

~1. Gauntlet~

*—Starting today, you will all be using a new technology developed in Japan. This interface is far beyond anything our army has ever been granted in the past, and only young folk such as yourselves have the capacity to learn how to use it effectively.*

That idea seemed a bit odd to the boy. Why was it that only the young could use it effectively? Wasn't it developed by someone who was... however old? (She was, as he would come to learn, thirty-six years old at the time of its invention.) So, he inquired with his commanding officer.

*—What? How the hell should I know? Figure it out yourself.*

So he did. On the first day of his time in the military, Richter Esslinger spent his time with this revolutionary new technology attempting to assess why it was they wanted him to do it, and not those they already had on staff.

He was fifteen years old, the boy from Esslingen (the name 'Esslinger' was, in fact, accurate), when those with sufficient grades in some categories he didn't understand were made to take a general aptitude test. When he had been called in, some of his classmates had laughed and said that 'Inzekter isn't good for much else but staring at bugs'.

Naturally, he had passed the test with flying colors. The test consisted of a number of open answer questions regarding how the writer would solve a given issue within the area of cybersecurity. Richter had always excelled at open answer questions, and he had apparently received the highest marks of anyone who had taken the test.

It was, in his own opinion, the only thing he was very exceptional at. He was a notable boy, with his affinity for bugs and insects, and his curious sense of style for a schoolboy his age, but he personally did not take himself to have any particular skills. So what was it about himself and the thirty-something children who had also been recruited that made them special?

What was the Universal Hacking Interface, was the first question? Supposedly, it was possible to control it through some form of 'gauntlet', but for Richter, there was simply the terminal he was sat in front of.

*—Noises of confusion or consternation would occasionally arise from the other children in the room. It wasn't a very large room, so they were clearly audible, and it was not very interesting, with its gunmetal grey walls and floor. So Richter only had his terminal to ponder.*

So, what was the Universal Hacking Interface? Ah, he should correct his thinking. If he had to think that long phrase the entire time, it would be bothersome. YUUHI was the nickname its creator had given it, so that was what it was called. What was YUUHI? Its proper name implied some very curious things—'universal' was a strong word. 'Hacking', of course, meant to access unauthorized data within a system or computer.

The name would thus imply that YUUHI was an *interface* through which you could *hack anything*. That was what 'universal' meant. But how was that possible? Computer systems were frequently quite different from each other, in physical form and in database. How could one system possibly be 'universal'?

Richter raised his hand.

—*Sir. I don't believe I can properly instruct myself in the use of this technology through this terminal. You mentioned something called a 'Gauntlet'. Do you have any?*

At first, he received some lip, but his commanding officer called *his* commanding officer, and there was a laugh over the radio. Richter, then, was taken out of that small, uninteresting room.

“Here we've got the curious boy, eh?”

Richter did not know this man's name, but this man—a stately, square man with a heavy white beard and an eyepatch, steeping his hands in his chair before Richter—was *Oberstleutnant* Frederick Blaster II. (For your information, the Blaster family was a well-known military family across much of the western and northern regions of Europe, whose various members tended to have rivalry with one another. The most recent family happenings were such that Frederick, currently second-eldest, felt somewhat jealous of eldest son Wilhelm VII, who had received the position of family head after the passing of their father, Walden II—but the family drama of the Blaster legacy is a tale for another time.)

Oberstleutnant Blaster scratched his beard, then grinned, showing a few of his yellowing teeth. “It's that sort of go-getter spirit we really need in this unit! What's your name, lad?”

“Esslinger, sir,” Richter said, standing up as straight as he possibly could—which was quite straight, given how unfortunately stiff this uniform was. “Richter Esslinger.”

“To be honest, young Richter, I haven't the foggiest how this whole thing works, but I know it's damned potent. You!” Oberstleutnant Blaster pointed at Richter's commanding officer, a man who is wholly unimportant and accomplished little in his life aside from this single moment. “Get the boy what he wants.”

—The Gauntlet was a piece of physical technology that one Dr. Homura Akaneno claimed “was definitely the best way to use YUUHI, probably!” The first thing Richter thought when he looked at it was that it looked rather like a keyboard for his arm on top of a glove. Come to think of it, he thought, hadn't Nintendo had a peripheral rather like that once upon a time? He wasn't very knowledgeable about video games themselves, but he did think the peripherals were rather neat, and it reminded him somewhat of one. The concept seemed similar, anyhow.

