

MIDNIGHT FLURY

By Shoji Amasawa

“Will it hurt?”

“Only a little. In comparison to the pain you feel every day, it should feel like nothing.”

The room makes another 4-dimensional rotation. The taller man grimaces, holding a hand to his forehead. The shorter man simply watches.

“What about Dr. Kingstone? For her discoveries to be used like this—“

“—Is none of her concern. A scientist has no control of what their research is used for after it leaves the lab.”

“... I’m only doing this because there’s no other way.”

The shorter man chuckles.

“Bringing someone back from the dead assumes there is a difference between life and death. We both know how outdated that concept is. What you want can only happen in a world where miracles exist.”

The shorter man raises a closed fist in front of himself, then opens his fingers to allow a white powder to fall to the floor. Against logic, it arranges itself into an ornate hexagonal pattern.

“And in order for miracles to exist, you need to have a miracle worker.”

Another rotation. On the floor, the pattern begins to glow blue.

“And you know what that means, don’t you Mr. Straker?”

“I do ... If there’s no God to answer my prayers, I’ll need to make one.”

The blue light increases in brightness, shifting from gradient to uniform as the room is consumed. The taller man, Mr. Straker, allows himself to be lost in its brilliance. When, after what seems an eternity, the light fades, so too does the world it inhabits. All that is left is the void which remains in the absence of human thought.

I.O - By Night

“Bullet!”

A crack like a cannon rang through the streets, and the accompanying flash illuminated the sleeping square in vivid blue. It was not a lightning strike, but the power of a Wielder in the midst of a life-or-death struggle.

In the middle of the square stood a figure, a woman with a long dark cape and an outstretched arm. Before her was a creature of monstrous proportions, an amalgamation of nightmares. They faced each other—neither moving save for the girl’s labored breathing and the constant shifting of the monster’s geometry.

Then, as if being eaten away by an inferno from within, the monster began to smolder and burn away into the night air. It let loose a howl of anguish before it was consumed, even its ashes smoldering into nothingness.

The woman finally allowed herself a moment of peace, her form relaxing as she breathed a sigh of relief.

If there were any eyes to behold the scene, an observer might be tempted to pinch him or herself, as the sight could only be described as ‘fantastic’ to all but the delusional.

“All right—look alive, Samieh! Here comes the last one.”

The woman spoke a name, perhaps her own, and shook her head as if to clear it of dust. Then, she once again became still. A rustling behind her caught her attention, as did the faint outline of something that does not seem to be entirely there, caught in her peripheral vision. She spun around without warning and thrust a hand outward with a shout.

“Bullet!”

A familiar crack, for a split-second, accompanied by a ring of blue light, and another creature stood illuminated by the power of the Wielder, its internal structure already beginning to incinerate. It clawed at the woman but was easily sidestepped and answered with retaliation.

“Rend!”

Another blast ripped through its back and hastened the being’s demise. It collapsed, its body flaking into the air and disappearing. As it faded, calm fell once again on the square. This time it was not interrupted by yet another invisible monster, this calm

lingered.

“Phew ... Just when I was starting to work up a sweat.” The woman, finally alone, chuckled to herself.

An observer would have seen her not as a figure of might as her prowess in battle would suggest, but an ordinary human being. She was young, perhaps not even 20. She was tall, perhaps 5’9”. On her chest was an emblem, a crescent moon. She wore a black carnival mask which obscured the upper half of her face. Her appearance presented an air of mystery. Her smile signified something else.

She was celebrating her victory, and eager to share the moment with someone close.

“Nicely done, Samieh. You’ve once again left me without anything to analyze while increasing your own ego.”

The woman, most likely named Samieh, directed her attention to a nearby fountain. From behind it stepped another woman, this one short and slight. Her head was covered by a black veil, revealing only her nose and lips. She scowled at Samieh and clicked her tongue disapprovingly. Samieh rolled her eyes.

“I said to call me Midnight Fury when we’re out at night! Anyway, maybe you’d prefer I let them chase me around for a bit? Spooks are only tangible when they’re alive, and when they’re alive they’re dangerous.”

“If you would just learn to charge oxygen and nitrogen atoms to create a negatively charged electromagnetic field, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. All I need is for you to incapacitate one for a short time, but you keep insisting on wasting absurd amounts of energy on enemies we know are highly reactive, and won’t leave any remains.”

