

~7. Home~

Since leaving home after graduating high school, the young man from Esslingen had found no true home but Esslingen. In Esslingen, those who once respected him did not care for him, knowing only that he had some shame, and not the color or shape of that shame. It was not something that ordinary citizens would concern themselves with—only knowing that the young man was not worthy of respect, that young Inzekter was just the sad boy he'd always seemed to be.

There was something different when Richter was handed the key to apartment 14. Obviously, he had flown across the oceans—he was further away from Germany than he'd ever been. However, he felt something in being given this key. He felt a sort of pride, a relief that he supposed came from knowing that he had a place to stay in this place outside of Europe, where he always felt that he was spinning around and around his homeland where he felt so shameful.

Richter only had one suitcase, and as he dragged it in, his friend couldn't help but chime in—“Honestly, I was worried you'd bring more than one bag. I wouldn't be much help.”

Megumi Kirisame was in his apartment now, taking a look around the place with him. She was a short woman, her hair an olive green and held in two modest braided pigtails that draped her shoulders. Her eyes matched her hair, behind a pair of thick-rimmed glasses. She had a sharp face, and arms stronger than her stature and slim build might imply. She wore a wool cardigan, in a lighter shade of green than her hair, over a white one-piece dress. This was the sort of thing she wore to work—it was a Saturday, so she had been able to leave her job early to come assist her friend in moving in.

(As for the comment about help, it was true—she was capable of lifting plenty in theory, but needed to have one hand free to control her wheelchair, and so bulky luggage was not much her forte.)

“Ah, that's alright,” Richter said. He smiled, placing his suitcase down onto the table in the center of the apartment. It was a simple one-room, not much to speak of, but Richter could certainly work with it. “Having you here is support enough.”

“Oh, stop,” Megumi said with a little laugh. Looking about, she said, “Not much room, but you could definitely do some decorating. How long's it been since you really decorated a room, anyway?”

“Years,” Richter said.

“Yeah, well, we'll have to figure something out. It'd be a damn shame if I came to visit and you were still totally drab in here.” Megumi laughed to herself as Richter began to unpack. “I told some of my students I had a friend coming in from Germany this week, you know. One of them thinks I'm making it up, because apparently, I'm not 'cool enough' to have foreign friends. You mind coming in so I can show you off at some point?”

“An unorthodox show and tell exhibit,” Richter said with a smile, “but maybe.”

Over the next few days, Megumi and some associated associates came by to help Richter out by delivering spare appliances. He had very few to his name, and he couldn't deny that he was happy to at least have a microwave. “So, what kind of job are you looking for?” Megumi asked, poring over job application sites on her laptop.

“Oh, nothing particularly special,” Richter said, “anything will do.”

“Of course anything will do,” Megumi said with a little sigh. She took a moment to ponder, and then said, “You know, I think I actually know a guy who might be interested in someone with your skillset. I’ll put a feeler out.”

“My skillset?”

“Yes, Richter, your *skillset*,” Megumi said with a roll of the eyes. “You wanna kvetch about it or you wanna trust me? I haven’t got much aside from my social network, but I do have that.”

“Alright, then,” Richter said, nodding his head as he finished placing his clothes into his new dresser, “I would appreciate it.”

“For the time being, though, come in your best clothes next Monday and I’ll harangue my school into letting you work as an aide somewhere or something. It’s nepotism, but I deserve a bit of nepotism for dealing with these brats,” Megumi said with a dry chuckle. Of course, the smile on her face was a bit too genuine for that—ah, but if Richter pointed that out he’d likely get chewed out. “I’ve got a German to parade.”

—As it turned out, Megumi was a seventh grade science teacher specifically. At least a few kids called her “Megu-nee,” to which she’d smirk, then grit her teeth and say, “That’s Kirisame-sensei to you!” with a furiously pointed finger. About half of them in the period he happened to poke his head in for were very impressed with their Megu-nee’s impressive skill of ‘knowing a German’. Richter could only laugh and bashfully look away, as the rest of them were stunned that he spoke Japanese as well as he did.

From what he gathered from the gossip at the school now that he had presumably steady employment as a clerical assistant (as it turned out), Megumi had only come onto staff three years ago, but from the moment she’d been employed as a student teacher she’d become very popular with the students. This was obviously hearsay, but supposedly if boys asked each other which teacher they had a crush on, ‘Megu-nee’ was the first answer. Something about her approachable, youthful, and vivacious demeanor.

Richter found this rather funny. Not because Megumi wasn’t quite a pretty young lady, but simply that when he was in school, most of the teachers were older or more fussy—none of this kindness-with-a-streak-of-egotism business... or the ‘being a prodigy in the field of analog programming’ business, either.