Its glove fit a bit loosely upon his hand, but it had a pair of straps to ensure it wouldn't fall off. There was an unmistakable heat beneath the keyboard—there was a running terminal inside of it, though Richter thought it couldn't be a very powerful one, could it?

“Supposedly,” said Oberstleutnant Blaster, “you can simply start using this thing and there's incredible results. We've seen videos of it working, but we're clueless on how—”

As Richter typed, the Gauntlet let loose an unmistakable blue glow. He wondered to himself how to view the interpreter, and thought perhaps it might be something like a phone—so he swiped upwards in the air, and a floating blue screen appeared before him, showing the random characters he'd typed in. “Whoa!”

—How could this machine be projecting this holographic image? Richter began waving his hand around the Gauntlet, but the screen didn't disappear or distort, so that implied to him that it wasn't being emitted through some sort of holographic emitter. It was in thin air, so it couldn't be a wired connection, either. In other words...

“The command I used on the terminal... appears to be distorting the air in front of me, sir,” Richter said, blinking in awe at the image.

Oberstleutnant Blaster started speaking, but Richter's mind was already racing. So, that implied that the function of this terminal wasn't direct computing power at all. There was clearly some computing power inside—'standard' computing power, he should say—but the actual mechanism of it wasn't wired such that it could connect to another system. Rather, it was...

—Aha! “Oberstleutnant!” Richter said, his eyes widening, interrupting Oberstleutnant Blaster in whatever it was he was saying. “I have a theory regarding the machine.”

Looking a bit flummoxed at the excited eyes of this new recruit, Oberstleutnant Blaster leaned back in his commanding chair and said, “Go on.”

“Have you ever heard of the concept of 'Maxwell's Demon'?” Richter said. “It's an idea that became an underpinning of the idea of infophysics. Essentially, the idea is that energy can be transferred entirely through information—that's quite the bottom line, but it's what's necessary to understand. I believe it's possible that this 'Gauntlet' terminal is allowing me to access the informational energy in the space around me. Is there some form of user's manual for the Interface? I'd like to read through it if at all possible, sir.”

“...There is, but it's in Japanese,” Oberstleutnant Blaster grumbled. “You know Japanese, boy?”

“No, sir, but I'll endeavor to learn,” Richter said. “But with the basic instructions provided earlier, I should be able to test this theory.”

—Richter swung his arm in another direction, towards a corner of the ceiling. He'd figured out earlier where the ventilation system must be within this building by virtue of where the vents were, so ideally it was best to point it towards there. “Let me see,” Richter said, and he began to type. Basic parameters and commands were laid out by his commanding officer earlier, and through extrapolation he could then discern how to create another basic command.

Yes, there it was! His command to target a mechanism within the wall had succeeded, and with that... based on this readout it appeared that it was liable to be a basic switch. Yes! He ran a command, and—“Done, sir,” Richter said.

One moment later, Oberstleutnant Blaster received a call on his radio. “Sir, the ventilation system's just switched itself off with no outside input,” came a voice from the radio. Blaster's eyes widened as he processed what he heard. “Should we call a technician?”

“...No,” Blaster said, “that won't be necessary.”

“Ah, yes, of course,” Richter said. He ran another command. “It should be back on now.”

“Oh,” the radio said, “it's fine again. Still, that's a bit worrying. Are you sure—”

“No technician will be necessary,” Blaster said, his voice monotone. “Back to work.”

—Richter thought he understood the logic, then. If this was a largely informational technology, then the young, with their greater capacity to digest new information, would be ideal. It only made sense. So that was why they needed the young.

## ~2. Formicidae & Acrididae I~

When Richter's parents received word that their son was the star of this new unit by a mile, they couldn't have been happier for him. In a departure from any other member of the future Unit 13, there were no particularly noteworthy circumstances regarding Richter's parentage—the two were a happily married man and woman with just the one son. Marital spats were rare, and both were understanding of their son's particular fascinations and skills.

As Richter continued going to school, whispers about him turned into regular conversation, and he found himself with something he did not expect to ever obtain—respect. For a time, people even referred to him as 'Richter', and not 'Inzekter'—though he didn't mind the nickname much to begin with. But respect did not lead to genuine connection; he was simply respected, and not much more. He was still a curiosity, just a more prestigious one.

