

鎌池和馬

イラスト／はいむらきよたか

創約

林示書曰 イシブクス とある魔術の 目録



Illustrations

A Certain Magical Index Genesis Testament

Science and magic exist side by side in this world.

This is the peak of the science side with a curriculum for espers, Academy City. In this city where eighty percent of the population are students, the season has finally come when all residents are excited and fidgety!

It's Christmas Eve.

Amidst the city showing a cheerful hustle and bustle, an ordinary boy who can't keep up with school, Kamijou Touma, also doesn't intend to miss this event! He was hard at work in his supplementary lessons...

A backward glance from the default misfortune-prone bastard, the silver-haired sister freeloading in his dormitory, Index, in a heart-pounding scene different from the usual, activates a new glutton skill!! While Kamijou tries to desperately stop that, Misaka Mikoto, taken in by the Christmas Eve atmosphere, appears before him. The Genesis Testament begins bursting!



か-12-97



創約とある魔術の禁書目録
Index

鎌池和馬



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KADOKAWA
ASCII MEDIA WORKS



Kamachi Kazuma

新約でもちょっとだけ触れたので注目のあの子は黒いサンタにしようかなとも思いましたが、ここはやっぱり黒いサンタクロースで！ そして、もちろん美琴をどう黒いサンタにしようって話じゃありませんからね。

[Product of Design Books]

A Certain Magical Index 1~22, SS1&2

A Certain Magical Index: New Testament 1~22, 22 Reverse

A Certain Magical Index: Genesis Testament

Heavy Object Series (17 Books Total)

The Zashiki Warashi of Intellectual Village (9 Books Total)

A Simple Series (2 Books Total)

The Circumstances Leading to Waltraute's Marriage

The Unexplored Summon://Blood-Sign (10 Books Total)

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The Malice of Beatrix the Level 1 Cap Holy Swallowwoman That Made Being the Strongest Even More Trouble - His Name? You Do (7 Books Total)

A Certain Magical Virtual-On

Apocalypse Witch: To the Strongests of an Age of Plenty

ILLUSTRATOR: Haimura Kiyotaka

I am slowly drawing in the back country of Hiroshima.

創約

とある魔術の禁書目録 インデックス

鎌池和馬

イラスト
はいむらきよたか

MERRY
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11月

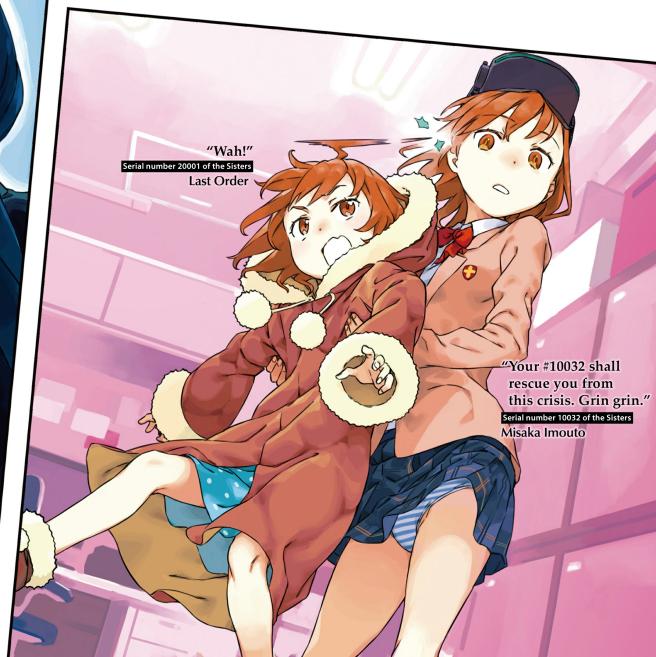


CONTENTS

10	PROLOGUE	At an Early Christmas Eve Intersection <i>Prepare_for_Xmas_Eve!</i>
44	CHAPTER 1	Just Like an Amusement Park <i>Red_Wear,Big_Bag,and_Flying_Sledge.</i>
94	CHAPTER 2	A Changing Academy City, the Night Before <i>the_24th>Showdown.</i>
152	CHAPTER 3	A Dark Conspiracy and a Barrier Gone <i>Enemy_Use_XXX.</i>
284	CHAPTER 4	Interaction with Another World, the Starting Point <i>"R&C OCCULTICS Co.Ltd."</i>
328	EPILOGUE	Snow and Crimson Cover All <i>White_End.(and_Merry_Xmas!!)</i>



Maidono Hoshimi





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Prologue: At an Early Christmas Eve Intersection – Prepare_for_Xmas_Eve!

>>December 24, 00:00 AM

>>District 7 Station Shopping District, Academy City, Western Tokyo

The three blades of a propeller spun round and round.

Those wind turbines could be found anywhere in this city.

A total of nearly 200 samurai walked through the blowing snow of the city late at night.

“How is this a Christmas activity? What kind of exploitative nonsense is this?”

Pardon me. They were actually the bright and shining girls of prestigious Tokiwadai Middle School. One of them, Misaka Mikoto, was (bare-legged) and wearing a thick duffel coat over her blazer uniform. Her lips were blue and her eyes stared off into the distance. Perhaps the bare legs during a snowy night were to blame. They were very bare.

“I’m going to die. I mean it, die.”

“Onee-sama, if you don’t stay strong, you really will take a trip to the other side of the Sanzu River.”

The twintail underclassman who insisted on using a very Asian allusion even on Christmas Eve was Shirai Kuroko.

Everyone loved Christmas Eve and here it was. Even that forest animal which had made the news by finding a digital camera and taking a selfie would learn how to enjoy itself when thrown into this environment. Yet there was no happiness here, it was cold enough for the puddles to freeze, and the girls were stuck performing a boring school activity.

The airship slowly floating through the night sky gave a weather report on the large screen on its belly.

“The 24th will be a sunny day, but the early morning and the late night may have some off-and-on precipitation. The predicted low is 5 below freezing, so- wow, we might have a white Christmas to look forward to!”

“It’s already snowing,” complained Mikoto. “And that’s why I’m going to freeze to death.”

“Let’s stop thinking about death, Onee-sama. It is Christmas Eve already, after all.”

Yes.

What did a little snow matter? For that prestigious school with both history and tradition behind it, Christmas was a solemn, silent, and pure date. No one was in high spirits here. They were busy performing some outside special service work. In other words, they were gathering up trash from the city. You can think of it as something like a 24-hour endurance work rally. This was well beyond the bounds of compulsory education.

The drum-shaped cleaning robots passing by were a lot noisier than usual. They had probably been given the ability to spray hot air at the ground like a hair dryer in order to melt the snow. ...Although if they simply melted it and left it there, it seemed like it would freeze onto the road as ice.

Mikoto used trash-collecting tongs, which resembled the ones used at a bakery, to pick something up from the ground. The cleaning robot’s sensors must have missed it with the snow making the ground bumpier than usual. Once she had picked it up, she found it was the plastic wrapper for a cream-filled sweet roll. Worse, the half-eaten sweet roll remained inside and some

cream had squished out with a color halfway between white and yellow. This was the worst. Instead of burnable or non-burnable trash, she had found some kitchen waste. For once, she was thankful for the frigid December weather. If this hadn't been frozen, it would have made for a much more horrifying visual.

She would sort the trash later. She sighed while, unlike Santa Claus, she filled her sack with prizes entirely devoid of hopes and dreams.

"Ugh. It's not like Tokiwadai is a mission school, so why are we even doing this? Is it really worth it for the prestige and status it supposedly brings?"

"Go down that route and you will end up rejecting the entire holiday of Christmas since it came from overseas too."

"I thought Academy City was all about science worship and digital atheism."

"Say a word more and we're cancelling Christmas Eve and going home."

"Whose side are you on here!?"

"On the side that lets me go back to that feminine garden and warm myself up with a certain someone's body heat, of course! And that someone is you, Onee-sama!!"

That broken response started to shift the focus of conversation.

However, this crisis was also the greatest opportunity for Misaka Mikoto. She was not about to waste this once-a-year event on dull drudgery like she was in prison.

The entire student body was out at once.

If she was going to pretend to get lost, now was her chance.

Suddenly, she felt a finger tracing along her spine and heard a whisper in her ear.

"(Misaaaka-san☆)"

She realized someone was standing right behind her, but she was not foolish enough to look back. She looked to the glass window ahead of her and saw a girl with long blonde hair casually pressing up against her.

That was Shokuhou Misaki.

Mikoto was Academy City's #3 Level 5 and this was the #5. Her power was Mental Out, the strongest of the psychological powers.

Mikoto kept her eyes on the window and mouthed her words instead of speaking them aloud.

“(Can't you brainwash all the teachers with ease using your Mental Out?)”

“(They know that as well as we do. Check out the accessories on those teachers who can use their bare hands to beat down a teenage girl who can use warship-level firepower. They have 2mm cameras on their tie pins or their glasses have been converted into smart glasses. They're covering their blind spot ability by using both human eyes and mechanical eyes.)”

Hence why cooperation was needed.

The Tokiwadai teachers had constructed a means of using their inferior numbers to control a group of powerful espers. Not even Misaka Mikoto was naïve enough to assume she could brute force her way through this.

Mikoto could handle machines and Shokuhou could handle human minds. Those two never normally got along, but this was enough of a reason for them to join forces.

“(You sure do work fast, Misaka-san. We want to escape ASAP, so I'm less worried about the teachers than that straitlaced Judgment girl who can Teleport after us. I'm glad you restrained her for me so quickly☆)”

“...”

“(What, surely you aren't feeling guilty at the last second. To be clear, I left the girls from my clique behind. Moving as a large group would slow us down and be far too conspicuous. Letting your emotions get the better of you

will only lead to failure. And then we'll all be stuck sitting out in the hallway for a Christmas of maximum gloominess ability.)"

She knew that.

She really did.

But what had Shirai Kuroko done wrong while she cheerfully hummed alongside Mikoto? In her own way, she may have been planning for an enjoyable Christmas with her roommate. Was it really right to throw all that out? While feeling the pull of freedom and the opposing pull of responsibility, Mikoto glanced over at her underclassman's lovely face in profile and heard the girl speaking under her breath.

"Eh heh heh. I get to spend this special day alone with Onee-sama. Yes, that's right. The teachers are so strict with us that there is no way anyone can escape the dorms. I can just sit back and watch as we are more or less confined to our rooms. Between Christmas Eve and Christmas itself, that means 48 hours with Onee-sama all to myself in a secret closed room with no prying eyes. No one can get in from outside to interrupt us, so I can tie up my beloved Onee-sama, lay her on the floor, put a blindfold, headphones, and a gag on her to rob her of her usual senses, and then use lots of special oil to – eh heh, geh heh – to not just make adults of us both, but to abandon our humanity altogether while we crash through the door of XXX and–"

"Shokuhou, do it now!"

Mikoto interrupted with a command to the other girl.

While still clinging to Mikoto from behind, Shokuhou Misaki pulled a TV remote from the small bag she wore over her shoulder and gently pressed it against the back of (daydreaming) Shirai Kuroko's head.

She pressed a silent button and the chestnut twintails girl's head wobbled slightly.

Shokuhou Misaki's Mental Out was the strongest psychological power.

But it had such a broad range of applications that it was difficult to control even for her, so she used different remotes as a form of self-suggestion to create categories for her power.

And of course...

“Hey.”

The teachers knew what her power could do, so tension ran through the one monitoring them once the blonde girl reached for her bag. She reflexively called out in a strict voice.

“Shirai, where did you find that remote? Was the actual digital recorder not thrown out along with it!?”

“What?”

She was focused on the remote, but not in the right way.

However, the teacher did not notice the shift in her own thoughts.

“What remote? This is a kamaboko board.”

But the item the confused twintail girl waved in her defense was an empty chocolate bar box.

“No, you definitely had a remote. It has to be around there somewhere!”

“Again, this is a kamaboko board.”

“It is a remote!!”

The two of them got unnaturally particular about something meaningless.

Meanwhile, the honey-blonde girl with the real remote in hand was laughing. She was of course within both arguers' field of vision, but neither one mentioned her at all. As usual, that girl had a knack for mischief.

The minor argument between student and teacher created a disturbance in

their ranks as the sheltered girls gathered around to watch.

“What about the smart glasses?” asked Shokuhou with a wink.

“Already dealt with.”

Even if they were running off, they could not just throw out the tongs and half-filled trash bags they were using, so they left them by the main road where the robots would find them.

Now came the tricky part.

Mikoto gave her casual response and then slipped away from the crowd into an alley between multi-tenant buildings.

She removed the GPS tracker locked to her right ankle and did the same for Shokuhou who had come with her and she tossed them into the gap between beer cases piled up nearby. Then she wrapped her arms around the blonde girl’s skinny waist and leaped straight up. She used her power over magnetism to use the reinforced concrete wall as a foothold and ran all the way up to the 5-story building’s rooftop. It was a lot like using the giant lifting magnet that cranes used to move abandoned cars in a scrap yard.

This was an example of Academy City’s esper powers.

That bizarre technology used electricity, drugs, suggestion, and all other scientific approaches to distort the “reality” an individual saw in order to intentionally have them make ordinarily-impossible quantum observations so that the micro observations could produce macro phenomena.

“But this is only Step 1☆” said Shokuhou while leaning out over the roof’s railing.

Several girls quickly ran into the alley they had just left. These were the high Level espers that could be seen as the royal guard of Shokuhou’s clique, the largest in Tokiwadai.

Escaping to the roof was not enough. *A mere* 5 stories was meaningless when their pursuers could find any number of ways to climb the vertical wall in a

single second.

“Since you took this risk to escape from Tokiwadai’s watchful eyes, I can assume you want to enjoy your freedom ability for the 24th and 25th, right? Then we need to really work at this escape.”

“Hmm. Shokuhou?”

“Of course, if a girl with your pitiful chest ability heads out into the city alone on Christmas, you might just end up depressed at all the happy couples you see around you. Peh heh heh.”

“There were plenty of other ways to shake pursuit, so why do you think I immediately chose this rooftop?”

“What?”

The blonde girl blinked a few times and the demon named Misaka Mikoto grinned back at her.

“Because this lets me cut our ties and run off the instant I don’t need you anymore.”

“Ahh!? Wait, Misaka-san! Surely you aren’t going to abandon me up here!”

When Tokiwadai’s Queen finally caught on, she began to panic, but Mikoto hopped off the edge of the roof with that smile still on her lips. She was of course alone this time. She could use powerful magnetism to easily leap from building to building because she was Academy City’s #3 Level 5. The #5 could not do the same.

“Ahh hah hah!! Have fun taking all the blame for yourself and spending a gloomy Christmas seated out in the hall, Shokuhou! Victory is mine!! Mwa ha ha ha ha ha!!”

“I-I will utterly eradicate you for this!! I swear I’ll do it, Misaka-saaaan!!!!!!”

There was only one response for those desperate cries: sticking out her tongue.

She was confident Shokuhou had similarly intended to betray her the instant they were safely away. They had never gotten along and cooperation born of necessity would never last long.

Academy City had seemed so dark from the ground, but from up here, it was a sea of decorative lights. 80% of the city residents were students, so its trains and busses stopped running early, but the college students and teachers still went out to enjoy the nightlife. The Tokiwadai teachers had probably chosen a route that intentionally stuck to more deserted areas so the students would not be tempted by anything they saw.

“...”

The reality of her situation finally caught up to her.

It was Christmastime and she was free to do what she liked.

“~ ~ ~!!”

Her youthful spine trembled from the overwhelming sensation of liberation and she just about lost control and crashed into a building wall. She pressed the soles of her leather shoes against the wall and used magnetism to reduce her speed while descending to the surface level.

She raised her arms, stretched her back, and let the free night air wash over her body.

She had assumed the shopping district would be overrun with couples at this time of year, but there was a much wider variety of people around. She saw a group of girls walking into a karaoke box and she saw siblings heading back to their dorm with a whole cake they had bought. Based on the cake's cardboard box, they were apparently decorated with a parent snowman and a child snowman who were the stars of a foreign 3DCG animated movie. She saw plenty of people out on their own in the long line for the latest fad: custom donuts with decorations based on your birthdate, blood type, and lucky color.

(Hmm. I had heard on the news people treat Valentine's chocolate a lot

differently nowadays, so maybe this is similar.)

Of course, it was unusual for elementary and middle school kids to be out and about at midnight. Yes, the 24th was an unusual day. The adults from Anti-Skill, the law enforcement group made up of volunteers from the teachers, were holding megaphones in hand and shouting from the top of their vehicles modified from SUVs.

“You can buy cakes if you like, but eating them here is against your school rules. I repeat, you can only buy them and head home! Pweeee!! You, the happy couple over there! I am willing to overlook holding hands, but princess carrying her is over the line!! Do you want me to take you into protective custody so you spend the 24th in a holding cell!?”

Even those straitlaced teachers were letting it all happen. And the lectures felt really performative, like the entire point was for people to get video of it and post it on social media.

There were a lot of happy couples that Mikoto could not bear to look at, but she at least would not stand out and gather attention for being out alone.

There was lots she wanted to eat and to do.

She checked a roadside clock and saw it was exactly midnight.

(This freedom only lasts for the 48 hours of Christmas Eve and Christmas itself. I should go around doing all the things I want to do on my own to waste some time until morning. It would be rude to start calling that idiot up at this hour.)

That thought naturally appeared in her mind, but then she gasped.

She wanted to push her limits. There was lots she wanted to try out. At the very least, she was sick of Christmases fully managed by the adults. ...But why did that pointy-haired idiot come to mind as the person to do those things with? And now that his face was there in her mind, it wouldn't go away!? Then again, it was true he was the only boy she could think of who she could drag around to do these things!!

(Wait, wait.)

She decided to not look in the show windows.

Because then she would see her face reflected there.

(Wait, wait, wait!! Yes, he's just a placeholder. Like a mannequin! There are things I want to do on Christmas and you need a partner to do those things. That's all this is!!)

But it seemed Christmas Eve had already begun because a miracle suddenly appeared in front of that dreaming girl.

It ran by at the intersection in front of her.

Kamijou Touma was running full speed with a horrified look on his face and with a naked little girl in his arms.

“Wha-?”

Her thoughts ground to a halt.

But the clock was still ticking in reality. While she froze up and was left behind, the pointy-haired boy ran off while princess-carrying an unfamiliar little girl and with a large group of delinquents giving chase.

“Wh-wh-wh-wh-wh-what!? Hold on! What the hell kind of Christmas Eve are you having!?”

Kamijou Touma himself had no answer for anyone asking what was going on here.

Q. What was he doing?

She was naked.

This time, the girl was entirely nude.

Was there no limit at all to his misfortune?

“Keh heh heh.”

The little girl in his arms looked up at him with sticky eyes and her lips formed a crescent moon slash of a smile. She was a small girl of about 10 with milk-white skin and strawberry-red hair...but the wicked look on her young face was the complete opposite of childlike innocence.

She seemed delighted to have him princess carrying her.

Was that a sheet or a dress? Regardless, she held a thin and wholly inadequate red cloth up to her chest while kicking her bare feet around in a depressing sort of good cheer.

“Eh heh. Eh heh heh heh. Christmas Eve with a romantic focus? It’s barely recognizable like this, but it is rife with unexpected excitement. Keh heh heh heh heh.”

“Hold on. Something isn’t right here. What kind of crazy personality is this? What’s next, are you going to say you’re an extraterrestrial queen who rode down to earth on a meteor to have some fun!?”

He had left to visit the local convenience store.

He had heard something out back and taken a peek.

He had found a little girl there.

Worse, she had pulled out a phone on a whim and used her small hand to aim it toward a bunch of extremely “intellectual” delinquents who were tampering with an ATM’s optical fiber to steal the card numbers and PINs of everyone who used it.

Also, they had not stripped her of her clothing or anything like that.

She had been undressed from the beginning. The naughty girl had been boldly walking around the city at night and secretly filming the delinquents from around the corner to enjoy the depressing situation herself.

Was Academy City a complete lost cause at this point?

“Hey, get back here!! Did you just film us!? Wait!!”

“Awawa! This is bad news, boss!! We’re screwed if she uploads that to a video site!!”

“Worry more about Anti-Skill since they have handcuffs and handguns!! And isn’t what he’s doing even worse!? How are we the bad guys here!?”

Those people had a lot of energy for people wearing tank tops during winter. Their list of equipped items must have included “thick muscles” in addition to “pants” and “underwear”. Also, reasons for picking a fight with someone had apparently been upgraded for the digital age. If you decided to film everything around you just because you had a phone and nothing better to do, you might just trigger a fight with someone. Especially if you caught them in a criminal act!

Why is this how I’m spending Christmas Eve? wondered Kamijou.

Why is this how any of us are spending Christmas Eve!? he added.

“It’s winter and it’s snowing. We can see our breath, so what in the world were you doing!?”

“It’s not like I’m doing this because its winter. In fact, I was kind of wishing spring would arrive before long.”

“...”

“Oh?”

Children might not seem like they noticed much, but they could actually be quick to pick up on slight shifts in the atmosphere. The little girl briefly stopped kicking her bare feet.

He could not engage in small talk about the spring.

Because his memories only went back to summer.

However, explaining that to her would not solve anything. For now, he had only lost his memories and he still remembered how to read and write and what he had studied at school, so it did not cause too much trouble in his day-to-day life. He consciously regulated his breathing, but the season caused trouble for him again. With his breaths visibly white, it felt like she could see a portion of his thoughts.

However...

“How are you planning to get away?” asked the sticky(?) little girl through her crescent moon smile.

She was only a little girl, but she was still a little girl. That excess weight in his arms slowed him down. The delinquents looked like they would catch up if he tried running full speed in a straight line, so he zigzagged his way through small side roads and around corners to try to escape out of sight instead of simply getting as far away from his pursuers as possible.

“Where the hell’d they go!?”

“Send in the car! We had a self-driving car waiting, so have it cut them off on the other side!!”

“I just sent out a drone! They can never escape our predator’s net with my all-seeing celestial eye peering down at them!!”

(Ehh? This is why you shouldn’t give idiots all this fancy tech!! That monkey that took a selfie with the camera it found in the forest was better than this!!)

Also, one of them seemed to have yet to fully get over his chuuni phase. If only they were a cute and harmless girl instead.

But regardless, these were the people who had been tampering with the optical fiber attached to the ATM behind a convenience store. After flunking out of Academy City’s esper development program and being branded a Level 0, they may have decided to rely on tricks and tools instead.

But on the other hand...

(They're relying on tech like a self-driving car and a drone. In that case...)

“The subway!!”

That allowed him to escape both of those at once.

Academy City's trains stopped running when the student curfew came into effect, but the shops and connecting passageways within the stations stayed open late. Kamijou ran down the stairs with the naked little girl in his arms and finally set down that bright-skinned luggage.

He crouched down to put himself on her eye level.

His vast experience with misfortune had taught him that life-or-death situations were not always dramatic affairs. No matter how stupid it all was, you would lose your life if you did not take it seriously. Now was the time to trust in the tense atmosphere he sensed.

“Listen, there are 6 exits from this station, but ignore them all. The connecting passageways in here will take you to the next station over, so you should be able to leave that station and be outside the range of their drone surveillance. I'll lure those idiots to the west, so you use that opening to leave the next station over and run to somewhere with a lot of people. Pretty much every major station that joins with a surface line will have an Anti-Skill station. Today is the 24th, so they're sure to be out in the public square patrolling. Got that?”

“I'm scared, Onii-chan.”

“Oh, shut the hell up!! I can't compromise any more than this!!”

“Also, this strategy meeting is taking a while. Did we really have time to stand around talking?”

“...?”

Kamijou Touma finally realized something was amiss.

Booooooooooooooom!!!!!

A deafening roar reverberated in his gut.

But not from ahead, behind, left, or right. It came from above.

The fear seemed to slap him on the cheeks instead of ringing in his eardrums, so it may have been similar to having lightning strike a large tree not 5m away.

Lightning.

A high-voltage current.

But he was not bleeding or burnt. This was a subway station. Needless to say, the thick ground protected him from above. That had not immediately occurred to him, but that may have been because his mind experienced a few seconds of confusion similar to being hit by a stun grenade.

Yes, something had happened outside.

Kamijou looked up at the concrete ceiling.

“You stay here.”

Something highly unusual was afoot. He could no longer run away blindly and hope to escape. If he did not get a look at this and grasp the rules of what he was up against, he was sure to die. Even in this world of science, that “premonition” sank into the center of his back like an invisible needle.

He even held his breath as he placed his feet on the cold concrete stairway.

One step.

Two steps.

Three steps.

As he gradually made his way to the surface, the prickly feeling on his skin continued to grow. He assumed it was due to his tension at first, but he was wrong. This was physical. He saw a faint light like glow-in-the-dark paint or

like a fluorescent light you thought you had switched off. The air itself was electrified.

A faint stench hit his nose.

It was an unfamiliar stench that reminded him somehow of disinfectant. It may have been ozone.

He had to remain hidden.

He knew that intellectually, but he could not stop his biological reactions. He gulped.

And.

So.

“Hey,” said a girl’s voice.

That was all there was. Those high-tech morons had been armed with nonmetallic knives, batons, and even bows and arrows made with a 3D printer, yet they all lay motionlessly strewn across the ground around a single figure. A mass of metal sat gaping open like a bear trap. Was that the self-driving car by any chance?

One person had done it all.

The nearby streetlights must have been knocked out of commission because it was darker than before. Something like bluish-white will-o’-the-wisps were floating around, but was that St. Elmo’s fire, a form of corona discharge? On closer inspection, he could see it was the very ends of a wind turbine’s three blades that were faintly glowing.

But just as firefly light was not enough to light up a dark forest, those few points of light were not enough to prevent the area from being engulfed in shadow.



So at first, he could only see the silhouette of the person standing in the center of it all.

Bluish-white electricity crackled like a bug zapper and illuminated the energy source that could supply up to a billion volts.

He saw short brown hair, triumphant eyes, and a small build.

The triumphant girl wore a fluffy Tokiwadai Middle School duffel coat and the bottom of a short skirt and her bright bare legs stuck out from below that.

“Misaka?”

“I would really like an explanation for all this.”

He would love one of those too. What was a middle school girl from that prestigious school doing out of her dorm and wandering the city at this hour of night and why had she appeared out of nowhere to *deal with* those delinquents using a high-voltage current?

Not all evil deeds were the result of some master plan. This place was full of dangerous weapons that could be used to kill on a momentary whim.

Or did none of that register as a threat to this girl?

Level 0, Level 1, Level 2, Level 3, Level 4, and Level 5.

80% of the city, a total of 1.8 million people, were ranked into those six categories and she was part of the group at the very top.

She had talent only seen in 7 people within Academy City.

Of those 7, she was #3, the Railgun.

She was said to be the strongest when it came to purely electric powers.

“Yeah, well, explaining this could be tricky. You see, I got roped into this all of a sudden and was just running for my life, so I don’t actually know what’s going on. But I think I did pretty good for a Level 0. So-”

He never finished his sentence.

His entire body was hit, not by a sound, but by a shockwave that was unleashed after breaking through the insulation of the air. Yet Mikoto had not been trying to attack him. Even this was only an accident. She had simply failed to control her power properly and a jumbled mess of electricity had shot from her bangs.

Although even that may have been enough to kill someone if it hit them.

But Kamijou Touma was not killed.

Glowing remnants of the electricity burst from the right hand held out in front of his face. With an estimated output of more than a billion volts, the average radar would explode with sparks if it was nearby when she did that. Yet he had negated it with non-insulated flesh and blood.

So...

“A Level 0? Don’t give me that crap.”

Her voice was awfully low for a lovely girl, even if she was hanging her head.

This was a certain boy’s one and only power – Imagine Breaker.

It only affected his right hand up to the wrist, but it could negate any and all supernatural powers.

A belligerent look entered his eyes.

“I was hoping to peacefully share what information we had and do some investigating to check on some things, but it doesn’t look like that’s going to happen. ...Man, and I really wanted to save this brute force method for a last resort!!”

“Peacefully?”

The girl repeated the word back to him and then she finally raised her head.

The #3 glared straight at the boy.

“What about this was peaceful!? Who is that naked girl!? Do you even know what day this is!? Christmas Eve has already begun, so how did you end up doing this!? Did you want to be the shining star of the pervert world or something!? Are you stupid!? Were you trying to get yourself killed!? And you wanted to do some investigating!? What were you hoping to ‘investigate’ by bringing a naked little girl into a dark and cold deserted subway station!? Well, do you have anything to say for yourself!!!!???”

Oh, no, thought Kamijou.

What do I do? This rich and violent girl is making some good points.

Maybe I took several wrong turns along the way here.

And while he stood there in a daze, a demon lurked up from behind. The naked little girl clung to the side of his hip with only the thin and inadequate cloth pulled up to her chest.

Her lips still formed a crescent moon slash of a smile.

Misaka Mikoto’s eyes began spinning in a panic.

“I’m scared, Onii-chan.”

“Wha-?”

“Go beat up the scary bad guy. Then we can have a secret nighttime stroll together, okay? Hee hee hee. Christmas Eve only comes once a year, but it has only just begun.”

“...!!”

All of Kamijou’s hair stood on end.

A moment later, something left Misaka Mikoto.

Or rather, a minor blue explosion burst from her in all directions.

Between the Lines 1

Academy City had a population of about 2.3 million, 80% of whom were students.

The giant city took up a third of the Tokyo metropolitan area and the rules differed in many ways inside and outside the walls surrounding it. For example, law enforcement was not handled by the police. Instead, the citywide work was handled by the teachers of Anti-Skill and the work in individual schools was handled by the students in Judgment.

That was why gym teacher Yomikawa Aiho was also an Anti-Skill officer with the authority to use handcuffs and a handgun. She normally wore a green track suit whenever she went out and, even when she was beating down criminal boys and girls with her transparent shield and with a smile on her face, she had sworn to herself she would never aim a gun at a child no matter how powerful an esper they were. However, she was breaking one of her rules today.

She was wearing a black suit instead of her track suit.

She hoped she would not have to break the other rule.

Hoped very much.

“This way.”

On the instructions of a cold-voiced guide, she walked down a winding corridor. It would be easy to get lost in here and it would be hard to push a dolly through it. The basic principle was the same as old samurai mansions, but the idea here was not to make wielding a sword or spear difficult. The idea was to obstruct the movements of indoor combat drones. Obstacles that reflected EM and IR signals were inconspicuously worked into the architecture and the floor had meaningless steps up and down. The benevolent principles of barrier free design must have been turned on their

head to design obstacles that wheels and treads could not pass.

From a technical standpoint, that might sound simple enough, but real architecture did not work the same as the bizarre mansions found in mystery novels. The government would never allow someone to design a building that intentionally prevented wheelchairs and crutches from getting through. That meant something lurked here that needed enough protection that breaking the rules was considered worth it.

There were no security cameras.

That may have been to avoid the risk of them being hacked and made to leak information outside.

A guard separate from her guide stood in front of a large composite armor door. Did he spend all day here? There was a folding chair next to the door.

Yomikawa frowned.

“I don’t recognize you.”

“I imagine not. You lack the authority to have seen me before.”

“Then do you serve one of the 12 Directors?”

Kaizumi.

Oyafune.

Nakimoto.

Shiokishi.

Yakumi.

Those were a few of the legendary figures that even Yomikawa had only heard bits and pieces of info about. Academy City held all of the planet’s technology and those 12 adult monsters formed the group with the most power over the city. But she had no way of knowing if the stories she had

heard were true. All of those stories were as absurd as the ones about men in black who were in contact with aliens and Yomikawa personally had a feeling the truth was *even worse*. These were the most crucial VIPs from a security standpoint, so it was not always clear when one of them died or was replaced.

“No.”

But the man waiting at the door like a machine rejected that idea.

And...

“I work for the *one and only* Board Chairman and no one else.”

“...”

This was on yet another level.

Yomikawa fell silent and the man spoke in a flat voice.

It was more or less a command.

“You require a body search.”

“I had one done at the entrance.”

“Now.”

He was even less verbose than a bank ATM. His educational history, skills, health, background, and behavior would have been thoroughly investigated before he was given this job, but “never questions his orders” must have been one of the necessary qualifications they were looking for.

Yomikawa raised both hands in her black suit and the gatekeeper pulled out a rod-shaped object. It resembled the colorful guidance lights that construction workers held in their hands to guide cars, but this was different. This was a sensor that used terahertz radiation. Their use had rapidly spread now that plastic submachineguns and assault rifles could be easily made by anyone using 3D printers. They could see through people’s clothing to detect even

nonmetallic objects.

Esper powers were not the only thing to fear in Academy City.

The adults who formed 20% of the population used next-gen tech to control the children who formed 80% of the population and had supernatural powers.

“I will hold onto your phone.”

“If you must.”

“Please remove your tie pin. And is that your skirt’s side zipper?”

“Do you need to confiscate my bra hook too?”

The man passed the sensor over her front side and back side before responding in a robotic voice.

“That will not be necessary.”

The large door opened, but there was nothing on the other side. Only another door. The two layers of door provided extra security, but they also prevented the guards from spying on what was truly “inside”.

Once Yomikawa stepped into that cramped space, the door closed behind her, its closure was confirmed, and the second door’s rods unlocked.

She found a small room within. That must have been enough for its occupant.

It only contained a clear table and two cheap chairs.

It was also a *windowless* room.

“It’s been too long,” said Yomikawa Aiho as if gently releasing her breath.

The person with pale white hair sat in one of the chairs with his legs lightly crossed up on the table. His red eyes glared back at the visitor.

“So what led you to ask for me in particular?”

He may have been more than a decade her junior and the barrier of adult and minor lay between them, but she was the one who needed to show respect here. She wordlessly displayed that with the suit.

When she spoke that boy's new title, her voice carried a sense of awe.

And also some disappointment.

"New Academy City Board Chairman Accelerator-san?"

Chapter 1: Just Like an Amusement Park –

Red_Wear,Big_Bag,and_Flying_Sle

Part 1

He so wanted it to be a dream.

But his sleep-deprived mind and aching muscles told him the events of the previous night had been all too real.

“Such misfortune,” muttered Kamijou Touma in his student dorm room.

His phone was propped up on the glass table using a stand and its power cable was plugged in. It was invisibly linked to the room’s TV with a short-range wireless connection, so the phone’s display was transferred to the large LCD screen.

He was in the middle of a video chat.

This month’s data limit was being rapidly chewed through in order to display Tsukuyomi Komoe, a 135cm and pink-haired teacher who was full of mysteries. And given the date, she was wearing a miniskirt Santa outfit. She apparently liked to dress up for special occasions much like the top page of a search engine.

“Okay, it’s time for one of my special makeup lessons since Kamijou-chan

here has missed far too many days of class.”

Her voice was as sweet as candy, but there was a hint of poison mixed in. Her perfect smile scared him. The 24th was part of winter break, so this was supposed to be a precious holiday for students and teachers alike. She was giving off an aura. Her anger and resentment over him ruining her holiday seemed to waft from her body like a dark perfume.

