

鎌池和馬

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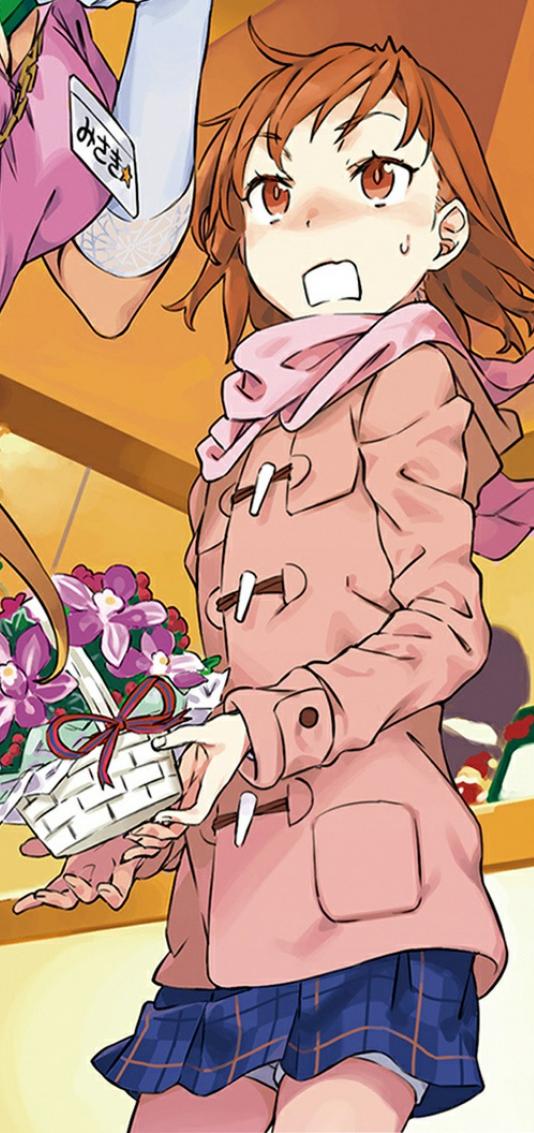


創約

林示書曰 とある魔術の 詠2

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A Certain Magical Index Genesis Testament 2

Kamijou Touma wakes up to find himself in the hospital.

The last thing he remembers is kissing Anna Sprengel of the Rosicrucian magic cabal.

But wait a second.

Kamijou Touma, a healthy high school boy in the midst of adolescence, had his first kiss with a beautiful mystery woman.

In the present, Misaka Mikoto, Index, and a honey-blonde girl have arrived at the hospital! When science and magic cross paths, the barrage of terrifying accusations begins...or so he thought, but for some reason those girls are trying to nurse him back to health instead!!

Mikoto and Shokuhou realize Anna is up to something, so they put their differences aside to join forces. The ultimate Level 5 partnership is born!!



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とある魔術の禁書目録

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2

鎌池和馬



電撃文庫



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Kamachi Kazuma

ついにやってきたクリスマス。嚴かにするか暖やかにするかは迷いましたが、結果こういう形になりました。高火力お嬢の真っ向勝負。皆様の記憶に残る事を願っております。

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Illustrator: Haimura Kiyotaka

I am slowly drawing in the back country of Hiroshima.

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とある魔術の 禁書目録

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“Oh, dear. Was that too exciting for you, boy?”

CEO of R&C Occultics and Rosicrucian leader

Anna Sprengel



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Prologue: The Bloody Christmas Begins – 12/24_to_12/25.

It was Christmas Eve.

Snow was falling, making it a white Christmas, the city was illuminated by colorful lights and filled with cheerful music, and everyone should have been smiling together and feeling thankful for their daily happiness.

In that sense, her action may have blended right in. Because however it was seen elsewhere, Christmas was primarily a couple's holiday in Japan.

However.

It was hard to say her action did not come as a shock.

At least for Index.

And Misaka Mikoto.

And Othinus, a god shrunk down to a mere 15cm.

Those three saw lips pressed against lips.

An alluring magician stood at the center of it all, quietly stealing the lips of a pointy-haired high school boy named Kamijou Touma.

Her name was Anna Sprengel.

Her long strawberry-blond hair hung down in a few flat shapes reminiscent of fried shrimps and she stood taller than Index and Mikoto. Her sexy curves were covered by a red dress...if you could call it that. It may have been

something like a red leotard plus a long skirt around the hips. It looked out of place in modern Japan, in Tokyo, and especially in the cutting-edge Academy City, but if asked what era and what region it better belonged to, no one would be able to find an answer. Instead of adjusting to fit her surroundings, she dyed the world around her in her colors. Even Martians visiting with a UFO would make more of an effort to follow earth's standards.

Her every movement spread a sickly sweet rosy scent around her.

“Nh, hh.”

Was she laughing or pouting?

Either way, she seemed to shove her heated breath into her partner's mouth as she stole this long, long kiss.

Finally, she pulled her head back while keeping her arms around Kamijou's neck. She leaned forward with her large chest squished against him and looked up into his eyes.

“*How was it?*”

“Ah, ahh, ah, ah, ah...”

The stammering came not from Kamijou Touma but from Misaka Mikoto who had watched it play out – no, who had found herself unable to do anything but watch.

Her throat almost seemed to be convulsing, but she did her best to force out the words.

“You!! Wh-what do you think you're doing just showing up out of the blue and doing th-that!?”

This made no sense.

It really had come out of nowhere. A girl of about 10 had wandered out of the crowd before *suddenly growing larger*, embracing Kamijou Touma, and kissing him. What did any of it mean? Mikoto's mind had gone blank and she

could not keep up. And if she could not draw causal links between the events she had seen, she needed to assume there was more going on behind the scenes. She had to fall back on the old adage that there was no such thing as a free lunch.

Yes.

That had to be what this was about.

This feeling burning in the back of her mind was her response to detecting a new threat and it had nothing at all to do with her personal feelings. The weird combination of sadness, irritation, unfairness, and loss roiling in her stomach that she could not easily find a name for was all just an illusion.

There had to be more to this.

Something smelled fishy about this.

She prepared for a fight, gathered strength in her legs, and forced down the feeling threatening to bring something to the corner of her eyes if she did keep her body tensed. With that done, she viewed the scene before her again.

And that was why she noticed it.

Blood was slowly dripping from that pointy-haired idiot's nose.

“.....
.....Ohhh, I see how it is. So you've finally accepted this ‘gift’, have you?
I see, I see.”

As her feelings dropped to absolute zero, she just about shifted her aim from the mysterious fried shrimps to the familiar pointy hair.

However.

Perhaps she should have been more observant.

Kamijou did indeed have a nosebleed, but why? Was the trope of getting a nosebleed due to excess arousal even biologically possible? And why had he

not spoken a word this entire time? Be it surprise, joy, or protest, he should have shown some kind of reaction to this unexpected turn of events.

Yes.

What if he was in no state to do any of that?

“Bff.”

Something escaped from his mouth.

Anna Sprengel giggled and pulled her arms away to release him from her chest. He immediately doubled over, like a plug had been removed.

“Bgh!? Agwahh!! Abwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh!?”

Some disgusting sounds followed.

At first, the couples walking nearby laughed quietly from a distance. They likely assumed some high schooler had gotten carried away on Christmas Eve and had too much to drink. But then doubt clouded their faces. Once they noticed the substance splattering from his mouth was colored red and did not appear to be a soup or drink of that color, panic began to fill the public square.

“Touma!! Are you okay? What did she do to you!?”

“Did she...did she make you swallow something just now!?”

Only one person was still smiling: Anna Sprengel.

“Oh, dear. Was that too exciting for you, boy?”

She responded in a very childish way for such a sexy woman.

She stuck out her tongue in a teasing fashion.

And that malicious tongue already had something sitting on top of it.

“Is that *St. Germain*?” asked 15cm Othinus with a click of her tongue.

“I suggest you put up a fight if you don’t want to lose yourself to the inner pain and unknown fear.”

She kept her seductive smile while waving something in her hand.

It was a perfectly ordinary smartphone.

“And if you think your own techniques are insufficient, feel free to put in a request at any time. Hee hee. R&C Occultics will provide the means to combat every unfair aspect of this world. We welcome anyone and everyone equally.”

“Kh!! Wait! I don’t know if that’s poison or bacteria, but if it’s yours, you must have an antidote or vaccine or-”

“*Stop!!*”

That shouted word seemed to freeze time.

It had come from Othinus.

But had she been speaking to Anna or to angry Mikoto?

Anna Sprengel did not seem interested.

And while she stood there, the falling snow was unnaturally avoiding her.

“*You got lucky.*”

Everyone belatedly noticed an unknown energy filling that space with an electricity-like tension.

And that calm comment clued them all into something.

It did not matter if this was something an ordinary person could understand or not. Everyone there could tell *something* had been set up here and, if Misaka Mikoto had carelessly taken even one more step toward Anna, she would

have been reduced to a *pile of gore* on the snowy ground.

Othinus had to be furious as well, but she knew what she had to say to avoid bringing any more sorrow to that boy.

“Give it up for now. If you can’t see *that*, it means you still aren’t standing on the same field as her. Attempting to fight her like that would be no more than suicide.”

“But...”

Mikoto knew that herself.

She knew she could not win or keep up.

With Maidono Hoshimi and Neoka Norito, she had felt this same way for what felt like the entire day of December 24. She may have been able to hold the line for a time and the trail might have gone cold without her efforts, but the final move had always come down to that pointy-haired boy.

How many more times would he have to be injured for everyone else’s sake?

Couldn’t she carry that burden for him just once!?

“But!!”

“Rebellious phases are so cute, don’t you think?” Anna Sprengel did not move a bit as she pointed her thumb toward the center of her own chest. “As you can imagine, I do have a solution to this problem. It’s right here. If it bothers you that much, why not reach out and grab it? That might be all it takes to save him right this instant.”

“...!!!???”

Misaka Mikoto bit her lip and an unnatural spasm ran through her right arm.

Simply imagining that unknown drug caused her fingers to crawl as if they had a mind of their own. She seemed to be experiencing some kind of withdrawal symptoms.

“Oh, dear.”

Miss Sprengel sounded disappointed.

She looked truly surprised to find Mikoto shrinking her body down and grabbing her dominant hand with her other hand to keep it at her side.

“That earns you a perfect 100 – the most boring score imaginable. It’s as boring as those linear RPGs this country loves to produce. Don’t you get tired of tapping the button over and over to watch some dreary conversation play out? Haven’t you ever considered breaking free of the tear-jerking story the developers created?”

That seemed to determine how this would play out.

With footsteps as light as a fairy frolicking in the snow at night, Anna kept her eyes on Mikoto while stepping back from that wall of death. She seemed to vanish into a darkness that they could all see but none of them could reach.

“Not even Imagine Breaker can solve this,” said a singsong voice. “This is not the *natural St. Germain* that’s corrosiveness had weakened as the generations passed. No, this is an acute version that I created. You could probably even call it a weaponized version.”

She laughed as if mocking Mikoto for being a straight-A student who could not take a single step outside the rules.

“This city’s scientific technology cannot cure him. The magic found everywhere outside the city’s walls cannot heal him either. Struggle for as long as you like – extend that boy’s suffering as long as you like. And once you despair in your ability to blindly extend his life, come to me. Knock on the doors of R&C Occultics and this trivial problem will be solved with the snap of a finger.”

She vanished.

This time, Anna Sprengel really did withdraw beyond the veil of darkness like a large fish easily snapping the fishing line and fleeing below the surface.

Yes.

Like she was withdrawing now that she had set up the parameters of the battle so her enemy had no chance whatsoever of victory.

“Wait!!” shouted Misaka Mikoto without thinking.

Even though she knew it was no use.

And the nuance of the word had changed from her previous raw anger. There was clear regret in her voice. If the chance arrived again, she might just reach out her hand even if it meant having her body obliterated. She would tear through the gamemaster’s predictions and render the game impossible to continue. That was the sort of misguided courage driving her now.

The class rep who always scored a perfect 100 had instead made a careless mistake and earned only a 99.

That may have piqued Anna Sprengel’s curiosity just a bit. The nuance she had picked up in that single word was enough for her to briefly stop her dancing steps backwards. She may have also been eliminating a concern about the game’s rules.

If they did give up, how were they supposed to find her? If they did not know how to contact her, they would have no way of letting her know when they gave up and had succumbed to her terms, so the boy might just run out of time and die regardless.

That magician, whose very existence had become a legend, had a simple response to that subconscious fear.

She pressed her index finger against her lips as if revealing a secret.

“You can contact me from any part of the world these days. You know how to use a phone, don’t you?”

Anna Sprengel disappeared.

She vanished into the city’s crowd so silently it made you doubt she had ever

existed at all.

Between the Lines 0

Golden and Dawn.

If those two famous words meant nothing to someone, then they did not belong. It would be like a café owner who had never seen a siphon. At least in this one field, anyway.

But there was no reason to feel ashamed for not recognizing that term.

The society that used magic as a technical system was a very niche field when compared to the entire world population. The majority were not familiar with it, so it was only natural to not know.

Now, let us get to the real topic at hand.

Those two words refer to a magic cabal established in the British capital of London during the late 19th Century. It was known as the world's greatest cabal with good reason. It produced many great magicians (and just as many troublesome perverts) such as Westcott, Mathers, Mina, Waite, and Aleister Crowley, it systemized the occult which had previously been a mixed bag full of unreliable information, and it even worked to create a simple kit that would allow anyone to easily create new magic. The Golden cabal possessed superb skill, but they were not blessed with ample operating funds and their members had been so devastatingly lacking in social skills that even their genius was not enough to make up for it. So in just a few years, that untouchable cabal had broken apart from within. The simplest way to understand how that happened is to look to the world's greatest magic battle – the Battle of Blythe Road.

The shards of the shattered Golden cabal – that is, the few survivors – had

held onto the spiritual items and grimoires they escaped with and started smaller cabals, all of which insisted they were the true heirs to the original one. Well over 100 such cabals have been officially counted, but you could say it was that great number that left no chance for them to reunify. The various Golden cabals that exist today are too busy sabotaging each other up to do much else, but surprisingly, there is no better example of *a group that performs systemized magic as an organization*.

Even as shards, splinters, and fragments, they carry unbelievable influence.

That may help you imagine just how much power the Golden cabal originally held.

However.

Even though the Golden cabal is so idolized (for their techniques and culture, not for their personalities and social skills), were you aware they had assistance in establishing themselves as a magic cabal?

It all began with Westcott, one of the three founders.

He managed with difficulty to decode a text he happened to acquire and (with the help of Mathers) used the fragmentary scribbles found there as hints to discover a new grimoire. Then he sent a letter to the address of the grimoire's supposed owner, used letter correspondence to get to know an organization with a long history in Germany, and received authorization to establish a new magic cabal along the way.

That German organization was the Rosicrucian cabal.

Now, is the Golden or the Rose more widely known?

When looking purely at the depth of their history and how many people and nations were involved with them, I will state here that the Rosicrucians win by a mile. The Golden cabal is said to have created the foundation of modern magic, but that had a lot to do with how much information they leaked due to their many troubles. So the Rose should not be seen as inferior to them in that regard – they simply did a better job of keeping their secrets. And they have

survived into the modern age even as networks and drones have become ubiquitous.

Now, let us dig deeper into the Rosicrucians.

The cabal's origins date back to the legendary magician Christian Rosenkreuz. He organized the knowledge gathered during his long journey around the world and then he redistributed it in a form usable by ordinary people. The three grimoires people were more likely to be blessed with an opportunity to read (in the form of a copy given to them if they abandoned their ordinary life in order to enter the hidden side of the world) were the Fama Fraternitatis, the Confessio Fraternitatis, and the Chymische Hochzeit, but there are also rumors of a highly-pure original grimoire known as the Book of M which Christian Rosenkreuz himself claimed to have received from sages. The cabal's goal was to heal the "illnesses" of the people and of the world and they would not hesitate to work without compensation to accomplish that.

Thus, they knew a lot about the traditional methods of gathering and mixing medicines.

Illnesses of the people are self-explanatory, but what are illnesses of the world? The most common theory is that the illnesses plaguing the world can be eradicated by guiding human society with proper knowledge and correcting the mistaken beliefs that lead to war, pollution, and overuse of resources. In other words, the cabal's magicians themselves function as the medicine.

Rosenkreuz himself was a man of the 14th century, but in the long time since then, the Rosicrucian group has risen to the level of common knowledge during the few times it gained an explosive boost in popularity. Even well-known historical figures are linked to and spoken of in regards to that popularity. For example, Francis Bacon who proposed the four idols was active in the 16th century, St. Germain who was occasionally sighted at social parties starting in the 18th century, Eliphas Levi who dug up some old Rosicrucian texts in the 19th century, and Advanced Wizard Aleister Crowley who claimed to be a reincarnation of Levi. And then there is Anna Sprengel who is shrouded in even greater mystery, who barely seems like a

real person, and who some doubt ever did exist.

She was the one who corresponded with Westcott via letter.

Thus, she was the master who gave her apprentice permission to establish the Golden cabal.

To repeat, Anna Sprengel is shrouded in mystery.

She is an old magician who claims to be the master of the Rosicrucian No. 1 Temple in Germany. She is addressed as Miss Sprengel, so she is likely a young woman, but her actual age is unknown. She has not surpassed or abandoned her humanity and instead claims to hold a position similar to a priestess who can contact the supernatural beings known as the Secret Chiefs. And if she is the only one to hold that position, then she carries the authority to wield their power against the rest of the human race.

Her existence is doubted because there are no official records of her ever appearing before other people and because she only ever appears within Westcott's letters. Also, the responses from Anna have clearly had the handwriting forged, so it is strongly suspected they were faked by Westcott himself. It is thought he wanted the stamp of approval from the respected Rose in order to give their new Golden cabal its historical bona fides.

But the letters being forgeries does not necessarily prove that Anna Sprengel does not exist. Westcott may have based the forged letters on a real person or he may have created those fake letters as a distraction to keep the real letters hidden from any other interested parties.

Miss Sprengel is the key.

As far as humanity can follow her actions, she indeed appears to be the highest level of magician. She is a legend with deep ties to the Golden and the Rose. In terms of a set of scales, she does not stand on either side – she sits at the center, viewing the angle of the tilt. By holding that position, you can see all sorts of numerical values. If someone could track her down, they would be able to drag up the entire dark domain lurking on the underside of this world that claims on the surface that science rules all.

What would happen to the world then?

If someone carelessly peered into that domain, could humanity's flimsy spiritual culture survive the encounter?

It is hard to guarantee it would.

Andreae, who served as an abbot in Germany, claimed in his writings to have invented and distributed the early 17th century Rosicrucian text, Chymische Hochzeit, when he was 19. He claimed that confessing to his prank had ended the dream, yet the Rosicrucians have in fact survived to the modern day. And survived as a mysterious magic cabal that practices “usable” spells. Thus, it seems shortsighted to accept that one man’s claim of fraud and rest easy. That would be throwing caution to the wind on the level of claiming radiation does not exist just because you cannot see it.

“Hm, so this is what happens when you use glue to forcibly piece back together the broken sculpture. As someone who knows the whole truth, this is such a shocking mosaic of fact and fiction.”

Chapter 1: This is the Real Battle — Home_Ground_Hospital.

Part 1

Kamijou Touma found himself lying in a bed.

It was already morning.

He also detected a strong disinfectant smell. Sadly, he found the scent very familiar. He was used to this sort of awakening.

He was in the hospital.

In fact, he was in the *usual* hospital where that frog-faced doctor worked.

He had checked his phone countless times, but the clock never turned back for him.

Which meant...

“December...25. I’m in the hospital on Christmas of all days.”

Complaining was not going to change that.

Dawn had arrived *and his presence in the hospital meant he had survived.*

This location carried that unbreakable guarantee of safety.

He understood that more than just intellectually – he knew it from experience.

And thinking back, his Christmas Eve had been pretty awful. His body below the covers was so wrapped in bandages that his movements were as stiff and awkward as an ancient civilization's clay robot. He did not want to know how many injuries he had in all and he definitely did not want to see them. Counting just the ones he was aware of, he had been stabbed in the side with a knife, lacerated by metal and glass shards, blown away by a few blasts of next-generation magic, and punched square in the cheek by a rich, sexy, macho former rescue squad member.

And to top it all off...

...

He silently brought his fingers to his lips. The sensation still lingered there, so that must not have been a hallucination caused by the lightheadedness brought on by blood loss. He still was unsure what to think about it, though. He had a feeling he would get beaten up by Index, Orsola, and some others if he chalked it up to the outdated stereotype of Westerners being more open about kissing.

(St. Germain.)

He had no idea what any of it had been about, but he did remember that name.

It had looked like a black pill now, but that would have originally been a magician.

(Then my first kiss tasted like St. Germain? Wait, what does that mean? That it tasted like some gross old man from the past? Oh, god why!? How am I even supposed to categorize this? Happy? Depressing? I can't figure this one out!!)

Q. A mysterious and breathtakingly beautiful woman asks you to kiss her while she has some strange old man's used sock rolled up and stuffed in her

mouth. What do you do? Also, this is your very first kiss, so no matter the circumstances, the memory will stick with you for the rest of your life☆

Kamijou Touma found himself covered in an unpleasant sweat.

“Oh, no. I don’t think I can get the taste of my mouth!! No, why is the old man sock so powerful!?” Anyway.

He felt like bloody tears were about to flow from his eyes and his memories of those final moments were still unclear, but he did know he had vomited up a lot of blood. He was amazed he had not died of blood loss and it made him wonder just how many liters of blood he had flowing through his veins.

But he was fine. He had to be. His spirit was as strong as ever. He had not heard back about any tests run in the hospital, but he did not hurt anywhere and he could move everything just fine. Plus, he had not coughed up any more blood. The crisis was over. He could even poke at his abs without any pain whatsoever!!

But deficiencies hit you without mercy the instant you became aware of them.

He started feeling faint while still lying down in bed.

(Ah, ahhh...I-I need iron. I could devour some liver and spinach right now.)

That was not the request a teenage boy’s appetite would normally make on Christmas, but he knew his odds of getting it were low. After all, this was a hospital and they might not let him choose his food based on the severity of his injuries. Which day of the week was it? Once he recalled the answer, he realized he would be served a saltless rice porridge that felt tasted like microwaved glue and a disappointingly thin piece of grilled salmon that felt like it was made from plastic.

“Man, if only I’d been hospitalized on a Friday. Then I’d have gotten seafood curry.”

It saddened him to realize he had been in this hospital enough to know what

food they served on what days.

And then...

“Heh heh heh. I appreciate the monologue, Kami-yan. Now I know exactly what you’re doing here.”

“Wait? Th-that voice!”

It came from beyond the curtain. This time, he was apparently in a large room containing multiple people divided by curtains instead of a private room.

And the curtain next to him was flung open from the other side.

“Mwa ha ha ha!! Join me in the depressing hospital Christmas life, my unpopular brother!!”

“I’m stuck being hospital pals with you!? How badly did you burn yourself with that microwaved boobs mousepad!?”

It was his classmate Aogami Pierce.

He had heard the boy had burned his hands after ignoring all of the usage warnings and throwing his boobs mousepad in the microwave on the 24th, but he had not expected to find him with bandages or casts covering his arms. Everything past his elbows looked like it could blast off like a rocket.

Also, snow was still falling outside.

It was indeed a white Christmas. But for these two boys, that only meant it was a little chillier by the window.

Robot Kamijou gave Rocket Aogami a look of pity.

“That looks pretty awful. I mean, you can’t do much of anything without using your fingers. What do you do about food?”

“Not to worry. There’s this old trick called floor humping. You lay down on your stomach like this and then rub your thing between your body and the

floor like this.”

“Shut up! No! I was not asking about that!!”

“There are rumors saying getting used to this modifies your body to the point you can’t enjoy the real thing, but that’s just a superstition, so don’t worry about it.”

“Enough with the demonstration! The only thing I’m worried about right now is your sanity, inchworm boy!! It’s 7 in the morning and your bed is by the window! People outside can see you!!”

“Don’t you dare take this so lightly, Kami-yan!! Deprive a nerd of this high-level one-man mental activity, and what do they have left!!!????”

“This is not a topic that warrants manly shouting! I won’t ask you to stop being a nerd, but can’t you please be the kind of nerd who creates an innovative new type of OS or something!?”

“Tch. I’ve never been a fan of American-style moe, you know? Be honest, what do you think about how they keep turning American comic superheroes into girls? It’s official and not just fan stuff, so I’m really not sure what to think about it.”

“I’m the kind of nerd who never laughs at people’s efforts to create something new.”

“Don’t hide behind that idealistic hogwash. Oh, I get it. You’re scared, aren’t you!? I loathe all of you self-styled ‘influencers’ who use clickbaity headlines to gather enough attention to earn ad revenue off their half-assed weaksauce criticism! Ban them, ban them, ban every last one of them!!”

“Just so you know, your life is as good as over once even us nerdy outcasts find you unbearable to be around.”

“I’ll kill you!!”

“You’re on. It’s time you left this world, you freak!!”

Different sorts of nerds could never see eye to eye. That sad history of conflict played out again here as the world's most meaningless battle began. Those two pill bugs simply could not remain rolled up below the same stone together in peace. However, one of them was a rocket boy with his hands covered up and the other was a clay robot with bandages around his entire body. Neither one could bend their joints very much, so despite announcing their intent to kill, their scuffle ended up more like a fight between old-fashioned tokusatsu kaiju. None of it looked very impressive.

In the mayhem, something slipped from Aogami Pierce's pocket: a notebook-sized tablet.

“Time out, time out!! Wait, Kami-yan! That internet device is my one remaining lifeline!”

“Hey, Seri!! Gather up all the browser history, bookmarks, and videos saved to the device and the cloud and then post them all online!!”

“Stop!! Don't give her that kind of crazily unspecific command!!!”

For better or for worse, modern voice commands checked for the user's voiceprint, so Aogami Pierce escaped that one alive.

That awful friend got down on the floor and protectively held the device close like a child protecting a puppy from parents who refused to let him have a pet.

“Do you know how much effort I put into finding a wholly prepaid device? There's no personal information on the device itself, so as long as I don't use my own wireless LAN, no can ever link the things I search back to me!! Do you get it now, Kami-yan? What would you type into the search bar on a device like this!!!???”

“I'm pretty sure the answer to that question is a mirror of your own heart.”

“Female doctors? No. Nurses? No, that's not quite what I want either. ... Gasp!? That's it! A dental hygienist!!”

Aogami Pierce forcibly pulled the curtain closed again.

Kamijou was left all alone on the other side, but then he realized the other boy was lying in his bed operating the device. Operating it via voice.

“Hey, Seri. Take me on a journey of freedom. Yes, yes, I accept, I accept!! Is there anything like this on the top video’s page?”

“Hey, wait! Please wait!! You aren’t actually trying it here, are you? Yeah, there’s a curtain between us, but we’re still in the same room. Please don’t make me spend my Christmas like this!”

Aogami Pierce was not listening.

Kamijou’s voice did not reach him. That bastard was probably wearing wireless headphones or something.

Just then, Kamijou heard solid footsteps from the hallway. They sounded like someone wearing heels. It was still early in the morning, so he doubted visiting hours had started yet. That meant this was probably a nurse going around to the hospital rooms to take temperatures and serve breakfast.

Which meant they would be coming here.

And if he could hear their footsteps, they had to be extremely close.

“Aogami! Aogami!!”

“No, not like that. I don’t want anything dark, so no tearful faces please. I want the kind of young woman who will take good care of you, but not where you’re just a complete horndog only interested in your own pleasure. I want something more heartwarming, if you don’t mind.”

“Seri won’t know what to make of such a long command!! And why are you more polite with Seri than with me? But that aside, you’re in serious trouble here, Aogami Pierce!!”

It was too late.

The footsteps had arrived in front of their room. Their step was light enough that Kamijou assumed it was a woman.

Farewell, my friend. May you rest in peace!! prayed Kamijou Touma while squeezing his eyes shut.

“Good morning, Kamijou-san. No trouble ability with your condition, I hope? It’s time for breakfast☆”

This was odd.

She was dressed up like the nurses of this hospital.

But.

As nice as her figure was, she was very clearly *a middle school girl*, so the outfit just looked wrong on her. And in a medical facility where cleanliness was king, it was odd for her *long, honey-blonde hair* to be left falling down her back like that.

And Kamijou was immediately disturbed by his analysis here.

Since when was he so perceptive?

(H-have I been in the hospital so much I’ve become an expert on nurses? I hadn’t noticed it before, but maybe I’m past the point of no return here.)

So who was this girl?

She spoke like they were friends, but he could not seem to remember her.

Yet he did not see how he could ever forget someone who looked like that.

The honey-blonde nurse(?) laughed.

“Yes, I know you don’t know who I am. My name is Shokuhou Misaki. Not that you’ll remember I told you that.”

“Shokuhou?”

What a strange name.

He felt like he would never forget a name like that once he heard it.

“See?” said the blonde girl while pointing at her large chest. A nameplate smaller than a stick of gum was clipped there, but the meaning of the characters written there seemed oddly reluctant to enter his brain. It was like how you could not make out any one face in particular when staring blankly at the audience in a packed stadium.

“So text doesn’t work either, does it?”

The honey-blonde girl let out a sigh.

She had the look of someone who had avoided getting her hopes up but still found the expected result painful.

“Well, the problem is in your brain, so I guess that makes sense. It would only be more confusing if there was some weird loophole like videos worked while photos didn’t.”

“I’m not sure what this is about, but sorry.”

“Your apologies hurt most of all,” she said rapidly under her breath.

She was still smiling, but she had apparently needed to let that comment out.

Kamijou only felt confused.

“So what brings you here, Miss Whoever?”

“I was thinking I would remove those bandages. You’re fed up with them already, aren’t you?”

“Eh, wait! I don’t want any treatment from a fake nurse!!”

“I checked inside a few people’s minds and it turns out they intentionally gave you an excessive amount of bandages to scare you. Because otherwise you’d run off and tear your half-healed wounds back open. Your injuries

aren't actually all that bad."

So were these like the plastic trumpet thing placed around a cat or dog's head to keep them from scratching at their ear? Kamijou could not believe it, but the honey-blonde girl removed his giant cocoon of bandages with surprising skill.

Once the seal had been removed, his body began to tremble.

"I-I can move. My clay robot limbs can move so smoothly!!"

"Your resilience is a constant reminder that the human body is a mysterious thing." She sat her shapely butt down on the bed next to him. "I went to the trouble of using Mental Out, the strongest psychological power, to sneak into the hospital, so I wish you would show the appropriate appreciation ability. Also, I came here for revenge."

"Revenge?"

"No need to get scared. It isn't against you."

She silently puffed out her cheeks from within. She looked like a sexy queen, but she was surprisingly childish deep down.

"(I can't believe Misaka-san went as far as abandoning me and then forced him to have such a gloomy Christmas Eve. What was she thinking? And then she shows such a lapse of defensive ability she lets some mystery woman come along and steal his lips!? If you didn't leave yourself so wide open, that kind of lazy long pass could never fly right past you like that!)"

"E-excuse me, but what exactly do you mean by revenge? If I'm being honest, it terrifies me to have someone mention revenge and immediately start muttering to herself with a shadow over her face. Wait, said you were some kind of powerful esper, didn't you? You aren't working for Neoka, are you!?"

"Oh, shut up!! Okay, I've had enough. That woman may have stolen your first kiss, but that just means I have to take all of your other 'firsts'

myself!!!!!”

“What kind of desperate move is that!? And does the entire world know what happened to me now!?”

“I reluctantly let Misaka-san have the 24th, but that means the 25th belongs to me!!”

Just then, the person hidden behind the curtain began to speak.

“Dammit, I can’t find a single dental hygienist video. God must be telling me now is not the time to remove my pants. The genre must be too niche at present, so I have no choice but to wait for it to flourish in the future.”

“?”

“Oh, no,” said Kamijou. “I don’t know where this is going, but you need to hide!!”

The girl let out a quiet shriek one second before the curtain was mercilessly thrown open.

“Huh? I could have sworn I heard a nurse in here, Kami-yan. When’s breakfast???”

“I sincerely hope you did stop before doing the deed, but I’m still not touching you until you’ve been sterilized with the hospital’s most harsh disinfectant spray.”

Kamijou Touma sounded casual, but he was keeping a secret from his friend.

He knew that fake nurse could not let anyone discover her here, so he had pulled her into the bed and hidden her below the covers.

“(Mgh, gh, um, excuse me, but what is happening here!?)”

“(Shut up. Do you *want* this to blow up into a huge deal!?)”

“(Well, um, none of that is actually a problem since I can use Mental Out to-

ahhh!! Th-this is – oh, wow – a boy’s chest!? Ahh. Never mind, I don’t care anymore. I’ll just let this happen.)”

She was hard to make out, but the mystery nurse began muttering to herself and then stopped struggling like her battery had died. Much like someone who had succumbed to the temptation of a kotatsu.

Aogami Pierce tilted his head curiously.

“What are you doing, Kami-yan? And should you remove your bandages like that?”

“I-I’m playing a life simulation game. I just caught this cute thing, but she’s a little feisty and won’t obey my commands. It makes her hard to take care of.”

“Oh, so you’ve got a gadget too, huh? But it’s not light’s out anymore, so you don’t have to play it under the covers like that.”

“(Well excuse me for being feisty.)”

“(Ow, don’t pinch me there!)”

“(I won’t obey your commands, remember?)”

Kamijou was moving both his hands around below the covers quite a bit, but Aogami Pierce did not question it.

“Come to think of it, since you don’t have to register a phone number with those handheld game systems, I’ve heard you can modify them to make truly private searches just like a prepaid phone. But you can only use wireless LANs, not whatever-G.”

“Why bother telling me that?”

Kamijou also doubted that would work so well.

If everyone knew about a loophole, it was bound to be secretly filled in. Plus, Academy City was chock full of strange technology and espers. The defenders could use every trick in the book as well. He doubted a Level 0

could emerge victorious in that world.

But the oblivious boy sounded very proud of himself.

“Heh heh heh. I’ll teach you how to do it later on. It’s time you entered the adult world, Kami-yan. We’re not in our dorms, so we don’t need to follow the dorm rules. We might be trapped in this room, but the world is at our fingertips!!”

“(Hm? What is he talking about???)”

“(You’re better off not knowing. And I’m relieved to find this mysterious blonde gyaru is surprisingly pure.)”

“(Surprisingly?)”

“(Ow!? What is this strange new feeling!? Did you...bite my chest!?)”

“(Goo goo ga ga☆)”

He had gone to the trouble of sheltering the honey-blond girl, but now she was getting out of hand. At this rate, he was afraid she would rapidly evolve into a little tyrant. He just had to hope this was not a case where the evolved form was much more brutal.

“What’s the matter, Kami-yan? You have the look of a man awakening to a new fetish.”

“Ih's nuffing.”

Part 2

Visiting hours were from 10 AM to 4 PM.

Visitors had to fill out the necessary fields on a form and then take it to the general building reception counter on the 1st floor.

Misaka Mikoto breathed a gentle sigh while returning the provided pen to its stand. This was not her first time visiting an injured person in the hospital, but she was still not used to this formality. Couldn't they let you through after automatically receiving the required personal information from your phone like at a train station's ticket gate?

(No. Do that and *people like me* could walk right through.)

Everything was being automated and digitized these days, but by including some outdated analog steps within the giant cogs of the machine, they could increase the overall security level. And in a workplace that dealt with people's actual lives, the extra inefficiency was worth it.

On the other hand...

“This kind of relationship is a real pain to explain.”

Students made up 80% of Academy City's population, so most people probably circled the school-related options like “friend”, “upperclassman”, or “underclassman”. The smaller option for “club member, classmate, etc.” was probably unique to this city. But there was a chance of someone questioning it if you were from a different school. Especially when you were in middle school and you were visiting someone in high school. But she could not select any of the other options to avoid such suspicions. Misaka Mikoto was of course not that spiky-haired boy's sister or daughter, after all. So it was such a pain figuring out what to say.

There was one option that would let her sidestep all the trouble even with different schools and ages: boyfriend/girlfriend.

She froze in place while her mind flashed back to that moment indelibly burned into her mind's eye – the moment when those lips touched.

(It doesn't bother me.)

Now, did she realize she had a frown on her face right now?

(Kissing isn't everything! I've given him a lap pillow before!!)

Then she gasped.

Her mind was headed in a strange direction, so she had to tap the brakes and calm down.

(Wait, wait, wait.)

Misaka Mikoto refused to admit defeat even as the young female receptionist in a red Santa-like outfit gave her a puzzled look.

(Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait!! Why am I turning this into a competition!? There isn't even a set goal here, so that would be like driving straight toward the cliff in a game of chicken. Why do I even have to take this all so seriously!? All I'm doing is circling an option on a form.)

“F-friend!?”

She pressed down too hard while drawing the circle and the pen slipped. It scraped audibly across the paper and ended up as an oval that mostly circled “friend” but also grazed the “boyfriend/girlfriend” option.

She could not believe this was how she was spending her Christmas.

Was that supposed to be her way of calling herself more than a friend but less than a lover?

Meanwhile, the nun in a white habit who had arrived with her was hopping up and down in front of the reception lobby's big Christmas tree.

“Short hair, can we go see Touma now? I'm worn out already.”

“Why do you know your way around the hospital so well? And why do you have that cat on your head!? Can you really bring it into a hospital!?”

“I've already decided what I'm going to tell Touma: He shouldn't let people

kiss him if it's only going to make everything more complicated. Grr, grr."

Mikoto bristled and yelled at her, but a nearby nurse simply smiled and waved while walking by. "Oh, back so soon?" she said as a friendly greeting. "The hospital isn't a playground, okay?" The gentle nurse looked like an alluring housewife with a mole by her lips and she must have been from the pediatric department because she gave the nun a piece of candy.

This only inspired further questions for Mikoto.

"Why do the people here know you so well???"

"Without Touma around to cook for me, I'd starve to death. And that would be a real tragedy!!"