Save, that is, for one other boy.

“I find myself wondering, what is it that caused them to develop such an instinct? To become that gregarious, nomadic swarm? What instinct within their brains led to that behavior? It's something gorgeous, Richter, how they join together to form one massive entity!”

He was a bit taller than Richter, lanky, and with pallid skin that showed he was not an outdoors boy. The other boy's hair was dark and oily, and he certainly lacked Richter's sense of style, most often dressing in plain white tees and dark sweatpants. Richter always thought that his friend looked a touch emaciated, and a bit more like a feral rodent than was ordinary—but Heinrich Scuttler, a boy in Richter's unit, was one of the few people who could speak on Richter's level.

“Mm,” Richter said, as they sat along the steps of the stairs in a scenic park amidst the falling leaves, “forgive me for saying, but my favorite form of insect sociality is actually hymenopteran eusociality.”

“A lovely concept in its own right!” said Heinrich, who was ministrating to himself as he walked back and forth along the stair he was supposed to be sat on. “I respect that. I always understood it as somewhat like an insult to the basic ideas of reproductive logic, and the sheer cheek of it, Richter!”

They went to different schools and didn't live in the same town, but one look at Richter's well-maintained ant farm and Heinrich had known that Richter was a man of culture. As it turned out, having something in common to speak about was rare enough for both of them that they'd hit it off near-instantly.

Richter didn't fully grasp the details, but supposedly, Heinrich's parents were rather hands-off, and as such there was nothing much stopping him from heading over to a neighboring district (incidentally, he was from Stuttgart). The boy was becoming an ever-more-common sight in Esslingen am Neckar, and while he could be a bit frightening with his hunched-over posture

and sharp teeth, Richter couldn't complain.

“I've been learning Japanese, you know,” Richter said. He produced the YUUHI instructional manual that he kept in his knapsack to show to Heinrich once the other boy had sat down. “To tell you the truth, I'm not certain Dr. Akaneno knew what she was inventing.”

“What?” Heinrich scoffed, crinkling his nose. “How's that meant to work?”

“While she's clear on the basic parameters of the interface, she seems a bit vague on what it's meant to be used for. Her understanding of the underlying principles is a bit more like...” Richter held his chin and tapped his foot on the stair. “How do I put this... it's as though a child playing proclaimed that they had a shield that could block anything.”

“So it's more along the lines of, 'This is my interface! It can hack ANYTHING! Wave it in the direction and do these and it does what you want!' instead of explaining the fundamentals, then?” Heinrich asked, and Richter nodded.

“It has been educational, but perhaps not in the method she meant it to be. Her own testimonials on what it can and can't do provide quite a bit of evidence. It's as though she presented a pristine sandbox, said 'I made this! Figure it out yourself!' and left.” Richter couldn't help but let out a chuckle. “She seems like quite a character, if she can do something like this and simply leave it be.”

“Horribly irresponsible, if you ask me,” Heinrich said, narrowing his eyes. “If I invented something like that, I'd keep it all to myself and never let anyone else have it.”

“Now, that's rude, Heinrich. Societal betterment is important!” Richter said with a louder laugh.

“Exactly!” Heinrich proclaimed. “If I were to invent something along those lines, I'd hope it made society *worse* if I let it loose!”

“Oh, you scamp, you,” said Richter with a smile.

Heinrich had received the second-highest marks on the tests to enter the unit, and not for lack of skill. Where Richter had finesse, Heinrich was much more of a brute force programmer. He had once described his philosophy thus; “If there's something I can't get done by acting like a swarm of locusts, it's either not worth doing, or I need to be a larger swarm of locusts.”

So, the two would meet in this park, take out their Gauntlets, and begin testing the efficacy of their programs against each other. To amuse themselves, they would project holographic representations of their programs onto the ground, as though it were a heated battle—but it was little more than two boys pushing buttons at each other.

“Argh!” Heinrich yelled, as his holographic cloud of locusts was once more dispersed by a single, decisive strike. “How'd you get in there?!”

