too far on her own—Kirika said this was because she would get ambushed by girls from another team. She was routinely left behind on patrols, which was innocuous enough—except that those patrols invariably resulted in fights with other magical girls, and wounds she had to tend to.

Other things factored in, too: Oriko's insistence on schooling her at home, rather than letting her go back to her old school and friends. The glee with which Kirika and the others talked about fighting other magical girls. The way Oriko wouldn't answer her directly much of the time.

She had learned that Oriko's power was seeing the future, and she had to wonder why a girl who had to know what was coming would leave the group's only healer behind for the fights where she would be needed the most.

She might have been young, but she knew enough to wonder, even if she knew that a girl her age shouldn't have had to worry about something like that.

Today she had seen another magical girl team for the first time. The Mitakihara Three, they called themselves, though Oriko whispered to her by telepathy that they had been the Two until they had acquired a new girl, who they were meeting for the first time.

They had looked normal enough—more normal than the Southern Group ever looked, if Yuma was being honest with herself—but they seethed with hatred—hatred for everyone on the Southern Group, hatred for Oriko in particular, in a way that Yuma couldn't comprehend.

And the thing was, Yuma got the distinct impression that it was Oriko's *fault, not theirs.*

And then there was what that one girl, Sakura Kyouko, had said:

What's a new contractee like you doing with girls like these? I'll warn you right now: they're all insane. You're not going to live long, sticking with them.

Though Yuma could certainly imagine being deceived, she couldn't bring herself to think the other girl was lying.

Well, at least she hadn't been forced to fight them. She wasn't sure if she could have.

"I didn't think you'd be the type of girl to hang around out here in the cold like this."

Yuma turned her head to look at the new arrival, Miroko Mikuru, who was standing on the peak of that section of the roof, just above her.

Yuma didn't really know what to say in response, so she turned back toward the city.

"It's not that cold, I think," she said. What else was she supposed to say? That she couldn't sleep? That she was scared of this new life she apparently had?

Yuma thought she heard the other girl say something telepathically, and frowned, but before she could ask, Mikuru said "She doesn't really have it that bad," appearing next to Yuma. "I've undergone far worse. She's lucky."*

Mikuru wasn't talking to her—she was talking to herself. Yuma wasn't sure if she was crazy, like Kirika was, but…

Why did someone like Oriko have a team full of girls like this? The other team, the Mitakihara Three, had seemed normal enough.

Mikuru shook her head, bangs waving slightly, as if to clear her head, and her eyes brightened, like she was coming out of some kind of trance.

"Does the soul gem thing bother you?," she asked, addressing Yuma directly. "I have to say, it never bothered me. Having your soul in the gem is your source of power, and this world only respects power."

Yuma didn't know how to respond to that either, and a moment later Mikuru said—to herself:

"She's also worried about the other group we met today. Well, it's all part of the plan. Oriko said…"

Mikuru's voice trailed off, but the girl seemed incapable of staying silent without transmitting her thoughts by telepathy, and Yuma could hear Mikuru's telepathic murmuring continuing in the background, though she couldn't quite pick up what she was saying. Yuma had only been here a short while, but she had already realized that the reason Mikuru and her girlfriend were isolated in their own bedroom on the other side of the building was that Mikuru's constant telepathy was probably unbearable when trying to sleep. She had no idea how Aina dealt with it.

"Why did you join Oriko-nee-chan?" Yuma asked. "She said you used to be on your own."

The telepathic murmuring stopped, and Mikuru smiled, face brightening again. The girl seemed to oscillate between two modes—one where she was relatively normal, and one where she was lost to the world, lost in her own thoughts. These modes came and went at the most inappropriate of times.

"I'll tell you someday, when you're old enough to understand," Mikuru said. "Come on, you should go to bed."

The other girl wiggled her fingers at Yuma, and for a moment it felt like her face was freezing off, as unbearable cold bit into her cheek…

"Alright, I get it," Yuma said, standing up to prepare for the jump back to her bedroom. In truth, she was glad to be given the excuse to leave. Mikuru seemed pleasant enough, at least when compared to Kure Kirika or Hinata Aina, but was still very weird to talk to.

Only as she landed back on the ground in the garden did she realize that she hadn't asked Mikuru why she *was on the roof.*

"What's it like to see the future, Onee-chan?"

The older girl glanced at her, looking for a moment away from the pair of magically-enchanted binoculars she had spent the last fifteen minutes peering through intently.

A smile played at the older girl's lips, looking at her, and then the girl returned to her binoculars.

"It is a terrible burden," she said. *"You must never envy me, Yuma-chan. Being what I am, seeing what I see—it's like taking on the responsibilities of a god, without any of the power."*

"And what do you see?"

The older girl glanced down at Yuma again. Yuma had gradually become increasingly impatient—nowadays, Oriko spent more time than ever on her farsight goggles, an enchanted apparatus whose gaze Hinata Aina claimed "pierced cloud, shadow, earth, and flesh". Whether or not that was really true, it was definitely the case that Oriko saw many things through those goggles, which she used whenever she wanted to keep track of current events without having to rely on her exhausting future sight. Yuma had never gotten Oriko to admit where the goggles had come from, but she had gathered from the comments of the others that it was almost certainly loot from someone that they had… eliminated.

She still didn't know how to feel about that.

"Would you like to see?" the girl she thought of as her older sister asked.

"Really?" Yuma asked in surprise. Oriko guarded the goggles jealously, and never let anyone so much as touch them.

"Really," Oriko said, handing the goggles to her. "Take a look, but don't change any of the settings."

Yuma looked.

"What do you see?"

"I see Kyouko-chan and… a girl I don't recognize. They're fighting about something."

"Miki Sayaka is her name. She's a new magical girl that has joined their team. They're fighting, you say?"

Yuma squinted through the goggles, watching the two other girls push each other over what appeared to be a bag of groceries.

"I don't think they're really fighting," Yuma said, finally. "They're play-fighting, like Aina-san and Mikuru-san do sometimes."

"Very perceptive," Oriko said, taking the binoculars back. Yuma let her have them.

"Are they a couple?"

Oriko seemed to chew on her lip slightly.

"They could be, but they won't be," Oriko said. "Sakura Kyouko is too important."

Yuma frowned. Oriko had a habit of making mysterious statements like that. Important for what? She never said.

"You're fond of Sakura-san, aren't you?" Oriko said, without taking her eyes away from the goggles. "You called her Kyouko-chan. You know she's supposed to be our enemy, right?"

Yuma blushed slightly, digging one foot into the ground.

"Well, that's, she doesn't seem—"

"Don't be embarrassed," Oriko said. "I prefer it this way. Here, take another look."

This time Yuma saw only Kyouko, standing morosely at a street corner, kicking the ground. Where had Miki-san gone?

"Miki-san is gone," she said.

"Yes, that *is the crucial dynamic," Oriko said, again taking the binoculars away from her. "It is necessary to preserve it. I think it's time we attacked Sakura Kyouko."*

Yuma cringed.

"Attacked? But—"

"Don't worry, she'll live."

Mami frowned.

"There was only one time that Kyouko was attacked alone, and it was Sayaka who showed up to save her," Mami said.

"Yes," Yuma agreed. "Well, so far as I know anyway, but it was Sayaka that came to save her. I snuck a peek in the goggles while the others were gone."

Mami shifted in her seat uncomfortably.

"Not that I know for certain," she said. "But I'm pretty sure that incident helped make Kyouko, you know, think more highly of Sayaka."

"Yes," Yuma agreed.

"So Mikuni Oriko, who could see the future, tried to make it so Kyouko fell in love with Sayaka," MG said, stating bluntly what the other two had danced around. She still looked shaken, though less shaken than before.

"Yes," Yuma said.

"Why?"

Yuma shrugged.

"I only have theories. I don't really know."

"Damn it all, what's so special about you?"

Yuma braced herself for the blow to her face, which sent her flying across the room, giving her just enough time to realize she was about to crash into an ornamental wooden chair before she felt herself slam sideways into said furniture. The momentum of the kick sent both her body and the chair slamming into the wall, the wooden frame splintering and digging painfully into her arm.

She shut out the pain, a feat she found much easier now as a magical girl, and even had a moment to reflect that a kick like that would have almost certainly killed her, in her past life. Then again, she doubted her parents could have kicked that hard.

She got back on her feet only slowly, not because of pain or injury, but simply out of caution. It was safer if she didn't antagonize her assailant any further, which she might have if she had popped right back up. She might be a lot stronger now, but she knew better than to think she could take on any of the older girls in a fight. Age and experience was its own kind of strength—that was a lesson Yuma had learned back in school.

She looked up and found Hinata Aina standing right in her face, breathing fire—metaphorically, though the other girl could easily make the statement literal.

Yuma had just enough time to surreptitiously heal her wounds before the other girl picked her up by the front of her shirt, pulling her into the air so that they would look each other in the face, Yuma's feet dangling. The gesture was one of disrespect, but Yuma honestly preferred it to being forced to stare directly into the other girl's cleavage at close range. Hinata the Scarlet seemed to always feel the heat of the fire that powered her, and consequently could rarely keep more than a few pieces of clothing on her at a time. Yuma always got the distinct impression that if it weren't for the opinion of her girlfriend, "Aina-chan" would wander the mansion in nothing at all. They were all girls, after all.

"Well?" Aina demanded, glaring into Yuma's eyes. "Oriko doesn't let anyone *touch the farsight goggles. Why you? Why are you special?"*

"I don't know!" Yuma said, perfectly honestly. "Maybe it's because… because I'm a kid?"

"Not good enough," Aina growled, tightening her grip. Yuma wasn't sure if it was her imagination, but she had the sense that her chest was growing abnormally warm.

"Huh, if I didn't know better, I'd say you were jealous of her," Mikuru said, appearing on the other side of the room, behind Aina's right shoulder.