The doctors and nurses could not dress up in a seasonal costume since they had an actual uniform to wear, but the receptionist and other administrative workers had all changed into red clothing. This seemed to provide a glimpse of the standards and licenses that were generally invisible to ordinary people. All the decorations were in full-on Christmas mode as well. The Christmas tree in the reception lobby was the most obvious example, but Santas and reindeer cut out of colored paper were attached to the walls, the doors had round wreaths on them, and a small stuffed snowman sat on the reception counter.

The tree was tall enough you had to crane your neck up to see the top, but it was entirely made out of plastic children's blocks.

The Christmas music playing at a gentle volume made it all feel like part of a department store during the Christmas season.

Of course, this was all done for the benefit of the hospitalized people. The hospital felt obligated to make sure the children in particular did not miss out on the seasonal events. Just think of it in terms of the biggest seasonal event of them all: what if it were announced that summer break was canceled for the year? So the hospital put a lot of effort into things like this.

In addition to the number displayed for people waiting to pay or for their

prescription, there was a large flat-screen monitor that helped enhance the holy night mood.

“This year, we’ll be using the real occult to capture Santa Claus! This program is brought to you by R&C Occultics.”

“...”

It was so absurd Mikoto just about laughed out loud.

Yet it required a bit of effort to peel her eyes off of the screen.

The two girls then cut across the lobby to the elevator hall.

Index spoke in a singsong way while popping the strawberry milk candy in her mouth.

“Which room is Touma in?”

“#904. Ugh, that’s the closest room to the nurse station and the ICU. It can be hard to tell since he looks fine, but maybe his injuries are worse than I thought.”

“Nurse station?”

He was being kept in the position where a doctor or nurse could come running at a moment’s notice. That might sound like getting the VIP treatment, but it was actually a “room of death” with a quick turnover rate because patients closest to death tended to be placed there.

“The room is also nowhere near the emergency exit, so I think I know what’s going on here,” added Mikoto.

“?”

They boarded the elevator and hit the 9 button.

This hospital was in a city of science, so they ignored the superstitions about the numbers 4 and 9 when it came to floor numbers.

(Superstitions, huh?)

“Hm? What’s wrong, short hair???”

“Nothing,” said Mikoto while shaking her head in that cramped box.

She could not really call it an ill omen when it had been right in front of her eyes all along. *She had seen magic.* And she had seen it before the rise of this strange new IT giant called R&C Occultics. But the answer right in front of her had not registered with her. Her eyes had skimmed right over it.

The elevator arrived at their destination floor and the door opened to either side.

Index tilted her head at a rustling sound.

“Short hair, why did you bring flowers?”

“That’s what you do when you visit someone in the hospital.”

“You can’t eat flowers, silly. I brought this – an apple cake!!”

“You just want to eat it yourself, don’t you?”

Mikoto sounded somewhat exasperated as she walked down the hallway. She had already checked where his room was, so she did not need to ask for directions at the nurse station.

However...

“Hey, wait.....I told you.....!!”

“?”

She heard a familiar voice coming from elsewhere before arriving at the room in question. Puzzled, she glanced over to find an amenity room.

The word amenity technically referred to “pleasant” things, but that name did not do much to tell you what the room actually was. Was it maybe a room for

light exercise for people confined to a bed during a long hospital stay?

“I’m telling you, this is weird!! I can do it on my own! I really can!!”

Whatever it was, he was apparently in there.

Sensing some kind of invisible pressure and feeling unidentified warning bells going off in her head, Mikoto felt a prickling feeling in her chest, but Index apparently felt none of that. With her cake box in hand, she flung open the metal sliding door without even knocking first.

“I’m here, Touma!! Can we eat this apple cake now!?”

As the door opened, *they* appeared before Misaka Mikoto’s eyes.

Yes, plural.

The pointy-haired boy was submerged in a giant nursing bath and four girls who looked just like her were approaching him from all sides.

Her mind went blank.

The concepts of time and space were cast out of her mind in that moment.

But no matter how hard the teenage girl tried to deny what was happening here, none of it would become any less real.

The large, round bath’s floor had steps along its round edge and there was a stainless steel railing to make it more accessible. What was she trying to say here? This was an ordinary bath, so it was not somewhat cloudy like a hot spring’s water. Everything below the surface was perfectly visible and unhidden!!



None of them was wearing a single shred of clothing. There was nothing but bright skin to be seen with no more than white soap bubbles to cover it up. A shell bikini or even simple bandages would have provided more of a defense.

Misaka Mikoto went red in the face.

“B-b-b-bubbles!? Are you insane!?”

“Not to worry. These bubbles provide the perfect defense in a system Misaka calls ‘wet underwear’, says Misaka #10032 to put your mind at ease while she puts her hands on her hips and pushes out her chest.”

“Please don’t call it that!! People will definitely get the wrong idea!!”

“?”

At any rate, the room was full of soft skin and bubbles.

The mysterious Four Generals (who looked identical and all had lightning powers) kept blank expressions while void of both clothing and bath towels.

“Do you itch anywhere? asks Misaka #10032 as she uses a professional-sounding question to take the initiative while showing off her heart necklace to remind you of our time together.”

“Now that you are in the hospital, you are on Misaka’s home turf, says Misaka #10039 to show her motivation while placing a dollop of white bubbles on the tip of her nose to show off her cute side.”

“Misaka is actually covering her important bits with bandages to fit the hospital theme, but now she is too bubbly to see them, says Misaka #13570 while working to stimulate your imagination.”

“Misaka is unsure what any of this has to do with Christmas, says Misaka #19095 while honestly finding this ‘says Misaka’ thing a real pain and hoping we can just abandon it.”

A strange babbling voice could be heard at the center of it all.

Kamijou Touma, demon lord of love and desire, was apparently in no state to actually enjoy the soft skin surrounding him. After all, he was covered in various injuries and the bathwater was painfully soaking every last one of them. Those clones were apparently unaware that people hoping to commit suicide by slitting their wrists would soak the wound in water to keep it from closing up.

Also, Mikoto realized she had something more important to do than get zappy.

(Kh.)

She immediately covered Index's eyes with her hand. But not because she wanted to snap a photo in the style of a sexy selfie.

(She's going to realize there's clone tech at work here!!! They're even calling themselves Misaka #Whatever! I might be able to explain away one of them as a sister, but that doesn't work when there's this many of them and they all look identical!!!)

"Ahh!! Forget you saw anything here!! There was nothing at all in here!! Okay, okay!?"

"Wow, there really was nothing in there."

"Whew."

"Grr, grr!! Why wasn't there anything like a sponge, body soap, a washbasin, or a shampoo hat in there!? And there were four of them, so why weren't any of them using shampoo? His hair will be all stiff. Also, that girl called 10032 should take that necklace off when she's in the bath because silver rusts surprisingly easily! But don't worry! I can teach you a trick from my spiritual item maintenance knowledge! If it gets too discolored, you can polish it right up with some lemon juice!!"

"I said forget what you saw, not remember it in excessive detail!! Look, you can have a gummi if you promise to forget everything you saw here! It's cyanogenic glycoside flavor!!"

“Yum. I’ll take whatever you give me, but I can’t forget something once I see it. Munch, munch.”

Those poison gummies had been a brief hit after non-fruit juice technology was used to create 100% safe reproductions of famous poison flavors. Not that anyone (well, anyone still alive) could actually prove that they really did taste like cyanide, wolfsbane, or tetrodotoxin.

The food had temporarily pacified the white beast, but things here were not over yet.

“I don’t want you doing stuff like this when you look just like me!!”

“Which do you like more: this squishy softness, this smooth slickness, or this jiggly plumpness? asks Misaka #10032 as she zooms into the lead and opens a wide gap between herself and the competition. While also opening up her body.”

“I! Said! Stop!!”

Then Mikoto spotted two colors not found on those Four Generals.

She saw honey-blond hair and a pink nurse uniform in one corner of the large room.

“My, my, my, my. You can’t help but tease him can you, you naughty girls?”

“You were here too, Shokuhou!? Don’t just stand there! Use your Mental Out to get those four to stop!!”

“Oh, come on. They’re being selfish, but it would be cruel to stop them now that they’ve found something they want to do. Even if I am less than pleased they stole him away just when I thought I could have him to myself☆”

“Don’t you get hearts in your eyes, you old hag! And why are you acting like the overly indulgent parent here???”

“Don’t you dare call me a hag, you meathead gorilla with no maternal side whatsoever!!”

Shokuhou Misaki threw a plastic washbasin, but it flew more than 90 degrees off course and crashed right into Kamijou Touma's head. How was that even possible? Misaka Mikoto had a succinct explanation for the mysterious phenomenon.

"I see you're as unathletic as ever."

"I am not!! I, uh, totally meant to do that!!"

That would suggest Shokuhou Misaki did want to lash out at that moron on a deep, subconscious level. Misaka Mikoto understood the feeling, so she sent some sparks flying from her body.

"And don't think you're getting off the hook just because so much happened at once. I'm keeping track of it all just fine."

"Wait, this wasn't my fault!" protested the boy. "That expressionless group grabbed me from my bed, carried me down the hallway, and chucked me in here! Also, baths and lightning are a bad combination, if you weren't aware!! You might as well be throwing a hairdryer into the bath with me!!"

Shokuhou Misaki beckoned the four girls over and they left the nursing bath in perfect unison.

The honey-blonde girl must have indeed carried some darkness deep down because she made no attempt to defend the pointy-haired boy.

"I believe violence is your domain, Misaka-san."

"Wait, I don't want to be known for that!!!!"

Just as she tensed up too much over that comment, the bath turned into a scene from a suspense drama.

Part 3

“So.” Kamijou Touma was wearing pajamas now and he still had Index’s jaws latched onto the back of his head. “What’s going on here? Is everyone in the world trying to kill me now???”

They were in the restaurant at the entrance of the hospital.

The swarm of clones was apparently satisfied, so they had returned to the research sector where normal patients were not allowed. Although he still had to keep his guard up since they could reappear at any moment.

“Touma, I brought this apple cake, so let’s eat it!”

“And where did you find the money for that!? I bet you used the funding I had hidden away to cover the end-of-year period where we can’t use the ATMs. Index, did you find that envelope I had taped to the back of the washing machine!? Was all the bleeding and electricity not enough!? Is the world intent on killing me through indirect financial routes as well!?”

Kamijou Touma would probably be restricted to hospital food during his stay here, but there were loopholes. Visitors could bring him food and he could visit this restaurant to speak with visitors.

Of course, the hospital would discover he had been sneaking food as soon as they ran any tests, but since he was here for cuts and contusions, not an internal illness, he did not really have to worry about the dietary restrictions all that much. And he was a growing high school boy, so he wanted to eat meat, meat, carbs, meat, salt, fat, and meat. He was not going to spend his Christmas with only slimy porridge to eat.

He grabbed the menu from the round table.

“Th-the prices will be reasonable since this is a hospital, right?”

“What, are you short on money? Since it’s an emergency, I could always lend you some.”

“I am not turning into a high schooler who owes money to a middle schooler!! It’s not happening! I’d be trading my dignity for money!”

“Are you trying to piss us off?” asked both middle school girls while pinching his cheeks.

Kamijou Touma was intent on having a feast since it was Christmas, so he ordered the fried chicken meal. Mikoto and Shokuhou could not see the connection between his intentions and his actions at first, but it eventually dawned on them as their imagination slowly caught up. Imagination speed had a way of slowing for the generations that could look anything up on their phones at any time.

“The fried chicken meal...is your idea of a feast???” The nearly-dumbfounded honey-blonde girl finally asked. “U-umm. I don’t mean to pry, but surely you aren’t thinking that qualifies as that one standard item of the Christmas meal, are you?”

“No, it’s not meant to be the turkey. They have a special Christmas fried chicken sale at the convenience stores, right? And if I want some fried chicken, this is my only option! Everything else would be too expensive!!”

“I, but, wait, really?”

The professional high-class girl waved her hands in a fluster and her thoughts seemed to have ground to a halt. She must have been hoping very dearly that she had misinterpreted what he had said, but her attempt to clear up the misunderstanding had instead planted her foot on the landmine.

Mikoto, a high-class girl who contradictorily had a better understanding of the commoner life, joined the conversation with exasperation in her voice.

“This is Japanese-style, so it’s not even on the bone. Christmas fried chicken is normally the Western-style, you know?”

“Don’t be absurd!! I couldn’t eat that kind right now if I had it! Besides, there’s no way I can afford anything as fancy as meat on the bone!!!!!”

When he was that upfront about it, even Mikoto could only stammer without finding the words.

A high schooler was simply too much for middle schoolers to handle.

As mentioned earlier, hospitals paid careful attention to seasonal events. The menu had a lot of special Christmas items available, but Kamijou Touma's mind had apparently skipped right past them. He seemed physically unable to see any single item on the menu that cost more than 1000 yen.

Index alone remained cheerful.

"All that matters is that it's edible!! Because you need food to stay alive!!"

"Exactly right, Index. Someone has taught you well."

"So I want the extra-large three-meat grill combo that comes with ginger pork, fried shrimp, and a hamburger steak!!"

"Why do they even offer something so unhealthy at a hospital? And *you* are stuck with that apple cake you bought with our precious money. That thing has to have enough sugar to keep you alive if you got lost on a snowy mountain."

The other two girls could only sigh as they watched Kamijou and Index divide up their prizes on small paper plates to share.

They exchanged a glance and then silently communicated by reading each other's lips.

"(Looks like there aren't any lasting effects.)"

"(I could have sworn that black pill was meant as an attack on him, though. What purpose ability did it even have?)"

Just as they arrived at that conclusion, some sticky red blood dripped from Kamijou Touma's nose.

Two small triangles appeared.

They were created by the mouths of the two Level 5 girls.

A voice seemed to crawl up from the pit of hell.

“Hold it. Are you putting mayo on your chicken, Mr. High Calorie?”

“Eh? What else would you put on it? Please don’t say something like ‘matcha salt’! And you’re gonna act like you’re better than me for it when all you’re doing is adding a pinch of some fancy salt to your food!!”

Kamijou Touma took offense, but that was not the real reason Mikoto had spoken up.

“I don’t really care about your topping choice – and I prefer lemon juice, for the record. Now, what was going through your head just now? Were you thinking about that kiss? That romantic smooch you had on Christmas Eve!?”

“And why didn’t you tell me were okay with some random person walking up and kissing you!?” cut in Shokuhou. “Argh, *I* could have been the mysterious and sexy stranger who swept you off your feet on Christmas Eve!”

Part 4

Shokuhou Misaki pouted her lips.

She was not in a special hospital room or examining room. In fact, she was out in a perfectly ordinary hallway. The people walking down the hall passed by without even focusing on that blonde girl in a nurse uniform.

She was not at all concerned about being discovered as an intruder.

There was only one thing on her mind: regret. She hated that some strange woman had appeared out of nowhere and stolen what could have been her own special memory for that holy night, but what did that really matter? That

woman may have stolen a small lead, but Shokuhou was not so pure that she would give up over that.

(What I have to do now could not be more obvious: I have to steal him back. Heh heh heh. Now, what costume would be best?)

“Hm, hm. Hm, hm, hm, hm.”

She was actually humming when she came to a stop in a small waiting room in the hallway. A few vending machines and a sofa were tucked over out of the way, but there was no wall or other partition dividing it off from the hallway. She was still in full view of all the nurses and patients walking by. It was not meant to hide anything, so it was not built to do so.

And yet the honey-blonde girl suddenly unbuttoned her nurse uniform and opened up the front, revealing her soft skin in broad daylight. Something jiggled in the process.

She did not care about all the eyes around her.

Or rather, *none of them were looking at her. Because she had manipulated them so they would not.*

(Locker rooms tend to be physically locked, so I can't get inside. And each department has its own keys, so finding a nurse with the key I need can be a real pain.)

“Now, what should I go with next? Wait, why am I even asking? How can I choose anything but Santa today?”

“Hey,” someone called out to her.

Shokuhou Misaki was the type to change her underwear to match her overall outfit, so she was currently 100% naked and holding her new costume up in both hands. She looked over in slight surprise to find Academy City's ill-mannered #3 glaring at her.

“What in the world are you doing? How long have you been an exhibitionist?”

“Just changing clothes real quick☆”

Tokiwadai’s Queen belatedly recalled that the #3 could deflect her Mental Out when that girl did not “allow it in”.

“But I do understand the concept is probably new to you, Misaka-san. You can change out of your uniform during winter break, just FYI.”

“Shut up. I was asking what you’re hoping to accomplish by dressing up like that.”

“Because I want to make the most of my Christmas. In ways beyond your wildest fantasies, Misaka-san.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought you would say. That idiot is in the hospital, so you need to let him rest!! If you mess with him now, his wounds could reopen!”

“And that’s what *I* thought *you* would say☆ By the way, here’s what I had in mind for keeping you from interfering.”

Mikoto’s eardrums were assaulted by an ear-splitting scream, like someone had stumbled across a murder scene.

A real nurse in the hallway was looking their way with her face bright red and a hand over her mouth. Her eyes were as wide as dinner plates and she must have been too panicked to even find the words to express herself.

The nurse appeared to be new to the job and she had the look of someone with a baseball-sized lump of air caught in her throat.

“Wh-wh-wh-wha-?”

“See, Shokuhou? Someone finally noticed your perverted-”

“What are you doing walking around without any clothes on!? I don’t know what led you to do this, but get over here right now! Yes, you! *The short-haired girl!*”

“What?” said Mikoto with her eyes wide.

But the pajama girl with a bob cut, the female doctor, and the other people in the hall had in fact come to a stop with blushes on their faces while they glanced over *at Misaka Mikoto, not at Shokuhou Misaki*.

The grinning Queen spun a TV remote around with all her bright skin still on display.

“W-wait, don’t tell me...”

“I’m the one wearing clothes while you’re the one who stripped down in public, Misaka-san☆”

That was how the scene looked to all those people.

A trick like this was a piece of cake for the #5.

“Of course, they’re only seeing what I imagine that would look like, so it’s not like they’re really seeing you naked. It’s like having your head edited onto a nude photo, so why even worry about it?”

“~~~~~!!!????”

“I even gave you a small boost in the chest department, so you should thank me really.”

“Go to hell!!”

Mikoto was not under physical attack, but she had hit her limit as a girl. She could not bear to have those people looking at her any longer.

With her face beet red, she opened the window, stepped up onto the windowsill, and shouted back at Shokuhou.

“Don’t think you’ve won yet, you moron!! You’ve altered what they can see, but the mechanical security cameras all have footage of you naked now!!”

“Oh, dear. I should probably take care of that later.”

Shokuhou spun her remote around and did not sound at all worried.

Erasing that footage would be a piece of cake for the #5.

Part 5

Kamijou enjoyed some lively company as much as anyone, but his visitors today were taking it a bit far.

“I definitely didn’t expect them to wield the cutlery against me,” he complained while trudging down the hallway, wet-haired and alone.

It was still before noon, but he was on his way back to his hospital room. The girls were not with him because he needed his visitors to be outside to give him an excuse to leave his room again. It could be easy to forget, but he had been hospitalized and he was supposed to stay in his bed as much as possible except for the rehabilitation and exercise routines prepared by the doctors. However, that left him terribly bored. Especially for a teenage boy overflowing with adolescent energy!!

However, he had needed to grab something back in his room.

“Shoes, shoes, where are my shoes? I can’t head outside in my slippers.”

This happened a lot during a hospital stay.

His joints were aching after staying in bed for so long, so he wanted to go on a stroll through the courtyard. And if there was a soccer ball out there, he could probably chase it around all day long.

He poked his head inside the room and found Aogami Pierce had slipped from his bed.

“What’s wrong, Aogami? You’ve been acting weird today.”

“Eh heh heh. I don’t know where you got off to, Kami-yan, but you should count your blessings. This lovey-dovey couple has been flirting on and on and on in here. The barrier surrounding their world of happiness just about crushed me to death.”

Kamijou could not have been happier he had been in the restaurant for that.

“Why do people care so much about pressing their lips together?” said Aogami Pierce with a shadow over his face. “Who wants to see someone’s gross mouth the moment they wake up? Us non-kissers are the smart ones! Right, Kami-yan!?”

“...”

“Wait, what’s with the creepy silence? Why must you pique my curiosity like this???”

However, Kamijou Touma’s silence was not because he had remembered his kiss with that sexy woman on Christmas Eve.

Nor was he battling the harsh truth that his first kiss had tasted like St. Germain.

A honey-blonde miniskirt Santa girl was nestled up against his chest.

“(Hiii, Kamijou-san. You were taking a while, so I decided to come check up on you.)”

“Wait, eh, what!?”

“(Well, *I’m sure you’ve already forgotten what happened just 10 minutes ago*, but now that Misaka-san, that nun, and all the other annoyances are out of the way, I was hoping to take another stab at visiting you☆)”

And she was nestled up against his chest in such a way that her large chest, which felt very different from his own chest, was pressed against him. He was utterly flabbergasted. Had that kiss destroyed the world’s inhibitions or

something!?

Kamijou was trying to figure out how to react to this sudden intruder, but Aogami Pierce only gave him a puzzled look.

Yes, he was looking at Kamijou, not at the younger (yet very curvy) Santa who clearly did not belong.

“Why are you freaking out all on your own over there? Gasp!? K-Kami-yan, do you have an imaginary girlfriend now!? You’re entering the world of Advanced Moe now!”

“What, no! Can you not see...!?”

Kamijou trailed off.

How would it benefit him in any way to let his friend know there was an unbelievably sexy girl here?

The honey-blonde girl laughed.

“(Yes, yes. There’s no need to let anyone else know about this. Now, Kamijou-saaan, you wouldn’t want your Christmas to be boring, would you? Let’s make this the truly unforgettable day it deserves to be.)”

“(Did you use some kind of esper power?)”

“(It’s called Mental Out. Can you actually remember my esper name? Not that that would be much solace.)”

A hint of loneliness entered her voice there.

It really did look like Aogami Pierce *could not see her*. But if the light was being physically bent to make her invisible, Kamijou would not be seeing her either. That meant she must have been affecting the other boy’s mind somehow.

Also...

“(Why are you dressed like that???)”

“(Because it’s Christmas☆ But since you didn’t ask *why I had changed into this*, I guess your memories really do vanish the instant I leave your sight.)”

“?”

“(That *has nothing to do with* Mental Out, to be clear. …But it’s okay if you don’t know who I am. Whether or not you remember it, the fact will remain that you had a very enjoyable Christmas. So let’s share some intimate loving, shall we?☆)”

That was apparently what she had planned.

He was very glad his blood pressure and heartrate were not being monitored. Even he could tell they had reached a point that the nurses would be rushing in. What was with this excessively mature and curvy middle schooler!?

Meanwhile, Aogami Pierce was muttering something more to himself than anything.

“Christmas is just another day. There’s nothing special about it. Some red jerk in a flying sleigh doesn’t have the stealth capability to slip past airport radar!! Heh...heh hee hee! Miniskirt Santas are just a fantasy!! I’m not crying!!”

“Hm?”

“How long are you gonna live in a fantasy world, Kami-yan? It’s time to face the facts! Busty blonde miniskirt Santas (who are somehow actually younger than you) aren’t real!! They’re as fake as Bigfoot!!”

“...”

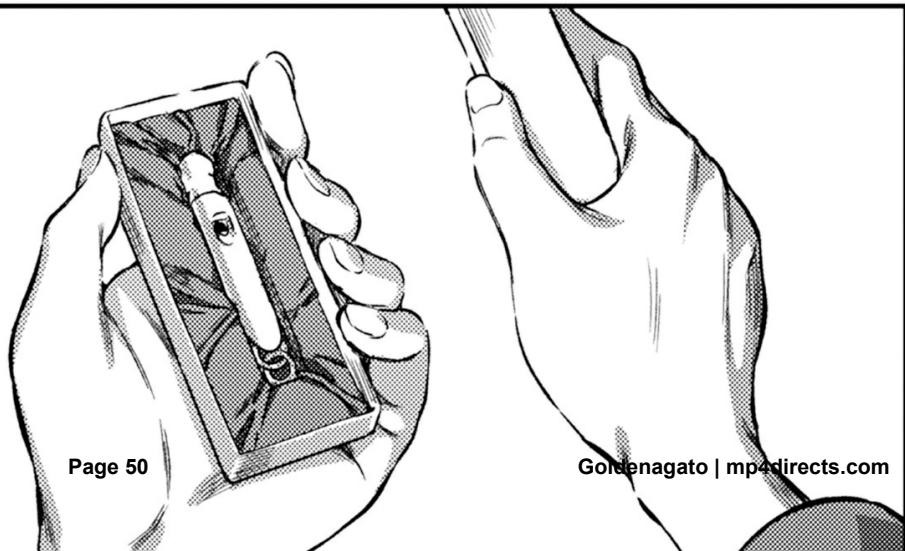
Aogami Pierce apparently had no idea who was currently nestled up against Kamijou, running her gloved index finger along his chest, and giggling in a bewitching way. She then pulled a wrapped box smaller than a phone from a location he would have been hesitant to describe.

“(Here, this can mark the start of our day of fun.)”

“Eh? Eh?”

“(It honestly irritates me to no end that you forget me every single time, so I want to leave you with something more concrete. So here.)”

“A present?”



The box felt faintly warm.

Maybe Santa only visited the pure-hearted children.

Wondering what was inside, he removed the thin wrapping paper. Aogami Pierce looked over like Kamijou had just performed some kind of magic trick. But his fingers were not back at 100% dexterity yet, so he ended up tearing the wrapping paper more than he meant to.

Now.

Had he noticed the deeply kind way the honey-blonde girl was watching his childlike behavior?

He stared at the contents of the box in confusion.

“A flute?”

“(It’s a whistle. Not that I expect you to understand its significance.)”

Part 6

“...”

The silver-haired girl in a white nun’s habit smelled faintly of soap, perhaps because the hem of her habit had soaked up a bit of the bathwater spilled on the tile floor during her visit to the amenity room.

She would look conspicuous most anywhere in this city of science. Especially in a hospital packed full of the latest tech. But this was the one place no one would question Index even if she had snuck in for no real reason.

It was a chapel.

Since it was located in the basement area below the hospital, it felt as chilly as the midwinter air, but Index felt like the chill helped highlight the worldly thoughts in her head.

The image in her mind's eye was from Christmas Eve.

Lips had contacted lips before her eyes.

With her perfect memory, she could never escape a memory she would prefer to forget.

In truth, she wanted to at least pout her lips over it.

(It doesn't bother me.)

“Hey.”

A voice rudely interrupted her while she folded her hands in front of her chest in prayer.

It came from the 15cm god named Othinus who sat on her shoulder.

But not because she found the chapel awkward as a non-Christian god.

“Should you really be in here? Isn't this room for terminal patients?”

For the most part, Academy City was a high-tech city where atheistic science worship prevailed and the stained glass in here was almost certainly lit up by LEDs on the other side, but freedom of worship was still guaranteed. A patient was free to find comfort however they liked in their final moments. Of course, instead of having an actual priest visit, they were more likely to get a teacher who specialized in that academic subject.

“It is.”

Index kept her hands folded in prayer.

She was not ashamed and in fact gave Othinus an earnest answer.

“And *that’s why* I’m praying for Touma here.”

“I see.”

Othinus did not ask anything more.

She knew that boy was forcing himself to smile. He was a worrier and made himself a part of other people’s business, which often resulted in him being injured. He felt other people’s pain more than anyone and he would not hesitate to rush toward certain death to alleviate that pain.

On the other hand, Kamijou Touma was not at all accustomed to having other people worry for him. It actually left him flustered when it happened. The more they worried for him and cared for him, the greater the burden he would feel. As his understander, that irritated Othinus to no end. That idiot did not know how to let other people take care of him when he had a cold.

Othinus pompously crossed her legs on the silver-haired girl’s shoulder but then jumped at the growl coming from the calico cat on Index’s head.

“So you’ve noticed?” she finally asked.

“About St. Germain? Based on what I know, that probably won’t go away on its own.”

“There’s no probably about it.”

Othinus kept her arms crossed and breathed a snort from her shapely nose.

That girl was a library who had memorized at least 103,001 grimoires, so it was laughable for her to act uncertain about something magical. Turning a blind eye to an inconvenient truth would only allow things to get worse.

So Othinus would nip that meaningless wishful thinking in the bud.

Her coldhearted response here was meant to keep herself moving in the right direction as much as anything.

If the only way to retrieve that boy's soul was to descend into the depths of hell, then what could they do but throw open hell's gates?

"It *will not* go away on its own. No matter what."

Part 7

Misaka Mikoto knew now was not the time for running away via window.

The clone girls were still sneaking around and they were sure to attack that hospital room again if not stopped. And once she noticed that, she had no choice but to drag them back to the hospital's research area.

Those identical girls stared back at her with a complete lack of expression.

"But Misaka was hoping to enjoy her Christmas, says Misaka #10032 in a dejected way."

"Ugh...n-no, you can't fool me! What does being naked in the bath have to do with Christmas!?"

"The information we found says Christmas has more bare skin than most any other time of year. Just think of the miniskirt Santas or the girls wearing only a ribbon or some whipped cream, says—"

"Where in the world did you find that picture of Christmas? Don't believe everything you see online and do something Christmasy!!"

Misaka Mikoto thought she was going to overheat.

She sighed after pushing away the identical girls.

As usual, she seemed to lose control of her life while around that boy. Her

image of herself as the Ace of Tokiwadai always seemed to crumble away. She never knew how to deal with it, but it was not what she would call unpleasant either.

(There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with him beyond the obvious injuries. That Anna Sprengel person sure seemed confident, but was her plan a dud?)

That was not impossible.

Misaka Mikoto had some of the best grades at the prestigious esper development school of Tokiwadai Middle School, but not even she had managed to analyze what exactly Kamijou Touma's power was.

She just knew it was capable of negating Academy City's #3 power.

In fact, it seemed to carry *some greater mystery* and it was the greatest black box of anything she had come across to date.

That meant it was even greater than the #1's blatant sort of "strongest" power.

If he had something so powerful hidden within him, maybe it was not all that surprising that Anna Sprengel's plans and predictions had fallen apart.

That was Misaka Mikoto's conclusion.

But her thoughts were interrupted by the racket of some small wheels turning.

Several doctors and nurses were pushing an emergency patient to the operating room on a stretcher.

"Clear the way!! Please clear the way!!"

"Blood pressure is dropping. Check the Bank for their blood type and allergies!! Oh, no. They've gone into shock. For now, we need to get some saline in them to keep their blood pressure from falling any further!! We need to at least know their blood type ASAP! Hurry!!"

It was like a storm blowing in.

Had there been an accident? Or was it an attack? It was Christmas, but trouble happened year round. With the snow and the events, the roads had to be packed with traffic, so the ambulances probably had a hard time getting around. Based on what the doctors were saying, this was a pretty bad case too.

(That can't be fun.)

With that silent comment, Mikoto decided to return to Kamijou's hospital room. Seeing that had helped cool her carefree anger and put her in a serious state of mind.

She rode the elevator to the 9th floor and walked down the hallway.

On the way, she spotted a blonde girl pressed against the wall. She must have stripped down and changed somewhere again because she was in her school uniform now.

Also, that was not the wall she was pressed against. It was an examining room door.

“Shokuhou?”

“Shh,” shushed the blonde girl with a finger to her lips.

Leave it to the strongest psychological esper to not respect other people's privacy. Mikoto considered blasting her away with a lightning spear, but things changed on her way to grab the other girl by the collar.

She caught sight of a pointy-haired boy through the cracked door.

He was speaking with the frog-faced doctor.

“The tests have told me most everything I need to know.”

“And?”

Her heart leaped into her throat.

She realized she was no better than Shokuhou when she did not raise her voice and chase the other girl away.

If she stayed here, she could learn about the boy's test results. She knew it was wrong, but her curiosity won out.

She wanted to rid herself of her lingering concern.

She clenched her teeth because she felt like this was no different from when she had been causing trouble night after night over those clone girls.

Oblivious to her presence, the conversation in the examination room continued.

"You said you saw a pill, yes? Whatever it is, I believe it will be difficult for your right hand's power to negate."

"Kh."

"Let me rephrase that. Your right hand is destroying it, but it is multiplying inside your body at an even faster rate. It's much like a situation where the body can't heal itself fast enough."

If Index had been here, she might have been reminded of the Innocentius spell.

But Shokuhou Misaki and Misaka Mikoto were the ones hearing it.

They were unfamiliar with the rules of magic.

"You said you had been bleeding, yes? Was it a nosebleed?" asked the frog-faced doctor to be sure.

He sounded serious. At the very least, it did not sound like this was a case of a teenage boy getting a nosebleed due to arousal.

"There are cases where someone can burst their capillaries through extreme

mental focus, but we need to take a more pessimistic view here. More and more of your body is being infected as we speak. I do not know of a vaccine or antidote for this and I doubt a stomach pump or dialysis can forcibly eliminate it.”

“...”

“Your Imagine Breaker is successfully slowing the advance of *this disease that science alone cannot explain*, but it is not working quickly enough to fully eliminate it. The microbes are even now gradually spreading through your body, so they will destroy all your body tissue at an accelerated rate if nothing is done to stop them. I do not know how long you have. This looks similar to deadly bacteria, but I believe it is different on a fundamental level.”

“Then...”

The boy’s voice was barely audible.

Mikoto could not see his face from her position, but his voice was that of a lost child who felt left behind.

“Then what am I supposed to do?”

“It would probably be fastest to speak with whoever caused this. I have never seen a microbe like this before, but since it is being used as a weapon, they must have some way of preventing it from infecting and killing them, right? So they almost certainly have some way of stopping or fighting it.”

“Do you have any idea at all how much time I have?”

“Two days at the most, but it’s frankly a miracle you’re still up and moving now. I do hate how I feel like I am pushing a child toward danger, though.”

“So...I’m going to die if this continues?”

“You are a minor, so I am not allowed to answer that question. Unless you have your parents sign a consent form.”

A monotone electronic beeping sounded.

The frog-faced doctor pulled an outdated mobile device from his pocket, but it was part of the unique communication infrastructure that was still in use at certain workplaces. Hospitals were one such workplace.

“Hm, we are receiving an awful lot of emergency patients today.”

“Um...”

“Oh, don’t worry about them, Kamijou-kun. Their symptoms are different than yours. Fortunately, we have yet to see those microbes spread from person to person. Much like yeast cells and rice koji, they only infect you if you directly ingest something containing them. ... Then again, you could say this has the same cause.”

The frog-faced doctor seemed to have stood from his seat.

The emergency patients were a major problem, but he must have also decided there was no more advice he could provide here.

“R&C Occultics, I mean. I hear a lot of the children have been babbling about what seems like nonsense. It makes you wonder what kind of non-scientific hocus pocus they have been dabbling in.”

The boy was not his usual self.

He looked so tiny while seated with his back to the door.

His head was hanging as he quietly muttered something.

However, *this was the normal reaction.*

He had been given a strange pill, he had coughed up blood and collapsed, and he had been taken the hospital. How could he be his usual self after that? He would understand better than anyone that now was not the time for smiling.

“Doctor.”

“Yes?”

Don't listen, thought Mikoto with a grimace.

She knew she had to avoid listening to this. She realized now he had been forcing a smile because he did not want anyone to see him like this. And by eavesdropping, she was rudely trampling on those efforts.

Yet she could not make herself leave.

So she heard it.

She heard the difference.

She realized just how hard he had been working to stay so cheerful in order to avoid worrying the others.

The Kamijou Touma curled up his back and spoke his honest thoughts in a vanishingly quiet voice.

Those two simple words seemed to shatter her world.

"I'm scared."

"I know you are. Everyone is at times like this."

There was only one exit.

But when the frog-faced doctor opened the door to go see to the new emergency patient, there was no one there.

The two girls were hiding behind a nearby corner in the hallway and exchanging a glance.

The air seemed on fire around them.

"Misaka-san, you heard that, didn't you?"

She just about clicked her tongue.

She wanted to punch herself in the face more than provide such obvious

confirmation.

And since Mikoto only clenched her teeth, Shokuhou kept talking.

“I’m sure you’ll be heading out to search for Anna Sprengel now that you know what’s going on, so how about we make this easier for both of us? If we work together, we can use both people and machines to search more easily. We *will* find her no matter where in the city she is hiding. Right?”

“...”

Anna Sprengel had already explained how they could give up. If they could not do anything on their own, they only had to contact R&C Occultics.

But then what would happen?

They had no bargaining chip of their own to use in exchange for receiving Anna’s help when they gave up. Anna was sure to mock them if they gave up without any kind of plan whatsoever. At this rate, Anna would call their bluff and it was that boy who would suffer for it.

So they had to defeat Anna and directly steal whatever antidote or vaccine she had.

That was their best bet.



Mikoto made herself take a deep breath.

And she asked a question.

“Where should we start?”

“With every single idea you have in mind. I’ll do the same.”

The two girls stepped out into the biting cold of the outdoors.

That boy had already taken a beating in order to crush Academy City’s dark side, so now it was their turn.

The 24th was over and they would make sure the 25th was different. It was time that boy was saved by someone else for a change.

Between the Lines 1

R&C Occultics was an enormous IT company that had appeared online out of the blue.

It was a monstrous site that gathered people from all around the world, but it also provided all sorts of magical secrets that were meant to remain hidden.

“A plan to divulge modern Western magic? Is this supposed to be the return of Israel Regardie? Utter nonsense.”

The time difference with Japan was about 9 hours.

The excitement from the countdown had finally worn off and the raucous partying had settled down to normal levels.

The darkness of the night was burning orange.

The damp wind blowing in from the Thames was scattered, leaving only hot and dry air reminiscent of a kiln to sizzle at the skin.

With a height of two meters, long hair dyed red, a barcode tattoo under the eye, and a cigarette in the mouth, Stiyl Magnus did not at all look like a holy man, but he was in fact an Anglican priest. However, he belonged to a secret part of the church: the 0th Parish known as Necessarius.

His job was to combat magicians.

The magical crime scene this time was in the City of London. And of all locations, a toxic magical flower blossomed in the center of the high-tech London Stock Exchange where deals were made at the rapid rate of 10,000 per second.