“If it was too much trouble to get us both at school for this, why even bother with the makeup lesson?”

“Because without this lesson, you would have to repeat your first year again. But if that is what you want, so be it. So, um, what will it be? If you do go for a second round, you should be able to live the life of an overpowered MC who has seen it all before.”

“Makeup lesson please!! I know full well the ‘overpowered’ life of repeating a year will be nothing so nice! Everyone else in the class is bound to just keep their distance!!”

Thus, he had to spend his holiday studying. Academy City was indeed a city of schools. They did things very differently from an ordinary shopping district where a couple would enter the karaoke box and excitedly discuss whether to choose the fake nose glasses or the cat ears headband for the optional joke product that came with the room rental.

He wanted to live that life. Was he allowed to wish for something like that?

“Academy City’s esper powers have a foundation in quantum physics. Quantum physics is useful in describing the behavior of subatomic particles like protons and electrons as well as the four fundamental forces of the strong force, the weak force, gravity, and electromagnetism, but you will almost certainly never be aware of the changes caused by the observations you make in an ordinary life. You can’t make an apple disappear by willing it to disappear, after all. You can think of those changes like imaginary numbers – they are necessary to explain the way the world works, but you are never really aware of them. *Normally, anyway.*”

She had complained about having to give this makeup lesson, but once she got going, she proved herself to be a true teacher.

Her words flowed smoothly, but she changed her intonation on the important terms so they would stick out in Kamijou's mind.

That made it easy to take notes and mark up his text with a highlighter. That provided an odd sense of accomplishment, so it was a lot like working out the structure of a dungeon in an RPG that required manually drawing out the map.

Of course, this was not unique to this special Christmas Eve lesson. Komoe-sensei must have always taught like this in the classroom, so the horrific state of Kamijou Touma's attendance record could be seen in how he was only really noticing it now.

“Academy City’s espers forcibly alter this to draw out phenomena that cannot be explained with Newtonian physics. In other words, supernatural phenomena. Drugs, electricity, suggestion, and other methods are used to distort how people perceive the world and that forces them to make observations outside of the norm. By bringing that from the microscopic and up to the macro world, we make esper powers a reality. Ksh.”

“Hm? Komoe-sensei???”

The footage had grown pixelated for a moment there.

Kamijou had a bad feeling about this and called out to her, but the Santa costumed teacher did not seem to mind. Or had his voice not reached her?

“The filter used to – ksh – distort the esper’s perception is known as their Personal Reality, but those are all unique and no two people have the exact same one. Kssh. That is one of the tricky aspects of esper development. Kssh!! But don’t worry! There is no such thing as wasted effort!! You might be ranked as a Level 0 for now, Kamijou-chan – kssh!? – but if you work at your strong points, you will surely- ksshhh!!”

“Wait, wait, wait! What is going on!? Ahhh!”

Kamijou Touma screamed.

The footage on the TV entirely froze for a few seconds and then it transformed into a bunch of white alphanumeric text on a black background. A bunch of incomprehensible English text was followed by a countdown. He apparently had to select an option and he was given 10 seconds to do so.

But this was new.

Computers were one thing, but he had not known that phone OSs had crash screens. He knew the hardware was fragile, especially the LCD screen that was easily broken, but he had thought the software was fairly robust and it would only reboot quickly if it ran into trouble. It felt like seeing your usually reliable dorm manager laid up in bed after coming down with a cold. It was actually kind of adorable.

Also, the phone's crash screen was not the well-known blue one. To reiterate, it was black. Why was she trying to be so stylish during an emergency like this? Was she dressing up somewhere she thought no one would ever see? It was a lot like deciding to help out by washing off the dorm manager's sweat and accidentally seeing some shocking underwear. It was awkward. *M-miss manager!! I thought you were more the kind and gentle type!!*

“...”

Ten seconds passed while Kamijou used those ridiculous thoughts to avoid facing the reality before him. The TV and his phone had both gone dark and refused to do anything.

It felt like some kind of punishment.

Did cutting-edge phone OSs dislike wishy-washy guys? Had that kind and gentle dorm manager (who could not hide the sexy allure hidden below the surface) finally grown fed up with him? If so, his life truly was devoid of hope.

“Umm.”

He had no idea what to do.

So he called out to the girl playing with a calico cat in a corner of the room.

“*Index*, how about we head out for a bit?”

Part 2

There was a girl known as Index.

Strictly speaking, her name was Index Librorum Prohibitorum.

At first glance, she looked like a small girl with a childish build, long silver hair, and a white nun’s habit, but she was actually a strange person who worked as a grimoire library by memorizing at least 103,001 grimoires. She belonged to Necessarius, the 0th Parish of the Anglican Church. You might be wondering what that is, but that sort of thing apparently existed in the wide world beyond Academy City’s walls.

That is, magic.

That other supernatural power stood opposite of the esper powers that Academy City had introduced to the world using science.

“Christmastime♪ It’s Christmastime♪”

The clear winter sky meant it was cold enough for a lot of the previous day’s snow to remain on the ground, but the girl in question was smiling and singing to herself with the calico cat riding on her white hood. She had come here from England, but this song was in Japanese. Kamijou had no idea where she had picked it up from. Since she had a perfect memory, she could accurately memorize it all by overhearing it for a moment as the in-store music being played in an electronics store shown on TV.

Incidentally, someone who had mastered all forms of magic was known as a Magic God.

And there was apparently a risk of someone turning into one of those if they used all of the grimoires contained in her head.

“Hm, hm, hmm♪ Hydrogen♪ And helium♪”

“Wait, Index. What happened to Christmastime?”

(Damn, I managed to restart my phone by holding down that weird button for a bit, but it won't connect to Komoe-sensei. What is causing this!? Is one of our devices busted!?)

“Listen, Index. We need to stop by Komoe-sensei's place first. I need to meet that goddamn teacher in person and figure out what happened to my makeup lesson. Because this is a crucial issue that could get me held back.”

“Touma, let's buy a turkey!! It's fascinating how they're selling them on the roadside!!”

“Are you even listening!? And those aren't like cakes. I mean, doesn't it scare you how cheap they are? Are those turkeys they sell at discount stores even real? They can design how meats look in the factory, right!?

Convenience stores even sell these mysterious salad chickens that have all the bones removed and are shaped like gold bars. Those supposed turkeys might use some other kind of meat altogether, like how the negitoro at a conveyer belt sushi place might actually be moonfish.”

If *Kamijou Touma* of all people was afraid of how cheap something was, you knew it had to be bad. After all, this was the king of thrift! When his finances were in dire straits, he would start to have some dangerous thoughts: “If you stick a bunch of eggshells in the blender, could you eat them? Hey, I bet it wouldn't kill you at least!!” The Christmas sales wars were built from love, desire, and mistrust. Just like the products bought at a global soccer tournament, the items making the city shine so bright would leave you wondering “what is this and why did I buy it?” just one day later.

Some elementary school girls were making a fuss in front of a store.

“Nyah!? They have a Santa catching kit!! Wh-when did Academy City invent this?”

“D-don’t buy that, Fremea-chan. That’s definitely a normal bug-catching net they couldn’t sell during the summer or even autumn.”

“Mister, I want one of these! I’ll pay using my phone – kaching!!”

“Ahh! How are you going to lure Santa in with sap jelly!?”

It was scary how wide a variety of joke products existed (most of which only added the “joke” so they could get away with it not actually working). Some would view it as a standard part of the season, while others would see it as a cruel scam targeted at children. It was similar to temple festival sharpshooting games in that sense.

But now was not the time to indulge in any of that.

Not until he knew what had become of his makeup lesson after his phone had frozen up!! *That tiny teacher might as well be a doctor who wandered out of the OR and left on vacation while my stomach is still sliced open for an operation!!* groaned Kamijou Touma while gnashing his teeth.

(Damn. My phone rebooted like normal but I still can’t connect, so the trouble has to be on her end. If an error on her part nearly corrupted my phone’s data, I need to get an apology out of her. And I need to avoid being held back. Even if it means blackmailing her!!)

He made a quick search on his still-functioning phone and saw no sign of other people having similar trouble.

The screen on the airship floating in the blue sky said nothing about a widespread communications disruption.

It scared him to think this was happening to him and only him. If he had been infected by something no one else had ever heard of, wouldn’t it slip right past his phone’s security?

(Please let her device be entirely busted!!)

He did not want to spend his Christmas Eve going on the journey of a clean install in order to troubleshoot his phone. Plus, he had no idea how to even do that with a phone as opposed to a computer. The ordinary factory reset mentioned on one corner of the settings screen probably would not cut it there. But what else was there? What was he supposed to do!? A sudden malfunction in the mobile device he always used brought nothing but unease. *Please get better soon, you kind and beautiful dorm manager!!*

(A-anyway, one thing at a time. I need to start with the solution I can try by just walking there.)

He was pretty sure Komoe-sensei lived in an apartment in Academy City's District 7.

It was a two-story building with the stairs and passageways on the outside. More than that, the two-part washing machine was kept outside as well. Tsukuyomi Komoe, that 135cm teacher from a fantasy world, lived in that divine realm where only Showa-era manga artists and ronin students were allowed.

Kamijou walked up to the door that looked so thin his fist would break through if he knocked on it and he pressed the doorbell. But he heard no bell. Either the battery or the wiring was out. He had no choice but to rap his fist against the thin door.

“Excuse me, miss!! Would you care for a newspaper!? Buy now and it comes with two boxes of detergent!!” His random choice of words received no response.

...

He had a bad feeling about this.

The door had a newspaper slot, so he brushed aside the entire concept of privacy by crouching down and opening the wide slot with his fingertips.

There was no lucky pervert moment here. Not only was she not changing within, but he only found a dreary space where time seemed to have stopped.

(Don't tell me.)

The neighbor's door opened.

The woman who stepped out wore a red track suit, a thick coat that looked like it was made out of a futon, and spiral glasses. Since she was living in this apartment and dressed like that, Kamijou decided she was only allowed to be a manga artist.

"Um, my neighbor left to go somewhere three days ago. She asked me to collect her mail for her."

.....
.....

He was pretty sure he remained frozen for 5 full seconds.

And then the pointy-haired boy screamed at the top of his lungs.

Tsukuyomi Komoe held his fate in her hands, yet she had gone missing. That teacher had been using her Santa costume and communication device to give him a remote lesson from wherever she had gone. That explained why she had been so reluctant to hold the makeup lesson at school. Plus, her neighbor had said she went "somewhere". That meant the woman did not know where and he would receive no further hints here. He did not even know if she was still inside Academy City, so this would be far too difficult a search for him.

The woman in a track suit, coat, and spiral glasses was not the type to care about other people's pain.

"Oh, whoops. I need to get back to day trading. With the big and bizarre wave of Christmastime in full force, I can't keep my eyes off the screen for a moment. I can rest once I sell off all my stocks and can watch the last trading day of the year end with a smile on my face! Bye!!"

"How dare you dress like that when you're rich!!"

She ignored him and shut the door. This place had to have incredibly low rent, so did she rent it out as a workplace separate from her actual home?

But now was not the time to be bothered by that unknown woman's lifestyle.

Winter truly had arrived for Kamijou Touma.

And this winter was as barren as a nuclear winter.

"Touma, I'm hungry."

"Yeah, probably so."

He turned around with awfully slow movements.

He had a smile of shadows on his face.

Laughter may have been the last resort of the lonely person who had been abandoned by the world itself.

A great demon king had appeared in the modern world.

"Mwa ha ha ha ha!! I don't care! Why should I even care anymore!! Fine, let's spend the 24th enjoying ourselves! Ha ha, ah ha ha! I mean, if the problem is with the adults' system, then I'm not at fault!!!!!! Hah hah hah! Gwa ha ha!!"

No, pointy-haired one.

That right there is known as crying.

Part 3

He had a chance.

The error causing that awfully stylish crash screen really had happened, so wherever it was stored and whatever had actually happened, there had to be a record of the error within his phone. He had tried his damnedest to take that makeup lesson, but the infrastructure prepared for him had malfunctioned. The dorm manager's unseen black underwear was all the proof he needed of that. So there was no conflict here! He was fine!! He wouldn't be held back!! If the 24th was going to put up anymore of a fight, he would summon the spirit of a middle-aged woman hidden deep within his heart and make a verbal barrage of arguments in his defense. Kamijou Touma had traveled through many a country and region with Japanese as his only language, so he had already proven how strong he was when he gave up.

That was why he had confidence in his voice when he next spoke.

But it was strange. He was super happy on the inside, yet the asphalt ground kept shifting around like it was made of cotton candy.

“Where should we go?”

“Somewhere with lots of lights!!”

It was a miracle that Index had not started listing off different foods. Christmas Eve was a truly devilish time. It was full of unpredictable things which could even be called little miracles. He was pretty sure Christmas was supposed to be the birthday of some important person or another, so was it really okay for it to be such a devilish time of year?

But anyway.

District 6 had been made into one giant amusement park, but visiting any of those crowded tourist destinations without a reservation would be a hellish experience. There was no need to crawl under a rock and hide on a day like this, but it would still be safer to go with a place that did not need tickets and had no lines.

“So instead of going somewhere special, let's check out the usual places in

District 7. Nothing could show off the Christmas spirit more.”

“Why?”

“Because all the lights and decorations will be more noticeable when you know what it usually looks like.”

High schoolers had to keep up appearances and maintain their pride, so when they gave a plausible sounding reason for something, they were oftentimes hiding their real reasons. In this case, he was too afraid to go anywhere near the fashionable shopping district of District 15. Those areas had a high enough difficulty setting already, but go there at Christmas, Halloween, or Valentine’s and there would be a strange event boost to that setting, making it entirely unbalanced. He could already imagine himself being torn to pieces like the poor fool who accidentally ran across the event boss battle in an online game!! *But there is nothing to be ashamed of*, Kamijou Touma told himself. After all, he was in the right here. The people boldly walking through those areas on Christmas Eve were decked out in the real-life equivalent of pay-to-win equipment (brand-name bags, fur coats, and the like), so he never had a chance! Competing with them was a lost cause!! If only their leather and fur products would all turn to cheap plastic!!

“Touma, why do I see a deep shadow in your smile?”

“No reason. There’s nothing weird about me, Index.”

It was Christmas Eve, so Kamijou did not want to feel like he should never have left the home he had made for himself by chewing through a rotted fallen tree, so he focused on the things he could actually manage. Spending Christmas close to home was fine. Walking around outside with a friend was plenty fun.

They could enjoy themselves seeing how different the city looked with all the decorations.

That told him where they would be going. The ordinary homes decorated with all sorts of lights for this one day only were as laughable as those decotora (←which one is that an insult to?), but the more populated areas

would still be the most decorated. They made their way to the train station area for now.

The cables of decorative lights had not been attached to the wind turbine blades. It was pretty cold, but they were going strong and had not frozen. Their surface was glittering from water droplets covering them, so they may have been installed with heating elements to melt the snow. Someone had even placed a bike's chain lock on the support pillar in place of a Christmas wreath.

A truck passed them by and they looked over to see an advertisement vehicle that was really just a truck carrying a big LCD screen that generally played ads.

This one was playing the news.

“Who wants to try a custom donut decorated with cream!? Here in New York, these sweets are all the rage instead of cakes. With the spread of the nuclear family, an entire cake provides far more than the ideal calories per person, so this practice was started by the doctors who look after the wealthy residents of Beverly Hills. Even US President Roberto Katze joined in on social media by...”

“Go to hell!! Don’t force your fancy private lives on us from across the Pacific! If you’re that worried about calories, then go gnaw on some wax food samples!! You know what happens when you truly cut all the calories out of your food!? You starve to death!!”

“Touma, you’re scaring me. ...Evil multitude known as Legion, I cast thee into those beasts and send you running from the cliff!”

Index clasped her hands together and began muttering some kind of ward against evil, but unfortunately, Kamijou was not possessed by anything evil. How unscientific. Let us ignore the fact that behaving like this while in control of himself was far more concerning than any occult explanation.

But once they arrived near the station, they found some strange lines had formed.

They were everywhere.

There had been signs of the fad before winter break, but this was something else entirely.

At some point, a bunch of similar-looking donut stands had multiplied like an amoeba monster. The entire donut was soaked in a sweet and gooey pudding-like substance to soften it up like a bavarois, then cream, colorful chocolate powder, and colorful syrups were used to decorate it however the customer asked for it. And how did the customers ask for it? If you guessed anything related to the flavor, you are truly naïve. They asked for it however would look best on social media!!

Also, something had gone wrong during the game of telephone as the fad crossed the Pacific because these had aspects not seen in the original. This country was quick to adopt new things but never cared much about getting the particulars right.

(Is that really safe? I've heard the decorations are based on your birthdate, blood type, lucky color, and so on, so can't people work out your personal information if you post pictures of that online?)

Also, why did people think luck and colors had anything to do with each other?

If something like that could create a significant shift in the probability and statistical data, then he doubted Academy City's quantum-based esper powers development would have been necessary in the first place.

Also, could you really call something a donut when you couldn't carry it around with you?

The donut was placed on a small paper plate and lots of cream was piled on top. They ended up looking like palm-sized wedding cakes and couples were happily gathered around them and using their phones to take plenty of pictures of those donuts colored with a toxic mixture of sky blue and pink. Some even had sparkling fireworks sticking into them.

Since the photos were the main point, the couples would flirt with each other over who would eat it and try to push it into each other's mouth. They had spent so much time waiting in line to buy it, yet eating it was being treated like a punishment. This was making Marie Antoinette look reasonable. At some point, people had entirely forgotten that food should not be wasted. Kamijou Touma wondered why these people were not being struck by lightning. These thoughts of his might be shockingly extreme, but the spirit of a middle-aged woman was rising up within his heart. Instead of the kind dorm manager, this was the restaurant owner who refused to give a discount no matter how hard up a student was.

“Ah.”

And Kamijou noticed something off about the scene around him.

But this was not about the girls in red Santa outfits who barely seemed special anymore now that they stood in front of every single store, from the convenience stores and bakeries selling cakes to the karaoke boxes and even the conveyer belt sushi restaurants(!?).

“Touma?”

“Ahhh!? Wait, tell me it isn’t so!”

The ramen shop tucked below the elevated railway was gone.

It had not been good enough to make it into the magazines or onto the gourmet sites. When asked if the ramen was made with chicken or seafood, that awful place had answered “I dunno. Some kinda chemicals?” right in front of the customers. But they had sold a serving of ramen the size of a rice bowl, making it even smaller than the usual small size. That had been an irresistible temptation for Kamijou and the others who had wanted some restaurant ramen on the way home from school before having to think about what to do about dinner. And yet...and yet....

This was strange.

It made no sense. It would not have felt so bad if something equally unique

had taken its place, but it was nothing but another fad donut shop with no history or personality at all! It would probably be forgotten the day after Christmas and gone by the New Year!! Kamijou Touma was hanging his head and trembling at this point. *I don't want my lucky color. Wh-where are you!? Where are you, old ramen chef!?*

He could not fit in.

It just wasn't possible for him. It was becoming clear that all allies of Christmas were his enemy. He was starting to think he never should have taken a step outside of the metal afro of a bird's nest he had created by gathering up wire hangers. This winter would be a harsh one. It pained him that he had ever decided to head out on December 24.

He had come to a depressed stop, so perhaps he could not be blamed for not paying attention to his surroundings.

A girl suddenly bumped into him from the side in the area for pedestrians to wait for the crosswalk light.

“Kyah!?”

“Oh, sorr-”

He apologized on reflex but stopped himself. Yes, he had not been paying attention, but he had not moved a step (because he was rendered motionless below the frigid sky by the shock of losing that ramen shop), so it had clearly been the girl who bumped into him. Also, he felt a sticky sensation on the chest containing his heavy heart. He looked down to see a small paper plate stuck there like a cream pie from a comedy skit. It was one of those gooey things made of cream and honey – one of those blasphemous and indescribable cosmic horror donuts that were more about getting a photo than eating them!

“Oh.”

At times, the misfortune could pile on so thick his heart could not take it anymore.

Too many sad things had happened today.

While stained with some stranger's lucky color, unlucky Kamijou Touma finally snapped.

"Hold it right there, little lady! I'll have you know this fine article of clothing is made of simple polyester so it can keep the rain out *and* be washed in a normal washing machine! Have you ever shopped at the year-end sale at Uniclo!? I think not! How do you expect to pay for this luxurious 1980-yen finery!?"

While bragging about his cheap clothing for some reason or another, the sparking firework sticking into the donut caught his jacket on fire. This was his divine punishment for reflexively snapping back at the girl instead of checking on the extent of the damage. He frantically stripped off the jacket and began flapping it around to put out the fire.

And it turned out the trembling girl was one he had seen just yesterday.

It was Misaka Mikoto.

"I thought I detected the stench of death in my Christmas! What are you doing here, Misaka!?"

She was not listening.

She wordlessly dove toward Kamijou Touma's jacketless chest and clung to his shirt with her small hands.

His mind went blank and the white nun next to him was caught completely off guard.

Then a storm arrived.

"Find the runaway!!"

"Don't rely on security cameras and robots! She has Level 5 electricity powers!!"

“She is definitely around here somewhere. I can follow the trail left by Onee-sama. Hweh heh heh. Because I can detect the faint scent left behind by her hair!!”

A crowd of people marched by with tremendous speed. What in the world was that? It was a mixture of students and teachers, but since when had Tokiwadai Middle School been an angry mob???

What were Academy City’s security robots doing if they were ignoring that army of monsters?

Or had those drum-shaped devices already been installed with special rules that made them go easy on cute girls?

Kamijou Touma had been flapping his removed jacket around to put out the fire and Misaka Mikoto had moved past the jacket, so it was spread out like a matador’s cape and hid the small girl’s silhouette from the mob’s view.

“Misaka-san.”

“Yes?”

“Explain this.”

That might seem like a reasonable demand, but he meant it a little differently. He was not asking her to explain it to him. No, he jerked his chin over toward the person next to him while Mikoto continued holding onto him.

“Explain this to Index!! And fast because she’s already started growling!! I really, really don’t want to spend my Christmas Eve in the hospital with toothmarks on my skull!!”

It was too late.

Her jaws were latched onto his head, yet it was his knees that gave out.

Part 4

It was an invincible and unassailable middle school girl.

Misaka Mikoto put her hands on her hips and breathed an exasperated sigh.

“I’m pretty sure you were born under an unlucky star or something. But instead of bad luck with women, I think it gave you bad luck with little girls.”

“Misaka-san, you really shouldn’t suggest that in Academy City, headquarters of the science side. ...And you might have had my attention if it was a good luck with young women and that it lets me make friends with all the young dorm manager ladies out there, but this I refuse to accept.”

“Science *side*? What? And...ah!! Come to think of it, what ever happened with that little girl yesterday!?”

“Don’t even ask that! What absolute moron would dig back up that horror story now!? I never want to see her again!!”

Then Mikoto stopped moving.

She looked alternately between Kamijou and Index.

“So should I pry her off of you? Y’know, since she’s a little girl too?”

“To be clear, you fall into that ‘younger’ category too.”

“I try to help and you call me a little girl!?”

Anyway, prestigious Tokiwadai Middle School was apparently very strict about Christmas.

Specifically, they had a gloomy and dreary seasonal event where the students were sent out into the bitter cold while wearing miniskirts (although the shortness of her skirt seemed like it was her own fault for altering it) and had to walk around the city collecting trash for 24 hours, day and night.

They existed.

They really did exist.

Maybe they were not found under the rocks, inside a rotten fallen tree, or in an afro of wire hangers, but that did not matter. They lived in a different world from Kamijou, but he was not the only one having a miserable Christmas!!

One such girl had gotten fed up with it all, saw an opening, and made a run for it, but her teachers and Judgment had noticed and she was spending Christmas Eve with them hot on her trail. How hot? Hot enough that being caught might as well mean being wrapped in chains and thrown into a blast furnace.

Kamijou grabbed her shoulders and practically hugged her with his eyes shining bright.

He had discovered someone else who would fight by his side against this godawful seasonal event.

He had seen the smoke signals demanding a rebellion.

“We might be making an enemy of the entire world here, but let’s give ourselves a merry Christmas even if we have to fight back against fate itself!! We’re in this together!!”

“Eh? Huh? W-wait, are you forcing your plans onto me or something???”

She blushed and started acting oddly.

Nearby, Index put her hands on her hips and puffed out her cheeks (because biting the back of his spiky-haired head was apparently not enough to calm her anger).

“Ugh, I don’t like this, but if you want to join us, can’t you at come out and ask directly?”

“Index-san, now is the time for kindness. Remember the Little Match Girl? If just one person out there had reached out to help her, she could have avoided that tragic fate!”

“Hey, wait, I wasn’t looking for pity! Even if I am thankful you saved me

from that army's grasp!!”

Kamijou Touma had no intention of throwing Mikoto out now. He was even moved to emotion. His miserable time could not be blamed on his poor, lower class lifestyle. It happened in the upper class as well. Those rich girls could treat real life like a pay-to-win game, so how badly had this girl mishandled her own life to end up with such a miserable Christmas!? Someone so incompetent clearly needed his help!!

And so Mikoto made a request.

“I want to do some Christmasy things. Because I'll be killed if I can't blend in here.”

.....
.....

“Hm? Huh? Did I say something weird???”

“No, you're fine. Perfectly fine.”

Mikoto sounded worried after seeing the smile frozen on Kamijou's face, but that wooden response was all he could manage.

Do Christmasy things? As in Christmasy activities?

He had no idea what that could be. He could think of plenty of Christmasy objects like cakes, turkeys, red clothing, and white beards. He could think of plenty of Christmasy places to visit like the main roads lit up by the lights wrapped around the trees or the giant Christmas tree in the train station plaza.

But Christmasy activities?

This wasn't like trick-or-treating at Halloween. What could you only do at Christmastime???

“...”

Of course, the confused boy could think of one thing. You could always take

a lesson from that bearded man who broke into people's homes like it was normal and shoved wrapped boxes in their stockings. You could always just exchange boxes like that.

But you only exchanged presents and said Merry Christmas just the once, and that generally happened on Christmas day. He could not play that card as camouflage every single time a violent girl barged into his life.

So what else was there?

What did people generally do on Christmas Eve?

Growing nervous, he glanced over at Index and Mikoto to see they were both tilting their heads curiously. In fact, so was the cat on the silver-haired girl's head. They had no plan whatsoever and were counting on him to figure it out. And if he said he had nothing, they were sure to call him useless. In stereo from the right and left.

It would be one thing if a young woman were gently whispering "oh, you useless thing" in his ear along with a sigh of mock exasperation.

But this was different.

These younger girls would have dead serious looks on their face when they said it.

The meaning and the warmth of it were entirely different!!

(Eh? So if the girls form an alliance here, will I be left all alone in a sea of verbal abuse? If that's how I end up spending my Christmas Eve, I can't even crawl back under the gravestone!)

He was soaked with sweat despite the December chill and he no longer even saw himself as a bug under a rock. Even his metaphors were veering in a dangerous direction.

He forced a smile and pulled out his phone.

"Ha...ha ha ha. Nothing to worry about. Just leave everything to Kamijou

Touma, well-known capable adult.”

“Where are you going?” asked Mikoto.

“Just checking on how crowded some places are. S-so wait just a moment, okay?”

He hid in the shadows and typed “Christmas Activities” into a search engine on his phone’s small screen, but all he saw were social media comments that made him want to vomit, so he quickly abandoned that route. Plus, the voices online were full of lies that exaggerated the romantic side of things about three times over. Or at least he hoped very much those were all lies. The world described there differed so much from his reality that he wanted to send out a curse that made sure they were actually all lonely.

He wanted help from someone he knew in real life.

After finding a male friend’s number in his address book and calling that, he waited a moment and they picked up.

“U-um, Aogami Pierce? I’d like some advice, one classmate to another.”

“Sorry, Kami-yan, but I have my hands full at the moment!!”

“Eh? Don’t tell me your Christmas schedule is jam packed. No! Please don’t leave me behind in this miserable world!!”

“I was so desperate to feel some human warmth I stuck my boobs mousepad in the microwave, but it turned out to be way hotter than I expected! So now I have no feeling in my fingers!! I couldn’t have even answered your call if my phone wasn’t sitting on the table and didn’t have voice-activated commands!!”

“It’s Christmas Eve!! That only comes once a year! What the hell were you doing at 10 in the morning!? Maybe I’d get it if you had poked at them with your fingertip out of curiosity, but did you just full-on grab them with both hands right away? Why couldn’t you direct these impulses in a productive direction, like building rockets or something!!!????”

“But VR is so lonely with just the video. I wanted some tactile feedback to make it more immersive! But I don’t want them to be cold!! I paid good money for all this equipment and it wasn’t so I could virtually touch a corpse!!”

“Let me repeat: it’s Christmas Eve!! What the hell were you doing at 10 in the morning!!!???”

“Hear me out, Kami-yan. You know how sometimes you think you’ve heated your food up, but it’s still cold in the middle? I was afraid of that happening here, so I decided to heat it up a little longer, but it turns out silicone heats up really well! This thing is legit dangerous!!”

Did this awful friend not know that they sold silicone pots for use in the microwave? This was his punishment for taking the easy route and never cooking for himself. Also, there was no point in listening to someone complain because they failed to read the warnings on the box. Kamijou ignored the idiot’s lamentations and hung up.

But giving up on his friend did not improve his own situation any.

Q. What can you only do on Christmas? He was still stuck with that deadly riddle that sounded like it came from the Sphinx (the original one, not the pet cat). If he screwed this up, a Girls Alliance would be established and he would be stuck curled up on the ground sobbing. On Christmas Eve.

“Touma.”

“Hey, you.”

The two girls asked an innocent question.

Those teenage girls had no idea how much pressure their expectations were placing on him.

“So what are we going to do?”

Part 5

Don't worry.

You don't need to think about it too hard.

Put on a red hat and play a Western party game and you have enough for a Japanese Christmas.

"You gave this about two seconds of thought, didn't you?"

"Shut up. I don't care what you say."

Misaka Mikoto gave a scathing review and Kamijou snapped back at her. However, he could not let the middle schooler know how relieved he was to not have his idea actually rejected.

Whether it was decorative or just how it was constructed, the building exterior looked like a few large storage containers joined together. However, the inside had a classic aesthetic of wood floors, wood walls, and ceiling fans twirling overhead.

Index looked all around the place that was dimly lit even during these late morning hours.

"What is this? Darts?"

"This is the most mature thing a high schooler could come up with on short notice, so don't laugh, okay?"

He made sure to say that part quickly and quietly. He had decided to avoid karaoke since it was too cliché. He sometimes saw darts at all-in-one amusement facilities like bowling alleys or batting cages, but those places would be too bright. He wanted something that made him look a little more mature!!

So.

There was no such thing as a dedicated darts center, so this was probably a bar most of the time. A high school boy felt so out of place inside here that seeing the interior decorating was bad for his heart. But given the time of day, they were only serving an early lunch menu. The excessive amount of bar snacks on the side menu was probably a glimpse of the place's true form. It was still hiding its claws.

Now, while Kamijou Touma was trying to look mature, he himself knew nothing about darts. After all, high schoolers did not go to bars! He only had a general idea that it was game where you threw small arrows at a pizza-like target board. When he rented a table for them, the employee seemed to assume everyone already knew how to play and did not provide an explanation. If he had come here alone, he might have been entirely lost.

He ended up having to get Mikoto to explain.

“The most popular version is called 01 and the object of the game is to reduce your points, not earn them.”

“What?”

“Don’t look shocked quite yet. You have 301 points to start with, you throw three darts per round, and you see who can work through their points first.”

Her explanation only confused him more. He was pretty sure you took turns throwing darts, but was it one by one or did you throw all three for your round in a row?

“I didn’t even know this was a competitive game.”

“I have to start there? I guess it might be confusing since there’s only the one board, but yes, it is a competitive game. You wouldn’t go to a tennis court alone unless you were a pro getting a feel for that specific court, right? This is the same.”

So if he had come here alone, he would have been more than just entirely

lost. The employee would have treated him like an expert when he in fact was utterly clueless. That illusion would have been shattered with the very first throw and then the lukewarm looks he got would have led him to curl up in shame.

“So it’s best to hit the center, right?”

“Again, no. You play 10 rounds and you can only throw three per round and you win by being the first to ‘check out’ by getting your 301 points to exactly 0. So if you just go for as many points as you can, you’ll go too far and end up with negative points. That’s called ‘going bust’ and your score is reset to the start of that round and you have to try again next round. That means you’ve wasted an entire round. So what part of the board matters changes depending on your current number of points. If you end up with just 1 point left in the third throw of your round, you want to aim for a spot that gets you the minimum value of 1 point, right?”

“But c’mom. You’ve gotta go for the center.”

“Yes, yes! All the idiots like to focus on the bull’s eye in the center since it earns 50 points, but you see that larger ring around the center?”

“The one sliced up like a pizza?”

“Yeah, that. Hit the line in the middle of that and you get three times the normal points. So get the triple score where the normal score is 17 through 20 and you can earn more points than the central bull’s eye. That can be useful at the start of the game when you want to bring down your points by a lot.”

Mikoto grabbed a random dart while explaining. It was 15-16cm long. It was made of metal, but did not feel all that heavy. It was kind of like a somewhat sturdy pen with plastic fletching attached.

“I prefer using coins, so these are really more Kuroko’s thing.”

“?”

She casually aimed the point toward the blank board before they had powered

on the scoring.

It seemed like a careless action, but she looked right at home doing it, suggesting she had done this a lot.

“You throw it from the elbow, not the shoulder. In that sense, it might be similar to throwing a paper airplane.”

They heard a thunk.

The cat on Index’s head stuck up his tail, perhaps frightened by the sound.

She had thrown from a distance of less than 3m, but instead of a straight path, it had taken a smoothly curved parabolic arc. This was entirely different from the ninja kunais seen in samurai dramas. This was only meant as a game, but did these really work as projectiles?

Mikoto’s dart had hit in the very center.

“I actually just barely missed the center, so that’s 25 points. Although the version most popular in Japan counts that outer area as a full bull’s eye.”

Then why even mention it? wondered Kamijou, but he had a feeling saying it out loud would lead to a further digression. He could tell he had to get the basics down pat or he was in trouble.

“Also, most dart games have the score tracked electronically. This one does. That can be convenient, but don’t forget that we all use the same board.”

“?”

“The machine doesn’t set everything up for the next person like in bowling. You have to remove your darts from the board before hitting the switch to end your turn. Hit the switch with the darts still in there and it will use your darts for the next person’s score too, which really messes up the game. Got that?”

Kamijou glanced over at Index who was listening along with him. He was worried that he was the only one who was still confused.

With the cat still on her head, Index grabbed three of the darts lined up there and she threw them all in a row.

5 points, 10 points, 15 points.

That was no coincidence. She had intentionally scored increasing multiples of 5.