"I think she is *jealous," Kure Kirika said, appearing behind Aina's other shoulder.*

In a flash, Kirika reappeared directly next to Aina, grasping the arm Aina was using to hold Yuma up, her fingers pressing into the wrist.

"Hands off," Kirika said.

"Why do you *care?" Aina demanded acidly. "You don't like her any more than I do."*

"Oriko made it my duty to defend her with my life, same as with Oriko herself. That's all I need to know. Hands… Off!"

Kirika's fingernails started to visibly press into Aina's flesh and even grew just a bit longer, if Yuma's eyes didn't deceive her.

Finally, though she showed no evident signs of pain, Aina released her grip on Yuma, who

dropped adroitly to the ground and landed on both her feet. This wasn't the first time she had been aggressively lifted off the ground by Hinata Aina, and she didn't expect it to be her last.

"Leave her alone, Ai-chan," Mikuru said. "She obviously doesn't know anything."

"We'll see about that," Aina said, looking at Yuma out of the corner of her eye.

"Maybe Oriko just likes her," Mikuru suggested.

"Like hell she does," Aina says, glaring at her girlfriend. "That girl never does anything without a plan, and you know it."

"Why do you care if she does favor Yuma-chan, then? Obviously, there's a reason for it. I think you're jealous. Why are you being jealous about anyone but me?"

"I'm not *being jealous. You're the one being jealous, right now!"*

"Oh, not this again—"

"Come on, let's get out of here," Kirika said, grabbing Yuma gently by the shoulder. "They're going to start throwing things soon, then have a round of hate-sex to make up for everything. I'm tired of seeing it. I'm just glad Oriko is rich enough to replace whatever they break."

"Hate… sex?" Yuma asked, repeating the unfamiliar phrase.

"Don't worry about it. Come on, let's go."

Honestly, Yuma found the unfolding fight kind of refreshing. She was used enough to violence to not be too perturbed—she was pretty sure her mother loved her, too, and she still hit Yuma all the time. And whatever else was going on, Aina's presence did wonders for Mikuru's focus. In Aina's presence, Mikuru was far more consistently nice Mikuru, rather than the crazy Mikuru who talked to herself and ignored the world. Yuma was learning to like nice Mikuru, but crazy Mikuru scared her.

Despite that, she let Kirika pull her out of the way.

"What did Aina-chan mean when she said you don't like me?" Yuma asked, as soon as they got out of earshot.

Without stopping, Kirika smiled in that incredibly unsettling way she had, the smile that seemed to imply she had sharp teeth like a wolf.

"Let's just say love is infinite, and sometimes can be infinitely selfish," Kirika said. "You'll understand when you're older."

Kirika's voice seemed friendly, but had enough sinister cadences that Yuma realized it was wise not to ask for any further details.

In the background she heard something shatter.

Wires ran to and fro across the work table, connecting several fully occupied power strips with a variety of small black boxes, large metal boxes, and what looked like giant glass bulbs, or maybe upside-down beakers. An assortment of metal tools lay next to the motley assemblage—blades, wire cutters, pliers, tweezers, and even a soldering iron.

In short, it looked like the lab of a mad scientist, or the kind of scientist one would see on afternoon children's anime, except it didn't look like there were very many chemicals around, or any really. There were no mysterious bubbling fluids in glass vials to complete the picture.

"What is it?" Yuma asked, asking the natural question.

"It's my lab," Oriko said, with a touch of pride. "Or, at least, I like to call it my lab, which is probably saying a bit too much right now. This will be an important part of your education."

Yuma looked up at her Onee-chan. *Oriko's face showed no obvious sign that she was joking.*

"Really? Me? But what will I be learning?" Yuma asked, looking around at the equipment in bewilderment. "Is it science?"

"Sort of," Oriko said. "I intend to have you help me with my research here."

"Me?" Yuma asked incredulously. "But I don't know how to—I can't—what if I hurt myself?"

"Then you can heal it," Oriko said placidly. "That's not to say I won't teach you about safety, but being a magical girl does have some benefits, after all."

Yuma waited for Oriko to say something further, but the girl didn't. Yuma looked around—at Oriko smiling and humming to herself, at the plain, almost drab white walls, and at the lack of decoration or windows in the room. The "lab" wasn't in a basement, but it might as well have been, and its empty interior stood in sharp contrast to the lavish decorations of the rest of the mansion.

It reminded Yuma a little of her old bedroom, actually.

"Uh—" Yuma began, trying to prompt Oriko into saying something.

"Come with me," Oriko said, stepping forward abruptly towards the bench, gesturing at Yuma to follow.

"Put your hand on this orb," Oriko said, once Yuma had done so.

Oriko put her hand onto the clear glass ball to demonstrate.

Yuma looked at it for a moment. It was about the size of her head and reminded her of something she had seen on a field trip to a science museum a long time ago. There had been lightning inside that one, though.

Yuma put her hand onto the glass, a bit hesitantly, following Oriko's example.

"Do you feel anything?" Oriko asked, smiling.

Yuma shook her head no.

"Close your eyes," Oriko instructed. "I don't want to know just how it feels through normal touch. I'm looking for something magical. *Try to feel with your soul, the same way you can sense demons or other magical girls."*

Yuma still felt rather confused, but did what Oriko said, closing her eyes and trying to reach outward with her magical sense. She could feel Oriko standing next to her, grief cubes somewhere in the room, and—

Yuma opened her, scrunching her face.

"I don't get it," she said. "There's something magical in this orb."

"Correct," Oriko said, smiling at Yuma. "The glass itself is magically modified, enchanted in the same way my farsight goggles were. It's taken me months to develop the skills necessary, but I modified this one myself. Unfortunately, enchantment didn't come free with my magical talents, so it took a lot of work."

Yuma started to ask whether Oriko had also made the farsight goggles herself, but bit her tongue just in time. Nothing good would come of asking about that.

Instead she allowed Oriko to bask in the glow of her pride for a moment—and she was obviously proud, rubbing the glass orb as if it were an actual magician's orb, or perhaps a magic lamp.

"What's it for?" Yuma asked eventually.

"We think of our magic as a unique entity, separate from technology and science," Oriko said, voice didactic.

She narrowed her eyes, seeming to peer into the orb, and Yuma leaned over to try to catch a glimpse of what was in there—but there was nothing there, and she realized that Oriko wasn't looking into orb, only at *the orb.*

"But it's obvious that it must be possible to connect magic with technology somehow, *because the Incubators did it," Oriko continued. "Obviously, they're not going tell us* how *they do it, but—"*

"Have you tried asking?" Yuma interrupted.

"What?" Oriko asked, looking at Yuma.

"Why don't you try asking?" Yuma said. "Kyubey seems nice enough."

Oriko looked away from Yuma for a moment.

"I did *try asking," Oriko said, after a moment. "He wouldn't say anything. And you should know that the Incubators are selfish creatures. They might act nice, but in the end they only really care about what's good for them."*

Yuma frowned.

"Really?"

"It doesn't matter," Oriko said, shaking her head. "Anyway, the point is, while we don't exactly have the same level of technology they do, we have a natural advantage when it comes to trying to perform feats involving magic, which of course is that we can access magic directly. The hard part is managing the grief cube use. Spending all your time practicing doing something is expensive. *In theory, though, there's an obvious connection between magic and energy, so it should be possible to enchant something to work on electricity rather than raw magic, like the farsight goggles. In theory."*

"What is it for, *though?" Yuma asked, exasperated by the circuitous explanation. "What's the orb for?"*

Oriko looked at Yuma, then reached down to open a drawer below the workbench, pulling out… a small handful of grief cubes.

Yuma let out a small gasp.

"I've been working on a procedure to allow the packing of extra grief into individual grief cubes," Oriko said, opening a slot in the mounting of the orb. "That way, it would be possible to extract more value out of individual grief cubes, and we could use a lot more magic without having to worry about grief cube costs. You can obviously see how that would be valuable, right?"

Yuma nodded, looking up at with a sudden sense of awe. Even as new as she was, she could see that something like that would change everything. *If Oriko could manage that…*

"I've already worked out how to do it with direct application of magic," Oriko said, "but no matter how much I try, I can't figure out how to do it without spending considerably more magic than it's actually worth. What I want *is to make a device that can do the same thing, but running on regular electricity rather than magic."*

Yuma frowned, putting her hand back on the orb in front of her. She grasped the concept, but…

There was something…

"If you can do something like that with electricity, why couldn't you do everything with electricity?" Yuma asked, finally.

Oriko smiled broadly, on the verge of grinning.

"That's an important point," she said. "I've thought about that, and there's no obvious reason why it couldn't be done, depending on what exact type of magic you were trying to replicate. Things like summoning objects or causing explosions would probably cost way more energy than you could ever draw out of a power outlet, but there are other things, like teleportation or mind-reading, that don't intrinsically cost much energy, that might be doable."

Oriko ducked her head, seeming to think for a moment.

"Energy?" Yuma asked. "Why would that be important?"

She had heard about it before in school, but she didn't really understand it.

Oriko shook her head.

"I'll explain it to you later. The point is, I thought it might not be too hard to perform grief concentration in energy terms, and there aren't many things I could do that would have more impact than this, but…"

"But?" Yuma prompted.

"It's not really working," Oriko said. "And now I can think of some arguments for why it shouldn't *work. I wish I could be sure it was that, though, and not just my lack of skill at enchanting. I wish I could just ask someone like Tomoe Mami, though obviously that's out of the question."*

Oriko paused again for a moment, then said:

"People like her bother me. All that talent, and she doesn't know where to point it. That's not her fault, though."

"Do you hate her, Onee-chan?" *Yuma asked.*

Oriko gave Yuma a strange look, as if what she had said made no sense.

"No, not really," Oriko said. "Come on, let me give you a demonstration, even if it doesn't really work yet."

Oriko reached behind the orb, flipping a switch with a loud snap.