With that said, he innocently floated the question as she was grading papers after school one day. “Why a schoolteacher, anyhow?”

She responded without looking over at him. “Turned out I was good at it. And it’s not the worst job in the world, though the pay could be better.”

“Sure,” Richter said, raising an eyebrow, “but even working in a school, you could run circles around the tech staff here. Your own computer runs about three times as fast as any other one here. It’s just surprising to me.”

There was a moment of silence tinged with a curiously awkward air. Perhaps Richter was reading too much into it, but he began to wonder if he'd said something wrong.

“What,” Megumi then said with a chuckle, “you want me to put all of them out of jobs? I might be good at it, but it's more important we all get to work. Don't worry, I step in if they really need me.”

“Ah, that's good,” Richter said.

—And so his life went on.

~8. The Man of Murakumo~

It was a windy day, in August of 2018, when Richter was out shopping for groceries, that he looked up and saw something wholly unexpected—a man, in the sky, hanging onto an umbrella. “O-oh my god! Sir, are you alright?!” Richter yelled.

“Blonde hair, blue eyes, that ever-styling scarf! There's no doubt *you* must be the man I've heard so much about!” said the man, who allowed the wind to carry him down on his umbrella, floating about like he was light as a leaf. He gently landed in front of Richter, closing his umbrella and, for some reason, holstering it on his waist like it was a gun.

This man wore a pristine white labcoat with laboratory-official plain clothing beneath, and he had a head of unkempt purple hair—it was not the most uncommon look among the research ward, but this man of Murakumo was singular nevertheless.

Before Richter could respond, the man walked up and clapped Richter on the shoulder. “Good to meet you, Mr. Esslinger! The name's Masaki, and I hear you're exactly the kind of man I look for in this business. Studious, hard-working, a crack shot with a chakram, and a hacker par excellence—”

“Er, what?” Richter said with a blink.

“Ah, but I overstep myself. I know Megumi,” said Masaki.

“Oh!” Richter said with a nod. “I understand now.”

(It came up in some short case beforehand, but Megumi's boyfriend of several years, a man named Gavin, had the inexplicable talent to be present near more interesting people—hence things like his former pro wrestler mother, underwear model father, and Russian-speaking dog. Many, many people knew Gavin, and thus Gavin had many stories to tell and many friends who by proxy knew his girlfriend, as the two were quite affectionate. Masaki was originally a friend of Gavin's who hit it off with Megumi quite well, seeing as they were both, to put it politely, huge nerds.)

With a vigorous handshake that felt like it threatened to tear Richter's arm off, Masaki said, “Now, you've got quite the pedigree, sir. I grilled Megumi a bit, and she tells me you're a genuine prodigy with software that is itself somewhat prodigious! How would you like the chance to do good with your hobby?”

“Well, that sounds quite lovely, actually, but do you mind if I get these to my apartment first?” Richter asked.

Masaki did not mind, but he did follow Richter the entire rest of the way. Once that was settled, Richter, being a polite young man, invited Masaki in to continue the conversation.

“Now, I'm a member of an organization called Murakumo,” Masaki said. “You can think of the organization as sort of a branch of the Japanese government made to manage and quantify talented individuals—”

“Sorry,” Richter said, “but I have a policy against military professions.”

“Ohohoho, don't you worry, I've heard!” Masaki said, waving his hands. “No, no. We don't want you as a soldier or a black ops agent or anything of the sort, sir. We aren't such a dishonest organization—at least, not such that I concern myself with,ahaha! No, no. See, as far as this branch of the thing goes, we attempt to develop approaches to budding technologies through cooperation with those with an innate talent for those technologies—it's the modern era, you know! Why, you might be surprised to learn how many advancements in the modern understanding of YUUHI come from Murakumo operatives.”

“So...” Richter said, narrowing his eyes. “Nothing dishonest? You wouldn't have me performing operations that could harm citizens?”

“Certainly not on purpose!” Masaki said with a wide grin. “Accidents might happen as they could in any profession, but no, department chief Ayafumi takes these things pret-ty seriously, I'd say. Good guy! You'd like him.”

On the one hand, Richter thought, a government association attempting to measure his talent with YUUHI brought back bad memories. He couldn't help but be somewhat distrustful, even when this man's mannerisms made it clear that this organization's standards for 'proper behavior' were much more lax.

On the other hand...

“Alright,” Richter said, “I'll give it a try. But only if you can promise me I'll be doing good through my work.”

“You have my sincerest promises, and if I turn out to be wrong, I can only ask that you take my head for that slight in a fascinating way that gives me a noble, skill-filled death!” Masaki said, leaning in a bit unnervingly close. Then he went for another handshake, after which Richter somehow had a number of forms in his hand. “Alright, fill those out, I'll show up in a day or two to take them in and we'll let you know!”