The roar of oxygen being consumed by a fire echoed through the polished financial district. The starlight and even the bright decorations and fireworks paled in comparison.

But this fire *was not Stiyl's doing*.

It had been there when he got here. Some amateur had learned the spell while searching online late at night and tried to do something ill-advised with it, but he had accidentally set himself on fire instead. The intensity of the flames made it obvious at a glance he was not going to make it.

The tall priest grimaced.

With an intricate plan, you had a chance of secretly nipping it in the bud by preventing the carefully laid out dominoes from falling, but there was nothing you could do with *a lone wolf who screwed it up all on their own*. Screams and shouts echoed through the night and small bottles of beer were scattered across the otherwise pristine sidewalk outside of a fancy little pub's takeout window.

There were an awful lot of people around for past midnight in the financial district. That it was early morning on Christmas probably didn't help. A lot of couples had gathered to watch the colorful fireworks being shot off across the

river.

And so they had all seen it.

Seen the mystical, the supernatural, *the terror*.

(I can't possibly clean up after all this. Is their plan to cause small incidents all over the world to overload Necessarius's ability to handle it all!?)

After all, there were 7 billion suspects.

Their traditional method was to find everyone who posed a large, medium, or even small threat and “deal with” them, but that would not work here. Just like an elite group of special forces could not suppress a riot large enough to shake the entire nation.

“Hey!!”

The best Styl could do for the moment was scatter around his laminated cards and construct a people-clearing spell that would prevent the chaos from spreading any further, but then someone called out to him.

It was a young voice.

The girl could not have been more than 12.

But the priest did not let his guard down. Especially when he turned toward the voice and found no one there. Just like a sniper, this person had found a position where she could observe him without him observing her. And on such a ridiculous level that she could talk without giving away her position.

“Since you Anglicans seem to think you’re cops, how do you plan to deal with this one? That guy on fire there is named George Close. Based on what our Dawn-Colored Sunlight has turned up, he appears to be enormous piece of trash who was so blinded by greed he rewrote the documents to get R&C Occultics listed here in the City. Without him, a paper company controlled by a sketchy cyber cult without a known headquarters could never have made it onto the London Stock Exchange!”

Stiyl loudly clicked his tongue while working to lock down all the information here.

He was not naïve enough to think the enemy of his enemy was his friend.

This required the utmost caution.

(This must be Leivinia Birdway, the boss of the largest surviving Golden magic cabal. Never thought I'd see the day I was receiving tips from the top of our wanted list.)

“God, this isn’t worth the pay at all! I’m sending the Dawn-Colored Sunlight a request for extra pay later on!” shouted another voice. “This at least deserves a Christmas bonus and hazard pay!!”

“Try getting the job done before you try to discuss your pay, subcontractor. The contract says you don’t get the second half of your payment if you screw this up.”

“I have a name, you know!? It’s Lessar of New Light! And we’ve met, so you should know that!”

“If you want me to remember your name, then show me some results here and now.”

There were apparently more people stuck out here working too.

Stiyl and Necessarius had already learned that George Close had been buried in debt despite looking like an intellectual working in a brokerage firm. And he was currently on fire because he had tried to use that magical fire to eliminate all the data pointing to his corruption.

Of course...

“Did you plan it all out so your cooperators would self-destruct, Anna Sprengel?”

“I imagine her (so-called) cooperators in New York and Frankfurt aren’t doing too hot right now either. This is going to make it hard to track down

which server that monstrous site is located on. You need to be ready. If we can't cut this off at the source, we're going to see more cases like this."

Something fell from high in the sky.

A golden glitter bounced at Stiyl's feet. He knew he would only see the night sky if he looked up. It was unclear where this had fallen from, but a more devout person might have viewed it as the return of St. Nicholas's miracle.

"I know you Anglicans are incompetent, but I can't have you getting stuck here. So here's a farewell gift. That's the money Anna seems to have been spreading around to construct her formless company. She was making deals in old rubies and pure gold metalwork."

"So the inheritance of the Rosicrucians?"

"They have treasure buried all across the globe. This is barely scratching the surface. Let's say you can create an unlimited supply of gold bars in a flask or beaker. You'd only cause the gold market to collapse, and the world economy with it, before the year was out."

The girl had a jocular tone to her voice, but Stiyl had no doubt in his mind that there was no smile on her unseen face.

(Antiques. If she's moving large sums around without the use of bank accounts or electronic transfers, the science side might not be able to fully track the flow of money. Damn, how does Academy City hope to track down and crush their headquarters!? Do they even see this for the threat it is!?)

Meanwhile, ordinary people were contacting magic.

They could do so from PCs, phones, tablets, handheld game systems, car navigation systems, mobile watches, smart TVs, intercoms, home theater systems, humanoid guide robots, pedometers, emergency buzzers, the monitors at passenger plane and bullet train seats, handheld translation devices, and any number of IoT appliances including ovens, fridges, rice cookers, induction cooktops, washing machines, juicers, and dryers.

In other words, from anywhere in the world.

But just handing people magic out of the blue would not necessarily fulfill everyone's wishes and bring them happiness. Guns were powerful and you might be able to strong-arm your way through most any problem with one, but without an understanding of how dangerous they were or how to use them, you could easily just shoot yourself in the head instead. Like someone leaving a round in the chamber and not applying the safety while they walked around with the gun holstered, or like someone carelessly looking down the barrel after it failed to fire.

And magic was an invisible power, so its danger was harder to see, *making that requisite initial step much easier to miss*. Professional magicians would do that by deciding on a magic name, completing an initiation ritual, and gaining the proper state of mind by artificially experiencing the judgment they would face after death.

But what would happen with someone who did not go through that?

What if they reached for magic as no more than a convenient tool? Stiyl was reminded of dirty salesman tactics where they talked up all the advantages of a risky investment to convince an elderly person to use their life savings on it.

(It's causing so much chaos out here.)

Stiyl knew who their enemy was.

And he continued his thoughts while making sure none of it showed on his face.

(But things must be so much worse in Academy City. They have to contend with their special rule against espers using magic. Because when they do use magic, it causes their blood vessels and nerves to burst.)

Needless to say, magic was risky.

But at the same time, it was the final trump card people would reach for when the world had abandoned them. No matter how reckless an act that was or

how hopeless a dream they carried in their heart.

It was not meant to be spread around for the purpose of trapping people like this.

Chapter 2: Black Pill, White Snow

— and RED Rose.

Part 1

The girl looked to be around ten.

It could be hard to tell thanks to the shopping district's arcade roof, but it was snowing outside. However, being outside in the middle of winter was not enough to stop her from working at the two scoops of ice cream sitting atop the cone she held.

“Munch, munch.”

“Why do I always end up taking in kids like this?”

The delinquent boy named Hamazura Shiage had a distant look in his eyes even though he only had himself to blame. This naked little girl had only a red cloth gathered around her flat chest to protect herself, so she was almost guaranteed to bring trouble.

This was all happening in District 13, where Academy City's elementary schools were gathered. This was the shopping district that had always(?) existed on the far eastern end of the district. A lot of children would gather there even though it was not on the way home for most of them, so it had become known as Afterschool Snack Road. If it were not winter break, gym teachers filled with a sense of duty would be patrolling the area.

(It doesn't look like there's any immediate trouble. Honestly, maybe it's a testament to how peaceful this place is that a naked girl in only a thin cloth can walk around without anything happening.)

He did not want to even entertain the thought that this was the latest fashion. At least he didn't see anyone else dressed like this among the local kids troubling the miniskirt Santas in front of the bakeries by peppering them with questions, hoping to learn the secrets of the flying sleigh that could slip past the military radars of advanced nations.

He looked up into the sky and saw a food delivery drone carrying a box using the claws attached to its crab-like legs. He briefly wondered if it was carrying a cake or a turkey before returning to the real topic at hand.

"I guess I can ask Fremea later on. Speaking of which, what's taking her?"

That delinquent was the type to take in a kitten on a rainy day, so he had a small friend in this district. In fact, the entire reason he was here was to bring Fremea Seivelun a bottle of a bubbly golden drink that had "nonalcoholic" plainly written on the label (and was more pricey than nonalcoholic beer) yet the clerk had still refused to sell to an elementary schooler like her. He wanted to get that party item to the sulky girl so he could be freed of the errand. But not because he was interested in the Christmas spirit. No, he just wanted to go after his girlfriend from a variety of angles while she sat motionless in the kotatsu. There was always the standard of embracing her from behind, but he could also go with submarine mode by sticking his head underneath the opposite side of the kotatsu!!

The girl in a white knit dress standing next to Hamazura sighed while looking even more exasperated than him. He was not clever enough to figure out what a girl was thinking just from the look on her face, but he could guess she had found her super-sweet donut (that was fully customized for District 13's many elementary school students) too much to handle.

Her name was Kinuhata Saiai.

She was a Level 4 who had been even more involved in Academy City's darkness than him.

He glanced down at the bare legs sticking out from the bottom of her short dress.

“Is there some bare-skin health craze I wasn’t aware of?”

“What exactly are you looking at while coming up with these super fantasies? Look any longer and you’ll have to pay me. And before you start asking about some ridiculous idea like nude sunbathing in the frigid December air, why don’t you give some super thought to how these questions will influence your life, Hamazura? As much as she says she doesn’t mind, I have a feeling that expressionless track suit girl would be super jealous, but what do you think?”

“Yikes.”

“If that’s all you can say, then you have some super sense left. If these lover’s spats are how you want to enjoy this couple’s holiday, be my guest, but don’t drag me into it. This isn’t about Levels—Takitsubo-san is simply impossible to predict when she’s mad.”

Kinuhata sounded casual enough, but she was actually keeping her eyes on the windows and stainless-steel pillars around them. But not because she was worried about her hair or clothing. That was a professional’s way of monitoring her blind spots without having to turn her head or move her eyes too much.

It was worth being cautious at the moment.

Because the entire dark side had apparently been shaken to its core.

(Now, will that year-end cleaning actually work? As long as there’s an illegitimate way to get ahead, the darkness will always crop up again. People love attaching price tags to everything and the negative cycle will begin anew when people need escape funding and hideouts to super shelter them during the chaotic aftermath. The rich can shout about justice through a loudspeaker all they want, but the black market won’t go away as long as people need it to survive.)

“Mm.”

The little girl used her small tongue to lick up the milk that had dripped onto the thumb holding the chocolate chip cookie cone. Some kind of AR walking game must have been having a Christmas event because the other children were gathered around seemingly empty areas with their phones at the ready, making it look like some kind of weird ritual. But this little girl must have had no interest in joining those children (and a few childish college students who were doing it too) because she stared at them with emotionless eyes.

“This really is a nice city,” she said from a short distance away. “Everyone has food to eat and a warm room to go home to, so they can all enjoy the holy night as no more than pretty scenery. Everyone has a livable environment here. Even though the winter city used to be a symbol of fear more sinister than a corpse, where the painful and ruthless chill would creep in through the snow to reach every nook and cranny both indoors and out. Just look at the hunger in St. Nicholas’s story or the icy cold in the Little Match Girl.”

“If you say so.”

A lot of kids that age liked to talk. Had she recently read a collection of harsh fairy tales or a book on how to make money by destroying people’s dreams?

She continued without worrying about the eyes on her.

“So I am sorry to say this city will soon return to having a true deadly winter. When a terrible day comes to an end, you might want to go to sleep with hope for tomorrow in your heart, but there was a time when you might not have woken up the following morning. People die so easily. But that is how humans are made, so it’s not your fault.”

“...?”

Something seemed off.

The little girl began muttering to herself while operating her phone.

“Hm, hm, hm hm. Good, good. It looks like all the people around the world I

had rewrite the paperwork to keep scrutiny off my paper company are dead now.”

It was like leaning in to get a sniff of a beautiful flower only to discover a strange new kind of mantis in your face.

He could not read the emotion in the little girl’s eyes.

Something thick was lurking below the depths there.

A crescent moon smile split across her face as she looked up from the screen.

“*Is Takitsubo Rikou doing well?*”

“W-wait. What are you talking about?”

“I do apologize for that. That was entirely my fault. Not that I expect you to understand even if I pulled out the name of that con artist Madame Horos. Since I have no way of objectively proving what happened, it is my duty to accept your anger and hatred.”

A name burst into Hamazura Shiage’s mind.

Yes, he had *only* known her name.

That person had lured his girlfriend in with sweet words, taken control of her body, and used her as a disposable tool. He had known far too little about that hated enemy.

“Anna...”

And now the ordinary delinquent boy had found his enemy.

He had found that mysterious figure who lurked in the deepest depths of the magic side and may have been even more hidden than the Magic Gods.

Could this really be her?

“Anna Sprengel!!!????”

The bizarre figure who had taken the form of a little girl was no longer even looking his way.

She held the thin cloth in one hand and the ice cream cone in the other.

With her hands full, she turned around to look in a completely different direction.

“And I must apologize again. If I’m going to have some fun, they take priority.”

A heavy metal clanking sounded as two girls landed on the snow-covered arcade roof nearby.

The Ace and Queen of Tokiwadai had descended from the sky.

Part 2

They did not hold back.

The black metal on Misaka Mikoto’s back spread out like demonic wings. A Gatling gun, a chainsaw, a smoothbore gun, a melt-cutting blade, a multiple missile launcher, a large drill, a plasma cannon, and plenty more heavy weaponry were attached around a base of twin rocket engines.

That was the A.A.A., or Anti-Art Attachment.

It was such a black box that not even the #3 herself knew what the device was *originally meant to do*.

But that was not enough to explain this.

While Mikoto could fly through the sky with that special equipment, the #5,

Shokuhou Misaki, should not have been able to accomplish that kind of physical feat. And yet she was keeping up with fully-equipped Mikoto's movements and rapidly jumped from a building rooftop to the arcade roof of the old(-looking, thanks to the professional "dirty" paintjob used for things like warship models) shopping district.

How could she do that?

There was a clear answer:

"I know that's cutting-edge equipment, but couldn't you have found something warmer for this time of year?"

"Ahhh, shiver, shiver. Send any complaints to my spare, *Mitsuari Ayu!*"

Another girl had possessed a psychological power similar to Shokuhou Misaki's. She had used several types of mechanical support to make up for her inadequacies as an esper and to defeat the #5 Level 5.

Those included the Five Over OS and the Five Over itself.

Both were Model Case: Mental Out.

To control *that bizarre equipment which had attempted to purely mechanically reproduce the power of Academy City's #5*, Mitsuari Ayu had worn a special suit.

However...

"Shiver, shiver, shiver."

"A swimsuit—ha ha—a high leg cut—ah ha ha!—in December—ah ha ha ha ha!"

"Oh, shut up!! Why did you have to choose such a pain-in-the-butt design for this season and location, Mitsuari-saaan!?"

"And skintight too—pff ah ha ha! Hey, the crotch is looking pretty bulgy there."

“It is not!! I can’t believe that girl! Did the loneliness drive her toward exhibitionism or something!?”

Shokuhou held her own body against the cold, but she still shouted in desperation with her body temperature higher than anyone else’s here. Fur coats and wool scarfs apparently had nothing on embarrassment when it came to keeping you warm.

The equipment’s design was about as crazy as bikini armor, but its defensive capabilities were very real.

And the enemy they had to defeat ASAP was right in front of them.

(It doesn’t look like she’s hiding a glass container or any other pills.)

After all, she only had a thin cloth barely covering her naked body. It seemed unlikely she had anything hidden below that, but did that mean she had no means of defense against the special microbes that not even Academy City could heal?

Or did she have antibodies in her body itself?

Whether it came to searching her possessions or running scans at the hospital, their best bet was to knock her out and capture her.

“Now, then,” said the barely-dressed little girl named Anna Sprengel. *“I gave you plenty of time, so I assume it has not spread to every part of his body yet. But if you’re still making me wait, perhaps I should speed things along.”*

Misaka Mikoto had seen Anna yesterday and the night before that. She had not noticed it at the time, but she had some clear differences from the other elementary schoolers who were busy using their phones to pursue the limited-edition Santa-costume Android Demon Lord (a hyper ultra miracle heroine who had destroyed three other worlds before arriving on earth and was actually just lonely). There was something about the aura surrounding the girl, the shadows lurking in her eyes, and the smile on her lips. There was something out of place there that felt far older than Mikoto or Shokuhou. Mikoto could not shake the feeling that she was looking at a cheaply faked

ghost photo or something.

The girl had been holding her ice cream cone like a microphone, but she casually tossed what remained of it over her shoulder. As it flew up into the air and dropped behind her, her sweet lips formed a single word.

“Incubate.”

More of a shockwave than an explosion filled the space around her.

The tables and chairs in front of the stores were blown away, the Christmas tree and snowman decorations were knocked over, and the passersby were mercilessly thrown to the ground. The shop windows and even the transparent arcade roof all shattered.

“Misaka-saaan!!”

“I know!!”

If Mikoto used magnetism to take control of the metal objects and Shokuhou took control of the *unconscious children and part-time workers*, they could keep the snowy glass shards from shredding the skin of the defenseless people walking below.

Misaka Mikoto remained hovering in place and Shokuhou Misaki jumped to the ground when her footing collapsed.

The shopping district had lost its transparent protection, so the wind and snow could now reach it.

That was more than enough for the unconscious people to freeze to death.

“We need to move elsewhere!!”

“Do you really think she’ll give us the chance? I’ll use Mental Out *to move those people out of the way*, so you buy me the time!!”

(What even was that, anyway?)

Mikoto was bewildered.

What had caused that shockwave?

And what was that giant orb that had appeared behind the little girl?

The metal sphere was more than two meters tall, making it taller than Anna herself. It gave off a dull silver light and it hovered in the empty air.

Had its appearance split the air?

That meant it worked very differently from Shirai Kuroko's Teleportation. That girl's movement did not have such a violent side effect.

It had caused this much damage simply by appearing.

Mikoto had no idea what it was, but she knew it was bad news.

(How was she storing that? If she's storing the vaccine, antidote, or other defense in the same way, then can anyone but her even get it out!?)

She bit her lip and pulled out an arcade coin.

She placed the coin on her thumb while maintaining her midair position, but then she stopped moving.

The little girl was pointing at the center of her own chest with a thumb.

"Give me your best shot."

"..."

"That 'power' was already deflected by *a minuscule fraction* of what R&C Occultics can provide anyone around the world, so do you really think it can harm me?"

"Argh!!"

Mikoto took action.

A boom shook the air and a beam of light scorched the air, but the straight line of destruction was not her Railgun that sent metal flying at three times the speed of sound.

It was a lightning spear.

She was afraid of facing that denial again. Even so, this lighting spear was powered up by the A.A.A. It could easily pierce the rubber suits used by workers on transmission towers and it might just immediately stop the heart of any ordinary person it hit.

However...

“Coward.”

She heard a single word full of both scorn and pity.

Not one step.

Anna Sprengel had not moved a single step while she was surrounded by dust crackling with electricity. The metal orb remained in place as well.

(What just...happened?)

Mikoto floated down from the broken arcade roof to the floor. She looked pathetic, but Anna actually seemed impressed.

“Oh, you didn’t fall for it?”

“...”

“Just like before, this would have been *very much over* if you hadn’t seen it. Did you use geomagnetism? Or the undetectably-faint plate vibrations? That’s kind of neat. So even the science side can detect those *landmines* made with ley line distortions.”

Anna laughed and pointed her thumb back over her shoulder.

While bragging about the metal orb there.

“Pneuma-less Shell. Hear me, Philosopher’s Egg and Clear Coffin. Hear me, spell that never strays far and is found hidden even in paintings and music. I seek not the red stone, so show me a distorted result here. So that junk might remain junk, entertain me with the unforeseen that not even I can predict.”

Was that a giant ship’s wheel at the very center?

The little girl grabbed it with her tiny hand and casually gave it a spin. It produced a continuous grinding noise like many heavy gears were turning along with it. Several cracks appeared in the orb and it opened in an even more complex way than a bank vault.

(Dammit, is this the real attack!?)

Something unbelievable had to be stored within.

The seal was opening.

There was no need to wait. Misaka Mikoto knew she had to settle this before the contents could show themselves, so she immediately readied the cutting-edge equipment she wore.

But she was an instant too slow.

Almost like the timing had been calculated out in advance to work that way.

With an especially loud clunk, *it* emerged.

It was a perfectly ordinary tree branch.

Mikoto’s mind went blank.

She honestly did not know what this meant.

The branch branched out several times to spread out like a large hand. It was no thicker than a little finger. It did have a scattering of solid green leaves, but Mikoto could not quite place what kind of tree it was from.

Mikoto help her breath, but for some reason, Anna Sprengel puffed out her

cheeks from within. She slowly let out the breath she had been holding in and it took the form of a sigh.

“Damn, that’s a dud.”

“Really!!!????”

She did not wait a moment longer.

Had Anna infected that idiot over something so unimportant she was willing to leave it up to chance?

And on Christmas Eve of all nights?

Every weapon forming the demonic wings aimed at Anna Sprengel. They were all powerful enough to possibly sink a warship, but Mikoto was past worrying about how sturdy her opponent was.

However.

Anna’s next comment was one of complete disinterest.

“Winning with this would be so easy it’d be a bore.”

Misaka Mikoto perceived it as the wind crashing into the side of her face.

But in fact, the demonic wings of the A.A.A. had their right half torn away like they were made of wet paper.

The white curtain of the blowing snow was swept away only after a short delay.

They were still a good distance apart.

The little girl with only a thin blanket lazily covering her bare skin had merely given the tree branch a casual swing with her arm.

“What!?”

But it was too soon to be surprised quite yet.

The twin rocket engines ruptured and the special fuel leaking from within ignited. The silhouette of Academy City's #3 was swallowed up by a flash of light as bright as the sun.

“Mi-”

The explosion was too large for ordinary gasoline to have caused it.

“Misaka-saaan!?”

Even Shokuhou's scream was drowned out by the noise.

No one could have heard her, but Anna whispered in a singsong voice.

Or maybe she had never really been focused on that “enemy” in the first place.

“The world's oldest whips are said to have been made from a thin tree branch, not leather or rope.”

She twirled the branch back to rest it on her bare shoulder.

This was the same as Misaka Mikoto flicking an arcade coin at triple the speed of sound.

In the hands of a true superhuman who could take a different view of things, even a single tree branch could produce such tremendous results.

“The first projectiles were stones, the first smokescreens were dried grass, the first biological weapons were corpses, and the first blades were...actually, I'm not sure if they were stone or bone. History and tradition can be found *in any part of the world*. And their essence can be freely extracted from all things. If you go to the effort of-”

“Wait, essence? What are you talking abou-”

“What do you think I was just explaining, you rogd! Qhuvnd—ahhhh—

hiengk!?”

A sudden change came over Anna.

She took action while Shokuhou watched on, frozen and unable to move.

That thin branch looked so cheap, yet it had eliminated the #3 with a huge explosion that may or may not have killed her. If the needle reached the end of the gauge, you would be killed for no reason. Without any dignity.

Shokuhou Misaki had mastered all things related to the human mind, so she did not need to check a mirror to know the look on her face. She had the look of someone who had drawn the wrong card.

Meanwhile, Anna's actions were even more obvious. Those were not attacks intended to kill. She kicked over the mascot in front of a nearby bakery and swung down the branch. She did not stop even after tearing off the thing's head.

This was frightening in a different way from seeing a simple weapon or army.

It was like seeing the kind and hard-working straight-A student engaging in domestic violence.

“You people always do this! Always, always, always, always!! I’m teaching you all the right things from the very beginning, but you decide it’s too much work! You take these shortcuts and try to enjoy the feeling of mastering something without putting in any real time or effort!! And when that inevitably leads to failure, it’s somehow my fault? You don’t understand—true—what you’re even doing, but you still feel qualified to criticize me? Are you kidding me!? Are you goddamn kidding—kfu—me here? Do! Not! Doubt! Me!! ~ ~ ~tnjswhglf~ ~ ~! Argh, there’s a purpose behind each step, so learn it all in order!! Don’t try to understand it yourself! Don’t assume you can—ntd—find the answer on your own!! If you just do what I tell you, all your questions will be answered and it will all make sense to you, you bvdkhktuh!!!!!”

It had been torn to pieces.

What had once been a torso was now just a few plastic blocks.

But then the monster must have noticed the dumbfounded honey-blonde girl's eyes on her.

"Phew."

She looked up from the mascot's severed head, brought her hands together with the mystery branch still held in one of them, and smiled bright.

And she spoke with an adult confidence that seemed out of place from such a small girl.

"Sorry about that. But I will explain everything for you right now."

"..."

Shokuhou was being taken in.

Even though she knew this was a bad sign.

The #5 girl was nearly invincible.

She had the strongest psychological power. She might have trouble in an unexplored jungle or the middle of the desert, but she was untouchable in a large city full of people. But there were a few people she would not want to run afoul of even then.

For example, the #1 who linked anything and everything to violence. Or the #2 who had stopped being an individual and split himself up so far that it was unclear if the overall will of "Kakine Teitoku" would keep a promise even if you negotiated with each individual branch and received their agreement. Those monsters could tear through a large group all on their own.

This girl was similar.

Manipulating minds was not enough to rest easy against her.

"Now, where was I? You were listening, so you know, don't you?"

“S-something about prestige...”

“Oh, that’s right! The people who seek out the Son of God’s bloodstains or bundles of ancient parchment are smalltime losers who only want their actions to carry prestige. So you were listening. Good girl☆”

The girl (who at least looked young) laughed and denied everything before her eyes.

Yes. Listening to her, following her rules, and currying her favor were not a guarantee of survival.

For one thing, they were already engaged in combat.

“And the title of Level 5 here in Academy City is no different.”

Part 3

Shokuhou Misaki shuddered.

And she leaped behind cover as if a paralyzing curse had been lifted from her. She doubted the hip-height concrete barrier dividing the road from the café space could actually defend against Anna’s attack, but she wanted to avoid simply standing out in the open.

After all, Academy City’s #3 had been knocked out of the fight with the very first move.

More than anything Anna had done, Mikoto had been caught in the explosion of her own equipment and vanished into the bright flash of light, and Shokuhou could not spare the attention to try to figure out what had happened to her. If the other girl could no longer fight, that was that. And a psychological esper like Shokuhou could not hope to stick her hand into

burning rocket fuel and drag someone out anyway.

Even from here, the heat felt like thin needles sticking into her body.

But she did not seem to be getting any warmth from that. The December chill remained, the snow stung as it hit her body, and that excessive heat was only doing more harm to the honey-blonde girl's skin.

At the very least, the fire had not spread to the shops of this old(-looking) shopping district.

(I'm surprised I feel so betrayed by this. As much I'm loath to admit it, I must have been relying on Misaka-san more than I thought.)

But she still could not run away.

That boy would not last much longer if Anna was not defeated here. It was Shokuhou's side that was in trouble if both sides lost sight of each other and wandered off into the city.

She forcibly stretched out her hand while crouched down with bent knees to grab at the chain of her bag full of remotes. She somehow managed to pull it over to her.

She heard a sound like thick rubber or leather stretching tight. It came from the suit between her two legs as her stretching to reach the bag put some kind of pressure on it.

She came to a stop as her thoughts were drawn to that part of her body. She had not thought too much about it before, but now she could not get her mind off of it. Was this an odd thing to think about given the circumstances? Yes, but she may have been trying to distract herself from the predicament she was in.

Mikoto's nightmarish words replayed in her mind.

(It isn't actually bulgy, is it?)

She looked down while crouching, but she could not tell from that angle. She

knew this was not the time. She really did. But there were some things a girl just had to check on. She bit her lower lip and pulled out a forbidden item: a mirror.

(Hmm?)

The Queen was squirming behind cover while holding the small mirror up toward a fairly private location, but...

“Hey.”

“Hwaahhh!!!???”

“?”

The #5 Queen literally jumped when a casual voice spoke to her from beyond the concrete barrier.

Anna Sprengel’s usual all-knowing look had slipped as she stood there with her head tilted quizzically.

But the mirror was not what really mattered here. The other items in her bag were: the many remotes.

Shokuhou’s life was already at risk thanks to the enemy’s attacks and her own ally exploding, but she still pulled a TV remote out of the bag hanging from her shoulder. That item was the key to Academy City’s #5 power, Mental Out.

Her power had such broad applications that she had trouble using it properly without dividing it out and categorizing it.

Just as she aimed the remote and pressed the button with her thumb, Anna Sprengel’s head shook unnaturally, like it had been hit by an invisible bat from the side.

But...

“That will not work on me.”

“Eep!?”

(She recovered!? No, it didn't take!!)

This was worse than with the #1 and #2 who she could control but she still had to keep her guard up around.

She had not expected her power to simply not work on someone. And not because they had forcibly deflected it with a solid defense like Misaka Mikoto did.

“You were mistaken to assume the supernatural ability to control people would allow you to comprehend my mental structure and take control. If you hope to grasp the mind of Anna Sprengel, you should have first trained yourself to the point that you can at least take control of an entire angel.”

Mental Out did not work.

Shokuhou's power was strong, but *it did not work at all against cats or dogs.*

And if her psychological power did not work on her enemy, her only remaining option was to use it on other people to gain more pawns. But doing that would only be sending innocent people to be slaughtered by Anna. That would leave a terrible taste in her mouth.

In fact, no one could stand up to this girl.

Even *he* had apparently been taken out with a single kiss attack.

That was why Shokuhou had not brought along any students with useful powers despite being the Queen of Tokiwadai's largest clique. This was no longer about logic. The legend was crumbling. Not even Shokuhou Misaki was willing to carry the burden of someone else's life when it came to fighting Anna.

In that sense, the only person she was comfortable with making use of here was that other girl.

(Speaking of which, what is that meathead doing? With our physical fighter

down, even getting the ordinary people to safety is going to be tricky!)

She effectively had to do this without Mental Out. She was wearing the special equipment related to the Five Over, but the general athletic ability it provided her was still not enough to outdo Mikoto.

(And it's worrying that Mitsuari-san never released the limiters on this suit during that *other fight*. Dark side toys aren't going to follow the safety standards, so I hope there isn't a problem with this thing.)

With the #3 taken out in a single attack, Shokuhou did not see how she could escape defeat no matter how much she jumped and leaped around.

So she had to find some other way.

But what other way was there!?

“Now, what will it be this time?”

Shokuhou heard the sound of heavy metal grinding together.

Even with the snow falling on her through the broken arcade roof, Anna Sprengel had tossed aside the ordinary tree branch and started turning the wheel attached to the 2m orb.

A perfectly logical victory was not going to inspire any emotion inside her.

So she chose to laugh now that she had once more thrown some randomness into the battle.

That superhuman had reached the point that *she enjoyed having Lady Luck abandon her*.

“If you don’t give up, you might just win eventually. But not because of anything you do—because my luck runs out. But if you don’t keep buying tickets, you can never win the lottery.”

“...!!!???”

With a dull thud, a complex arrangement of cracks ran through the orb and it opened up to reveal...

“Rope.”

Was that the tool she planned to use to take on one of the strongest forces in Academy City?

It was a perfectly ordinary piece of junk that looked so worn out it could snap at any moment, but Miss Sprengel hummed with the smile of a small child returning to their secret base and showing off the prize they had found on the ground.

There was no legend here.

It was really and truly a dud.

Yet she remained unchanged. The difference between her and her opponent was too overwhelmingly great. So much so that Anna herself seemed bored to death.

“So a question: what is this the world’s oldest form of?”

Part 4

Anna Sprengel laughed.

She had considered going easy on her opponent if she got the right answer, but that girl apparently had no intention of trying. She turned 180 degrees around, her honey-blonde hair spreading out behind her, and she began running full speed away.

(Of course, going easy on her would just mean a longer, more painful death

instead of an instant, painless one.)

It did not look like the girl was actually trying to escape.

Was this a temporary withdrawal so she could hide herself and make a surprise attack later?

(I am impressed she's willing to risk her life for an antidote that might not even exist as far as she knows.)

"You're used to working from behind the scenes, aren't you? Do you normally boss other people around to wear down your enemy from a position of safety? Or are you actually afraid of letting these children come to harm? Hee hee. This is a school culture, isn't it? You're all children, but you upperclassmen get stuck with so much extra work."

The girl who looked no older than ten had not moved a step from that spot. Her smile remained, yet she did not try to hide the boredom on her face as she waved her small hand to the side.

And she gave the answer to her quiz question.

"This is the world's oldest form of bondage, courtesy of ancient Egypt."

Several things could be heard slicing through the air.

The distance between them did not matter.

The old rope looked worn out and ready to snap if it tried to support someone's body weight, but the Rose leader was able to endlessly draw out its essence. With that, she could bind even an asteroid falling from the heavens to hold it in place in the middle of the air.

(Running away will only mean stepping on and being blown away by a distorted ley line "landmine".)

But...

"Wagh!!!????"

Shokuhou Misaki let out a strange cry and then pitched forward onto the ground.

Anna Sprengel had not done anything to her.

The snow had started to pile up due to the shattered roof, so the ground may have grown wet and slippery.

The rope thrown by Anna actually missed its target entirely, shooting by directly over the Queen of Tokiwadai's head, and wrapping tightly around one of the pillars that held up the arcade roof. A light tug with her small hand was all it took for tremendous pressure to break the pillar away.

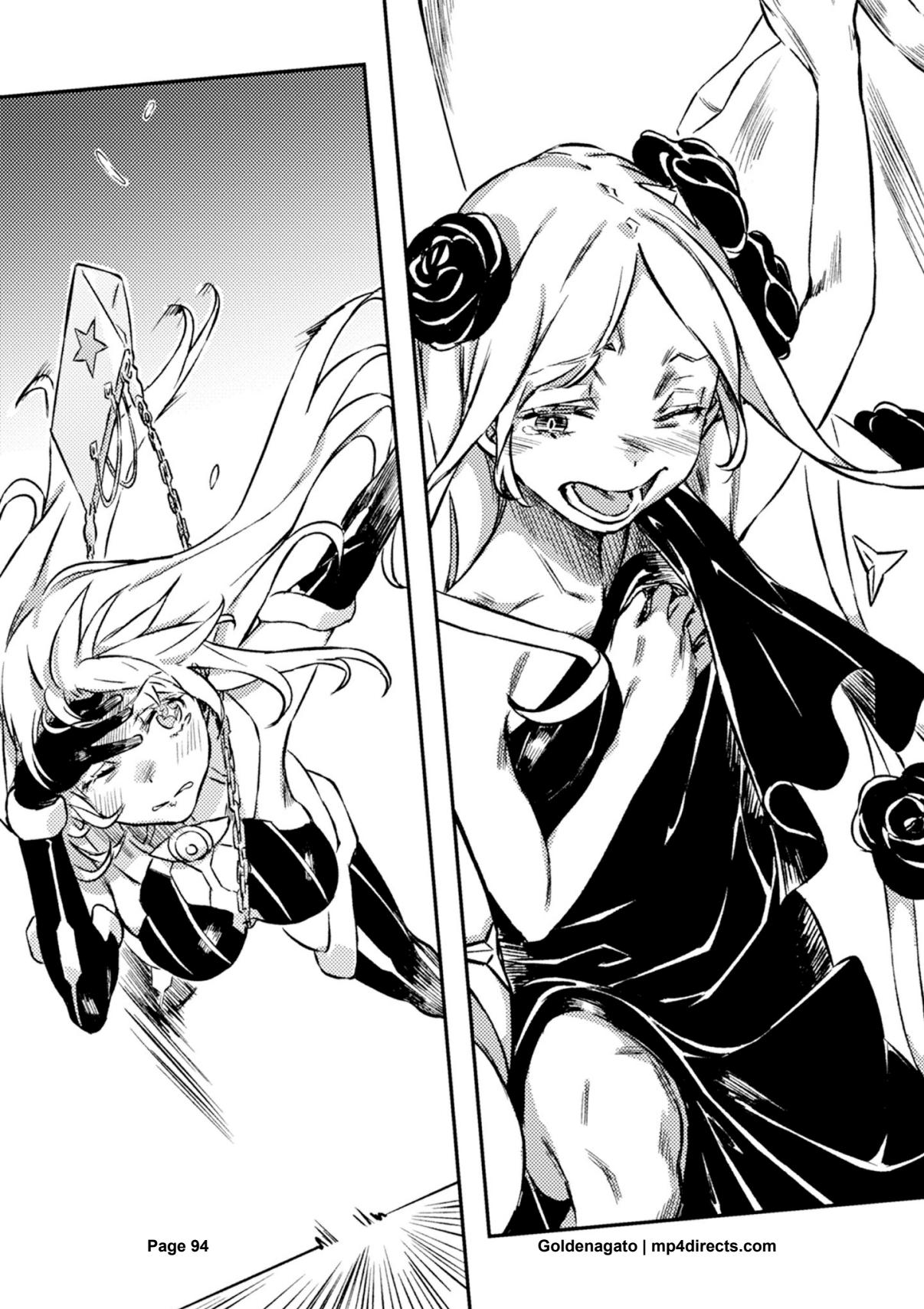
Anna had used the world's oldest whip and a ley line landmine, yet her opponent had dodged them both simultaneously. And not with the esper powers or technology of Academy City. This was purely the girl's lack of athletic ability.

The Miss Sprengel stared in disbelief.

It was true Shokuhou Misaki was wearing a suit that supported her athletic abilities.

It was not a powered suit designed for combat, but it was still a bizarre piece of Academy City tech she had picked up in the dark side. Shokuhou would be able to take a handgun bullet to the torso without flinching and she could lift the average car from the ground with just her two arms.

But that did not mean she had overcome her own lack of ability there.



If she had followed the proper movements found in textbooks, she would have been killed instantly. And Anna would have looked bored throughout. Or if the suit had optimized her movements based on combat data from martial arts masters, Anna would have snorted with laughter. She would have called that high-tech solution just another way of seeking the prestige of her predecessors.

But that was not what had happened.

Shokuhou Misaki had survived in her own way.

Anna's predictions had failed. She had not received the expected result. A loophole or vulnerability in the world had been discovered here and it had overturned Anna's accurate predictions in a single move.