Darts was not simply about hitting the center of the board. According to Misaka Mikoto, who was being an oddly grownup middle schooler(?) today, you had to reach exactly 0 points in the end or you would “go bust”. So wouldn’t it be more important to know how to apply the brakes than the gas!?

“Hmm.”

“Hold on, Index-san. Where did these super skills come from!?”

“I thought I just needed to know my distance from the board and its diameter, but there’s still a margin of error. Maybe I didn’t get enough visual samples. If only there were more customers to observe.”

She was muttering under her breath without even looking his way.

The game had already begun.

“Oh, no. Is she using her perfect memory to memorize people’s motions!? Oh, I get it. This wouldn’t work for karate or boxing, but body size doesn’t matter in darts since it only uses the elbow. If she understands it intellectually, she can actually pull this one off... Let’s get this game started already, Misaka! If we dillydally, Index is going to evolve too fast for us to catch up!!”

“You’re going to start playing without ordering anything? How stoic are you two? It’s not like you’re pro players. Excuse me, could we get something to eat over here? Oh, you’re doing those donuts here too? Then I’ll have one with my lucky col-”

“You are not bringing any of those trendy things to our table!!”

“?”

Kamijou Touma’s shout only made Mikoto tilt her head. She may have thought he was allergic. In truth, he was allergic to those things, but he could not let anyone know it was an allergy of the heart, not the body. If this capable middle school girl hit him with a deadpan “you’re such an idiot” right now, it would petrify him and then shatter him into a million pieces.

“Then we’ll take a party tray of snacks. Do we need to go to that counter for the drinks?”

Fountain drinks were so cheap because you served yourself, so what was the point of having to get an employee to do it for you? But now was not the time to be asking that question.

On the other hand, that kind of distraction might actually be the secret to defeating Index who was continuing to learn like a fearsome supercomputer preparing to conquer the world with its AI society.

In other words...

“I lure her in with food and drinks and move in for the kill while she’s distracted!!”

“You sure are ruthless for Christmas Eve.”

Part 6

With that, their enjoyable Christmas Eve had begun.

Their voices echoed through the darts bar that was created from a few storage containers joined together.

“Yay! I got the bull’s eye!! How about that?” said Mikoto. “Wait, why didn’t my points go down?”

“Wow, my bad. I forgot to hit the switch to end my turn,” said Kamijou. “Ha ha ha. Sorry about that.”

“You idiot! Is how to cheat the only thing you learned from my lesson!? Stop using the machine scoring to rattle me!!”

“Okay, short hair, that means your bull’s eye didn’t count,” said Index.
“There, I pushed the button for you, so you can try again. Don’t worry. You still have a chance to redo it!”

“And why did you just remove my dart, you airheaded nun? If you had just pressed the button and flicked the dart with your finger, I would’ve gotten my rightful points! That was a bull’s eye. W-will no one take my side here!?”

The boy and two girls enjoyed themselves while throwing darts at the board. Things got wilder once they established a local rule that you had to get a bull’s eye to go get a refill for your drink. The greasy fried chicken and fries on the platter in front of them was a tantalizing sight, but eating those without a drink would make them too thirsty to concentrate. And as soon as you started thinking you absolutely had to hit the bull’s eye next time, it became impossible to hit. Kamijou might have hit it out of beginner’s luck under other circumstances, but not when there was something riding on it.

“I’ve already memorized the motion, so now I’m unstoppable,” said Index.
“Watch as I bring my score down to 32 points.”

“Oh, look. They have a dessert platter covered in tiny cakes,” said Mikoto.”

“Gotta love how they bring things out the instant you order them here in Japan,” said Kamijou. “Okay, let’s claim all the tastiest-looking ones before Index is finished with her turn. I’ve got my eye on that shortcake and rare cheesecake.”

“Hm, then I’ll go for the Mont Blanc and the caramel pudding.”

“There’s no way I’m letting this Santa sugar sculpture go.”

“Really, I’m more interested in the chocolate plate with a message written on it. Oh, don’t let us bother you, little one. Take as long as you need. Although once you get back here, you might only find the only thing left is the gelatin with canned fruits dumped inside.”

“Let’s not talk ill of canned foods, Miss Fancy. If you don’t want that one, then I’m claiming it. Hey, kitty cat. Looks like they even have a cat cake designed just for you.”

“Wait, where’s mine!?” cut in Index. “Give me time to focus!”

Time passed and they became just another part of the noise, just like everyone else.

“Oh, we’re almost at the end of our 5th game,” said Kamijou. “Then whoever wins this one gets to say the line.”

“Huh!? Wait, why not whoever won the most games!?” said Mikoto. “I held a commanding lead when it comes to wins, right!? Right!?”

“Merry Christmas!!” said Index.

“Hey, don’t just come out and say it without winning first!” said the other two.

That may have been why they did not notice.

While the place was serving a wholesome lunch now, it was normally a bar and thus the windows were made so no one could see in from outside. That was why it only had dim indirect lighting in the middle of the day.

And yet.

Nevertheless.

An observer’s eyes were following every movement made by Kamijou’s group.

Between the Lines 2

That was a *windowless room*.

Simply not being able to see outside was enough to make the place feel cut off from the normal flow of time. No one shown the inside of that room could have guessed it was currently December 24. In fact, they could not have said whether it was summer or winter, day or night.

Yet a monster had chosen to place himself there.

He was the true #1 who overwhelmed even the other Level 5s within Academy City.

Yet he had also claimed the power of Board Chairman as his own.

“Ironic, isn’t it?” scoffed the white monster.

But his scorn was directed not at Yomikawa, but at himself.

Thinking back, he had always been this kind of person. Everyone had looked up to him as the strongest and he had reigned at the top as a target of fear, yet his heart had always been ruled by alienation and self-loathing. That may have been why that *small girl* had latched onto him like that. The pair could seem strange, but it had probably been the most natural thing in the world for them.

That girl was not here.

There was no airflow in here. Only an oppressive sense of imprisonment.

In other words...

“I really do have the entire world in my grasp, yet I chose to entomb myself here. Maybe humans have a tendency to retreat from freedom the more of it

they have.”

Yomikawa Aiho, who had been “allowed” to sit in the seat across from him, had been speaking with that monster for a little bit now. It had not been long, but now was not the time to let that bother her. In fact, it was scary she had been allowed even this. Her expression was far from bright. The words of the Board Chairman would directly influence the fates of Academy City’s 2.3 million people and it would shake the lives of the more than 7 billion people reliant on science and technology.

There were no absolute correct answers in the world of technology.

For example, it was perfectly fine to loathe microplastics that would never decompose, but mass-producing exactly as many paper straws and cups would wipe out the Amazon rainforest in no time at all. Doing what was considered “right” would not necessarily lead to the future you wanted. The world would grow distorted. One careless statement from the new Board Chairman could change the course of history. It could easily redirect the entire world from right to left. And that course might bring them to a sea choked with plastic or continents dried out into deserts. And just as doing what was right would not necessarily lead to the future you wanted, avoiding the mistakes before your eyes would not necessarily lead to a future devoid of mistakes.

Yomikawa Aiho was speaking with someone who controlled the world.

Like it or not, she was participating in a game of the gods.

No more crime, no more disease, no more accidents, no more natural disasters, no more wars, and no more tragedies.

Everyone could come up with those sayings, but if you actually said them here, who would the monster target next and how would it influence the rest of the world out there? She had to consider those matters. Now that she was seated here, she could not claim ignorance.

This was not an issue of selecting a card from a predetermined deck.

If she was going to guide this new Board Chairman, she would have to make him come up with a brand new option not already on the table.

And in that sense...

(His choice is certainly an impressive one.)

“Are you really sure about this?” she asked.

“About what?”

“I really think there had to be other options. This might be the right thing to do, but you’re clearly accepting some tragedy here.”

“Don’t make me laugh.”

“I wasn’t delighted to hear about it, I can tell you that!”

“Then what are you gonna do about it?”

The monster smiled a little.

His lips silently split part and spread into a crescent moon shape.

“Are you going to stop me? As a special kindness, I’m willing to set aside all of my grownup authority. But what can you do after descending to the world of us kids?”

“...”

“Do you get it now? I’m sure you did from the beginning. You aren’t afraid of the title of Board Chairman, but you aren’t scared of the Academy City’s #1 moniker either. ...You already know that this is the *right* choice. You know you can’t argue otherwise, so you can’t grab at my collar to lecture at me or whatever. And that’s fine. That puny pride is a virtue. You can’t bring yourself to throw a tantrum in front of a kid, right? You’re far better than those Kiharas and others like them.”

“But!!”

“Let’s get ambitious, shall we?”

These were the juvenile but cruel words of the child created by the adults.

It was almost like losing control of the satellite they had launched and having it fall down on their heads. And since that satellite had been made with the best of humanity’s technology, it was loaded with a dangerous reactor meant for use in outer space that used sodium cooling and deuterium.

Yomikawa felt like “just deserts” may be the best term for this.

But whose just deserts?

“Think through all the annoying little details like you’re a goddamn Board Chairman yourself. You adults have messed with my brain so much for your own purposes, so now that you’ve dumped all this authority in my lap, I hope you’re ready. Because it’s my turn now. You’ve got no right to complain if I use this clever brain you’ve given me to utilize this new power to its fullest.”

“...”

“I gave you plenty of time, so I’m sure you’ve got everything set up. I know you wouldn’t have shown your face here otherwise. I’m not here to pester you about your progress, so hurry up and tell me everything is in place. That’s why I called you here. I knew you were the best one for the job.”

Yomikawa Aiho gently clenched her teeth.

“This will change everything.”

“It will.”

“Not just for the kids in this city. This choice you’ve made all on your own will affect the fate of this entire planet of 7 billion people!!”

“It wouldn’t be worth doing otherwise.”

He knew full well what he was doing.

Yomikawa Aiho was part of Anti-Skill, so she was meant to protect the children of Academy City. If dragging that white monster to the floor and putting him in an armlock would stop this snowball from rolling down the hill, she would have done so without hesitation. This was the #1 who was far more powerful than the #3 Railgun who could create and control currents of more than a billion volts or the #5 Mental Out who could control people's minds. *She knew exactly what his fearsome power was*, but she still would have grabbed him with her bare hands. But she understood that doing that would not stop what he had started.

That would not protect anyone.

It did not take a genius to understand it, but saving people was not that simple.

“The trigger is ready to be pulled, isn’t it?”

“...”

“I’m saying I want you in charge of this. But if you won’t do it, I’ll just get someone else. Will you be a part of the world’s conclusion, or won’t you? Choose. Which will it be?”

When it came down to it, Yomikawa Aiho was only a teacher and this was the new Board Chairman who held authority over them all.

No matter what they had once been for each other, that was now an unavoidable fact.

She felt ashamed

She spat out one last thing while powerless to do anything more.

“You’ve changed.”

“And you’re one of the ones who changed me.”

It had already begun below the surface.

The *plan* of this new era was known as Operation Handcuffs.

Chapter 2: A Changing Academy City, the Night Before – the 24th, Showdown.

Part 1

The death game rules had changed.

The poor bastard who went bust by dropping below zero would be punished in some way.

“Hey, wait! I can’t!! This is a reindeer costume, isn’t it!? There’s no way I can throw darts in this thing! I mean, look! The hands are like potholders!!”

“Then would you prefer to be the sleigh, Touma?”

“That’s not even a costume!! It’s just a rectangular box!!”

A player would only go bust just before checking out. Even if they screwed up, they would return to being only 16 or 32 points away from winning, so they might just finish it up next round. Thus, it was unsurprising that local rules showed up to trip up whoever was winning.

Fortunately, there were plenty of party goods here.

That gave them plenty of tools to mess with whoever was doing well.

“Heh heh heh.” Wicked laughter left a middle school girl. Misaka Mikoto was entering a slight demon king mode. “Keep tripping each other up this Christmas Eve, you fools. Yes, continue struggling while I throw three 10s in a row to check out!! It’s the exact same course each time, so nothing could be easi-”

“Oops, did these bulky reindeer antlers just hit something?”

“Ahee!?”

When the strange stimulus rubbed up along her back, Mikoto jumped straight up.

But something was odd.

She blushed bright, flapped her mouth, and turned back toward him.

“Y-y-y-you. M-m-my b-b-bra...my b-b-b-bra hook.”

“Eh, what!? I swear I didn’t mean to do that!”

Her dart flew off course and actually stabbed right in the center of the bull’s eye. With 50 points taken from her remaining 30 points, she went bust.

Oblivious to what had gone on below the surface, Index checked inside the plastic costume box.

“Okay, short hair, you have to wear this one. It’s Santa Claus!”

“Ugh, really!? Well, that’s not so bad. A red coat and pants shouldn’t affect my movements too much.”

“Australian version!!”

“That’s just a red bikini and miniskirt!! The worst part is I don’t think you’re being intentionally cruel!!”

Mikoto grew somewhat tearful as that costume set was shoved into her arms, but these punishments were nonnegotiable. It helped that Kamijou Touma

had already transformed into a reindeer. After forcing him to do it, she could not back out herself. “Dammit,” she grumbled while disappearing into the back. Kamijou had told her where to go – a handmade dressing room seemingly made using curtain rails bought at a home improvement store.

“My turn now. It’s Kamijou-san’s time to shine!!”

“Ooh, what should I have Touma do if he goes bust again?”

Then he noticed something.

“Why is this dart all sticky?” He squeezed the dart in his hand. “Index, did you use it after touching the snacks?”

“Eh? I don’t think so.”

That sounded simple enough, but with her perfect memory, an “I don’t think so” meant she really had not done so. The white nun tilted her head and touched the dart herself.

“It doesn’t feel sticky to me.”

“No way. It’s definitely catching on my fingers. None of the other darts did this.”

He pouted his lips while opening and closing his right hand. However, both his hands were covered by the potholder-like gloves of the reindeer costume.

“Hey, Index. Is there anything on this costume’s hand?”

“Not that I can see.”

“Then are the two materials a bad match? This is really weird.”

Wiping them off with a dry handkerchief and tissues did nothing to solve the problem. He recalled seeing some wet tissues in the bathroom and he could not think of any other option, so he called timeout and made his way to the back of the darts bar.

After turning the corner, he saw the small space surrounded by a curtain.

That was the dressing room.

Something suddenly occurred to him.

(Oh, yeah. Misaka hasn't come back yet. What's taking her so long?)

He was not about to approach that curtain that was shut tight and fluttering slightly from the movement within. After all, it scared him. A lot. With his misfortune, that makeshift dressing room was a serious threat. What would happen if the curtain rails fell from the ceiling and exposed the person changing within? He could not hope to nimbly dodge out of the way in this reindeer costume and his right hand was covered by that mitten-like glove. Plus, this was Academy City's #3, aka the Railgun. There was no surviving a "kyah, pervert!" attack when it packed the same punch as a battleship's gun.

(Yeah, best to give this one a wide berth.)

With that, he safely slipped past the dressing room and opened the door to the unisex bathroom.

His memories vanished after that.

All he could remember was the color red.

The next thing he knew, he was lying in the hallway.

"???"

He truly had no idea what had happened.

There were clear gaps in the film of his memories.

He had simply found himself lying on his back while Misaka Mikoto mounted him with her face blushing bright red. Instead of her blazer uniform, she was dressed in red for some reason. Yes, she had transformed into that Southern Hemisphere Santa Claus. But...

“What was that? I think I opened the door and someone was chang-”

“Stop, no!! Don’t try to remember!! Forget it all!!”

She hit him with her clenched fists, but that was not enough to remove the memories from his head.

Then his eyes opened wide.



“Now I remember! Why were you changing in there!?”

“Because you told me to go change ‘in the back’.”

“There was an obvious dressing room set up right there!!”

“I was supposed to use that!? But it looked like a staff only thing!”

Hadn’t that shut curtain been fluttering from movement inside? But if she hadn’t been in there, then why!? Kamijou grew more and more confused by how unfair the world could be, but then he heard a rumbling sound from the ceiling. It was the air conditioning. That goddamn warm air had been blowing on the curtain.

“Hey, Misaka-san? Wow, wow. Thinking back on it now...wow, wow, wow.”

“No, I said forget everything!!!!!!”

Santa shouted loudly while riding a reindeer.

Except there was no sleigh here.

Part 2

“Phew,” sighed Misaka Mikoto.

She was back in her blazer uniform.

The heat gathered within her clothing was still hard to miss, though.

She decided she needed to think about something else or she would cross the 42 degree border and die.

(Ugh, I feel like that kitty keeps avoiding me. Is it because of the weak EM waves I passively emit? That's always depressing.)

They had played a few more games of darts since then.

Not only had she started with more knowledge, but she was accustomed to the mentality of *aiming and shooting*. Her Personal Reality was tailored in that direction. When looking at the overall score, she had crushed the competition. And the limited number of male costumes had presented a problem for the special rule they had come up with. They had a penalty set up whenever someone went bust, but after that pointy-haired boy had done so several times in a row, they had run out of punishment costumes for him.

(Oh, god. And I can make a pretty good guess why he's too preoccupied to play right, so I can't even say anything!!)

She just about remembered what happened and felt her temperature starting to rise, so she fanned her cheek with her hand.

They were taking a short break between games, so she had snuck into the back to escape the main floor where the boy and other girl were. The door to the bathroom was here, as was a little shop with some custom goods to buy. They were of course darts. Those did not affect the score too much (and if special parts did influence it that much, the organization in charge of intentional matches would ban them), but people who were into the game could still be particular about it. Mikoto was fine with the rented darts, so to her, those looked little different from homemade parts for a bright and shining fishing lure.

Her Christmas Eve was passing by without incident.

Or so it seemed.

“...”

But at the same time, she kept feeling a tingling sensation along her spine. These were human eyes, not a machine. That would be why she had spent so long thinking before each throw during their last game before this break.

When she looked toward the exit right now, she saw nothing there.

But when she looked away, she once more sensed a presence there.

She doubted this was a figment of her imagination.

When she used the street security cameras or the security robot lenses to observe things outside, she could not see anything, suggesting whoever this was had chosen the perfect angle to hide.

She could tell where they were, but they would duck away and hide the instant she turned that way. They were clearly observing her.

She was enjoying her freedom while skipping out on Tokiwadai's school event, but she doubted any of her schoolmates or teachers would behave like this.

(This seems more dangerous, doesn't it?)

There was more to Academy City than the pamphlets let on.

There were real threats here.

Whether it was simple back-alley delinquents or the wealthy looking down upon the city from their administrative building, there were ominous shadows and villains here. And they were not all separated out into neat categories; it was a complex tangle of villainy. The adults would boss around the dropout students to have them do crimes or many researchers would serve a single dangerous genius.

In that sense, being Academy City's #3 made it easy for her to get caught up in that sort of trouble.

She was not some sheltered girl who was afraid of the unknown darkness out there. She had seen a *large project* using her own DNA map.

(I need to check this out.)

This was why she had suggested they take a short break.

She hated how smoothly she could switch between being open with people to keeping secrets from them, but if this abnormal attention was due to her being a Level 5, it made no sense to get those other two involved.

“And on Christmas Eve of all days.”

She grumbled to herself, released the electronic lock on the staff only door next to the bathroom door, and walked in. The door locked automatically, so she let the door shut on its own and then opened the stainless steel smoke vent on the wall near the ceiling. It was about three meters up, but she could move freely up the wall by using magnetism to cling to it. She nimbly climbed outside.

The classic interior was gone and now she was looking at the exterior that looked like a few metal storage containers joined together. This was probably an application of plastic construction using large parts made with a 3D printer. She could cling to it via magnetism thanks to the rebar placed inside to increase its sturdiness.

And while she had not done much, freedom of movement was the best way to lose someone tailing you. Just like you could escape pursuit more easily with a helicopter or submarine.

However...

(The main floor’s security cameras... don’t show anything.)

She used her power to send the darts bar’s security camera footage to her phone, but that did not help. In fact, the footage itself was frozen. It was hard to tell at a glance, but it had been modified so no one could tell if someone passed by directly below the cameras.

She would have to check with her own eyes.

She still felt the gaze piercing her as she used the rear emergency exit to return to the darts bar. She circled around to move back to the previous staff only door.

(The electronic lock and the smoke vent should stop someone who doesn't have the same power as me. I don't know why this person is after me, but now I can sneak up behind them.)

Of course, there was a risk of them feeling trapped and striking back. It would take a lot to bring down the #3, but Academy City's darker parts could provide a lot. There were no absolutes in this field, so she felt a weight in the pit of her stomach as she approached the previous door.

"Eh?"

The staff only door was cracked open.

The lock had not been broken. It had been electronically opened.

"Just like I did!?"

She jumped back from the cracked door as if she had seen a crocodile's jaws there.

This should not have been possible.

She was the #3 of Academy City's seven Level 5s. No one should have been able to use the exact same power as her.

Not understanding the situation could be deadly in a battle with an esper.

It was like looking at the shogi or chess board and seeing a mysterious kid's meal toy on the board. No matter how much of an advantage your arrangement of pieces gave you, that piece could take your king in a single move depending on how it moved.

(This is bad.)

This was worse than she had imagined.

Before even considering the specifics of distance, direction, number, obstacles, and attack method, this mystery person had stolen the general idea of "the initiative" and that clutched at her heart. How many turns had she

fallen behind in this one second? If they had maliciously set up the shogi board with the intent of robbing her of her freedom, they would already be in the perfect position to slit her throat at any moment.

The enemy had opened the staff only door's electronic lock and moved within. But what about the other obstacle – the smoke vent? Instead of opening the door and checking inside, wouldn't it be better to blast through the door and storm inside?

She considered using her Railgun.

She had enough firepower to warrant that name.

(This is bad!!)

She reflexively reached for her skirt pocket and confirmed the presence of the arcade coin there with her thumb.

And then...

“Oh.”

She heard something through the cracked door.

It was a voice.

And to her surprise, this was no stranger.

“I see. I get that you were lost, but only the workers are supposed to go in here. Let's head on out and I can take you to someone who works here.”

Lost?

That word and the tone of voice took the edge off of her mood, but she also recognized the voice itself. It belonged to that pointy-haired boy she had been playing darts with not long before.

(What is happening here?)

Was this an esper who looked like him? Or were they using a next-generation weapon that could change what you looked like? Or maybe it was the voice itself that had been modified.

But this meant she could not fire an arcade coin through the door at thrice the speed of sound without any warning. She was too afraid to launch an attack without checking first.

“...”

While working to remain as stealthy as possible, she placed her hand on the staff only door. Then she gradually applied pressure to push it inwards. The crack between the door and doorframe widened.

That high school boy was down on all fours like a dog with a diminutive dominatrix of about 10 standing on him with her bare feet.

“Again, you can’t reach that hole! It’s too high up! If you want to head out back, then use the kitchen door or the emergency exit!!”

“But Misaka can deduce that the Original left through here, says Misaka as Misaka sees some magnetized metal and reveals how perfect a detective she would make! Misaka can’t reach the truth without passing through that smoke vent!!”

The pig boy receiving the blessing of her bare feet required no further explanation at this point.

The small girl, on the other hand, had shoulder-length chestnut hair, a triumphant expression, and a thick outdoor coat worn over a thin dress. That made her upper body very fluffy, but her legs were entirely bare, giving her an imbalanced appearance and making her blindingly bright thighs look all the more risqué.

Perhaps Mikoto should have considered the possibility once someone was using the same methods as her.

It made sense this girl could use her powers since she had the exact same

DNA map as Misaka Mikoto. Although her actual power output could not match Mikoto's.

Her apparent age was very different, but individual parts, such as the chestnut hair and lively face, were the same as Mikoto's.

“What are you doing here?”

“Gasp!? Is this a case of the culprit returning to the scene of the crime!?” says Misaka as Misaka nervously turns around.”

“Get off of that barbaric boy first!!”

That was not any way to speak to a young girl, but it had to be said first and foremost here.

Except Mikoto's frantic demand caused the barefoot girl to slip. Her hips fell straight down, causing her small butt to land right on the crawling boy like he was her chair.

“Gyah! Squeal!?”

“Oh, nice catch, says Misaka as Misaka gives you a perfect score while continuing to sit on you.”

The spiky-haired (pig) boy trembled and seemed unable to respond.

Mikoto could not imagine how much that would hurt, nor did she want to. That kind of experience was not necessary to live a full life.

Also, hadn't that boy run into trouble with a different little girl just the night before? She did not really believe in fortunetelling, but was her joke about bad luck with little girls actually true?

Anyway...

(Was she the one I sensed watching me?)

“I don't know what's going on with you, but should you really be out on your

own? What is your caretaker doing?"

She put a hand on her hip and softly sighed, but then...

"You are correct, Original. That is why Misaka here was out searching for that runaway moron, faithfully reports Misaka."

A voice spoke from directly behind her.

A quiet but solid sound soon followed.

Mikoto's shoulders jumped and she quickly turned around to see a girl of about 14 who really did look exactly like her. That girl was looking to her with emotionless eyes.

She wore special goggles on her forehead and the metallic noise from before had been her slowly decocking the hammer of her handgun with her thumb.

But something surprised Mikoto more than that dangerous toy that should not have existed in Japan's capital.

"Wait, really? How did you sneak up behind me?"

"It is true you have an anti-personnel radar that eliminates your blind spots by emitting faint microwaves in all directions and detecting the reflected waves, but it does have a weakness, explains Misaka with a smug grin.

Electromagnetic waves are indeed waves, so as long as you know the frequency being used, you can negate them by sending out a reverse phase wave. Grin."

Despite what she said about grinning, her face remained devoid of expression.

She was one of the Sisters, mass-produced military clones of the #3 Level 5 who were meant to artificially reproduce the Railgun but had not been able to match the original's power.

Also, the 20,000 Sisters were linked by a weak brainwave network and Last Order, a special unit, had been created in order to control the network and

prevent the Sisters as a whole from rebelling. Last Order had likely been intentionally kept younger than the rest so the researchers could more easily force that role onto her. Her purpose as a safety measure was meaningless if she led the rebellion herself.

Academy City had concentrated the negative side of science and technology like crazy.

But the fact remained that none of it would have happened without her initial foolish action.

She could easily identify Last Order as #20001, but it was hard to tell apart the other Sisters, so she asked a simple question of the girl with thick goggles on her forehead.

“What’s your serial number?”

For some reason, the identical girl opened the chest of her jacket and showed off the heart-shaped necklace there.

“Misaka is your #10032, says Misaka while showing off a slight monopolistic tendency.”

“Why aren’t you looking at me while you say that? Why are you staring at that pig boy who’s being that little girl’s chair?”

“Must Misaka repeat the part about a smug grin? asks Misaka. Because she will. As many times as necessary.”

The sisters formed a single giant brain through the network link, but Mikoto had also heard that the specific clones grew more individual the more they learned on their own. So was this a case where a clone was developing in a strange new direction? She gained the kind but pitying eyes of someone seeing a self-proclaimed genius girl who had been so fixated on memorizing pi or train station names that she failed to learn how to do anything other than that.

“M-Misaka Imouto?”

“Yes?”

“Please do something about this extreme tomboy sitting on me. Any more of this and my hips...squeal...my hips won’t last.”

“Understood. This Misaka – your #10032 – shall rescue you from this crisis while the Original stands uselessly over in the corner. Grin, grin.”

“You weren’t infected by some weird virus, were you?” asked Mikoto.

“Actually, acting like this without a virus might be worse.”

Some said that it was harder to fix an AI that had been unmaliciously taught mistaken things than one that had its code or parameters maliciously rewritten by a virus. Mikoto stared into the distance while hoping she could treat this like an idiosyncrasy and not a weakness.

“Misaka hates being made to work for the benefit of *that side of things*, says Misaka to express her stance here. And while Misaka will respect Last Order’s free will and let her do as she wishes, this Misaka sides with the pointy-haired Level 0, not the albino Level 5.”

The tension ruling this place had vanished like it had been a mere illusion.

While making a mental note to look into how her anti-personnel radar could be negated, Mikoto was pleased to see she was not being immediately confronted with the dark side of Academy City which *had found it hilarious to create 20,000 clones*.

She breathed a sigh of relief.

She had been overly cautious here for the same reason that victims of burglary could never relax until they had checked over and over to make sure their windows and doors were locked before they went out. She did not like carrying around the scars of that old incident like this, but it could not hurt to err on the side of caution. The unit the boy had called Misaka Imouto was #10032 and none of the preceding number existed any longer. Mikoto never wanted to find herself in a situation like that again. Never ever.

Misaka Imouto placed her arms below small Last Order's arms and lifted her up, finally giving the boy his freedom back. He placed his hands on the wall and slowly stood up before tapping on his lower back like an old man.

"I-I just about had my hips destroyed after an awfully powerful girl assaulted me on Christmas Eve."

"Please rephrase that."

"Silly Original. When an innocent boy unwittingly says something of that nature, it is in fact an intellectual puzzle where you replace the context in your mind for your own enjoyment, says Misaka while she lectures this rookie on how to properly entertain yourself. You must not interrupt this game for classy ladies and gentlemen. You simply remain silent and grin."

They still had to find out why Last Order had left her hospital or apartment or whatever to wander the streets, but it was time to end this little meeting. It would look odd for them to remain in this staff-only office for too long and they would stand out even more with three girls who looked exactly the same (even if Last Order was a different age). They might be able to claim to be two twins and a younger sister, but clones were banned by international treaties. And since the researchers might coldly decide to kill the clones and eliminate the evidence if word of their existence got out, "might be able to" was too risky a gamble to make when not absolutely necessary.

(So I guess we can't just enjoy playing darts together.)

She hated having to exclude the clones like this, but trying to force it to happen held the greater risk of ruining any chance of a happy and uneventful Christmas Eve. That was not what she wanted for the clones.

Someday, even they would be able to walk freely out in the open.

Buying time for that to happen would be the best choice here.

"Let's get out of here. Who knows when an employee will come to this office during a break."

At the very least, there had been no suspicious pursuers or attackers.

Confident of that, Mikoto let out a sigh and prepared to bring this to an end.

But that was when it happened.

Something slammed into the building from outside and the sturdy modern architecture of the office was fully split apart.

Part 3

“Oh, whoops.”

Someone somewhere casually placed a hand over their eyes to keep out the sun.

The shadow whispered.

An alluring tongue licked some cream from their lips, perhaps from a toxic-looking donut dyed in their lucky color.

“Didn’t quite hit the mark there. I need to be more careful.”

Part 4

The entire scene slanted.

There was an obvious fault line.

The office had been a long, narrow rectangular room, but it had suddenly been split between front and back. Index and Mikoto instantly vanished from view. A giant cliff face towered in front of Kamijou. Had the two girls been launched upwards?

(No!)

He realized it was the opposite when he noticed what that large shadow pressing down from overhead was. They were not rising up; he was sinking down. The walls, ceiling, and even ground had been sliced through and Kamijou and Last Order were plunging underground.

“Oh, no!!”

The entire room had tilted at a diagonal angle.

Everything seemed different now and the ground itself rocked like a small boat in a storm. This had been a reinforced concrete building built on flat ground, but now it was a steep slope. And Last Order had nothing to grab onto, so she was rolling around and falling away.

Pieces of the ground weighing more than 100 tons were powerfully smashing together.

The giant jagged edge of the slice was still moving. Touch that with an arm or a leg and it might bite down and tear the limb straight off.

But Kamijou’s fear never came true.

The mouth was opening.

But this was not a wall of dirt. There was an open space underground. Given the limited space in Academy City, the underground area was packed full of development. They must have broken into an underground tunnel connecting subway stations. They had sunk unnaturally deep, yet the sliced edge of the ground-level road could be seen here.

It almost seemed intentional.

After swallowing Last Order, the ground wobbled like a seesaw. Once the height difference levelled off, the underground tunnel's mouth would close.

(This wasn't an accident or a disaster.)

That was obvious enough. He refused to believe this was a natural occurrence. He was unsure how exactly it had been done, but human malice was plain to see here.

They were under attack by some kind of supernatural power, so he had no reason whatsoever to let it continue.

It was time to make up of his mind.

(I can't leave her alone right now!!)

“You idiot! Are you insane!?”

“You go check on Index for me. Please!!”

Mikoto shouted down from the upper level, but she could not stop him while he was on the lower level. He in fact let go of his handhold and slid down the slanted floor to dive into the underground tunnel.

He just barely made it.

A moment after he was in, the great jaws of the ground snapped shut. If he had been just three seconds slower, the ferocious weight of more than 100 tons would have torn his upper body from his lower body like someone biting through a hot dog.

“Are you okay, Last Order?” he asked from the floor.

“Yes, Misaka is not hurt, says Misaka as Misaka looks around curiously.”

This would normally have been an entirely ordinary underground tunnel, but there were now cracks everywhere and dark soil spilling in from the fissures in the concrete. The power system must have been knocked out because the fluorescent lights were all dead and some electric sparks were sporadically

pouring down from the walls and ceiling like fireworks.

“Hm.”

Last Order brushed off her clothes with her small hands. She may have been particular about staying clean.

The tunnel was as dark as a movie theater and pieces of torn wiring and shards of concrete could be anywhere. If they were not aware of where the cracks were, they could be buried alive by dirt. It was dangerous in the dark, but they only had his phone’s LED light to go on.

The small girl raised her hands and hopped up and down.

“Misaka can make light too, says Misaka while Misaka holds her head high.”

“What? Can you send electricity to the surviving lights?”

“Misaka can send sparks from her hair!!”

He politely refused the offer. In the dark, a light source would be the first thing an enemy would target. Making that light source your head or hair was the most dangerous option.

She must have been worried because she clutched his clothes with her small hand and asked a question.

“What should we do now? asks Misaka while Misaka seeks advice.”

“Good question.”

If they were free to move, where should they go?

What could they do to ensure their safety?

(Think.)

This half-broken tunnel was clearly dangerous, but the surface was not necessarily safer. The enemy might concentrate fire on them the instant they

appeared in an open area.

So it would be best to come up with a plan instead of wandering at random.

The first issue was...

(If this was an intentional attack, *who was the target?*)

It could always be Kamijou himself, but he figured that was highly unlikely. He could not just blame his misfortune for everything. Since this was Academy City, headquarters of the science side, #3 Misaka Mikoto would be the top of the list. The cloned Sisters and Last Order, their command tower, would also be valuable.

No.

(The most unique of them would be this one here.)

“?”

Last Order tilted her head as if to ask why he was looking at her.

He was starting to think it had been no accident that the earth had opened its jaws and swallowed only Last Order.

Meanwhile, there had been another important person in that darts bar, albeit important for an entirely different reason.

Index.

The magic side also existed. She was the grimoire library that had memorized at least 103,001 grimoires and apparently all the world's outlaw magicians were after her knowledge. In that case, it was conceivable someone had *used Last Order* to remove Kamijou Touma from Index.

So was it science or magic? Whichever side the unseen enemy belonged to would greatly change what was to come. If he got that wrong, he would hold his shield in the wrong direction and end up being hit in the back or side by the enemy's concentrated fire.

Assuming the entire building had not collapsed from that initial attack, then Index would have Mikoto and Misaka Imouto with her. Those two would not be defeated so easily.