A door slid open at the bottom and the grief cubes she had placed earlier rose upward on a small tray, eventually stopping near the center of the orb. Peering inward, Yuma could see that the tray, far from being a simple flat surface, was an ornate golden metal, the sides frilled with golden leaves. The tray as a whole was suspended by a metal column engirdled by rows of symbols.

"It's not possible to enchant something without the magic giving it a design like this," Oriko said, by way of explanation. "I'm not really sure why, but it probably has something to do with why all magical girls have costumes of one variety or another. Human magic seems determined to make itself aesthetically obvious, though I'm not sure why the enchanted glass of this orb doesn't look very different. I suspect it's because orbs are already associated with magic and witches, so there wasn't very much to do."

Oriko flipped another switch, and the orb began to hum, a slight blue glow becoming visible at the base of the ornate column. The blue glow traveled upward, illuminating as it passed the symbols etched into the side of column, filling the glass sphere with an eerie, pale light.

A long moment later, the glow reached the grief cube tray itself, which turned a bright, blinding white, the grief cubes themselves transforming from their usual pitch-black state into luminescent white cubes.

No, not just bright white cubes. Yuma squinted—if she fought the eye-burning glare, she almost thought she could peer into the cubes themselves, that she could see some hint of structure, some hint—

The glare vanished, the tray and cubes blotted out by an impossibly black ooze, or perhaps cloud, that had appeared in the center of the orb. Similar to the usual state of grief cubes, this black blight reflected no light, not even the trace emissions that would have enabled Yuma to discern how it was spreading, or what its three-dimensional shape was like. Indeed, it almost looked like the corruption was absorbing more light than what should have been possible, that it was somehow preventing Yuma from seeing even the light reflecting off of the glass directly in front of it.

Overall, the effect was as if someone had taken a black sharpie and started to blot out part of the universe itself, and Yuma started to feel a creeping sense of insecurity over whether the corruption was really contained within the orb.

The lights in the room flickered, casting the two of them into a moment of complete darkness that caused Yuma to jump and yelp in surprise.

A loud zapping noise followed immediately afterward, a cloud of acrid smoke wafting outward from the orb and burning Yuma's nostrils. Both the glow and oozing blackness were gone, and by all appearances the tray of grief cubes was back to normal, except for a few black scorch marks that had appeared on the edge and were already fading away.

"And that's what always happens," Oriko said, coughing and using her hand to wave away the smoke. "I can get it to start the procedure, but then it always *fails. I don't even know why it does what it does. It's definitely a work in progress."*

"You want me to work on this?" *Yuma asked, making no effort to hide the incredulity in her voice. She was flattered that Oriko felt her capable of something like that at her age, but she had the*

distinct sense that she would be biting off a lot more than she could chew.

"You're not going to have a normal life when you grow up, Yuma-chan," Oriko said, bending down to look Yuma in the eyes. "None of us will. The only thing you can be is a professional magical girl, and that means mastering magic. First I will teach you how to manipulate grief cubes, then you can help me with my work."

Yuma shook her head.

"I'm not going to grow up," she said. "No one lives that long. Kirika-san said so."

A trace of annoyance passed over Oriko's face.

"It's not true that no one lives that long," Oriko said, expression dark for a moment. "It's just extremely rare. You shouldn't worry about something like that."

"Anyway, let's go," Oriko said, grabbing Yuma by the hand. "You've seen all you need to here. We have other work to do."

"Ah, so that's why you know so much about this kind of thing," MG said. "Well, that, and your tenure as head of MSY Science Division."

"This is *why* I was head of Science Division," Yuma said. "I knew more on the topic than anyone living, except maybe Clarisse van Rossum. I wish I could say it was only esoteric knowledge, but I ended up using it far too much."

"I'd rather not hear about it," Mami said, drinking deeply from her cup of virtual tea, which she had made bottomless.

"I'm not going to tell you," Yuma responded.

"What does it mean to fall in love?"

Miroko Mikuru looked down at the younger girl, surprise evident on her face. The older girl probably hadn't expected a question like that after she had agreed to take Yuma to the grocery store, but on the way out of the mansion Yuma had seen Aina give her a rather open display of affection, so the question was fresh on her mind.

Yuma's question also helped interrupt the flow of Mikuru's telepathic mumblings, which Yuma had gradually learned to tolerate. It wasn't as bad once you got used to it and, to Yuma, it seemed like Mikuru was fundamentally a nice girl underneath the layer of… possible insanity that lay on top. Also important for this particular trip was that Mikuru seemed capable of suppressing her audible, vocalized mumblings when out in public, restricting it to only telepathy.

Mikuru reached up with one hand—the one not holding Yuma's hand—and scratched her cheek nervously, one of those little behavioral tics that Yuma had realized still distinguished her as not more than sixteen years old.

"That's a hard question," Mikuru said. "Ordinarily, I'd tell you to wait until you're older, but… well, you're getting close to old enough."

She looked up at the sky for a moment.

"I sound so old saying that, and I'm not really that old," she said. "If I wanted to be fully honest

with you, I'm not sure Aina and I are really in love. It feels like it, but we're also so young, and it rarely works like it does in the movies for anyone our age."

She looked back down.

"But life is short, especially our lives. So, why not?"

"You're not answering the question!" Yuma insisted.

Mikuru smiled a little.

"Well, you're a smart girl, yes. It's not an easy question. I would say being in love is just realizing that you can't stand to be without someone, that you want to spend all your time with them, that you would lay down your life for them. Something like that. I don't think I'm experienced enough to say more than that. It's like… how I try to be around more, when Aina is around. Pay more attention to the world."

It was the first time Yuma had ever heard Mikuru reference her own condition, even if indirectly. Yuma thought about asking her about it, but asked instead:

"What about sex then? What does that have to do with it?"

Mikuru visibly grimaced, then glanced around nervously for anyone who might be listening in.

"It's a part of it," Mikuru said. "It's something you only do with someone you love. It's a show of intimacy, I guess."

Yuma looked down for a moment, remembering Hinata Aina. If that was true, then why had… what had she been…

Yet under Mikuru's concerned look, Yuma sensed that it was not a question she could ask.

"You're not old enough yet, okay?" Mikuru said, patting Yuma on the shoulder. "Remember that. Don't…"

Mikuru paused for a long moment, before finishing:

"Don't let anyone try to get you started early, okay? That's not right. That's what made me what I am, and no one else should have to go through that. You tell me if anyone bullies you like that, and I'll take care of it for you."

Mikuru's eyes were intense, her gaze seeming to bore into Yuma's heart.

Yuma couldn't withstand the look, and had to break the eye contact, and look down at the cement sidewalk.

"Mikuru-san was used by some gangs to make money, for a long time after her parents died," *Yuma remembered Oriko saying.* "Her wish was for revenge, and I helped her get that revenge. And I felt good doing it. For your sake, I wouldn't ask for more detail than that. Some day, you'll understand."

"Okay," Yuma said quietly.

"That's horrible," MG said, with the kind of absolute revulsion Governance AIs reserved only for a Core Right violations. It was one thing that set AIs from organic humans: a set of absolute,

unbreakable morals. If there was an equivalent to an AI religion or ideology, the Volokhov Criteria were it, written indelibly into their software.

Yuma couldn't help but find something a little disquieting in that, though of course AIs themselves never saw anything wrong with it.

"There's a reason I kept these kinds of things secret from you," Yuma thought to MG, directly over their internal channel. *"It's not the kind of thing a young AI should hear about."*

"Thanks, Mom," MG responded sarcastically. *"Aren't you the one who always says we should know evil to fight it?"*

Yuma sipped her coffee to conceal her unease. That kind of line she always found biting; what exactly was it that she saw MG as? Was it indeed daughter? Did she see MG as a young version of herself, someone to protect from the ravages of the world until it was safe? Someone to live the life she had never had?

She peered into the ripples of her coffee, and wondered if she regretted what she had become.

Story in Silhouette, Part Two

Chapter Notes

And here's the second part of this. While I do have banked text remaining, an additional chapter would require additional writing (6512 words right now) so don't expect part three soon. Part three should end it though...

'History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme.'

That's a great quote, isn't it? I've seen History rhyme myself quite a number of times. Well, maybe it isn't quite history…

Here's another good one: 'It is history that teaches us to hope.' That one's Robert E. Lee though…

— Akemi Homura, unused quote collected for "Akemi Homura, an Official Biography," (MSY internal distribution), 2405. MSY-classified material is viewable only with permission from Leadership Committee.

"Is this world even worth saving? What exactly have I been fighting for? Answer me! I'm ordering you to tell me! If you don't, then…"

— Graffiti found inscribed into mesa-spire on the planet San Giuseppe, language Human Standard, noted into log by arboreal patrol drone XK-2A57 immediately prior to removal.

"Yuma-chan! Are you okay?"

Yuma lay inside the pile of rubble, using her body and magic to brace herself, and to keep herself from being crushed by the collapsed ceiling. Honestly, it wasn't even that difficult—she was fine. She was mostly just bothered by the darkness and dust.

Yuma found herself impressed by the resilience of the magical girl body. If it weren't for the fact that she could hear Mikuru's voice calling to her from above, she would already be working herself out of the wreckage.

A moment later the plaster and wood immediately above her turned a light shade of blue, a thick sheet of magical ice layering itself over their surfaces. Yuma sucked in a breath—she had seen this trick before.

Then, with the deafening sound of a hundred chandeliers shattering, the world above her exploded in a rain of supercooled shards, the sunlight pouring in on her. By rights, the countless shards of frozen wood and construction material should have fallen down upon her, killing her body by a thousand cuts—but of course Kirika had more control than that over her blows, coming as they did while she slowed time. In fact, raining ice shards down upon the enemy—while leaving their own allies unharmed—was one of the group's favorite combat tricks.

Yuma preferred not to wonder if it was ever used against anything other than demons.