It may have been a very minor thing, but it was also so wonderfully, unbelievably sweet.

“Ha ha☆”

The sweetness burned at her mind.

She knew this was a bad habit of hers, but she went along with it anyway.

It was like a never-before-seen powerful enemy had appeared in the middle of some tedious level grinding.

She let go of that rope that should have been a sure thing for her and she once more spun the wheel on the Pneuma-less Shell. With another grinding noise, the giant orb opened along a complex arrangement of cracks and her small hand roughly snatched at what emerged from within.

Her target's face was bright red with embarrassment as she scrambled to her feet and continued to run away. Her long blonde hair swayed side to side while she tried to leave the arcade.

“Eh heh hah, ah ha ha ha ha ha!! What luck! You have such absurd luck!! Well, you did emerge victorious from the endlessly-cruel screening process of gene rarity to stand here before me now, so I suppose you had already

The metal orb groaned some more as it opened. It was no longer holding out on Anna.

“Pff. Ah ha ha! It’s been a while since I’ve gotten an ultra-rare one like this! This is from the 20th century!!”

“Kh.”

A tree branch and a flimsy rope had been devastating enough. Shokuhou grimaced at the thought of what was to come, but she was entirely taken aback by what emerged.

It was a silver-colored mass. It was no more than a fifty-eight centimetre sphere, but it sounded much heavier than a bowling ball when it dropped to the ground. The asphalt broke below it. But the official documents said it weighed eighty-four kilograms, so that was to be expected. It also had four metal rods that extended behind it like a comet's tail.

In other words...

This was...

“Sputnik☆ Are satellites more your thing, Miss Science Side?”

“Wait a second.”

“The essence I can draw from this is the world’s oldest orbital launch. Although poor lonely Laika was on the second one. Now, I hope you enjoy this super-ultra-rare cause of death!!”

The instant Anna raised her hand from a good distance away, Shokuhou's hair rose up in defiance of gravity. She was outside the shopping district, meaning no more arcade roof overhead. Only the mercilessly snowy sky waited up above her.

“Oh, no. This has to be some kind of joke ability. If she seriously going to blow me away like this!?”

She went pale and tried the best she could to run away, but...

“Eek!?”

Her right ankle twisted in an odd direction, she staggered to the side, and she fell. Anna’s predictions and calculations must not have taken that into account because the bus stop sign right next to her was torn from the ground and thrown into the snowy sky instead. Only the blue sky awaited it.

“Hee hee. You really are entertaining.”

“Oww.”

“More, more, more, more!!”

Anna rejoiced at her own bad luck.

She pulled out the next one. It was a perfectly ordinary fist-sized stone. No, it had a small indentation that the little girl stuck her finger into. What she scooped up was not paint. The thick, reddish-black substance was...

“Ha ha, ah ha ha. The world’s oldest writing tool was charcoal. Before papyrus or parchment, humanity preserved their own records by mixing charcoal with blood or fat and rubbing it on cave walls.”

She even licked her lips as she whispered the answer.

She toyed with the substance on her fingertips and moved her hand as if she were carving something into the world as a whole.

“In other words, all grimoires started from here.”

She wrote on a round table lying on its side nearby.

She wrote on a stainless-steel pillar that had avoided breaking.

She wrote on the snowman decoration positioned in front of an ice cream shop.

And all of them transformed into original grimoires that drew energy from the ley lines to autonomously defend themselves.

They all creaked as they began to move. The table's four legs moved like an animal's, the stainless-steel pillar bent over and crawled around like an earthworm or inchworm, and the snowman decoration's smile gained a definite will of its own. And all three of them "glared" toward fleeing and falling Shokuhou Misaki.

"Go on. Sic her☆"

They obeyed Anna's lazy command by rushing toward the girl, each in their own way.

The air shook.

The newly accumulating snow was blown away as they began to run.

Anna once more noted the middle school girl's "luck" when she did not immediately look back at her pursuers. These were true grimoires, even if they were impromptu ones. If the casually written words there had entered the girl's field of view, they would have assaulted her brain and sent blood pouring from every hole on her face.

"Ahh!!"

Anna had never imagined that someone facing such a threat to their life would run right smack into the support pillar of a wind turbine.

The table had overtaken its target and then made a U-turn to cut off her escape like a hound, but the unexpected collision threw off its aim and it crashed into a concrete wall instead.

"Pff!?"

When Shokuhou Misaki pushed her hands against the ground and climbed to

her feet, the stainless-steel inchworm was clearly right there at the center of her vision, but she was so dizzy from the pain in her nose and her tension was so high that the text must never have actually reached her mind. She managed to overlook what was right in front of her and it saved her life.

Anna Sprengel could only hold her stomach with both hands and laugh.

“Ah ha ha ha!!!!!! Yes, you I like. Kamijou Touma is interesting as a raw material to work with, but he’s grown so used to his misfortune and he’s learned how to operate within it, so he’s just too unchanging. You, on the other hand, are a delight. You really are trying to do everything flawlessly, but you’re so hopelessly bad at it that it actually ends up saving you. Yes, yes. This truly is beyond any of my expectations!!!”

And how did the Queen of Tokiwadai respond while on the run?

“This city only needs one Queen: me!!”

(Now I get why Mitsuari-san never shut off the suit’s limiters no matter how cornered she felt *back then*. This thing amplifies your unathletic side too, so one careless acceleration could have you trip or crash into a wall at twice the speed and she wanted to avoid self-destructing like that!)

Shokuhou Misaki tearfully held her reddened nose with a hand while shouting back at her foe.

Anna had called Kamijou Touma a “raw material”.

She would make her regret that. She would make her cough up whatever vaccine or antidote she was hiding. She would do whatever it took *like the cruel queen she was*.

Anna Sprengel walked leisurely through the shopping district and poked her head out from the arcade before looking a bit to the side.

That was when it happened.

An arcade coin shot down from the top of the building at three times the speed of sound.

Part 5

It was past the point that thinking of her as a ten-year-old mattered.

“Eek!”

Shokuhou’s throat trembled at the sudden explosion.

A powerful explosion and shockwave erupted around Anna Sprengel, sending smashed plastic and concrete into the air as a fine dust. Invisible but thick walls rushed out in every direction, forcibly tearing the inchworm and snowman from the ground as they tried to attack the honey-blonde girl. It was the same principle as a ship’s sail or an umbrella during a typhoon. Shokuhou had fallen to the ground while the monsters had their large bodies raised, so the blast affected them differently.

“Oh, my.” Anna laughed from a short distance away while holding the thin red cloth to her chest. “You finally found the courage, did you? Good girl. You seemed to be arguing before, but does she actually mean a lot to you?”

But they had bigger issues to deal with.

Shokuhou looked up while still trembling.

Academy City’s #3 had her feet perfectly balanced atop the raised edge of a short building’s rooftop. But the A.A.A. was gone. Instead of sticking with that half-destroyed junk, she must have abandoned it to focus on escaping the rocket fuel explosion.

Shokuhou Misaki raised her voice while grimacing at the unpleasant wetness of the snow that her own body heat had melted below her butt.

“What is this sticky dust ability!? Microplastics? Concrete powder? Ew, ew, ew, ew! Are you trying to kill me by having me breathe in all this gross stuff!?”

“Shut up and go back to eating your organic vegetables covered in caterpillars and worms!! I just saved your snowy ass, so you should be rubbing your forehead into the ground to thank me! And get on up here. I can’t aim my Railgun at those *drones* with you down there!!”

“...”

Shokuhou leaped straight up before she could even look back on reflex. She jumped a full seven meters with no footholds on the way up. Unfortunately, she had been too panicked to even think about how she would land. In fact, she jumped clear over the building rooftop, lost her balance in midair, and began to rotate vertically.

“Oh, no! Oh, no! Oh, no!”

“(The world would probably be better off if I just let her fall ass-first into one of the TV antennas or Christmas trees around here.)”

“Enough calm calculation ability! Just save me already! Humanely, I mean!!”

Mikoto fired a few extra Railguns down.

Instead of Anna Sprengel herself, these were launched at the table, stainless-steel pillar, and snowman that had been attacking Shokuhou.

Explosions and shockwaves erupted out and they knocked the honey-blonde girl further off course, sending her through two flips along an unnatural trajectory. And for some reason, she landed neatly in Mikoto’s arms.

She was being princess carried in a highly unusual fashion.

“Kyun☆”

“Don’t say that out loud, you liar Queen!!”

“Well, this isn’t my first time being princess carried, so this is fine by me.”

Mikoto did not like where this conversation was headed, so she relaxed her arms to let Shokuhou fall straight down. She let Shokuhou’s defenseless back fall right onto her raised knee, bending her spine at an unpleasant angle.

“Agwahh!?”

“Stop thinking you have the upper hand here and tell me one thing. I need to know to stay focused right now, okay? The first time you just mentioned: was it with that idiot? I can’t imagine who else it would be.”

“I-I’ll leave that one to your imagination.”

A gloomy darkness entered Mikoto’s eyes, but she was also focused on the reality before them. Now was not the time to be having fun with Miss Exhibitionist in her high leg swimsuit (with one portion of her body a bit damp after sitting in the snow).

Their enemy was not dead yet.

And that did not just refer to the table, stainless-steel pillar, and snowman.

Anna Sprengel parted the dust while laughing. Yet the asphalt at her feet was torn up, so the Railgun blast had definitely hit there.

(You damn monster!!)

Mikoto clenched her teeth, but she had honestly doubted a surprise attack would be enough to settle this.

That was why she had been able to fire the shot without worrying about accidentally killing the girl and forever losing the only means of saving that boy.

Her Railgun was supposed to be her trump card, but ever since the 24th, it had been reduced to a mere door knocker that always lost to the enemy’s defenses. However, she was most humiliated by the fact that she was actually growing accustomed to that fact. Of course, that was due to the fact that she

had high enough base stats to swiftly accept unpleasant information so she could work towards another solution instead of being a one-trick pony.

“What do we do!? My Mental Out isn’t showing any sign of working!!”

“Has she abandoned her humanity in body and mind? Anyway, we need to get away from her for the time being! Even if we are going to take the fight to her, we need to at least lure her into a soccer field, nature park, or other open area. Otherwise we’ll just do more damage to everything around her!!”

They knew it would only sadden Kamijou Touma if they caused a ton of collateral damage while trying to save him.

And that side of him was part of what made them want to save him in the first place.

Shokuhou Misaki was wearing an enhancement suit, but she would still trip and fall (with several times the force of normal), so she could not exactly jump from rooftop to rooftop in the middle of battle. If she slipped on the snow during her running start, she could end up falling and going splat at the bottom. Thus, Mikoto continued princess carrying her while leaping from frozen building to frozen building.

The Queen of Tokiwadai brushed her hair from her shoulder.

“Yes, this is how it’s supposed to work. The super genius beauty handles all the cool and calculated brainwork while the brawny dumb-dumb handles all the fighting and the transportation while also looking after me☆”

“I’ll drop you from this twelve-story building, pork buns.”

“Whaaaat!? How can you look at this perfect, lustrous body and think of that horrifying convenience store product full of additives!?”

The dumb Queen roared back with various (meat-filled) parts of her jiggling, but Mikoto ignored it. Although she did decide to be a little kinder to Shirai Kuroko who she always used as a convenient means of getting around. She had discovered that asking for help and being asked for it were completely

different experiences.

She also noticed she had calmed down enough to think about other things like that.

Not receiving any additional attacks from Anna Sprengel would of course be best, but Anna also had no real reason to stop. It was hard to imagine *her* losing sight of someone just because they fled across the rooftops. This was an improvement, but it had been handed to them by the enemy. Mikoto was honestly unsure if she could simply accept it, so she grew cautious.

“...”

After coming to a stop on a rooftop (while princess carrying the hot and juicy pork buns), she looked back into the distance.

She saw nothing there.

Nor did she hear anything.

She waited for a bit before realizing what had happened.

“She... isn’t following us?”

Why not?

She thought to herself in the falling snow, failed to find an answer, and felt her mind boiling over.

She thought back to the sign she had seen Anna Sprengel looking at: *Straight Ahead – District 15*.

In other words...

“*Did she lose all interest in us!?*”

Part 6

“You know what I’ve realized, Kami-yan?”

“What?”

Kamijou Touma sounded out of it as he responded.

“It’s not about the female doctors and nurses.” Aogami Pierce sat cross-legged on the neighboring bed with nothing better to do. “I’m all about the sickly girls in pajamas right now. I saw the cutest girl with a bob cut and an eyepatch out in the hall earlier.”

“What’s with you, Aogami Pierce? Did you take a mental trip to some other world when Fukiyose broke your secret tablet over her knee during her visit?”

“In fact, this is the home of girls in casts and eyepatches!! I need to be more careful cause I overlooked this until now! And I’m supposed to be the all-time master!!”

What did that matter?

Kamijou regretted asking, but he decided to say one thing more.

“What am I supposed to do about this information?”

“Let’s go visit a girl’s room.”

“Why did I even ask!? We can’t do that! You’re the kind of guy that loses all control on the school trip and ends up hated by the entire class! Think for two seconds why they go to the trouble of keeping separate rooms for boys and girls in the hospital!!”

“Shut up!! I’m not spending my Christmas playing cards with another guy!! I want at least one bittersweet memory!!”

Aogami Pierce’s hands were not functioning, so he had learned how to manipulate the cards with his toes. People always found a way to grow when the need arose. Even if it was meaningless growth.

He was making more sense than when he had been stubbornly refusing to admit Christmas was anything special, but he had taken it in the worst possible direction. Kamijou really wanted to avoid being caught in the middle of this.

“Don’t worry, Kami-yan. I’m pretty sure I can get away safely while they’re attacking you.”

“Do I need to break a few of your bones to extend your stay here? If you know we’ll be attacked and have to ‘get away’, none of your dreams are going to come true there!! Just accept the reality you’re stuck with, Aogami! At most, you might open the door and accidentally see them changing, but no love starts that way!!”

“Wrong!! We still have our old friends the suspension bridge effect and Stockholm syndrome!!”

“Aren’t those both about people mistaking their fear for something else!?”

Kamijou was aware that manuals on how to get someone to fall in love through hypnotism or psychology stubbornly refused to go away in certain niche markets, but he was pretty sure the end result of that would only feel empty. It was all one way and they would never be seeing you for who you really were.

“Oh, I’ve given up on any normal sort of love,” said the garbage in the neighboring bed while sounding almost proud of himself.

“...”

“As long as I can do her, I don’t really care how I get to that point. The age of maturity was lowered! And there’s a curse placed on all us boys, requiring us to lose our virginity before then!!”

“Pretty sure you’re just screwing yourself up so bad you’ll never even be able to hold a girl’s hand.”

“Wait...you’ve been acting awfully calm for someone sharing this hellish

Christmas with me. What is this barrier between us? You can tell me!"

Kamijou Touma stared off into the distance.

He lamented his current situation.

And he stuffed a rolled-up tissue in his nose while thinking back on something.

"Kissing isn't all it's cracked up to be."

Aogami Pierce stopped breathing.

"What... did you say? And what's that nosebleed supposed to mean!?"

"I mean, people's mouths are full of germs. You never know what kind of microbes are in there."

"How dare you!!!"

Part 7

Anna Sprengel sighed quietly.

She looked up into the chilly white sky as those two disappeared, but then she looked away. It was just like a child watching an airplane through the car window until the car entered a tunnel.

She began walking in the direction she was most interested in.

She checked the blue sign and kept walking with a bored look on her face.

(Shokuhou Misaki is fun because she introduces so many irregularities without even meaning to, but now Misaka Mikoto is in control again. People

who fight properly and lose seriously are such a bore. There's nothing of value there. And I was really hoping to enjoy that a while longer too.)

Below the snowy sky, she wiped the reddish-black paint off of her small fingertips which looked softer than custard, causing the devices she had sent out to collapse on the spot. The powerful text written out on the table, stainless-steel pillar, and snowman all melted away and the same happened to the inanimate objects themselves. They were only makeshift grimoires and they had failed to establish the proper circulation of ley line power absorbed from the ground, so they appeared to rupture from within. It was similar to a stroke or aneurysm where your own blood flow kills you.

She did not even care enough to look back at what remained.

She snapped her fingers as she walked and the two-meter metal orb compressed down behind her. In the blink of an eye, it became a bottle no larger than an eyeglass container. The minuscule round flask was lined with a thin lead foil. And unlike the flasks found at ordinary schools, this one had multiple necks, making it look something like a bagpipe.

This was not her only trump card.

The Pneuma-less Shell was a base metal still made by intentionally distorting the original egg. It was in fact a spiritual item meant to disturb her own rhythm and reduce her status.

Once you eliminated death, you would forget the fear of death and others could bring about your death without you even realizing it. In other words, it led to careless mistakes. Just like the immortal Greek gods were unable to control themselves and ended up giving into their pride and jealousy, leading to many very human mistakes.

People could not restrain or govern themselves without wanting for something.

Think of the people of a certain country who so hated the clean water coming from their faucets at home that they would go out and buy bottled mineral water. Did those people properly appreciate the rarity of that single drop of

water?

“I suppose that’s enough *sightseeing*. There’s nothing more to see in this city, so maybe I should get to work. Nothing else of interest here... If St. Germain still hasn’t destroyed that boy, I need to help it along.”

(The acute St. Germain should have spread through his body by now, but I can hasten the process by driving him to anger.)

“I wonder what I’ll see.”

She laughed.

All she did was laugh.

“The pain, anxiety, fear, and resignation will wear your soul away, leaving only the last and final piece, but what will that final piece be, Kamijou Touma? I cannot wait to see what your true essence is.”

Anna then pulled out a perfectly ordinary smartphone to replace her spiritual item. It displayed the kind of map app used everywhere in the world.

The signs around here said this was the border between Districts 13 and 15.

Her destination was further east.

Academy City would normally be blotted out on navigation services from outside the city, but this was a complete version with everything down to the back alleys filled in by a satellite belonging to R&C Occultics. She could find her way around Academy City with this.

“Hm, hm, hm hm☆”

She inputted her destination and a few different routes were automatically calculated.

She tapped the shortest of the routes to begin.

Her destination was a certain hospital in District 7.

The phone spoke in a polite, female artificial voice.

“One hour to your destination.”

Part 8

The situation had changed.

They hesitantly turned back the way they had come and then followed the blue signs to the east. They of course made sure to continue jumping from snowy rooftop to snowy rooftop to avoid accidentally running into Anna on the streets.

Yet it was them that were in trouble if they lost sight of Anna.

She was the only one with the vaccine or antidote they needed. They had to prevent her from reaching the hospital.

But they also knew Anna would show up at the hospital eventually, so couldn't they lie in wait there instead of trying to chase her around?

No, they could not.

Two Level 5s had attacked without slowing her in the slightest, so the hospital would be destroyed the instant she arrived there. It did not matter whether or not the sick boy who kept coughing up blood could win in the end. Everything there – the people and the things – would be destroyed in the process.

And that might be enough to break him.

Because he would carry the weight of things he had no responsibility to carry.

“Whoops.”

They had to be careful while jumping. If they knocked some snow off the edge of a roof, they might just be noticed.

They had arrived in District 15.

This district looked very different. It was Academy City’s largest shopping district, so it was flooded with young people dressed up as Santa or a reindeer. There were also some weird costumes like a box or a turkey with short arms and legs attached. There was apparently an attempt to break the record for the world’s largest cake, so the excitement was not going to end until the cake had been sliced up and everyone had a chance to snap a photo of their piece.

There were no umbrellas to be seen.

The view of the phone cameras was apparently more important than anyone’s health, so those view-blocking pieces of waterproof fabric would get you judged guilty.

Which made her easy to spot.

“There she is!”

A pedestrian deck was constructed up above a pedestrian scramble, making for a very busy area, but a girl who looked to be only 10 was walking above the road there mixed in with the crowd. From time to time, some young people carrying bottles of beer or sparkling wine (those were actual adults and not just high schoolers, right?) would pour some of their drink on her while laughing. The thin red cloth barely covering her was actually being accepted by the people here, so District 15’s happy and cheerful Christmas was a strange time indeed. A young wife in only an apron would apparently be accepted as no more than a costume on this day.

Shokuhou was disgusted since she preferred a classier atmosphere.

“This is worse than I’d heard.”

“All these lights are nearly blinding me, so it’s easy to lose track of her. Help me double check her location.”

The partying was already out of control, but a girl must have decided this was her chance and began an unauthorized concert out on the street. Around ten bodybuilders were lifting up a German luxury car (probably one of theirs) like a palanquin and smiled for the camera while filming an ad for a sports gym. This white Christmas was growing deadly cold, yet both the girl with a bare midriff and a megaphone and the oiled-up group in only trunks did not seem to care. District 15 really was a strange place. Enough so that the TV cameramen who had showed up hoping to get some good footage had to cover the lens with a hand to avoid filming the overly risqué costumes and the people misbehaving for the camera. It was easy to see why no one was paying much attention to Anna.

Had she chosen to use the elevated path because the ground level was packed in as close as a crowded train during rush hour? Although it did look like there would have been other options.

“She really is staring due east!” shouted Mikoto while focusing on something other than the people.

A blue sign was installed on the pedestrian deck. It was half frozen over by sherbet-like snow, but it was still readable: *Straight Ahead – District 7.*

(She’s moving from west to east? And District 15 leads right into District 7.)

Shokuhou must have been thinking the same thing because she arched one of her shapely eyebrows.

“There are plenty of landmarks there, but the last place we want her is there too: the District 7 hospital where he was taken.”

Anna was walking along in such a defenseless way she might as well have been daring them to attack her.

And if they managed to entertain her, she would be willing to come to stop and watch the show. But the instant she lost interest, she would resume

walking toward that hospital. And once she arrived, she would destroy the entire building with the dying boy inside. Her steady pace gave off the same precision fear as a time bomb or a cruise missile.

Shokuhou kicked her legs like a small child while being princess carried.

“So what do we do?”

“Stop trying to act cute, pork buns.”

“The next time you call me that, I’m breaking through your mental barrier with Mental Out.”

“Oh, really? Well, I chose not to call you ‘sweet buns’ because I thought it sounded wrong, but if that’s what you prefer. Also, she’s using a device to navigate, isn’t she? Then we need to move in close and attack.”

“Did you learn nothing from last time!? We can’t hope to win with our direct fighting ability!!”

That was not something two Level 5s should have been saying.

But if they did not accept their disadvantage, they could not keep up with reality. They would be left behind by the times.

Mikoto let out a white sigh.

“Which is why that’s a diversion. Our real plan is to hack her phone and mess with her navigation to send her in an endless circle. I don’t really know how much of a monster this Anna Sprengel person is, but that’s a normal electronic device she’s holding. We can redirect her somewhere more convenient for us and then figure out how to keep her from defending herself. We’ll invite her into a whiteout. It’s time she learned how scary it is to get stranded out in the snow in a high-tech city of 2.3 million!!”

“I see,” said Shokuhou Misaki.

The diversion part would have to be done by Misaka Mikoto since physical fighting was her specialty. Everyone involved already knew Shokuhou

Misaki's Mental Out did not work on Anna, so the Queen honestly had nothing to do here. She just wanted Mikoto to get it on with it and become a noble sacrifice that would extend that pointy-haired boy's life.

Except she had forgotten something.

Her dislike of the other girl was a mutual one.

"Okay, do your best to act as disposable bait. If she actually takes a bite of those sweet and sexy buns, I promise to never forget your sacrifice."

"Bwah, wait!? Th-this is an 8-story building!! You can't just toss me off of here, Misaka-saaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan!!!!!"

After a count of three, Mikoto tossed the weight she was princess carrying. Shokuhou felt an odd floating sensation, but she could not actually do anything but scream while dropping down. And with that much noise, everyone in the area ended up looking up toward the source. That included Anna Sprengel in the middle of the crowd.

And a crescent moon smile had torn across her face.

It was the cruel smile of a small child thinking about squishing the bug held between her fingers.

"Ha ha☆"

"I am so sick of being used as a toy for weirdos with no common sense!!"

While Shokuhou flailed her arms and legs, the transmission of force must have come together just right because she spun around in midair and her feet landed cleanly on the railing of the pedestrian deck.

(A-and Misaka-san didn't even help my landing ability!? Was that musclebound moron really trying to kill me!?)

"Of course I helped. I just did it wirelessly."

That response came from the same pedestrian deck as Anna.

They were less than ten meters apart. Misaka Mikoto was crouched down in an animalistic stance as she took aim at the little girl's navel. And she rushed in with enough force to dislocate Anna's spine with a single tackle.

At the same time, a disconcerting sound came from all over Shokuhou's body. No, the skintight suit covering her was being *electrically* controlled.

She leaped from the railing, flipped as gracefully as a ballerina or figure skater, and used the centrifugal force to sweep her heel around in a roundhouse kick. It was aimed for Anna's face. Specifically, her eyes.

She did not need to score a clean hit.

As long as it blinded Anna or forced her to evade, it would create the opening Mikoto needed.

“Wait! Misaka, why!?”

Shokuhou Misaki finally bristled and yelled about being used as a sacrificial pawn, but the seemingly ten-year-old girl reached a small hand out toward the approaching heel and casually grabbed the Queen's ankle. With a swing of her arm, Shokuhou transformed into a projectile to intercept Mikoto.

Mikoto did not really care. She focused on her magnetic control.

Instead of catching Shokuhou who flew in while rotating like a defective boomerang, Mikoto stepped on the girl (specifically on those loathsome twin pork buns on her chest) to take a leap forward.

This did not produce a “boing” sound effect, nor did it enhance her jump in any noticeable way.

(Really?)

The honey-blonde girl was mad now (and too much of an amateur to realize she needed to focus on her landing right now), so she pulled a TV remote from her bag and aimed it at Mikoto.

That girl who liked watching TV despite being the Queen of social media

raised her voice.

“There are TV crews here, so you can kiss your social life goodbye after I make you strip down and dance in the nude, Misaka-saaan!!”

“Don’t interfere! Now is not the time!!”

With a dull zap, Mikoto’s head shook to the side. The #5’s Mental Out did not work on the #3 as long as Mikoto rejected it. All it did was give her a minor headache.

Without that, Mikoto would have crashed into Anna Sprengel, slammed her to the ground, and pinned her down. As a teenage girl, she hated having to win by using her weight, but there was no way such a little girl could overpower her like that.

But.

Something scorched the empty air.

If Mikoto had stayed on her previous course, her upper body would have been reduced to ashes before she even reached Anna.

Anna did not appear to be holding any kind of special weapon.

She had simply blown a kiss in an oddly mature way for her body size.

(What? This isn’t like that junk she was using before!)

The soles of Mikoto’s shoes scraped at the pedestrian deck. She had landed a bit to the side of the girl instead of on top of her.

She had not intended for that and she doubted Shokuhou had either.

Still unarmed, Anna laughed.

She crossed her fingers in an odd way for simply clenching and unclenching her fist.

“Hilarious. You should really keep the unathletic one in charge.”

“I! Am! Not! Unathletic!!!!!”

That must have been something Shokuhou Misaki refused to let stand because she tearfully hopped back up while rolling and writhing on the ground (because she had been too focused on revenge to prepare for her landing).

Anna waved a small hand and took a single step back.

That brought her right alongside a redhead high school girl in a knit cap who happened to be on the same pedestrian deck.

“Oh, no! She’s taking a hostage!!”

“Hey.”

But what happened next came as a complete surprise.

Instead of holding a blade up to the girl, Anna whispered in her ear.

The girl had been trying to earn more views on social media by filming as much of the partying as she could, but she had not had the courage to dress up in a costume herself.

“Did you hear that? A mere middle schooler is worried for you. Doesn’t it make you want to die of embarrassment when you’re in high school?”

“What?”

“How long were you planning to be a mere cameraman while walking around in the snow without an umbrella? Don’t you feel lonely standing there adjusting the camera’s focus? It’s your phone, so shouldn’t you be there in the center of the screen? And you have a new power to show off, don’t you? If you could only use the magic properly, you could tear down the illusionary hierarchy built by science. And isn’t today the perfect day to throw out your inhibitions and make yourself the star?”

Miss Sprengel's whispers made the girl gasp.

Those words were like a sweet and slow-acting poison.

“Sigh. Maybe my hopes for you were misplaced.” She delivered the finishing blow. *“You’re just going to sit here all alone on Christmas and let that power go to waste, aren’t you? People like you, who have the power to change their future but refuse to do so, are doomed to live and die in obscurity.”*

Those words must have carried a great bewitching power because the knit hat girl immediately changed her mind.

“The power of a four-legged animal can be extracted from a single finger. Picture a line extending from the center of your heart to the tip of your middle finger and let the fire essence roar!!”

A bright flash of light was followed by a sound more like melting metal than burning.

And that was accurate because the pedestrian deck was melted and sliced through.

“What in the—!?”

“Ah ha ha.”

The knit cap high school girl’s response was strange.

She could have easily become a murderer just then, but it was joy that covered her face. She sounded like an elementary schooler whose esper power had first shown real results.

“I did it, I did it!!” She kept her palm held out toward Mikoto and Misaki. “I actually did it!! I forced the famous #3 to gasp and fall back. Hey, were you filming that? A selfie isn’t enough for this! This needs to go viral! My power was real after all!!”

Mikoto was overwhelmed by how unusual this was, but then she heard some laughter growing more distant. Anna Sprengel was slipping through the

crowd while whispering a few statements each to the boys and girls she set her sights on. With some she used a grudge, with some talk of making easy money, with some an inferiority complex, and with some a desire for unity. She chose the perfect words to work their way deep inside each individual's heart.

That was all it took to unleash something.

The middle and high school students enjoying their Christmas pulled out some objects from their pockets and bags. Some were plastic wands, some were metal medallions, and some were cards made with an automatic business card printer.

They all shouted something, but Mikoto could no longer perceive it as words.

Their voices shook the entire deck like the cheering at a stadium and their voices produced beams of light, explosions, ice spears, and even humanoid forms that rushed toward Mikoto like a flash flood.

Mikoto's intuition told her this was very bad.

She could tell these were not the esper powers she was used to dealing with.

She reflexively tried to leap up with her magnetism to avoid it, but she felt some resistance at her right leg.

Someone was clinging to her while squishing those two chest buns against her leg.

The girl really did have tears in her eyes at the prospect of being left behind.

"What kind of servant are you, you violent maid!? You need to look after your Queen when she has this kind of once-a-millennium beauty, Misaka-saaan!!"

"Bwah!?"

She lost balance and both of them fell from the railing and off the pedestrian deck altogether.

But that may have been the best move they could have made since a few beams of light scorched the sky above. Mikoto could not have been more reluctant to admit it, but she might have been shredded by that barrage if she had followed her original escape plan.

Instead of falling to the ground, she used magnetism to attach themselves to the underside of the pedestrian deck. The unexpected movement managed to shake off all the gazes from above and below the deck.

“Any idea what that was!?” she asked.

“It wasn’t ordinary esper abilities, that’s for sure. If it was, then two Level 5s like us wouldn’t need to hide up here like bugs.”

“I agree, but that isn’t what I was talking about. If you had a ‘special power’ dropped into your lap out of the blue, would you really just start using it to kill? To be honest, Anna’s words weren’t that attractive. In fact, you’d be extra skeptical of any offer made by a little girl wearing only a thin cloth. Con artists normally try to look as legitimate as possible while giving an extremely calculated sales talk! So why did it work for her!?”

Mikoto was asking the Level 5 with the strongest psychological power if there had been any “interference” at play there.

“All she did was talk to them.” The Queen bluntly rejected that idea. But, “That can work if you already have your target’s personal information. Specifically, if you have already researched all of their internal problems, such as inferiority complexes, traumas, and mental tension in need of catharsis.”

“But how could she...?”

Mikoto trailed off as she found the answer.

R&C Occultics.

That enormous IT company had appeared seemingly out of nowhere and took fortunetelling requests from all around the globe. Which required the names,

genders, ages, birthdates, blood types, and other crucial personal information about the requester and the person they had a crush on. (Did it also work with more platonic feelings, a boss you disliked, or someone you wanted revenge against?) Even the reason someone wanted the fortunetelling was a treasure trove of information on their doubts and worries. The possibilities someone rejected for themselves and the words they wanted to hear someone else say were a very good indicator of their psychological scars.

Giant IT companies loved to show off how personal information was a new form of monetizable asset, yet they also did everything they could to extract it from people without paying them for it, so analyzing their users' browsing history to display the most effective advertisements was a walk in the park for them. If you dug deeper into those techniques, you would be able to influence the nonphysical mental world through psychological analysis, scoring people's humanity, creating a cyber cult, and more.

In other words, you could develop a master key that would have no effect on the other 7 billion people out there but was carefully designed to stir something inside that one person and push them toward a certain action. Of course, it required such a massive prior investment that it was generally not worth the effort.

But this extraordinary idiot had actually done it.

This fool had ignored all of the warning bells from wiser people and done it anyway for one simple reason: because she could.

“By the way.” Anna Sprengel’s cruel laughter arrived from somewhere in the crowd. She sounded like a child who had never been taught the value of life. “Psychology deals in individuals and groups. Just like a single person running for the entrance during a good sale or at a concert will inspire everyone else to do the same, the actions of a few have a way of spreading through a larger group. To be clear, controlling a group is much easier than controlling an individual.”

Mikoto heard a gurgling sound.

She raised her guard against whatever was coming, but that “flash flood”

from before did not arrive again.

Puzzled, she hacked a nearby street camera and displayed its footage on her phone's small screen.

“What the hell?”

Was it Mikoto or the knit cap high school girl who asked that?

The girl who had wielded that strange *new* technique known as magic was holding her hands to her mouth. A dark red liquid was spilling from between her fingers. There was far too much sticky liquid dripping down to the pedestrian deck for this to be a simple scrape or cut.

“Eh, eh? Wai- bh. Cough, cough, cough!! What’s happening to me!?”

She extended her bloody hands hoping to find some assistance, but no one reached out to help her. In fact, the other boys and girls who had used what was (apparently) called magic were all coughing up blood and collapsing much like her. No, it went beyond coughing up blood. The blood vessels in their body were bursting, the dark blue marks of internal bleeding appeared on their skin, and some of them must have had the blood vessels in their eyes burst too because the whites of their eyes were stained red.

There was no answer to be found here.

Of course there wasn’t when no one understood the mechanism known as magic.

Their minds clung to speculation to escape the fear of not knowing and that groundless information inspired new hatred.

In other words...

“The #3 did this.”

There was deep resentment in their voices.

They refused to admit to their own fear, so the resentment settled in deep and

inspired simple aggressiveness and hostility, all so they could avoid looking at their impending doom.

They were driven by an invisible fear.

Civilization had regressed to the age when germs were called a witch's curse. If they caught a cold from being out in the winter chill, they would blame Mikoto. If their throat grew hoarse after shouting too much, that too would be Mikoto's fault.

"She used EM waves somehow!!"

"That's right. Why else would our blood vessels start bursting!?"

"It's her or us! Electrolysis can easily break down our vitamins!!"

Mikoto had trouble breathing.

Even Shokuhou asked a trembling question while below the pedestrian deck that had clear icicles hanging down from it.

She had doubt in her eyes.

"I seriously doubt you did, but you didn't actually do anything, did you?"

"No, I have no idea what this is. In fact, I can't even cause that with my powers!?"

Mikoto shouted back, but that did not make it any less awkward. Yes, Mikoto and Shokuhou knew more about the situation than any of the other students, *but not even they knew what was happening*. And without knowing that, she could not be 100% certain she had not accidentally caused this somehow.

If Kamijou Touma had happened to be here, he could have explained it right away. He would have said this was the obvious *side effect* when a scientific esper used magical spells. He would tell those students to stop if they wanted to avoid destroying all their blood vessels and nerves.

But the majority of people living in Academy City did not have that

knowledge.

And without the knowledge to avoid the damage happening to them, they could only turn to meaningless superstition.

Kill the witch and all the world's problems will be solved. Break the Muramasa because that sword is disturbing the peace of the world. In the West and the East, there had always been cases of absurd mass hysteria where people attacked a minority to achieve peace of mind.

People were more frightening when inspired by fear than by anger.

Because they could no longer decide for themselves to lower their raised fist.

"Hey, what do we do? She already saw who we are. Oh, god. This is terrifying."

"Shut up. We can't back down now that the fight's started. If we don't take her out, she'll just hunt us down in revenge!!"

"Get her!! Before she can attack again!! This invisible attack can get you through your dorm's walls, so we need to kill her nowwwwwwwwwwwwwww!!"

"Misaka-san," said Shokuhou, but Mikoto was on the move before she even finished. With the Queen still in her arms, she used magnetism to swing around from the bottom of the pedestrian deck like she was on a trapeze. She flew in a large C to arrive high overhead just before the point below the deck was filled with beams of light and great heat. That part of the deck actually melted and the remainder tilted like it had lost its balance.

The #5's eyes were wide as she clung to the #3's hips.

"We can't get the vaccine or antidote if we lose sight of that monster. And she'll destroy the hospital when she gets there. Where did Anna Sprengel go!?"

"I don't know!! But these people collapsing take precedence right now. Did Anna do something to them!?"

Every time the terrified students used magic, they would harm themselves more, but they mistook that for another mysterious attack from Misaka Mikoto, grew even more terrified, and clung to magic again to rid themselves of that fear. Unfortunately, no one here could prove to them they were trapped in a hopeless vicious cycle.

Kamijou Touma was not here.

Even so, Misaka Mikoto focused on what they had to do while she flew upside-down in the air.

That verbal slap to the cheek got the Queen to gasp and grab her remote.

Yes.

Anna Sprengel and Misaka Mikoto were exceptions, but Mental Out would work just fine against this ordinary group of ordinary people.

A single button froze the world around them.

All those boys and girls had been shortening their own lives with magic like someone obsessively checking to make sure they had locked the door before heading out, but now they all came to a stop.

The negative spiral had been broken.

At the same time, the only person still moving stood out like a sore thumb. A small form was using the stairs to descend from the tilted deck.

It had to be...

“Anna Sprengel!!!!”