He had two primary options here.

The first was to reach the surface as quickly as possible and regroup with Index, Mikoto, and Misaka Imouto. Whether Index or Last Order was the target, he would know where the enemy would attack if those two were together. And whether the threat belonged to science or magic, they could team up on the enemy and eliminate the threat once they showed themselves.

The second was to separate Index and Last Order. Seeing which one the attacker pursued would tell him whether they belonged to science or magic. And if he could contact Mikoto's group, they could take advantage of being split up. While the attacker thought they were cornering their target, Kamijou or Mikoto could sneak up behind them.

“...”

After some thought, Kamijou Touma made up his mind.

“Last Order, let's get away from here for now.”

“If you say so.”

When he started to move, the small girl followed while still holding onto his clothes. She apparently had no intention of letting go.

He had chosen the latter option.

He could only choose to split up because he trusted in Mikoto and Misaka Imouto's skill. He was hesitant to flee or fight without knowing who the enemy was. From the moment of the attack, his group had been a step behind when it came to information. They could never escape this vicious cycle of attacks unless they filled in that gap.

Would he really find peace if he escaped back to his dorm room?

If he went to Anti-Skill and asked for protection, was there really no chance of the Anti-Skill station being destroyed?

At the very least, he wanted to know who this enemy was.

The former option of regrouping might seem safer since they could pool their forces and cover for whoever was being targeted, but there was a trap there. If the unknown enemy chose to hide and wait, there was nothing he and the others could do. Whatever this opponent's attack was, it was powerful enough to split through a building and lift up the ground. There was nowhere they could safely hide from that, so he wanted to avoid holing up somewhere while that unknown assailant could freely walk around outside. That would be just like being adrift in the ocean aboard a lifeboat with a giant shark circling around.

He had to drag the owner of those fangs out of the water.

Finding safety could wait until then.

“Okay, let’s go.”

“Why not run? asks Misaka while Misaka hopes to go faster.”

“My phone is our only light source, but the ground is covered with pieces of concrete thicker than a phonebook and shards of fluorescent lights. If we trip and fall, we’ll hurt ourselves pretty badly.”

If this tunnel did connect subway stations, where was the closest stairway back to the surface? Kamijou tried to remember that. He did not know how widespread the damage from that attack had been, so he could only hope the stairs had survived.

After less than 10m of progress after forming their new team down here, Kamijou and Last Order were hit by another powerful tremor.

“Wah!?”

“So they were after her, not Index!!”

Was the snapping sound he heard from concrete or metal? It was such an unusual sound that he could not even imagine what kind of destruction he was hearing.

But the low rumbling never seemed to end.

In fact, it was growing louder.

The deep sound was loud enough to shake the entire floor.

“Dammit. Run, Last Order.”

“Eh? But you just said-”

“They intentionally broke some kind of major water pipe down here!! Hurry! A ton of water is on its way!!”

His loud voice seemed to push her forward and she stumbled. He wrapped an arm around her skinny hips and scooped her up while running forward. He only had a phone’s LED light to go on, but not even that was much help with his arm pumping at his side. Last Order kicked her skinny legs while he carried her.

“The entire tunnel is shaking! shouts Misaka while Misaka explains what she noticed!”

“I know. I hope it doesn’t collapse. Well, put your hands over your head to protect yourself as best as you can!!”

The noise was growing louder.

No, it was drawing closer.

He felt the deep rumble more in his gut than his ears now.

How many seconds until it caught up and swallowed them whole? He could not see in the darkness, so his panic just about caused his feet to tangle together. There was no hope for them if he tripped now. They would be helplessly swallowed up and there would be no recovering from it. The fear

of bringing about his own death squeezed at his heart.

Which was why he almost missed it entirely.

Once his bright LED light illuminated the icon for the stairs, he slammed on the brakes and dove in there. Still holding Last Order's hips in his arm, he ran up to the landing two steps at a time.

Then his legs were nearly pulled out from under him.

The deluge had risen to their level in an instant and almost carried him away. It had stopped at less than knee height, but that was enough to throw him off balance.

There had been more than 10 steps to the landing, so the actual tunnel had to be fully inundated. There was no telling how long this stairway would last either.

“Kh!!”

He slammed himself against the cracked concrete wall to stop himself from falling. Then he ran up the rest of the stairs. He heard a muffled sound of destruction in the distance and the amount of water rapidly increased. Another major water pipe must have broken. He ran up the stairs to escape the water level that was rising in order to swallow up his hips.

His feet slipped at the end.

“Gah!?”

He curled up his body to at least protect Last Order from the cold and hard corner of the stairs. He clenched his teeth to bear with the pain and used both arms to push that small body up the last few steps to the surface. But instead of standing up, she stayed on all fours and reached out a small hand toward him.

“Hold on! Hurry up here! Nhhh!!”

Her efforts probably did not mean much.

If he had slipped down, he would only have pulled her down in the midwinter water with him.

(N-no.)

But.

That was why he made sure to hold his ground to the very end.

(Not yet!!)

While focusing on not pulling her to her doom with him, he forced himself up the last few steps and to the surface.

He and Last Order rolled out onto a sidewalk paved with broken tiles.

The torrent stopped at exactly the surface level. The water level receded, much like a ferocious beast slinking back into the bushes after failing to catch its prey. Another crack or large hole must have formed.

Things were bad outside too.

All those sturdy buildings were now tilted and cracks formed ominous Xs in the reinforced concrete walls. Were those danger signs of a possible collapse? A drum-shaped cleaning robot had fallen on its side and could not get back up, leaving its tires spinning fruitlessly. A few of the three-bladed wind turbines had fully collapsed and crushed the guardrails and the cars parked on the curb. It would have been a disaster had any of those hit someone.

It was all made worse by the Christmas season. The cables of colorful lights meant to decorate the city had broken and were dangling down and scattering sparks. It was not as bad as old-fashioned power lines, but there was still a risk of people getting shocked or a fire starting. Especially when combined with that water.

The road glittered in the sunlight like the ocean surface.

Perhaps due to the damage to the buildings, the windows of the higher floors must have broken and sent glass shards pouring down. He was pleasantly

surprised to not to see bloodstains everywhere. As soon as they felt the shaking, the people of this country tended to hide in sturdy buildings or below cars. In stark contrast to matters of crime and war, he had seen on a trivia show that Japan was one of the best countries in the world when it came to disaster response knowledge.

Last Order opened her small mouth and looked up into the peaceful blue sky.

The airship gently floating there seemed cut off from all the chaos. The screen on its belly was not playing any kind of special news report.

“C-could it have been an esper who controls earthquakes? wonders Misaka as Misaka tilts her head.”

“I’m thinking no.”

That had been one hell of an attack, but he felt like the attacker had been trying to mislead them by limiting their own method of attack.

If their power simply shook things, then that darts bar should have collapsed. Instead of lifting up the ground, it had looked more like the ground had been sliced through where the building was. That was why the ground had shaken but the building had not collapsed. Since it had already been split in two already, it had not twisted and snapped apart.

And this was the more concerning answer.

If this was a general-use Telekinesis user, they would have a lot more options. They might even be able to directly target Kamijou or Last Order and tear their bodies in two. Just like a small child cruelly playing with a bug they had captured.

In that case, being locked onto meant death.

But on the other hand...

(They didn’t do that.)

If they really did have such a powerful ability, they would not have needed to

make that bluff to fool their prey. That act was proof that they were afraid. They were afraid of being identified and of a counterattack. So the enemy was saying themselves that, whatever their power might be, if their trump card was identified, *that alone* would set the dominoes falling and they would lose their advantageous position.

He could not let the malice swallow him up.

He had to read between the lines and convert it into hope.

Real incidents did not have magic potions and spare ammo placed on the floor every so often so anyone could win. The enemy would have eliminated anything that would help him and cut off all paths leading back to them before making their attack. So *don't expect any help from the enemy*. He needed to transform what he was given. Just like turning sticky sludge into a disinfectant, he had to find what information he could from the malicious words and actions sent his way.

"What do we do now? says Misaka as Misaka asks a question."

"We look up," he bluntly replied. "Where could someone see everything, from the initial darts bar to here? If they've been using a single power this whole time, then they must have been watching us."

"B-but we were underground before."

"Because they invited us there."

Also, it was hard to think they had lost sight of Last Order after setting that up themselves.

"The attack underground seemed a lot less targeted than the initial one that split the darts bar office. They broke open an industrial water pipe in the distance to flood the entire tunnel, right? They knew where we were in general, but not specifically. And that was fine with them."

He did not have any actual proof of this, of course. This was only guesswork based on what they had experienced and what he would have done if he were

the enemy.

But he would lose sight of his destination if he did not set up a framework like that. If he let his emotions take over and simply ran at random, he knew exactly what fate would await him. Their lives were on the line, so he wanted to maintain enough freedom to open up the map and decide on a destination.

“So this might be our chance. The further away we are, the less accurately the enemy knows our position. If they don’t know if we’re in that flooded tunnel or out here, they’ll be open to attack. If we can work out where they’re hiding and looking down on the city, we can sneak up on them and strike back.”

The enemy used extremely largescale attacks, but wouldn’t that mean they could not use their full power if Kamijou arrived on the same building rooftop as them? If they used their power to destroy the very building they were standing on, they would be caught in it as well.

An esper could only have one power.

It would be difficult to protect yourself with this destruction-focused power. That would be like grabbing a raw egg with the heavy arm of some building demolition equipment.

“Eh, what? What’s going on here???”

A miniskirt Santa girl (probably a part-timer) had fallen to a sitting position on the curb while seemingly forgetting about her short skirt. Had she dyed that long blonde hair just for this job? She was apparently the type of person who would even now continue holding onto her handmade sign for 20% off if you bought a cake and turkey as a set.

“This is unbelievable, but I bet I’d get flamed if I uploaded a photo.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We need to provide accurate records of what happened!”

The couples who had evacuated into a ground floor café with broken windows were finally stepping out and taking a look around with a mixture of

apprehension and annoyance. A café worker was scratching their head while looking at the glass-covered floor. The lucky color donuts must have been selling really well because they did not seem all that bothered by the idea of having to buy new windows.

Needless to say, this was Christmas Eve. It was a busy time even for winter break. This mystery esper could not be allowed to run amok any longer.

“Okay, Last Order. It’s time to begin the counterattack.”

“How are we going to find the enemy? asks Misaka while Misaka checks on your plan.”

It was obvious enough once you tried, but you could not see what was on the roof of a tall building while looking up at it. Running along the roads viewing the buildings would tell them nothing, but if they climbed to the top of the tallest building in the area to look down, the esper would only have to bring down that building. They would be caught in the collapse and lose their lives.

But Kamijou had an idea.

“It doesn’t exist.”

“Hm?”

“There is nowhere that gives you a clean view of everything from the darts bar to here. To avoid drone collisions, modern map apps will show things in three-dimensions instead of just a flat map. One look on here is enough to tell me the other buildings would block the enemy’s view and make it impossible to target us.”

“But they have continued to target us, says Misaka as Misaka makes a rebuttal.”

“Correct. So there’s some trick at play here.” He lowered his phone to short Last Order’s eye level. “If you only look at the building heights, it does look like their view would be blocked, but that isn’t actually true.”

“?”

“The wind turbines.” He pointed his thumb toward that ubiquitous feature of Academy City. “They’re everywhere, right? When rotating so quickly, they can function like a large circular mirror. With the melted snow covering them, they can reflect light easily enough. So the direct line of sight might be blocked, but those temporary mirrors give the enemy a view around the buildings. Which leaves us exposed.”

Of course, not many buildings would let someone use that.

Kamijou had come up with his answer.

“Ragweed Real Estate’s office building is located 300m west of here. It gives you a direct view down on the darts bar and the wind turbine mirrors lets you see around the cinema complex in the way. That’s the only place they could be waiting to attack us!”

They had a plan.

Kamijou pushed on Last Order’s small back to hurry them along to the conclusion.

But then a small misgiving pricked at his heart.

(Wait a second.)

Hadn’t he just seen something out of place? The café with broken windows, the unconcerned employee, and the evacuated couples were all normal enough. Shards of glass had poured down from the skyscrapers, but they would have escaped harm as long as they took shelter inside before the windows broke. Kamijou and Last Order had been safe because they were underground to begin with.

But what about the other person?

Hadn’t there been someone who had been outside the whole time yet had not been hit by any of the glass for some reason?

“Well, I guess you can’t expect much more than that from an amateur’s

deductions,” said a voice.

He heard a dull sound before he felt anything.

“Gah?”

A merciless blow had hit him in the right side. What was that stabbing into him there? It was not a drill or an icepick. It was skinnier than a pen, but it was in fact a knife. It may have been designed for slipping through the gaps in an armored jacket to hit someone in the vitals.

But more than that, there was the person holding it.

The person who had snuck up close enough to feel the heat of their breaths was not an ancient ninja or an assassin squad that used electronic camouflage to blend into the background. This person had been in plain view from the beginning. They had been there, but he had overlooked them.

It was the part-timer girl.

The miniskirt Santa carrying a sign for a cake shop.

“Damn...you!?”

“No hard feelings, okay? I don’t have anything against you; this is only *a job*. If I screw this up, I’ll never hear the end of it from the higher ups.”

Her long blonde hair swayed as she whispered emotionlessly even in this situation.

During Halloween or Christmastime, extreme costumes were the best way of hiding one’s identity. *Being the most conspicuous person prevented anyone from remembering much about you.* You could be attacked head on yet only be able to remember that it was someone in red clothes and a miniskirt that did so.

(She wasn’t watching us from a distance.)

Something reflected the sunlight in the December sky.

It was an airship.

Those were seen all over Academy City and it had large screen on its belly. And the thick protective glass covering the screen reflected the light. But he never would have noticed that *large mirror* by viewing his map app.

There had been another point from which someone could view the entire area using reflected and refracted light.

(She was here the whole time waiting for us to emerge!?)

“Last Order!!”

He gathered the last of his strength and shoved the small girl as far away as he could manage.

But...

“Useless.”

A crack ran down the road, but not in a straight line; it snaked along and clearly divided the Santa assassin and Last Order from Kamijou.

The ground rose up as if abducting the small girl and carrying her into the sky.

But Kamijou did not have time to just watch. Dirt fell down like a scattershot blast, sending him spiraling through the air.

He still had the knife in his side.

If he slammed into the ground now, he would not survive this. The shock would cause the knife to shred his insides.

Then it would all be over.

The pursuit would end and no one would know who had taken Last Order.

“Dammit!?”

There was nothing he could do.

Once his feet left the ground, he had already lost all right to control his movements.

The object sticking into his body was already gouging into his soul before he even hit the ground.

Once he did hit, the impact would sever through it all.

Nothing he could do with his arms and legs now would help.

He knew only red-stained death awaited him in three seconds, but all his senses seemed to vanish.

In the final moment, his nerves seemed to misfire and he felt only a sensation as soft as feathers.

Between the Lines 3

The low tremor reached that windowless room as well.

“So it’s begun.”

“...”

“You must have known what this meant from the beginning, Yomikawa. Idealism is powerless against reality, so if you try to force your ideals onto reality, there is bound to be a fierce backlash.”

When Yomikawa Aiho had first learned who the new Board Chairman was, she assumed she had misheard.

But when she had heard what he said, she had been willing to follow him.

He had said he wanted to rid Academy City of its dark side.

He had said he wanted to eradicate all of those wicked and hopeless experiments.

That was what everyone in this city had wanted but no one had managed to pull off.

Also, things had changed once Accelerator had taken the position of Board Chairman. He had created Operation Handcuffs. He was a true monster who no one could touch with direct violence or indirect influence, yet that #1 had still said the right thing with no fear whatsoever.

No one wanted to create tragedy.

Perhaps even those men and women in white coats believed that as they dedicated themselves to their research.

With the exceptions of trueborn freaks like the Kiharas or the higher ups who were fixated on enriching and empowering themselves, people could not escape their own conscience. No matter how much they fortified themselves with logic to justify their actions, they would still be plagued with nightmares of the students they had sacrificed. Every single night.

So someone only had to create an opportunity.

A truly powerful leader only had to take their side.

“Everyone already knew what my Achilles heel was.”

“Last Order.”

“The people who are more comfortable in the corrupt darkness were bound to attack there first. If they can’t make any headway through official channels or backchannels, they only have one option left: take someone I care about hostage and use that to negotiate.”

But if Accelerator gave into his anger and rushed outside, he would only be repeating the cycle. The white monster had not called Anti-Skill Officer

Yomikawa Aiho here to discuss that.

Yes.

“Send me to the prosecutors and have me indicted.”

“Kh.”

“*Why do you think I turned myself in?* This is your job, Yomikawa. You’re the only one I know who can handle the rest of this.”

This was not some secret base of the new Board Chairman’s.

Nor was it a mysterious lab.

This room belonged to Yomikawa Aiho and Accelerator was an uninvited guest.

This was an Anti-Skill station. Specifically, it was a secret interrogation room not displayed on any official diagrams, where a minimum number of officers would make a final check before beginning the actual investigation of largescale corruption, bribery, or other cases that required the utmost secrecy before law enforcement made their move.

She knew this was an emergency.

Still, she had been surprised when she saw someone she did not recognize in control of her usual workplace.

She was the one who had asked who that guard worked for.

She had assumed the rest of the Board of Directors had taken over and sent one of their pawns in as a guard. She had never imagined the man worked for the new Board Chairman himself. Even if he had the power of the #1, that seemed too careless.

The stage was not yet set.

No one was in agreement, so there was bound to be backlash once the

confusion set in.

“I will rid Academy City of its dark side and I can’t leave any exceptions. I asked you to write up a charge sheet, didn’t I? I’ve killed more than 10,000 living humans, even if they were clones. And after that, I irresponsibly stayed in the dark side and fired guns all throughout this peaceful city while claiming to be helping. Someone like that can never be allowed out on the streets again. I must be placed behind bars no matter who tries to stop it.”

“The Board Chairman has complete control over Academy City. The 12 Directors below you are only for show. And whatever we might like to think, the rules never say the Chairman has to be a good person. I’ve never heard of someone that powerful just turning themselves in.”

“So what? That just means the system has always been broken. ...Don’t make me laugh. If the rules differ from what everyone wants, then you’ve clearly found yourself a problem in the rules needing fixing.”

Who had been at fault? The answer was obviously Accelerator.

A Kihara had developed his powers and old Board Chairman Aleister had guided that monster down the path of murder for his own purposes, but it was still Accelerator who had actually done it.

But the #1 had been involved in far too much of the darkness.

How many people’s hands would be cuffed from this one boy’s testimony?

Of course people would be coming out of the woodwork to prevent this from happening.

Not because they were his good friends; because they had to protect their own future.

“You will never again leave prison.”

“I am aware of that.”

“Even if you are tried as a juvenile! Even if your sentence is reduced for

cooperation with our investigations!! It just isn't enough. The computer has already run some preliminary calculations. At this rate, your sentence will be for 11,000 years!!"

"Way too short. Around a year per murder? What kind of joke is that?"

"Why?" Yomikawa muttered under her breath.

The #1 did not look away.

"Didn't I tell you? I can't leave any exceptions. I'm the #1 and the Board Chairman, so I have to lead by example."

Yomikawa Aiho was supposed to be a protector of the law.

But when she handcuffed an esper run amok, it was so they could be rehabilitated and have a second chance. That was why she would never aim a gun at a child. No matter how dangerous an esper they were, she had to create a situation where she could hear them out.

However, Accelerator would have no future.

This might be the right thing to do, but then who would save him?

"What about the clones?" she asked. "Once this is all investigated, their existence will come to light. That's around 10,000 people who violate international treaties. Society might not accept them."

Did clones have human rights or not?

Academy City had once answered no and repeated cruel experiments using them. And Accelerator was the one who had dirtied his hands there at the insistence of the researchers. They were undoubtedly the victims there, but the people in the outside world might not see it the same way.

If they too answered no and even saw the clones as a threat, they could be "disposed of".

However...

“That’s why I have to make sure they’re safe.”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you think they’re safe now? If they’re discovered, then that’s the end for them. How is that safe? I need to correct that unnatural balance and make sure they have solid footing to stand on. They were victims in all this, so why do they have to continue keeping their heads down and hiding? Unlike me, they deserve a free life out in the open.”

Accelerator had only one hope of accomplishing that.

The white monster pointed his thumb back at his own chest.

“I’ll be the villain.”

That was the natural result.

In fact, it was unnatural for it to have not happened yet.

“I’ll gather all the attention of the media and the scientific society and accept all of the criticism myself. I’m the ridiculous genius, I’ve got all the political power now, and I’ve even got money too. That’s exactly the kind of asshole people will just *love* to see go down in flames. All the news will be focused on me and they’ve only got so much space for info in their articles. They’ll aim for impact and focus on the guy who went around murdering clones instead of the clones themselves. And who cares about the people spreading rumors? A lot of time will have passed before the media is sick of attacking me. And then it’ll be like a flat soda. Focusing on the clones after that won’t move the masses to action. People jump on these bandwagons because they’re bored with their own lives. These are the people who find themselves bored even with all the excitement out there to find, so they’re experts at living boring lives. Once they grow tired of a topic, their interest in it is forever dead.”

That was why he could not cheat the system.

He could not use his special authority as Board Chairman to pardon himself

after being found guilty and he could not live behind bars but emerge as a heroic Board Chairman whenever there was a problem needing solving.

There could be no exceptions.

The person most deserving of punishment had to be appropriately punished and that had to be shown off to both Academy City and the rest of the world.

They had to show that true justice existed here.

They had to show that they had moved past the absurd age where the evil laughed and the good were left in tears.

Otherwise, nothing would change.

If he tried to use any tricks here, that would create a distortion and those aware of the secret would eventually create a new darkness.

He had always spat on the self-serving acts of the adults. He had punched at the filthy concrete wall and shouted in rage, wondering how they could do things like that.

And now that child held the position of Board Chairman.

So it was time to show them.

He would let the world know he was not all talk.

He would walk a different path than Board Chairman Aleister.

“It all starts here,” whispered Accelerator. It may not have been obvious without paying close attention, but the #1 and new Board Chairman was clenching his back teeth. “This is also an issue of how much I can trust Academy City. If I get worried, can’t bear it anymore, and *break through that wall to go save that brat*, then it’s all over. That would create an exception and those shitheads from the dark side could have their way. So I have to trust that the giant system of Academy City will save that brat without me creating an exception.”

That may have been nothing more than a fantasy.

Accelerator himself had peered into the darkness plenty of times himself. He knew there were truly hopeless people out there and that it was absurd to think justice would win out in the end. Everyone knew it, but breaking the rules gave you an advantage. The shittier a person you were, the more technology you could surround yourself in and the more mercilessly you could fire on the good people who were bound by the rules. At the very least, it had always been that way in Academy City. There were times when the good guys did not arrive in time and the good guys who did arrive did not always win. If he wanted absolute certainty, then he could not rely on someone else; he would have to go rescue Last Order himself.

He was indeed a monster, so there was a violent part of him that was going wild inside him right now. It told him the rules did not matter and he should break out of here right this instant. Villains would always betray you in the end. Some eloquent speech about being reformed was not even worth listening to. He needed to pin them down, crush them, tear them apart, and grasp safety for himself. Even the greatest villain could not betray you if they were a corpse. And what other choice did he have if he was going to protect that young life? What could make a more beautiful story than dirtying his hands to allow someone he cared for to live their life out in the open?

But.

Even so.

“I will trust it,” said Academy City’s #1 and new Board Chairman. That incarnation of slaughter turned fearsome dictator spoke the words like he was suppressing bubbling magma within himself. *“I will trust this city. I will trust that it is worth throwing out the rest of my life to protect. If I can’t trust the city I rule, then I don’t deserve to rule it in the first place.”*

Was it Yomikawa who had said he had changed?

It was this monster who had said she was one of the ones who had changed him.

Which was why this monster had retaken a human form and could continue to fight like this.

Even if it meant clenching his teeth and bearing with it all alone.

Chapter 3: A Dark Conspiracy and a Barrier Gone — Enemy_Use_XXX.

Part 1

Kamijou's vision spun wildly around.

If he slammed into the ground, he was dead. The special knife stabbed into his side would shred his organs and blood vessels if he did. He knew that, but he could not just sprout wings and fly. Once his feet left the ground, he could not recover.

However, that did not happen.

Because...

“Are you okay? asks Misaka to confirm your condition while catching you.”

A gentle sensation saved his life.

This was not just the soft skin of a girl. Not only had she caught him without touching the knife, she had used her body like a spring to eliminate the impact.

But he did not have it in him to thank her right now.

He ignored his aching body and pointed straight up while the young girl held him in her arms. This should have been a flat asphalt road, yet there was now a two or three story cliff there.

“Please! Help Last Order!!”

Misaka Imouto did not respond.

In fact, she gently lowered him to the ground and began checking over his wound.

“Hey?”

“By grazing your liver, it threaded the needle between several different blood vessels. This location may have been intentionally chosen to make it difficult to remove, says Misaka while grimacing at the cruelty.”

“What are you doing? Forget about me! You need to pursue her or we’ll lose them!!”

“Misaka cannot do that.” The girl shook her head with no emotion in her eyes. “Misaka will respect our higher unit’s free will and let her do as she wishes, but her opinion still reaches Misaka through the Misaka Network, explains Misaka.”

“What are you talking about?”

“She does not want to reward your kindness by abandoning you. And this Misaka agrees, says Misaka to establish her own opinion.”

He clenched his teeth so hard he thought they would break.

He reached for his own side and grabbed the handle of the knife.

More than a burning pain, he felt an iciness along his spine from the slight tremor passing into his body through the weapon. This told him all too well that a foreign object had torn into his body and the sharp metal remained there. That unrealistic sensation caused his vision to darken as if with static and his breathing picked up pace. His mind was off balance. Before long, he

would collapse backwards and the force would cause him to gut himself.

“Oh.”

But instead, he tightly gripped the knife’s handle and gave a merciless tug.

“Ohhhh!!!???”

He felt a slippery sensation, but was that blood? To be blunt, any other possibility would be even worse. Removing the blade plugging the wound caused him to start bleeding a lot more, but he had to ignore that now. He tossed aside the unnecessary blade.

Breathing deeply would only harm him here.

He held his breath for a bit and the illusionary static slowly faded from his vision. He had apparently started hyperventilating.

He was soaked with sweat despite the chilly air and he glared over at Misaka Imouto.

The world was wobbling around him.

If he lost any focus, he would pass out almost immediately.

But.

He had to say this.

“Kah, ah… I-is that good enough? Now you don’t have to look after this useless SOB.”

“That is not even remotely-”

“Shut up!! I wasn’t looking after all of you because I wanted anything in return! I’m just doing whatever the hell I want, so quit attaching price tags to it and trying to manage it all!! Who made you the good deeds police? You might as well be nitpicking every little thing people do!!”

All his shouting accomplished nothing.

He wobbled and nearly collapsed, so she gently supported him.

“Misaka shall sew up your wound. A bandage is not enough to stop this level of bleeding, says Misaka to state the objective facts.”

“...”

“Misaka would really like to administer painkillers or provide a transfusion first, but are you willing to go through with this as is? asks Misaka to receive your final confirmation.”

“Go for it. I just need to keep this goddamn body moving for another minute or even ten seconds. As long as it lets me save that kid.”

The goggles girl pulled something like a sewing kit from her skirt pocket. The actual tools may not have been all that different, but it was sealed up in plastic. This was a disposable first aid kit.

“We do not have time to prepare a sterile environment in a sealed-off operating room, so Misaka will provide field medicine sterilization. This will hurt like hell, warns Misaka.”

“Just do it.”

“Then enjoy this big-old splash of ethanol.”

He screamed and his vision filled with firework-like afterimages.

This was more than just pain, but she calmly restrained his arms and legs to make sure he did not further tear open the wound in his side.

“Misaka will sew up the wound once the convulsions have stopped. That means Misaka will be passing a needle through the already sensitive wound and sewing it shut with thread, explains Misaka. Doing this without anesthetic will be a living hell, so consider yourself warned.”

“A-and if you do use anesthetic?”

“You will likely wake up around this time tomorrow in a sterile hospital.”

He was having trouble breathing, but he still moved one trembling finger.

Raising that particular finger formed a gesture one should never direct toward a girl like this.

“Hell no.”

“You’re so cool, says Misaka while grasping the needle between tweezers.”

Again, he screamed.

Feeling an explosion of pain atop an already excruciating injury was a rare experience. His teeth chattered as he tried to clench them and bear with what felt like having all five senses shattered into a million pieces. He came close to accidentally biting his tongue.

“Do not worry, says Misaka to state her conclusion.”

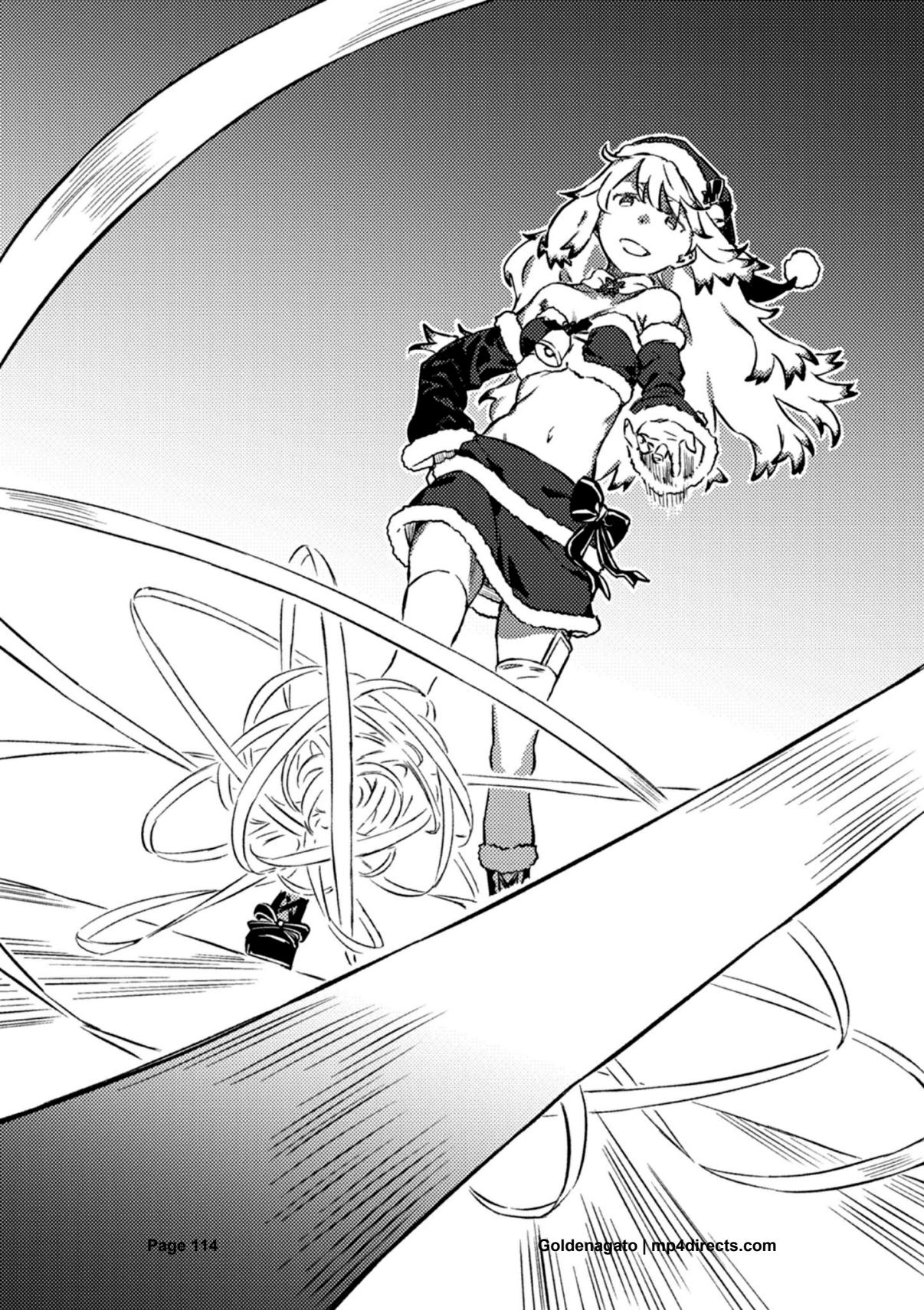
“What do you mean?”

“Misaka is not about to unconditionally accept every part of Academy City, but she knows that the depth of its dark side is matched by the warmth of its soft side. So do not worry. We can catch up to them without you carrying all the weight yourself, states Misaka. This city contains that sort of opportunity as well.”

In other words...

“You are not the only hero. That is what I am trying to say, explains Misaka with a wink.”

Part 2



The Santa costume girl stood on a relatively gently-sloped part of the asphalt cliff that rose up at an angle.

“Now, then.”

As powerless as this hostage was, she did not want the girl struggling.

(My head is so hot in this hat and wig. But I have to keep them on for a while longer still.)

The girl of 15 or 16 tossed out a bandage roll that spread out all on its own before hitting the ground. This was a controlled rope that could bind, constrict, and kill on its own. It had originally been serpentine duct tape that could safely wrap around and seal off leaks in gas or steam pipes at accident sites that would be too dangerous for a person to approach. As she watched the rope automatically bind Last Order’s limbs and mouth, the girl pulled a handkerchief-like cloth from the chest of her Santa costume. She spread it out to reveal the kind of large white bag often seen at Christmas scenes.

It took her less than two minutes to pack up her poor “gift”.

The cosplay girl reached for the side of her miniskirt and pulled a smartphone from the top of her white kneesock.

“Maidono here. Things have taken a turn for the better, so I was hoping I could meet you directly and explain the result. Is now a good time for you?”

The words from her mouth and the violence surrounding her were like polar opposites.

The asphalt ground had risen up, the structure below the concrete was flooded, and the nearby buildings were shaking like willow branches in the wind. All of this had of course been noticed, so sirens were blaring as Anti-Skill vehicles rushed in from all directions.

(That sounds like a V10 with hydrogen explosions, but those Fugaku sports sedans don’t generally have E-chargers installed. These are custom models for those civil servants, not for civilian use. These must be those unmanned

pursuer vehicles that were introduced lately. Weren't they called Hammerhead Sharks?)

They looked like slim sports cars built low to reduce air resistance as much as possible, but they actually had the engine in the rear and the hood was stuffed full of composite armor. Those weapons on wheels were meant to stop rampaging drivers and otherwise dangerous drivers by safely and swiftly catching up to them with no one onboard and then crashing into the target vehicle to stop it. After the press conference announcing them, they had been mocked as an "eye for an eye" policy.

With several of them linked via high-speed wireless internet, those weapons could force even a 20-ton truck off the road.

They were not meant to be used against an unprotected person.

But the girl going by the name Maidono tossed the bag over her back and used her other hand to stick her phone between her cheek and shoulder. With that hand now free, she simply pulled the index finger in towards herself as if telling them to come at her.