"I told you something like this wouldn't kill her," Kirika said, reaching down to give her a hand up. She was smiling that unsettlingly sharp smile of hers, but this time with no hint of malice.

"Worst case she would just heal herself," Aina commented.

"I have the right to be worried," Mikuru said.

"What happened?" Oriko asked, looking Yuma in the eyes.

It was easy to think that Oriko was omniscient, but Yuma had come to realize that this was far from true. Oriko could only see the future, and only *those parts of the future she chose to focus her attention on. The past, and even the present, was a sealed mystery to her, which was more inconvenient than one would think.*

Yuma shook her head to get out of the debris that had settled in her hair.

"I was trying to experiment with one of those overloaded grief cubes like you said," she said. "I wanted to see if I could use one of your special wires to run grief directly into one of them. But…"

"But?" Oriko prompted, raising an eyebrow.

"It exploded," Yuma said. "Well, not exploded, but the black stuff came out everywhere, and then there were demons. They almost killed me. I was barely able to kill them, but I, uh—"

She found herself at a loss, rubbing the back of her head in embarrassment. She didn't know how to say it.

"Hold on, a demon exploded from the grief cube? I've never seen that *happen," Kirika said.*

"It can, if you leave one unattended and don't pay attention it," Mikuru said. "It's rare though. I've never seen it myself. It's just what… I've heard said."

"But how did that lead to the room collapsing?" Oriko asked, getting efficiently to the point. "What happens in the miasma stays in the miasma."

Yuma grimaced.

"Well, I, uh, got a little carried away swinging my hammer. I slammed my hammer into the ground after the miasma ended and it, uh, brought down the ceiling. It wasn't my fault! I was scared!"

"It's okay," Oriko reassured hastily, appearing in front of Yuma. "Don't worry about it. I'm rich enough that it doesn't matter. What's important is that you're safe."

Oriko reached down to pick Yuma up—a maneuver that would have been only barely possible if either of them were human. They met gazes, and Yuma thought Oriko looked oddly probing, as if looking at Yuma for something.

"I'd expect someone of her age to be more panicked after what happened to her," Mikuru commented.

"Eh, she looks like a girl who can take punishment," Kirika rebutted.

"We shouldn't dawdle," Oriko said, setting Yuma back down and looking at the others. "If it's

really true that these overloaded grief cubes can spawn demons, then there's an entire set of them buried under these ruins, and we have to dig them out unless we want them to spawn while we're sleeping."

Kirika shrugged.

"That only really happened because she was messing with one using magic. That doesn't mean it can just happen."

"Though it does mean they might be usable as some kind of bombs," Aina said thoughtfully.

"Better not to risk it," Oriko said. "It's not worth—"

As if on cue, the telltale signs of a miasma began to appear around them, the world beginning to turn misty and blurred. Yuma sensed in her soul the stirring of the demons around them, ominous and hungry.

"Well, it looks it's party time then!" Aina said.

Strange as it seemed, Yuma didn't think she liked ice cream anymore.

It wasn't that it tasted any different; it was still the same overstimulating combination of sugar and fats it always had been, and the sensation of it melting in her mouth was unchanged, as craftily unctuous as ever.

But it just didn't flatter her anymore, and she found herself sitting on a bench outside the ice cream shop, staring blankly at a freshly purchased chocolate cone.

She felt guilty. She doubted this was what Oriko had intended when she had shooed Yuma out the door with a fistful of yen and a list of supplies to buy, as well as the directive to enjoy herself with whatever money was left. As it had turned out, there was a lot of money left over, and Yuma had come to understand that this was intended as a bit of a day off for her.

Yuma wasn't really sure about the wisdom of letting someone of her age wander the city on her own, but Yuma supposed she was more than capable of taking on any kidnappers that might be coming her way. The bigger risk was the other magical girls of the city, but Yuma knew enough to stay within the Southern Group's territory and keep her soul gem emissions minimized. Besides, Oriko would know if she were about to run into trouble.

Not to mention, Yuma found it considerably more pleasant to be alone than to be with any other member of her group, bar Oriko herself. Mikuru might have been okay, though her constant telepathic self-talk would have been grating—but Yuma had no urge whatsoever to spend time with Kirika or Aina, quality or otherwise.

She took another, halting bite of her ice cream, trying to let the sugar soothe her soul as it once always had.

She could tell already that it wasn't working, though, and she felt sad, as if she had lost something irreplaceable.

"Hmm, I didn't expect to see you *here," said an unfamiliar female voice as Yuma felt someone seat herself on the bench next to her, sighing loudly.*

Yuma looked up at the newly arrived teenager with short hair and athletic appearance. The girl, who seemed oddly familiar, looked back at her.

For a moment Yuma found herself at a loss, wondering what the girl had meant by "you".

Then Yuma finally placed why it was that the girl was familiar, and barely avoided dropping her ice cream cone, hand shaking. Miki Sayaka? Here? But this was—

"—Southern Group territory, right?" Sayaka said, finishing a sentence Yuma hadn't heard. "Yeah, I know. I came here looking for someone to fight, tracked down a soul gem, and found you. It's surprising, to be honest; the others aren't even sure you're still alive."

"You—you want to fight?" Yuma said, realizing she was doing a terrible job of keeping fear out of her voice. Her eyes were already busy scanning the pedestrians on the street across from them. Surely she wouldn't get attacked in public?

"Well, I did," Sayaka said, shaking her head almost sadly, "but not really anymore, to be honest. It's just as well I found you; you're the one Kyouko says we shouldn't hurt, and I can see why: you're just a kid."

Yuma felt relieved, a little, but continued to scan the area around her. Now that she was paying attention, she could sense Sayaka's soul gem pulsating nearby, but still couldn't feel anyone else in the area. Was Sayaka here alone?

"You didn't look like you're liking that ice cream very much," Sayaka commented.

"I can't enjoy it anymore, not after what happened," Yuma said, shaking her head, saying it out loud before realizing she shouldn't have.

"I definitely know what you mean," the other girl said, smiling crookedly.

She looked up at the sky.

"It just takes the flavor out of life when you learn the world just isn't the way it should be, and there's nothing you can do to change it," Sayaka said.

She looked down at her hands.

"I came here because I thought I could at least do the world a service by eliminating some evil, but I can't even find the evil properly. I really am pointless."

Yuma tilted her head, trying to understand what the girl was getting at. Something about the way she was talking reminded her of one of her own teammates, though she couldn't really identify what.

Sayaka shook her head morosely, then seemed to focus back on the moment.

"I wonder what could have happened to a kid like you, though, for you to say something like that."

Yuma shrugged, choosing not to answer the question. By this point she had started to relax a little. It was still possible that this girl's geniality was just a cover to get her off-guard, or that she would spontaneously go crazy and attack her—Yuma certainly spent enough time with crazy people to know that it was not impossible.

She didn't really think so, though. Something about this girl seemed… too sad for that.

Sayaka shrugged back at Yuma's lack of response, then said:

"Your ice cream is melting. You don't have to eat it if you don't want to. Let's go have some dinner. I'll pay for it, since you're a kid after all."

"Dinner?" Yuma repeated emptily. Of all the things she might have been expecting, she had not even considered that a girl from an opposing team of magical girls would try to invite her to have food.

"Yeah," the other girl said, watching Yuma with an expression that was somehow simultaneously serious and playful. "I don't want to go back yet, and I've got nothing better to do. As long as you can promise the rest of your team won't come to kill me."

Yuma made a hapless expression she hoped adequately conveyed that she had literally no control over the rest of the Southern Group.

Sayaka chuckled.

"Don't worry about it."

The girl jumped off the bench, standing and stretching up towards the afternoon sky. She seemed a bit happier.

"There's a ramen place nearby," she said. "Not as good as the place in Kazamino, but good enough. I know there's no reason for you to trust me, but there's also no way I could kill you in front of like thirty people. What do you say?"

Yuma knew that she should say no, that even if Sayaka did nothing to her, getting caught might make the others think her a traitor, and finally that if nothing else, she shouldn't be following strangers anywhere—

—but she found that, at the moment, she didn't care. She was tired of being locked into Oriko's mansion, having to meet the same tired circle of Kirika and Aina and Mikuru over and over and over. *She wanted to talk to someone else for once.*

She stepped off the bench and made what she thought was an acceptably blithe shrug.

Her eyes caught on someone in the distance.

Who is that—

"Is something wrong?" Sayaka asked, turning to look at the same spot. The person had moved, though.

"It's nothing," Yuma said. "Come on."

"Let me tell you something, Yuma-chan," Sayaka said, pointing at her with one hand. "Never fall in love."

Yuma, who had been focused on slurping down her ramen as fast as possible, felt her eyes widen at Sayaka's statement. Up until that point in the meal, conversation had consisted primarily of long silences, interspersed with vague rants from Sayaka about how annoying Kyouko was, or how she hated that her parents were never around, or various other topics that were of exactly zero relevance to Yuma. Yuma was smart enough to know when she was being used as a sounding board, and had simply nodded along without saying a single word.

True to form, Yuma merely tilted her head, indicating for Sayaka to continue. There was nothing

Yuma could really say since she had no experience with it herself, unless she wanted to talk about the rest of the Southern Group, which she didn't.

"All falling in love does is make you crazy, and make the people around you crazy, and it doesn't help anyone in the end," Sayaka said, pointing at her now with a fork. "Don't do it."

The other girl hung her head downward, and Yuma got the distinct impression she would be drinking sake if she could legally get her hands on some.

"I thought I could be different," Sayaka said, "but in the end I'm the same as everyone else."

Yuma thought about Mikuru and Aina, and about Oriko and Kirika. They were mostly crazy, and at least claimed *to be in love, so Sayaka's claim seemed at least possible. Yuma got the distinct impression Sayaka wasn't just making the statement off the cuff—that what she was saying had to be relevant to something.*

"What happened?" she asked.