“I don’t get what you want to learn from them. We already know they’re made of ‘imaginary matter’ or whatever, and the only way that’s happening is if someone were willing them into existence.” *That’s what you told me, anyway.*

“And if we knew exactly what the imaginary matter is made of, we could conceivably trace it to its origin.” The veiled woman snapped, approaching Samieh. She held a cane in one hand which she tapped along the cobblestoned street as she walked. This woman was blind.

Samieh sighed.

“Look, I don’t want to risk both our lives for something that’s just hit-or-miss anyway. Obviously, the culprit is a human living in Vienna, most likely a resident of this part of town, and might even be a college student like us.”

“Your point?”

“We’re already so close to figuring this out, Evette. Let’s not unnecessarily risk our lives when all it’ll take is a little investigation. Anyway, bad boys are my specialty!”

The second woman, Evette, turned up her nose, appearing against all logic to regard the statue for a moment. “Well, we proved tonight that Spooks only attack when we’re out. They’re not targeting non-Wielders, so the remaining curiosity is—“

Evette’s sentence was cut short as she stopped for a moment to listen.

“What are you—?”

“Shush!”

Samieh listened too. After a moment she also heard something, a soft but resonating thud, on such a low frequency that it was far more noticeable as a vibration through the ground than a sound in her ears.

“What is that ... ?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t like it. We shouldn’t stay out here any longer.”

“Why not? I can take a couple little Spooks, why should a big one be any trouble?”

“Because I think you’re misjudging the size of this thing. I can ... sense it. Feel it ...”

Samieh took a hesitant step toward Evette, glancing around herself nervously. Her confidence seemed to drain at the smaller woman’s words.

“Okay, now I’m feeling something too. Want me to draw an order formula? I have chalk.”

“No! Trust me, this isn’t a battle you can win right now.”

The pounding was becoming more audible and beginning to distinctly resemble footsteps.

“So we run and hide? That’s what you’re suggesting, yeah?”

“The alternative is facing a very large and very powerful enemy. My offensive abilities are nil, and you’re obviously tired. What was that you said about not risking our lives, Midnight Fury?”

“Good point.”

Whatever the source of the low beats on the drum that was Vienna, it was coming closer. The two women beheld the sound for another moment before Samieh took Evette’s hand. They sprinted across the square to the safety of an alley and began to make their way through the winding labyrinth.

Though the scene that had just unfolded would raise a great many questions to anyone who happened to witness it, the night had gone almost exactly how Samieh had expected it to. She hadn’t expected to retreat, but Evette gave a good argument. Besides, she was feeling quite drained from the experience. Muggers and drunk frat boys were one thing, but these Spooks left her in no condition to exert herself, especially against something of the size she was picturing.

While the physics weren’t entirely clear to her, she knew something big enough to make footsteps of that frequency and volume would require a great more energy than she had in reserve.

Physics played into magic far more than she would have liked.

Samieh, now without her mask, lamented this fact as she soaked her feet in a bucket of warm water, sitting by the kitchen table. Apart from her woes on the nature of magic—or magistics as Wielders were supposed to call it—the chilly nights of Austria were something she didn’t think she would ever get used to. Iran, while not a tropical paradise, rarely went below 40 degrees Fahrenheit, and the Shiga prefecture of Japan was

downright balmy for much of the year.

Samieh's roommate, Evette Kingstone, seemed immune to temperature. At the very least she never showed any discomfort from it. Besides annoyance and cold logic, she never showed much of anything. For most of the day, she could be described by a single verb: Reading.

Like right now.

"Hey, Evette, I told you I found something you should see, right?"

"... Yes."

"Well, I thought you might want to look at it now."

A sigh. "Bring it here. At least our little adventure wasn't for nothing."

Reluctantly, Samieh stepped out of the warm water and dug around in her pants' pockets, finally locating a piece of paper torn from a notepad. She brought it to Evette, who was sitting comfortably in an armchair, moving a hand lazily over a page of *Fabric of the Cosmos* by Brian Greene.

"Crinkling paper... Describe it to me. Something's written on it?"

"It's an order formula—the Hendrickx Gambit, I think."

"Six sides? Eight outer circles and four inner circles?"

"Yeah. That's supposed to be one of the hardest to perform, right?"

"It requires absurd concentration and foresight. Most Wielders never bother learning it."