That was all she did.

A moment later, the asphalt ground rose up along with the dark soil and concrete structure below. Unable to respond to the makeshift ramp in time, the Hammerhead Sharks flew by over her head, crashed into the third-floor windows of a nearby building, and stopped moving.

These were unmanned machines, so had they only been meant to get an idea of how powerful she was?

A manned unit would be coming next.

"Yes, yes. You probably just heard an explosion, but it's nothing to worry about. Just cleaning some things up afterwards. I have safely secured the gift. To be honest, if we just want to get Accelerator to self-destruct, wouldn't it be easier to just wring her neck and kill her? Eh? We can't? I had a feeling you'd say that. I will send the gift to the designated point."

They must have originally planned to attack from the safety of the sky after using the unmanned Hammerhead Sharks to secure the ground. She looked up at the noisy helicopter rotors and saw a total of four fully-equipped powered suits attached to a round observation helicopter, two on each side.

With the faces fully covered, she could not judge their age or gender, but she could easily imagine the looks on their faces. The emotions of fear and confusion were oozing from the gaps in their armor.

She did not care if they could see her.

She had altered her color sample with the wig and colored contact lenses.

Her makeup was thick for being seen with the naked eye, but she had applied a noticeable pattern to be seen through cameras and sensors, much like a kabuki actor. She only had to ensure they could not use facial recognition or photo sharing to locate her official data. The surveillance society of the digital age had eliminated crime? No, it had only created a new dilemma where crimes that left no electronic record could not be proven to legal standards. If a convenience store was robbed in broad daylight, what would happen if the security cameras were not running? People would simply suspect the poor clerk was behind the whole thing.

“Yes, I’m dealing with it now.”

With a wave of her finger, Maidono tore a wagon-shaped window washing robot from the side of a building and threw it. The observation helicopter had to be fairly maneuverable, but it was flying between buildings and its exposed companions were clinging to either side. It could not make any sharp movements that might shake them off. But that hesitation prevented it from dodging the mass of steel, allowing a direct hit that sent them all tumbling to the surface as a giant fireball.

“When will I be done? I already am.”

(These are post-Denmark models, so that much of a crash and explosion shouldn’t be enough to kill them. I can’t say the same for the helicopter pilot, though.)

“We can handle Anti-Skill and Judgment in the usual way. If you send enough violence their way, the confusion causes their chain of command to break down. The internet will go a little nuts over it, but there are plenty of crooked ‘experts’ out there. Those filthy adults will lie and claim none of what happened was possible, all so they can cover up their mistakes in the initial investigation. If we get them to make enough of a fuss, it will create the perfect camouflage to hide our own involvement. No one will see through to the truth.”

She was a natural at cleaning up messes.

Peace of mind was no more than a prey lured out using destruction as bait.

“Yes. Given what we’re dealing with here, the amount of attention needed is going to be pretty high, but that is not a problem. It is still within acceptable bounds.”

She earned points by thoroughly eliminating the people and things that got in her master’s way. She reached for unease to search out, snatch up, and offer peace of mind to that master. She would use concerts, festivals, parades, and other events with abnormal security routines and where a lot of outsiders would be present and then she would *choose a conspicuous costume that actually helped her blend into the background*.

“I am aware of that,” she said cheerfully.

She was the kind of person who would walk right past a dying old person while preoccupied with her phone.

“I agree that we cannot have the dark side eliminated on some idiot’s whim. Not everyone in the world hopes for a world without crime. Academy City has only kept such a massive lead over the rest of the world by constructing and preserving an isolated space where the rules need not apply. You have seen that in the world of money and me in the world of fists. Neither of us can survive without the dark side, can we? ...Oh, please. I at least know it’s true for me since you *remade me* to be that way.”

She could be as noticeable as she liked.

In fact, it only worked as camouflage if it was noticeable.

It had to feel like stepping beyond the bounds of reality and wandering into a nightmare. By creating such a grotesque and psychedelic world, she could ensure that boring reality could not keep up.

The festival of doom was already beginning.

Today was a day to kick back and enjoy the festivities.

(By destroying those specific pipes, the water department will close a few floodgates to prevent the filthy water from leaking out. I have control of the waterflow, so after confirming the bag is watertight, I can toss it in the river and let the collection team fish the trash out downstream. But the scenario says I need to hold their attention on the surface so they don't notice that.)

Had she used the word trash because she was reminded of herself?

The ground was far from clean. It was littered with glass shards and metal fragments, as well as the bags and phones dropped by fleeing students. Cracks ran through the asphalt and it rose up in some places. But when she saw some chopsticks fallen at her feet, she quietly clicked her tongue.

“One question.”

Her long blonde hair swayed as she looked overhead with the phone still held between cheek and shoulder.

But she was not viewing another helicopter.

“I can ignore the invisible power balance this time, right? If someone tries to obstruct my work, I can eliminate them by force without calculating out the necessary expenses?”

She looked up at one of the skyscrapers swaying in the wind like a bamboo thicket exposed to a crosswind.

Instead of the roof, she looked to the girl clinging to the wall and staring quietly down at her.

“For example, I can go ahead and kill anyone who opposes me, even if they’re one of the Level 5s?”

Part 3

Academy City’s #3 was the strongest girl when it came to pure electricity generation.

In other words, this was Misaka Mikoto.

“You stabbed him.”

She used magnetic power to cling to the wall at the 44th floor of a building that included office space on the lower levels and apartments on the upper levels, but magnetism was not the only thing she could do. Traveling along the ground would have taken too much time given the extreme confusion and damage there, so she had chosen this other path. A Level 5 could reach for this level of freedom for *no other reason than that*.

“And on Christmas Eve when we were enjoying ourselves!! You’re a natural when it comes to ruining the mood, aren’t you!?”

The situation here was exactly what Kamijou Touma had predicted earlier.

Splitting up into two teams gave them an advantage. While the villain pursued the boy, Mikoto’s team had managed to track them down and move in from behind.

Misaka Imouto had been sent to support the boy on the surface, but she did not need to deliver a finishing blow to the villain. Once she got the boy out of the way, Mikoto could handle the rest.

She moved from that 44th floor to another building’s 38th floor and from that

38th floor to yet another building's 52nd floor.

She was even holding a certain girl while moving freely between buildings in midair.

The small calico cat in that silver-haired girl's arms was struggling, perhaps because of the EM waves.

Unlike the well-trained Sisters, it would have been too risky to let her move along the ground while it littered with glass and rubble.

“Short hair!! That monster Santa turned the corner, but that’s not the biggest problem. Do you see that plaza across the bridge? What is with this country!? It looks like it’s full of red Santas! She’ll blend in with them at this rate!!”

(No, if she only wanted to hide from our elevated vantage point, she would only have to move indoors or underground. Is she intentionally staying visible to distract us from something else?)

Mikoto realized something and ran full speed along the vertical wall while holding Index in both hands. A deadly attack burst through the thick reinforced glass just below them. The brand-new sports cars lined up in the well-polished display area were crashing out through the window one after another.

There was no rumble from their engines.

The squealing of thick rubber would be from forcibly pulling the cars out with some kind of power while their tires were not turning.

The #3 was not about to be hit by an attack like that, but it did destroy the glass she was using as footing, making it hard to continue clinging to the wall here. She used magnetism to jump to the opposite building's wall while clicking her tongue.

“Tch!!”

She was a powerful esper who could use the Lorentz force to launch an arcade coin at more than thrice the speed of sound.

Her magnetism was powerful enough to stop a car plowing toward her.

And yet even she was forced to stay on the run. Her power had the upper hand when things like its breadth of application were included, but when it came to the simple power to move objects, she could not compete in this game of tug of war. Their enemy had the greater power output. So if she was still not considered a Level 5...

(Is she the kind of genius that can only use her power for spying or stalking or something? Where has such a powerful esper been lurking in the shadows all this time!?)

That girl was a threat, but Mikoto could not lose sight of what really mattered.

That blonde Santa did not have to defeat her in a fight. In fact, wearing herself down in this fight had to have been an unexpected expense for the girl. Combat was a risky choice that unavoidably scattered material evidence all over the place and increased the number of witness accounts. Not fighting had to be the best option if available.

Win or lose, this fight would only work against her.

So for this girl in the world's most conspicuous camouflage, what was the ideal result and what was her win condition?

Mikoto only knew one thing for now.

(She's definitely after Last Order.)

Mikoto hated how coldly she could work through the calculations at times like this.

The #3 always stood on the borderline.

She was one of the few people who could get involved in both the sunny and dark sides of Academy City. Of course, just like all the people who had peered into the dark side, she had not ended up in that position out of choice.

(She has such a powerful ability, but she made sure not to harm that girl. That means killing her isn't her goal. She won't want us rescuing Last Order or a stray shot accidentally killing her. That means she will be taking Last Order somewhere safe no matter what it takes. That's her goal! So where is Last Order!?)

All of those conspicuous actions were camouflage. When a stage magician made some large sweeping motion, they were actually drawing the audience's eye while they performed some trick under the table.

This was where a girl with a perfect memory came in handy.

"The bag is gone."

"?"

"The monster Santa was carrying a white bag before, but it's gone!"

(Did she throw it in that river!? But that water has to be freezing!)

Mikoto started to look downstream of the concrete-banked river that intersected at a right angle with the bridge the Santa-costumed assailant had used, but she stopped her head.

The Santa girl put away the phone she had been using to speak with someone, freeing up her hands as she turned toward Mikoto. Her long blonde hair spread out behind her like something from a shampoo commercial. She placed her miniskirted butt on a drum-shaped cleaning robot located nearby and crossed her legs while aiming her hands toward the sky.

She made finger guns.

Both index fingers were aimed high up at the building where Mikoto was and she winked.

That alone might have looked like a playful gesture, but...

"Here it comes," said Mikoto.

Stage magicians did not train just for when things went well.

If so, their shows would be little different from clockwork doll performances.

The pros would have several recovery scenarios prepared in case their attempt to draw the audience's eye failed and their trick was about to be revealed. If it looked like an audience member had seen through the trick, they would call out to that person, draw them into the scenario, and remake the near failure into fuel for a new surprise.

In other words, the enemy would now be contacting them in earnest.

"Here it comes!!!!!"

Part 4

"Not bad. It's been a while since someone dodged three of my attacks in a row," whispered the girl seated on a random cleaning robot.

She was enjoying the situation.

She wanted the dark side to continue because she could not live without this sort of excitement.

She tore objects from the buildings and threw them at her opponent: first a crane atop a building under construction, then a giant broadcasting parabolic antenna, and lastly a clear glass pool jutting out partway up a building. But none of them hit. She would have won right away if her opponent had acted out of pride and attempted a direct competition of strength, but once that opponent grew concerned she might be no match for this girl in pure power output, she had focused solely on dodging. That was the only reason she was still alive.

Maidono noticed the #3 briefly turn her head in a different direction while soaring through the air. They were currently engaged in a deadly battle, so that girl's life was at risk. No one could look aside when they suddenly found a dump truck charging toward them.

So she must have spotted something important.

Something she thought she should prioritize over the death fast approaching her.

(So did she notice?)

If so, rushing into the crowded plaza and vanishing into the sea of Santas would not be enough. She had to kill that girl to fully cut off that line of investigation.

But more importantly...

"How should I spend my Christmas Eve?"

(I really want to get this all done with by 7 tonight. My school life might be built on lies, but I have made some promises. I do want to cut up those donuts with cheap plastic forks so we can all share them together.)

Light flashed up in the sky.

She could not avoid lightning by starting to run after seeing the light. Or she shouldn't have been able to. But she was even humming as she slammed the heel of her boot against the side of the cleaning robot she was riding, causing a malfunction in the robot's obstacle avoidance routine and making it move to the side. It only moved the length of a single human step to the side, but that was enough to cause an unnatural change in the lightning dropping vertically toward her. It instead split apart a Christmas tree located nearby. To intentionally use the tree as a lightning rod, she only had to picture a right triangle formed by the ground, the top of the tree, and her own position and adjust the angles to work out a safe distance for herself.

She even seemed to hear a tongue click from far overhead.

And now it was her turn.

“Found you.”

For fire safety purposes, some large wooden boxes were being carried to the rooftop using a window washing gondola instead of the indoor stairs or elevator. She “grabbed” at them and launched them to the side. Those containers were the size of a slender girl, so the #3 had to launch high-voltage spears from her bangs to blast them into pieces.

But did the #3 realize those boxes contained someone’s work tools?

A Japanese Christmas was far removed from the solemn atmosphere of a holy night.

Those electric attacks had triggered the professional fireworks meant for a countdown event during the night.

“Whew!!”

The Santa girl whistled while watching the tremendous explosion.

With a deafening boom, the midday sky was obscured by a whitish smokescreen. That might not be enough to kill the other girl, but fireworks used the principle behind a flame test, where specific materials would create flames of certain colors when ignited. And the materials used for fireworks were generally powdered copper, lithium, tin, or other metals.

Meaning...

(After the initial blast and flash of light, she has to contend with the smokescreen. That will blind her in the ordinary sense and it will also function as *metal chaff* that will mess with any microwave radar she might be using! And at that height, a single second’s delay can be deadly!!)

The explosive blast also destroyed a rooftop sign, but the girl only raised her index finger overhead. The metal sign had to weigh more than 20kg, but that was enough for it to come to a complete stop in midair. When she lightly swung her finger to the side, the sign sharply stabbed into a nearby concrete

wall. She did it all as casually as operating a smartphone's touchscreen.

Her Telekinesis was powerful enough to directly grab the underground structure spreading across the entire city and shake it hard enough to create a new fault line, so this actually qualified as delicate work for her. Stopping it was not the impressive part, holding it in place without crushing it was.

Telekinesis, aka psychokinesis.

That was such a popular ability that it was counted as one of the two major categories of esper power: PK and ESP. If someone was making a site or pamphlet meant for outside audiences, their primary examples would likely be using PK to bend spoons and ESP to read a face-down card. In fact, some academics even used telekinesis as a catch-all term for all powers that had physical effects, including teleportation and thoughtography. In the simplest form, it was the power to move objects with your mind.

Of those that could *produce force out of nothing*, hers was probably the strongest.

The only reason she had not been given the title of Level 5 was because the adults saw no alternate uses or economic value in her power.

That power was too specialized for killing and destruction.

To the point that announcing her existence to the world could lead to as many international risks as announcing their possession of NBC weapons.

“Now, then.”

The blonde Santa looked over.

A portion of the polished glass was broken, so the target girl (who carried a silver-haired nun) had given up on clinging to the delicate wall and had apparently jumped inside a random room instead. It was not a bad adlib, but it was sorely underestimating the Santa girl’s power.

Who ever said she could not destroy an entire 50-story building?

“The estimated number of deaths would be just under 2000. I do so love being freed from my usual restrictions about such things☆”

Maidono grinned and aimed her right index finger toward the entire building. And she pulled that finger straight down.

The skyscraper shrank to about half its height.

The destruction was much like crushing an empty can under the heel of your shoe.

But that was not her true attack. She was only setting the stage by bending all the doors and windows to seal her target within a giant cage. The humans within would not be dead. Not yet, anyway. Skyscrapers had a lot more gaps than the people walking through them thought. There were ducts, base isolation structures, cable pathways, and plumbing. Halving the height was not enough to crush the people within. Of course, they would be unable to stand and forced to crawl and the metal doors would be crushed and stuck in place, so it would certainly feel cramped.

(No sign of the target forcing open an exit and emerging. Well, she can't rely on the original plans anymore. I'm sure she could blast through a concrete wall, but I bet she's afraid of frying the people buried alive in there. Of course, that hesitation is only going to get everyone in the building crushed soon enough. Life is full of ironies, isn't it?)

She only had to point her left index finger toward the building as well.

Maidono Hoshimi's Telekinesis could crush that 50-story skyscraper to the size of a softball. The intense heat caused by the compression would make it glow like lava, but it would not even be allowed to drip down as a liquid. Just like the core of the earth was supposedly made of molten iron and nickel, yet it still managed to remain a solid.

But a moment later, she swung her left hand to the side in the exact same pose. The finger gun looked silly, but that was an absolute weapon coming from Maidono. Something had happened that forced her to aim that second trigger elsewhere. The Santa girl whispered a question while aiming at two

targets at once like she was wielding dual handguns.

Her butt rose up from the cleaning robot and her boots touched the ground.

Playtime was over.

This irregularity was beyond what the stage magician's recovery scenarios could handle.

“What brings you here?”

The threat took the form of a boy.

Bloody Kamijou Touma went ahead and answered her.

He used a word that did not at all suit Christmas Eve, when everyone was meant to be smiling together.

“Revenge.”

Part 5

How was he supposed to remain calm?

Kamijou Touma's heart was racing wildly and his throat felt so dry he could have sworn there was an invisible film coating it. He felt like his voice would crack if he was not careful.

Plus, nothing he could do would erase the fact that he had been stabbed.

His opponent was the kind of person who would do that sort of thing without batting an eye.

The wound in his side had only been roughly disinfected and sewn up. His

lost blood had not been replaced and the throbbing pain continued to plague his mind. In fact, if the blood loss had not left him feeling so woozy, he might have been writhing around from the pain.

Nevertheless, he had made it here.

He was here to reward the good will of the girls who had taken over while he was out of the fight.

And.

He was here to reclaim Last Order from this absurd cruelty.

It could all be a bluff, but he had to gather every ounce of willpower and courage he had.

Revealing his weakness would do nothing to improve things here. And if things got any worse, something he could not afford to lose would be shattered. Things had fallen to a point that even an amateur could tell that. It was painfully obvious.

So.

He had to make sure that did not happen.

“Are you sure you don’t have your priorities backwards here?”

The Santa girl smiled quietly while aiming her index fingers at two different locations.

The boy’s breathing really did catch in his throat.

She had not hesitated to target him with a weapon far more frightening than a knife.

“You have to choose between defeating your enemy and saving your friends, so are you sure you want to waste time playing with me here?”

“If that were true, you wouldn’t be so chatty,” he said while taking a page out

of the girl's book.

He formed a finger gun with his right hand and pointed it at the drum-shaped cleaning robot that Santa Claus had been sitting on before. With its freedom returned, that machine was slowly moving off again.

Don't tremble.

Don't look away.

Simply making the effort to keep his words flowing smoothly could turn the tide. He could grab at what was slipping from his grasp and lift it back up. From his opponent's perspective, this had to be an eerie sight. It looked like the enemy soldier she had utterly defeated and even stabbed in the gut had returned like nothing had ever happened to him.

He had to make himself look like something illogical.

If his presence here made no sense, then he could throw her off balance.

This was Academy City, where people either refused to accept the unscientific or could only accept it by restating it with scientific terminology.

But at the same time, Kamijou Touma did believe in luck.

Although it primarily hit him in the form of cruel misfortune.

"That bag you threw in the river was a bluff. When you've got something to hide, you aren't going to transport it in a way someone could track down so easily. That was why you needed to create *at least two different escape routes*. Your recovery scenario was to gather attention on the river while you let the robot containing Last Order escape to safety. Right?"

His voice did not crack.

He could still do this.

Willpower was not enough to overcome blood loss, so he honestly felt a cold sweat on his brow and was overcome by intense dizziness with every breath

he took.

He heard the crackling of sparks.

The cleaning robot had changed direction.

No, it had been hijacked. A girl with short chestnut hair stood not far away. She looked just like Misaka Mikoto but was not. Even the mass-produced military clones known as the Sisters could hijack control of a cleaning robot.

“Maidono.”

The Santa girl slowly moved her finger.

She moved her right index finger from the distant building and pointed it at him. That put both finger guns on him. She apparently saw him as enough of a threat to require everything she had.

“My name is Maidono Hoshimi. Nice to meet you.”

“Another bluff.”

Don’t let her draw you in.

He pictured their exchange of words like waves crashing together. He had to draw her in. So even if it was not like him, he had to grin and respond with the look of an absolute know-it-all.

Kamijou Touma kept his mind from falling into darkness and recited the magic words.

“A criminal would never use her real name at the scene of the crime. But adding on more camouflage here must mean you’re even more scared than I thought.”

The deadly battle began with what sounded like the city itself being destroyed.

He could guess her power was Telekinesis.

She had demonstrated enough power to slice apart buildings, lift up the road and the ground below it, and freely tear apart water and gas pipes.

Right and left.

Having two points from which to wield her power gave that power a much wider breadth of applications.

What had happened just now?

A station wagon parked on the curb was lifted up overhead and then it was torn down the center like someone slicing through soft bread. The diesel fuel within its gas tank splashed everywhere. Sparks from the battery ignited that and fire poured down. Kamijou managed to roll out of the way, but then the remaining scraps rushed in from the left and right like a giant's boxing gloves.

Imagine Breaker in his right hand could suppress the supernatural power, but then the uncontrolled wreckage would crush him.

So he kept his momentum going and slipped below the guardrail dividing road from sidewalk. He twisted his body to keep rolling so he could use one of the thick supports as a shield instead of the long horizontal metal panel.

The shock-absorbing metal structure stopped the front half of the station wagon, but he did not have time for a sigh of relief.

With a dull sound, his vision blurred and he found himself tossed more than five meters into the air. The ground below him had explosively risen up to function like a ramp.

Five meters might not seem like much, but as seen in the Ippon Seoi Nage of judo, even a single meter could knock someone out if they were not ready to hit the ground. Worse, this was an asphalt ground covered in glass shards and heavy metal scraps.

“Kh!!”

He immediately reached out and grabbed at the trunk of one of the

Christmas-decorated roadside trees. The thick light cable tore and swung around like a whip and, once he blocked that, the tree snapped off at its trunk. But it did not simply fall over like normal. It unnaturally rotated vertically like it was flipping 180 degrees upside down.

If that continued, he would have been squashed like a bug hit by a hammer, but that did not happen.

By letting go of the tree trunk instead of trying to hold on, he was not caught in the vertical rotation and was flung away instead. Specifically, he crashed back-first into the center of a giant polyurethane Christmas present decoration in front of a candy shop.

With her right finger gun still at the ready, the Santa girl going by Maidono twirled that slender index finger in a small circle.

She could indicate the same target with both fingers.

By pulling the fingers apart, she could tear the target apart. By pushing them together, she could compress it. But by shifting the points of force a bit out of alignment, she could provide rotation. Her power would be dangerous enough if she could only set a target with her fingertip and indicate movements with a flicking motion, but by using both hands, she could also *alter the vector*.

Her long blonde hair swayed as she quietly assessed his performance.

“You never stay still, do you?”

“You sure do. Are you a stationary cannon?”

He could do this.

The veil was still functioning. For better or for worse, the Santa-costumed assailant had shown too much of her power. That had to be a sign of her fear. She was afraid of *an esper with an unknown power*.

So she wanted to believe showing off her power would cause her enemy to reveal their own, or that her pure brute strength could end it without needing

to solve that mystery.

That ridiculous violence was of course frightening.

But once he saw her fear there, even that violence felt like a mask.

The more powerful the attack she used, the more her fear showed through.

(I can still win this. I'm the one making enough waves to draw her in.)

The girl pointed her index fingers high in the sky. It almost looked like she was posing for a photo, but that was actually the sign of a coming aerial bombing. She “grabbed” something in the sky and swung both hands down to slam it toward him.

He could not think of that as empty space above him.

There was air there.

(She isn't limited to solids?)

Kamijou felt the gears of his mind jam. This was bad. The unknown always swallowed people up and blanked their mind.

She had shaken him.

His body was already in bad shape, so if the same happened to his mind, he had no chance of winning.

He had to figure this out and fast.

He could not stop here. He had to grease the wheels of his thoughts.

Otherwise, he would be swallowed up and crushed.

(This is not a freaking joke!!)

“Tch!!”

He quickly removed his belt and wrapped it around a nearby roadside tree as a lifeline. The mass of air crashing down from above might be enough to give him a light concussion, but after the wind slammed into the ground, it would scatter in all 360 degrees in search of a way out. If he only prepared for the impact from above, his feet would be scooped out from under him and he would be sent tumbling for dozens of meters.

Plus, the road was littered with small pieces of asphalt and glass shards.

What if the wind gathered those up and chucked them toward him?

The road was enveloped in an explosion even more gruesome than a directional mine that scattered countless metal balls in a fan shape to instantly negate a charge made by 50 enemy troops. This was like cleaning out the bath's water pipes.

He could only cling to the back of the thick tree and bear with it.

The hard bark was stripped away as if by a giant file and the Christmas light cables and small branches were torn away into the wind. If he took just one step from behind that trunk, his flesh and blood body would not last even a single second.

But that was not what really mattered.

He raised his voice while sounding on the verge of coughing up blood.

“Misaka Imouto!! You’re okay, right!? Then don’t lose sight of that cleaning robot and chase after it!!”

Yes.

The girl using the pseudonym of Maidono was not really trying to kill Kamijou here. She was only trying to get away with that container carrying Last Order. And she had to cut off all pursuit. This flashy attack was no more than a stage magician preparing to do something below the table.

That was the entire purpose of this indiscriminate explosion of wind.

He did not know if she assumed the cleaning robot could move through the storm of glass and metal since it did not feel pain or if she had intended to launch the robot away with the wind, but he had to do more than simply endure this immediate threat. Defeating this girl was meaningless if the robot got away.

And he had figured something out from this.

(This whole time, she has never “grabbed” and thrown around an actual person with her Telekinesis.)

If she only needed to remove Last Order from the scene, that would have been fastest method. Either by throwing the hostage or by using her power on herself to fly. Even when she had launched Kamijou into the air, she had done so indirectly, by lifting up the ground below him when it would have been easier to directly grab and throw him.

Yet she had not done that.

No.

Once the storm died down, he let go of the belt wrapped around the tree and rushed out from behind the tree trunk.

He began a charge along the shortest route toward the blonde Santa.

She of course aimed both index fingers at him, but...

“*You can’t do it,*” he immediately announced.

This mostly seemed like an attempt to convince himself of that fact to put himself at ease.

He had to understand this or he would be swallowed up. He had to tell himself he was the one making the waves and attacking her. He was not the only one who would want the upper hand psychologically and who would be willing to lie to hold onto that. But once he considered why he wanted to make that kind of bluff, he could actually see through to her fear.

He forced himself to bare his fangs while going for a psychological cross counter.

Yes.

“At the very least, you can’t ‘grab’ living humans!! Maybe it’s about the material, like protein or something, and maybe the other person’s mind jams your power, but it’s something!!”

If that was true, she would be unable to directly stop his charge.

Her power may have been similar to a poltergeist that caused furniture to move around on its own in an old mansion. It was said those cases were often the work of an undiscovered naturally-occurring esper known as a Gemstone, especially a small child whose power spontaneously erupted during a period of high stress. This girl may have been able to consciously wield that same power.

She could grab things and move them around.

She had to stop him with an indirect attack and that would create a moment’s delay.

So he only had to arrive before that happened.

In close quarters, a knife was stronger than a gun. Similarly, he did not have to fear her power once he was right in front of her!!

“So?”

That was when she separated her index fingers.

She moved them far to the right and left.

She had been just a bit faster. She had “grabbed” something and then she directed those two fingers toward him again.

Much like jaws snapping shut.

“Why should that matter?”

A dull tremor followed.

The two giant buildings on either side of them were torn from their foundations and mercilessly crashed together with Kamijou Touma in between, erasing him from the scene altogether.

Part 6

“Phew.”

(I miiiight have overdone that. I can smell gas leaking out.)

Maidono Hoshimi sighed.

She had no limitations this time, meaning she could kill as many people as necessary to achieve her objective. But that attack had clearly been excessive and meaningless. From a stage magic perspective, it was like the magician shouting at an audience member in anger when they were about to discover the trick.

She had slid two skyscrapers two building-widths to the side from the left and right. Those buildings were too heavy for cranes to move and too unstable for workers to enter them, so they would have to be demolished to clear this major road. And since she had torn them from their foundations, she had also torn through the electric, gas, and water lines. The gas line was especially problematic. Since she could sense the artificially added odor, she was at risk of being blown up if the conditions were right.

Nothing would be more foolish than performing a “cutting yourself in half” magic trick and accidentally doing it for real.

It was crucial to always ensure your own safety first.

In that sense, the Santa girl was a second-rate illusionist for failing to immediately confirm her own safety.

“...”

After a short silence, she looked away.

Her blonde wig spread out as she turned 180 degrees away from the seam between the two buildings that were smashed together so tightly not even a sheet of paper could fit between them.

(Those two should manage to crawl out of that half-crushed building before long. It would probably be safer to wait for them to come out and make sure I kill them than crush the building and assume I got them. If I’m not absolutely certain they’re dead, it might worry my client.)

But more than that, she could not keep her thoughts off of something else.

There was no direct cause and effect there. It annoyed her to still feel fear of someone she had supposedly defeated, but she had to listen to what her own subconscious was telling her.

(That boy gave that ordinary clone some instructions. I need to deal with her, retrieve the cleaning robot, and finish transporting Last Order. Is that all? That should end it. This is looking more and more like a lonely Christmas for me.)

“I need to go eat one of those cream-covered donuts somewhere. Using a knife and fork to break apart the reddish-purple chocolate and the tower of matcha cream will rid me of this bad mood.”

While somewhat grumpily going over her plans, she noticed something else.

Her phone had been going off for a bit now.

She grabbed the vibrating mobile device and it was exactly who she expected.

“That was unnecessary,” said the person on the phone.

“You think I don’t know that?” she responded.

“Then why did you do it?”

“Shut up. It was you adults who made me like this.”

She was burning with a quiet anger.

But quiet did not make it any less dangerous.

“I can’t use chopsticks.”

That was an odd thing for a high school girl to say.

And it was accompanied by a tone of deep, deep resentment.

“Does that not sound like much to you? It probably doesn’t to those of you who took it from me, but when you can’t do something that everyone else can, it binds your heart far more than any of your calculations could have told you! I can only manipulate things with my index fingers. Because you made me that way. You sprung it on me without warning, calling it nothing more than an ‘optimization’ for my power!!”

She had been the class rep who could do anything.

She had not been all that much smarter than anyone else and she was certainly not the most athletic person. But when it came to trivia or manners, she was always the easiest one to come to. She had found a place for herself there.

So she could never allow herself to stumble in those ordinary things. And yet...

“It’s like I’m a small child. Whenever we’re chatting at school or eating out after school, I’m always reaching for the fork or spoon while curling up in fear that they’ll realize the truth!!”

She noticed the person on the phone had gone quiet.

But that was not someone who could be overpowered into silence. This silence almost certainly came from exasperation. They were not foolish enough to get rid of useful personnel for purely emotional reasons, but this had still been a mistake on her part.

She intentionally regulated her breathing before continuing.

“I will do as instructed because I too need the dark side. But please stop expecting anything more than that from me. Conforming to society? Adapting to the situation? I can’t. You should know that as one of the ones who *removed* that ability from me so you could manipulate me more easily. So I will do this the simplest way I can. Just as you so selfishly hoped I would.”

She could tell some lengthy orders were still coming, but a puzzled look appeared on her face as she held her phone.

Then she quietly clicked her tongue.

“Excuse me,” said the blonde Santa.

She loathed that person, but she also could not leave her work undone. Grades and family background were useless in the dark side. It was all about results. She could not let those slip if she wanted to survive.

“I still have more to tell you, but I must return to my job.”

She had enough of a reason to hang up now.

Namely...

“I’ll tell you why that should matter.”

“...”

She heard a voice.

An unbelievably simple male voice came from behind her.

But how? How in the world???

During their previous fighting, she had known the boy was covered in sweat and bluffing every step of the way. It had partially been to apply psychological pressure to her, but it must have also been to keep himself going after getting stabbed and beaten up so much. That method could certainly be effective, especially in Academy City where battles were often based on esper powers. And as a standard method, it had been easy for Maidono, a master of underhanded tricks, to see through it.

But what was this?

Was there some further trick she had not seen?

Or had the situation really and truly moved beyond her tactics?

Someone other than herself spoke so smoothly and loquaciously it was hard to think it was entirely calculated or entirely uncalculated.

Which one was it!?

“If your Telekinesis can only move inanimate objects, then it all makes sense. I was wondering why you weren’t counted as a Level 5 with that much power, but I think I get it now. I certainly wouldn’t want your power. Misaka’s highly adaptable powers and the psychological powers of the #5 *who I’ve heard rumors of* sound like a lot more interesting options if I could trade powers with someone for a day. There’s just no way I could see your power being on that same highest rank.”

“.....”

The gears in Maidono Hoshimi’s mind ground to a halt.

Her planned timetable truly did fall apart here.

“You can’t save anyone and you can’t make anyone smile. All you can do is

destroy.”

He sounded almost regretful, like he had seen someone else horribly wounded.

“How did you end up like that? ...I did hear you say something about being unable to use chopsticks.”

With the stiff movements of a rusty doll, she turned 180 degrees again. She was supposed to have the initiative here, yet someone else had forced her to turn around.

And there he was.

That completely ordinary boy stood there like normal.

With blood soaking his side.

He was sweating a disturbing amount for the December weather and his face was haggard and pale.

Yet he refused to collapse.

Plus, not even his bones should still be intact. That attack had not been something you could overcome through the psychological boost of some bluffing.

“How did you do that?”

“How do you think?”

“I used two skyscrapers standing more than 50 floors tall! Was my maximum weight limit of 100 thousand tons not enough, or are you saying you can hold back nuclear aircraft carriers with your arms!?”

“I wasn’t caught in the clockwork traps of some ancient ruins. The buildings had windows and doors on their ground floors. Tackle through one of those and there was a whole hollow floor for me there. If you were going to do that, you should have kept going until both buildings were squished flat, like

metalworking with gold leaf.”

And besides that.

Or because of that.

He had heard her mention the chopsticks.

She only had herself to blame for not checking on the corpse, but still.

She had lied to her friends and deceived everyone in her everyday life to keep that secret, yet it had slipped out so easily here.

Psychological pressure?

A psychological boost?

This was beyond anything words like that could influence.

“I’ll kill you.”

“You can try.”

“I’ll kill you!!!!!!”

Most likely, these emotions were not really directed at the pointy-haired high school boy in front of her. He was just getting caught in the crossfire. But she could not hold it in any longer. She had soaked in the dark side to the point of no return. She knew that so well that it almost made her laugh, but this was something she could not stand.

She felt like it had all been a waste of time.

Even that twinge of pain she always felt in her heart.

Even that patchwork school life she had held together by deceiving those ignorant people.

She could feel an unidentifiable noise rising from the depths of her mind. She

could feel it, but she could not stop it. This was the annoying part of the human psyche. Things had derailed further than even she had ever imagined.

“Yes!! Yes, it’s true!! I can’t do something everyone else takes for granted. I can’t manipulate those two little sticks in one hand and I can’t pick up food with them! I can’t use chopsticks!! All I can do is hold them in my fist and stab the food like a small child!! But you wouldn’t understand what it’s like to have the adults steal from you what no else ever has to even think about!!”

“Stole from you?”