Part 9

“Oh, dear. They’ve noticed me. That psychological one is still full of surprises and a lot of fun. Maybe we’re just a good match.”

Anna smiled as she descended from the snow-covered pedestrian deck to the crowd on the surface.

A part-timer on a red Santa-themed bike was trapped in the crowd with a phone and an insulated bag, presumably after someone ordered something to this area without thinking. These human shields apparently made it difficult for those girls to attack, so Miss Sprengel slipped past the poor part-timer and kept walking. She was starting to think using a bike might be fun because she had seen a Christmas-themed rental bike stand that formed a metal tree by attaching a ton of bikes to a revolving door made from cross-shaped metal poles.

(I’m sure they can guess where I’m headed, so will they panic if I arrive ahead of schedule?)

The naked little girl pulled her red cloth in closer and smiled coldly. The danger of being her favorite was obvious enough from that boy who was approaching death due to an unexpected kiss from her.

The thorns of this rose would harm all life around her.

She cut across District 15 which continued to party like they were in Sodom (which shouldn’t have been much of a surprise for a city built by Aleister) and she approached the neighboring district.

That was District 7.

But just before she arrived, a black shooting star fell toward her head.

Misaka Mikoto had dropped straight down with an iron sand sword made by

gathering up all the iron sand she could find and shaping it into a rapidly-vibrating sword.

Anna simply held up her small hand.

But her fingers were crossed in an unusual way for simply spreading your hand out.

That was enough to stop an attack capable of slicing right through an armored train.

“And this is unbearably boring, Misaka Mikoto. You were somewhat interesting back when you were blurring the line between science and magic with the A.A.A., but no longer. Now you’re just plain old strong. You can increase your parameters all you like, but your movements themselves are so one-note. I’m not interested in an event boss that requires the strongest equipment, so get lost already.”

“!?”

Mikoto did not expect a clean hit.

The instant she tried to push her way through, it was not Anna Sprengel who was destroyed. It was one of the metal trees found here and there in District 15. It was a rental bike stand made by attaching all the bikes to metal poles to form a tree.

A large cloud of snow scattered into the air around her landing point.

Disconcerting cracks ran through the entire metal and concrete stairway Anna stood on. The metal poles were sliced to pieces and the seemingly ten-year-old girl was slammed into the ground along with the wreckage of the many bikes.

They were rental products, so they did not use anything fancy like carbon or aluminum frames.

That meant Mikoto could control them via magnetism.

(I don't have to defeat her. If I can crush her under all these scraps and keep her from moving, she won't be able to cause any more trouble. Once she's caught, I can apply even more pressure from all directions with my magnetism to really trap her!!)

"This will get you nowhere." Those words mercilessly left the rubble to pierce through the girl's heart. "I said I wasn't interested in raw strength. Because I already know who wins in a contest like that."

It was like a volcano had erupted.

Concrete shards and sharp rebar scattered every which way. Misaka Mikoto (and Shokuhou Misaki who was clinging to her hips) were blown away in a tailspin. They were launched at a high angle, so instead of falling back to the ground, Mikoto planted her feet on the wall of a nearby building to stand on it.

"What... just happened!?"

"Wait, what is that?"

Mikoto and Shokuhou's questions were subtly different.

When Mikoto blinked her eyes and took another look, she noticed a translucent figure standing next to Anna Sprengel. It held a small fist straight up in a silly kind of way.

What was it?

She honestly did not know.

It looked like a humanoid silhouette about as tall as an adult man, but it had large, swan-like wings growing from its back, and its entire head had been transformed into a twisted falcon, eagle, or some other bird of prey. It gave off a pale platinum glow and there was no mistaking it for an ordinary person. But despite the sinister silhouette, a glowing halo hovered above its man-eating head.

Anyone would know what that symbolized.

Even children's picture books used that to signify an angel.

Mikoto felt a terrible sense of wrongness, disgust, and rejection crawling up her spine, like she had seen a maggot-ridden rotting corpse being named the winner of a beauty pageant and no one was questioning it.

That thing was wrong.

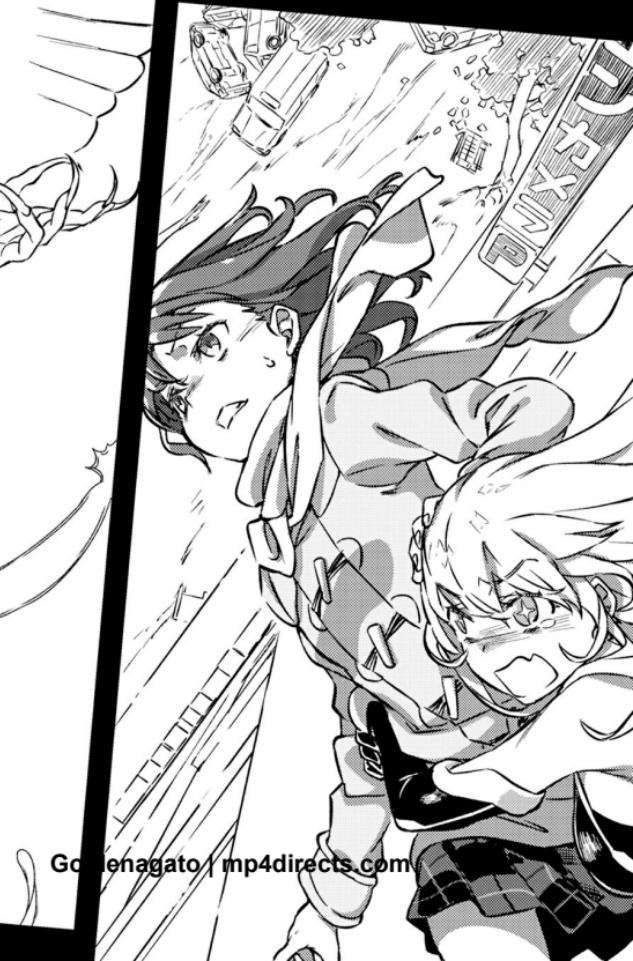
This was not about the division between science and magic. Even Mikoto, a science worshiper who knew nothing of the occult, could tell this was blasphemous.

That was the only word she could think of for this being that shattered people's ordinary values just by existing.

"*Aiwass*," bluntly whispered the little girl lazily covering her nudity with a thin cloth.



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Was that its name? Mikoto was not even sure her ears had heard it correctly. If she analyzed the high frequencies and low frequencies with an auditory device, she might find it was pronounced entirely differently.

At any rate, this was on another level altogether.

It may even have been the source that shared its “power” with the monster known as Anna Sprengel.

But Misaka Mikoto forced herself to take a positive view of the situation.

“We drew this out of her. That means we managed to break through that confident smile of hers.”

“U-u-um, Misaka-san? I realllly doubt my Mental Out is going to work on that falcon angel, so if you’re done with me, could I head back to that boy’s hospital bed and—”

“That means the real battle has finally begun!! We’re on the right track here. If we keep going like this, we can force Anna to use up everything at her disposal!!”

“Please just let me leave!!!!!!”

The little girl looked up at them from the ground.

She was no longer smiling.

Anna Sprengel spoke with that bizarre monster by her side.

She did not even glance toward that reliable partner.

“Do not come out when I have not called for you, dullard. You’re ruining my fun.”

Misaka Mikoto boiled over.

She thought her vision had gone entirely red.

Anna had possessed a means of winning at any time, but she had chosen not to use it. She had dragged out the fight while dancing elegantly along the line between life and death, like she was trying to draw out every last drop of blood.

Did she really not have anything more to her?

Did she not have an earnest desire she could not wait a second longer to fulfill or an anxiety that things would never be the same again if she screwed things up here? Did she not experience impatience or hatred so intense she lost sight of herself? Was she really filled with so much confidence she could take as many detours as she liked and choose as many methods and options as she wanted to try out?

Even though Mikoto had to worry about all the unrelated people who were injured, the definite threat to the hospital, and the microbes eating away at that boy's life from within?

"Give it a rest, you—"

Mikoto gathered strength in her brow and clenched her teeth so hard she thought they might break.

She prepared to let out a roar.

But just before she could, Miss Sprengel sighed and said more.

"Because, dullard, I can slaughter them instantly even without your help."

Part 10

An ominous tremor ran through the entirety of Academy City.

Part 11

The air was scorched and no one was moving.

This was the sinister atmosphere of a battle's aftermath, where even the corpses were abandoned.

And amid it all...

“Hm, hm, hm hm.”

A little girl hid her soft skin with a red cloth and hummed an out-of-tune Christmas song.

She did not bother looking back.

No one remained to get in her way, so her small legs calmly crossed the district border and entered District 7.

That was their home ground.

That hospital was located there.

(Now, then. I wonder if those innocent little heroes were aware what it means to worry about someone else's life. It means you believe your own life is not at risk and that it isn't your time to go.)

Anna Sprengel followed her phone's navigation while she spoke aloud.

“Believing you’re special and that you won’t die is a common form of megalomania in teenagers, but I seriously doubt the real world will be so kind.”

Everyone died eventually.

But in most cases, they did not know their time was coming.

Between the Lines 2

Something pushed up from his stomach.

He thought it was vomit, but it was blood instead. After splattering something the color of tomato juice into the antibacterial sink, Kamijou Touma staggered backwards.

With so many patients living in shared spaces, lines would form at the bathrooms if they were the only places with mirrors for grooming yourself and sinks for washing your face. That was why hospitals often had separate washing stations.

They were generally used to keep yourself clean and presentable even while hospitalized.

They were not meant for going pale-faced with despair.

“Acute St. Germain, huh?” sighed Othinus from his shoulder.

The look on her tiny face in the mirror said she could not call herself a god of war if the color splattered in the sink was enough to faze her.

Pride could often be taken as a negative thing, but it was also comforting to be surrounded by people with the proper knowledge of what to do in a crisis.

“Do you know what’s happening to me?”

This was an unexplained phenomenon as far as Academy City’s scientific analysis was concerned. Kamijou Touma fully trusted the frog-faced doctor’s skill. That man had saved him countless times. But that was why it weighed on him so heavily that this was too much for that doctor.

Those Tokiwadai girls might have widened their eyes at his tone of voice here. It was unusual for him to reveal his weakness like this.

The fifteen-centimetre one-eyed god, who was also his understander, let out a soft sigh and crossed her legs while seated on his shoulder.

“The Magician St. Germain is a colony of parasitic microbes. Oh, and it won’t infect anyone else unless certain specific steps are taken, so you don’t have to worry about that. I imagine St. Germain himself wanted to avoid diluting and altering himself by spreading indiscriminately.”

“...”

“That means St. Germain himself has no life force to be used as source for magic power. This might be easier to understand from an Eastern perspective than a Western one. Without a body containing the organs, blood vessels, and nerves, the ‘energy’ can’t circulate, and it can’t refine that energy into magic power. That’s why St. Germain always uses a host body to refine life force into magic power before using magic. For an Academy City esper, the side effects of that act as an internal attack that destroys the body.”

Kamijou wiped off his sticky lips with the back of his hand, but his lips still felt gross. He looked down and found the back of his hand was bloody too. The skin had split open and the dark red liquid was oozing out.

Even after seeing the wound, he felt no obvious pain there.

He probably had too many wounds to distinguish any single one anymore. His entire body felt hot and swollen and he could have sworn it had grown to twice its usual size. He was a human-shaped blob of pain.

“The method was different, but this is pretty much the same as what Anna Sprengel is doing in the guise of a giant IT company,” said Othinus. “The students of this city are being attacked by knowledge over the internet, while you are being directly attacked from within by a microbe, but in both cases, *it comes down to the taboo of an esper using magic.*”

He heard a group of footsteps hurrying by outside the sliding door. The nurses were probably rushing to a hospital room after receiving a nurse call.

Finding the people collapsed in their dorms or on the streets and then

transporting them to the hospital was difficult enough, but the problem did not end there. The number of R&C Occultics victims would only continue to grow. Once it reached a certain point, it was even possible the hospitals would cease to function.

And even after all this, they still had no idea what Anna was even trying to accomplish.

Why did the Rosicrucians want to cause this devastating damage to Academy City?

(What am I supposed to do?)

He questioned himself.

At the very least, he knew nothing would improve if he simply waited around here. If he did not do something while he could still move, he would rapidly run out options.

But where was he supposed to go and what was he supposed to do there?

He turned on the faucet to wash away the red blood that felt like it had been drained directly out of his lifespan.

“You will know that soon enough,” said Othinus from his shoulder.

Chapter 3: In the Void of Zero —

Contact_6.

Part 1

“Emergency arrival at Entrance 3!!”

“Another one? Our treatment rooms are full!”

The emergency entrance primarily used by ambulances was so tense it was easy to forget today was Christmas. These were not operating rooms. They were treatment rooms used for simple tests and first aid.

Everyone there had to wonder if the rusty stench was escaping the rooms.

They knew everyone who moved in and out of the room and the hallway were disinfected in a variety of ways, but the scent still seemed to linger in their minds. That was how bad the situation was.

An (intentionally) anxiety-inducing siren could be heard approaching. EMTs and doctors rushed this way and that. The people moving in and out were shuffled around like a deck of cards thrown all over the floor. The nurses and a private guard had to throw out a self-styled reporter who was trying to use the confusion to sneak some photos with a pen camera.

If a patient’s breathing or blood pressure fell too far in the treatment rooms, they were finally moved to an operating room. The long row of treatment rooms was meant to provide more minor care to avoid overburdening the

limited number of operating rooms, but there was barely any difference between them anymore. If no operating room was available, a doctor would come to the treatment room and provide as much treatment as possible without violating regulations.

The term “field hospital” was on all their minds even though none of them had ever seen a real one.

“Really, what is going on today?” said the frog-faced doctor with a large mask covering half his face.

He could seem detached from the things going on around him, but no one knew how he really felt on the inside. His ability to maintain a stable condition at all times seemed to prove his talent.

They had no obvious external wounds.

At the very least, they had not been stabbed with a knife or hit by a car.

Yet they had undeniable internal damage.

Their blood vessels and nerves had ruptured.

The cause was unknown, but the number of victims continued to grow and it was nothing short of a miracle that none of them had died yet. The frog-faced doctor had initially suspected a toxin, bacteria, or radiation, but since he was here among them without any special protective equipment, they had obviously found no evidence of that sort of risk.

(But only specialists with the proper knowledge will be able to accept that conclusion. People will have seen all these patients taken to the hospital after they collapsed on the streets. I hope this doesn’t start any harmful rumors.)

A new nurse nervously held out a silver tray.

“Um, these are the patient’s possessions.”

Everyone here was merely medical staff and not Anti-Skill or Judgment, but when an injury suggested a crime or they found evidence of illegal drug

usage, they were required to swiftly record and report it. That required them to know what their patients had on them. Especially when that patient was unconscious and they needed to identify them.

“Hm.”

He noticed something curious along with the ordinary wallet and phone.

It was a coaster-like disk made of smooth plastic. It was divided into different colors with a few different symbols carved into it, so it probably had some kind of meaning.

“Was this made with a 3D printer?”

“We keep finding stuff like this,” said the nurse with an almost fearful tremor in her voice. “They all have these weird items like a small skull or cards with strange symbols on them! What is happening!?”

“...”

Mythology, the occult, the spiritual world.

If this had to do with those things, the frog-faced doctor wondered if something external to the students was causing their powers to go berserk, but that did not seem quite right to him. In that case, they should have been harmed differently depending on their powers: burns from a fire power, telekinetic wounds from a telekinesis power, and so on. It was hard to imagine that would lead to such uniform symptoms.

(When the cause is unknown, it is important to look back from the onset of symptoms and reassess each and every thing they did. Did they start something new recently, or did they finally do something they had been avoiding before? If they stop whatever that is and the symptoms go away, then you can be fairly certain that was the cause.)

But that method would only convince a special sort of person who could view other people as something to be observed.

A cheerful female voice was speaking from the flat-screen TV in the guard

office located next to the ambulance entrance.

“Are you worried people are keeping secrets from you? Do you feel left out?”

Everyone was afraid.

And fear led people to try things they normally would not.

They might call those very things ridiculous in public, but once no one was looking, things changed.

“Well, worry no more! Normal methods might be powerless to help you, but real magic can fix it all in a jiffy. If there is anything you want to know, investigate, or divulge, then log onto R&C Occultics. Our large collection of fortunetelling methods will free you from those needless worries!!”

And none of them had any idea that eliminating their worries in that way would only make them the next victim.

The negative cycle would never end until the cause of the damage was known, but R&C Occultics were the ones in control of the knowledge and data needed to learn that.

Without that knowledge, it would never end.

Just like how IT companies and car manufacturers would show off their graphs explaining how self-driving cars dramatically reduced traditional traffic accidents, but they would fail to mention the increase in accidents caused by cyber attacks.

Or like how online stores would advertise how much more convenient they made everyone's lives, but they would fail to mention how inconvenient it was once the local stores all went out of business and your city or town grew fully dependent on the online store.

Or like how global food companies would highlight how they did not use additives or agrochemicals, but they preferred not to explain how they ended up with fruits and vegetables that stayed fresh despite being almost disturbingly pure and free of additives.

Information sources would hold back any information detrimental to them.

All publicly available information was biased in some way.

That was one of the most basic facts of giant corporations.

Part 2

“Ugh,” groaned Kamijou Touma.

It took him a second to remember where he was.

(Oh, right. I was thirsty, so I stepped out into the hall to get some water.)

He could not tell if he was in pain or not. He had lost all ability to judge his own pain.

He only had a general feeling of his entire body being swollen. He did not know what exactly that meant, but he knew there was something wrong with him.

He looked down at himself again. He was doubled over and leaning against the cold wall of the deserted hallway. He slowly tried to move away from the wall, but he could not manage it. He could not move, like the wall was sucking him in.

“You must be about at your limit.”

“Othi...nus?”

“I told you this before, but you might not remember due to the constant pain.”

A small form poked her head out of his pocket. It was the fifteen-centimetre

god named Othinus. The girl with long, wavy blonde hair and an eyepatch climbed up to his shoulder.

“If this acute St. Germain really has been modified by the Rosicrucians as the legends say, then the technology here will have a very hard time fully healing you. After all, it is growing faster than Imagine Breaker can negate it. Human, if this continues, the microbes will infest *your right hand* as well. If you hope to escape death, you will need to speak with Anna Sprengel since she did this to you.”

“...”

Was that true?

Maybe it was.

But he had to ask about something else before continuing based on that assumption.

“You knew?”

“Knew what?”

“That I need Anna Sprengel to fix this. Did you tell anyone other than me that?”

Othinus let out a short sigh, but she did not hesitate to answer.

“Based on the commotion I’ve seen outside, Anna appears to be approaching this hospital. Now, I never told them myself, but Misaka Mikoto and Shokuhou Misaki learned of Anna’s necessity on their own. I saw no reason to stop them, though.”

A dull sound followed.

Kamijou Touma’s hand squeezed around Othinus, but she did not bat an eye.

“Will you be satisfied once you have crushed me?”

“Othinus.”

“Only one thing matters here. Anna Sprengel is powerful and you have zero chance of victory if you thoughtlessly confront her head on.” The coldhearted voice of the god of magic, war, and deception continued. “So it is necessary to send someone else against her first so she will reveal her trump cards before you face her. Would you want ordinary Anti-Skill or Judgment playing that role? They would be slaughtered gruesomely. To be honest, I don’t really expect those two to win. I don’t, but those two Level 5s are the only candidates I could think of who had any possibility of staying in the fight long enough before losing and still making it back alive. *Of course, it’s all over if they screw it up,* but they at least have a chance. Anyone else would have been killed for sure no matter how hard they tried. Again, for sure.”

“Othinus!!!!!!” he roared in anger.

Her logical series of words came to a halt there.

And after a bit...

“There was never any way to avoid damage altogether. This was the only option that left any possibility at all of everyone surviving.”

“This is my problem.”

“If you had simply gone to face her on your own, you would have been killed first and foremost. And then it would all have fallen apart. Even for those girls who are fighting now.”

“Please, Othinus.”

The god glared up at Kamijou like a sulking child even as her entire torso was squeezed within his hand. It was the boy who had the wavering eyes of a lost child.

“I want you to save me, *but not like this.* I know I’ve fallen several steps behind. You said Imagine Breaker *alone* isn’t enough to keep up here, right?”

Well, it's always been like that. I've always had to use every trick in the book to get by. So please. If someone has to die, then please build the plan around that person being me. Then I'd be on board one-hundred percent."

"And if I refuse?"

"I don't want to hate you."

This time, the god fell silent.

She hung her head a little, hiding her face behind the brim of her witch's hat.

And she spoke in a vanishingly quiet voice.

"(It was necessary, but even after all this, you still 'don't want to', huh? It's that soft side of yours that forces someone else to make the hard decisions, you know?)"

Before Kamijou could ask what she had said, she sank her teeth into his thumb and his grip on her relaxed.

"Ow!?"

"Hmph, insolent human. You can't just touch a god's body like that. Without asking permission first, I mean."

She used that opening to slip from his hand and sat on his wrist with her thin legs crossed.

"I get your policy now, but that is no reason to abandon the information we have now. I will tell you what I have learned about Anna Sprengel. Let's start with what you can do. However this plays out, it can't end until you defeat her."

He had already decided he was going to the battlefield himself.

This was his fight, so he was always the one who should have been in harm's way.

But...

“Wait. If Misaka and...*who was the other one?* Anyway, if those two are on the front line, then how have you been watching them fight? Did you exchange addresses so you can watch a live video sent from their phones or something???”

“A certain idiot I could mention is so poor I do not have a phone of my own. And it wouldn’t be very mobile for me anyway.”

He felt bad about that, but it did not answer his question. Othinus was a legitimate god, but she could not use magic on her own in her current state.

For some reason, she could not look him in the eye.

Just like a child afraid of being scolded. Or like a child being asked who had broken the window when they were hiding the fact that they had broken the bonsai too.

She whispered rapidly while dripping with sweat.

“(R&C Occultics already has everyone using all sorts of meaningless magic, so a professional god can easily alter their half-assed spells to secretly place a Huginn and Muninn effect on top. But I really probably shouldn’t tell him that. I definitely can’t let him know I spread around those surveillance spiritual items made from the raven’s feathers. I mean, the side effect for using magic is hitting them whether I alter their spell or not, so this isn’t doing any more damage, but I just know he’d still be mad.)”

This time, he moved his hand higher.

Kamijou Touma, the God Catcher, squeezed Othinus’ head between his thumb and forefinger.

It was punishment time.

The fifteen-centimetre understander flailed wildly for a while from the pressure to her temples.

Part 3

“Gh, agh.”

A hoarse sound reached Misaka Mikoto’s ears.

Even she was surprised a sound like that could come from her 14-year-old throat.

(I’m not dead?)

She could not seem to access her memories of what happened. It was a rare but irritating experience. It was like her body was sending out a powerful warning signal telling her that opening the lid of her memories would destroy her own ego.

What had happened?

(What did Anna do? And what happened afterwards?)

Her vision was unstable. Not knowing what had happened was causing a mild panic within her. There was something flashing in front of her eyes and she felt a dull pain throbbing in her temples, but nothing was actually flashing – her mind just could not process the scene before her. It was like having a piece of trick art shoved in front of her face without being told how to look at it.

She slowly tried to get up and finally realized something soft was surrounding her head.

It was Shokuhou Misaki.

The other girl was apparently seated on the ground and holding her to her chest.

Almost like she was comforting a small child.

“Are you alive there?”

“...”

Mikoto forced herself to shake her head to focus herself on reality.

“I can’t believe you came to before me.”

“And I never imagined I would have to look after you like this. But it’s not like I had a choice. I can’t save him without sending you after Anna, so I’m willing to do anything, even try out my nursing ability.”

They were in District 15.

Anna Sprengel was not here. She must have already gone on ahead.

A scorched smell reached Mikoto’s nose.

She also saw a metallic shine.

A crushed and bent mass of steel lay on the ground nearby, but it was not a 4-wheel vehicle or an airplane with a distinctive silhouette formed from the main wings and tail. She saw what looked like squid or octopus tentacles and a special paint oozing out onto the street. The technology was sticky and liquid, reminding her somewhat of a rotting corpse.

She gulped.

(What is that? Some kind of machine?)

“That is the Five Over OS, Model Case: Mental Out.”

The two girls were hiding behind what looked like a ruptured plastic ball with a diameter of several meters.

Mikoto was limp and sweating despite the cold and Shokuhou gently raised one hand for some reason.

Her fingertips moved as if she were controlling a marionette.

The gloves she wore must have been made to read her finger movements.

“Have you seen the mantis-like #3 version, Misaka-san? Well, this isn’t just the #5 version. *It’s another version derived from it.* To be clear, I picked this up from the dark side and it’s said to have enough academic value to rival me. I never imagined I would have to sacrifice it to save my life like this.”

They had to catch up to Anna who had gone on ahead.

Mikoto calmed her breathing and tried to pull her head away from that warmth that felt as inviting as a down blanket during the wintertime. But her actual body refused to leave that comfort. Her body more than her mind had been infected with a fear that she really would die if she kept doing this.

She exhaled and asked a question.

“What do we do?”

“What else can we do? We save him. Which means stealing some kind of method from the villain. And I’m willing to immaturely play as many trump cards as it takes to do that. So how about a second one!?”

With a dull thud, a metallic flash flew in from the side.

This one was a bizarre parasitic wasp the size of a car. Its two front legs wrapped around Shokuhou Misaki while she hid behind the scraps. Mikoto just watched it happen, but once she realized she was about to be left behind, she quickly clung to its reinforced glass abdomen. The strange machine slid across the ground while it rapidly vibrated its four thin wings to take flight while otherwise motionless.

This was not the further derivation.

It was the original Five Over, Model Case: Mental Out.

(Honestly, I thought this thing was destroyed back then, but then I look into it again and find there was a full set of spare parts out there. You can’t let your

guard down for a second with this city!!)

The military weapon modeled after an ichneumon wasp flew up into the sky while making a rapid V-shape like a red pen marking a test.

The relative speed caused the snow to feel a lot more like a blizzard blowing right at them.

“Do you know where Anna went!?” frantically shouted Mikoto. “She’s following her phone’s navigation, so if we don’t stop her now, she’ll head straight to the hospital. And it takes less than half an hour to get there from here!!”

“You can handle that sort of mechanical search of the city, Misaka-san. Start hacking security cameras and phones to find her!!”

Then had Shokuhou taken flight just to feel like she was *doing* something? She could look cold and calculating, but this side of her reminded Mikoto of *someone else*. Mikoto pulled out her phone, but then she clicked her tongue. Finding Anna was not as easy as Shokuhou had made it sound, but...

“Some of the cameras have unnaturally repeating frames as if to hide someone?”

“Where?”

“Keep going east. She isn’t even trying to lose anyone tailing her, so she’s taking the direct route to the hospital!!”

Their flight sped up.

If they had not already known how far to go, they might have passed her right by.

Mikoto pulled out an arcade coin.

They were already in District 7.

If Anna really was headed where the girls thought she was, they did not have

a moment to lose.

“Keep our attitude and speed steady! Let’s see how she likes an aerial bombing!!”

Then the giant wasp suddenly began to stall. The blowing blizzard created by relative speed changed direction. They dropped straight down like a marionette after its strings were cut. Mikoto’s eyes widened as she clung to the thing.

“What, did it malfunction!?”

“No, this was something else!”

The mechanical bug wings continued to vibrate so quickly they produced afterimages. There was no damage to the machine and its output remained optimal. Nevertheless, the cutting-edge military weapon lost its balance and dropped toward the ground.

Mikoto could see Anna Sprengel’s thin smile down below.

She was also holding her small palm straight up toward them.

That was all, but...

“Did she grab at the air and the atmospheric pressure itself!?”

Airplanes and helicopters could not fly just anywhere. They had a maximum altitude. Devices that flew by interacting with the air would lose their power to fly if the air was too thin.

A dull roar reached Mikoto’s ears shortly thereafter.

A localized whirlwind attacked the Academy City sky and the Christmas lights and trees were torn away and flung upwards as if on a space elevator. The Five Over was caught by it and could only fall now that it had lost its flyable environment.

“Gahh!!”

They crash landed and the accumulating white snow burst into the air around them.

They had used two Five Over superweapons without doing any real damage to Anna at all. They were less than 200m from Anna, although they were separated by a few temporary warehouses (probably delivery drone bases) that looked like circus tents.

“Well, we’ll just have to make do,” muttered Mikoto while getting up from the ground.

In a dragged-out robot anime battle, the main characters would withdraw and try again the instant they ran across the slightest problem, but in reality, only the side with greater quality and quantity could escape enemy pursuit to leave the battlefield. If the weaker side carelessly turned their back, they would simply get shot down like this.

Would Anna Sprengel come to them?

Or would she ignore her surviving enemies and continue walking toward the hospital?

Misaka Mikoto exhaled and spoke.

“Shokuhou, hey, you with the excess fat.”

“What is it, you cut of bland lean meat?”

“I’m going to attack Anna again, so you use that opening to get away from here and return to the hospital.”

“Don’t you have that backwards? Placing me in front of the goal won’t accomplish anything. We already know Mental Out doesn’t work on Anna.”

“Yes, which is why you need to get that idiot out of there. If we called him up and told him, I just know he’d come here instead. We’re already in District 7 and this is only 20 minutes away from that hospital on foot, after all.” The rapid clip at which Mikoto spoke suggested even she was not fully convinced about her idea. “You might be hopeless in a direct physical fight, but you

specialize in the more confusing worlds of influence and conspiracies, right? I don't care how you do it, just spirit him away to somewhere Anna can't reach him. I'll do whatever it takes to get the vaccine or antidote from her. I swear it. So you get that idiot to evacuate. Take him outside Academy City if you have to."

"Are you sure about this, Misaka-san?"

"Of course I'm not," she spat back. Then she clarified. "But I know he would hate to see what happens if we don't. If the peaceful hospital is attacked and all the doctors and patients are hurt while he watches on, he'll blame himself for it. So you need to get him out of there before that happens."

This was not a fight to win.

It was to avoid a bad aftertaste after they lost. Their best case scenario had already fallen that far.

They had to accept that Anna Sprengel was enough of a monster to change the modern era.

"Misaka-saan." Shokuhou Misaki sighed. "I won't forget you for at least a week."

"Oh? That's longer than I expected. The world might be destroyed by then."

They bumped fists and then got to work.

Misaka Mikoto moved toward a building wall while crouched low and Shokuhou Misaki instructed the ichneumon wasp combat machine to pick her up.

However, something had slipped both their minds.

Or maybe they had never had a chance to accurately assess their location after making an emergency landing due to the irregular stall. They deserved praise enough for making sure they did not crush any of the boys and girls who were visiting supermarkets and discount stores on Christmas to buy soba or a mochi maker for the New Year.

In other words, what would happen if they had happened to land on the direct line between Anna's current position and the hospital?

A dazzling flash of light blasted right through the temporary warehouses in between.

They had been careless.

That 2-3m metal orb that could produce the world's oldest whatever was enough of a threat, but Mikoto and Shokuhou had been attacked in another way afterwards. They had not given any thought to what that light had been. And in a clash between supernatural powers, leaving any gaps in your understanding was tantamount to suicide.

They were not given enough time to analyze what had happened. Just like the audience drawn in by the stage magician's act, they could not make out the truth of what they were seeing despite seeing it directly.

Even seeing clearly grew difficult.

Shokuhou Misaki would have died if the ichneumon wasp Five Over had not left her control and automatically protected its user. It was bent, crushed, and pushed backwards while it counteracted the force. The thick shield very nearly flattened the human it was meant to protect. A torn-off shard of metal grazed the Queen's cheek as she scooted back on her butt. A cut ran across her cheek like someone had slashed her with a blade.

The ichneumon wasp silhouette fell apart.

It could no longer fly and probably could not even walk.

But Shokuhou did not have time to worry about that. Things were even worse. If they were crushed here, their plan to "make the most of their loss" would fall apart too. She could see that solid pillar snapping before her eyes.

Since they were so near the hospital, an ambulance with siren blaring had to swerve out of the way of the "obstacle" collapsed on the side of the road.

In other words...

“Misaka...-saaan?” called Shokuhou from behind the crushed metal.

There was no response.

The other girl looked like a cat that was hit by a car. She was lying on her side and she did not even turn her head toward Shokuhou. The only movement was her short chestnut hair weakly fluttering in the chilly December wind. The white snow was falling on her and starting to accumulate so evenly and cruelly.

And Shokuhou also heard some quiet footsteps.

She was coming.

“Misaka-saaan!!”

Still no response.

The girl who had sworn she would retrieve the vaccine or antidote now lay collapsed on the side of the road.

The disconcerting sirens clutched at Shokuhou’s heart.

Part 4

“Hm, hm, hm hm.”

Someone was quietly humming in the hospital hallway.

Even though an ominous tremor had just reached the hospital itself.

A short girl had one arm in a cast and a square medical eyepatch over her

right eye while she dragged along a metal stand carrying a clear IV bottle. That bob cut girl in pajamas must have been an inpatient because she was walking around in hospital slippers. But she bumped into a boy when she walked around the corner.

And with her forehead still pressed against Kamijou Touma's chest, the girl known as Maidono Hoshimi spoke quietly to him.

"(Looks like you could use some help. I don't know what you're trying to do, but if you simply open the emergency exit, an alarm will go off at the nurse station. If you want to escape safely, you would do best to get some help from a professional.)"

"..."

They had injured each other during their intense Christmas Eve battle, but Maidono was clearly exaggerating her own injuries. He should probably be judged guilty for punching a girl at all, but he certainly did not remember breaking her arm or gouging out one of her eyes.

This was her form of flashy camouflage where she chose the most conspicuous costume for the circumstances to keep anyone from remembering what she herself actually looked like. That dark side pro had eliminated all notable details other than "hospital patient".

For that matter, Maidono Hoshimi was a fake name and her real name was still unknown, but a criminal suspect like her should have been locked in a hospital room with bars on the windows. It was enough of an emergency that she was even walking around free like this.

"(I owe you one,)" whispered the bob cut girl. "(And I thought it would be best to repay you before my trial begins. I'm sure to be charged with tons of additional offenses anyway, so what's one or two more crimes now, right? You have something you need to do, don't you? I'll help you escape.)"

Kamijou appreciated the offer.

The hospital was overrun with confusion due to the near constant influx of

emergency patients. But even so, the doctors or nurses were sure to stop a patient in as bad shape as him if he tried to leave through the main entrance. They would physically restrain him and drag him back to his room. That was why he had decided to use the emergency exit, but Maidono said that route held risk too.

However.

Kamijou Touma gently placed his hands on the pajama girl's small shoulders.

And he slowly pushed her away from him.

"You don't have to."

"I don't understand."

"You were going to quit the dark side, weren't you?" He crouched to her eye level. "This is like going on a diet. If you decide to stop doing something, you have to *get in the habit* of not doing it. If you switch back and forth all the time because 'I have to this time' or 'this is an exception', no one will believe you actually want to quit. That's like a serial killer who keeps insisting they'll stop tomorrow or next week while continuing to kill people."

"..."

"Listen, this is your life."

His mysterious bleeding was still happening.

He felt like he could cough up some blood at any moment if he let his guard down.

But he still refused to grab that outstretched hand.

"Use your power for yourself. You were sick of dirtying your hands for someone else, right? You can't use chopsticks, but you decided to believe you can still live a normal life and start making progress again, right? Then you can't do this. You can't run to the dark side again, Maidono. Living an honest life isn't easy. Life often isn't fair and it's full of disappointments, so

if you know some secret tricks, it's definitely easier to just use them. But you decided *you weren't doing that anymore*, right? That was your decision. So live that life. It's your life, so you need to put yourself first and do your best with the rules you've chosen for yourself."

Her face twisted up.

Just like a child who had gotten separated from her mother at a large amusement park.

"For the first time." Some time passed and she seemed to be holding her breath throughout. "For the first time, I found someone I actually wanted to serve. I thought I could go nuts just one more time before being thrown behind bars."

"Like I said, life often isn't fair and it's full of disappointments. But that doesn't mean anything is permissible. This is a good chance to learn how to show self-restraint."

He smiled and wiped her tears away with his thumb.

He felt certain she would be fine now.

If Anna Sprengel was after him, he could not allow the hospital to be caught in the crossfire.

Just like Maidono had her life to live, Kamijou had his own way of living his life.

He squeezed the whistle he was wearing around his neck *even though he could not remember where it came from.*

"I'm on my way," he said while pushing open the emergency exit with his shoulder.

Part 5

An explosion sounded in the distance.

The fire alarm linked with the emergency exit began to ring and Kamijou Touma ran down the stairs while barely staying on his feet. He was still technically indoors, but the heating was less effective here. The ominous chill felt like the invisible presence of death sneaking in toward his heart.

If he was spotted from here on, he would be restrained.

They might be acting out of good will, but his presence at the hospital would draw Anna Sprengel to it. If that happened, all the emergency patients driven to the verge of death by R&C Occultics would really and truly be killed by Anna.

He had to avoid that at all costs.

But even his sense of pain was failing him, the deafening alarm messed with his senses, and the stairs never seemed to change no matter how many flights he descended. Before long, he was enveloped by a sensation like he was walking on fluffy clouds. The light seemed to blur and the sound grew distorted. He lost track of what floor he was on.

And amid it all, he heard a voice.

“Looks like you’re having some trouble.”

No one had been there a moment before.

He at least felt confident of that.

The soprano voice carried well. As a high-pitched child’s voice, it was hard to judge whether this was a boy or a girl. Or maybe it had been intentionally modified to that end. Kamijou of course did not recognize it. He looked up again, but he could not actually see someone leaning against the wall of the landing. He only saw a vague outline there.

The next thing he knew, all the deafening noise was gone.

The fire alarm and the ominous rumbling from outside had vanished.

Had those things stopped, or had his senses gone out? He had no idea. Here, he was surrounded by a silence so great it actually hurt his ears.

At the very least, this person did not seem intent on capturing him.

When he slipped past them and descended the next flight of stairs, he found the same figure waiting there.

This may not have been real.