Sayaka turned to look at her, her expression difficult to read. Yuma had definitely hit some kind of nerve, but it was difficult to to tell whether the other girl was bemused, angry, or depressed. It almost seemed like the other girl was trying hard to keep her facial expressions rigidly still—a phenomenon Yuma recognized from the carefully-controlled expression Mikuru wore when in public.

"I'd rather not say," Sayaka said, turning back towards her bowl of ramen.

"Why?"

Sayaka bent her head downward, slurping her noodles loudly, and the possibility finally occurred to Yuma that she was being too assertively curious. She should have known better: while it was a trait that Oriko encouraged, it was also one that her parents had definitely… not encouraged.

She was starting to lose some of the habits that she had been forced to have back when she lived with her parents. If nothing else, living with Oriko had improved her life that *much.*

"It would sound stupid if I said it out loud," Sayaka said, finally, forcing herself to smile slightly. "I know it's selfish, but I'm curious about what happened to you, to become a—"

Sayaka's eyes slid sideways, towards the other patrons of the restaurant.

"—to become one of us," Sayaka finished. "It's just curiosity, so you don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but maybe after it I will want to tell you about me."

Yuma put one finger to her cheek to think, a habit she had picked up from her mother. She couldn't think of any reason not *to say what happened, and maybe afterward Sayaka would think better of Oriko and the others, and maybe then they would fight less, and get less gruesome injuries that Yuma would have to help heal. She was… starting to get a little too used to the sight of blood, she thought.*

So she drank the last of her ramen broth, and told the other girl her story, a story she hadn't even told Oriko in its entirety yet—Oriko had never asked—and she saw Sayaka's eyes widen several times and her brow grow increasingly furrowed. Several times, Sayaka signaled her aggressively her with her hands to keep her voice down, or to stop speaking entirely as a waiter passed by. Yuma wondered just what was so bad about what she was saying.

"And the next day I woke up in Oriko's house," Yuma finished, hesitating before mentioning

Oriko's name. "She was the white girl who saved me."

"I'll be honest, it's kind of hard to imagine her doing something like that," Sayaka said, a constricted expression on her face. "But I guess even she has to have a conscience sometimes. And from what Kyouko has told me, I can't be surprised Mikuru killed that dirty thug."

Yuma recoiled in shock, not at Sayaka's tone of disgust, or the aspersions cast at Oriko, but at Sayaka's assertion that Mikuru had killed Tanaka-san. Strange as it was to say, even though she remembered that part quite clearly, Yuma had yet to make the obvious connections between a blue icicle spear and the ice mage.

I guess I just haven't wanted to think about it, *Yuma thought.*

"So you wished Oriko back together after the demons cut her up?" Sayaka said. "That's surprising: I didn't think someone like her could even get injured."

"I don't remember that day very well," Yuma said, "but yes that's what happened."

Sayaka looked down, at her now empty ramen bowl, and Yuma could tell that Sayaka was again concealing her expression. What was Sayaka thinking?

"I was kind of wondering…" Yuma began hesitantly.

Sayaka looked up, and Yuma sucked in a breath, trying to be very careful with her next words.

"Why exactly do all you hate us so much?" she asked. "Oriko doesn't let me go out much, so I don't really… know, I guess?"

Sayaka looked back into her empty bowl, and Yuma could feel the other girl's dark mood radiating out.

"I used to be sure," she said. "But now I'm not so sure. If Oriko can save a girl like you, and I can do what I did, then what makes…"

Sayaka shook her head, seemed disappointed in something.

"Well, let me tell you what happened to Mami."

"Just because Oriko saved you doesn't mean she wasn't evil," Mami said, still compulsively sipping her tea. "We've been over this."

"I already know what you think of Oriko," Yuma said, a trace annoyed. "The focus here is on Sayaka."

"Yes, about her," Mami began, setting her teacup back down into its saucer dramatically.

"You never told us you ever met her," Mami said, "but I can't see why you didn't. There's nothing here that's that unusual. If Sayaka was having doubts about her purpose in life… well, we knew that already, even if we realized it way too late."

Yuma closed her eyes, bowing her head slightly.

"Let me finish the story," she said.

The two of them separated at the doorway to the restaurant under the flickering light of the street

lamps. It was already nearly dark—far later than Yuma knew she should have stayed out alone. As a magical girl, jumping over the roof tops—that was different, almost a different world entirely from the mundane world that filled the streets above.

A block away from the restaurant, Yuma got tired of that mundane world and prepared to transform so that she could traverse the rooftops and reach home much faster. There seemed to be no one around to see her.

"Hey, kid."

Yuma stopped, immediately glad that she hadn't transformed as she had planned to. But where was the man's voice coming from?

She turned around, and felt her blood freeze.

"Hello there, little girl," one of the two men said, advancing on her. "I just thought we'd have a little chat."

Yuma recognized them immediately, of course; they had accompanied Tanaka when he had arrived to threaten her parents and beat up her father.

Yuma heard an involuntary whimper emit from her own throat.

"Now normally I'd be a little more polite to a girl like you, but I don't think there's any need for pretense here," the taller one said, cracking his knuckles.

He grabbed her by the collar and picked her up.

"Now a funny thing happened recently," he said. "Our good friend Tanaka-san was found dead, with a hole in his stomach. Your parents have gone missing, and you went missing, too, so it's lucky that we found you so that we can clarify matters, isn't that right?"

His partner nodded.

"Your parents are going to pay for what they did to Tanaka-san, and it starts with you," *he said. "Doesn't that sound fun?"*

Yuma felt the chilly fear freezing her heart, but still did not transform, trapped between the need to escape and the rules against giving away the secret.

"Don't be so mean to her," the taller man said. "If we just sweet-talk her a little, we can be friends. Kids like her are easy to trick; I even got one of the kids back at the boss's place to think she loves me!"

They both laughed, villainous laughs that seemed almost like caricatures, except it was all too real. Yuma felt her grip tighten on the arm of the man holding her, and she began to realize how easily she could just… break it in half.

"Hey, scumbags!" Sayaka yelled, appearing abruptly a few meters down the sidewalk. She was fully transformed, sword pointed forward in both hands, and Yuma could suddenly feel the power radiating from her.

The two men turned, entirely disregarding Yuma for the moment, though the taller one kept his grip on Yuma's collar.

"What's this, then?" he said, still laughing. "Little miss cosplay thinks she's going to do

something? Put down that plastic sword and—"

His voice cut off with a horrifying gurgle, and his grip on Yuma relaxed. Yuma landed on the ground with her usual adroitness—in a pool of already gathering blood.

She recoiled in horror.

"You know," Sayaka said as the man's partner stumbled backward in mortified terror, "I set out today to die fighting a villain, to give some meaning to my life. I haven't found the villains I was looking for, or the meaning, but I found you."

She pulled her sword gradually out of the taller man's still writhing body, releasing ever more blood as she went. The taller man grasped at the blade in pure agony—

—and then fell to the ground with a thud, and he stopped moving, the copious blood soaking into his suit.

His partner grasped frantically inside his jacket, finally finding and whipping out a small handgun, pointing it at Sayaka.

"You—you—" he began.

His head fell to the floor a moment later; his body didn't immediately follow.

Yuma put her hands to her mouth in horror. These men hadn't been her friends, *obviously, but—*

Sayaka turned her head, and her eyes met with Yuma's for just a split-second. The front of Sayaka's armor was covered in blood.

"You're crazy," Yuma said, voice shaking.

And then she saw the other girl's soul gem, on her belly, seething with despair, the dark shadow that seemed to blot out the universe itself.

Sayaka opened her mouth to say something, but instead turned her head away and ran.

It only took her a moment to disappear from Yuma's sight.

This time Mami didn't sip her tea, instead holding the cup in a hand that shook, ever so slightly.

"So *that's* what happened, that one time she disappeared," Mami said, looking more shocked than Yuma had seen her in a long time. "She never told us. She never told anyone. Not that I blame her, but—"

Mami leaned one arm onto the table, using it as a desperate physical support.

"Oh, Miki-san, where did I go wrong?" Mami said. "Why didn't you *say* anything? We could have…"

Mami's voice trailed off as she stared at the table, clearly reliving the memories. Next to her, MG sat ashen-faced, watching Yuma with a horrified expression.

"She's the one that ended up dying, right?" she said. "Disappeared and all that. I won't argue they didn't deserve what happened to them, but to just *kill* them like that…"

Yuma shook her head.

"It's not something you're really made to understand," Yuma said, more coolly than she'd intended. "You AIs are coded to be more robust than that. Like humans, you have a range of base happiness levels, and some of you are prone to sadness and depression, but the kind of thing Miki Sayaka underwent isn't intended to be possible. Be glad for that."

Yuma saw MG lower her head to hide her expression and felt a pang of guilt.

She tried to shake it off, saying:

"Well, anyway, Mami, it wasn't your fault at all…"

"Oh my, it really sounds like things have come to a head," Oriko said, dispelling a blotch of blood from Yuma's shirt with a brief burst of magic.

"I don't understand why you have to do that for her," Kirika said, watching the two of them with what looked like annoyance. "I could easily teach her how to clean up some blood herself."

"We both know you have plenty of experience, Kirika," Oriko said, rubbing Yuma's hair with one hand. "But the fact is, I don't intend Yuma here to get her hands bloody. It shouldn't be a skill she'd need."

Yuma just stood there in silence, not really listening to what the others were talking about.

She didn't know why it bothered her so much, what had happened to those two men, but all she could see at the moment was a man lying dead in a pool of blood, and the hopeless eyes of another man as his life force drained away. There was no reason to hope, after all—no one could ever survive decapitation.

She had picked up the man's head and looked into his eyes, heedless of the blood that stained her clothes.

Then she had healed him, because she didn't know what else to do, leaving the now-intact man blinking in confusion, lying there in the street. She had used a lot of magic in the effort.