A gust of wind blew, and in one swift motion, Masaki unsheathed his umbrella, which carried him away into the distance. (He had a near collision with a tree, but luckily came away unharmed.)

—And so life went on.

~9. Engagement~

September came, and then October, and November, and December.

“We're getting married,” Megumi said one day after work, as the two had gone out for coffee at a nearby cafe. “Finally, right?”

“Oh! Really!” Richter said, clapping his hands together. It was a bit muffled on account of his mittens. “Congratulations, Megumi! You're right, it has been a long time coming.”

“It was mostly legal,” Megumi said, shaking her head. “Pain in the ass government databases. I won't bore you with the details, though. Another thing was, we weren't sure which surname to use.”

“Really?” Richter said, tilting his head.

“Sure, I could be Megumi Sakaki, but Gavin thinks—well, Kirisame isn't my surname by birth, you know. I chose it. And he finds a lot of meaning in that, so we had to ponder for a while who would take whose surname,” Megumi said. Any time she spoke about her boyfriend—no, fiancé—her smile could light up the room. “So, he's going to be Gavin Kirisame now, we've decided.”

“Ah, I see. Really, though! Congratulations!” Richter said. “I'm so happy for you!”

Megumi looked down into her coffee, and said, “Yeah. Man. I get to wear a wedding dress, huh? I used to dream about those back in the day. I never thought I'd look good enough to wear one.”

“No?” Richter said. “Well, I think you'll look great in one.”

There was a long, long pause.

“Sure, sure,” Megumi said. “Of course. I mean, I'm not bad-looking, I suppose.”

“Megumi?” Richter asked. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I'm...” Megumi trailed off for a moment. “I'm fine. I've just been thinking.” Another pause, this one much shorter. “You know Homura Akeno?”

“The creator of YUUHI?” Richter asked. “Yes, I believe so. She seems like quite a character.”

“What a fucking egotist,” Megumi said, clicking her tongue. “I... look. You know, you were the first friend I ever really made for myself by myself, the first one I really got to know. You know what I'm like. I mean, back in the day, the whole... I can't really aggrandize myself if there's this lady stomping around on stage making it look *gauche*. I'm me! I'm a genius! And I should be allowed to aggrandize myself without having people look at me and go, 'oh you picked that up from the lady who wears a tiger print bikini'. I hate it! I—I've tried, you know, I've tried for a long time to like myself and it *helps* to self-aggrandize, eventually it makes you start to believe it. And now it's just...”

Megumi's hands slumped into her lap. “I don't know. I hated being a teenager, but I also miss when I could act like myself without having to temper it. I didn't get much of that.”

Richter couldn't help but be taken aback by this sudden outpouring of emotion. In his experience, Megumi did quite a good job of appearing much more together than he was—but he supposed he didn't know much about what it must have been like growing up like she did.

“Ugh. Sorry. I didn't mean to dump on you,” Megumi said, taking another sip of her coffee.

“No, no, it's really alright!” Richter said, raising his hands in a sort of self-defense gesture. “Er, that is... I'm glad you feel comfortable talking about this to me.”

“You're too nice to tell me to shut up,” Megumi said. “And this shit is too petty to talk to anyone else about. I mean, I spent years working on my anger issues, obviously, I'm the picture of feminine elegance and grace, but sometimes I still need to get mad! It's like, why the hell do these 'talented' people get to stroll up there and act like that but I can't, huh? What makes me any less worthy of being admired than someone like that old lady? I mean, I know I shouldn't speak roughly around a bunch of kids, that's beside the point, but just—rrgh.”

“Megumi...”

“It wouldn't have been my first choice,” Megumi said, “being a schoolteacher. Maybe third. But I never... I never got the chance. I deserved it, but I never got it. Nowadays, people just want workers who know how to use YUUHI. Nobody's interested in a lady who's the best in her field at analog programming. That's too plain, too boring, too old-school. Nobody pays attention to a plain old programmer. I couldn't adapt, so all of a sudden nobody cared about me. I had to figure out how to care about myself. Nobody ever prepares you for that when you're a 'gifted youth'! They don't prepare you to find meaning in yourself!”

“...Yeah.”

“I have something now. And I'm happy. But is it what I wanted when I was younger? What everyone told me I deserved until they just all moved on to the new hotness? No! Nobody ever teaches you that kind of thing when you're 'talented'! They just tell you you should learn to be satisfied by being talented! So I just...”

Megumi slumped over and put her head in her hands. “Shit. I'm an adult now. I'm going to be twenty-five in a few weeks. I have a lot of what I wanted but it isn't perfect and I just have to live with that. And I should be happy right now but instead I'm just tired. Can it be winter break already?”