He looked over at the floor number sign. He had it square in his field of vision, but the meaning of the number never actually reached his mind.

“Not wanting to involve Maidono Hoshimi makes sense, but that does not change the fact that there is no hope left for you if you continue on like this.”

Kamijou Touma placed his right hand on the side of his head.

The figure seemed to be laughing.

“Oh, I am not St. Germain.”

He descended another flight of stairs.

The figure was again waiting for him. He began to wonder if the stairway would continue forever and he could never escape the spiraling prison without the permission of this boy(?).

Kamijou finally came to a stop and asked a question.

“Who are you?”

“Sorry, I guess my appearance wouldn’t be much of an explanation, would it? You may have at least heard my name, but I shouldn’t just assume. I should probably introduce myself from the beginning.”



The light blurred even when he looked straight at the figure.

Even their outlines were unclear, like it was a scene filmed through an out-of-focus video camera.

But accepting this other person's presence seemed to allow a more colorful alternate world to spread out around him. The walls and floor had been given calming colors for the benefit of the patients, but now they flashed with bright colors and the orderly stairs bent and undulated like smiling lips. There were no gaps below his feet. There could not be. This distorted view was only an illusion. But he still felt like he would forever vanish from the real world if he were to misstep and fall into those pitch-black gaps.

The dream refused to end.

Was it his thoughts rather than his senses that were going haywire?

"I am Aihana Etsu, the Level 5 known as Academy City's #6."

“...”

He felt a squeezing at his heart.

Was this really them, or was it someone else?

“Why are you here?”

“To do the usual. The usual for me, anyway.”

That answer seemed to prove their legitimacy.

The #1 Accelerator, the #3 Misaka Mikoto, and all the others known as Level 5s *created a unique world all their own*. It may have been in his imagination, but it felt that way to Kamijou. Clashing with them carried the same pressure as being taken inside an action movie or suspense movie.

“Now, what power would you like? I can give it to you. But I'm not too proud of that since I can't say I actually ‘create’ the power.”

If he did not stay strong, he would be taken in by it.

He would stop to question his presence in the world of a war movie or suspense movie where people's lives were used up as readily as tissues.

Aihana Etsu seemed to be smiling bitterly.

Kamijou could not actually see their face, but he could just tell from their aura.

"I cannot actually do all that much. The nature of my power means I cannot bring about justice on my own. So I am always thinking about who I can side with to ensure the good guys win. I lend out the name of Aihana Etsu as a part of that."

"What...are you talking about?"

"*You are not a good person,*" they bluntly stated. "Which is why I avoided contacting before now, but it seems supporting you is the best choice available here. R&C Occultics, this mutation that has occurred within science, is rapidly tearing through the world centered around Academy City. It seems supporting you with my power is the only way of fighting it."

This was Academy City's #6.

Kamijou was being offered the power of one of the Level 5s officially recognized by the city.

"Now, picture the you that you wish to be. Picture your ideal self."

A distortion ran through that blotted-out person's voice.

In a way, this may have been the power most wanted in this era. The modern age prioritized time-saving and cost-effectiveness over all else, so no one had to go on a test of courage or go exploring through an old abandoned building for themselves. With a video site's streaming service, everyone could safely experience the adventure someone else had posted. As long as the one person charged toward certain death with a camera in hand, millions more could safely share in the same thrill and catharsis. That was what the modern age

demanded.

No effort was needed on your part.

You could ignore all the risks.

You just needed a service that immediately provided the end result.

“You can be that version of yourself. Now, *I will lend you Aihana Etsu.*”

“...”

“For example.” The person with the unseeable face pointed at the center of Kamijou Touma’s chest with their index finger. “Would you like to know what meaning that whistle holds? Are you at all interested in restoring your lost memories? You can do it, as long as you arrange the necessary conditions in this city.”

The #6 was smiling.

That much Kamijou could tell.

“I generally do not give this sort of hint because my suggestions will only narrow people’s imaginations. But, well, I do promise you this power is more convenient than that Rensa’s was. And you must feel lacking in more areas than that. You must have realized by now that your right hand alone is not enough to keep up here. You must know that rushing in as you are will only get you killed.”

Anyone could be instantly transformed into a protagonist, no annoying training or leveling up required.

Kamijou Touma held his breath and shook his head.

“I don’t want it.”

“Why not?”

“This is none of your business.”

“This is my decision. What makes you think you have the right to refuse it?”

Kamijou just about smiled bitterly at that one.

This really was one of the chosen Level 5s. They were always so arrogant *when they were doing the right thing*. Just like the #3 had destroyed so many labs to protect her clones and just like the #1 had decided on his own to get rid of the dark side.

“Hey,” said Kamijou.

“Yes?”

“You aren’t Maidono Hoshimi who was driven to the edge by someone else. You seem to be enjoying your life well enough, so maybe it’s wrong of me to worry about you getting caught up in my business,” spat out Kamijou with a look he had not shown to that uncertain girl. *“But you’re starting to piss me off.* I don’t like how you reject all my own possibilities by just saying from the start I can’t solve this on my own. It’s like you’re looking down on us all as no more than dolls you can play with. ... You’re the perfect example of what a Level 5 shouldn’t be. And the fact that you honestly think you’re acting in our best interest makes it all the worse.”

“...”

“This is our issue. We’re not fighting for your amusement.”

This was the opposite.

It was the same thing he had said to Maidono Hoshimi, but viewed from the opposite direction.

He was providing an example of the anger you were supposed to feel when you learned your life was being used for someone else’s purposes. It was because Kamijou Touma felt this way that he had refused Maidono’s help. It was because he felt this way that he had decided to cut all ties with her despite knowing her help would be more and more convenient each time he used it.

“Stop setting up a camera, stepping in to help, and posting a nice edited version of the story to some video site to make you look like a success, you peeping tom. You’ll lend me Aihana Etsu? Don’t make me laugh. If you want to change the world, then put in the work yourself. What your power is doesn’t matter. Whether you’re a Level 0 or a Level-less teacher, everyone still does what they can to fight the cruelties they see in their life. Changing the world requires someone who isn’t afraid to get hurt, but that ain’t you.”

He was unsteady on his feet.

He would have fallen if someone pushed at him with their finger. In fact, he could barely stay standing without anything to prop him up. And even if he was in top form, clashing head-on with one of Academy City’s Level 5s would seem like suicide.

But he still said it.

Kamijou Touma made his point while holding out his right fist.

“And if you still don’t get it, then you’re just an obstacle to overcome. I will keep moving, Aihana Etsu, even if it means breaking through you.”

“You will die.”

“I know that,” mouthed Kamijou Touma.

For some reason, the #6’s voice had changed slightly here.

Almost like they were recalling a history of repeated failure.

“If you keep going like this, you will surely die. Whether you rush to the battlefield or you curl up here, you will not last long. No matter what you choose, the villain will have the last laugh. Your destruction has been predetermined here.”

“So what?”

He was afraid of dying. So terribly afraid.

He kept smiling so the others would not notice and he had avoided confiding in any of them, but those words he had revealed to the doctor were not a lie. It was him who had said he was scared.

But.

This was a separate issue.

“I made a choice here I never should have made,” said the #6. “To be blunt, *I should never have anything to do with a hypocrite like you who refuses to take a side*, but I am here anyway because I have reason to believe I must act here even if it means violating my principles. Yet you are insisting on remaining your usual self. You insist on walking your extremely contradictory path where you talk endlessly about the goodness of human nature yet cannot abandon the violence of your fist. You are like someone who refuses to evacuate as the lava of a volcanic eruption approaches their city at the foot of the mountain and instead stares at the clock, waiting to walk to school according to their usual schedule. And that is why you will die. You are simply repeating the same pattern over and over.”

“If you want to take control of my life, then clench your fist, Aihana Etsu. Your words won’t reach anyone if you refuse to take even a single step out of your safe zone.”

He heard a quiet tongue click.

The #6 must have realized neither side was budging here.

The genderless soprano voice suddenly dropped to something terrifyingly deep.

And he(?) clenched his(?) fist.

“How stubborn can you be? If you want misfortunate that badly, then go ahead and die.”

After a dull thud, one of the two crumpled down and the other one slowly descended the stairs. The endlessly spiraling stairs were gone now. They

arrived on the ground floor surprisingly quickly as they counted the flights they walked down.

The victor let out a breath and spoke all alone.

“See, Aihana Etsu? Was that so hard?”

The #6 had known no one would remain to stop Kamijou Touma if they lost here.

Yet they had still clenched their fist in order to “convince” him.

It had been a sort of ritual.

Fighting a battle they knew they would lose had been a ritual to allow Kamijou to continue onward. That elite ensconced in their safe zone had actually taken a single step outside of their usual way. It was Aihana who had said their #6 Level 5 power was not suited for direct combat.

Kamijou Touma could only smile as he stepped outside after rejecting someone else’s methods and trampling on their concern for him.

He felt the biting chill and the white curtain of snow blocked his view. The professional doctors with specialized knowledge had shaken their heads and said they could not support him in this outside field, but this was the freedom he had chosen for himself.

This was his life.

So now he had only one option left: to win.

Part 6

Shokuhou Misaki grimaced while hiding behind cover.

She groaned and shook her long honey-blonde hair. She was leaning back against a concrete wall while seated on the ground. A child would have known the cold might freeze her skin to the wall, but she was too preoccupied to even consider that risk.

Misaka Mikoto had been taken out of the fight.

They had no direct fighter left. She knew they were out of options, but she could not ask for a do-over either.

She looked up while still leaning back against the wall. The wall appeared to belong to a department store. Instead of the fancy ones she would shop at, this one was directly connected to a largish subway station. You could maybe call it a vertical supermarket.

There was another wall here too.

She was hiding behind a partially scrapped superweapon.

The Five Over, Model Case: Mental Out had collapsed on its side. She was holding her breath and lost in thought while hidden behind that ichneumon wasp device. Sound, heat, and the color white all scared her at the moment. Because she did not understand how Anna worked. For example, who could say she could not detect carbon dioxide?

(Five minutes.)

She had no plan.

She could see the hospital's roof even from here. The pointy-haired boy, the clone girls undergoing treatment, and the many other patients and workers were there. Any option that allowed that monster to reach the hospital was out of the question.

Even if she was going to grab the antidote or vaccine, it had to be done safely.

And that safety included herself, Kamijou, and even all the other people out there. The Queen of Tokiwadai honestly was not that compassionate, but she was following that boy's rules for today. It all had to follow that.

(It won't take her even five minutes to reach the hospital on foot. Even if I manage to get him out of there now, she still might see us and chase after us. Not to mention our footprints in the snow.)

And on top of that, there was Anna Sprengel's strength. She was hopelessly powerful. Shokuhou hated to admit it, but that was not someone she could outdo with her #5 Mental Out alone. She could not defeat her and she could not even escape from her.

That was set in stone.

No matter how much she prayed, she could not change it.

So she knew full well that if she was going to rejoin the fight, she needed *someone or something else's help*.

The first thing that came to mind was the thing she was using as a shield.

(I never touched this thing before today, so it kind of scares me how readily it obeyed me. This suit doesn't support you by messing with your head, does it?)

She held a remote in her dominate hand, but she moved her other hand's fingers like she was operating an invisible marionette. Even she was confused by how smoothly her fingers moved independently of each other.

However, the weapon itself had been partially reduced to scrap.

It could not take flight at full speed with her in its grasp. At most, it could run along the ground while dragging its bent and smashed form around. That would be like asking to be shot by Anna.

(Which means...)

“...”

She let out a heavy breath, pulled out her mirror, and used that to check on things outside of her cover.

Misaka Mikoto remained motionless.

She was still collapsed on the ground with the chilly wind whipping at her chestnut bangs and short skirt. Shokuhou could not see her face, so she could not actually tell if the girl was conscious or not.

They were only a few meters apart, but those few meters of unguarded space were a deadly barrier at the moment.

She would be killed the instant she stepped out.

A millimeter and a kilometer were no different. She had to assume she stood on a precipice and that taking one step out would mean being devoured by the great maw of death.

Mikoto had crossed to the other side.

No one living could reach her anymore.

(Argh, Misaka-san is the one that's supposed to come bowing to me and ask to come under my umbrella. Then there wouldn't be any risk for me! And if she was awake and capable of accepting the rule of her beautiful queen, I could ignore her solid defenses and control her. But she'll reject my commands while unconscious!)

Shokuhou heard a quiet footstep.

She quickly pulled the mirror back before actually confirming what had caused it.

The enemy must have noticed her.

That was the master of the other side.

To a member of the living, that was the grim reaper who would drag them into the darkness.

In other words, that was Anna Sprengel. Shokuhou doubted she could escape detection just by holding her breath behind cover. Not to mention that Anna had only hunted down those who impeded her path to the hospital. Mikoto and Shokuhou had not been attacked because they were Level 5s. They had been attacked because they *just so happened* to be on the straight line path between Anna and the hospital.

Anna would keep going no matter who stood in her way.

She would crush and tear through everything that stood along that invisible path.

“There’s no time.”

It was already surprising Shokuhou was still alive at all. And if Anna was no longer interested in her, Anna would probably ignore her if she just left. But “probably” was not good enough right now. If Anna held a small hand out toward her back on a whim, that was the end right there.

She wanted something she could do.

Something that would distract Anna Sprengel enough to create an opening for her to escape.

Sending the half-scrapped Five Over would be the height of folly. Even if it barely provided any defense, she would still be throwing out her only shield. Not to mention its speed was severely restricted since it did not even have all of its legs left. Anna would be able to dodge it with a single casual step to the side, or she could blow it away with an attack of her own if she felt like it. ... And if that attack tore through the machine, it would also hit Shokuhou behind it.

(That only leaves one option.)

The look in Shokuhou Misaki’s eyes grew colder.

It was now icier than the snow.

This was the face of the Queen of Tokiwadai’s largest clique. It was the look

of the one who had torn down so many rivals and ruled a world of influence where pretty ideals were not enough.

Her rational mind provided a coldhearted answer.

(Using Misaka-san would be the easiest and most certain method.)

Anna was only interested in *that* pointy-haired high school boy.

She was not interested in Mikoto, but surely she would be somewhat cautious of that physical fighter ranked #3. She had already moved to defend herself and strike back against the girl, so whether or not Anna was aware of it, she had decided the #3 required more attention than the #5 whose power did not work at all.

The #5's power to control minds did not work on the #3 who could control electricity.

It did not work, but Shokuhou knew Mikoto would react like she had a headache when rejecting the command.

Shokuhou spun the remote in her hand while still hidden behind cover.

(If I use my full power, won't her body jerk even while unconscious?)

It was her ability to place this option on the table without hesitation that made her the Queen.

People's ideas were not distinct points; they were a continuous stream. If you narrowed your options in advance based on taboos or what seemed sensible, you would cut off your access to further inspiration. The people who did things other people could not were generally a mess inside their heads. She had peeked inside a few monsters of that sort, so she understood that better than anyone.

(And once Anna looks over at Misaka-san on the ground, I'll use the Five Over to escape. I don't expect it to protect me, but I have a single chance to avoid her attack if its bent even slightly by all the metal and silicon inside this thing. That seems like the best I can do here.)

There were ways to use a lifeless machine even if its specs were lacking.

And even humans with lives of their own could be used to survive if you abandoned your morals.

“...”

She leaned back against the nearly-scrapped machine and looked up into the white sky as if trying to free herself from her human heart.

The Queen of Tokiwadai took a slow, deep breath.

A few dozen options danced in her head, but she could not find one with better odds of survival.

(I'm starting to feel silly trying so hard here. I don't know how this enemy works, but she's clearly cheating.)

Strength rapidly drained from her.

And despite relaxing, her body felt horribly heavy.

(Besides, why am I doing so much to support Misaka-san and why do I feel so guilty about considering this? Since when were we such good friends? She's not even in my clique. I have no real obligation to look after her. If I turn tail and run, the hospital is right there. And if I can get him out of there, then the hospital won't be attacked.)

If they did not acquire the vaccine, antidote, or whatever else, then running away would only mean waiting for Kamijou Touma to die.

And her own odds of success were extremely low.

They were low, but not nonexistent.

(I can probably only use the half-destroyed Five Over just one more time.)

The Queen of Tokiwadai's cold side appeared on her face.

(So I should leave Misaka-san here and escape for the time being. And when that sadist Anna Sprengel decides to attack Misaka-san while she's defenseless, I can ram the Five Over into her, or...)

Trying to save Misaka Mikoto here would save no one.

That would only get them all killed.

But abandoning her might open the door for saving some people.

"At times like this..."

Shokuhou Misaki of course had lines she refused to cross.

For example, she would not eat a burger full of artificial ingredients even if she was stranded on a snowy mountain in the middle of winter. She had other rules like that that she held dear. But wasn't she following his rules instead for today?

However...

"Disappearing from his memories no matter what I do is annoying as can be, but it has its upside. No matter how this turns out, he won't hold a grudge against me or criticize my actions."

She heard another footstep on the snowy road.

There was no prideful demonstration and no merciful final warning. Anna Sprengel was like a freight train. She simply arrived and continued on her way. She would plow through whoever stood in her way without a second glance, even if they were the #3 or the #5.

She was close now.

If she moved any closer, the diversion plan would not work. Shokuhou needed to escape in a different direction from the diversion, so she could not have Anna close enough to kill them all with a single attack.

She could escape right now.

There was an alley between the department store and the next building. If she snuck in there while behind the Five Over, she could escape without Anna noticing.

“Misaka-san.”

This was the most logical answer.

Her voice had grown colder than a machine’s.

She held a remote in her right hand and she controlled the Five Over with her left hand. She held her one and only option in her head to intentionally drown out the noise there.

The word “responsibility” appeared in the back of her mind.

The Queen of Tokiwadai gulped and made up her mind.

“I won’t forget you for at least a week.”

An electrical sparking sound violently burst out.

Something moved.

Anna Sprengel’s eyes briefly strayed from her destination.

“Oh?”

She sounded amused.

A moment later, *the half-destroyed Five Over, Model Case: Mental Out charged straight at Miss Sprengel.*

“Tch!! I can’t believe this!!” shouted Shokuhou Misaki as she more jumped than ran.

She heard a crash even worse than from a car accident, but that mass of several tons was meaningless against the small body of what looked like a ten-year-old.

Light erupted out and it was blown away like melted cheese in a single second.

Even with the support of the suit, there was simply not enough time to pick up Misaka Mikoto and princess carry her while jumping up onto a building rooftop.

Which was why she instead focused on the remote in her right hand.

She held it like a stake and slammed it against Misaka Mikoto's right temple while the girl lay motionless on the ground with a thin layer of white snow accumulating on her.

"Wake up already!" she roared. "Misaka-saaan!!!!!"

Shokuhou's Mental Out would not reach the #3's brain without Mikoto's acceptance, but she knew it would give the girl a powerful headache.

What if she could shake Mikoto's mind enough to wake her up?

She had no guarantee this would work.

It was no more than a poor gamble entirely based on speculation. No, it was wishful thinking she was clinging to in order to escape the other, crueler choice.

"Gah!?"

Someone groaned, but it was not Misaka Mikoto.

A dull impact had hit the #5 Queen in the side while she lay protectively over the other girl. The suit's protection could hold back a handgun bullet, yet this knocked the breath out of her. Her vision flipped around and she could not prepare for her landing, so she ended up tumbling across the cold asphalt.

She had been kicked in the side.

It took her a few seconds to realize that simple fact. However it had happened, Anna Sprengel now stood right next to Mikoto. Shokuhou did not

have time to check what had become of the Five Over. She had trouble breathing and started choking. She tried to move her arms and legs, but they only convulsed. Such a small body should not have been able to make an attack like that.

“Eastern martial arts are the best-known use of the lifeforce circulating through the body,” said Anna like this was some kind of joke. It had probably only looked like she was kicking a soccer ball. “But the Western Sephiroth also corresponds to the human body. It is possible to focus on the channels connecting the spheres to throw a punch or a kick that obstructs that flow of power. Hi-yah☆”

“Cough, ahh!!”

Shokuhou could not breathe. The blood vessels in her temples were throbbing, but that was not the actual problem. She could tell that some more important and unseen circulation had been obstructed.

Anna Sprengel lowered the small foot she had raised as if mimicking something.

She placed it on top of Misaka Mikoto’s right temple.

Shokuhou thought she heard a straining sound, but she knew she had to be imagining it. There was no way the straining of the skull could be heard from outside the body like this. And yet...

She had screwed up.

Her gamble had failed.

She had poured all her strength into Mental Out, yet failed to shake Misaka Mikoto awake.

Or had she?

“Ah...kh.”

A foot was pressing down on Misaka Mikoto’s head, but her eyelids cracked

open. She could not do anything, but she did turn her eyes toward where Shokuhou Misaki lay collapsed on the ground too.

“Run... get out of here. Hurry.”

“...”

“You’re supposed to be the black-hearted Queen who runs off and gets that idiot out of the hospital, right? Then stop getting all hot-blooded. You need to abandon me here. Go and figure out a way to steal the vaccine or antidote by controlling a more useful esper than me. Weren’t those the roles we agreed to here?”

The straining sound grew louder.

Mikoto grimaced like a metal spike was being driven into her temple, but she still yelled at the top of her lungs.

“So get up! Get up and get out of here, Shokuhou!!”

Hearing that really pissed Shokuhou off.

She was still trembling too much to stand up, but she clenched her teeth and adjusted her grip on her remote. She forcibly crawled the best she could with just her hands.

But not to run away.

She crawled toward Misaka Mikoto.

“I’m not... doing that, Misaka-saaan.”

It pissed her off that Mikoto did not understand something so simple. They never did seem able to see eye to eye, not even when they were saying much the same thing.

“Yes, I’m not obligated to save you. Yes, abandoning you and running away would probably be more efficient, more logical, and bring me more happiness.”

Anna did nothing.

But instead of giving them time to talk, she simply did not seem interested. And that was fine. Shokuhou did not need anyone's permission to crawl along the ground and challenge this situation.

"But if I did that, it would make him sad."

So she spat out the words.

It did not matter who was listening.

"It might be nice having another nuisance out of my hair and that might open up a happy future for me with him!! But it would make him sad if you had your head crushed here!! Yes, I hate this so much, but my own circumstances don't matter right now. He might forget all about me and he might never be able to feel anger or hatred over me abandoning you! But *I'll* still remember what I did!! And I'm sick of keeping secrets from him!!!!!"

She crawled and crawled and crawled.

And she grabbed at Anna Sprengel's leg. Anna had the small body of a ten-year-old, but she was as solid as a boring machine.

"Now, now," said Anna. "This isn't like you at all. Aren't you supposed to be more like me?"

"I know that." Snowy and muddy, Shokuhou smiled back at that scoffing voice. She spat out words full of self-contempt. "I know I'm a bad person. I know I break my own rules all the time to achieve my goals and then use my power to hide that I broke them. Again, I'll break my own rules to achieve my goals."

"..."

"So I'll do anything for him."

She managed to draw out just a bit of strength.

She found she could still move.

“And I will never do anything that makes him cry. He saved my life, so I will protect the world that lets him live with a smile on his face. That is my number one rule and it trumps issues of good and evil!!!!!!”

But the Queen of Tokiwadai did not think she could move Anna a single millimeter.

Instead, she moved her dominant hand to grab her remote and aim it at Misaka Mikoto’s head again.

“If you’re conscious, then let this through.” She clenched her teeth and raised her voice. “If you want to fight to save him, then lend me your strength!!!!!!”

No pain, regulated breathing, emergency consumption of the body’s water and fat reserves, elimination of the physical restrictions brought on by fear, cutting the muscles’ limiters, repeated experiences of success, expanded processing power for the senses, temporary memory enhancements and increased memory analysis.

The remote filled Misaka Mikoto’s brain with all the errors of brain science, like the enhanced strength, slow motion, out of body experiences, and life flashing before your eyes during a near-death experience.

Shokuhou did not command her to perform any specific actions.

Because Mikoto had the greater combat instincts.

Mikoto’s right hand jerked up to an unnatural extent. The sherbet-like snow clinging to her like a curse was shaken off. She seemed to be gently clenching her fist, but she was not preparing a punch. She had an arcade coin sitting on her thumbnail.

It was an uppercut-like attack aimed up at Anna’s jaw.

The point-blank Railgun crackled with electricity as it prepared to launch.

“Whoops,” said Anna quietly.

Shokuhou was lifted up as the small foot left Mikoto's temple along with the honey-blonde girl's upper body clinging to it.

This was working.

They had distracted Anna Sprengel. She had put her guard up even slightly. She might as well have been telling them this would be effective.

And...

“Stop that.”

They were too slow by just an instant.

Shokuhou's vision blurred as she dropped straight down. It took her a second to realize what had happened.

In a truly merciless act, Anna had dropped her lifted foot down to crush Mikoto's raised right hand.

She robbed the girl's arm of all strength and pinned her wrist to the cold ground. The arcade coin bounced off the asphalt with a solid clink.

It was not enough.

Their feelings were not enough to reject the very real threat before them.

A dull straining sound came from the right wrist below Anna's foot.

“You strayed.” Anna spoke like she was watching some fools struggling with all their might to survive in a blizzard but actually only wandering around in circles. “Be it chess or horse-racing, the most important thing when it comes to winning a game is to stick with a single strategy. You will only lose focus if you change strategies whenever you start to lose. That will not lead to an unexpected come-from-behind win. It will only accelerate your very predictable path toward failure.”

“You... wouldn't understand,” said Shokuhou Misaki like she was uttering a curse.

She was more caught on that young leg than clinging to it anymore. Like a dry leaf caught on your coat or skirt on a winter day.

But she still got the words out.

“I’ve been consistent from the beginning. But you wouldn’t be able to see it since you always put yourself first.”

“Oh, I’m so jealous. Is that how an immature teenager sees the world?”

A dull thud followed.

That foot looked like it belonged to a small child, yet Shokuhou flew through the air when kicked like a soccer ball. If not for the special suit, her organs or spine might have ruptured or broken. The honey-blonde girl rolled along the ground and then gasped for a reason other than the pain or lack of oxygen.

The goal was right there.

They had arrived at a certain hospital’s main gate.

“Zero minutes to your destination.”

The phone in Anna’s hand mechanically and mercilessly ended its countdown.

The little girl laughed.

“You still have delusions about the importance of bonds with others, don’t you? I have long since grown cold about such things.”

That was effectively her final warning.

The hands of the clock would not stop. They had failed to draw Anna’s interest. She was going to continue walking according to schedule while crushing and killing everything that stood in her way. The railways crossing gate had lowered, so everyone knew what would happen to anyone dumb enough to not get off the tracks.

They had challenged the freight train with no more than fragile human bodies.

This was the result.

And yet.

Who was the first to notice something was not right?

Was it Shokuhou Misaki, Misaka Mikoto... or Anna Sprengel?

The predicted blow never arrived.

The girl who looked no more than ten had looked to the side with her small leg still raised.

But that was not how it was supposed to work.

Anna Sprengel was following her schedule. Everything in the way would die. There was probably only one person who could draw her interest enough to change that.

But that person was the last one they wanted to be here.

The girls had worn down their lives as they continued to fight to avoid exactly that.

That whistle had been a meaningless present, but the #5 had given it to him to say it was her turn to save him. Even if she was the only one that still remembered what had happened the first time around. Even so, she had wanted to do what he had risked his life to do.

Loneliness could kill.

But you could still be saved if someone reached out their hand.

She had thought today was the day when she would repay him for teaching her that.

And yet.

“Hi.”

She heard that voice.

He was in such bad shape that he should not have still been standing.

He probably could not even remember that he had forgotten who the honey-blonde girl was.

Nevertheless, here he was.

As if to say he would always be the one to come to her rescue.

“Let go of that girl, Anna Sprengel.”

“Ah.”

Shokuhou Misaki turned her head while barely able to move.

And she saw something beyond the silent snow.

“Ahh.”

What she saw there seemed to reject everything they had done.

She should have been angry.

She should have gone red in the face, shouted until her throat tore, and thrashed her limbs about. What had they sacrificed so much for if it was just going to end like this? What was the point of their shed blood, their pain, and their fear? They still had not stolen the vaccine or antidote from Anna. If they passed the baton to him now, she knew they would never acquire any means of saving that boy. Because he would never put himself first even for a second and he would only focus on saving the two girls. But doing that would mean all their previous efforts had been for nothing!

And yet.

(*Why?*)

Academy City's #5 Level 5 did not feel any anger. The Queen of Tokiwadai was not at all bothered by her wasted effort.

As no more than an ordinary girl, she must have accepted it somewhere in her heart.

(*Why do I actually feel happy everything fell apart like this!? I'm so stupid!!*)

There was no logic to it, but Kamijou Touma was standing there.

Part 7

“Hm?”

Anna Sprengel tilted her head again.

She gently brushed *the snow* off her foot. She was not interested in any of that, so she stepped forward to leave it behind.

She walked toward the pointy-haired high school boy named Kamijou Touma.

“*Aiwass.*”

She made an attack.

With that one word, she showed the rules of the battle had changed from when she was playing with the #3 and #5. A translucent figure now stood next to the little girl. It was a bizarre angel with swan wings and a falcon head.

Miss Sprengel kept her eyes directed dead ahead.

Her gaze was fixated on a certain person. The Golden cabal had once sent a great many letters from England to distant Germany in search of her. Without knowing how frightening her gaze really was.

She placed a hand on a hip that had yet to develop any curves and she laughed.

“So what do you hope to accomplish here? The St. Germain I gave you should have begun to dissolve your ego by now.”

“...”

Kamijou Touma did not respond.

He simply clenched his right fist with his body still tilted to the side.

Anna let out a disappointed sigh.

(I wanted to return you to what you were before Aleister got his hands on you.)

There was no anger in her eyes.

There was nothing there.

She had the look of someone who had lost all interest in another person.

(And once you were worn down to the extreme, I wanted to see what part of you is bound to that supernatural power. I am tired of explanations. Q&A sessions are entirely meaningless. The exchange of words only distorts the truth and spreads valueless corrupted information. So I wanted to master this on my own. I wanted to see how much someone could understand when they came in contact with the supernatural with zero prior knowledge.)

“But after turning you into a mass of pain and robbing you of your ego to the point you can’t chain your memories together coherently, all that remains is a machine that goes around saving people? I already saw that performance around two thousand years ago.”

This was the result of optimizing him.

It was the result, but was it the answer?

Anna Sprengel shook her head.

She did not take another step.

She could not maintain her interest. She simply snapped her small fingers.

Her target was Kamijou Touma, but she did not show any concern for anything around him. The look on her face said she did not care in the slightest if this also blew away the hospital behind him.

“It is time to die, you weak soul at the mercy of your own power. Failing to draw my interest counts as an even zero, so that I can forgive. But disappointing me earns a negative score. That warrants death.”

The Holy Guardian Angel roared.

The distance between them did not matter. If he closed those arms equipped with sharp talons, Kamijou Touma’s body would be squashed beyond recognition. And even if he deflected that with his right hand’s power, he was done for once the larger angel wings attacked. The larger and smaller pairs of scissors closed in on him like an invisible field of death. Imagine Breaker was useful, but it could not handle multiple simultaneous attacks.

And.

But.

Both of Holy Guardian Angel Aiwass’s attacks were deflected.

The snow flew through the air.

As did the angel’s feathers.

“?”

The Anna Sprengel wrinkled her brow in confusion. It was not much, but the situation had moved beyond her expectations. The giant freight train should have crushed everything in its path, but it had begun to derail.

(What?)

Imagine Breaker alone was not enough to handle multiple simultaneous attacks.

He could have blocked either the talons or the wings, but then the other one should have reached him and torn through him.

(What was that? Did he use Imagine Breaker to redirect the destroyed magic into the other one, like sending the sword's broken blade against the spear's tip? No, this was something else.)

“Don’t tell me.”

The great maw and the angel wings had been deflected at the exact same moment.

A dark red line dripped from the corner of his mouth.

He had already been ignoring his bleeding, but the cause of the bleeding was what mattered here.

What if?

What if Kamijou Touma was focused on *all* the pieces on the game board here?

By looking at how he had gotten here, the identity of the dual attacks became obvious. When making an enemy of this boy, the greatest threat was not his right hand's power or his inspired fighting technique that seemed too great for a simple high school boy.

Anna Sprengel had “optimized” that boy by stripping away everything he had been given so she could see what remained.

And his essence had revealed itself here.

In this case, it explained the dual attacks.

“Did you use magic!? By making an ally of the St. Germain I implanted in you!?”

Part 8

In truth, Kamijou Touma could only see about half of the scene before him.

That had been the case even while on the way here.

“Pant, pant.”

He had descended the hospital’s emergency stairs and entered the courtyard.

There he had lost his balance and collapsed.

His trembling fingers had grabbed at the whistle that slid across the snow.

He could not remember when he had gotten it. He could not even remember if he picked it out or if someone had given it to him. But when he squeezed it in his hand, he felt strength filling the very core of his body for some reason. That warm driving force helped him fight the chilly winter air.

Even though his Imagine Breaker was supposed to negate all supernatural powers, whether they were good or evil.

“...”

He once more managed to get on his feet while clinging to a streetlight.

His feet slipped on the snow, but he managed to start walking again.

Nothing entering his eyes or ears managed to reach his mind. His body was nothing more than pain and feverish heat. He could not shake the feeling that he had swollen to twice his usual size.

“Hey.”

And that may have been why he had focused his mind inwards.

“Maybe this is all you are now. You lost your body, took the form of microbes, and can only do anything by disguising yourself as an elixir of life to get into people’s mouths. You may be more of a phenomenon than a person now.”

It was only a whisper, but he did call out to someone.

He was the only one there. No nurses or guards had come running to search for the runaway when the fire alarm went off. But that did not mean no one was listening.

He could tell.

There was a listener waiting inside him.

“But you’re a magician too, aren’t you?”

Yes, Kamijou Touma had been fighting this whole time.

But not against the pain of his wounds. He had been holding this conversation his entire time in the hospital.

All so he could open the door for someone who had been suffering for far longer.

He had refused Maidono Hoshimi. He had punched Aihana Etsu.

Because this was *our problem* and he could not let an outsider get involved.

He had not been speaking to a mere prop. There was *another* actor on the stage who would share his fate.

Someone who could clear a path for themselves through fighting.

“You’re a magician who carved a magic name into your heart and started down that path for your own reasons, right? Then what was it you wanted to do way back then? I’ll help you, St. Germain. Let’s end this *silly game of pretend*. If there’s something you want to do, then I’ll lend you my body.”

St. Germain had indeed destroyed his body from within as a part of Anna’s plan. That was an undeniable fact.

But.

Had that been the result of St. Germain’s malice or ill intentions? Had he demonstrated any sort of dark emotions? The answer was no. Anna Sprengel had meant him harm, but none of St. Germain’s human will could be found there.

What if he caused harm just by existing there and that magician had not meant to do any of this?

Was St. Germain really an enemy who had to be opposed?

Kamijou could not answer that question.

So all he had to do was ask.

“...”

The response did not come as a physical voice created from a vibration of the air.

The acute St. Germain had infected his entire body, so he must have reached the boy’s nerves or brain cells.

However it worked, a clear will existed there.

A will with entirely different beliefs than Kamijou Touma – a will that had been suppressed until now – spoke in his mind.

“I...”

Anguish, resignation, failure.

It was a clearly human will that oozed with all of those things.

“I wanted to give people dreams. I did not want great riches or fame as a magician. I simply wanted to appear in a town and surprise everyone with a fun little show – that was all. I hoped someone would pursue those techniques that began from lies and eventually accomplish something far greater than their wildest dreams.”

That must have never come to pass.

No one had tried to do it themselves. They had simply relied on St. Germain who provided them with everything.

They took the easy route.

The self-indulgent route.

The magician who claimed to be well-versed in techniques of creating gold, diamonds, and the elixir of life soon found himself surrounded by the nastiest sorts of nobles and the wealthy. He had been pushed into the center of the social scene and had been unable to back out. And once he was no longer able to deceive those greedy people who were only interested in riches and fame, they demanded he be judged and he was forced to abandon his physical body.

But even that magician had a starting point.

He was not just a tool. He had been a living human being.

So.

Kamijou Touma did not hesitate to focus on that central point. And he used a power that was frightening indeed when used against you.

The boy spoke the words that got down to his very essence.

“Then do it, St. Germain.”

“...”

Was he an enemy or an ally?

Was he the time limit that threatened the boy’s life?

But what did any of that matter?

Those were only the rules of the game Anna Sprengel had forced onto them both. Obeying those rules would only please Anna. Kamijou Touma had never drawn such a boring line between the two of them.

He was afraid of dying eventually. He was terrified. But there had to be something he could do while still alive. Something only Kamijou Touma could do.

When the entire world had given up on someone, they became “evil”.

A former god had told him that and he agreed with her.

But to put it another way, you just needed one person who would not give up on them no matter how unfortunate their nature was.

You just needed one person who did not give up on speaking with them.

Then surely they could be saved.

No, they *could* be.

“You wanted to use your magic to give people dreams, right? You wanted to master magic so you could dry the tears of children, put smiles on the squabbling adults’ faces, and loosen the mindsets of the elderly who had grown too set in their ways, right? Then the time is now. There isn’t a single reason to hesitate because this is your life. If you want to call yourself a magician, then don’t look away from your goal. I’ll give you my body to use, so go out there and master the path you chose for yourself, St. Germain!!”

A dull straining sound came from within his body.

He could not tell if it was his blood vessels, nerves, muscles, organs, or bones being destroyed.

An esper's body would not last if St. Germain used magic through it and St. Germain would be gradually worn down as long as Imagine Breaker existed in that body.

They could not have been less compatible.

They never should have been working together.

But.

Kamijou Touma still did not hesitate to say it.