"You learned it, didn't you? You told me you'd mastered all the formulas."

"... Yes. Yes, I did."

"And you lied, didn't you?"

"... Possibly."

Samieh sat down on the couch next to Evette's chair, cross-legged and smirking. It wasn't the first time Evette had lied about her abilities to sound impressive. For all her criticism toward Samieh, she had quite an ego as well.

"Then I guess there's not much hope in you knowing who drew it?"

"Unlikely. All I can say for certain is that there is another Wielder in Vienna besides us."

"Okay then ... Conceivably, could that formula be used to create the Spooks?"

"The so-called Imaginary Field Hypothesis is still unverified, despite rigorous testing. The Hendrickx Gambit is used to create a perpetual cycle of cause and effect, not realize unproven hypotheses."

"... Does that mean it's *possible*?"

"Possibly."

Possibly possible?

"If you want to put it that way, yes. Let me examine the note."

Samieh handed over the crumpled paper, knowing what Evette intended to do with it. When they first met, Evette claimed to be able to read minds. As it turned out, thoughts and emotions were two different things, and perceiving the spin of electrons could only

get you so far.

Inanimate objects were another matter, especially if they had been used by a Wielder in a formula.

Evette handled the paper carefully, turning it in her fingers for a time before letting it rest in the palm of her hand.

“There are many entangled particles trapped on this piece of paper. I think it is safe to assume there are such particles on the one who drew this formula.”

Samieh looked up. Entangled particles were a hard concept to grasp, but from her time spent with Evette, she had come to vaguely understand it as two particles which acted in a corresponding way, regardless of the distance between them. The catalyst for this phenomenon was usually some kind of high-energy event. In this case, a magical event.

“So, does that mean you can find out who it is?”

“Possibly. Of course, even if I do, I can’t do much else. People are your metier, not mine.”

“You don’t know me very well if you think that. You want me to talk ‘em out of it?”

“Or, if necessary, take them down. That shouldn’t be hard for *Midnight Fury*.”

“Why is it that whenever you call me that it sounds like you’re mocking me?”

“Mocking? Why would I mock our campus’ very own champion of vigilante justice? I don’t know how the students of Vienna University survived before you transferred.”

Biting sarcasm tinged Evette’s words. She made no effort to hide that she disapproved of Samieh’s alter-ego, but had never reported *Midnight Fury*’s existence to the Wielders’ College. Perhaps it was an “honor among thieves” mentality, or simple paranoia that bringing any attention to their abode would interfere with her research. Either way, Samieh was grateful.

Without another word, Evette handed back the paper and returned to her book. Samieh watched her in silence for a while, finding the movements of her hand almost hypnotic. In spite of not being in her bed, she began to drift off. She found her mind wandering, reminiscing. Until that is, Evette spoke again.

“You’re thinking about *it* again, aren’t you?”

“You don’t even know what *it* is.” *Neither do I.*

“No, but I recognise the signs. They’re distracting me.”

“Fine, I’ll go to bed and leave you to your reading.”

“Goodnight.”

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“And that concludes today’s lesson. Make sure to do your homework for later this week, and don’t hesitate to shoot me an email if you have any questions.”

Stepping out of the lecture room with her classmates, Samieh looked over her schedule for the day on her PDA.

Monday, February 14, 2078. Today's courses: Self Defence, German, English.

German wouldn't be starting until after lunch, giving Samieh two hours to herself. The investigation, while nerve-wracking, was most likely the best way to spend these hours. Evette had most likely gotten a major head start, as all Samieh had seen of her that day was a text.

"Out sleuthing. See you later."

As she walked down the hall, Samieh realized that she wasn't sure exactly where to start. Old fashioned, non-quantum mechanical investigation had been her idea in the first place, but so far all she could think to do was ask random people questions, which didn't exactly appeal to her.

Still, she needed to start somewhere. Picking out a random student who was passing her, someone she probably would never speak to again, Samieh composed herself and made her move.

"Excuse me, I was just wondering if maybe ... Well, have you seen anyone suspicious around here? Like, at night?"

As Samieh internally cursed her awkwardness, the male student she chose to question raised an eyebrow, "No ... I don't think so. I mean, there's the new guy, but new guys are always suspicious."

"New guy? How new?"

"Got here a week ago, doesn't talk much. Got a weird major ... Philosophy, I think. I've barely seen him, to be honest."