“I'm proud of the person you are, Megumi,” Richter said, “and I'm glad you're my friend. I don't know if that helps, but... it is true.”

“Thanks,” Megumi said. “Thanks, Richter.”

—And so his life went on.

~10. Locusts~

>**ANONYMOUS**: I'm on... an island, I think. The tongue is foreign to me.

>**Attacus**: Hmm... Is there anyone around you can speak to?

>**ANONYMOUS**: Only an officer, and that's for my orders.

>**Attacus**: Let's see... is there a window?

>**ANONYMOUS**: Yes. Outside, I can see a river, and a sign that's...

>**ANONYMOUS**: 'St. Luke's International Hospital'. That's in English. I can read that.

A quick web search revealed only one hospital by that name—in the Tsukuji district of Chuo, Tokyo. Richter raised his eyebrow. Heinrich was in Japan?

>**Attacus**: It seems you're in Japan.

>**ANONYMOUS**: Japan? That's... odd. I don't know the language at all. What could they possibly want me to do?

>**ANONYMOUS**: Wait... do I know the language? Hold on. What's

>**ANONYMOUS**: What's my name?

>**Attacus**: It's Heinrich. Heinrich Scuttler.

>**ANONYMOUS**: 'Heinrich'. So that's it. It doesn't feel very familiar. What year is it?

>**Attacus**: It's just turned to 2019.

>**ANONYMOUS**: 2019...

>**Attacus**: What's the last thing you remember?

>**ANONYMOUS**: I was... eighteen, I think. A wire was stuck to my brain, and then... then the buzzing started. The buzzing... it hurts, it hurts, it hurts

>**Attacus**: Please try to calm down.

>**ANONYMOUS**: I'm calm. I'm calm. I'm calm. I can survive this. I'm okay. Japan... there's someone I was supposed to look for there. Someone I need to find.

>**Attacus**: Why do you need to find them?

>**ANONYMOUS**: Because... I need to fight him? No, that's not right. I need him to fight me? He needs to... He's better than me. Always was. Nobody would ever look at me and see the best. That's



why the buzzing, the buzzing, the buzzing, the buzzing, the buzzing,

>**ANONYMOUS**: But I don't want to hurt him, I don't think. He was... my friend. I think. I don't hate him... do I?

>**ANONYMOUS**: He left, and I need to find him.

>**Attacus**: Alright.

“Megumi,” said Richter, late in January, the day after his twenty-fifth birthday, “I need your help.”

Megumi's wedding was next month, so she had a lot of preparing to do—he greatly appreciated her time, even over the phone. “What with?”

“I need to access records of experiments conducted by the German military using YUUHI seven years ago,” Richter said. “I don't have access to those myself.”

There was a moment of silence before Megumi responded, “I'm sorry. Did you just say you want me to help you break into a foreign nation's military servers?”

“Or something of the sort. However you think we might be able to access this information. Finding someone who might have access, chancing upon declassified records, I don't know, but I need to know what happened. I can't...” Richter gritted his teeth and put his head in his hands. “I can't just sit back and watch anymore. Something—something happened because I wasn't there.”

Another moment of silence, before Megumi gave an audible smirk and said, “Oh, so you think I can't do it by myself, is that it?”

“Eh?”

“Of course I'll help you, idiot. Hell, maybe I can get you to use that technical knowledge of yours for something useful for a change,” Megumi snorted. “Hold on. I'll bring my computer over there so I can be sure of what I'm doing.”

It was a scant three hours later that Megumi was sternly glaring at her computer screen, her hands steepled over her keyboard. “So. It looks like this is still surprisingly analog—the infrastructure of the military servers here, I mean. Your interface doesn't have the range to connect to something that far away, and thank goodness for that, so what I'll try to do is manage some kind of connection through my computer that you can connect through and do what you will with.”

“Once that's done, I should by all rights be able to maintain it, but that's greatly appreciated,” said Richter, waiting with his own laptop at the ready. “Still. You're about to get married, you have a successful life—I didn't expect you to agree to help so readily.”

“You're my friend, Richter,” Megumi said, turning her head to glare at him. “What the hell else was I gonna do?”

There was a sparkle in her eye, and Richter smiled. “Are you sure you aren't just excited?”

“Can it, you,” Megumi said. Then she shook her head. “Ugh. Do they not value this server at all? Tests conducted with cutting-edge technology and this is all they give it? It's like they barely care. Probably a bunch of old hats too concerned with their proximity defenses against this new, scary threat that they forget about long-range connection—or maybe they're just stupid. I shouldn't rule that out. Okay, here. Go.”