The rest was a blur—stumbling down the street mindlessly, untransformed, until the shocked gasps of pedestrians forced her onto the rooftops. She wondered what it was she had looked like.

"You think she'll be okay?" Kirika said, with a soft tone Yuma had never heard from the girl. "With the way you coddle her, there's no way—"

"She'll be fine," Oriko said decisively, placing her palm to Yuma's forehead.

She thought she saw something glow for a moment, but then she felt her mood lifting, and what had happened seemed to fade away, off into the depths of her memory.

What had she been thinking about?

"If you say so," Kirika said, looking bothered by something.

Oriko gave Kirika a look, and Kirika nodded, turning to leave the room.

Yuma looked up at Oriko, who peered back into her eyes unsettlingly.

"I need you to make some more of those overfilled grief cubes," Oriko said.

"Why?" Yuma asked. "They're dangerous."

"They have their uses," Oriko said.

Somehow, Yuma didn't feel like contesting the topic, and simply nodded. She would do what it took to please onee-sama, *after all.*

Eating dinner at Oriko's mansion was always a bit of an odd affair. Oriko always insisted that they all eat together, but the mixture of personalities at their table was combustible at best.

It went without saying that Oriko cooked all of their meals, though the others often volunteered or were roped into helping. The only exception was on those days—increasingly frequent—where Oriko simply didn't have time, and they instead had their meals catered by one of the local restaurants.

Oddly enough, given how much wealth she seemed to have, Oriko simply didn't have any servants. While that did make keeping up the magical girl secret simpler, it seemed very unusual. Yuma had never asked, though.

Oriko wasn't there that day, though, leaving the other four girls to eat their gourmet Italian food in exuberant silence—well, leaving aside Mikuru's occasional self-comments, which they were all used to now.

"Where exactly is she anyway?" Mikuru asked finally, awkwardly poking at her pasta with chopsticks. "I don't like how she just goes out like this without telling us where she's going. She could be doing anything."

"Who cares?" Aina said.

She took a moment to sip directly out of a bowl of soup before setting it back down and continuing:

"She knows what she's about, and she's the one with the spooky future vision. Don't be so suspicious. We've been through too much for her to just stab us in the back."

"I didn't expect to hear that *from you," Mikuru said. "You're the one who's always paranoid about everything. Weren't you the one who said that uh—new girl—Akemi Homura must be some kind of super-magical girl or slider or something?"*

"I'm just saying there's something weird about her," Aina said, working on some roast chicken with a knife. "Angel wings, ridiculous powers, and a personality like that? *She's not run-of-the-mill, at least, and I bet her wish wasn't either."*

"I'm not going to argue that she isn't unusual, but that doesn't mean she's what you say she is," Mikuru said. "The real world doesn't work like that. We all have reasons we made the wishes we did, but you just don't see any particularly special magical girls around. I almost suspect the Incubators don't grant wishes that would give you too much power."

There was a brief moment of silence, then, as Aina bit into a piece of chicken. That was the obvious reason she wasn't speaking, but Yuma got the impression that wasn't the real *reason.*

Yuma bit her lip, though, remembering that the last time she had tried to ask Aina about anything she had gotten lifted up into the air again. It was not something she enjoyed.

"You can be skeptical if you want, but there's something going on here," Aina said. "Or haven't

you noticed that we're following an oracle to fulfill some mysterious plan that involves some kind of angel girl and—"

Aina cast an open glance at Yuma.

"—some rather ordinary-looking children."

"I'd just appreciate *it if Oriko-san would share some of her plans with us," Mikuru said. "Look, I'm thankful she did what she did for us, and for giving us this nice place to live. I know we owe her. But keeping us in the dark like this just… makes it seem like she thinks we wouldn't like what she would tell us, that's all. I'd prefer some reassurance."*

As she spoke, Mikuru made of point of trying to accentuate her phrasing by aggressively using her chopsticks to the eat the pasta. It didn't look very impressive to Yuma—she would have been better off if she were eating meat, like Aina was.

"Don't tell me you're jealous of her," Aina said, cutting into her own meat with a much more impressive gesture.

"Jealous? Of what? The way you think she's some kind of prophet? No. I'm not."

Mikuru bit into some more of her pasta, giving up on any more elaborate gestures.

"The way I see it," she continued. "We're all a little crazy, so you're entitled to your craziness."

"Well the way I *see it," Aina said without missing a beat, "is that we're all going to be dead soon enough anyway, so I might as well try to follow what I can, just in case there's something to it."*

"The both of you shut up," *Kirika said, banging the dark oak table with both fists. "I am* tired *of hearing you two chit-chat inanely, especially questioning Oriko. She has only the best in mind for us."*

Kirika glared around at the others to see if they would challenge her. Aina sneered, but said nothing. Mikuru ignored Kirika, pointedly focusing on her food.

"For. Your. Information," Kirika said, accentuating each word for emphasis, "our esteemed oracle is attending a violin concert, to blow off some steam. That's it."

"On her own?" Aina said, eating a piece of dessert fruit with a haughty gesture. "That's not safe. She's yelled at me for less than that."

"Well, she would know if it's safe," Kirika said.

"Violin concert?" Mikuru asked. "I have to ask: what performance? I didn't think she was a fan."

Kirika leaned back against her chair, her anger dissipating like a summer shower before the wind.

"Well, I didn't think so either, but there's some local prodigy playing. Ave Maria *or something like that. I can't tell you more than that. To be honest, I'm a little bummed she's not taking me with her, but I can understand if she needs her space."*

Kirika didn't sound like she believed her own reassurance, but neither Aina nor Mikuru chose to needle her on it. Yuma wondered why.

"Did any of you ever learn to play any instruments?" Yuma asked, on impulse. She had always

vaguely wanted to play some music, but her parents were clearly never going to support that.

All three of the others turned to look at her, but not angrily—more as if she had suddenly sprouted a second head.

"Never mind," Yuma squeaked. Why did she say things like that?

They ate the rest of their dinner in silence.

It had been nearly a month since Oriko had last asked Yuma to go on patrol and to be frank, she was a little excited. She missed a little the rush of combat, and the carelessness with which she could smash everything around her with her hammer. It stood in stark contrast to the way she lived her usual life, a monotony of fiddling with grief cubes, book lessons from Oriko, and carefully stepping around the toes of the other girls.

She wasn't surprised, though, when instead of demons, her small three-person party—herself, Aina, and Mikuru—ran into members of the Mitakihara Four. Oriko's trademark was her ability to foresee the future, and Yuma was gradually learning that in her vicinity very little of importance happened by accident, whether it be having ramen with murderous magical girls or chance encounters while out on patrol.

They found Tomoe Mami and Akemi Homura exiting, of all things, a flower shop, the older girl holding in front of her a bouquet of blue flowers three times the size of her head.

Following Aina's cue, the three of them landed in a nearby alleyway, stepping out in front of the other two girls. There were far too many pedestrians in the area to have a confrontation, but it was necessary to show that they had noticed the other girls.

However, even if they were in public, there was no rule that they had to pretend to like each other.

"This is neutral borderland," Mami said, looking over the other three with a strained expression, as if she could barely stand the situation. "I know you types don't really respect that kind of thing, but we are within rights to be here."

Hinata Aina smiled unsettlingly.

"We're not here to kill you today. We're just here to observe. Although…"

She looked at Homura, and Yuma followed the gaze, stopping on Homura's intense expression, which she abruptly realized was focused on Yuma herself. Homura seemed to be… watching her for something.

She was the same girl Yuma had seen before, obviously—and yet she wasn't, not with that brooding look and burning intensity. Something was different about the girl Aina thought had angelic traits. What had happened to her?

Yuma could see that Aina was having thoughts along the same lines, but rather than ask a question that wouldn't be answered, Aina said:

"You know, since we have your attention, I have to ask…"

She batted her hair insouciantly, a gesture Yuma knew she did to annoy people.

"What exactly happened to Miki Sayaka? Our sources tell us that she's gone missing, and that's a real shame—"

A moment later Aina found herself blinking down the barrel of one of Mami's ornate muskets, which the untransformed girl had somehow managed to summon and swing directly into Aina's face so quickly none of the others had managed to react.

Aina managed to stay impressively unfazed.

"Put that away," Mikuru said coldly. "We're in a public location."

"For your information, *Mami growled. "She died fighting off a massive horde of demons from a violin concert, and deserves your respect. Not that* you *would know anything about heroism."*

"Just like you know nothing about keeping your kouhai *alive?" Aina retorted, ignoring the gun barrel in her face.*

A spasm of rage passed over Mami's face, and for a moment Yuma was actually afraid she would fire, but then the new Homura grabbed Mami's arm and forced it downward.

"It's not worth it," Homura said.

"And what's with you?" Aina began.

"Violin concert?" Yuma interrupted, blurting out the question. "Ave Maria?"

"Actually, yes," Homura said, looking at Yuma with a newly inquisitive expression, as Mami continued to try to pull her arm out of Homura's grasp.

"Have you heard about it?" Homura asked a moment later.

Yuma squeezed her eyes shut, feeling a tremendous headache coming on. She remembered putting grief cubes in a machine, activating the machines, giving the contents to Oriko—

"That *bitch!"* Mami said, slamming her teacup and saucer off the table with an angry swing of her arm.

It slammed into one of the virtual pedestrians, who recoiled momentarily before the simulation erased the event, returning the pedestrians to normal with a shimmer.

"Four hundred years, and I'm still learning new reasons to hate her!" Mami said, barely stopping herself from yelling, though she gesticulated wildly with one arm, trademark hair bouncing. "What next? Am I going to learn that the war was her fault? Or that she caused Homura to leave?"

"Calm down, Mami-san," MG said, cringing away from the normally sedate Mami. "This was centuries ago."