“Modern technology can erase specific information from the brain without harming the brain cells themselves. There is, technically speaking, a chance of recovery, but I imagine the only person who could truly do that would be Academy City’s #5.”

It felt like her head was swelling.

Her temperature kept rising from within, which threw off the rhythm of her breathing.

Tears welled up in the corners of her eyes as she yelled at him.

“But if you send a massive amount of information to a specific part of the brain to rewrite it and then repeat the process over and over, you can leave it truly beyond recovery. It’s known as the signal slide method. My mind was optimized for using this power. By removing what wasn’t necessary!!”

So she could not use them.

All so she could fully focus her nerves on her two index fingers.

She could no longer perform a task she had managed with ease before – and that even kindergartners could do.

“Makes you want to laugh, doesn’t it?”

Her lips had grown loose.

But not because she was smiling.

There were children out there who could not write or do their times table. And after hitting a roadblock at a point everyone else passed without issue, they could make no further progress and fell off the rails of their school life.

She had been the same.

And terrified of what people would say if they found out, she had kept it a secret.

“All I want is to enjoy eating with my friends without having to worry about all this. All I want is to eat at a restaurant without hunching over and fearing everyone is watching me. That’s all I want, but the next thing I knew, my feet were caught in the quicksand I couldn’t escape!!”

Something could be heard slicing through the air.

She had pointed her finger at one of the glass shards at her feet and launched it at her target with a flick of her finger.

Her maximum weight limit was more than 100,000 tons.

After using two entire skyscrapers, she now used a clear needle of only a few millimeters.

Human senses would adapt to stimuli and make corrections without the person being consciously aware of it. The average person would have been stabbed through the forehead before they could adjust to this sudden change in scale.

“I see.”

“!?”

This was odd.

The boy was not shaken.

All of a sudden, his right hand was raised with its perfectly ordinary palm directed her way. That was all it took for it to fall apart. The glass shard that should have shot through her target from only a few meters away fell powerlessly to the ground.

He had broken it.

He had torn through it.

He had destroyed Maidono Hoshimi's power itself, which was something like an invisible ropeway.

Yet he said nothing about that.

But not because he was interested in hiding his trump card.

It was more like he had something more important to say.

"Then do you feel a little better now?"

"Huh?"

She did not understand.

But his words seemed to force their way into the blank in her mind.

"I mean, you haven't been able to tell anyone about all this, but you just got it all off your chest. So how was it? Maybe it was painful and embarrassing and maybe it made you want to stomp and writhe round, but do you feel some relief in getting it all out there?"

Why did he sound like he knew what he was talking about?

People acting like they understood should have been the most infuriating thing, yet his words hit home.

After some thought, she fell silent for a bit.

She had no objective proof of this, but could it be?

“You too?”

“...”

“Did you lose something too? No, did you have something stolen from you too!?”

She could guess that there was something special about this boy’s right hand. And that was what he used now.

He formed a finger gun with it and aimed at his own temple.

“*My memories.*”

“No.”

“*I’m missing everything before this past summer. A full 15 years’ worth.*”

He was not speaking particularly loudly.

He did not make any grand gestures and he did not add any dramatic tone to his voice. If he had played it up in that way, a pro like her would have seen through it right away. But she saw none of that. Which was why she felt the weight of his words.

That realistic sound seemed to make the air itself harden.

The truth was not a kind thing.

She knew that all too well as someone who protected herself by soaking in the dark side. In fact, she knew the unvarnished truth could be used as a weapon to scar people’s psyches.

“Although it was apparently just the episodic memories, so unlike you, it doesn’t really affect my day to day life. I can’t objectively prove it, much like your chopsticks thing.”

Was that possible?

How was that allowed?

She had had things to cling to for support. Even when she had killed people while working for the dark side, she had still been focused on protecting her connections to other people. It was those very connections that had made her so ashamed of what she could not do, made her lie to hide those things, and made her sink ever further into the quicksand.

But.

Did she want to quit just because it was hard? No.

No matter how much it had torn her heart to pieces, she never wanted to lose those memories she had made with those people. It was those very connections that had given her the strength to keep going in the darkness. She had wanted to keep that small light within her.

Yet that was what had been taken from him?

“Then how?”

The words spilled from her.

She had been avoiding it from beginning to end, but now she found herself seeking the answer.

“How can you possibly *keep going!*? Your case is far worse and you can’t reclaim what you lost no matter how hard you try, so wouldn’t it be easier to just resent whoever did this to you!? How!?”

He was a normal boy.

He might be accustomed to fighting abnormal battles, but he was still far too naïve deep down.

As someone soaked in the dark side, she could tell that all too well. Simply having another place to live made him fundamentally different from her.

Who had done that to him?

The answer honestly did not matter. When you lost something, it was like being given an excuse to resent the entire world around you. After all, no one noticed what was happening, no one protected you, and now it was too late. You could shout those things to excuse whatever you were doing. He had essentially been handed the absolute privilege of being the victim.

But.

The boy shook his head.

“That wouldn’t be easier.”

“...”

He lived in a different world.

“That path is one of pain. I don’t think I could bear it. That’s why I’ve hidden my memory loss for so long. Although it was terrible act and full of holes, so some people still figured it out. But that’s why I won’t rely on intangible things like memories anymore. I mean, we’ve got a whole world out there. I’d be missing out if I didn’t enjoy that along with everyone else. Smiling and running around together is the much easier path.”

His values were fundamentally different.

Which was why they could not reach an understanding.

“So how about you?”

Yet his voice would not leave her ears.

She could not drive those words out of her mind even though they made no sense to her.

“We lost different things and in different ways, so I’ll ask you what it’s like. Is it really that comfortable being forever bound by what you lost? You can’t use chopsticks and there is no changing that. *But don’t you want to become someone who can look at that and say ‘so what’?*”

“I can’t.”

“You can.”

“It’s not that easy!! You can’t just add in something new to fill in the gaps!! This isn’t a simple case of one plus one equals two!! The same amount of data doesn’t mean the same contents. This must have taken a lot out of you too, so stop trying to force it. *I mean, I can’t imagine how hard it would be to lose your memories.* That’s way worse than not being able to use chopsticks! You have to be way more dead inside than me!!!!”

“I lost my memories and they’re never coming back. *So what?* I’ve made it this far, although I’ll admit it took me a while. But where are you right now? What part of this long path is most comfortable for you?”

Then what explained this?

Where had the two of them differed?

These were not the words of some outsider who did not understand her pain.

There really was someone worse off than her.

So how had that boy managed to make this decision?

“I don’t think I really had a reason.”

“...up.”

“I lost something. I had something taken from me. Yeah, it hurts, but that doesn’t give me the right to do whatever I want. Actually, it’s not even about what’s fun or what’s painful. I just don’t want to be *that kind of person.*”

“Shut uup!!!!!”

The ground more than the air gave a roar. Then the asphalt rose up right next to Maidono Hoshimi. And it did not end there. That was merely the catapult. A tunnel was pushed up from below. An entire subway track was tossed up to the surface.

There was no warning whistle.

Based on all the lenses and sensors added to the front, it was probably an unmanned train. It may have been a freight train carrying Christmas products, but it would not have mattered even if it was manned.

The 8-car mass of metal bent and tore through the air while mercilessly charging toward Kamijou Touma. In terms of pure physical destructive force *and nothing more*, this was more powerful than Academy City's #3 Railgun. And this was not based on her power. The train itself was only moving with its electric motor.

But.

However.

“I’ve seen a lot of people, even after losing my memories.”

He moved a meter to the right.

That slight movement of his feet was all he did.

He simply sidestepped the range of those predetermined rails.

He ignored the deafening roar of destruction as he kept his eyes on her.

“I’ve seen elite Level 5s and I’ve seen dropouts who couldn’t make any progress no matter how much they struggled. I’ve seen a smoker magician who couldn’t protect the person he cared for most and I’ve seen a Saint who was always followed by tragedy due to no fault of her own. ...It’s not just us. Everyone is carrying pain no one else will ever understand, but they clench their teeth and continue to fight. This isn’t a small enough world to warrant tearing it to pieces just because of our own personal reasons!!”

Then.

Then what was she supposed to do?

Changing how she felt would not cause the world to take her side.

The cruel reality would remain unchanged.

After everything she had done, she could never leave the dark side. Looking back at the bloody path she had taken made her feel queasy. She needed that resentment that told her she had been justified in her actions. By only ever looking ahead, she had been able to believe she could reach that ridiculous future where she would one day laugh with her friends without any of these worries.

Even though, deep down, she had known that was never possible after she had killed her first person.

Deep down, she had given up at that point, making it easier to kill the second and the third.

“Yeah.”

She heard an odd sound.

This did not come from her power. She had not done anything at all.

“So if you’re going to agonize over this all on your own and if you’re going to waste the opportunities you’re given because you let those intangible things bind you...”

Then what had made the sound?

She looked up and saw that boy quietly but strongly clenching his right hand.

She saw him form a fist.

And she heard his words.

“Then I’ll destroy that goddamn illusion until not a scrap remains.”

Part 7

One step.

Kamijou Touma only needed the courage to take that one step and he could end his battle.

He had been stabbed in the side and Misaka Imouto's quick sew-up job was far from perfect. Then he had forcibly twisted his body around to dodge and defend against Maidono's attacks. He could not even imagine what things were like below his clothes right now. The wound might even be worse than when he was originally stabbed.

But.

Even so.

(I will end this.)

He had to save Last Order no matter what.

His lack of memories and Maidono's inability to use chopsticks were not Last Order's fault.

He had to stop Maidono Hoshimi.

Adding onto her crimes would not return the thing she wanted. All that would await her after this battle was more of the same harsh reality. But if she did not stop here, she could never go back. He could not allow her to move even further from the world she dreamed of.

There was no more room for tricks.

They both knew where the other stood. Trying to draw each other in with further words would accomplish nothing. He only had to bring this to an all-out head-on collision.

He understood her and she understood him.

That understanding was more than sufficient.

So.

They did not need a final signal.

“I swear I will end this! Here and now!!”

She aimed her two finger guns at him.

This was a hopeless enemy.

They lived in two different worlds.

But for some reason, it looked like she was smiling. Her face was crumpled up on the verge of tears, but he still could not help but see a smile on her lips.

Finally.

For the first time.

It was like she had found a friend she could reveal her ugly and violent truth to.

They both roared.

Kamijou Touma clenched his right fist and ran forward while Maidono Hoshimi wielded her two Telekinetic fingers that could move an entire nuclear aircraft carrier.

The ground rose up and broken pipes were exposed.

Flames and shockwaves erupted around him, but the boy ducked low and clenched his teeth to charge through while the large screen installed on a building wall dropped down like a guillotine. Glass and metal shards

scattered in all directions and red cuts appeared on Maidono's own cheeks. She had not expected this herself, but that no longer mattered to her. The screen crashed into the ground, shattered, bent, and bounced back up while she once more "grabbed" it with her two index fingers. She separated the two fingers and that LCD device larger than a tour bus was torn more easily than toast and the two halves were raised up like a giant's fists.

A cloud of gray dust filled the air.

It threatened to hide everything, but that did not happen.

Kamijou Touma ran full speed toward the Santa girl who was vanishing behind the gray curtain.

She would be enveloped by the intangible dark side and be taken beyond anyone's grasp.

He refused to let that happen.

He moved as if to give his thoughts a tangible form.

"Are you immortal!?" she shouted, despite likely realizing otherwise.

She threw a right straight and a left hook. Those arms could have knocked the average car up to a skyscraper rooftop, but Kamijou dodged them just by swinging his body.

This was not some special ability. He was not entrusting this to luck or the divine.

He would protect.

He would save.

And that applied not just to kidnapped Last Order but to Maidono Hoshimi as well. If all he had to was reach out to the person in front of him, he could suppress the shaking of his legs. When you got down to it, that right fist was all he had. If he was going to end this, he had to get close. So he would do it. The powerful explosions and sharp glass and metal shards flying about were

irrelevant. If he could not save her without reaching her, then he would make sure he got close enough to do so. He clenched his teeth and swallowed the pain.

Yes.

Needless to say, he was soaked with blood.

He was not escaping this unscathed. The wound in his side was not the end of it. He was being pummeled by shockwaves and pierced by blade-like fragments. Dark red blood was leaking from all over his body, but he had decided from the beginning that he would take this one step here. That decision allowed him to move. That was all there was to it.

“Don’t worry.”

It did not matter if it was only for 10 seconds, 5 seconds, or 1 second.

He just had to keep his body moving a little longer.

If he managed that, he could tear apart the chain of tragedy that had trapped Maidono Hoshimi in the spider’s web!!

“You might never again use chopsticks, you might have everything taken from you, and you might end up behind bars, but I will never abandon you!!”

An intensely dull sound – a more violent one than expected – reverberated through the broken streets.

His right fist slammed into her.

What was on that dark side assassin’s mind when that dull strike hit her cheek?

She did not scream even once.

That girl, who had wanted to be normal more than anyone else, dropped to the ground.

Part 8

How far you had to go to properly restrain a powerful esper was an extremely tricky question, but it was obvious enough in this case that the trigger was her index fingers. Kamijou borrowed some duct tape that must have rolled in from a nearby construction site, folded unconscious Maidono Hoshimi's hands into fists, and wrapped duct tape all around them up to the wrists. Then he put her hands behind her back and bound them there.

(Maidono, huh?)

He peered at her face while still crouched down.

That girl could not do what most anyone else could.

If Kamijou had remained fixated on his lost memories, he could have ended up much like her.

(What can a normal high school boy like me even do for her?)

“Touma!!”

“Whoa! That’s not a Santa costume, so why are your clothes so red!?”

Meanwhile, the other girls gathered around.

Misaka Mikoto descended a building wall while carrying Index.

“I’m more impressed that you got through that without a scratch on you. And that you got outside at all while the elevators weren’t working.”

“Ugh, my hair and coat are so dirty. I so hope that place didn’t use asbestos. We couldn’t do anything about the half-collapsed concrete and the combination of broken gas pipes and power cables was absolutely terrifying! It took some doing hacking the smart tower and shutting the gas off. Without

that, I would've been here a little sooner."

Misaka Imouto also returned while dragging along a cleaning robot with some yellow and black construction rope.

"Is Last Order in there?" asked Mikoto.

"Presumably, but we cannot carelessly open it before checking for nonelectronic traps using a glass fuse, says Misaka to show off how useful she is."

At some point, that clone had learned the same rhetorical tricks as an office worker who wanted to get out of doing any real work.

But anyway...

"Take care of this, will you?"

Kamijou tossed over the phone he had found on Maidono, but for some reason, the two girls with the same face began fighting over it.

"This is a delicate task where max power output is irrelevant, so you wound Misaka by implying she would be no help here, says Misaka while making sure to show off that she is nothing like the ill-mannered Original."

"Then how about we hold a cyber-attack benchmark competition? You can hook yourself up to the entire Misaka Network if you like. Also, who are you calling ill-mannered?"

"Then the prize can be one of those fashionable donuts. Misaka will order one via a bike delivery boy and we can see who has it unlocked before they arrive, suggests Misaka."

"Deal. But isn't the point of those to be decorated in your own lucky color?"

They continued bickering while pressing their cheeks together and staring at the phone's screen. They may have been competing to see who could crack the passcode first, but they looked more like two friendly sisters.

Then Index cut in from the side.

“Isn’t it 58051?”



“You can’t just guess a random number and hope it’s- ehh!? You’re kidding! Why does my analysis say it’s 58051 too!?”

“Leave it to the occult girl to show off an occult power, says Misaka while trembling at this paranormal phenomenon. Misaka has heard that astrology and fortunetelling use math and statistics, but what exactly happened here?”

“Yay, a donut for me☆” shouted Index.

The toxic-looking item covered in whipped cream was delivered by bicycle and was inside Index’s stomach in short order. This put her on *their* side too. Their happy Christmastime was too blindingly bright for the pointy-haired boy to watch from his position in the shadows.

Phones were treasure troves of information.

They knew nothing about Maidono Hoshimi, including her real name.

If she had been acting alone, this would be the end of it, but if she had been working with someone else, the threat to Last Order was not yet over. Could they turn this girl in to Anti-Skill, breathe a sigh of relief, and get back to enjoying Christmas Eve, or did they have to remain on their guard? Even if they were amateurs and they were wasting their brainpower thinking about this, they could not rest easy without figuring that out first.

But.

Mikoto tossed the phone to him without even looking at the screen.

“Here.”

“?”

“I don’t know what happened, but you’re the only one with any right to look in here.”

Was that true?

He liked to think so, but he was honestly not sure.

Spying on someone else's phone was a scummy thing to do. The links to ebooks and videos about etiquette stood out the most. Those likely had to do with using chopsticks. She seemed to be avoiding books meant for little children, probably because it would have wounded her pride too much.

He could sense raw adolescent humanity oozing from those lines of ordinary digital text.

The album contained quite a few photos, but strangely the blonde girl was in none of them. He initially thought these were all photos she had taken of her friends, but he finally realized she had been hiding her identity with a wig and color contact lenses.

When he crouched down and removed the wig from the unconscious girl, he found a surprisingly innocent-looking girl with a bob cut.

That same girl was the most common person seen in the album.

The phone did not seem to contain her real name anywhere, but it might be possible to reveal her identity by analyzing the people and background objects in the photos. He could not think of any reason to do that, though.

“...”

All the girls in the photos were smiling.

But those scenes were all something she had created to cover up and hide her complex.

Maidono Hoshimi had to be a false name.

She had been living a life much like someone who always had to choose the clothes that would cover up the tattoo they had gotten long ago. Except in her case, someone else had forced her into that situation.

(This is all stuff you can't communicate with nothing but your fists.)

“Misaka.”

“?”

“I’ve looked through most of it, but it’s too normal. She didn’t seem to have another phone either. I don’t really know what kind of world the dark side is, but you need some tool to let people contact you if you work there, right? This phone must have a secret space hidden in it.”

“I’ll look, but is there anywhere I should check first?”

“There’s nothing in the call logs or address book, so I just want to know who she was contacting.”

“Got it,” said the middle school girl as she casually accepted the phone and the task.

And before long...

“There really is nothing.”

“What?”

It seemed unusual to him for Mikoto to so readily throw in the towel.

But for some reason, she was grinning.

“Basically, this phone is only used to connect to a dedicated server that acts as a remote digital lockbox for all her work documents and contacts. So even if she does drop her phone or have it stolen, she only has to sever that one line to prevent any sensitive information from leaking out.”

“So we’ve hit a dead end? It looked like she was sending Last Order somewhere, so there must be someone else who was to pick her up.”

“Yes, *normally* anyway.”

Mikoto winked and shook the borrowed phone.

It gave off a monotone beep.

“And we’re in. Okay, you’re up again.”

“No, I doubt there’s anything from her private life in there. And if it’s work info, we can all see it.”

The phone displayed a screen he did not recognize and it contained a list of filenames. Even the file extensions at the end were unfamiliar to him. He tried tapping a few, but the text within was incomprehensible to him. It was not the same as the legal contracts adults would sign, but the level of confusion he felt was about the same. It was filled with so much jargon and roundabout phrasings that he could not get any of it into his head in a sensible form.

“Shall Misaka summarize it for you?”

“Please.”

“Basically, this is related to the Board Chairman, says Misaka to keep it short.”

“*To him?*”

Kamijou sounded confused.

The “him” here was not the human known as Aleister. It was the person who had taken over that position after Aleister.

That person had a strong connection to both Misaka Mikoto and Misaka Imouto.

And more importantly, to Last Order.

“Yes, assuming this file is accurate.” Mikoto gently nodded. “This says the new Board Chairman has begun eliminating Academy City’s dark side, but the people who are more comfortable in the dark side or cannot escape it oppose that decision. So they want an effective bargaining chip.”

“...”

The Board Chairman's plan had to be much easier said than done.

Even if you announced that ideal, the people trembling in fear might not come forward to testify and others might be opposed to the very ideal itself. And once everything fell apart and the attempt failed, the first target of retribution would be the one who had hoisted the flag and led the charge.

And he had immediately shown how far he was willing to take this.

"First, he will reveal his own crimes," continued Mikoto.

"What?"

"It looks like he means it. He's going to reveal everything he's done, primarily the more than 10,000 clones he killed in that experiment. That way he can show there are no exceptions. He seems to think that's the only way to drag the fearful skeptics out into the sunlight. ...And he has in fact turned himself in at an Anti-Skill station."

"He turned himself in!?"

"He certainly doesn't strike me as the type to do that, but apparently it's true."

His punishment would not be altered by the conditions and timing of this act. Once his crimes came to light, he would have to pay for them. And it seemed unlikely he would ever again emerge from behind bars.

Misaka Imouto tilted her head while looking through the files.

"Does this mean the new Board Chairman is resigning the position before the year is even out? asks Misaka. And what good is this effort if the next Board Chairman brings back the dark side?"

"The Board Chairman has the right to resign and choose his replacement, but the system is not made for anyone below him to remove him from that position. Just like teachers casting votes in the faculty room can't get the principal or the school's board chairman fired."

Academy City was a giant educational system Aleister had created *to achieve his own goal*, so he would not have constructed it in a way that let others interfere with his actions.

Meaning...

“So does he think he can pull it off if he uses his authority as Board Chairman to run the city from behind bars?” wondered Kamijou.

“He must intend on seeing this through to the end. What is it with the people at the top of this city closing themselves up behind thick walls?”

Anyway, they now knew why someone would want Last Order.

One side wanted to destroy Academy City’s dark side and the other side wanted to stop that.

It was a lot like a direct clash between the light side and dark side of the city. That meant an entire half of the city would be after Last Order. Maidono Hoshimi had only been the vanguard. Pulling back now was not a fundamental solution.

“Isn’t there something more?”

Without even thinking, Kamijou Touma began searching for an enemy.

“Isn’t there someone else? Like an obvious mastermind behind it all!? If this is only a sporadic wave of lone wolf villains attacking, then we can never rest again!”

Error messages suddenly flooded the screen.

Someone had noticed them.

But instead of cutting off the connection, it looked more like the data itself was being erased.

“There is one person managing all that frustration. And I’m betting they’re the one supplying the money and weapons needed to take action.”

But that did not stop Mikoto.

They were not interested in evidence they could use in court.

They only needed to know the name of the mastermind behind this incident. And this rushed erasure of the server's data only seemed to confirm that the data there was legit.

So Misaka Mikoto read the data out loud even as it was erased.

“Neoka Norito. One of the twelve on the Board of Directors.”

Part 9

With a heavy pop, Misaka Imouto managed to remove the round lid at the top of the drum-shaped cleaning robot she had captured. She must not have detected any of the traps she was concerned about. Kamijou was surprised to see they opened up like that. It looked like they would normally require a special screwdriver other than a Phillips or flathead, but she had apparently directly turned the screws using magnetism.

The inside was almost entirely hollow, providing enough space for a small child to fit while curled up. But since there was no garbage inside, this must have been one Maidono had prepared (i.e. stolen) to transport Last Order.

Anyway.

Last Order was unconscious, but she seemed unharmed when Misaka Imouto reached under her arms and pulled her out.

Her limbs and mouth were bound by a special controlled rope, but it did not appear to be a trap. And an electronic device like that was no match for Mikoto.

“Hm? But if a clone like her couldn’t get this electronically-controlled rope off of her, does that mean I really am superior when it comes to cyber-attacks???”

“Why must the higher unit’s failure cast doubt on the quality of the Misakas as a whole? wonders Misaka while trembling at this unwelcome speculation. The command tower had better learn her lesson.”

Fortunately, Last Order must have been a valuable hostage because she had no noticeable injuries. Even if that was to use her for malicious purposes, it was still a stroke of good luck considering the massive damage that Maidono Hoshimi had done to the Christmas Eve city around them.

Index asked a question with the calico cat still on her head.

She asked about the definitive crossroads they were approaching.

“Touma, what do we do now?”

“Good question.”

If he was being honest, a simple high school boy like him could not see the big picture here.

He imagined it had something to do with what the grownups wanted and the overall power balance within the city, but that did not mean he could see any of the specifics. You could not perform surgery or disarm a bomb based on a vague sense of “I think I kinda, sorta understand”. It was probably impossible for him to reach the right answer using pure logic at this point.

“First, I’d like to know what kind of person this Neoka is.”

Kamijou Touma was not the type to remember who ran the city or even who his own school’s principal was. This had nothing to do with his memory loss; he simply never interacted with them. He knew of those twelve ultra VIPs at the top of Academy City. They may have been something like a head of state’s cabinet, but that was exactly why he had no idea who they were. People tended not to remember much beyond the actual president or prime

minister at the very top.

He never would have needed to know who they were if he lived a normal life.

“The officially released info says he’s a big name in the security industry,” explained Mikoto. “With bigshots like the Board of Directors, they’re mostly pretty old, but he’s actually quite young for the group. That said, he’s still not a child like us.”

“I see. Do important people like that have a list of achievements on the government website or something?”

“Hell, he’s got his own social media account.”

Kamijou was having trouble following along already. Weren’t these criminal masterminds supposed to be veiled in mystery in the depths of a subterranean secret base or something?

But when he took a look at Mikoto’s phone, he saw a very official looking page. It was all so neat, tidy, and squeaky clean that it had no real human warmth to it. Even the sign in front of a corporate headquarters building would feel a bit warmer than this.

The young man looked good in a suit, but he did not have the look of a businessman.

He was more like a high-profile entrepreneur or film actor. Maybe it was how he looked too young to be one of those executives in suits and maybe it was the muscle tone visible even through his suit. Then again, who could say how edited the photos on his social media page were. It was even possible the man in the photos was a body double.

“What do you mean by the security industry? Is that another way of saying he sells weapons? asks Misaka while cutely tilting her head.”

“Pipe down, you flirt,” snapped Mikoto. “And no, it isn’t that. It looks like his work is in the fields of firefighting and disaster prevention. He donates a lot of money to charity and volunteer programs. …Of course, that might all

be camouflage to hide his true colors.”

This was not a case of good suppressing evil.

Nor was it a case of creating an evil more powerful than justice so they could rest easy.

The truly hopeless people would ally themselves with good and justice. They would manipulate those things to their own benefit and, when that was not enough, they would rewrite those systems altogether.

“Firefighting and disaster prevention don’t sound particularly dangerous at first glance, but you could do scary things by abusing those systems,” said Mikoto. “Disaster rescue robots could be converted into weapons, or you could even artificially create your own disaster.”

Whatever the case, he was one of the twelve VIPs who ran Academy City.

Maidono Hoshimi had only been the vanguard.

He had to have something of his own. He stood at the top of Academy City which ruled over all the world’s science and technology, so he was bound to have all sorts of bizarre tech all to himself.

He sat on *the* Board of Directors.

In truth, they were only pretending they knew what he was like based on rumors and online information. Because fighting against an unknown entity was too frightening. In the worst case, this could be a fight that *never ended* no matter how much they struggled.

They could not challenge him on a whim.

They should have tried to avoid making contact with him at all costs.

But...

“If he’s cheating the system, he must be in a position that makes that necessary.”

“Touma?”

“We can’t ‘see’ any of the political power, hierarchy, or power balance of the adults and there’s no way we can get a feel for it right away. But we do know that Neoka Norito has been living the good life by throwing that unseen power around. He’s sure to use that unseen power before clenching his fist. He used dirty tricks, threw money around, abused his authority, and set so many people in motion, but it wasn’t enough. *That* is why he finally resorted to violence.”

It was obvious.

It was the most basic of facts, but using violence came with risks. Director Neoka could use violence to protect his position, but that would be meaningless to him if his use of violence was exposed and he was placed under social pressure. That villain was clearly fighting for himself, so he would not want to bring peace to Academy City by sacrificing himself.

Which meant…

“We fight.” That was Kamijou Touma’s decision. “If we let things keep going like this, who knows when it’ll end. The enemy will try attacking over and over and we’re dead as soon as we let our guard down for even a moment. We can’t leave this in a situation where a single mistake spells our doom. So now is our only chance. We can’t see the power balance of the adults, so none of us can say if the conditions providing us this chance will still be around tomorrow or the day after that.”

They could not let this happen to Last Order. Or to Maidono Hoshimi for that matter. And the same could probably be said for the still-unseen enemy who would attack next, and the one after that.

Neoka Norito.

That piece of garbage had remade charity and volunteer work into his own bullets and allied himself with good and justice so he could create countless tragedies without dirtying his own hands. His twisted form of cleanliness had robbed so many people of their possibility and distorted their lives.

The dark side.

If he really wanted to protect that shadowy utopia, he should stand in the line of fire himself.

Maidono could not use chopsticks.

Kamijou pictured her face as she bit her lip and held back the tears over that pain no one else understood.

Just like Accelerator had Last Order, Maidono Hoshimi had her chopsticks complex.

That godawful adult had used those things as a shield to manipulate children to his will. He did not clench his fist, pit his will against his enemy's, or join any kind of battle at all. He stole people's lives and used them for his own purposes, but he considered that a sign of his own intelligence and did not see the need to bother interacting with them.

The tragedies would not end unless he was stopped.

No matter what.

“Let’s end this.”

The enemy was currently weakened.

The rules of the adults had failed here, so he had been forced to stoop to the juvenile and violent rules of the children. Meaning he had chosen to abduct young Last Order and use her as a hostage.

But if he had descended from his unreachable ivory tower and he was now within reach...

“We need to grab him by the collar before he can ascend out of reach once more.” That was Kamijou’s answer and conclusion. “This will probably only be an option today. He’s been weakened because *someone else* was fighting back out there, but we can’t say when he’ll recover from that. So we should use this chance and finish what *someone else* started. Otherwise, we’re right

back to square one. Last Order will be captured, Accelerator's plan will fail, and someone will have their life stolen from them so they'll act as a new pawn in Maidono's place. The only person laughing then will be that crazy clean freak Neoka!"

"Misaka is fine with that, says Misaka to express her agreement." The expressionless goggles girl had more to say. "Setting aside how you intend to locate and attack Neoka, it is frankly miraculous that this has been simplified to the point that it can be resolved through fighting. Forcibly settling things today would likely be a much more effective and optimal choice than letting this chance go and retrying it when the conditions are tangled with politics and economics, says Misaka to further explain her reasoning."

"So is this the extent of the cavalry?" asked Mikoto. "Counting Last Order sleeping here, that's only 5. Oh, I guess it's 6 if we include the kitty on your head there. He's sure to be a huge help."

"Eh? I'm just glad to not be alone this time," said Touma. "I'm not used to having so much help."

"..."

"..."

For some reason, Index and Mikoto both glared at him. The pressure was intense.

Being alone was so sad.

And...

"About that." Misaka Imouto raised her hand. "Since Neoka Norito was trying to capture the command tower, wouldn't it be suicidal to bring her with us? Whatever form the fight takes, Misaka thinks we should keep Last Order away from it, suggests Misaka."

"But wouldn't it also be dangerous to leave her alone?" responded Mikoto. "We don't know how many people Neoka has hidden out here, so she could

always be abducted again while we're fighting."

"Which is why Misaka will list off what we need. First, we need fighters to defeat Director Neoka Norito. But if we let the command tower escape, we cannot leave her alone. That means we also need fighters to protect her," explains Misaka while raising two fingers. So wouldn't it be best to split into two teams?"

She made it sound simple, but who would be on each team?

Kamijou could negate all forms of the supernatural and Index had an unbeatable interception ability when it came to magic, but they were both weak to normal firearms. Misaka Imouto was strong against guns and knives, but she could not deal with extreme supernatural powers. Mikoto had a seemingly almighty power, but removing her from the front line would reduce their odds of defeating Neoka Norito. They were a well-varied team when together, but their pros and cons stood out once they were separated.

However, Misaka Imouto had an idea about this.

"Misaka thinks it would be best to use her as the command tower's bodyguard, says Misaka while pointing at her own face."

"Eh? You?" said Kamijou.

"Your skepticism bothers Misaka, so she will remind you of her skill with all firearms and her ability to use the city's security with her electrical power."

"But can you beat someone on Maidono's level like that?" asked Mikoto.
"You can't, can you?"

"Wake that scum up right this instant. This Misaka will kick her ass in short order, says Misaka while rolling up her sleeves to show how eager she is."

She was being a little too motivated here, so Kamijou quickly restrained her. Fists that would not protect anyone's smile were entirely meaningless.

The mass-produced girl expressionlessly struggled (while still being hugged from behind), but she also continued speaking.

“More importantly, Neoka Norito does not want the new Board Chairman’s crimes – that is, the past project that the Misakas were a part of – to come to light, correct? *Misaka can fight by using herself as a hostage.* We are both clones, the command tower and an ordinary serial number, so if Misaka fights while drawing attention using her gunfire and Radio Noise power, it should give them some trouble, says Misaka to list off the expected conditions of the battle.”

She had a point.

Kamijou certainly agreed that they could not bring Last Order with them to the front line. Dangling that treat in front of the kidnapper’s eyes would be foolish in the extreme.

But it still was not enough.

Misaka Imouto’s logic only worked on the assumption that Neoka Norito’s side was trying to resolve this in secret and thus their attacker would withdraw rather than risk revealing their actions to society at large. For example, they would end their attack if they saw a live broadcast of the scene from a TV station’s camera or a livestream from a phone.

However.

(He gave so much freedom to Maidono Hoshimi.)

Yes, they could not trust in that assumption.

No matter how big this got, you could still cover it all up if you had enough power. So if Neoka decided he only had to get through today, no matter what it took, Misaka Imouto’s plan would not work. Even in front of a TV camera or a livestreaming phone, he or his troops would move in to kill or abduct the fleeing girls.

So they needed something more.

They had to play some other powerful card to deter their enemy.

“This might be a complete rejection of his work and efforts, but we’re under no obligation to play along.”

“Touma?”

“Misaka Imouto, we’ll leave Last Order with you, but can I suggest a destination to escape to?”

“Misaka may not use it, but you are free to make suggestions.”

Kamijou Touma breathed in and out.

And he ruined someone’s plans with a smile.

“*Accelerator is holed up in an Anti-Skill station, right?* Take Last Order there and fortify yourselves there too. Then Academy City’s strongest will fight off Neoka’s troops for you.”

The #1 could not leave himself.

He would trust in Academy City’s ability to purify itself.

That was all well and good, but it only meant they had to set up a situation where Accelerator could protect Last Order while still behind bars. He could remain there in the same building and fight to protect himself from the attackers. And if he happened to save some civilian who happened to be here? Well, that was just a coincidence.

Kamijou Touma did not understand all the tricky grownup politics and whatnot.

He thought the Board Chairman was incredible for leaving the world of pure violence and fighting in that more complex world.

But.

Even so.

Accelerator was the one who should be protecting that kid. Not even

counting issues of efficiency and logic, that was just how it was meant to be. Kamijou Touma was temporarily looking after Last Order, but there was another world in which she was meant to spread her arms and run free. He had to make sure that rule was followed. No matter what.

“Uh,” groaned Last Order with her eyes still shut.

Thinking back, this had been strange from the beginning.