Richter keyed into Megumi's machine, and then the distant server it was accessing. Without a defense against that sort of far-off attack, the files on the server that he was aiming for were child's play to obtain, and were soon cleanly copied to his machine—appearing near-instantly. All in all, this deeply illegal act, a crime of quite a high degree, took Richter about thirty-seven seconds.

“Thank you,” Richter said. “Really. Thank you so much.”

Megumi shook her head, and said, “Richter, seriously. What kind of person would I be if I didn't help you out here?”

“One who was more cautious?” Richter posited.

After a moment to think about that, Megumi said, “I need to be myself, and not somebody else. But it's not so much that I need to find something that makes me myself, so much as me not being myself if I lose something.”

Richter blinked. “What?”

“I donno, it's something I heard somewhere. It felt kind of profound here, but now I'm wondering if I made any sense,” Megumi said.

“No, I think I understand. That's just oddly poetic coming from you,” Richter said. “I'm glad I could help give you some fulfillment.”

“Good!” Megumi said, clapping Richter on the shoulder. “Then you won't mind helping lug my setup back into my car.”

Richter did not, in fact, mind that at all. Once that was done, and his ill-gotten gains safely obtained, Richter began to peruse the files, looking for anything about his old friend Heinrich. It did not take him long.

—This is not a direct quote or translation. However, here is the essential basics of what occurred to Heinrich Scuttler.

Young Heinrich's parents did not much like their eccentric, messy son. They would tell him, time and again, that he was not as good as his friend Richter—that success in this field was the only way he would be given any honor at all. As such, Heinrich took to every order with gusto, becoming more and more daring in the orders he would carry out.

Cybernetic attacks. Targeted destruction of property to 'accidentally' take out ill elements. Based on psychiatric evaluations, while he grew more respected among his peers, this did not satisfy Heinrich or grant him peace of mind—rather, he grew more fervent and frenetic over time, seemingly desperate

for actual connection, but unable to obtain it.

This led to an experiment carried out by scientists when he was eighteen. It was a simple idea—if YUUHI could enact specific programs, would it be possible to load a program inside the brain to increase the speed of processing, removing the need for manual input? Naturally, Heinrich volunteered. He was a brute force programmer, so he gave them his best program.

—The results of the experiment were, at least to a degree, positive. To be certain, Heinrich became able to use the program more effectively. However, the method by which it was applied to his brain—a most ghastly procedure, invading his body and mind—caused him severe side-effects.

Heinrich Scuttler loved insects. His favorite of all, locusts. 'Stratos', the program he'd loaded, was a brute force attack that devoured informational fields like a swarm of hungry locusts. It devoured everything in its path, leaving nothing where once there was information. That swarm began to devour him, as well. His mind had no method to defend against the routine that had been forced into it.

Since he was eighteen years old, Heinrich Scuttler lived with a severe, deleterious mental illness—his mind would devour its own memory time after time, leaving him in a haze from which he would start again and again. His faculties were damaged, and thoughts which should have been simple became mangled and pained, unable to reach their proper conclusions. The memories themselves still existed, but his ability to access them was plagued by the swarm running rampant inside his skull.

His promising young mind became good for one thing, and one thing alone—the deployment of a technological swarm which devoured everything in its path. As such, Heinrich Scuttler became a sort of tactical missile, a weapon deployed for specific situations, left to wander and struggle in his haze when not needed.

This, too, was a possibility of YUUHI.

~12. Formicidae & Acrididae III~

February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019, was a very momentous day. On that day, in Tokyo, a young girl who loved cats, along with an android, a former member of Murakumo's Unit 8, and an otherworldly spirit known as the Royal Historian, entered into a battle with members of the United Nations party to rescue a political prisoner from the bowels of a research facility. It was quite the exciting battle, and by the end of the night, a young girl would pick up her first gun and fire all on her own.

This battle would not have any relevance at all to Richter Esslinger for quite some time to come, and those in that battle had no idea of his relevance—but as it turned out, he would be quite relevant.

February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2019, was a very momentous day. After all, it was the day that Richter's good friend Megumi Kirisame was to be wed. He had purchased a suit for the occasion, and was hurriedly attempting to primp himself to be presentable, when he heard a noise from his phone.

>**ANONYMOUS**: it hurts

>**ANONYMOUS**: it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts it hurts

Richter's blood ran cold.

>**Attacus**: Heinrich. What's wrong? Where are you?

>**ANONYMOUS**: everything is so bright and i'm burning again everything is turning white white white it hurts it hurts it's all going to end I can feel it I can feel it it's almost over!! soon!! soon!! soon!!

He switched channels.

>**Attacus**: Megumi. Apologies. I might be late.

>**Puopurin**: Train run late or something?

>**Attacus**: Tell you later. I promise I'll get there.