“You really must learn to keep your backdoors closed,” Richter said, tapping away as his knightly, bipedal insect went through its swing, then sheathed its blade. (The ease of 3D modeling with YUUHI was something else, he'd thought to himself.) “I—”

Heinrich's Gauntlet produced an image of a mechanical scorpion bursting out from under the feet of Richter's knight, its maw opening wide as it darted past, Richter's Gauntlet beginning to throw up error messages. “Hah!” Heinrich shouted. “*You* should learn not to talk so much!”

Thinking quickly, Richter spun a honeycomb barrier in front of the scorpion. His knight was still largely uncontested, so he just needed to keep Heinrich's assault from breaking through until the battle was won. As it did its best to tear down the barrier, Richter launched one of the combs from above its head towards its heavy tail, causing the scorpion to topple over from the impact.

The knight broke through another layer of Heinrich's defenses, but Heinrich grimaced and yelled, “You won't get through so easily!” The scorpion turned its claw towards Richter's knight and launched it off like a rocket, forcing the knight to turn about and block the projectile with its sword.

Richter gritted his teeth and grunted. “Stay strong! You can do it!” he said, before running one more command—parrying away the claw, the knight launched it into the back wall of Heinrich's defenses, leaving a crack that it slammed the claw through.

“No!” Heinrich said, shaking his fist. He slumped over, his back hunched, as the holographic images disappeared. “Not again.”

“You almost had me there,” Richter said. “If you'd used the scorpion's other claw to launch through the hole I'd left in my own shielding, you might have had me!”

Heinrich blinked. “I hadn't thought about that.”

—Explaining it to anyone who wasn't the two of them was likely a fool's errand, but this was how the two boys bonded. Somehow, this served as both practice and as a friendly bout. Richter won most of them. After that, they would spend a bit longer out, then return to Richter's home. Sometimes, Heinrich would even stay over—after all, Richter's parents were just glad that their son had a friend.

Thus did the training of this unit pass by, amidst the falling leaves.

### ~3. His Principles~

It was a simple affair that led to the end of Richter's time in the military, being that his reasons themselves were also simple. A few small missions had come and gone, little skirmishes on the internet with enemy hackers attempting to access confidential information.

On a day in the dead of winter, a missive was sent to the members of the young operatives' unit to convene after school. The night had already fallen, and a light snow was beginning to fall, moisture dripping down the bare branches of the trees.

Twenty-five of the thirty children in the unit were made to stay back, but five, including Richter and his friend Heinrich, were placed in an unmarked, black van. The unit had convened in Stuttgart, and the convoy was driving towards a large, white building with two towers sticking out of it—the Stuttgart-Gaisburg thermal power plant.

“Esslinger, Scuttler,” said the driver, “out.”

The streets were awfully quiet, so Richter had to imagine that the military had managed to divert traffic. The lights, however, were on. Puffing a cigarette in the cold air was one Oberstleutnant Blaster, looking up at the power plant and scratching his beard.

“Sir!” Richter and Heinrich both saluted, but Oberstleutnant Blaster came over to pat them both on the shoulders.

“Our number one and number two!” Oberstleutnant Blaster laughed. “Now, boys, I know you're the best we've got at this business, so I came to oversee this personally. Wanted to see you in action and all.”

“Y-yes sir,” Heinrich stammered, his salute becoming more rigid. “Yes sir, absolutely, sir.”

“Now, this here's the Stuttgart-Gaisburg thermal power plant. Lovely building, valuable service. Thing is, we've reason to believe that there are anti-state elements, like those rats you've been dealing with for the past few weeks, hiding out somewhere in Stuttgart. Understand?” Blaster said.

To Richter's ears, he said it like what they were meant to do was obvious. “Er. No, sir.”

“Well, that's fair, you're fifteen and all. Now, if we were to take direct action against—and the higher-ups think this—agents of a foreign state, that likely wouldn't be the best, but we do want rid of them. So, you boys are to shut down the power plant for a few hours.”

—What? “Er. Excuse me, sir?”

“Ah, I see,” Heinrich said. “So the rest of them are shutting down the power grid and the



other power plants, then?”

“Quite right!” Blaster said, with a stern nod. “We'll freeze them out, and the whole matter will be handled in a flash.”

—What? “Alright, then,” Heinrich said, “let's get to scou—”

“What? Sir,” Richter said, his face trying its absolute hardest not to twist into an active grimace, “what about the citizens?”