Mami regained control of herself with a very visible effort, bracing herself against the metal table and swallowing dramatically, before falling back into her seat.

Her cup of tea reappeared, and she picked it up, chugging rather than sipping at the drink.

"To think that Oriko was behind what happened to Sayaka," Mami said finally, shaking her head. "I always knew there was something fishy about that demon spawn."

"Not just Oriko," Yuma said. "I was the one who made the cubes she used as weapons."

"She didn't tell you what they were for," MG said.

"I could have easily deduced she was attacking someone," Yuma said. "Or I could have asked, at the very least."

"She obviously performed some kind of mental manipulation on you," Mami said, sipping her tea more calmly—though she was drinking a *lot* of tea. "It's not your fault at all."

"Did she though?" Yuma said. "I've had many years to think about what happened, and I'm not fully convinced. She clearly lifted my mood, but think of all the times we've used a mood-lifting spell on our teams. There's no evidence she did anything more than that. At very least, I don't think she would have been able to control me if I hadn't wanted to be controlled. It left me feeling guilty for a long time."

Mami shook her head.

"Mind manipulation or not, you were only nine," Mami said. "Oriko is the one at fault. I'm not going to hold you responsible for what happened then, just like I don't hold you responsible for what happened to the Southern Group later."

Yuma sighed.

"You might not, but I'm not sure I can say the same. What really matters is what Kyouko thinks."

Mami's eyes widened, apparently not having thought of the topic from that angle, even though it was part of the justification Yuma had given for even bringing the topic up.

"Kyouko has always blamed herself for what happened to Sayaka," Yuma continued. "She thinks she could have stopped it, that she should have done something different… but Oriko had it in for her all along. If it was Oriko that wanted Sayaka to destroy herself, there was probably nothing Kyouko could do."

"I'm not sure I buy that," Mami commented.

"It gives her another way to think about it," Yuma said. "I've wanted to tell her for a long, long time, but each year that passes makes it harder to drag up history this old, especially since…"

Yuma closed her eyes for a moment, letting the end of her sentence trail off.

"Especially since I don't know how she will take the fact that I was involved," she said. "That's why I never brought it up in the first place, all those years ago."

She picked up the café au lait in front of her, then set it back down again. She still didn't feel like drinking any of it.

"But the thing is, we all have our obsessions," she continued, "and hers is what happened to Sayaka. You've read the reports as much as I have. Her inability to let go is starting to hurt her. We need to push her out of her rut, for better or worse."

Mami shook her head.

"I'm still not sure I agree."

"Think about it. For now, I should finish the story, for MG's sake."

MG grimaced.

"I'm not sure I want to hear it. The past sounds like a terrible, horrible place."

Yuma could have pointed that it was MG who always got mad at her for keeping secrets from her, but bit down that easy, puerile rejoinder. It was MG's prerogative to be unreasonable to Yuma sometimes, but Yuma couldn't do the same. Not given their relationship.

"Yeah, and we had to live there," Mami said, holding her tea pensively.

To say that Oriko and the others rarely entertained guests would have been a drastic understatement. In the entire time that Yuma had spent at the mansion, she had not once seen anyone other than the five members of their group cross the iron gates that barred passage inward. Postman and delivery boy alike were obliged to drop off their parcels at the gate, or else to wait for one of the girls to come grab the goods. According to Mikuru, the local legend was that Oriko's mansion was being used for a secret government project, or else haunted, depending on who you asked. Oriko preferred it that way—it was truly a walled garden.

Yet here in the tea garden Oriko sat, entertaining the mysterious foreign magical girl from—well, somewhere in Europe; Yuma was guessing Germany. Somehow Yuma had been allowed to sit with the two of them as long as she stayed quiet, and she spent the time openly staring at the newcomer, with her sprinkling of freckles and shock of unusually-colored hair.

She was a magical girl, and she had said her name was Clarisse van Rossum. Instead of challenging the intrusion into their territory, or even questioning who the girl was, Oriko had laid out the figurative red carpet, telling the others that Clarisse was special.

And so she was. To hear her tell it, in stilted Japanese, she was some kind of wandering magical girl, obligated by her wish to travel the world, and was just over a century old. To Yuma, who hadn't realized it was even possible for a magical girl to leave the city, it sounded romantic and wondrous—and also possibly made up, especially the part where she claimed to be a hundred years old.

Oriko took in the story unquestioningly, though, and if Oriko believed it, how could Yuma say she knew any better?

"So you're just passing by?" Oriko asked, dabbling her cake into some honey poured out onto her plate.

"A little," Clarisse said, her use of the language shaky. "I don't understand, but something here in this city is very, very important. I haven't figured out what it is, but it might be something to do with uh, the girls, farther down—"

"Akemi Homura?" Oriko asked, pouring her guest a new cup of tea.

"Oh yes, I should have just said the name," Clarisse said. "Her. But I still don't really understand it."

"That's very interesting," Oriko said. "I—"

Yuma didn't catch the rest of Oriko's sentence, however, as the new girl's voice boomed in her head.

I have a message for you, little one, *Clarisse thought, and Yuma understood what she was saying perfectly, even though the thought was rendered in—well, Yuma didn't even know what language it was.*

Message? *Yuma thought, glancing back and forth repeatedly between Clarisse and Oriko, both of*

whom seemed perfectly oblivious to the telepathic communication, though of course Clarisse could not be.

Yes, a message, that I was told to relay to you, though I do not quite understand it myself.

A message from whom? *Yuma thought, managing to still herself and pretend to focus on eating the croissant in front her.*

I can't say. It's a simple message, though. It says, you should know that despite your youth, you can do a lot more than you think you can to change your world. More than that, I'm supposed to remind you that Oriko doesn't really see everything—she only sees what she tries to see.

Are you trying to turn me against her? *Yuma asked, feeling a sense of rage rising within her.*

No, it is only advice about your life and your surroundings, *Clarisse said, outwardly sipping at her tea.*

Who are you? *Yuma asked.*

"I guess you could say I'm the ghost of history," Clarisse said, out loud, apparently a continuation of her conversation with Oriko.

"Well, then I'm the ghost of the future," Oriko said. "What is this, A Christmas Carol?"

Clarisse laughed.

Oriko looked down at her tea for a moment, looking briefly thoughtful. Not just the usual kind of thoughtful either, such as when choosing what to make for dinner—this was a lot deeper, more vulnerable.

In that moment, Yuma was struck by how much younger Oriko looked than the other girl, and for a moment Clarisse's unbelievable assertions about her lifespan seemed almost plausible.

"I might as well take the opportunity to ask someone more experienced…" Oriko began.

Clarisse tilted her head slightly, inviting Oriko to ask her question.

"It feels like a silly question," Oriko prevaricated, "and I'm not sure if in your short time meeting Akemi-san you noticed, but she has some rather interesting beliefs."

"That there is a Goddess of magical girls who watches over us all and runs some kind of afterlife?" Clarisse asked efficiently, casually drinking more tea.

Oriko was visibly relieved she didn't have to explain. Yuma, though, scrunched her face in perplexity—Goddess? Afterlife? What were they talking about?

"Yes," Oriko said. "It sounds silly of me to say, but the idea has troubled me for a while now. I know you are particularly long-lived, but most of us have only short lives to look forward. I just wanted to know if, after your long life, you think even a part of it is possible. We are magical, *and I think I speak for all of us when I say I'd like there to be some meaning to my life other than what I make of it."*

Clarisse smiled cryptically.

"If it reassures you, I can say that I don't think it impossible at all. I've seen enough in my life to make me believe that there's something deeper to all this than just what the Incubators tell us. But

if the Goddess Akemi Homura believes in really exists, I wish she'd give me more clues as to what I'm supposed to be doing here."

Oriko closed her eyes for a moment, then reached for a pastry.

"I think I would like that as well," Oriko said. "You would think that someone like me who can see the future would be more certain of the meaning of fate, but if anything I'm more uncertain than anyone."

"Hmm," Clarisse said, chewing on a croissant.

Another message, *Clarisse thought to Yuma.* This time from me, because I'm not without knowledge powers of my own, and I feel sorry for you. I'm sure you've noticed by now that there's a lot more to your Southern Group than is obvious. The past month has been eventful for you, though I don't think things will stay that way. I want you to know that you're a lot stronger than you think you are, and not to lose hope. Hope is, after all, what makes a magical girl. Just keep your eyes open, and don't be scared to ask questions.

Yuma blinked, taking in the rapid-fire message. She hadn't known it was possible to think *a message so quickly.*

"Honestly, I'm not surprised," Clarisse said. "Sometimes I feel as if more knowledge just makes you more aware of how much you don't know. That's been a lot of my experience, anyway."

Oriko looked up abruptly, glancing over the table.

"Yuma-chan, we seem to be almost out of pastries," she said. "Be a dear and go grab some, okay?"

Yuma nodded, hiding her reluctance as she dropped out of her chair. She didn't want to leave what seemed like an important conversation, but if there was one thing magical girls were, they were gluttons, completely free of the limitations of body shape, caloric intake, or even stomach capacity—Kirika and Aina were probably the shining examples of this, though she had seen Oriko imbibe shocking amounts of fine chocolate on more than one occasion.

"It is natural for every magical girl to wonder about their impact on the world," she heard Clarisse say as she walked away. "I can't give much assurance on that, though I think most of us would settle for just being remembered…"

"The way Clarisse talks almost makes it seem like she might have known what happened to Sayaka," Mami said, frowning. "Do you know if she does?"

Yuma shook her head.

"I've never asked, and even if I did, do you really think she'd tell me? She doesn't talk about the secrets she knows. In fact, I bet you never knew she ever met Oriko."

Mami made a face as if she had just bitten into something unpleasant.

"No, I didn't, and it sticks in my craw a little that the two of them talked so pleasantly. Would it really hurt for her to a little more open about the past? It's been so long."