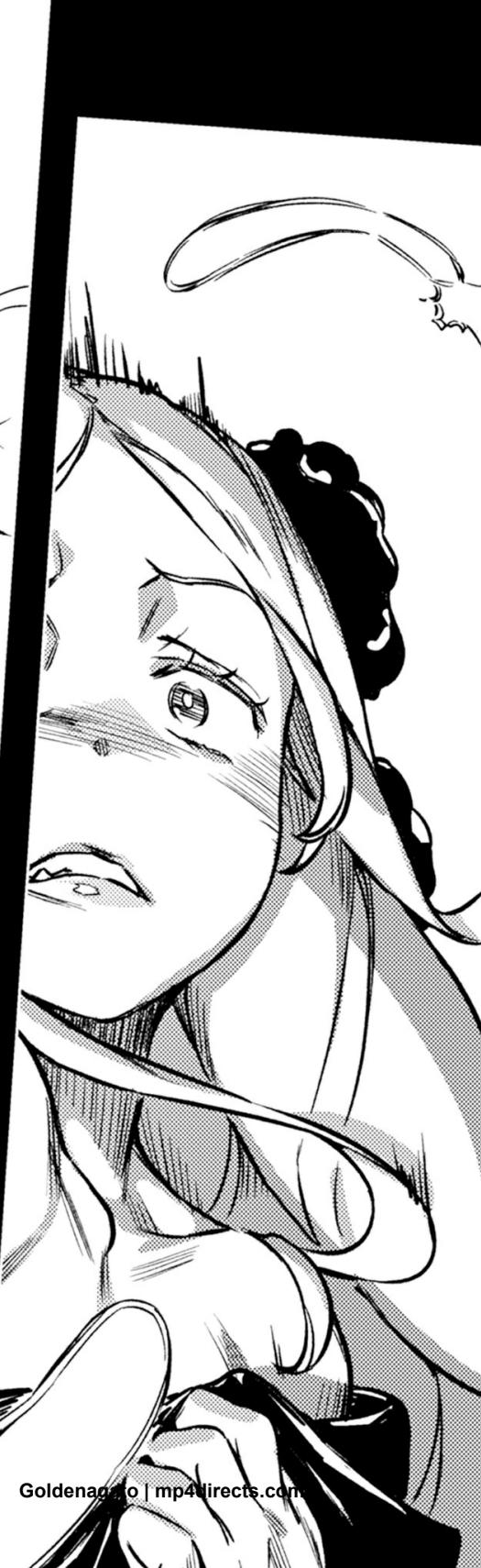
“Tell me what it is you want to do.”

“...”

“I’ll make it happen with my body, so now’s not the time to get shy!! You’re still clinging to this world even after being reduced to that form, so you must have some regret you can’t bring yourself to forget. So out with it! Tell me what it is so I can make it happen!!”

“I want to protect people’s dreams. Tears of failure and resignation have no place in this world!!”

Part 9



There was a definite explosion.

It was the light of possibility created by a certain magician.

It was the power to protect everyone's dreams.

A boy's right fist shattered the invisible maw while the magic light launched from his bloody left hand deflected the angel wings.

Enemy or ally?

What a silly question. That division meant nothing to Kamijou Touma.

This was not Imagine Breaker and it was not his combat experience built up from a sharp intuition and countless battles fought.

It was the power to break down barriers and work together.

It was the power to keep trying with no fear of failure no matter how many times your outstretched hand was brushed aside or how many nasty looks you earned.

This was the essence that remained when all else was stripped away from him and it was the special trait to be feared by all who would oppose him.

Between the Lines 3

The Count of St. Germain is one of the most mysterious figures even on the magic side.

His first officially confirmed sighting was in Paris's high society during the 1750s. It was said he could fluently speak many languages, he exuded a mysterious charm, and he was a master conversationalist who could skillfully

bring himself closer to someone the very first time they met. The division between science and magic was less clearly defined back then, so intellectuals were educated in all forms of the occult and methods of manipulating chemicals and diamonds were especially popular.

After some complicated turns of events, the official records say he died of illness and was buried in Germany in 1784, but self-proclaimed St. Germain were occasionally sighted after that.

That, combined with the legend that he never consumed anything other than the pills and oatmeal he made himself, led the nobles and wealthy of the time to spread rumors that he was a magician who had successfully manufactured the elixir of life.

Due to his manipulation of diamonds and his title of count, some confused him with Cagliostro who was involved in the Affair of the Diamond Necklace that also involved Marie Antoinette, which could explain the older tales of his death and annihilation. But that mystery man continued to be witnessed even at the end of the 20th century, in the age of ubiquitous color TVs. And whether it was a hoax or not, a self-proclaimed St. Germain (not just someone playing the role for a show) once appeared on a color TV broadcast. Although, the Anglican Church and Academy City made no move to stop that broadcast, so that may be all you need to know about its legitimacy.

He has been linked to the old Rosicrucian magic cabal to give him some occult legitimacy.

However, his name is never seen in the legends of CRC or his followers, so it can be assumed he joined the cabal in a later age.

In truth, he broke down his own physical body to become a colony of microbes.

They are generally kept dehydrated to preserve them for longer, but once a host swallows the black pill and their saliva and other bodily fluids activate

the microbes, the microbes will swiftly hijack the host's body and begin to function as St. Germain. Thus, when looking at history as a whole, he looks like an immortal figure who pops up here and there in different eras.

He excels at manipulating carbon and thus diamonds.

Several St. Germins were seen together within the Dianoid building, an Academy City landmark.

When Magician Anna Sprengel saw the current St. Germain, she said his purity had fallen.

He holds the lowest rank.

There is no evidence he has ever contacted the No. 1 Temple in Germany.

But if you will permit some speculation, his desire to provide dreams to the people has some overlap with the Rosicrucian plan to eliminate the world's diseases by optimizing imperfect human society with intellectuals used as a medicine that spreads education, so it may be worth seeing if he has reached an understanding with that cabal.

St. Germain's objectives are a mystery and it is often said he possesses a megalomania that leads him to throw the political and financial worlds into disarray with the scams and pranks he claims are meant to support his diamond research.

But since he is a magician, something must have caused him to despair in the world or in the divine gears that hold it together, leading him down the path of magic where he could access miraculous tricks all on his own.

There are no records of what that was.

Because he decided it was better that way and sealed away those records himself.

Chapter 4: The Phenomenon of Kamijou Touma — Not_Right_Hand.

Part 1

It was two against two.

“Hmm.”

The small girl smirked.

She was the monster who would simply travel along a straight line to her destination, destroying all that stood in her way.

“Now, this is a little more interesting. Can you expand on this unexpected turn of events and send it my way?”

On one side, Kamijou Touma and St. Germain.

On the other, Anna Sprengel and Holy Guardian Angel Aiwass.

“One step.”

The naked little girl who looked about ten held the red cloth to her skin below the falling snow and smiled confidently with the bizarre angel by her side.

She seemed to threaten the hospital's front gate like it was a mystical barrier.

She began to walk with an unbelievable amount of strength for someone who looked like you could blow her over with your breath. And that strength was not just figurative. The snow at her feet really was blown away, the asphalt sank down slightly, and cracks formed around her.

"If you're going to talk big, then stop me from taking this one step. R&C Occultics is a new trend the world over. If you can't push back a mere global trend, I will be sorely disappointed. And you can figure out for yourself what that would mean."

"..."

Kamijou Touma silently clenched his right fist.

But that was not all he did.

He pressed his other palm against the center of his chest and spoke toward that point.

"St. Germain, can you do this?"

"Who do you think I am? Leave the ley line landmines to me. You only need to fight the threat before your eyes."

Two different statements came from the same mouth.

Kamijou saw Anna Sprengel's eyebrows move ever so slightly.

That other voice was audible to other people and it was accompanied by a visible breath.

And it was Kamijou Touma who readied his fist now. He would not hold back no matter what form his enemy took. In fact, something inside him was telling him it was abnormal for an enemy so great to be contained in a body so small.

He could not ignore what R&C Occultics was doing. Or that the girls who

had stood up for him were collapsed on the ground here.

He could work to understand this person after he had punched her and settled this.

They were still a good bit apart.

Kamijou would have to take five steps to reach her even when running at full speed.

But...

“Aiwass.”

The instant Anna’s young lips whispered that name, the angel next to her was gone.

No. She had clenched and unclenched her small hand and gently swept it to the side like she was using a fan.

And she made an announcement.

“Open the pathway from Gevurah to Hod *and reside in my right arm.*”

The distance did not matter. That was all it took for the five distant skyscrapers that formed a crucial corner of the scenery to be sliced through and drop to the ground like a poorly-made Daruma Otoshi. Since the buildings had no windows, they must have been automated agricultural buildings that could be harvested more than twenty times a month.

“Structure Breaker,” said her small mouth.

That great firepower had been entirely unpredictable.

That kind of unfair attack would normally kill you before you even realized what it was.

Yet Kamijou Touma remained alive.

“!!”

He had dropped straight down.

He got face-down on the ground with his limbs spread out, grabbed at the ground with his arms and feet, and then launched himself toward Anna Sprengel while down on all fours like a beast.

Right hand clashed with right hand.

Of course, the *symbolism* brought in by the Rosicrucian leader was worse than the actual destructive power.

“*Shall I take over?*” asked St. Germain. “The slightest hesitation will lead to death here, esper!!”

“Not yet!!”

Anna apparently had no intention of keeping her distance and wearing him down with a barrage of attacks. It was possible that over-the-top attack had only been a way of shocking Kamijou into moving in closer since he had no projectile attacks of his own.

She had only moved her opened hand as casually as swinging a tennis racket.

That was all it had taken to mercilessly slice through space itself with no regard for distance or material. *The mere touch of her palm would negate the world, tearing through whatever was there along with the dimension and space itself.* Kamijou felt impatience burning at the back of his mind, but he was now within a meter of Anna Sprengel.

He took aim at her small jaw with an attack that tore upwards from below.

“Ohhh!!”

That fist could return all magicians to being mere humans. That attack stole their means of fighting back against the cruel world and threw them out into the wilderness with no way of defending themselves. But Anna calmly took a step toward that critical attack. That was all it took to avoid it.

She seemed to be nestling herself up against the boy's chest.

Moving even closer than the swinging fist naturally kept it from hitting her.

And.

With her other hand, the left one, she held a perfectly ordinary but deadly knife.

Kamijou Touma could negate all forms of the supernatural, but he had no way of defending against those fatal ten centimeters.

"Hee hee."

"*St. Germain!!*"

There was a loud clang, but the knife held by the little girl was not equipped to make that sort of noise.

So what had caused it?

"A diamond? Is that eternal light a variation on the lamps that illuminate the tomb?"

"..."

They had traded places.

An unseen baton had changed hands.

And in that moment, the weapon used by the pointy-haired boy changed from his right hand's fist to his left hand's magic.

Specifically, some kind of glittering particles were scattered in the few millimeter gap between the boy's chest and the bare-skinned monster's palm.

It was said diamonds were so hard that they were in fact easily breakable, but that did not mean the blade that hit one would escape intact. The knife's tip broke off and the blade chipped when it split the stone.

“You were never planning to block that with the strength of the diamond. Was it more like a matador’s cape? That glitter throws off my visual aim and the chipping of the blade diverts the speed and vector of destruction. Still, Academy City must have very polluted air if you can manipulate that air to produce diamonds.”

“So what if I did?”

St. Germain’s magic did not require a special sword or cards.

He could create anything with just ordinary carbon.

“I would call it inefficient,” said Anna. “Using magic with that body requires circulating his lifeforce throughout the body and refining it into magic power, right? You will always have a large chunk of that precious magic power negated before you can use it.”

“True enough. This boy’s right hand is powerful indeed and it is not something I can fully control even with his permission.”

St. Germain could not use Imagine Breaker.

Kamijou Touma could not use diamond magic.

No matter how hard they tried, they had to support each other as they fought.

So their best bet was to switch back and forth between those two sides based on what was currently needed to fight the conflagration before them. Even if something was deadly to one of them, the other might be able to break through it. They switched back and forth like they were moving a tennis racket from one side to the other during a high-speed match. It sounded convenient, but their opponent was Anna Sprengel. One wrong decision and the ball of survival would slip past them and they would lose the game.

“But even if the Sephirah and the channels between them correspond to parts of the human body, you never hear of someone who can no longer use magic after being injured or falling ill,” said St. Germain. “Magic is a means of making up for what we lack and making our dreams come true, so a lot of

students enter the world of magic after just such an injury or illness.”

“Are you saying you can separate out his right hand or divert around it?” asked Anna.

St. Germain’s words contained fear and respect, but he still bared his fangs.

“I was always a lowly magician who refused to be defined solely by the two characters of RC. I instead worked to make my mark on high society under the individual name of St. Germain. There is a considerable loss in power from diverting the flow around that hand, but I am accustomed to wasted effort and this is not enough for my diamond spells to fail. The acute version of me you created appears to be even more powerful than you thought.”

The boy’s body veered to the left while those two spoke.

But not because they had any kind of plan.

A sticky sound splattered against the ground, decorating the road with a Christmasy red.

“Gh, bh!!”

“Yes, the side effect. And let’s not act like you can do that a set number of times or anything like that. Just like Russian roulette, one unlucky round and you die instantly.” The little girl gave a cruel smile at close range. “So I think it’s about time I did this by force.”

She swung her small hand around, but she was not going for an occult attack. Her fingers tore through the gas pipe running through a nearby wall.

St. Germain had to fight against this sort of physical danger.

If this kept up, Kamijou could not rejoin the battle. And if this remained a magician vs. magician battle, it could not have been more obvious who would win between St. Germain and Anna Sprengel.

“Tch!!”

Even so, an attack based on ordinary physics would obey the well-known rules found in ordinary textbooks. St. Germain created a double layer of diamond sheets thinner than an umbrella. That was not for attack or defense. Any obstacle would change the direction of the wind, just like buildings did. And if the wind direction changed, the invisible but highly flammable gas would be diverted elsewhere.

They had avoided an explosion, but Kamijou coughed up blood due to the internal injuries.

“I was hoping to buy some time for you to catch your breath, but perhaps I spent too long talking. This isn’t over yet, esper. *Back to you!!*”

Something whooshed through the air.

And a supernatural attack meant it was his turn.

A powerful light returned to the point-haired boy’s eyes. As a small hand swung down toward him, he leaped to the side with all his might despite not being able to stand up straight. He ended up falling to the ground. Normally, he would have failed to avoid the next horizontal swing of her arm and he would have been sliced through.

But that was not what happened.

After a dull sound, he had all of a sudden jumped several meters straight up into the air.

“St. Germain, *take care of this!!*”

“Fine, but switching back and forth like this will only shorten your life. *Back to you!!*”

Instead of jumping up with his legs, it was more like he had been hit by a car. A diamond hexagonal pillar had thrust up from below him, launching him about three meters into the air. Anna’s fingers missed the human torso and instead sliced through the thick mass of diamond.

The two minds took turns controlling the single body by switching between

right and left.

They really could overcome it this way. Kamijou's Imagine Breaker was weak against multiple simultaneous attacks, but St. Germain's diamonds could defend against them all. St. Germain's magic could not fully stop Anna's brute force attacks, but Kamijou's right hand could forcibly blow them away.

“Ohhh!!”

The right fist clenched tight, so this was clearly Kamijou Touma in control.

It was the ordinary boy's turn to attack from midair.

He held the blood back in his mouth while clenching his fist again. Anna should have had no way of stopping this since she was already in the middle of casually swinging her palm to the side.

The little girl looked up with just her eyes and smiled.

Her fingers had been gently bent like claws, but now she extended them straight. That spread out the angle of her deadly fan without changing the force of the swing.

As a result, the snow and asphalt at her feet were torn through and the ground collapsed below her. She was taken down along with it.

Changing the height of the ground greatly threw off Kamijou's aim from midair.

There appeared to be a subway platform directly below.

That counted as indoors, but the chill grew even worse.

He did not recall there being a subway entrance nearby, so this appeared to be a fairly complex underground structure. Or maybe it carried some kind of secret, like it was connected to the basement of *that hospital*.

“Gah!?”

Kamijou failed his landing and rolled along the rubble-covered floor, but he did not have time to writhe in pain. He spat blood from his mouth while diving behind a drink vending machine with its clear cover broken.

He and St. Germain could keep up with the fight, but that still had not allowed them to actually strike back.

Anna had already swung her right palm to the side.

“Oh?”

But then she sounded somewhat impressed.

She had come across something slightly unexpected.

As soon as the little girl sliced through the boxy mass of metal she had been guided toward, the chemical coolant that preserved a temperature well below zero came in contact with the ordinary air. Only a brief moment later, white steam resembling a cumulonimbus cloud expanded in every direction like a smoke bomb had gone off.

It was an obvious smokescreen.

Attack, escape, hide, rest, or think.

With the flow of battle delayed, Kamijou and St. Germain now had endless possibilities.

Part 2

Things had crossed a dangerous line.

The ICUs, the operating rooms, and even the treatment rooms for new

arrivals were at max capacity.

The ambulances just kept bringing in too many patients.

“Get back!! Authorized personnel only!!”

“Get some extra sheets over here so we can block them from view! Don’t leave them exposed to the phone cameras!!”

Angry yelling and shouting were traded back and forth and the tension had spread even to the Christmas-decorated main lobby.

But it could have been worse.

This hospital had been receiving so many ambulances because the others had already stopped functioning altogether and this one still had its personnel and supplies in some semblance of order. What would happen to the patients if they were turned away here as well? Every second counted in EMT work, so they would know all too well that these people could not just be handed off to someone else.

But there was no saving them without solving the fundamental problem.

Closing up their wounds and stopping the bleeding would only buy some time unless the patients stopped doing what was causing them new wounds.

“Use localized anesthetic. Don’t knock them out. If they go under now, they might never come out of it!!”

“What is all that shaking outside?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care as long as it doesn’t knock this patient from their stretcher. But do make sure to be extra careful with the IV needle due to the shaking. Don’t harm their blood vessels!”

The elevator hall looked like a battlefield, but then a small set of footsteps cut across it.

For some reason, no one paid any heed to the white nun while everyone else

was running around in a hurry.

“Wait, what was that?”

When they turned around again, she was already gone.

The young doctor looked to the patient on the stretcher and then stared at the medical monitors lined up alongside it.

“*Why did their vitals just stabilize? What just happened!?*”

Hearing that, the girl walked to another stretcher.

She was Index the Grimoire Library.

“Hm, hm, I see, hm.”

“They have this all backwards. But they don’t have the necessary information, so it’s not really their fault.” The fifteen centimeter god seated on the nun’s shoulder remained somewhat cautious of the calico cat on Index’s head. “As long as they remain conscious, their anxieties remain, as long as their anxieties remain, they can’t stop using magic, and as long they continue using magic, their wounds will remain. It’s all part of that pattern.”

It was like someone who obsessively washed their face over and over to calm themselves. If they rubbed their face bloody and saw that bloody face in the mirror, they might just decide they needed to wash their face some more because it was still dirty.

The simplest forms of magic did not require tools or a specific location.

They were terrified of dying, so they could not relax without continuing to use the good luck charms and fortunetelling methods they had been taught.

And that ended up destroying their esper bodies.

They only had to stop using the magic, but they had no idea what was causing it, so they would either use magic to figure out what it was or they would conclude it would only get worse if they stopped using magic.

Left like this, their lives would eventually run out.

“It doesn’t matter how much you try to bail out a sinking boat with a bucket if more and more holes are opening in the hull. It doesn’t matter how skilled the doctors are – if the patients don’t cooperate with the cure, their injury or illness will never heal. That lead doctor has done a hell of a job for someone who looks so silly. Without his instructions, these students would probably already be dead.”

“They’re all breathing with a unique rhythm. That means they’re refining their lifeforce into magic power.”

“We need to start by confiscating the spiritual items hidden in their pockets, but the simplest forms of magic don’t rely on tools. We really will need to put them to sleep to level out their *conscious breathing method* to accomplish anything here.”

“It would only weaken them to keep them asleep for too long.”

“We only have to break the rhythmic breathing they’re using to refine magic power. Let’s find an arbitrary reason to hook them up to a ventilator.”

Magic was the latest fad in scientific Academy City.

Even an Anglican nun who knew how to properly manage magic could tell how abnormal this was. She had never heard of it spreading like this before, yet Index and Othinus did not make their way to the center of the explosion.

They had a clear reason for remaining in the hospital.

“That human will not consider this a win if he simply defeats Anna in a fight. If all these people die in the process, he will place the burden of their deaths on his own shoulders. Even though they are not his responsibility.”

“...”

“That colossal idiot did not rush out there to protect his own life. He says he’s scared, but he still finds the destruction of this hospital or us to be worse. Refusing anything but zero deaths against a monster of that level is about as

insolent as it gets, but just this once, that fool is correct. When things get truly hopeless, downgrading your goals will only mean being swallowed up by the situation. Compromise? Adapting to reality? The opinions of the wise? They can all go eat shit. There's clearly something wrong if people are dying. If you can't bring your self to shout that obvious fact, you'll only drag everything into a long, drawn out war with many more deaths to come."

This one hospital in District 7 could not take in all of the victims across Academy City. Index and Othinus had all the necessary knowledge, but neither one could use convenient healing magic on their own.

But not being able to do that one thing was not the same as being helpless.

"Anyone could solve this if they only had a manual telling them espers can't use magic. We need to make one and distribute it through this hospital. If they see it work once, they'll start using it even if they don't know how it works. That will stop the city from spinning its wheels on this issue."

"But the people of this city might not officially recognize that magic exists."

And there were ceremonies that managed to spread despite being unofficial.

In this country's case, the most obvious example would be the Kokkuri-san. Because the adult organizations had taken so long to accept its existence, they had been slow to react and it had caused real damage such as mass hysteria.

"We have a source we can use," replied Othinus with a smile. That god of deception based her answer on Academy City's bizarre situation at present. "We use R&C Occultics. The material they've spread around can be used to show magic is dangerous. Anything we say might be rejected outright, but official information from a well-known giant IT company will seem more reliable. We can use that to our advantage. That information is meant to get people to use magic, but we can use it to show people the risks and keep them away from it."

"You mean...?"

"We just have to create something that bridges the gap. An extra text that

explains the problems that occur when an esper uses magic.”

Index and Othinus would have preferred to be on the front line of this fight.

Magic was their area of expertise, so they were confident they would be of some help there.

But.

They turned away from that temptation.

They had chosen to fight alongside him, so they had to do everything they could to face the problems they had found. So they could avoid the horrific conclusion where that boy dragged his battered body back to the hospital only to find after the fact that everything had fallen apart.

“Listen, we can’t let anyone die.”

“Right.”

They would protect Academy City, the people who lived there, and the home he would return to.

“This hospital is a sanctuary. We start here, establish a methodology, and then spread that sanctuary out until it covers Academy City as a whole. And that will also help that softhearted human.”

“I know that already!”

So this was their battle.

It was fought in a different place and in a different way, but those girls were giving their all just like Kamijou Touma was.

Part 3

The biting cold swept across the platform of the District 7 subway station.

As soon as Anna's vision was obscured by the white steam, Kamijou rolled across the platform and through the broken platform screen door to drop onto the tracks. The landing added another dull pain to the already lengthy list, but now was not the time to be counting up his injuries.

This had not bought them much time, but even thirty seconds would be more valuable than a jewel at the moment.

He clenched and unclenched his right fist.

It was Kamijou Touma's turn right now.

"As I imagine you have noticed by now," began St. Germain.

"Oh, don't worry. I don't understand a damn thing about this."

"Anna Sprengel's spells are not pure Rose spells."

Like any wise saying, that one carried several different pieces of important information at once.

A sizzling like water on a hot griddle echoed through the area. The white steam curtain made from hydrofluorocarbon had unnaturally burst into flames and holes spread through it like a paper photo exposed to a flame from behind, correcting the distorted scene.

Anna Sprengel was smiling atop the platform while gently spreading her burning right hand.

She was the master of a different right hand.

"Found you☆"

"!!"

Trying to run away along the tracks would accomplish nothing.

She placed two fingers horizontally against her soft lips and blew out like this was a sort of whistle. The air immediately expanded at an explosive rate. Just like a picture book dragon, sticky orange flames left her mouth to cover the tracks a step lower than the platform.

This did not seem like normal fire. The way it moved like a sticky liquid was reminiscent of a flamethrower or napalm. It filled every nook and cranny of the train track like a sudden downpour filling the ditches and waterways.

“Ohhhh!?”

“Your right hand, esper.”

St. Germain pointed out the obvious solution.

The one without, the one looking up from below, and the one that yearned for it urged the Level 0 boy to action.

“Panicked or not, that is the only card in your deck, so master its use!! Just like I focused on mastering the manipulation of diamonds and carbon!!”

He could only swing his right hand around wildly in a struggle to survive. He negated the massive sea of flames that splashed up the concrete wall and ran along the groove of the track.

A power created by a right hand could be destroyed by a right hand.

But he had something else on his mind.

(That was different from before!?)

“Aiwass,” called Anna with a snap of her small fingers. “What shall I call this one? Item Breaker perhaps?”

Bluish-white sparks scattered like when an electric lighter failed to ignite, but that ephemeral flashing did not go away. Once it grew as bright as a blowtorch, the LCD signs, the lights, the air conditioning equipment, the train’s power line, and all other electrical equipment was transformed into a bomb.

It was like a cluster bomb had been dropped into this small space.

And Kamijou had a phone in his pants pocket.

“Gahh!?”

It happened just as he ran from the platform area and into the tunnel.

Excruciating pain jabbed down all the way to his thigh bone and it rattled his consciousness.

“Not yet, esper. The bone is not broken. And even if it was, I would support you with a diamond exoskeleton, so you can keep going regardless!”

The biggest problem was their location: an underground facility. With all electronics dead, a veil of darkness had fallen, preventing him from seeing his hand in front of his face.

And he heard a singsong voice within that dense darkness.

“Hee hee hee. You are in my grasp now.”

“!?”

She was holding out her small hand and accurately targeting him even in the darkness.

Would it be Escape Breaker next? Or Shield Breaker?

Whatever it was, she would have changed her right hand to something else now.

Kamijou always had to rely on fistfighting, so he had no way of fighting in this darkness.

She was coming.

She had jumped down onto the track and was slowly walking toward the tunnel.

She gave a casual swing of her palm and it sliced through something. A high-voltage power line danced madly about while scattering electricity.

This was a physical attack.

“St. Germain, *take care of this!!*”

Something flipped around at his left hand.

A light as bright as a camera flash filled the tunnel with a deafening “zap!!”, but the boy survived.

Carbon conducted electricity.

Mechanical pencil lead and diamonds could both be used as lightning rods that redirected electricity.

Also...

“Summon the spears here. The seven-walled secret room has protected its secrets for 120 years and allows no unauthorized intruders!!”

The pointy-haired boy’s body staggered over and pressed its back against the tunnel wall just before a high-pitched sound rang out. Anna held her small palm as if in pain. There was a sound like cracks running through a hard object, but that was all. Transparent spears – seven in all – had broken through the concrete wall behind him such that they passed over his shoulders and head.

“The depths of the earth are my territory,” said the man known as a count while gesturing like he held an invisible wand. His words carried both respect and hostility. “St. Germain controls diamonds. Even the master of the No. 1 Temple in Germany will run across a compatibility issue there. When performing a major ceremony, you must first focus on the stars and terrain. But worry not, this insolent result was not due to your own skill level.”

“Shut it, you imposter who only used our cabal’s name to increase your own prestige. You can control diamonds, can you? Did you think the true and legitimate Rose would care about some mere pebbles just because the

common world attaches value to them?”

This exchange of emotions was inscrutable to the people of the present day.

It only made sense to those who had become legends simply by breathing, eating, working, reading, writing, and walking.

“Why do you deceive, Fräulein?”

“It is a form of defragging—an optimization.”

“I do not know how that works, *but your right hand is very clearly not the same thing as Kamijou Touma’s.*” St. Germain stated that with confidence. And, “Using your words to inspire others to action instead of doing it yourself is St. Germain’s way. It does not suit you. The Miss Sprengel who once ruled in the depths of the No. 1 Temple in Germany was the goal of all magicians. Everyone wished to be like Anna Sprengel who was closer to a god than anyone without actually being one and who had taken the authority to contact the superhuman Secret Chiefs while maintaining her human emotions! Perhaps you find it difficult to trust a magician who can freely swap out his own memories and ideals for fun, but I was not the only one who thought that way. The Golden cabal, the Theosophists, and the witches all set you as their goal, not god!!”

“But.” The words that spilled from the little girl’s lips sounded somehow dry. “Not one cabal actually understood my words. They all distorted the meaning for their purposes.”

St. Germain noticed something and briefly forgot all about their plan. He started to step closer like someone who had spotted a soaked child out in the rain, but then a horn sounded from the side.

It was a freight train.

The unmanned train was being used to meet the Christmas demand.

“So you will never understand me either!!” shouted Anna. “Never, ever!!!!!!”

“Tetractys, numerical triangle formed from ten points. Grant me ascension

with your perfection!"

St. Germain sent carbon fiber threads from Kamijou's fingers to jump up to the roof of the high-speed mass of metal, but Anna simply stuck her small right hand out toward the front of the freight train.

The entire space shook as the front car was crushed and lifted up and the eight cars after that stacked up against each other in a zigzag pattern.

The front car hopped up at an angle, breaking through the metropolis road and the layer of snow atop it before jutting up into the snowy winter sky.

They had emerged at a different point.

They were likely still in the vicinity of that hospital. A sign identified a nearby building as a large subway station that linked together a few different lines.

The place was already abandoned. A code red may have been issued, which indicated either a largescale terrorist attack or a devastating underground chemical fire linked to a chemical plant.

(This body really is tricky to use.)

The need to forcibly divert the lifeforce circulation around the right arm while refining magic power created a time lag before he could complete his spells. And even when he did complete them, he lost a considerable amount of the magic power. It felt as unstable as flying an airplane that had parts falling off of it and had a severe fuel leak.

But at the same time, St. Germain knew all too well what would have happened if he had hijacked a non-esper adult who would give him full use of his magic.

He would have died instantly.

Thoughtlessly pitting magic against magic with Anna would never work. That would be like an overexcited soldier loading up with a ton of ballistic missiles to challenge the sun to battle.

Light could not be used to battle light.

You needed something else entirely. Defeating the sun would require a blackhole that could swallow even light.

“...”

The pointy-haired boy focused on regulating his white breathing before jumping from the twisted roof to the main road below, but he looked at his own palm before anything else.

It was stained red and black.

(The wounds have widened too far. The esper's body will not last much longer.)

Revealing that would be cruel, but St. Germain could not have the boy's body tearing apart from within either.

“*Back to you*, esper. Are you prepared to hold the baton again?”

“Ahh, cough!”

The focus shifted from the left hand to the right hand. The pointy-haired boy coughed up a dark red color even as he tightly clenched his fist once more.

“St. Germain, you are no more than a collection of microbes I could kill by scrubbing you out with disinfectant soap. But you talk big, I'll give you that. You're still listening over there, aren't you?”

The footsteps they heard this time were a lot rougher than before. A small figure walked through the train sticking diagonally up from the ground to crawl out onto the surface.

“You had power from the beginning, yes, but what was your goal?” she spoke slowly in a low voice that made it sound like she was uttering a curse. “To save people? I'm so sick of that. To master your field of study? I can find all the answers so easily. To destroy the world you so resent? It was already

destroyed from the beginning. To fulfill your desires? I have done that more than you can imagine.”

That small body swayed side to side with that powerful right hand casually lowered at her side.

A bright light shined in her eyes and a smile tore across her lips as she approached.

“*A life of fulfillment is such a bore.*”

Her movements seemed so coldly robotic.

And dry.

“*I want someone to support me instead.*”

She demonstrated the ultimate form of wastefulness where even achieving immortality became an eternal prison of boredom.

But there had to be some hints of truth within her insolent statements.

“What do you get from a power that distorts the rules and renders the game meaningless by its very existence? Creation? Destruction? Enhancement? Reduction? Friendship? Rejection? Gluttony? Restraint? What does it mean to live? What goal am I supposed to live for? How can I find fulfillment?”

The footsteps stopped.

Anna Sprengel had taken the final step and arrived aboveground once more.

She stood below the frigid falling snow and on the same level as the others.

“The exchange of words only distorts the truth, so no words are needed here. I want to know how much people can understand from instinct alone. Hence the optimization. Kamijou Touma, the One who Purifies God and Slays Demons. What will remain once everything has been stripped from you and you are laid bare? When exposed to the supernatural with no prior knowledge, what side of you becomes most active? Show me the answer.”

“...”

Kamijou remained silent for a while.

Was he even aware his shoulders were crooked?

“Y’know,” he finally said.

“?”

“I think I kinda get why you can’t find fulfillment.”

“I might understand you, but you can never understand me. Because I contain so much more than you.”

“Still putting up your defenses like that? After we’ve been baring our hearts in this deadly battle?” spat out Kamijou. “You want others to give you fulfillment instead of finding it yourself? Don’t make me laugh. You’d just find things to complain about and keep going. You’ll never escape that feeling of unfulfillment even if you try to let go of your own life and take it easy. But you wouldn’t be able to accept that even if you grew angry with that other person, hated them, and took revenge on them. You want someone else to support you? Those are the words of someone who doesn’t know the fear of having that other person suddenly let go. You don’t have to fear their betrayal because you already know you can support your own weight if you have to. You might claim to be supporting ‘each other’, but you already have everything you need for yourself.”

“Wait.”

“And you know that that means?”

“I said wait.”

“It means...”

Anna had said she was hoping to observe herself.

And that was exactly what happened.

“You have your super-secret techniques that you refuse to actually teach anyone, but you still want to show them off. That’s nothing special. It’s what everyone dreams about every single day.”

A dull thud burst out.

“Really, why do idiots insist on using their heads when no one wants them to?”

She was showing signs of definite irritation, which was a stark contrast to the mysterious joy from before.

“Do not think you understand me, boy.”

Would this one be called Gravity Breaker?

Anna Sprengel raised a single finger and spun it around. That was all it took for something invisible to rotate around her, gather together the metal trashcans, cleaning robots, streetlights, and wind turbines into a single large mass, build up plenty of centrifugal force, and fling them at Kamijou Touma. It was like they were attached by an invisible chain she was swinging around.

“Kh.”

He could not fully block this with Imagine Breaker.

Fighting her right hand with his would not work here.

But he did not switch to St. Germain.

If he only negated the supernatural power, he would be crushed by the force gathered by the mountain of scraps. But physics was physics. He could already see the general path they would take as they swung around his way.

And Anna herself had shown him the answer earlier. If he moved further in than the radius of the rotation, he could not be touched by that outward-swinging path.

He only had to step forward.

He clenched his right fist as hard as rock and moved toward the little girl. He could ignore that morning star now. He only had to forget about their difference in body types and throw his full weight behind a merciless punch right into that small face.

A dull impact followed.

But not from a clean hit. His punch had been stopped.

Stopped by...

“My left hand.”

“Kh.”

She only wrapped her small hand around his fist to defend, but that was enough to stop him.

However, she had broken her pattern.

That was critically important, so Kamijou Touma put on a belligerent smile.

“What kind of ‘Breaker’ was that? Honestly, who cares? You keep going so over the top that it all starts to look cheap, so I can’t help but wonder. *You’re not even using that Aiwass you made a point of showing off earlier, are you?* Since you broke your own rules to stop me with your left hand, let me guess: getting punched hurts like hell even for a legendary magician, doesn’t it? Am I wrong, Anna Sprengel?”

“*Who gave you permission to speak?*”

This time, she pressed her right palm against the boy’s stomach.

He had swung his fist and had it blocked, so he was defenseless at the moment.

The girl with the wounded pride widened her eyes as far as they would go.

“*Do not get carried away. You should be dead already.*”

A human-sized mass was blasted backwards as if by a point-blank shotgun blast.

“Esper!!”

“Shut up, Germain. I’m staying in control. I can keep going.”

“No, not that. You need to get up before the next attack arrives!!”

He was not even given time to lie sprawled out in the snow.

Kamijou rolled across the cold asphalt and two things entered his vision.

He could hear the straining of her skeleton even from here. Anna Sprengel had changed from a fragile-looking ten-year-old little girl to a voluptuous yet toxic woman.

She moved her right hand’s index and middle fingers together in a scissors gesture.

“Break... Breaker... you know what? I’m sick of coming up with these names. Maybe this is how women lose their charm.”

Anna gave up on naming her right hand.

But that did not mean its destructive power was in any way reduced.

“Since it’s Christmas, how about I treat you to a show?”

The other thing he had seen was an airship that had been slowly floating across the white sky above.

Its rugby-ball-shaped gasbag had ruptured, transforming it into an orange shooting star. It scraped along the walls of the skyscrapers as it fell straight toward him.

Ironically, the large LCD screen on the side of the shooting star displayed a large image of white-bearded Santa Claus aboard his sleigh.

“Merry Christmas☆,” whispered Anna while viewing that giant face falling toward the surface.

(Dammit!!)

Kamijou slowly got up and made his way to a nearby building. He pushed open the glass door with his shoulder and collapsed inside. The world outside of the thick reinforced glass was consumed by flames and heat.

This was a department store, but not a fancy one.

They must have tried to make it look fancy to earn shoppers during the Christmas season, but that had only emphasized how unfancy it was. It was the kind of store even Kamijou would feel comfortable entering alone.

His ability to sense warmth must have broken because he did not feel at all comfortable even though the heat had to be on in here. Did that mean the trembling of his fingertips was not caused by the cold?

The first floor seemed to be for jewelry, glasses, and musical instruments. The rows of glass showcases with gentle music playing in the background was somehow reminiscent of a museum.

After a freight train bursting out from the ground and a burning airship crashing down, there were of course no people around. All the customers, employees, and even guards had left.

Only the gentle music remained.

Good, thought Kamijou.

They might not have survived if they had decided to stay here to protect the jewels or the money in the till.

“...”

He still did not know what Anna was doing.

But something about it seemed wrong to him.

She drew in external power, rearranged it how she liked inside her body, and then fired it back out. Her attacks were definitely deadly and destructive, but when he thought about it, they seemed more centered *on the productive side of things*.

Kamijou had fought a great number of magicians over his right hand. Maybe this was just another part of that. They had all provided their own view of things. During all those exchanged words, some had said his Imagine Breaker was a reference point for the world. Magic put everything in flux, so those who wielded magic could put their minds at ease by focusing on a single immovable point that would never change. In that sense, the idea of adding more to it *was incredibly unusual*.