“Oh, they're a hardy lot, they'll handle it—”

“You want us to cut power to the entire town? But—sir, there are hospitals here! Places that require power to save lives!” Richter could feel a bit of sweat starting to form on his forehead that felt like it was going to freeze right then and there.

“They're a *hardy lot*,” Blaster said, “and they'll *handle it*.”

“Come on, man,” Heinrich said, tugging at the sleeve of Richter's shirt, “they've got backup generators. We have our orders.”

“Even if those were on within a minute, that might cause severe complications! We can't just shut down the entire town with no notice like that! The cost to the citizenry would be—”

Oberstleutnant Blaster's smile had long since vanished, and was now replaced by a swift knee to Richter's stomach. The last bits of food he'd eaten almost threw themselves out of his gut as his spit flew onto the pavement, and he saw stars as he collapsed into a prone position, coughing and coughing.

“Listen,” Blaster said, his voice a low growl. “I found your antics amusing when you were doing a good job. I'm not laughing anymore, boy. Hurry up. Get to it.” Richter didn't immediately stand back up. “Ugh, how are they even training you kids? You can't take a single hit? I'll need to reprimand your CO something fierce, then. Get up, or I'll do it again.”

—In his life, Richter Esslinger would try his absolute best to ensure that his principles took precedent over base survival. He would, in fact, mark this as likely the only time that had not been the case. Because, in the face of all that, he stood up, and he did his duty.

It was also the last day Richter Esslinger would be in service.

~4. Analog~

>**Puropurin**: Damn.

>**Puropurin**: Are you even allowed to tell me these things?

>**Attacus**: No. However, the jurisdictions under which I'm not allowed to tell you these things are irrelevant at the moment.

>**Puropurin**: You know what, Richter? You may just be the dumbest smart person I've ever met.

>**Attacus**: My goodness. Am I really that bad?

>**Puropurin**: Just once I want to meet another STEM kid who doesn't have the self-preservation instinct of a lemming. Where are you, anyhow?

>**Attacus**: On a train into Hungary.

Reminiscence was much of what Richter did on train rides—that, and using the internet. (He'd also started practicing at darts, but that was beside the point for the time being.) Obviously, being that YUUHI was still quite a new technology, there weren't any books on the thing aside from the instruction manual, so hobbyist forums for programmers took up much of Richter's reading.

—As for his friend, they had met on one such forum. 'Puropurin' was the username of an analog programmer with a combative attitude towards YUUHI. They'd met when Richter was seventeen, as he was getting further into the discipline—well, he'd seen Puropurin about on the forum, yes, but they'd had a solid conversation for the first time at that point.

>**Puropurin**: What are you gonna do there? Look around for a job?

>**Attacus**: That was my plan, yes.

>**Puropurin**: ...You could get a job at any cybersecurity firm *instantly* and you look around for manual labor. You know that, right?

>**Attacus**: My talents really aren't anything special. You're more impressive than me, Megumi.

>**Puropurin**: How can you say shit like that with a straight face? I'll never understand you people and your 'value of manual labor' crap. We invented computers to automate the kind of things you're actively looking for.

>**Attacus**: It's less the value of labor itself and more searching for my own value, like you

and the RC cars.

>**Puropurin:** That's called a hobby, Richter.

>**Attacus:** Is it? Aren't you going to tournaments and the like?

>**Puropurin:** Yes, I'm ridiculously talented, so obviously I'm among the nation's best at it. But it's a hobby. People have those. You like bugs, right? Raise another ant farm or something!

>**Attacus:** Your worry for me is appreciated, but I'll be alright.

>**Puropurin:** Look, just don't get yourself in trouble with some street toughs.

She happened to be the same age as Richter. Since they'd been friends for quite some time, he knew her name—Megumi Kirisame. When he was first discovering YUUHI, she'd been making some minor waves as a genuine prodigy in her field at quite a young age, but according to her, 'everyone just wants people who do your newfangled bullshit these days'.

(For the record, the two were speaking in Japanese. Both were capable of speaking the other's native language (for Megumi, a point of pride was the number of languages she could argue with people in,) but Richter preferred to keep his Japanese fresh.)