"Do you know him at all? Uh ... Maybe you could introduce me?"

Gosh, I'm not being exactly stealthy. Nice one, Samieh.

"Sorry, but you're asking the wrong guy. Philosophy is pretty close to here, and I think class is letting out. He's easy enough to spot, so why don't you talk to him yourself?"

No turning back now. "What does he look like?"

Samieh walked to the courtyard outside the philosophy wing, trying to work out everything in her head. The Spooks had been appearing for a little under a week, but the odds were still low that she got it right on the first try.

And on the off chance she was right, what could she do about it?

This question was left unanswered as she spotted the new guy among the dozens of other students around her. He was fairly tall, blond, and wore the same turtleneck and vest described by Samieh's informant. Despite his otherwise good looks, his eyes had dark circles around them, and he was rather pale.

With these observations, Samieh was at an even greater loss of how to approach the situation. The guy was currently talking to another student. Obviously, he wasn't as much of a loner as she had hoped. Plus, she didn't want to catch anything from him. He looked

kind of sick.

“... Crap.”

“Samieh, fancy meeting you here. Your electrons spin very distinctively when you’re nervous.”

Samieh spun around to see Evette walking toward her, weaving through the sea students with a characteristic blank stare, her cane tapping out a rhythm on the bricked ground.

“So, why are you so interested in Mr. Straker?”

Evette pointed her cane at the guy, tilting her head in a quizzical, mocking fashion.

“Straker? You know this guy?”

“He was my partner back at the Wielders’ College before I graduated. Very distinctive neuron patterns, I’d recognize them a mile away. I never expected him to come to Vienna.”

“What do you mean, ‘partner?’”

“Lab partner. With his and my scientific expertise combined, we may be able to solve this curiosity.”

“Really?”

“Yes. But whatever you do, don’t tell him you’re from the Wielders’ College. I want to do a little experiment.”

Samieh stood dumbstruck as Evette approached her only suspect. Seeing no other option, she followed. Straker didn’t seem to notice them until they were only a few feet away.

“Anyway, the idea of life as being distinct from—Kingstone? Evette Kingstone?”

Straker dismissed his classmate, turning his full attention to Evette. “Excuse me ... Evette—or should I say—Dr. Kingstone, it’s a pleasure to see you again.”

“Steve Straker; Oh, what rejoicing and jubilation. Why didn’t you tell me you were coming to Vienna?”

“I would have, but ... Well, I didn’t know you were here, to be honest.”

“Am I really that easy to miss in a crowd?”

“It’s a big campus. Anyway, aren’t you at least going to say hello, or introduce me to your friend?”

Realizing it was her opportunity to take at least some kind of action, Samieh jumped at the chance.

“Uh—Samieh Darvish. Pleased to meet you.”

Out of courtesy, Samieh reached out a hand for Straker to shake. He seemed to hesitate for a moment before returning the gesture.

“Call me Straker. Are you good friends with Dr. Kingstone?”

“Er, you could say that, but I never knew she had such a title.”

“The good doctor has always been full of surprises. Well, any friend of Evette is a friend of mine.”

He released her hand, perhaps a little too eagerly in Samieh’s opinion, and returned

his attention to Evette.

“Well, look at you. I always imagined you holed up in a lab, not gracing the halls of an ordinary college with your presence.”

“Charming as always, Straker, but don’t think for a minute I’m not on to you.”

Evette spoke in a disapproving tone, her brow creasing. Samieh suddenly felt like she was intruding on something very private. Evette was acting like she wasn’t even there.

“What are your plans for tomorrow?”

“Sociology in the morning, then I’m free. Why?”

“I’m asking you out on a date, of course.”

Samieh and Straker’s jaws simultaneously dropped.

“Um ... What?”

“You heard me—or are you going deaf? Sign language is little difficult for me to learn.”

Straker quickly collected himself but betrayed his surprise through his words.

“I mean, I wouldn’t be opposed, but—“

“That’s a yes? Good. I’ll expect you at Café Landtmann, tomorrow at 1:30—sharp.”

“Right ... Listen, I’d love to catch up, but there’s somewhere I need to be. If we could continue this some other time—anyway, see you later!”

Straker hurried off, ducking into a crowd of students and out of sight. Evette clicked her tongue as she often did, dismissively shaking her head.