This may have been an anonymous account, but with the use of YUUHI, Richter could track where that most recent message had been sent from. This may very well be his only chance to finally find Heinrich in the wild—he had to make it count.

Richter leapt out of his apartment and hurried to the nearest train station. Conveniently, but worryingly, Heinrich's last message had come from Marunouchi, just near Tokyo Station. He didn't have time to change out of his suit.

“Masaki-san!” Richter said into the phone the moment Masaki picked up. “Sorry about this, but do you have any spare Gauntlets over there? I need to borrow one for the evening!”

“Oh? Ohhh?” Masaki made a few increasingly high-pitched noises. “Do I get to watch?”

“Yes, that's fine, I don't care! I just need it at Marunouchi, as soon as possible!” Richter hurried to Ogikubo Station, and headed on the Marunouchi Line toward Tokyo Station. From Ogikubo to Tokyo Station was fifteen and a half kilometers. Ogikubo was the first stop, and Tokyo Station the seventeenth.

Five minutes turned to ten, then fifteen. Times like this made Richter wish he owned a car. Then, at twenty minutes, something happened—his phone screen began to glitch out. From mutterings to his side, he had an idea that something like that was beginning to happen to others as well.

By the time the train pulled into Tokyo Station, the display tickers in the train were also beginning to throw up errors—Richter's phone could hardly display anymore, and the lights in Tokyo Station were beginning to flicker.

A complete disruption of the technologies within a localized area, that grew increasingly large the more times it was used—if Heinrich was being deployed, there was no doubt. All of Tokyo Station would soon be disrupted, and what then? How far would it go? A kilometer? Ten? Twenty? An infectious swarm like this might devour the data for dozens of kilometers around.

—Asakusa wasn't that far away, all told. For her special day, Megumi had been given the honor of a marriage at Senso-ji, the oldest temple in Tokyo. If all of that were devoured from there, the city plunged into darkness—

“Here you go,” said Masaki, handing Richter a Gauntlet as he exited out the front doors of Tokyo Station. For the first time in nine years, the Gauntlet slid smoothly onto his arm.

“Thanks!” Richter said, before running down the stairs.

—A part in the crowd had begun, as the crowd took a fair distance to stare at the haggard, gaunt foreign man slinking his way to Tokyo Station. The Gauntlet upon his arm jolted and sparked, launching command after command. Looking for all the world on the verge of death, Heinrich Scuttler slowly inched forward, one step, then two, toward the station.

“Heinrich!” Richter called out, loud enough to get Heinrich's head to jolt up. “I'm here!”

The withering face of Heinrich Scuttler looked up from beneath his matted hair, eyes wide with a senseless rage. “Richteeeeeeeeeeeeerrrrrrr! There you are! You can't run from me!”

“I won't run, Heinrich,” said Richter, entering a familiar combat position. “I'm sorry. If I hadn't run—this wouldn't have happened to you. I should've tried to find you sooner—no. I should've tried harder to help you when you searched me out. You're right. I'm a coward! I ran away!”

***“Fight me! Fight me!”***

—If there was one thing YUUHI could not do, it was hack a human being. Nobody had yet figured out how to do that, and Richter hoped that it would never happen—that mistakes like what had happened to his old friend were never given the chance to occur. But—

Richter Esslinger and the Universal Hacking Interface were bound by fate. Running from his

fate was useless. If he could not win this fight with it, then his life meant nothing.

“I will protect Megumi's happiness,” Richter said, “and I will save you. I swear!”

“You won't run away from me anymore! *RICHTEEEEEEEEER!*” A drop of Heinrich's spittle landed on the ground—

The appearance of the colossal cloud in midair was enough to make much of the crowd run away. It couldn't physically harm them, but it could easily destroy any technology they had on them, so that was a relief. So once again, Richter summoned forth the spectral image of his insectoid knight, to fight Heinrich on his own terms.

A slice through the cloud resulted in the knight's blade being devoured, so Richter was forced to step back, using the shield to block. Thinking quickly, Richter replaced the blade with an arm-mounted flamethrower, launching a burst of flame into the swarm of locusts. Heinrich bent over, clutching his head, and began to scream bloody murder as the locusts burned away, but more and more would only come.

Even summoning an infophysical whirlwind was insufficient to dispel the swarm, as for every locust that was devoured, another would appear. The Gauntlet upon Heinrich's arm sparked and sputtered, taking a number of orders that it was never built to process. Taking out the locusts faster than they could spawn wasn't going to do anything, Richter thought—if the Gauntlet upon Heinrich's arm exploded, that would likely fatally injure him. No, he needed to find a way to cut down on the number of routines that were being run. He needed to—

No, wait. These weren't originally coming from the Gauntlet. Heinrich's mind was uncontrollably running this routine. Direct attacks simply wouldn't work—unless one's goal was to kill Heinrich. That was unacceptable. Richter would not allow that. But YUUI couldn't alter a human being—Richter could only...