Richter had taken a look at much of Megumi's work, and read reports on the matter, and it was true—Richter had no clue how she managed the sort of things she did in terms of analog programming. Which, he supposed, was a rather silly phrase—after all, she worked entirely digitally—but was how the discipline had come to be referred to in the wake of infophysical programming.

>**Puropurin:** Hey. That friend of yours. Are you two still friends?

>**Attacus:** After I dropped out, I tried to go by his house a number of times, but his parents, or their staff, would always shoo me away. I haven't seen him again since.

>**Puropurin:** Sorry. Their 'staff'?

>**Attacus:** Yes, they employed a number of servants.

>**Puropurin:** Buddha fucking help me. You were really friends with a kid with servants?

>**Attacus:** I suppose it is rather odd. He never seemed very happy about the matter, though.

>**Puropurin:** On the one hand, screw people who are that rich. They're all lunatics. On the other hand, I wouldn't mind a butler or two. Get a nice young man, dress him up in a tight-fitting uniform, watch him go to work...

>**Attacus:** Have them call you “ojou-sama”, yes?

>**Puopurin:** Well, *duh*. I'm the picture of feminine refinement and grace.

>**Attacus:** So you are, *ojou-sama*.

>**Puopurin:** You're not bad-looking yourself, Richter. You're pretty enough, you'd do a decent butler cosplay. Might have to spruce it up a bit to make it sufficiently stylish, but I could stare at you doing dishes.

>**Attacus:** Ahahaha. Is that the sort of thing you should be saying? Will your boyfriend not get mad?

>**Puopurin:** Just because I could stare at you doing dishes doesn't mean I will. My appreciation for men in suits and the like is wholly academic. He knows that. I mean, I have wall scrolls of my husbands, if he didn't know that we wouldn't be dating.

>**Attacus:** You two are adorable. I'd love to meet him at some point.

>**Puopurin:** Well, you might have some trouble. He types like he talks, so the dialect might screw with you. You know Russian?

>**Attacus:** He speaks Russian?

>**Puopurin:** No, he speaks dog and his dog speaks Russian, so you could have the dog interpret.

>**Attacus:** ...With all due respect, Megumi... are you quite sure of that?

>**Puopurin:** One of these days you're going to see it for yourself and know I have never lied to you in my life.

And so did the man's life continue.

~5. Formicidae & Acrididae II~

“Hey! Don't you run from me! *Don't you run!*”

Richter kept a pocket watch on him that he made to check when he heard that voice behind him. He had a train to catch—this one into Poland—but as he made his way through the crowd, he realized he had a few minutes to spare.

“Sorry,” he said, turning around. “I don't have much time to spare, but—”

The crowd thinned behind him somewhat, so Richter could see that on this cloudy spring day, as a light rain fell, there was a gaunt, tall, pallid man with the countenance of a feral rodent grimacing at him, the man's sharp teeth grinding in his mouth. He wasn't dressed for the weather, with hardly a coat or even long sleeves in sight.

“Oh!” Richter said, smiling. “Heinrich!” Perhaps counter to Heinrich's expectations, Richter walked up with a beaming smile on his face, strolling up to clap his old friend on the shoulder and say, “How've you been?”

“...Wha?” Heinrich's eyes narrowed. “You—hey, hold on, you!” He wiped Richter's hand off of his shoulder. “What's the meaning of this?! What are you doing?!”

“Well, I'm saying hello, aren't I?” Richter asked, tilting his head. “It's been, goodness, four years? I went by your house a number of times before I left Germany, but you were never in—”

Heinrich grabbed Richter's wrist and shook it a bit. “Enough with the small talk! Do you not understand what's happening here?! You've run away from me for the last time, Richter Esslinger! Pull out your Gauntlet! *Now!*”

“Excuse me?” Richter said, with a blink. “Er, I don't... Well, I turned mine in, you know. I don't have one. What are you talking about?” Heinrich reached up to start scratching furiously at his head, hissing a bit as he did, and Richter added, “Are you alright? Do you need me to call you a doctor? Now that I look at you, you look awful—”

“No Gauntlet?! Oh, I'm sure! As though you'd just toss away your key to greatness! No, there's no way you would! If you don't have a Gauntlet, what's the point?!” People were beginning to stare. “If I were to just beat you in a fistfight it wouldn't have any meaning, I'd never be able to—”

“Do you have a ticket?” Richter asked. “I don't want you to miss your train—er, where is your luggage?”