“My, my ... He never used to be so jumpy.”

“Some guys don’t like being pounced on! You weren’t going to take no for an answer, were you?”

“It’s been ages since the last time I saw him, it was almost like seeing a ghost. This is my way of punishing him for that.”

“Seems like a funny way of punishing someone, and a silly reason to do it in the first place. Anyway, you said you were going to ask him about the Spooks!”

“I will, on our date.”

Evette turned on her heel and began to walk away. Samieh followed, now becoming a little annoyed at her roommate.

“Hey, we’re not done here! Aren’t you going to tell me if you learned anything this morning? You did some investigation, right?”

“Yes, and I found nothing of interest.”

“What about quantum entanglement?”

“Very unstable, virtually useless when the entangler knows what they’re doing.” Evette turned again, reaching into her purse and producing a ballpoint pen. Samieh eyed it with confusion.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Our perpetrator knew to unentangle himself and use a proxy in the form of this pen. It has a sibling to every entangled particle in the note.”

“I still don’t understand ...”

“I misjudged this person. They knew how to confuse me. Someone with my abilities comes around once a generation, which gives us very limited data. My hypothesis is that our suspect knows me.”

“Straker? But you two are friends, right? Why would he try to hurt you?”

“Why indeed? Observe, question, hypothesize, test, gather data, revise ... Then we’ll have a theory. See you later, Samieh.”

“But—”

“Samieh ...” Evette put a hand on Samieh shoulder and seemed to look directly at her for a moment. “Get a life. Don’t make my mistakes.”

Evette once again turned, and walked away, leaving Samieh alone in the crowd.

2.0 - Imaginary Field

We now travel back in time and go to the Wielders' College, located on Lake Biwa, in Japan. Hidden by the crater of an extinct volcano, this secret sanctuary is called home by the mightiest beings on Earth, as they train to use their fantastic abilities.

The lecture room is abuzz with the whispers of over a hundred young Wielders. One of their greatest scientists is about to conclude a lengthy talk on his life's work.

"And that concludes my lecture on the Imaginary Field Hypothesis, known by some as 'If Theory.' I will now take some time to answer your individual questions."

A hand shoots instantly into the air. "Yes, you there, Ms. Kingstone? I should have known ..."

A girl rises from her seat. This is the same Evette Kingstone we have already met, if a few years younger. "Professor Sakabe, you claim that if the Imaginary Field were to exist, it could be host to make-believe life forms such as dragons and fairies. You also state that a sufficient amount of energy could bring these life forms into the real world. What about non-imaginary lifeforms?"

"I assume you are referring to people and animals? Well, the Imaginary Field encompasses that which is unverifiable. As it is impossible to prove a negative, dragons and fairies will always remain in a state of pure imagination, and therefore exist within the Imaginary Field. Extinct lifeforms, such as non-avian dinosaurs, could also exist there because it can never be definitively concluded how they looked and behaved, even with fossil remains."

"What about people, then?"

"Fictional characters of the last few centuries are out since their origins can be definitively traced. Mythical or historical figures, especially those who existed before the information age, could conceivably be brought into existence. However, they would not be the real person, but instead an amalgamation of whatever the one who brought them into the real world believed them to be. And of course, they would not be able to exist for very long."

"Why would that be?"

"That's where sapience comes into the equation. Most animals have only limited self-awareness and operate far more on instinct. Humans, while retaining their animal

instincts, have a sense of being that is absent in dogs, mice ... If a human were to be taken from the Imaginary Field and brought to the real world, they would be aware that they only just begun to exist. Everything would feel like a dream to them, which they would soon awaken from.”

“Surely, though, if whoever brought them into the real world was able to convince them they had ... amnesia, perhaps, the existential crisis could be altogether avoided.”

“Ms. Kingstone, we’re crossing over from theoretical physics to the realm of psychology, which is regrettably not what I have a doctorate in. The idea of creating life through the Imaginary Field is merely conjecture, and I find its application to particle physics far more exciting in its potential uses in the real world. However, if a magician Wielder were able to somehow gather enough resources to create life from scratch, and keep it in a self-sustaining chain reaction, then I suppose that Wielder would never have to fear being alone.”

Evette looks dejected and sits back down. Some of the other students send confused looks her way. She can sense each and every one of their emotions, but in the vast sea of electrons is unable to discern what they are.