It did not fit.

He felt certain that Anna Sprengel's method was incorrect.

So...

(Magic.)

He shifted the focus of his mind.

St. Germain had said Anna's *spells* were not pure Rose spells.

(She's using some kind of method to manipulate the mystical and miraculous. I can't let the focus on my hand lead me astray. She's only using *ordinary methods* that even Stiyl or Kanzaki could use if they knew how!!)

However, he was not currently with Index, who had memorized at least 103,001 grimoires, or Othinus, a true god given a new form. So even if he could make some guesses, he could not find the answer.

There was also the time she had used her left hand. Her power must not have actually been limited to her right hand, but that did not tell him what she *was* doing. He felt like someone questioning what the doctor said, but not sure what the actual cure was.

But...

“...”

He came to a stop.

He had seen something.

The jewelry section of the department store had a lot of showcases. The employees must have put in more effort than usual since it was Christmas because there were a few handmade signs inside the glass cases, perhaps hoping to catch the eye of customers who were on a date.

Kamijou had noticed one of those:

“Check out our December Gematria Special☆ An available employee will convert your name into numbers and find which gem is a must-have for you. The process is free of charge! Are you a couple that feels they don’t have enough in common? Dig deeper and you’re bound to find a stronger connection there!!”

He could not believe his eyes.

Had magic always been stuff like this?

“Engrave your favorite rune into a pure gold ring! Some civilizations used to carve these holy symbols into gold coins and cups to bring themselves wealth or avoid poison. And...”

“Would you like to add an extra something to your usual yoga lessons? By creating your own personal incense, you can more easily picture the breaths moving through your body, so...”

“Crystal healing isn’t just a Western thing! Even something you have lying around the house can work! Prayer beads are a hot choice at the moment!! You can even select stones other than crystals to...”

Kamijou had been vaguely aware that jewelry stores would use this kind of thing to sell birthstones and healing crystals.

But this was too much. This kind of jargon and equations was knowledge meant to be strictly stored in an ancient library or in that white nun's head. That info should not have been advertised on handmade signs cut out of cardboard and written with a felt-tip pen.

How had this happened?

There was only one possible answer.

“R&C Occultics has gotten to places like this too!?”

He heard the reinforced glass shattering. The road out front should have been consumed by orange flames, but it had instead frozen white. The thick glass wall had failed to withstand the temperature difference, so the entire thing shattered and rained down like a waterfall.

The sexy woman took a single step into the department store.

She did not seem at all worried about the sea of glass she had created. You would be hard-pressed to find a woman better suited to be surrounded by jewelry and musical instruments.

Kamijou silently raised his right fist again.

“Are you...” He gulped but still faced that blatant threat. “Are you using something to switch between different kinds of ‘power’? What you’re doing isn’t like my right hand. That’s the magic of the outside world that lets you control a variety of supernatural powers by default!!”

“This is the rose and the cross.”

The sexy woman waved her right hand with a sadistic smile.

And she said one more thing as she approached.

“Not that I expect you to understand what that means.”

Part 4

Losing his phone was a heavy blow.

The answer was somewhere out there. And it would be so easy to find that an amateur might accidentally stumble across it. But Kamijou Touma currently had no way of accessing that site.

“Tch!!”

“Hee hee.”

With each casual swing of the sexy woman’s long hand, a powerful gust of wind would blow through, caustic acid would spread out like an amoeba, or a bright light would flash.

The movement of her hand was more like a pliant whip than a solid fist. She put on the smile of a sadist while mercilessly producing deadly slap after deadly slap.

Instead of trying to kill him with the occult, she was trying to kill with him with physical attacks. She would shatter a glass showcase to kill him with the shards flying toward him.

His fist *alone* was not enough to deal with that.

“St. Germain, *switch!!*”

“I will keep you alive.”

They reversed hands.

Of course, St. Germain could not overwhelm Anna on his own, so they would switch back and forth.

They called each other's names like partners fighting back to back. The right hand deflected the blowing wind, a diamond pillar burst diagonally from the floor to hold back the flood of acid, Kamijou ran along the transparent pillar like a steep slope, and he leaped at Miss Sprengel from midair.

The one body played the roles of magic and science.

But...

“You've reached your limit, haven't you?”

“!!”

She swung her right hand horizontally and the light that burst out slammed into Kamijou's side. He was knocked away from his downward path toward her. He flew to the side and crashed into a showcase, sending ruby rings, emerald necklaces, and more scattering around with the shattered glass.

“Kahh!?”

Sharp glass stabbed into his thigh.

But he did not have time to grimace in pain.

“It might look like you are holding your own with that bizarre fighting style, but surely you know better. In a clash between magic, the theory behind it matters far more than the quantity. And after all this, you still do not understand what I am doing.”

“...”

He did not need to admit to it out loud, but Anna was right. Kamijou only knew that she could change her right hand's power at will, but he did not actually know what spell it was or what category of magic it belonged to.

He could negate all kinds of supernatural powers by brute force, but that was not enough to get by with someone like this.

Rushing blindly in at a magician was like running into a densely-packed

minefield. You could even say a magician's standard strategy was to set things up so a direct attack like that could never work.

"St. Germain."

"You aren't going to get an answer back when you don't even know what question to ask," said Anna.

She casually swung her open palm from a distance and three explosions appeared in quick succession.

Kamijou swallowed the blood that had gathered in his mouth and let out a roar.

"*Take over!!*"

Once St. Germain was in control, he moved back while blocking the attack with a diamond shield and pillar. It was a solid defense, but that was all it was. Relying on magic was clearly only going to get them backed into a dead end. Kamijou alone could not defeat Anna and neither could St. Germain.

So they swapped out.

Never relying on only one of them was the only way to stay alive.

"*Back to you.* Alter your timing a bit next time. Don't let her predict our actions!!"

"St. Germai-!!"

"No. I said alter the timing, esper!!"

A broken square pillar was spinning Kamijou's way, but he would have to deal with it himself. He frantically dodged the giant blunt weapon that knocked aside the entire register counter and eye test machine.

While they frequently switched back and forth, Kamijou's fist threw off the destructive rhythm.

He had no choice but to confront her head on.

Any cover he tried to hide behind would only get destroyed along with him and moving over by the wall left him without enough room to swing his right arm.

While buying time like that, he had to ask about everything he had seen. Whether or not it would be helpful, he did know that this jewelry section had already been influenced by Rose magic.

He did not have to hit the jackpot right away. In fact, he doubted that was possible.

He swung his bloody fist while asking his inner partner some questions.

“What’s crystal healing!? I know I’ve heard the term a lot!”

“It is believed that jewels can gather up the power of the constellations and return it to their wearer. It is also said the harder the stone, the more power it absorbs, making diamonds the most extreme example. That is why it is thought they can be used for a great many specific goals such as detoxing and exorcisms, not just vaguely providing good fortune.”

“What’s this about engraving runes on treasures like gold coins and cups?”

“Engraving the rune for victory into a coin is a way of praying for wealth and engraving the rune for suffering into a cup is a way of detecting poisoned drinks. You could think of them as protective charms with specific effects.”

“Then what’s the connection between yoga and incense!?”

“Yoga is not technically a form of training done at the gym. It is actually a method of controlling your inner body through your breathing to have an effect on the outside world. Tools are generally not needed. In fact, you are supposed to rid yourself of all worldly possessions and thoughts, but beginners would probably find it easier to focus on their breathing if the air were given a color or aroma. Of course, using a guide means only following the rails laid out for you, so the act loses all meaning.”

“What about gold and silver!?”

“Seven metals were given a position of importance in ancient times, but since that included iron and lead, they were not all precious metals. On that note, the idea of silver weapons being effective against monsters is mostly the influence of folklore and entertainment, so I would not rely on it if I were you. There might be some effect, but a truly pious person would not melt down a silver cross to create a knife or bullet in the first place.”

“Argh, what else was there? Prayer beads!?”

“They are a type of spiritual item used in Buddhism. The term generally refers to seeds of the bodhi tree strung into a loop by a single thread, but beads of crystal are also used. The number of beads is usually 108, but there are other versions. The Christian rosary is the same basic idea.”

None of it was very specific and they were getting off topic.

Even now, the boy’s life was being shortened for every second of freedom. He bled more each time he and St. Germain switched out, but they kept it up. He had to pick up every single hint he could get from the handmade signs and the occult code(?) conversion chart pasted on the side of the register.

“Then what about birthstones!?”

“Each of the twelve months is given a different gem, but there are several different versions. The version most well-known now was created by the American National Association of Jewelers.”

That one was a complete bust. They might have used some older source when deciding on their list, but he doubted a centuries-old tradition would have been passed down with perfect accuracy. At best, it would have partially incorporated some of it. He felt an urge to lash out at the half-assed system here. This was like the stores telling you to give chocolate on Valentine’s Day just to sell their products. He could not entrust his life to that.

He heard a disconcerting zapping sound.

It was not aimed directly at him, so he was slow to react. The electricity instead crashed into the showcase in front of him, causing it to burst from within. The wall of sharp glass pummeled his entire body and he was knocked to the floor.

“Hit.”

“Ah...kah...”

“I think I see how this works now. You’re nimble, but it dulls your intuition when your life is not directly targeted.”

There were countless types of magic.

And Anna Sprengel was in the deepest depths of that world. Was he just not going to find the answer by looking through some random bits and pieces of magical knowledge?

But.

St. Germain spoke from within Kamijou while the boy clenched his fist.

“I see. You cannot find the answer right away, but you can arrive at the answer by eliminating each wrong answer in turn.”

“...?”

“The runes are not necessary and we can eliminate the yoga and Buddhism as well. R&C Occultics has spread all forms of magic. That may have made the occult harder to detect, just like the city lights hiding the stars in the sky, but if you understand the Rose’s methods, the knowledge requiring our focus makes itself readily apparent.”

Kamijou Touma did not know enough to take issue with that conclusion.

He had to rely on St. Germain’s senses since he still knew the Rose, just like people never forgot how to hold chopsticks or ride a bike.

“The answer is three.”

Kamijou felt so woozy, but he was guided to that specific answer, not four or five.

St. Germain went on to explain.

“The Rose often used Kabbalah, which says the entire world can be explained using the twenty-two Hebrew characters. You merely need to subtract the seven metals and the twelve constellations from twenty-two. If you remove each of the petals on the outside, you are left with the number hidden in the center of the flower. You are left with three characters.”

Come to think of it, hadn’t Anna herself mentioned the rose and the cross?

“Shin is fire, Mem is water, and Aleph is wind. The rose symbol represents the world by surrounding those three elements with a ring divided into sevenths and with the twelve colors.”

Kamijou managed to keep breathing, but it felt like breaking through a sticky barrier.

Was that due to being torn up on the outside or eaten away on the inside?

It was hard to tell anymore.

“Then...is Anna using that to create different things out of the energy produced by that angel named Aiwass?”

“Yes, but that does not simply mean 22 different attack patterns in all. Kabbalah has a code system known as Gematria. The characters are assigned numbers and two words with the same number are considered to have the same meaning.”

“But...”

If she only started with three characters, weren’t there only so many combinations she could use?

But St. Germain got ahead of that question.

“For example, Shin’s numerical value is 300, but Gematria adds the digits together to reach a single-digit number. That gives you an answer of 3. But that can be read simply as three, aka Gimel, or it could be read as 1+2, aka Aleph and Bet. So depending on how you break it down, the possibilities are endless. That is why a powerful grimoire can be such a hotbed of misreadings.”

“I was wondering about that, but it wasn’t my main question. Where is Anna hiding her rose accessory!?”

He doubted it was the decorations in her fried shrimp hair.

Nor would it be her thin dress.

She would need a detailed symbol that accurately placed the twenty-two Hebrew characters on as many rose petals, but Kamijou could not see anything like it.

The sexy woman grinned and raised her right hand from a short distance away.

“This will never end unless we destroy that. We’ll be killed if we can’t rob Anna of her power!!”

Part 5

“Found it!” Index shouted excitedly in the District 7 hospital.

If basic magic could be constructed from magic words, gestures, and hand signals with no need for a spiritual item, it might seem like there was no way to save the espers from the side effects.

But that assumption was wrong.

“The stars, the three prophets, a link to the date, and it only activates on the 25th.”

“So it’s a curse that takes advantage of Christmas’s date!?”

That might sound ridiculous, but at some point, Christmas became more than just an enjoyable festival. Either a very twisted person had spread the idea or a lot of people had wanted to believe it because there were traditions of that sort out there. For example, there were mysterious figures who generally only appeared on Christmas and who you never wanted to so much as encounter, like the dark Santa Claus that abducted bad children or the Kallikantzaros that was only active during the end of the year.

And human psychology had a fascinating tendency to spread stories of misfortune more than ones of fortune. For example, everyone would immediately forget an urban legend that still remembering the keyword ‘silver mirror’ when you turned twenty would bring you happiness, but no one could bring themselves to forget the urban legend that still remembering the keyword ‘purple mirror’ when you turned twenty would mean your death.

So the happier a time Christmas was, the more the dark joy spread of wondering about the people for whom Christmas was an unhappy time. Yes, joy. When people at a large party started wondering about the people who had no date to share Christmas with, they were generally imagining someone worse off than them to make themselves feel better about their own situation. There may have been a magician that provided that with a concrete effect at some point. Either to ruin Christmas or to make sure the event would never be forgotten.

In fact, it was not uncommon in the world of magic for experts to give concrete form to something they encountered and thought was neat. Othinus *who once destroyed the entire world* was not one to talk, but magicians had a tendency to cross some lines generally considered taboo.

Take, for example, everything related to the Cthulhu Mythos.

Or the Rosy Cross that Andreeae claimed to have invented himself.

“A good luck charm meant to confirm your own happiness, huh?” Othinus sounded disgusted. “And it ends up destroying their body as they keep using it. Self-doubt really is the greatest poison. Besides, if you need something to objectively tell you you’re happy, then you’re not really happy at all.”

“But now that we know this...”

“Yes, we can bring the party to an end. Let’s leave a present by the patient’s pillow while they sleep and before they can start using that magic while emptyhanded. Santa’s visit is considered the highlight of Christmas in this country, so once they have their present, Christmas is over, right?”

“A spell to end Christmas.”

“Once it’s ready, search out an adult among the visitors. If they aren’t an esper, we can get them to use the magic without any side effects.”

Normally, they might not find anyone willing to cooperate with that. Especially in Academy City. They might even get yelled at for asking for something so extremely inappropriate.

But things were different now.

It was R&C Occultics who had lowered the barrier toward magic.

And the god of war, deception, and magic would use everything available to her. If the enemy was going to give her a gift, she would use that gift to bring the enemy to their knees. That was Othinus’s style.

“Then let’s settle this,” said the god without hesitation.

Part 6

Anna Sprengel considered what to do with her right hand next. But only with the tension of someone pondering what to make for dinner that night.

She had well over a million attack options.

(The optimization should be done soon and the boring result has already shown itself.)

She had made her choice.

40 + 300. Each digit was split out separately and summed together, so that came out to a 7. That meant the true character she had extracted was Z or Zayin. That corresponded to The Lovers in tarot and it was the channel that connected the spheres of understanding and beauty in the Sephiroth.

It meant a sword or armor.

That determined the nature of her right hand.

(The emotion of irritation is a rare one for me, but I do experience it from time to time. If this result is not to my liking, maybe I should dispose of him and move on to my next objective.)

Anna Sprengel gently stretched out her slender hand. Her right hand could use just two fingers to slice through anything. In other words, simply closing those two fingers would create a massive invisible maw with her target's head between the jaws.

Just then, Kamijou Touma took an unusual action.

“*Change!!*”

He did the opposite of his usual move of suicidally rushing in with fist clenched. In fact, he jumped backwards to move away from her.

That was still suicidal, but the boy did not have any projectile attacks.

Which meant...

(St. Germain!!)

Anna smiled.

It might look at first like Kamijou Touma had acquired a great variety of options here, but it was actually the opposite. When it came to the essence of Rosicrucianism, no magician knew more than the master of the No. 1 Temple in Germany. No one had any chance of defeating her if they challenged her on that field. They might put up a decent fight, but they could never win. They would only be postponing their inevitable death.

It could not have been more apparent that the only way to defeat this magic was to destroy the illusion.

(Attempting to keep your distance and wear me down with projectiles after all this is just pathetic.)

St. Germain specialized in creating diamonds.

That meant carbon manipulation.

(Then all I need to do is absorb all forms of carbon, both solid and gaseous, to remove it from this space.)

Something gathered in her small left palm. It was a filthy black ball a little larger than a pill.

(Now St. Germain is helpless. Or will he use his host's own body to create a diamond? Based on the optional services offered by funeral homes, an entire human body's worth of carbon should only get you a diamond no larger than the tip of your fingernail!!)

Anna laughed, but then she silently grimaced.

No matter what she said, she clung to success and victory more than anyone. To the point that she could not maintain herself without them.

The boy's words were coming back to her and they were accompanied by pain.

However.

“.....”

A brief pause followed.

After falling back—and thus gathering Anna’s attention as she pursued—Kamijou Touma lightly tossed something into the air.

It was a symbol made from cheap gold plating and it was only a few centimeters long. Instead of a number or a letter of the alphabet, this symbol looked sort of like an ‘n’ with a loop at the end.

The symbol stood for Capricorn.

Its essence was femininity, activity, Saturn, longing, and prosperity.

As well as...

(The element of earth.)

Yes.

The twenty-two characters were broken out into three, seven, and twelve. With only three in the center, the rose symbol managed by the twenty-two Hebrew characters had no place for earth in the center of the flower.

And while it was a magical symbol, it had no magic power within it. In fact, it felt like someone trying to use what little knowledge they had without any practical skills to back it up. This could not be St. Germain who did have those skills.

In other words...

“Was this Kamijou Touma?”

She knew that, but human thoughts were so easily altered by your assumptions.

Something extra had been thrown into the mix.

Capricorn was a symbol of the earth element.

How things looked in a red room was very different from how they looked in a blue room, so a train's driver's compartment had its coloration chosen carefully.

Because the wrong coloration could be distracting.

(This could be *bad*!!)

Part 7

December's birthstone is either turquoise or lapis lazuli.

All you Capricorns out there, don't feel too bad about being the earth element. Christmas is your season. Today's the day to ask for a special gift!

“!!”

Kamijou clenched his teeth while kicking aside one of the handmade signs scattered across the floor.

Up ahead, Anna Sprengel grimaced and held her feminine right wrist with her other hand. He doubted that had actually accomplished anything and, even if it had, it would still give him the opening he needed.

He just needed a large enough opening to take one big step.

He cut powerfully forward as if defying the white light expanding explosively in front of him. He gathered up the very last of his strength to move right up to her.

Anna must have no longer cared about losing control because she tried intercepting him with her right palm even as it continued to produce a blinding blowtorch-like light.

“But how!?” roared the bewitching woman who seemed to corrupt everything around her with her very presence.

Yes. Kamijou Touma had fought plenty of magicians, but he could not construct a spell himself. He would be able to use magic if he let St. Germain take control, but St. Germain would not rely on the fist that would kill him.

But the answer was simple.

“R&C Occultics.”

“...”

“You spread this knowledge yourself. If you hadn’t done that, I wouldn’t have been able to fight back!!”

Anna gave up on trying to control her right hand.

She broke her own rules by raising her other hand.

Yes, *Anna Sprengel’s right hand was not actually special in any way*. That was only an unnecessary restriction she was placing on herself. She had cheated like this once before, so Kamijou did not hesitate.

He took action.

But if he used his right fist here, it would only be a repeat of last time. While his right hand clashed with her left, she could use her right hand to blow him away.

So...

“Wha—!?”

He bit at her alluring hand. At her long, slender fingers. It was such a

primitive choice from the perspective of an intellectual well-versed in all forms of magic, but it was certainly effective.

Because...

(*Her fingers.*)

Kamijou Touma clenched his teeth.

It made sense that a jewelry store would focus on something like this.

Because if wearing a ring on a finger other than your left hand's ring finger gave it a special meaning, that might give them another way to advertise to people.

Yes.

Anna did not need to carry around a full rose symbol.

A scrap of paper on the floor – probably some notes for speaking with customers – explained which elements each finger corresponded to.

(Starting with the thumb, they're ether, water, fire, earth, and wind. So by bending her index, middle, and little fingers as a command, she can switch the basic elements of fire, water, and wind on and off, creating whatever Hebrew character she wants in her palm. That's how Anna was controlling her angel. That's her magic! Which means...!!)

However he did it, he only had to keep her from moving her fingers.

That would let him seal away Anna Sprengel's Hebrew-based rose spell.

And with his right fist still free to use, of course.

“...!!”

Kamijou Touma and St. Germain had arrived at this point along very different paths. One of science, the other of magic. They were very different people with nothing in common.

But at this moment, the two of them stared in the exact same direction.



It did not matter if they were dropouts or if they were considered disappointments.

Any being living here and now still had the freedom to change what happened to them.

No matter what form that being took.

They only had to act upon their desire to protect the people and feelings they held dear.

Then they could fight on equal footing with anyone in the world!!

(Kamijou Touma.)

(St. Germain.)

He had used his mouth.

With his teeth clenched tight, they could not speak aloud.

So they faced their single enemy and attempted to end this in silence.

They had both only ever wanted to do one thing about Anna Sprengel's tyranny.

To clench that fist as hard as can be.

To gather everything that woman had done to them, place it in that fist, and send it...

(Back to you!!)

(Back to you!!)

This time, those two battered wills caught Miss Sprengel square on the cheekbone.

Epilogue: Greeting Through the Bars — Matching_Complete.

A violent crash shook the department store.

“...”

Bloody Kamijou Touma had fallen down the escalator. His mind was cloudy and he was bleeding badly. His entire body felt feverish and he could have sworn the flavor of blood was growing stronger with every breath he took.

He was at his limit.

He had never received a vaccine or antidote. Defeating Anna Sprengel was not enough to save him.

The few remaining employees hesitantly emerged to check on the sound, but they screamed and fled when they saw the bloody boy.

“What are you doing?” asked St. Germain.

His continued existence meant Kamijou Touma’s life would continue to be worn away just as Anna Sprengel wanted. Yet the boy had not tumbled down the escalator in order to reach the pharmacy or clinic.

He staggered over to the food section in the department store basement, leaned against the shelves, used them to drag himself along while knocking products to the floor, and made his way to an area where cold air reached him.

He was trying to find something perfectly ordinary: agar-agar.

He grabbed it and then collapsed down from the shelves.

He coughed up a lot of blood.

He did not have the time or strength to mix the powder with water. His balance was already shot and, while he could still see, he had trouble telling which way was up and which way was down. He grabbed the ready-made pack of block-like gelatin to try something before he passed out.

He did not know the exact conditions, but that stuff was not just used for cooking and making sweets; it was also used as a culture medium for growing microbes in a Petri dish. He knew it could not have any other germs in there, so he stuck the plastic container inside the large microwave used for heating the roast chickens sold at the front of the store, turned the dial, and forcibly sterilized it with heat.

Kamijou spoke as if forcing the air out of his lungs.

“If I die...”

“...”

“You’ll die too if you’re still in my body.”

Yes.

Finding a vaccine or antidote might save Kamijou Touma, but he did not see that as a perfect solution.

“If you could hijack dead bodies, people would have viewed you differently. Maybe they would’ve just feared you, or maybe they would’ve thanked you for helping them remember the dead.”

“It would be meaningless.” St. Germain rejected the entire idea. “I cannot maintain my own thoughts without using someone else’s brain.”

“Kh.”

Anna Sprengel had always intended for him to be disposable.

Whether Kamijou Touma or St. Germain remained in the end, it never would have kept her interest. She would have abandoned them and both would have been destroyed. That was probably what made this a “safe bit of fun” for her.

To put it another way, no matter who had won out, no sample of them would have remained for Anna Sprengel. She would have gained nothing no matter how it turned out. She may have had some objective other than Kamijou and St. Germain.

But he was in no state to look into what that might be.

There was another problem he had to solve.

One he had to solve by his own hand.

“I will leave,” said St. Germain.

“Wait.”

He felt the heat receding from his body.

No, it was moving toward a certain point in his body, as slowly as a slug. Specifically, the palm of his right hand.

“This is your body, so it is only right to return it to its original state.”

He knew what St. Germain was trying to do.

Imagine Breaker apparently could not fully negate him because he continued to multiply within Kamijou’s body, but that would change if St. Germain stopped the uncontrollable spread and directed himself toward his own greatest enemy.

This was likely a choice not even Anna had considered.

“But what happens to you?” asked Kamijou.

“If I remain within this body, I will continue to destroy it from within. An esper cannot escape the side effects of using magic. At some point, it would

be too much and you would die. So no matter what I choose, I cannot avoid annihilation.”

“If you’re only doing this because you can’t avoid it, that means you don’t want to do it!! Any living being, no matter what form it takes, will be troubled if it knows it’s going to die!!”

“...”

“Let’s try out even the smallest possibilities we can find. It might seem like suicide, but there has to be another option! If there’s even the faintest ray of hope out there, you can’t rush toward this dead end!! This is a crucial moment. I don’t care what all the other St. Germains out there have done. The version of you right here fought to protect Academy City! You don’t have to give up on yourself just because it’s ‘the right thing to do’!”

“But if I do that...”

“Shut up!! What good are ideals that can’t protect everyone? I don’t care if it makes you look selfish. I won’t reject that choice, so reach out your hand!!!!!!”

Silence followed.

But the meaning of the silence had changed somewhat.

It was a much softer silence. The other being inside him may have been smiling.

“Why must you say these things? That is precisely what makes me want to protect you from further harm at the hands of others.”

“...”

“Anna Sprengel might think she is all-knowing, but I will accomplish something here she failed to predict. Esper, I will free you from that woman’s game. Allowing you to live happier than anyone will be the greatest attack against her.”

Kamijou Touma had no choice in the matter.

This was a microscopic suicide using Imagine Breaker. He may have been able to stop it by cutting off his own right hand, but he did not have the strength left to drag himself over to the fish and meat preparation area with its specialty knives and other equipment. Simply grabbing an ordinary pack of agar-agar had brought him to his knees.

If he had taken that step right away, without hesitation, he might have been able to save a life here.

He regretted that decision.

The final choice was entirely in St. Germain's hands here.

"This is the right thing to do."

"But..."

"It is wrong to destroy your own body."

St. Germain's words seemed to reject the very act he was in the process of completing, but he bent his principles for the boy he would leave behind.

He was of course afraid.

Any form of life, even one that wished to die, would feel fear when the moment actually arrived.

Yet...

"And there is no need to grieve our parting."

He knew it was a lie.

But that magician enjoyed putting on a little show that excited people and gave them dreams.

So he went with duplicity here.

“Whatever happens to the me here, there are many more St. Germains scattered around the world. I am an imposter who fools even himself by swapping out his memories and ideals. The great magician, the Count of St. Germain, is already an immortal being who has surpassed space and time, if you will recall.”

Kamijou Touma listened to his every word.

Because he felt that was the respectful thing to do.

And once that powerful magician was done speaking, Kamijou Touma slumped forward.

He had reached his limit.

The boy had been given his Christmas present.

He had been granted life.

Accelerator sat in a cold, dark room.

Academy City's #1 and the new Board Chairman was inside a holding cell. The white monster was waiting to be indicted and tried. All so he could clean up the city's dark side with no room for any exceptions.

The cell was quiet.

Only the most basic rights were guaranteed here. The place had to be heated, but that did not seem enough to eliminate the chill creeping in through the concrete.

But this was still far better than the sticky darkness.

This was the natural world.

It was the world as it truly was, not a warm but somehow twisted sense of safety. It seemed to slowly and silently numb over your good sense.

No one wanted to be surrounded by bars, but when you knew it was the leadup to achieving true freedom, it was not all that bad. It was something like being in an egg protected by a hard shell.

Then he heard some footsteps.

They were very quiet.

The next cell over must have been occupied.

A little girl who looked only ten smiled as she spoke to him through the bars.

“Hello, big boss of the science side. Do you know who I am?”

“...”

“For someone with a fancy title like Board Chairman, you are not easy to get in contact with. Even the CEO of R&C Occultics was forced to come see you directly.”

He clicked his tongue.

He could always bend the bars and attack the adjacent cell, but that would mean breaking the rules he had chosen for himself. If he created a new exception, any who knew that secret could use it to design the next form of the darkness.

It was time for his diplomatic debut as the new Board Chairman.

“What brings you here today?”

“Nothing much. Set 1 is complete, so I was using my free time to enjoy myself and gather some data. My digital invasion is progressing quite smoothly, after all.”

“...”

“But I’m done with that. I saw an interesting irregularity, but it only barely reached the level of interesting. *Set 2’s objective is right here.* Now that I’ve

met you, my Academy City sightseeing tour is probably over.”

“Cut the crap. However you got here and however you choose to interpret it, you’ve lost now that you were thrown behind bars here.”

“Oh, I’m leaving once I’ve had enough. So do try to draw this conversation out as long as you can. Entertaining me will preserve world peace for that much longer.”

“Hey.”

The atmosphere had changed.

It was a small change, but something about his voice brought a chill to any who heard it.

And in response, countless particles of dust and dirt gathered on a single point. That was an unclean cocoon that gave mass to an otherworldly being. *A translucent demon* rose up out of thin air.

“Do you really think you can get away with that sort of exception while I run Academy City?”

“Heh.”

Yet she refused to relinquish control of the conversation.

Another ominous atmosphere gathered there.

“It irritates me. Oh, how it irritates me. You’re so slow on the uptake I want to *bite through* these bars and kill you right this instant. The fact that you would ask such an unbelievably stupid question now of all times irritates me to no end. And yet people will still doubt *my* intellect and claim I didn’t explain properly? It would be less infuriating to see a message window from on high saying ‘the problem is 100% on your end, so go check your system settings, you utter trash of a user’ when your download keeps cutting out and you keep getting server errors. But not to worry. I can bear with it. I can suppress these feelings. Eh heh heh☆ Maybe I should learn how to enjoy self-restraint. Yes, that sounds like an excellent goal if I say so myself. So

bright and positive. I need to learn to enjoy a cup of coffee while waiting for that late-night download to complete. I won't be able to sleep afterwards, though. Hey, where's my applause? I just saved your pathetic life, so I believe I am warranted some praise here."

She did not feel the slightest hint of fear when facing the #1. Did that mean she was even more unusual than him?

She had managed restraint this time.

But next time, she would explode.

She would destroy the entire world, her original plans be damned. Her tinderbox of a smile said as much as she continued speaking.

"You will learn soon enough that there is someone out there that this city, this country, and this world cannot restrain."

"..."

"Hee hee. No stupid questions this time? Clever boy. It is time you learned that your authority is not absolute, you wannabe ruler of a child. I belong to the ancient Rosicrucian magic cabal that the world's royals and nobles, driven by pathetic greed, searched so desperately for using their own and the people's money. It does not matter how much power you have or how much justice or materiel you rule over; you can never capture me."

Time dragged on in a closed cell with no clock.

The old ruler narrowed her eyes affectionately toward the new ruler.

And she made a blunt statement.

"I did not start up R&C Occultics because I wanted a giant IT company of my own. That is simply the modern form of the organization which can never be caught. So I already know the answer. Let me be clear—your authority will bind you. You cannot capture me like that. No matter what."

"Who are—...?"

“Do not question me, fool. ... Oh, dear. Hee hee hee. I’m sorry. That was rude of me☆. But this completes Set 2, so an outsider like you can keep me here no longer.”

She laughed.

And the master of the No. 1 Temple in Germany’s voice contained the tension of unexploded ordnance as she leaned against the bars and spoke.

She was somehow reminiscent of the human who had once allowed the dark side to exist as he ruled over and observed everything in the city.

She hinted at trouble brewing.

“So I will use my spare time to help myself to some of this boring city’s data, new Board Chairman.”

Afterword

If you've been buying one volume at a time, welcome back. If you bought them all at once, welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

It's Christmas day! In GT1, I got a lot of ordinary people involved to take a look back at the scale of the city and how its law enforcement works, so for GT2, I had the powerful characters push away the ordinary people to focus on a battle between the elites.

The #3 joined the battle in the previous volume too, but once the #5 shows up, you really see more political power and concern for their surroundings, don't you? I had her repeatedly change clothing between her school uniform, the nurse uniform, the Santa costume, and the Mitsuari Suit(?), but that was to lighten the overall mood that could have been pretty heavy when done straight, especially as a continuation of the last volume. Lighten up! The one flaw is that using Shokuhou a lot doesn't leave Shirai Kuroko any room to appear. Hopefully I can find some way to let them coexist.

Shokuhou shines most when Kamijou is around. She might think he ruined everything and she might be angry with him, but that queen's body still rejoices. I am still learning more about how to use Shokuhou who is basically visiting semi-permanently from Railgun, but I think her cutest point is how she might seem to be cleverly manipulating everyone else, but she fails to notice how she herself is being manipulated. (We never made a joint rule about this or anything, but thinking back, the original novels, the various manga, and the anime all have a lot of scenes of that queen being beaten up and losing badly, don't they?) She can satisfy both the doms and the subs depending on which side of her you're looking at, so we've really raised one

hell of a girl here.

Mikoto and Shokuhou can never seem to get along, but I think their biggest difference in the original novels is whether or not they're willing to get help from an enemy without any reconciliation. (When it comes to controlling your allies without any explanation, Mikoto is actually in a gray zone herself since she has a tendency to not tell anyone what's happening and run off to fight on her own, meaning she decides for her allies that they will not participate. It seems to me that she's so sensitive to having her friends controlled because she subconsciously fears that will boomerang back and criticize her own actions.) In that sense, the rules of the battle change when Shokuhou is around. You might be able to see their distinct fighting styles if you compare GT1 and GT2.

Also, Kamijou's way of fighting by tearing down the barriers between enemy and ally is different again from both Mikoto and Shokuhou's styles. He rushes to the scene on his own much like Mikoto, but he's been doing that for ages without feeling the slightest twinge of guilt about it, so that might be where the difference comes in.

The setting this time was that District 7 hospital.

This may be the first time that place has been the primary setting in the main series. It isn't the same as his dorm or school, but I wrote the manuscript while hoping it could feel like a place where Kamijou could relax. Did you notice how weird Kamijou is for feeling like the hospital is his home away from home?

And this time I had *her* use her right hand and *him* use magic. You could call it the shocking "Wait, did he just use magic!?" counterattack. When I looked back, I realized St. Germain was one of the few magicians who had left the story without being saved, so I made sure to mercilessly save him this time.

What remains at Kamijou Touma's core once everything else has been stripped away?

In a city where your esper power determines your worth and in a world where everyone focuses entirely on his right hand's special power, I thought it would be most astonishing for him to display the ordinary power to bring people together. That just seems like who Kamijou Touma has to be. ...And being so sure about that is another upside to being able to write this series for so long.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Haimura-san and to my editors Miki-san, Anan-san, Nakajima-san, and Hamamura-san. Christmas ended up lasting more than one volume, so I probably used up a lot of what had been stockpiled for the occasion. Thank you so much for going along with my nonsense every single time.

And I give my thanks to the readers. It is up to all of you to decide whether Kamijou Touma was successful or unsuccessful this time. It took some doing to work out a way to explain the fragmentary information on that era-hopping magician St. Germain, but I ended up really liking him. I hope he will remain somewhere in your hearts. Thank you so much for reading this far!

It is time to close the pages for now while praying that the pages of the next book will be opened.

And I lay my pen down for now.

Writing about flavors is hard too, but it's so easy to forget about the winter cold if you aren't careful.

-Kamachi Kazuma

Ending

Someone was lying in a hospital bed.

But it was not Kamijou Touma.

“...”

Depression hung over Misaka Mikoto in that bed.

Academy City's #3 had finally joined the ranks of the hospitalized. All the powerful people who had fought in that battle were gathered in this District 7 hospital. Was it supposed to be an RPG inn or something?

Now, Mikoto was rich, but she was not in a private room.

Several girls around her age were gathered in this room and someone she knew was lying in the neighboring bed.

If Mikoto was in the hospital, then so was that other girl.

And Shokuhou Misaki seemed to be enjoying herself.

She had the look of someone preparing for a sleepover.

“Heh heh heh. Eh heh heh. I always wanted to do this. In the big picture, this is basically having a sleepover with him, right? Now I have a route in and I don't have to worry about visiting hours. I can stop by his hospital room for some fun whenever I want—morning, noon, or night. This is going to be the best winter break ever!!”

“There's something wrong with you.”

Also, she was wearing a sheer babydoll even in the hospital. Was she planning to only let female doctors and nurses treat her? And since she was brought in as an emergency patient, who had she gotten to bring her that perverted nightwear???

“Misaka-saaan, why are you wearing frog pajamas? You do know everyone can see you in the hospital, right?”

“There really is something wrong with you! I don’t think we’ll ever see eye to eye!!”

But aside from that, Misaka Mikoto spoke quietly in the Christmas night.

“We lost.”

“I think that depends a lot on how we define winning and losing.” Shokuhou started out with that carefree comment, but then she admitted to the facts at hand. “But if you’re talking about protecting him ourselves, then yes, we lost badly. We tried to save him and ended up being saved by him. I can’t say I’m pleased with that.”

Of course, nothing would change if they simply decided they were outmatched.

Mikoto had given up on assuming that they fought on different fields and that a middle schooler could never stand on the same stage as a high schooler.

So she accepted what had happened and continued from there.

“I want more power.”

She was not referring to the Level system determined by Academy City.

She wanted enough power to protect the things she held dear.

That was like a small key.

This loss had changed her way of thinking, allowing her to view the world in a completely different way.

She never could have done this before.

She was still lying face up in the bed and staring up at the ceiling, but she reached her hand out to the side.

“So help me. I know this isn’t over yet and I need your help to get stronger.”

“Sounds good to me☆ This is a surprising amount of honesty ability for you, Misaka-san.”

She felt a definite squeeze at the hand she held out toward the neighboring bed.