“What concern is any of that of yours, huh?!” Heinrich yelled, a bit of his spit flecking onto Richter's face. “You... I don't know! Do you have a computer or something?! Where is it, is it in that briefcase of yours?! Pull it out! You won't escape from me—!”

“Er,” Richter mumbled, “I have to... go...”

—Roughly twenty minutes later, the train was off, and it turned out that Heinrich did have a ticket... for the same train. Of course, the two were in different passenger classes, but Richter didn't feel right asking for his old friend to be escorted out when he was so clearly unwell.

“Heinrich?” Richter asked, as the gaunt young man sat on the other seat in this small cabin, hunched over and curled up, his back facing Richter, making little hissing noises. “Are you alright?”

“Don't speak to me until you've got your Gauntlet out!” Heinrich shouted over his shoulder, his bangs covering his eyes. Richter shrugged, sat down, and pulled out his phone.

>**Attacus:** Say, Megumi.

>**Puropurin:** That's my name.

>**Attacus:** Do you remember me mentioning my old friend Heinrich?

>**Puropurin:** The rich kid you hadn't seen in a few years, right?

>**Attacus:** Coincidentally enough, he happened to be on the same train as me, but he's lodged himself in my cabin and is yelling at me to pull out my Gauntlet and... fight him, I think? He won't look at me.

>**Puropurin:** What

>**Attacus:** It's a bit rude to say, but he looks awful. I'm not certain he's eaten recently, for one thing.

>**Puropurin:** How long is your ride? Is there a doctor on the train?

>**Attacus:** Not that I know of. And it's going to be quite a ride, I believe.

>**Puropurin:** Ugh. I guess order him some food and make sure he doesn't hurt himself? If he looks that bad that might be all you can do.

“Do you want something to eat?” Richter asked.

“*I don't want your pity!*” Heinrich yelled, and Richter took a moment to be glad that these cabins were soundproof. “I need, I need to—”

“Heinrich?” Richter asked, raising his hand as gently as he could. “I'm sorry, but I don't understand what you're talking about or why you want to fight me. I really don't. Can you please explain it to me?”

There was a moment's silence, after which Heinrich turned his head over his shoulder, one eyebrow cocked quizzically. “Are you really serious?” Richter nodded. “Of course you wouldn't even know. All you did was run away, but you solve one little problem and then everyone asks about you instead. Why do you have to be so damned perfect, huh?! If I can't beat you, then nobody even thinks I exist!”

“Heinrich—”

“And you're just wasting yourself going wherever the wind takes you, barely even doing anything! This wunderkind I keep getting compared against doesn't even *want it!* Why?! Why do you have to exist, huh?!” Heinrich was curling further into his little ball.

>**Attacus:** Megumi...

>**Puropurin:** Is your friend okay?

>**Attacus:** I... think I may have done something wrong. He says I'm wasting myself. He seems awfully angry about it.

>**Puropurin:** So what, he wants to fight you so you'll go back to the military?

>**Attacus:** I don't think so.

“Heinrich, I'm sorry, but I won't fight you,” Richter said, shaking his head. “Not only do I not have the means, but I don't have a reason to. I don't know what's happened to you, but I can assure you I never meant you any harm—”

“I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!” Heinrich began to shout, holding his head in his hands and rocking back and forth. “I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate you! I hate, I hate, hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate hate, hate, hate—!!”

A bit of gurgling allowed Richter to notice quickly that Heinrich had not stopped speaking because he was done—he was attempting to strangle himself. “Wait, stop!” Richter shouted, pulling a string for assistance and trying to pry Heinrich's hands off of his own windpipe. It was an unnatural level of force Heinrich was applying, beyond what Richter knew a man of his physical state could apply consciously.

Heinrich's eyes were full of tears, darting around, tinged with terror and pain. Richter

managed to loosen his grip slightly, but not enough to actually allow his friend to breathe again—

“What seems to be the pro—oh my god!”

Once one attendant saw the situation, more were called, and the exertion of having his arms freed from his neck caused Heinrich to pass out completely. With a hurried explanation of the circumstances to the attendants who had come to the cabin, Richter apologized for the trouble, and soon was alone once more.

Sighing, Richter could do little but stare up at the ceiling and quietly ponder the events that had just transpired in front of his eyes.