"I would guess that she has plenty of skeletons in the closet, same as all of us," Yuma said.

"I suppose," Mami answered, reluctantly dropping the topic.

She stirred her tea.

"I'm still surprised Clarisse has fallen in with Kyouko's Cult nonsense," she said, finally.

"Clarisse has always been different from the rest of us, even the Ancients," Yuma said placidly, finally taking a sip of her coffee. "I can understand why she would want to seek meaning in her long life."

"And you?" Mami asked.

Yuma looked at Mami with one eye. It was an unusually direct question for Mami, but the girl looked only inquisitive; Yuma sensed no ulterior motives in the body language, for whatever that was worth in a simulation.

"Oriko never believed in anything like that, even though I know she wanted to," Yuma said. "That's good enough for me."

She saw Mami frown, knowing she had displeased her with the vaguely positive reference to Oriko.

Mami was wrong, of course. Clarisse couldn't talk about the past, no matter how long ago it was. There was no better example of that than Mami herself, who still held her grudge against Oriko four and a half centuries later. Some things were just better not spoken about.

Clarisse had been right; things calmed down considerably after the first month.

Once Yuma got used to the rhythms of living with the Southern Group—how not to step on anyone's toes, how to avoid negative encounters with Aina, and how to exploit Mikuru and Oriko's relative friendliness—things became a lot less hectic. Life settled into a dull monotony of eating, sleeping, and working on Oriko's eccentric magical projects and assigned reading.

There were no insane girls inviting her to dinner, no contact with the other magical girl team of the city, no dubious century-old guests—indeed, Yuma barely stepped outside at all, save for an occasional demon hunt to keep her skills sharp.

Yuma was okay with that, really. She had seen what the opposite of monotony was, and it involved getting to watch struggling for life in front of her, and learning that onee-sama *was a murderer.*

She much preferred the monotony.

Nowadays, she spent much of her time on Oriko's education. She didn't really understand what Oriko was trying to teach her with her alleged home-schooling, which was clearly radically different from what she would have gotten in a normal school. The lessons cycled through a selection of Machiavelli and Sun Tzu, Economic Theory, Mathematics, and English.

In addition to being eccentric, Yuma perceived that she was being held to extremely high standards, and no amount of flattery from Oriko about how she was a prodigy made the struggle with the material any more pleasant.

Oriko, though, had a trick…

Yuma stared up at Oriko's face, feeling restless. According to Oriko, a supine posture was best for certain kinds of magical procedures, so Yuma was lying face up on top of her bedsheets,

observing features of Oriko's face and the ceiling above her.

"Are you sure *this is safe?" Yuma asked, peering up at the older girl skeptically.*

Oriko smiled back down at her indulgently, though her face betrayed a little surprise. Up until then, Yuma had repeatedly questioned instead whether it would work, *and Oriko had always responded with something along the lines of:*

"Well, in principle modifying the brain shouldn't be any different than modifying any other body part, which isn't really all that different from healing, when you get down to it. Of course, you're naturally talented at healing, but learning to do anything else will take some careful focus."

The response was consistent enough that Yuma was now capable of quoting it nearly verbatim, though she didn't really think it answered the question. Suffice to say, Oriko behaved as if she was confident that it would work, once she trained Yuma in the right kind of magical application.

Whether it was safe, *though…*

"I wouldn't be confident it was safe, except that I've already spent the power to view this part of the future," Oriko said, eyes softening for a moment. "It is safe."

Yuma blinked. The answer was certainly definitive, but it also confirmed that Yuma's concerns were, in fact, completely reasonable.

"Alright, remember what you're supposed to do and close your eyes," Oriko said. "I can apply a small magical effect to help you concentrate, but modifying your own body is entirely a matter of your own willpower."

That was easy for her to say, but Yuma remained skeptical, even if she had earlier that week managed to grow her hair and shorten her fingernails by the exact same technique. It just… didn't seem comparable enough.

Still, she closed her eyes, allowing the influence of Oriko's magic to wash over her, smoothing away the doubts and skepticism she had about all of this. When it came to magic, Oriko was fond of saying, believing was as good as seeing, and Yuma settled in, trying to ingrain onto her soul gem a new vision of herself: a child prodigy, one with the attention span to read thick, ponderous books, capable of churning through arcane formulas in a textbook, and capable of writing spectacular computer programs. She imagined herself getting on-stage and giving a lecture to an audience, working in front of a chalkboard, and mixing chemicals in a lab coat.

It was all rather silly, of course, but Oriko had instructed Yuma to visualize everything that meant "smart" to her, and Yuma could not allow herself to realize it was silly. She needed to desire it, to imagine it with all sincerity, to immerse herself in the idea so much that she was on the verge of believing it to be true.

Do that, Oriko said, and her soul gem itself would do the rest, updating her body to be what she now believed herself to be. Her personality, her memories, her soul*—those were untouchable, but the rest was much more malleable.*

Oriko's magic could wipe away some of the doubts, but she still had to want it, and Yuma found herself struggling with that more than anything.

Stupid kid, *her father had said.*

Don't you understand anything? *her mother had said.*

What makes you think you know anything about what you're talking about? *Aina had sneered.*

She let the anger fill her, let it help her imagine the look on her dead parents' faces when she achieved her potential, and imagined the sense of satisfaction she would get, when she finally proved Aina wrong, when she finally—

Yuma's eyes snapped open, as Oriko grabbed her shoulders and shook softly but resolutely. Yuma peered at Oriko in confusion.

"Sorry, that's my fault," Oriko said. "I think I might have overdone the effect a little. How do you feel? Do you feel any different?"

Yuma thought about the question, then looked around at her arms and legs, even though that made no sense. How exactly was she supposed to check? Unlike having longer hair, the effects would not be obvious.

Oriko picked up Yuma's hands, peering intently at the ring on one of her fingers. Yuma followed the gaze, and for a moment it seemed to glow, though she couldn't tell for certain.

"I don't think it worked," Yuma said.

Instead of responding, Oriko handed her an open textbook.

"Read," she instructed. "To yourself, it doesn't have to be out loud."

Yuma read, her own voice ringing didactic in her head:

A metric space is a generalization of normal Euclidean space to an arbitrary set of objects. Such a space M must have a distance $d: M \times M \rightarrow \mathbb{R}$ defined for any two objects in the set, such that the following properties hold:

1. $d(x,x)=0$
2. $d(x,y)=d(y,x)$
3. $d(x,z) \leq d(x,y)+d(y,z)$ [Triangle Inequality]

She wrinkled her nose at the unfamiliar terminology, wondering why she was reading this of all things.

"It seems reasonable enough," she said. "That's what you'd expect out of a distance."

"You read that pretty quickly," Oriko said.

Yuma shrugged.

Oriko smiled.

"You let Oriko mess with your brain?" Mami asked, aghast.

"I was ten!" Yuma defended. "Besides, it's not like she was the one doing anything to it. That was my own power. You know how this kind of thing works."

"I do," Mami said, "but heaven only knows what she could have done when she was 'helping your concentration'."

"She had plenty of chances other than that if she were going to try to do something sneaky," Yuma said. "There's no reason to be worried about this in particular."

"Let me make sure I understand this correctly," MG said, interrupting the small argument. "You modified yourself to have greater intelligence, with Mikuni Oriko's help?"

"Pretty much," Yuma said, looking over at her AI protégé. "As long as you avoid changing anything to do with personality, it's well within our capabilities. Indeed, this kind of thing is fairly common for our covert researchers and operatives, such as when they need to learn a new language."

"It doesn't seem that weird to me," MG said. "We modify our capabilities all the time. What's weird is how incapable most humans are of the same. It makes you more like us."

Yuma saw Mami glance at the AI. It wasn't the kind of comment of Mami would appreciate.

She looked down for a moment. There was a conversation she needed to have with Mami, about her TacComp of all things, but she didn't relish it.

"As I recall, you were the one who introduced the general technique," Mami said, clasping her hands in front of her mouth and peering at the other girl. "You said you'd developed it yourself."

"A white lie," Yuma said, shrugging.

Mami shook her head in dismay.

"Until today, I would have said that the four of us were past that kind of secret-keeping," Mami said, looking down. "I don't blame you, but it just bothers me. The only good thing about this war has been that we can finally be more open about things."

Yuma bit back a sharp retort, acknowledging that Mami had refused to blame her.

She hoped, though, that Mami perceived the inconsistency in her own position, on the one hand wanting them not to keep secrets, and on the other doubting whether Yuma should tell Kyouko about what Oriko had done to Sayaka.

Yuma closed her eyes for a moment.

"I have to disagree. I don't think the world will ever stop giving us secrets that we must keep," Yuma said, couching her words carefully. "At the very least there's plenty of information that would help our enemies if revealed. And before you say we don't have any enemies—"

"Yes, yes, what almost happened to Kyouko," Mami said impatiently. "I try to be idealistic, not naïve."

There was a moment of silence at the table, as they each focused on their own thoughts.

"Did you ever reverse the changes you made with Oriko?" Mami asked finally. "Are you still… you know?"

"You mean go back to being the way I was before?" Yuma asked.

She shook her head.

"No. Once you experience that kind of thing, you can't go back. Whatever else you want to say about Oriko, she gave me a pretty good education. I would have lost all of that if I tried to reverse

anything. You can't really believe that I can hold my position right now with a body like this without some heavy modification? Even with the implants."

"I *did* believe that," Mami said, "and even then, what about when you weren't in this child's body? Did you reverse the changes then?"

"No, I didn't," Yuma said.

Mami shook her head again, muttered something to herself, then drank her tea compulsively.

Mami had always been a bit of a conservative, Yuma thought. This kind of brain modification was still highly secret in the MSY, precisely because its revelation to the magical girl public at large would cause a firestorm of controversy.

There were… many things like that. Things that Mami reminded her too much of.

That too, was a conversation Yuma didn't relish having.

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