“Ah!” Richter's eyes went wide, and his idea was formed. No, what he needed to do was hack into the representation he saw before him! Not to break through it, but—

A glowing blue, holographic plug appeared in Richter's hand, and he shoved it forward. “Take this!” Access—

—*granted*. While the knight continued fighting off the swarm itself, Richter had access to the functions of the routine. It was simple—devour the enemy. Devour nearby data. Devour, devour, devour. And, if one is destroyed by an outside force, spawn another.

“*Engaging apoptosis!*”

One simple adjustment did it. The locusts fell away from attacking the knight. No, now they were eating each other—the cloud folding in on itself as the locusts devoured, and devoured, and devoured each other. As the cloud dispersed, Richter ran over to the shivering and shaking Heinrich, grabbed his Gauntlet, and ripped it off his arm, the skin beneath the Gauntlet horribly pale—who knew how long it had been since it had been removed?

—Only one locust remained. One lone locust. And locusts only exhibit that behavior in swarms.

Heinrich Scuttler was nothing if not a fan of insects, so naturally, his program was the same. The image of one lone locust disappeared, as did Richter's victorious knight.

Heinrich fell to his knees as Richter caught him and kept him from falling over. A hacking cough erupted from Heinrich's lungs—and a warm liquid from that cough that Richter knew to be blood. Looking down at his phone, Richter saw he'd managed to save it, so he frantically dialed 119. “Hello? Hello, yes, a man has fainted in front of Tokyo Station! He's coughing up blood, he needs an ambulance immediately—!”

It was quite late by the time Richter managed to hail a taxi, given all the confusion from earlier. Apparently, something had happened with the trains besides the situation with Heinrich, so there was quite a bit of confusion going on—but one intrepid taxi driver was still willing to give Richter a ride to Asakusa, albeit for an increased rate, considering the blood.

So it was that as the sun had almost fallen, and well after the actual wedding ceremony, nearing the end of the second reception for friends, a young man from Germany wearing a Western-style suit with a bloodstain on its midsection, a purple and black checkerboard scarf, and a piece of high-tech military software on his arm charged toward the Asakusa Kannon Senso-ji at a full bore, panting and wheezing as he did.

As it happened, the bride, still in her pure-white yukata, had just taken a moment to leave the banquet hall for a breath of fresh air. So, luckily for Richter, the only person at the front to greet him was someone who wouldn't call the police. Megumi lifted her head as Richter stumbled the last bit of distance, and said, “Holy shit, what happened to you?”

“I had... had some... some business...” Richter wheezed. “It's... it's not my blood, I swear, where... where did I put the gift money...”

Richter began to pat himself down looking for the customary envelope of gift money, and Megumi couldn't help but burst out laughing, hard enough to hurt her lungs. “Hahahaha, how am I supposed to explain this? Y-your suit's covered in blood!”

With a gasp, Richter finally found the envelope, a bit bent now from all the exertion. “Congra... congratulations on... on your... marriage...!” He reached forward to hand it to Megumi, who took it, despite her laughter. Then, and only then, as people were finally coming out to see what was so funny, did Richter Esslinger, a man who was not well-suited to such thorough physical exertion, pass out.

~13. A Specialist Advances~

“Seven years, huh...”

The internal damages caused by the strain on Heinrich's body were severe, but he was not in critical condition—he was fine to receive visitors. Of course, only one visitor had arrived as of yet. “Seven years, living like that... I think. I still can't quite think clearly,” Heinrich said, doing his best to minimize his movements. “It was seven, right?”

“Yes,” Richter said with a nod. “It's 2019.”

“Near to a decade, gone like that...” With a wretched laugh, Heinrich continued, “I look horrible. I'm amazed you recognized me.”

“You're my friend,” Richter said with a smile. It had been some days now, so he was in much better condition. “It's the least I could do for you.”

“I wish—I wish I'd been as brave as you,” Heinrich said, averting his eyes. “I wish I'd been able to leave. Maybe then this wouldn't have happened—”

“No, Heinrich,” Richter said, “I should've stayed with you. I shouldn't have run away. If I hadn't, this wouldn't have happened to you.”

“Let's agree to disagree there, then,” said Heinrich with a grin. He returned his eyes to Richter. “I'm glad you're doing alright. I... missed you.”

“And I you,” Richter said with a nod.

—It would be quite some time before Heinrich Scuttler would be safe to move around. His body was deeply weakened from the strain, and to ensure that the beast inside his brain would not begin to devour him once more, he would never pick up a Gauntlet again. To run, to work... He did not even know Japanese, and yet he couldn't return to his homeland.