Had she left her usual place and searched out her original, Misaka Mikoto, because she had realized what was happening and come for help? Had there been something only she could see using the sharp eyes of a young child that Kamijou, Mikoto, and the others had already lost? Maybe so and maybe not. It was also possible she had sensed some vague fear and just ran around with no destination in mind. Just like a child pacing around with their pillow after having a nightmare.

But so what?

What did it matter if this came from cruel reality or a baseless dream?

Kamijou did not want to abandon people who were afraid and suffering. He and the others had found her, so they had to notice what was going on with her and they had to act on that knowledge. They might not be able to save the entire world right away, but they could save the people they saw right in front of them, one by one.

A human out there had bet on the fact that the scales of the entire world would be tilted just a little if everyone attempted to do the things even they could accomplish. When all the good parts and the bad parts of the world were weighed against each other, he had bet it would tilt ever so slightly toward the bright side.

So they would show him that the world he hoped for did indeed exist.

In the world Academy City’s #1 dreamed of, perhaps no one would ever again be led astray for someone else’s purposes like Maidono Hoshimi had. And even if they were, perhaps they could create a kind enough society to

give them a second chance. They could not just hope someone else would do it. Kamijou and the others had to become some of the small gears within Academy City who would help make it happen.

They had to believe.

They had to make their own bets, just like he had.

Kamijou Touma looked to each of their faces in turn: Index, Misaka Mikoto, Misaka Imouto, and Last Order. And then he made a blunt declaration of war.

“Let’s give ‘em hell.”

Part 10

There was a lot of noise all of a sudden.

Yomikawa Aiho had been speaking with Accelerator in the Anti-Skill station’s secret interrogation room, but she was now contacting someone else.

He lightly clicked his tongue while seated across from her with his feet up on the clear table.

“So what’s all this about?”

“A girl just arrived at the main entrance with Last Order. And while carrying one of Neoka’s protegees, who is unconscious.”

He just about fell back onto the floor in his cheap chair.

Yomikawa’s custom tablet was displaying the security camera footage, so he could tell this was not a joke. Instead of a stationary camera installed near the ceiling, this was a body camera attached to an officer’s chest.

An expressionless girl stated her purpose here while making double peace signs for some reason.

“Boom. Misaka is submitting an individual and electronic evidence related to illegal activity by Director Neoka Norito. The server itself was wiped clean and this phone only holds some slight traces of the data, but looking through it should reveal information on his home base, explains Misaka in a thorough enough way to ensure even an idiot would understand. Hooray.”

“You just said everything Misaka wanted to say! says Misaka as Misaka stares in shock at the line thief!”

“The Misakas are all one giant Misaka, after all. But make no mistake. This Misaka is on Team Level 0, says Misaka while winking and striking a pose with her right hand. Kerpow☆”

The #1 groaned while clenching his teeth so hard he was afraid he would break them.

“Have those clones never even heard of reading the atmosphere?”

“But they have set things in motion.” Yomikawa must have gotten sick of the excess formality because she stripped off her black jacket. “Anti-Skill can’t throw out people seeking protection and we would be very grateful to receive some conclusive evidence on Neoka. This will let us head out and attack instead of passively fortifying our defenses.”

“It won’t be that easy. We’re talking about the biggest shithead of them all with deep roots in the dark side. He will have something up his sleeve.”

“Are you suggesting he has more espers like the one just brought to us?”

“...”

“If so, I will remind you that *saving those kids is part of our job*. We can’t just ignore this.”

Accelerator breathed from his nose.

“You’re a dumbass,” he grumbled.

“What are you even talking about? You’re the one that bet on this kind of power existing alongside all the darkness in Academy City. And I refuse to disappoint you there.”

With her removed jacket in her left hand, Yomikawa Aiho brought her feet together, stood straight, and saluted with her right hand.

“Anti-Skill Chief Yomikawa Aiho reporting for duty. I will now leave on an emergency deployment to bring this all to an end.”

“Suit yourself.”

Part 11

Evening had fallen.

Based on the information they had taken from Maidono Hoshimi’s phone, Neoka Norito had his base in a giant building in District 15, which acted as Academy City’s largest shopping district. With a shopping mall and movie theater on the lower floors, fancy corporate offices on the middle floors, and luxury apartments on the upper floors, the skyscraper was a symbol of wealth and power. The topmost floors acted as the Director’s mansion.

“Just like the powerful people of old.” Misaka Mikoto put her hands on her hips while looking up at the 70-story building from below. “The foolish lord looking down at the city from the top of his towering castle. Or maybe he wishes he could live in those older times.”

“I’m not quite sure what you mean, but I always thought the corrupt and rich were really cautious about their own life,” said Kamijou. “How do you protect that place? With a building that tall, isn’t he afraid of being trapped

during a fire or attack?”

“He’ll have a personal VTOL craft on the roof. There’s as much space as a helicopter carrier’s flight deck up there, so he has room. He can also send several remote-controlled ones out along with him to make it harder to target him with anti-air missiles.”

“Well, isn’t he rich.”

Index was looking all around while carrying the calico cat in both hands.

“I saw that person before,” she said.

“Index?”

“Same with that woman and that person eating ice cream. They were in different clothes before, though.”

“Then Anti-Skill is making their move,” said Mikoto.

You could not fool Index’s perfect memory. Anti-Skill officers must have been taking up position in the area while slipping past any mechanical surveillance by frequently changing their clothing and makeup. Since technology was available to good and bad alike, surrounding a target while avoiding detection had grown very difficult.

That building was undoubtedly Neoka Norito’s castle, but it did not belong to him alone. The mall on the lower floors, the offices on the middle floors, and the apartments on the upper floors meant a lot of ordinary people would be coming and going, allowing anyone to move almost up to the very top floors.

There were thick doors in the way and the elevators had several layers of security applied, but they could still break through the ceiling from the floor below to reach him. It was unlikely Anti-Skill intended to just attack the main entrance.

“So what do we do?” asked Kamijou.

“We can let Anti-Skill climb up from below like normal. We wouldn’t

accomplish much more than them if we took the same route.” Mikoto pointed straight up. “If he’s going to escape, it will be with his rooftop VTOL craft. So if we can take the rooftop beforehand, it should have a huge overall impact. And no one will notice us if we climb the wall with magnetism. So...”

A moment later, explosives flames erupted from the windows on the highest levels of the building she was pointing at.

They gasped because they had no clue what had just happened.

This undefinable occurrence just about left Kamijou’s mind blank. Much like a computer that had forcibly tried to read a corrupted file. This unexpected event violently ate into his mind, swallowed up his thoughts, and tried to drag him into the deadly depths of the water.

Neoka Norito.

He had caught a glimpse of who that man was before actually seeing him. Unlike Maidono Hoshimi, this man had to be someone who created his own waves. The tiny waves a child like Kamijou could create by gathering up all his courage and willpower would be crushed so very easily.

However...

“Wha-?”

“Don’t just stand there, Misaka!! The glass is falling!!”

He had to force himself to keep going.

No matter what might happen, they were done for if they came to a stop and the gears of their minds jammed. Time would cruelly pass them by and that delay would force them to accept a horrific conclusion to it all.

So.

His words acted like a slap to the cheek.

After he shouted at her, Mikoto frantically took action. She used magnetism to forcibly move some Christmas decorations like giant stockings and a huge Christmas present and she placed those above the plaza and major road in front of the building. Who knows how much blood would have soaked the ground around the crowd there otherwise.

There was no direct damage done, but there was some chaos. Someone in a snowman costume rolled wildly along the roadside and a reindeer girl selling toxic-colored donuts from a food truck quickly shut off the gas, perhaps fearing secondary damage from a panic.

“Wh-what just happened?” asked a dazed Index.

Kamijou bit his lip because a bad idea had just occurred to him.

Just like with Maidono Hoshimi, this was a stage magician’s sleight of hand. That explosion *would cut off the standard route of pursuit*.

“Neoka predicted Anti-Skill would be arriving at his castle.”

“So he set his house on fire!?”

“Right when Anti-Skill was showing up. What if it turns out that Anti-Skill took no damage, but he alone suffered from a fire in his home?”

He had never spoken with any of the Directors, but he had seen bits and pieces of how they did things.

They were a twisted sort of clean freak that never wanted to dirty their own hands, so they always had “shields” prepared allowing them to safely win.

And if you viewed this situation from that perspective...

“*He’s using the rules as a shield.* That’s the most effective method against the people who are supposed to protect the peace here. He’s going to completely flip this on its head and make himself the victim. Anti-Skill didn’t do anything, but what happens if he points at them and claims they nearly got him killed while forcing their way into his home as part of an illegitimate investigation with insufficient evidence to back it up? Anti-Skill will take all

the blame, the investigation will end, and he'll remain free to go around destroying all the inconvenient evidence!"

The methods meant to empower the good would instead be used to attack the good.

And Anti-Skill was not *paid* enough to continue searching for a villain that might not even exist.

Before even reaching him, they could already see just how nasty a foe this was.

"B-but we handed Maidono Hoshimi over to Anti-Skill," said Mikoto. "Her phone had real evidence on it, so isn't Anti-Skill following proper procedure in coming here!?"

"Which is why he needs to buy enough time to go and *eliminate Maidono now that she has escaped the dark side.*"

Kamijou did not wait even a second before responding and even Mikoto went pale and fell silent at his answer.

Neoka was not acting alone. He had plenty of fighters on Maidono's level and he would have released them into the city. Something would be moving toward the Anti-Skill station where Misaka Imouto and Last Order had gone. The #1 was there and it would take a lot to break through that barrier, but there was no guarantee that Neoka could not provide a lot.

They could not let his plan continue.

They did not have a feel for the adult power balance, so they had to end this today before that became an issue once more. They could never turn this around then.

(Think.)

Kamijou clenched his teeth.

They could not let the confusion sweep them away. There had to be a way to

retake control.

They could not give in to fear.

There was no need to narrow their range of freedom at the thinking stage. They had to come up with ideas based on an ideal version of themselves, like they were a Hollywood star or a mysterious special forces unit.

The answer had to be hidden beyond that leap of logic.

Especially in Academy City where so much craziness could be made a reality with technology.

(If he's going to weasel out of this with a cheap act, he'll need to make it look good. In stage magic terms, this is an escape artist's trick. Escaping the box before it explodes is all well and good, but the audience won't be satisfied if he's just standing there in some other place.)

"He's nearby."

"?"

"Neoka Norito is somewhere around here!! Pointing at Anti-Skill and accusing them will be most effective in front of a large audience, so he'll show off the injuries he gave himself and use that as a shield to bludgeon them with by blaming it on their attack!!"

In that case, they more or less already had the answer.

If Neoka's intention was to influence people's view of the situation to reverse the positions of attacker and victim, get the people on his side, and throw the investigation into confusion, then he would want people to see Anti-Skill entirely unscathed while was all bloody. That meant he would have to harm himself. But could an amateur really do that to himself? He would not want to accidentally lose too much blood and Anti-Skill and the doctors were experts at viewing injuries. They would probably see right through a self-inflicted wound only meant as an act.

So what would he want most right now?

The stab wound in Kamijou's side started to throb and make its presence known.

He did not need any special knowledge for this one. He only had to use his own personal experience.

Yes.

"A medical facility," said Kamijou.

He knew he could not wound himself like that as a form of disguise. If he accidentally nicked an important artery or an organ, the wound would quickly grow fatal.

Of course he would be terrified.

He would want to rely on a medical professional.

Neoka was apparently an expert in firefighting and disaster prevention, but this was about his authority as part of the Board of Directors. Just like the chief or superintendent general of the police was not the best police officer, he might not have the actual skills of those fields himself. And even if he did, he would not want to sew up his own wound with the dirty sewing needle and fishing line he had lying around. That could even lead to an infection of some kind. Partial knowledge would lead to fear and he would get someone else's help to make up for the gaps in his knowledge.

So...

"If he is going to injure himself, he'll want a sterile environment and a doctor with all the proper knowledge. *And this needs to be done in absolute secrecy.* That building is a single giant complex, so it's bound to have a clinic, a medical room for treating anyone who falls ill, or..." The boy's eyes stopped on a specific point. "Or at least a first aid kit!! Is the parking garage underground? A surprising number of minor injuries happen there, due to people getting their finger caught in a car door or dropping their luggage on their foot when trying to load it into the trunk, so they might have some

specialized emergency equipment along with the fire extinguisher and AED!"

He began running before he had even finished speaking.

That would not provide the sterile environment, but it may have been worth it to Neoka to have something mobile that he could carry with him or have removed from the scene.

Kamijou ran down the slope and into a concrete space larger than a soccer field.

But.

"Th-there's nothing like that here," said Index while looking all around.

There was a fire extinguisher at the base of a concrete pillar and an AED in a metal box on the wall, but...

"There's no first aid kit. Could he have already taken it away?"

"..."

Had Kamijou misread this?

It was possible someone as absurdly rich as Neoka would have a personal doctor who never left his side, or he could feel even more desperate than they thought and had decided to injure himself despite the risk.

But Mikoto looked up above.

"It might not be a first aid kit."

"What do you mean?"

"I said the roof is like a helicopter carrier, didn't I!? So he can have an air ambulance parked up there. Some of those have more equipment than the average medical room!!"

Why had he started by blowing up the very top floors?

Because that would destroy the elevator pulleys, making the elevators unusable and delaying Anti-Skill's arrival. Meanwhile, he could appropriately injure himself in the air ambulance and then have the helicopter itself fly away. That would of course require altering the airport's control data. That might sound absurd, but he would not have let Maidono Hoshimi make such a mess of things if he ever thought he could be captured. He definitely had what it took to pull this off. Once the exhausted Anti-Skill officers had finished running up 70 flights of stairs, he could point at them while all bloody and say the magic words: *How could you do this!? These injuries are your fault!*

"He definitely gave this some thought, but not enough," said Mikoto while kicking down an elevator door in the parking garage.

The elevator would never arrive no matter how much they pressed the button, but that was no problem for her. She gave a belligerent smile while staring up the elevator shaft that looked like a gaping mouth of hell leading high into the sky.

"Did he forget we're in Academy City? I can tear through this puny barrier like it's nothing!!"

Yes.

She was Academy City's #3 Level 5, the Railgun. Magnetism was only a secondary effect of her power, yet it was all she needed to cling to the skyscraper's wall.

Part 12

It took no time at all.

The elevator shaft was surrounded by thick steel beams on all sides, so it may

have been easier to climb with magnetism than the reinforced concrete walls. The elevators would have fallen after their wires were snapped, but they fortunately did not get in the way. There was apparently a boiler room and other facilities located below the parking garage.

Misaka Mikoto held Kamijou and Index while jumping straight up like this was some kind of ride.

The building was about 70 stories tall, but it took them less than a minute.

There was no need to destroy the elevator door on the roof. The explosion had already bent everything outwards along with the gearbox.

What they found outside was apparently a heliport.

Gray asphalt covered an area just as large as the parking garage – which meant the size of a soccer field – and white lines were drawn all over it in a pattern that an amateur had trouble making any sense of. Mikoto had said it functioned like a helicopter carrier, but it almost looked like a runway to Kamijou.

She had said he would have multiple VTOL crafts and there were in fact three fighter craft, like something out of a movie, stopped on the edge of the roof. However, the white lines formed large boxes around them, so were those hangar elevators like the ones on an aircraft carrier?

Mikoto had said they could be remotely controlled and their pure firepower was frightening too.

However, Kamijou's group needed to focus on something else first.

Those gray military craft were accompanied by a pure white one. This helicopter was a lot larger than the four-passenger ones used by TV crews. If the four-passenger ones were analogous to an ordinary car, this was more like a van.

It was an air ambulance.

“Misaka!!”

“That’s a crucial piece of evidence, so let’s be clever about how we retrieve it.”

With a dull zap, black smoke burst from the base of the main rotor. She had apparently messed with the rotation rate to damage the engine. If it could not fly on its own, it could not be removed from the scene. And with the bloody medical devices remaining, the Director’s cheap act would be far less convincing.

Kamijou’s group cut across the aircraft carrier flight deck of a rooftop and approached the white helicopter.

The sliding door was open and someone awaited them with a smile.

“Perhaps I should have had the injury done before the explosion. But I would have had no explanation for the injury if the explosion failed to trigger, so I wanted to make sure it worked first.”

“You’re Neoka Norito, aren’t you?”

“That’s Director Neoka Norito to you. I am on the Board, after all.”

The man’s face twisted into a smile while seated on a stretcher and with his wrist held out toward the female doctor next to him.

This was the same person in the photos on the suspiciously clean social media page.

Did that mean he had not edited the photos or used a body double?

He looked maybe 30. Now that they were face to face with him, he definitely felt like an adult, but he seemed more like a friendly homeroom teacher than a principal or vice principal. He wore a fancy suit and had the look of a young entrepreneur who had only ever known success from the moment he was born.

He also seemed like the type to be a twisted sort of clean freak. Maybe it was due to seeing what happened with Last Order and Maidono, but he did not

look like someone who would dedicate himself to charity and volunteer work.

Mikoto had likened him to the powerful people of old.

Or as someone who wished he could live in those older times.

The elderly all said the younger generations had it too easy, but those comments had come to a stop at some point. This man was one of the powerful from that newer era.

Electricity crackled and high-voltage sparks scattered from Misaka Mikoto's bangs.

"Anyway, I'm glad we got here before you could injure yourself. You're aware this is checkmate, right? Even if you blew up your room with real Anti-Skill equipment you illicitly acquired, you can never brush aside the suspicions with this air ambulance here. No matter how clever a statement you write for the press conference, you'll have a hard time selling that you got first aid done *in an air ambulance that just so happened to be waiting on the roof before the explosion.*"

"Probably so." He gave a snort of laughter. "Which means I'll have to kill all of you. You could have avoided this fate if you hadn't spied on me here. On the other hand, some dead kids to blame on Anti-Skill is sure to get the bored common folk on my side all the easier."

"How do you propose doing that? I'm the #3, so I hope you don't think firing a bullet at me is going to accomplish anything."

Neoka seemed stunned she would even suggest such a thing.

Still seated on the stretcher, he tilted his head and answered her.

"I mean, I could always do this."

Another fearsome explosion erupted out, but this one was pinpoint targeted at Misaka Mikoto.

It happened so suddenly she could not possibly have reacted in time.

If Index had not tugged on her arm with both hands and if Kamijou had not held his right palm out front, her body might have been obliterated beyond recognition.

But what was that?

What just happened!?

He was not holding any kind of weapon, but something had definitely happened.

“Stand back!!”

This time, Misaka Mikoto placed an arcade coin on her right thumb.

This was the Railgun.

Academy City’s #3 Level 5 was named for it. It could not be more obvious what would happen if a mass of metal fired at thrice the speed of sound hit a flesh-and-blood human, but that basic fact may have slipped the girl’s mind. She had decided the person in front of her was dangerous enough to warrant it.

And she was not exactly wrong.

If not for the fact that even this was not enough.

“Construct a fictional port between Au and Cu, aka Path 14.”

With a high-pitched ringing in their ears, *the world blurred*.

The elite from the Board of Directors was a moment faster due to his lack of hesitation.

He spoke only a single word.

“*Feuerel*.”

This time.

This time something really did fly in at a supersonic speed and ravaged Misaka Mikoto's soul.

Her weapon was eliminated.

What had that voice command activated? The arcade coin on her thumb was meant to produce great firepower, but something massive struck it and it melted into the color orange.

The attack shot right by her cheek and scorched the air.

Kamijou had been watching from the side, but he had not managed to see what it was that had flown by.

(What?)

Neoka.

Neoka Norito had yet to even get up from the stretcher.

(What just happened!? The Directors are the elite few adults who control Academy City, so is he hiding some kind of technology that can overpower us!?)

“Now, then.”

The man slowly stood from the stretcher. He removed his expensive-looking watch, placed it aside, and put on the jacket the doctor handed him.

No one could do a thing.

The monster took a casual step down from the air ambulance.

With a single word, he had taken control of something unseen and bent something inviolable to his will. He seemed to be saying he would play by the childish rules of the children like Kamijou until he had taught them a lesson using this violence.

What was his science?

Kamijou could not figure out what this man's science was.

"What did you do?"

He had been caught off guard with his right hand still held out in front.

Not only had the mystery attack come as a surprise, but *his hand had negated the first one*. So whatever this was, Neoka Norito was using a supernatural power.

Why had Maidono Hoshimi remained struggling in the darkness when she had so much power?

He felt like he understood now. At the very least, Neoka Norito would not be bitten by his own pet dog. He would be able to overpower a Level 5 by force and put a chain around their neck!

The young Director shrugged.

"You come rushing at me ready to attack and then you act all offended when I fight back?"

"What did you do!? *I thought Academy City's esper development only worked on children!!*"

Academy City's monsters could be divided into two general categories.

The first was the children with powerful abilities, such as Accelerator and Misaka Mikoto.

The second was the adults who found military uses of next-gen tech said to be more than 30 years ahead the rest of the world.

But this man was different. Did he not belong to either category!?

"It is simple," he said while loosely spreading his arms like he was welcoming his enemies. "*Feuerel Construct a fictional port between Au and*

Cu, aka Path 14.”

“!?”

Immense flames appeared out of thin air before spiraling and gathering around the man’s right hand.

Was this an esper power?

“No!”

“*Wasserel*. Construct a fictional port between Hg and Ag, aka Path 20.”

It was his left hand this time. The water must have been compressed quite a bit to increase its pressure because it produced a straining sound like an old rope as it gathered around his hand.

This was bad.

Kamijou had no idea what this was, but he could tell it was bad news!!

Then the man made a casual motion. He brought his two hands together in front of his chest. Almost like he was clapping just the once to gather attention from his listeners.

And he made an announcement.

“The two are different, but their essence is equal. So let us combine them to arrive at a new solution.”

That was all it took for a fearsome water vapor explosion to erupt and to cover the entire rooftop in steam hot enough to boil a chicken white in three seconds.

The VTOL fighters stopped on the edge of the roof creaked and the air ambulance he had left shortly before rolled onto its side. The steam must have passed the 100-degree barrier several times over, so if someone contacted that without any kind of special gear, it would be just like being thrown into a steam oven.

“Windel. Construct a fictional port between Pb and Fe, aka Path 8.”

A purifying wind whirled around to allow Neoka Norito to stand in the center of the explosion without batting an eye.

And...

“I see. So this is the Imagine Breaker I have heard so much about.”

“!!”

Kamijou clenched his teeth while holding out his right hand to protect the two girls.

This was too much.

An adult using an esper power was breaking the rules in the first place, but he had wielded fire, water, and wind, one after another. One power per person was an absolute rule, but had he also broken through that barrier *while he was at it* to become a theoretically impossible Dual Skill!? Was his power so great he had to split it up using that voice control!?

“Is this really so surprising?” The one who had broken through the barriers made it sound so simple as he smiled and whispered. “This is no more than Minimum Collision Theory.”

“?”

“For example, exposing a nitrogen atom to powerful alpha rays will cause the number of protons to collapse. As a result, you will have an entirely different element, such as hydrogen or oxygen. There is no need to rely on a Personal Reality to manipulate the visible phenomena.”

Then was this a product of science?

Had it not left that category?

Kamijou was growing ever more confused, but...

“No matter how complex the world is, you only have to simplify things by cutting them down to a manageable size. Just like elementary particles are made up of only so many different particles. And just like light only has two states – a wave or a particle. I have merely simplified things in a way that allows me to view the composition of all things from a different angle. Using Minimum Collision Theory.”

(No.)

That sounded like an explanation, but it was not.

The example about nitrogen did not connect to what he had demonstrated. He was forcibly stuffing it all into one big box, but was that categorization really accurate?

Wasn’t he stuffing something entirely different into the wrong box?

Besides, Academy City’s esper powers were a way of forcibly shifting how one observed reality by viewing the world before your eyes with a set of values that only existed in your own head.

That might sound all-powerful, but it only provided the one filter. So an esper who controlled fire would not have a filter for water and an esper who controlled water would not have a filter for wind. Trying to carry both filters at once would only reduce the extent of the “shift” in your observations and you would fail to produce either power.

That was not something you could switch between using a voice activated command. Your Personal Reality would stick with you for your entire life. It was hard to control even for the esper it belonged to, so a lot of kids had trouble developing theirs well. Not even the #5’s strongest psychological powers would be able to freely switch this back and forth. If she could do that, she would likely have been known by a different esper name. Because if she had succeeded in that, she could have developed more than just those psychological powers.

In other words...

“You aren’t using a Personal Reality?”

“I believe I already said so.”

“I know that! That ‘box’ you’ve created for yourself isn’t the point!!”

The box was clearly mistaken.

But was the thing in that box not even an esper power?

An adult was using the supernatural powers that only kids should be able to use. He was also ignoring the restriction of one power per person and freely switching between different types of power.

Or was that not what was happening?

Was he not even an Academy City esper? Then the restrictions against adults and multiple powers no longer mattered. But in that case, why was he dividing things up by chemical element to manipulate whatever classical element he wanted?

Minimum Collision Theory.

What was this thing he had given that mistaken label?

“Hydrogen♪ And helium♪”

Kamijou heard a singing voice. It belonged to the girl who should have been an outsider in this situation – the white nun. And was she simply repeating that science song she had heard someone singing in the city’s crowds?

Or...

“Au, Cu, Hg, Ag, Pb, Fe.”

Even those tiny elements could form bonds.

And in this case, those bonds were formed with the knowledge in all of that girl’s grimoires.

“Gold is the sun, copper is the planet Venus, mercury is the planet Mercury, and silver is the moon. No, this process isn’t manipulating metals. 6, 7, 8, 9, 3, 5. Are they being assigned to the 10 Sephirah to reach the 22 channels linking them and thus to control the tree?”

All thought vanished from Kamijou’s mind.

But it made sense.

That would explain the many oddities seen here. It explained how an adult like Neoka could use a supernatural power and why he had ignored Academy City’s hierarchy by overwhelming Misaka Mikoto.

But this should have been taboo.

The people in this city could not be using that kind of thing.

That had to have been part of the rules Kamijou had never actually seen for himself. But that agreement had been between Aleister Crowley and Lola Stuart, both of whom were gone now.

So could it be?

Could it be?

Could it be?

“*Are you using magic!?*”

Part 13

The situation could hardly be worse.

But Kamijou Touma had a reason to not back down here.

Before coming here, he had exchanged a few words with someone.

“Um, will you hear what Misaka has to say?”

It was such a ridiculous idea.

Some clone girls had once appeared before him. When he had learned of the experiment meant to kill all 20,000 of them, he had been overcome with rage and risked his life to stop it. But even he had only caught the occasional glimpse of Academy City’s dark side, so he did not have a feel for what that world was actually like.

What did it mean to crush that and get rid of it altogether?

“Can Misaka ask something of you?”

But that may not have been what really mattered.

A girl had been captured, knocked unconscious, and then bound tightly enough to leave bruises, but Last Order had made sure to say this before rubbing at her raw skin, trembling in fear, or sobbing.

So he did not need two options here.

The one was enough.

“Will you fight to save him? asks Misaka as Misaka begs you!”

Kamijou did not know how this would save that boy.

Even if he did defeat this asshole on the Board of Directors, Accelerator would remain behind bars of his own free will. Maybe that was the right thing to do, but that would never be a happy life. Kamijou could not help but wonder if Accelerator would not have had to make that choice if just one person out there had seriously tried to stop him.

But.

Even so.

He did not know if that was really true, so he did not want to reject the other boy's decision too quickly. This was the path someone had found for themselves, so he would feel wrong trampling it underfoot. Maybe Accelerator would have reconsidered if someone had stopped him, but some futures could fail to come about if he had stopped.

Kamijou could tell Accelerator knew this would not be an easy thing but was prepared to do it regardless.

Then there could be no exceptions.

Just as Kamijou and Index had their path to walk, Accelerator and Last Order had their path to walk.

It would not be easy, but there was no need to overthink it.

He only had to place the scales in front of him.

Would he work up his courage here and live the rest of his life with his head held high with pride, or would he choose safety here and live the rest of his life hunched over in shame?

Which would he prefer?

The answer was obvious.

"So, uh, how should I put this? Yeah, I know what to do here."

So the boy smiled and answered.

Because he had wanted to be someone who could smile at times like this.

"We'll head over to the villain's place and beat the snot out of him, so you wait for the good news."



Page 204

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He could not fail to make good on that promise.

Great political power and concrete military might could allow people to trample on all sorts of rules.

But true human strength was found elsewhere.

So Kamijou could do this.

The willpower of no more than a boy could keep that other human on the path they had chosen.

He knew what Academy City's #1 and the new Board Chairman wanted.

It was time to protect Accelerator's dream.

Between the Lines 4

Academy City's Board of Directors had 12 members below the Board Chairman at the top.

They each had their own specialty field and were constantly trying to muscle in on each other's territory. The complex and antagonistic structure they formed created an untold history of developing new weapons and new technologies that were used above and below the board. And the weapons mentioned here need not be simple blades or firearms. For those old men and women fighting for a larger slice of the pie in that adult world, justice and philanthropy were no more than disposable bullets.

“Good grief. Looks like one idiot has pushed up above the rest.”

A high school girl was whispering in the shadows.

She was not one of the Directors herself. She was the brain who worked below one of those old men.

“A former rescue squad elite, huh? I don’t know where he took such a wrong turn, but I bet he’s a lot more athletic than he looks.”

It had been lost in the confusion of Accelerator butting in as the new Board Chairman, but the old man she worked for had mentioned a “youth” trying to steal the initiative during former Board Chairman Aleister’s absence.

Had he made that bold move because he had a reason forcing him to do so?

Rescue work was taxing and it was even more difficult within Academy City. An unbelievable number of risks could be found in this densely-populated metropolis: chemicals, bacteria, electromagnetic waves, strange next-generation technology, and esper powers gone berserk.

Of course, none of that ever made it to the news. Academy City only stayed in business as long as it remained an ideal city where parents felt comfortable leaving their children. No one would sign on the dotted line if the contract blatantly stated that the city was under no liability if the children under their care ended up dead.

Someone had continually braved those hidden dangers.

So how had he wandered over to the world of money and politics, risen above so many other monsters, taken one of the 12 seats on the Board, and grown so fixated on the dark side where so many people sank into the depths of tragedy? As a fellow Director, Kaizumi had the same authority as that man, but even his computer was not enough to search out the answers to those questions.

“Now, then,” sighed the high school girl. “I need to write up a report on the pros and cons of intervening and of not intervening here. Although as usual, it looks like neither one is quite the right answer. Either option comes with pain, so it really comes down to choosing which one you like more.”

The new Board Chairman wished to eliminate the dark side.

When the rest of the Board heard that, they had only checked to see how it would benefit or hurt them personally. Of course, not a single one of those 12 VIPs had no involvement in the dark side. The old woman named Oyafune Monaka was the gentlest of the bunch and avoided underhanded dealings, but even she had stopped at simply turning a blind eye to the dark side as a whole. But since they all dealt with the dark side differently, the damage they would take from its elimination differed.

Those who would take little damage would welcome it, those who would take a lot of damage would oppose it.

They did not particularly care if the attempt to eliminate the dark side actually succeeded or not. They were only interested in attacking the other Directors when that great wave shook them.

In that sense, Neoka Norito had been the biggest target.

He had sided too much with the dark side in his pursuit of personal interest. If this attempt destroyed that economic foundation out from under him, he would have trouble spending the money needed to maintain his social standing. And once he was weakened, the rest of the Board would attack. They would bite into him, tear him apart, and devour him. There was no camaraderie between those 12 Directors.

“Those 12 forces are too busy attacking each other to stop the attempted elimination of the dark side.”

This was always going to be a hard fight for Neoka Norito’s side.

He must have thought this was his only option if he was to recover. Even if it was a baseless theory and he had not been dumb enough to think it would actually work.

“Then again, I never expected him to join forces with an organization outside the city. That qualifies as inviting in a foreign threat, so I wonder how he intends to end this.”

Neoka Norito was using a type of technology this girl and Kaizumi did not

fully understand.

But it was not something he had exclusive ownership of.

Things had been in motion for a bit now.

(Interesting events have a way of falling on Christmas Eve, don't they?)

A baked good and some strong coffee sat on the side table next to the leather sofa she was using.

"A custom donut decorated with a lucky color based on your birthday, blood type, and such, huh?"

Normally, that sort of occult nonsense would find no place for itself in this city.

But it had instead become a huge fad.

There was no obvious sign of companies pushing it, like there was with the idea of giving people chocolate on Valentine's day, yet something had grown twisted here.

Academy City was generally atheistic and tried to resolve all things with scientific equations, but maybe it was not too surprising that something occult had found its way in on this day.

The donut itself was not a conspiracy.

If anything, it was more like a litmus test meant to measure people's hearts.

If a silly product like this could spread so rapidly, then it was also possible for the people of this city to reach for something else they normally never would have.

People's hearts could be swayed.

Like when they viewed a solemn religious painting or cathedral, or when they saw a giant meteor falling from the sky. Only believing your own eyes was

second-rate as a defensive tactic. You might as well be telling people you would be easily taken in by the occult as long as it was shown to you in a visible form.

In other words...

“Gathering local troops via the internet? What a nasty age we live in.”

The girl hit a key on a special computer the size of a drawing board and thus too large to call a laptop. She displayed something on an LCD screen the size of an average TV.

“R&C Occultics. A new giant IT company that specializes in magic, huh?”

Chapter 4: Interaction with Another World, the Starting Point — “R&C OCCULTICS Co.Ltd.”

Part 1

Magic was a supernatural thing that should have been hidden from the world at large and carefully managed.

But after several large battles, doing so had become difficult.

And then a new disaster struck.

“Wouldn’t you like to know your compatibility with your crush? Fill in this online form with your names, birthdates, and your troubles and a professional fortunetelling group will accurately calculate your fortune together.”

It had appeared on the internet.

No one knew in what country its headquarters were located.

Nationality could be a vague matter when it came to giant IT companies, but in this case, no one could even explain where such an enormous company with so much capital had come from.

“Having trouble finding a new home? Then why not have the land or building assessed for you? Send us plans of the model room and a professional

appraiser will calculate out your quality of life there based on the cardinal directions and ley lines.”

It had likely begun as a fortunetelling site.

They had gathered countless people’s personal information in the name of helping them with their troubles. And in the case of romantic compatibility, they would receive private information on a third party without their consent, so it was a very efficient method. The collection of people commonly known as the magic side was powerless to stop the giant corporation as it spread like an amoeba.

After all, they had no experience with someone so loudly announcing the existence of magic but also remaining entirely hidden.

And while the science side was in control of the internet, they could not properly detect the threat. A site producing firearms or poisons would be one thing, but they saw no issue with a fortunetelling site that sold occult goods.

So they did nothing about it.

R&C Occultics was growing by the second and it ignored the barriers between all things while setting its sights on the entire world.

“Bad luck is no reason for concern. With the right information, you can ward off bad luck. Ordinary herbs are all you need to purify that bad energy! Click the following link for a witch’s potion that only requires plants available for purchase at any florist and a siphon coffee maker.”