>**Attacus:** Megumi. Did I make a mistake?

>**Puropurin:** That bad, huh? I don't know.

>**Attacus:** I just don't know... what it is I've done. I

—A direct message from someone.

>**ANONYMOUS:** when I look at you I remember when I felt like there was a life for me as an individual

>**ANONYMOUS:** i'm bursting at the seams starving for meaning

>**ANONYMOUS:** my head is so noisy and I can't quiet it down

>**ANONYMOUS:** conscious thought is the torture inflicted upon humans and I want it to stop

>**ANONYMOUS:** when this message is sent please tell me what time it is

>**Attacus:** ...It's 17:38.



~6. Where the Wind may Take Me~

Heinrich had vanished before Richter could speak to him again, and so Richter had no choice but to simply continue onward, the memory of that unsettling evening replaying in his head when he found himself becoming too comfortable. What had happened to his old friend to cause him such agony?

Once in a while, Richter would get further messages from that anonymous account he couldn't bear to block.

>**ANONYMOUS**: Who is this? Do I know you?

>**Attacus**: I believe so. Is this Heinrich?

>**ANONYMOUS**: I think so. Whoever you are, you're the only person I can message on here. Are you an agent? Some sort of contact?

>**Attacus**: No, I'm...

>**Attacus**: Well, I've nothing to do with your job, at any rate. I'm just an ordinary man.

>**ANONYMOUS**: I see. This might come across as an odd question, but... what year is it?

>**Attacus**: I believe it's 2016 now.

>**ANONYMOUS**: 2016... So I'm twenty-two?

>**Attacus**: Yes. Are you alright?

>**ANONYMOUS**: I don't know. Wherever I am, it's noisy as hell. I can hardly hear myself think. The attendants in this room say that there's no noise, so maybe I'm hallucinating.

>**Attacus**: You should try and rest. The last time we met in person, you seemed rather ill.

>**ANONYMOUS**: I *feel* rather ill. There's something I need to do, I know, but I can't remember what it is.

>**Attacus**: Please prioritize your health.

—And so it would go. That anonymous account would message him a few times in the next few days, and then—

>**ANONYMOUS**: there's heat all over my body a numb tingling heat like everything that I am is being burnt away by a flamethrower but the worst part is that it's not even that bad there's

part of me that is dying to be burnt away everything is vanishing it's like my brain is being eaten bit by bit by bit *crunch crunch crunch chew chew chew* I can feel it it's DELICIOUS everything filling my stomach it's all I can feel in this sticky heat dont you want to join me come on in the waters fine

—From then on, radio silence until the cycle began to repeat. With no knowledge of where Heinrich actually was, Richter could do nothing to actually help him. And even then, what could he do? He hardly knew anything. All he was was a drifter. There was nothing in the life of Richter Esslinger that was suited to heroic deeds. All he was was—

So all he could do was ignore it. And so it would go. West to east, month by month, he would find himself wherever the wind took him. Until one day—

>**Puropurin:** Why not Japan?

>**Attacus:** ...What?

>**Puropurin:** You've got a lot of baggage over there in Europe. Why not try for a fresh start in Japan? I could help you find a place, if you wanted.

>**Attacus:** Japan... It seems like a lovely country, but...

>**Puropurin:** But nothing. You're miserable. This whole vagrant life isn't right for you and we both know it.

>**Attacus:** I would just be running away.

>**Puropurin:** Who cares? Sometimes running away is a good thing. Better than just letting yourself marinate. Do you even have any other friends?

—Japan, hm? The idea had been floated before, but Megumi sounded much more serious this time. It would need a call home to his parents to explain, certainly, but...

One part of Richter said it would be fascinating to be in the home country of the technology that despite himself, he couldn't quite let go. Another said that it would be nice to be somewhere where he wouldn't have to worry about his past catching up with him. Another was just horribly tired, and thought it might be nice to be near a friend, any friend at all.

...Despite his hesitance, it seemed he was essentially in agreement with himself.

>**Attacus:** Alright.

>**Puropurin:** Good. I'll find you a flight.

>**Attacus:** You're aware I'm currently unemployed?

>**Puopurin**: I've got enough saved up, and I know this apartment complex with low rates if you don't mind the ghosts.

>**Attacus**: ...Er?