And yet Heinrich Scuttler still lived. So long as he lived, there was still hope. And at the very least, his old friend would be here for as long as he could be.

—“Well,” said Megumi after another long day of work, sipping on her coffee, “spring's going to be here soon.”

“How's married life?” Richter asked.

“Eh, about the same. Nothing much has changed, I've just got a ring,” Megumi said. She shook her head. “Ugh, can we get to the end of third term yet? I need a damn nap.”

“Ahahaha. Well, Kirisame-sensei, your students appreciate all your hard work,” Richter said, taking a sip of his own coffee.

“Hey, uh...” Megumi trailed off for a moment, but then said, “Thanks, Richter.”



“For what?” Richter asked, sipping his coffee.

“Eh. Everything and nothing, I guess,” Megumi said. She shook her head. “Just thanks. For being my friend, I guess.”

“It's no problem at all,” Richter said with a smile.

It would not do to linger overlong on the young man's daily life. After all, the details of his further entrance into Murakumo have been explained, and are not so interesting as to warrant further examination. Rather, it is best to understand the young man from Esslingen as he was—as a young man from Esslingen with principles, who on that day in February took his first step towards his eventually becoming a hero.

~14. The Hacker of Unit 13~

“And here's your captain!”

Kirino Ayafumi, head of the research department, gestured grandly to an unconscious young woman in a bed in the Shinjuku shelter. As far as first weeks went, this was likely the strangest Richter had ever had... and the worst, at that.

“Er,” Richter said, raising his hand, “she appears to be asleep. Should we wake her up?”

“Oh, she's been unconscious since we dragged her back from City Hall. She's been promoted to your captain, sure, but you're the only active member of Unit 13 at the moment! Congratulations!” Kirino said, before frowning and said, “Yeah, I know, it's awful. Not much good at all. Her name's Chisa Inomiko, and she's a pretty deft hand with a katana when she's not in a coma.”

“Well,” Richter said, “that is good, then.”

It had been three days now since Richter had come in to start his new job. Naturally, the world had ended in that time. As a result of the circumstances, tentatively, Richter had been pre-emptively placed in Murakumo's newest unit, a small strike team... as its only active member.

According to Natsume Hikasa, president of Murakumo, “Preparations are being made to give you a third member, but she's a touch temperamental, so the transferal has been difficult. Please continue to do your best in the meantime.”

Richter did recognize the Gauntlet he'd been granted. It was hard to discern quite how he could tell, but he was fairly certain—it was the same Gauntlet he'd been loaned a year prior. It seemed, he supposed, that the two were linked by fate.

“Much as I'd rather have you in here all the time,” Kirino said, as the two stood at the entrance to the Shelter, “we're real short staffed right now, and you're the only guy we have with a chance in hell at managing to do some scouting.”

“Eh?”

“See, we really, really need some more operatives. And Ms. Hikasa thinks, hey, if they're alive out there, there's a decent chance they might be helpful. So, congratulations! You're on rescuing duty!” Kirino's smile turned into a grimace. “Please don't die.”

“I, uh.” Richter blinked a few times, looked down at his Gauntlet, his small chakram, and the light body armoring he'd been given, and then looked back up. “Really.”

“Hey, now, don't worry,” Kirino said, raising his hands, “you do have some support. We'll have Miroku and Mina on navigation for you, so hopefully you'll be able to avoid the Dragons. But... if it ever gets too dangerous, you *have* to come back. Got it?”

“Yes, of course,” Richter said with a nod.

So the young man from Esslingen stepped out into the world, Gauntlet on his hand, looking up at the sky where predators from the cosmos flew above. The ground outside the shelter was broken and difficult to traverse, but who knew what was happening in other regions? Tokyo, the city that had become his home for two years now, had been thoroughly obliterated.

Taking a deep breath in and feeling the bit of lightheadedness that came from existing in the vicinity of the Bloom, Richter clapped his cheeks and said, “Alright! You have people to rescue, sir!”

“Oh, great,” said Miroku over the comms, “the new guy talks to himself.”

“Please don't be mean, Miroku,” said Mina. “This is a stressful situation!”

Richter Esslinger's scarf blew in the wind. It was soon to be spring, but still cool enough that he was glad to have it. Who knew what he might find in this brave new world? Naturally, he was terrified, but he did not shiver or shout—

He did not yet know what his 'something' was, but he knew one thing. The young man from Esslingen did not wish to run away from his duty, ever again. No—he wished for a duty that truly suited him, and this, now, was the first step on that journey.

The young man from Esslingen was not yet a hero. But in short time, he would be.

*-Fin.*