For example, in Academy City.

Inside and outside, science and magic. The attack used the internet to ignore those divisions altogether.

How many people had used their phones on this one day?

While they were smiling and heading out to meet someone, what was it they were actually viewing on that small screen?

“Tip: Answer just 10 simple yes-or-no questions and, like magic, this AI form will accurately pinpoint what is troubling you and find the perfect witch’s potion you need right now. Help us teach the AI with your input!”

That unique environment was already rooted in the supernatural and there were obvious power differentials between people. The powerless espers and even some of the adults would have a complex about that. Students made up 80% of the population and adults only 20%. Plus, the children had powers much greater than any “mere adult”. Not all of those adults would have accepted that state of affairs.

If only they too had some kind of power.

And once they started thinking that way, what if they came in contact with R&C Occultics...and thus with magic?

“Magic is nothing difficult. With a third-generation 3D printer that can do colors, you can create your own spiritual item – such as a Symbolic Weapon for one of the four elements – at the click of a button. A list of products and blueprint data for specific models of printer can be found [here!](#)”

A great number of people would have found this information.

There were no statistics on how many of those would actually act on it.

“Basic breathing and meditation techniques can be easily learned with simple training sessions that only take 10 minutes a day. The lecture videos are divided out by skill level and can all be found [here](#) for free! You can simply watch for now, but make sure to consider purchasing any equipment you deem necessary.”

But Academy City’s espers were different from normal people, so it was not hard to imagine there would be devastating malfunctions and side effects if they attempted to use a different and unknown form of the supernatural. Those who failed to consider that simple fact may have already collapsed in a pool of blood in their dorm rooms.

And what about the adults?

They were still normal people, so what would happen when they used the supernatural for the first time?

“If you are dissatisfied with anything about your life, why not take matters into your own hands?”

True chaos was beginning.

The division between magic and science was no longer the obvious one between inside and outside Academy City.

It was now the adults and the children.

The divisions of hostility took a marble pattern within a single city.

And it was had all the work of some unknown figure who had to be laughing somewhere out there.

“When the world cheats you, cheat right back. R&C Occultics will supply you with true magic to support your efforts to achieve a better life!!”

Part 2

Flames roared as they consumed oxygen.

“*Feuerel*. Construct a fictional port between Au and Cu, aka Path 14.”

“Damn you!”

Kamijou obliterated the thrown fireball with his right hand, but that was not Director Neoka Norito’s only weapon.

“Tch!!”

Mikoto clicked her tongue and raised her hand, but not toward Neoka himself.

She messed with one of the VTOL fighters stopped elsewhere on the rooftop and used the main flaps and the jet engine to forcibly turn it around without a specialized towing vehicle. Then she made a horizontal sweep with the 20mm autocannon installed on the fighter craft.

However, the man in a fancy suit still did not bat an eye.

“*Erdeel*. Construct a fictional port between Sn and Fe, aka Path 9.”

The ground was as flat as an aircraft carrier flight deck, but it suddenly swelled up and a thick rock shield appeared.

He had now used fire, water, wind, and earth.

“You’ve got as many options as a video game, don’t you!?”

“Who said I am limited to those four? *Schmetterlingel* Construct a fictional port between Au and Hg, aka Path 16.”

A swarm of glowing butterflies appeared out of thin air. Unlike before, they could not even guess what kind of attack this was. Were their wings as sharp as razors, did they scatter toxic scales, or did the patterns on their wings confuse the eye and knock you out?

The swarm took the form of a torrent as they flew toward the VTOL craft Mikoto had hijacked and swallowed it up. The machine visibly rusted over, corroded, lost its shape, and exploded. And after that detour, the butterflies flew toward Kamijou’s group once more.

What did they actually do?

There was no need to figure it out. Mikoto repeatedly launched lightning spears from her bangs, realized those only slipped unnaturally through the swarm without any effect, and then pulled an arcade coin from her skirt pocket.

Whatever these things were, they could affect metal badly enough to eat into and destroy a fighter craft.

She flicked the coin up with her thumb and then unleashed a Railgun that traveled at thrice the speed of sound, scorched the air, and destroyed everything in its path. The glowing torrent of butterflies was blown away and eradicated.

But...

“How?” Kamijou gulped and unintentionally raised his voice while trembling in fear. “How did you get this!?”

“I thought a high schooler would be more up to date on the latest trends. You can access this from anywhere now. Although I will admit I was the one who gave it a little push by having my cracking servers make enough parallel posts to bring it to the top of the Japanese language trending lists.”

Kamijou was flabbergasted.

The terms this man was using were something even an amateur like him could understand.

“*Anyone can do this now.*”

“No way.”

It couldn’t be.

This was not something he had found in an ancient library or deep in some ruins.

“*The tides are turning.*”

“Please tell me you’re joking!! This can’t be true!!”

This was worse than leaving your bankbook out on the roadside. Was he saying this kind of thing had been put out there where anyone could see it!?

“This began when my automatic investment algorithm detected signs of *something interesting brewing*, but if I claimed it as my own, it would be too easy to trace it back to me. So I spread it around as a form of camouflage. Just like it is much ‘safer’ to use an ordinary mass-produced knife than a fearsome gun brought in from overseas. Ubiquity is excellent at throwing off pursuit.”

Index was focused on a different aspect of this.

If Neoka Norito really was using magic, then she would know where to look much better than Kamijou Touma or Misaka Mikoto.

“Exodus?” She was Index Librorum Prohibitorum, the grimoire library who had memorized at least 103,001 grimoires, and she opened her mouth to reveal it all. “No, this isn’t even a sanctifying vocalization. Are you simply adding ‘el’ onto the end of random German words to create a random angel each time you need one!?”

“Please, call it Minimum Collision Theory.”

“But!!”

“I do not particularly care if that is only a way to focus your mind properly, or if something occult is actually in the works. I only care that I have a technique that works and that I can use to escape this situation.”

There was no hesitation in the man.

Yet even Academy City espers were always aware on some level of the possibility that they could lose control of their powers. This was proof that he viewed his power differently. He had the fearlessness of a baby who had never touched a hot tea kettle before.

Had he never considered that he would do more than just burn his hand if this continued?

“I agree that it is a silly-sounding method, but history has apparently proven it effective. In a time when angel worship was heating up to the point of

ignoring the Son of God, people apparently crudely created all sorts of angels never once seen in the Bible. And it was all ended by...was it Pope Zachary?"

They all heard something akin to a clockwork contraption.

"What is that?" groaned Misaka Mikoto like she was having a nightmare.

The devices that left his sleeves were a lot like assassination handguns. The double-barreled handguns were the size of cards, so they could easily be overlooked while hidden in the palm. These were magical tools known as spiritual items. In place of steel barrels, they had glass containers reminiscent of vacuum tubes, each with a girl smaller than his index finger enclosed within. With two guns and two barrels per gun, there were four such girls in all.

And those mystical girls had halos over their heads.

These guns weaponized the supernatural.

Had he taken inspiration from Maidono Hoshimi, or had he been the one to teach her to control her power like that?

"*Lichtel*. Construct a fictional port between Pb and Au, aka Path 7."

His whisper brought a clear change to one of the glass containers. The hair, clothing, and halo of the girl in the sealed space changed in response to the man's voice.

They became a glowing white light.

"Here it comes, Touma!!"

"If you think you can respond in time to stop light, then just try it."

The man smiled and then the vacuum tube girl came apart.

She transformed into a massive amount of light that was unleashed from the clear muzzle.

And the instant it touched the air outside the glass tube, a tremendous attack shot straight forward.

Part 3

Neoka Norito was on Academy City's Board of Directors.

Yet once he realized he could not win if he remained inside the science side, he had reached for the magic found in the outside world.

Such a horrific example of cheating.

But in that case, he could hardly complain if Kamijou cheated in his own way.



“Othinus!!”

“I thought you’d never call, human.”

A blonde girl of only 15cm popped out from within Kamijou’s jacket. She wore a black witch’s hat and a distinctive eyepatch. She wore a thick cape that covered a lot of her body, but the outfit below was as revealing as a swimsuit.

She was a Norse god, albeit a downsized one.

She sat on the boy’s right shoulder and then kicked that shoulder with her slender leg.

That slight stimulation shifted the position of his outstretched right hand.

As a result, his palm accurately caught the warship-class beam weapon that could accurately shoot down even ballistic missiles. Whatever it might be, magic was magic, so his Imagine Breaker could instantly negate it upon contact.

“Kh.”

Neoka did something with his fingers and a smoothly curved mass appeared within the vacuum tube that had lost its master. It took the form of a girl who could be dyed in any color.

“That is severely lacking in inspiration,” spat the small girl haughtily crossing her arms. “You have free use of the supernatural at your fingertips and all you do is recreate a warship weapon that can be created with machines easily enough? Your magic is weeping. But what else should I expect from someone without a tragedy warranting engraving a magic name in their heart?”

“*Explosionel*. Construct a fictional port between Fe and Au, aka Path 12.”

“How is that different from Feuerel?”

Othinus actually sounded exasperated now.

But Neoka did not aim this at Kamijou's group. The girl became a mass of red, unraveled in the air, and was fired on the ground nowhere near them before triggering an intense explosion.

Othinus did not bat an eye.

"This is a simple adaptation of a sanctifying vocalization. A familiar and tangible metal is used to envision an invisible Sephirah and, much like a woodpecker, an extra 'nest' is embedded in the pathways between the tree's spheres in order to alter the rules of the world. The Sephiroth are guarded by the angels, so is creating a fictional angel supposed to create a fictional sphere? I see. Fair enough. That is very much the kind of spell I can imagine a puny human coming up with. A truly hardheaded and boring type of magic that traps your infinite imagination in the realistic frameworks of metals or elements."

While Kamijou Touma's vision was blocked by the flames and smoke, gravity shifted.

"Othinus, what was that exp-whatever it was!?"

"Explosion. It's pronounced almost identically to the English, you failing student."

"Hey, I still might not be held back!!"

He had assumed it was some kind of gravity magic, but apparently not.

The helicopter carrier flight deck of a rooftop must have failed to survive the explosion and it was now tilting while falling apart.

He heard two familiar girl's voices from beyond the smoke.

But he could not reach them.

"Touma!"

"Wait, you idiot! Do you *want* to fall!?"

Or rather, he had his hands full with himself.

He could not keep his footing as the rooftop rapidly tilted and he started slipping down like it was a slide. There was nothing to grab onto with his hands either.

“Dammit!!”

“That foolish villain is surprisingly cautious,” casually stated Othinus from his shoulder. “Eliminating any unknown elements took precedence for him, so he decided to split us up from the grimoire library and Academy City Level 5.”

He slid right off the edge of the skyscraper, but fortunately, he was not thrown out into the empty air. The next floor down jutted out a lot, so he fell into the garden there. The garden was larger than a tennis court, but Neoka’s explosion had left it unrecognizable. This place seemed like it might collapse too.

And there was someone else there.

Neoka Norito had also slid off the rooftop.

“What is that?”

This seemed to be an honest question.

As a member of the Board of Directors and a magician, he was a huge cheater, but now he had encountered something he did not understand.

Which was why he had focused his attacks on it to separate it from the others.

While keeping the two assassination handguns at the ready, he glanced down at the tiny girls loaded in the glass barrels.

“I’ve never heard of anything like that. It doesn’t appear to be one of the *filaments* I have in the flasks here.”

“This is what you get when a fool tries to use magic without knowing what

he's doing." Othinus sighed in complete and utter exasperation. "How could you take step one into the world of magic without knowing of the Magic Gods who act as the final goal there? Yes, yes. *I'm not getting into the details here, so if you want to know about this god here, you need only look back into the vast annals of history.*"

"Othinus, I want to punch this asshole out right this instant and I want your help doing it."

"Of course you do. If you couldn't deal with a smalltime guy like this, you would make a mighty poor understander for a god, human."

She spat out those words, but there was a look of enjoyment in the eyes hidden below her witch's hat.

Her analyses were not quite the same as Index's.

Hers were more aggressive and had a way of maliciously tearing down their opponent's dignity.

"There is nothing original about his magic. It's really just rehashed Golden stuff. To efficiently control the colorless and formless angelic power known as Telesma, the world's largest magic cabal *invented and split apart* the names of 72 angels. What he is using here comes from a verse in the Old Testament book of Exodus. Magicians before the Dawn would extract the text they wanted from Exodus and create temporary angels by adding 'el' or 'yah' to the end. That is why you will hear a bunch of unfamiliar names in the lists of the 12 angels of the zodiac or of the archangels. This fool's spell is no more than an adaptation of that. Angel names are simply a way of using high-level calculations to extract specific meaning from the full text, but adding a slight modification to the end of the word isn't going to give you the full power of that thing."

"As long as it gives me the power I wish, I do not care about the rest. Format is of no matter to me."

"Is that supposed to be a reference to 19th century Hermeticism, you uneducated fool? Hermeticism was an attempt to explain all of the world's

mythologies and religions with a single combined theory based on Western ideas, but it was a pathetic attempt that forced their own reasoning onto any words or numbers they failed to understand. The very fact that a god is currently standing before you as an independent entity should be enough to show you that Hermeticism alone cannot explain everything in the world. Or do you intend to continue using that world map that is hopelessly inaccurate when it comes to anything outside of the conception of Europe invented by the Romans? Keep in mind that magic is always advancing.”

“Schneide-”

“Too slow.”

In the middle of their conversation, a high-pitched shattering sound shook the air.

The Director had supposedly used his left gun in a surprise attack, but without even uncrossing her legs, Othinus had struck Kamijou’s shoulder with her tiny heel. That stimulation shifted the position of his right hand just enough for him to shatter a steel blade before he even knew what had happened.

As soon as a lead-colored girl’s head stuck out of the vacuum tube, she shattered and transformed into countless razor blades that scattered outwards like a shotgun. Kamijou only realized what had happened after the fact.

“Your weakness is your limited stock of four and the requirement to state their name when you are switching from one to another. The attack we already know is easily dealt with and the movement of your mouth is enough to warn us of a new attack incoming. So no matter how you use your spell, *it will never function as a surprise attack.*”

“...”

“When fools feel cornered, they run to god instead of trying to solve things themselves. I imagine you were that type, but it ends here. A cheaply-bought power will only provide a cheap resolution. What kind of life did you live before this? You should have found some deeper lessons there.”

Othinus said it all while crossing her slender legs on Kamijou's shoulder.

And she made sure her haughty words tore into the core of the man.

“Why did you choose to resort to magic, former rescue squad member?”

Now it was the boy who felt left behind by it all.

“Rescue...squad?”

“Yes, human. I can tell from the distinctive way he fires those guns. They look like assassination weapons, but the way he always aims a little high is a habit picked up from firing rescue guns that launch ropes. He is used to aiming toward someone but not at them because he must send a gas balloon into the water near the panicked drowning person so they can grab onto it before running out of strength. By aiming too high, even a missed shot will leave the balloon’s rope nearby, so the drowning person can either grab onto that when it falls or onto the balloon itself when the rope is reeled back in.”

“Shut the hell up!”

The man’s veneer of politeness had been stripped away.

Neoka Norito was the kind of person who would injure himself and feign being the victim to keep Anti-Skill away.

He had received help from a doctor on that air ambulance, but that did not mean he had no medical knowledge himself.

That knowledge would actually increase the suspicions if he had done it himself, so he had wanted someone else to do it so none of his idiosyncrasies or techniques could be seen in it.

“If you had managed to engrave a proper magic name in your heart, you may have made a decent enough magician, but you screwed it up. Having a righteous goal does not always lead to a righteous conclusion. Choose the wrong methods and an attempt to save someone can kill them instead.”

Silence followed.

There were some territories in which no one was allowed to tread.

Finally, he spoke in a truly quiet voice.

“I did save them.”

From a logical standpoint, speaking here had no meaning. It seemed odd to Kamijou. But since Othinus had managed to draw these words from him with a single attack, they may have lived in a world other than the magic side. This was a man who had discovered magic without knowing the proper route for such things, so Othinus pinpointing his flaws may have helped pull out whatever was jamming the gears.

So he did not resist.

Kamijou had seen a fair number of magicians himself. They would face the world’s cruelties, gnash their teeth at their own powerlessness, and then reach for the most secret of techniques. Normally, people would not reach for the occult unless they experienced something requiring them to choose to beseech god or to fear him. So the life of a magician may not have been a happy one, but they had all found pride in that life.

No matter how much was taken from them and no matter how stormy a life they had lived, they had always carried that pride with them.

Neoka Norito had reached for that power for a much cheaper reason, so searching his own heart here may have been the first real step he had actually taken on that path.

“I saved so many people. From the flames, from factories full of chemical smoke, and from the eye of the storm of sorrow created by their own rampaging esper power. ...And what do you think happened to those people afterwards?”

Kamijou had no way of answering that.

Why couldn’t it be that they lived happily ever after?

Neoka Norito must have believed that to be the case at one point.

But something else had happened.

“They became targets of curiosity.”

This was not at all what Kamijou had expected.

The Director smiled with a sticky look in his eyes and his bizarre guns still aimed.

“If they had evacuated sooner or if they had been more careful, they would not have had to bother the firefighters and the people’s tax money would not have been wasted. Complete strangers criticized them on and on and on and on. ...But they couldn’t have possibly prevented it. Some disasters are truly unpredictable and anyone who happened to be there would end up seeking out an expert for help!! I explained that as one of those experts!! But they couldn’t bear it. They were crushed by a responsibility they never should have had to carry. The people we risked our lives to rescue wasted away and finally ‘disappeared’! And you know I don’t mean that literally, I hope. In Academy City, you are trapped within walls covered in countless lenses, so how can someone disappear!?”

Was the visible or invisible side uglier?

Or was it the area in between? Or was there no distinction between the two in the first place?

Kamijou had occasionally heard mention of the dark side, although he had been fortunate enough not to have been directly taken into it very often.

But Neoka’s argument here changed how he viewed that.

The darkness was not just something to be feared; it was also necessary to gently surround people and give people security and sleep. In this digital society with cameras everywhere, no one could physically disappear, so that darkness was especially necessary in this twisted city.

“The darkness was necessary in this city with nowhere to hide!! There must be a dark space beyond prying eyes where people can soothe their wounded

minds and bodies before returning to the light once more. I won't vouch for all of it and I have no interest in letting the dark side take control of Academy City. But still!! There were people who could only find peace of mind in that stagnation!!"

This city had been designed by Aleister, so it made no sense for a territory to chaotically grow to such a large scale if it was truly unnecessary, meaningless, worthless, and valueless.

It was the gentle quiet that surrounded all injured people regardless of social standing. It was the veil that protected the weak from the harsh artificial lights so rudely trying to bring light to every last nook and cranny. It was *the dark side*. Was the only real problem that some had started using it as a hiding place for wicked research?

This twisted clean freak had targeted innocent Last Order, pushed Maidono Hoshimi onward when she had no choice in the matter, and never done anything to dirty his own hands.

But thinking on it now, that made sense.

Everyone had at least one thing they refused to compromise on.

And this man had never had a way to fight himself.

No matter how much he trained his body, he had never been given a chance to learn techniques he had never before deemed necessary. When he had heard a voice calling for help within the flames or smoke and when he had seen a small hand sinking below the water, he had rushed or dived in no matter where he happened to be. He had physically and mentally trained himself to the limit for that one purpose.

But that was why he had never learned to repel people's malice.

He had lost much due to that.

He had cried, lamented, and raged.

Wanting to change, he had turned in a different direction and become

something that feasted on the city's malice to use it for his own purposes.

He had gone that far to protect the sanctuary of that dark shade.

And when he still felt fear even then, he had reached for further power.

"So I will protect it," declared one of the Directors who stood at the top of the city. "I will protect that bedroom full of gentle darkness where the bright sun cannot reach. I will protect that silent cradle where you will never be woken by an unexpected explosion. I will protect that safety net that catches and saves those who slip through the cracks!! It need only be a small portion of the city, but when people reach a point where they want to disappear from this world, there must be a place where they can take their time and rediscover themselves. And I will break any taboo to protect that dark side. I am even willing to become a demon that does not belong in this city of science!!"

This viewpoint also existed.

There were people who viewed the dark side in that way.

When Kamijou Touma heard it all, he doubted he could understand even a fraction of the anguish this man had gone through. He could not even imagine rescuing people only to see them sink down into the quicksand time and time again.

But.

Even so.

Kamijou Touma did not look away as he spoke.

"Don't give me that crap."

He rejected it.

This man had his reasons for doing all this, so it would be rude if the person here to stop him were still having doubts.

The time had come for Kamijou Touma to stand up to Neoka Norito with his words and his actions.

“You said yourself you’re willing to become a demon.”

“...”

“So while you talk about eliminating tragedy, you knew from the beginning that you were an exception! You knew from the beginning that you would be sacrificing Last Order to protect the dark side and you knew there would always be people who continued to suffer like Maidono!! You wouldn’t be changing anything. You might think you’re controlling the dark side, but *it can’t be that easy!!* You’re already being controlled by it!! And the fact that you’re already creating new tragedies yourself is all the proof anyone needs!!!!”

Kamijou did not know if the dark side really did function in the way this man claimed.

That albino #1 might know better than him.

But Kamijou Touma was the one here right now.

So he had to be the one to stand up to this here. For all his grumbling about misfortune, he was still one of the lucky ones. Because he had never been stained by the dark side, he could take an external view of it now!!

“The dark side might disappear today.”

He had to look the man in the eye.

He had to glare back at him.

He had to trust in the skepticism he felt. The scale of the issue did not change the outcome. What had he seen so far? He could never accept that Director Neoka Norito’s conclusion was the correct one.

“So a Director like you shouldn’t be clinging to the dark side. You should be remaking Academy City so it can protect everyone without the dark side!! I

mean, you aren't even talking about a fundamental solution. This clearly isn't even about the survival of the dark side! It's about creating a world where the people you rescue from the fire and smoke can live happy lives free of suffering!! That might be a crazy dream for a kid like me, but you might be able to do it now that you've worked your way up to the Board of Directors!! Am I wrong!?"

The boy had no money or political power.

It may have been strange that he could even directly stand up to a monster like this.

But...

"Don't run from it, Neoka."

It was one-on-one.

A puny boy who simply lived in the city bared his fangs against one of the Directors who ruled it.

Because he knew he absolutely had to do this here.

"You never should have resorted to violence. And you definitely shouldn't have cheated by relying on magic. What you needed was to put in the honest effort that's unavailable to a brat like me who only has violence in my deck. It might not be dramatic, but you could have made progress, step by step! Then you could have changed things. The invisible power balance of the adults? You could have made it all visible if you had wanted to!! Whether you pulled up those who had fallen or caught those who were going to fall further, at least it wouldn't have been this kind of *safety net that only takes further lives!!*"

"I see," said Neoka while aiming his right gun, but not at Kamijou.

"*Feuerel!!* Construct a fictional port between Au and Cu, aka Path 14!!!!!!"

Something could be heard breaking.

A red girl with a glowing halo unraveled into a mass of light that scorched

the air in a straight line.

But that sound was not the girls Kamijou knew being roasted by the flames. It was the sound of him moving in between and destroying the deadly blast with his right fist.

“Makes you tremble, doesn’t it?” Neoka Norito laughed. “Not with your body, but in your soul!! This is neither scientific nor unscientific. This is what it means to have people you care for targeted. This is what it feels like to witness the moment of a life being taken! There is no logic here. I am not doing this because it is the right thing. *This is all I have*. I cannot even imagine how to rescue people any other way!!”

“Human,” called Othinus from his shoulder. She sounded exasperated and somewhat pitying. “Further conversation would be meaningless. He must know better than anyone that things have fallen apart for him, but he refuses to accept it. You could easily lose this, unless you receive some help from a god like me.”

“Othinus.”

“I will lend you some shrewd knowledge, but you must be the one to fight. Are you ready? You are both reckless and indescribably soft, so I imagine *you are starting to want to save this man*, aren’t you?”

With a dull sound, that puny boy clenched his right fist in order to win out in this clash of wills.

“If...” Kamijou Touma roared while ignoring how bloody his body was. “If there’s a chance!!”

“You must do it yourself. Show him the power you once used to save a god like me.”

Part 4

Neoka Norito raised both assassination guns.

A single boy was headed toward him.

The man had four glass barrels. The tiny girls within, who could be easily dyed in any color, were how many cards he had in his hand. So what would he load in there? How could he defeat this boy and have his way?

Fire? Water? Wind? Earth? Or some other kind of power?

He had to think.

And the young Director smiled quietly.

He let go.

He dropped those strange products of magic and tightly clenched his empty hands.

For the first time, the boy and the small figure on his shoulder both looked taken aback.

As soon as the twisted assassination guns hit the solid floor, the man moved.

He tore through the air to rush forward.

“You’re in trouble, human!!”

“I know that!!”

This was a former rescue squad elite. Assuming he had maintained his powerful body, a mere high school boy like Kamijou Touma did not stand a chance physically. And his Imagine Breaker was no more than a bloody fist when no supernatural powers were involved.

Yes.

This was the best possible answer.

This boy had faced the esper power of Academy City's #1 and the ultimate magic of a true Magic God, *but what he feared most was the ordinary martial arts that anyone could learn.*

“Oh.”

But there was no turning back now.

Neoka Norito intended to win this even it meant throwing out his pride. He was challenging the boy using his rescue squad body, not his power as a magician or a member of the Board of Directors.

Kamijou Touma had pushed him to this point.

This was the Neoka Norito he had most wanted to see.

So how could he turn away now?

How could he patiently keep his distance and face the man the smart way!?

He roared and stepped forward.

Two full-power fists crossed in the air.

A dull sound followed.

Kamijou Touma definitely heard it ringing in his skull rather than his ears.

In a pure competition of arm strength, he was no match for the man.

Neoka's fist had slammed into his cheek, but Kamijou's fist felt nothing. It had wandered right past this powerful foe's face.

He had failed to land the cross counter.

However.

“Did you think...”

Kamijou Touma’s brain was rattled, but he could still move his fist.

So he spoke.

“*That was just a punch?*”

“!?”

His knees were already shaking and he did not have enough strength left for a fierce rush of attacks.

So he simply opened his clenched fist.

Specifically, he revealed what was hidden in that palm right next to the man’s face. It was his own blood. He flicked his fingers to launch the drops of blood soaking so much of his body.

But.

Even that could be used to blind an enemy if used well.

“Sorry about the cheap move.”

“Tch!!”

The man used his fingers to wipe the blood from his eyes and shook his head, but an opening was an opening.

Blood would coagulate, especially when exposed to oxygen or other living things.

“From the moment I heard you were in a rescue squad, I knew I couldn’t win if it came to a fistfight. So I had to think up some way of winning even if it was dirty and underhanded. Just like you did!!”

After having his head rattled, Kamijou did not have the strength left to redo this from square one.

But he still gathered what strength he had.

“But if this is the only way I can protect the people I care for.”

Neoka Norito could not see, so he would probably rely on his ears instead.

If Kamijou feared pure martial arts, he only had to make sure his opponent could not use them. But Neoka could not crawl around in search of the spiritual items on the floor while blinded. If he was going to win, he too had to keep using his fists.

“And if you’ve trapped yourself in some nonexistent bonds of your own creation.”

But that was exactly what Kamijou wanted.



No matter how much they might understand each other now, they were still enemies. Kamijou could not have the man stalling until he collapsed from blood loss, so he opened his mouth to make sure that did not happen. He used noise and his voice to direct Neoka toward him. Because he was too weak to charge toward the man himself.

And this time, he really would deliver the finishing blow.

“Then I’ll destroy that illusion of yours!!!!!”

This punch was the most he could manage.

After feeling the tactile feedback in his wrist and seeing the man collapse to the floor, Kamijou Touma fell to his knees and then collapsed alongside the man.

Part 5

The powerful tremors and gunfire had stopped at some point.

The white-haired and red-eyed monster named Accelerator remained seated on the floor with his back against the secret interrogation room’s thick door. He had one leg stretched out and one bent up with his arms around the knee while he looked up at the ceiling. In that pose, the #1 confirmed something had come to an end.

That monster never had set foot outside that door.

Even though he could have obliterated this pathetic battle in less than a second if he had used his power as Academy City’s #1.

“Ee hee hee. Are you sure that was a good idea?”

“Shut up.”

Nothing was more irritating *than the temptations of a demon*. And just as he whispered into empty air, he heard something.

It was not quite a creak, but a definite sensation reached his back pressed against the door.

“It’s over, says Misaka as Misaka informs you.”

“...”

“Can you hear Misaka? This is a thick door, so maybe you can’t.”

“Oh, shut up. Do I have to respond to every little thing?”

After a quiet sigh, he finally answered.

The “atmosphere” was not a tangible thing. It would be undetectable even by the Academy City devices that could measure the faint and invisible AIM Diffusion Fields that espers emitted.

But.

This conversation definitely changed something.

“There is no stopping you, is there? says Misaka as Misaka asks despite knowing the answer already.”

“Got a problem with this?”

“If this is what you have decided to do, Misaka will go along with it.”

That obedient statement may not have been a pleasant thing to hear when paired with the path the clones had taken to reach this point, but Accelerator detected a slight difference there.

Laws and morals.

The general public's definitions of fortune and misfortune.

This had nothing to do with those established values. She was not obeying Accelerator's words as a command; she had assessed them for herself and decided she agreed. It was a subtle issue and hard to put to words, but the two could not have been more different. Last Order could hear what Accelerator had to say and choose to either agree or disagree with it.

The white monster decided he could not allow anything to change that.

The demon floating in front of him grinned without saying a word.

"This is for the best." He spoke softly while placing the decisive piece in front of the king. "This incident showed me my will can reach every part of this city to act in my stead. I can see and move through the entire city while remaining behind bars."

Yes.

Academy City was a den of the worst possible people. All sorts of people went unsaved even when things were successfully resolved and there were countless fools who would remain fools until the day they died.

But there were also people who would give him what he wanted.

They were not all part of a special category like him. Ordinary teachers would gear up in bulletproof armor and rush to the scene as Anti-Skill, EMTs would transport the injured to the hospital, and doctors would fulfill the duties of their job. And it was not limited to those professionals either. Ordinary students and office workers would work to suppress the chaos and wonder if there was anything they could do without relying on some kind of special talent.

Not all of them needed to punch out the villains.

People could demonstrate plenty of strength simply by clearing the path needed for the heroes who would protect people's ordinary lives and spring to action whenever they saw a problem. There had to be dramatic events

playing out everywhere and the people bringing together that great power were not even aware of what they were accomplishing. People who could do the ordinary things were strong in their own way.

He had sensed that here.

Maybe idealism was not enough and maybe reality was cruel, but he had sensed that this city was worth trusting.

“So this is for the best. It’s high time I gave up the title of ‘white monster’. That’s no more than a name that was forced onto me, so it’s time I removed that boring uniform they gave me. How can I call myself the true strongest if I can’t even do that?”

“...”

“You don’t have to stick with me. I’m choosing this path for myself, so you can choose a different path for yourself. As soon as this feels too heavy to bear, you can throw me out.”

“Misaka will come visit you. She can choose for herself and she chooses to come visit you every day! says Misaka as Misaka can’t stop trembling!!”

“You dumbass,” spat out Accelerator.

But the only person who could see the look on his face then was *the supernatural demon*.

There was a special sort of mirror on the interrogation room wall, but he had zero intention of looking in it.

No one else could understand.

There were as many ways for people to form bonds as there were people. So what was wrong with everyone having their own unique way?

He could not stop the girl’s tears without letting her lean on him, but he could not bind her with his words either.

So that human had just one thing to say.

It was just harsh enough in a way only they would understand.

“I won’t be waiting.”

Between the Lines X

Hm.

Well, that should be enough for Set 1.

Epilogue: Snow and Crimson Cover

All — White_End. (and_Merry_Xmas!!)

It was over.

But they could not forget one fundamental fact.

“Ugh.”

“Wait, are you okay!?”

“Touma, your clothes aren’t just a little stained with blood. They’re soaked red.”

The pointy-haired boy could not be blamed for feeling woozy. Nothing would change that he had been stabbed in the side by Maidono Hoshimi. Misaka Imouto had roughly sewn him up, but the wound was still there. Plus, he had fought back-to-back battles against Maidono and Neoka and been slashed by glass and metal shards all across his body. Kamijou Touma was definitely headed to the hospital this Christmas Eve. He could only hope he would not be there long.

Night had fully fallen.

“Neoka, huh?”

“I doubt there is anything more you can do for him here,” dryly said Othinus from his shoulder. However, she did know how to support her understander boy. “But you too must play a role in creating an Academy City he will

accept. The city will not change if the person at the top calls for change. The rest of the people need to respond to that call or that person will simply be isolated up there.”

Anti-Skill must have given up on climbing the long, long stairway. They belatedly rushed in on a large tiltrotor craft, so Kamijou’s group left Neoka Norito, his doctor, and his helicopter pilot in Anti-Skill’s care while they made their way back to the ground level. It was a 70-story building and none of the elevators were working, so it would have felt like being stranded in the middle of the city if not for Misaka Mikoto’s magnetic power.

“There weren’t this many people here before.”

“Isn’t that because it’s Christmas Eve?”

Kamijou Touma was bloody, had run around throwing punches, and still did not know if he was being held back or not, so when he was thrown out into the frozen city night, his hopes for a romantic night had finally dropped to devastating levels, but then he saw something.

He saw a small miracle.

“Th-the old chef?”

“What’s with you?” asked Mikoto.

“Give me a sec!! The old ramen chef is here!?”

He forgot all about the pain in his side as he parted the crowd to chase someone’s back and circle around in front of them.

It was indeed that old chef.

When asked if the ramen was made with chicken or seafood, he would answer “I dunno. Some kinda chemicals?” right in front of the customers. But he had sold a small serving of ramen the size of a rice bowl for the students headed home from school. Kamijou had thought the old man’s shop had been lost to the strange onslaught of donut shops, but here he was. Academy City’s soul was not dead yet!!

The old man wore a headband even on Christmas Eve and he pointed at a used car dealer.

Kamijou was bloody as could be, but that old man reacted the same as ever.

He was a true man who never strayed from the path he had made for himself.

“Whatever form it takes, I need a shop to do business, but I can’t stand to push around a cart in this cold. I was thinking of moving up to a food truck next. I hope I can get started again before the New Year.”

“Oh, ohhhh.”

“This place is offering a cheap used one for about 20,000 yen.”

“Ohhhhhh!! It’s really you. Only you would have such a messed-up sense of standards!! I so missed this complete lack of tact where you serve customers food made in a food truck so cheap I can only imagine every past owner ended up dead under mysterious circumstances! This is the rich kind of afterschool snack that those fad donuts could never provide!!”

Kamijou was as bloody and fired up as a pro wrestler after a fight outside the ring, so he failed to notice the girls he had left behind staring at him with their mouths forming small triangles.

After the old man said he was planning to use an app-based delivery service since hiring a delivery boy was too expensive, Kamijou waved goodbye and left him to his business. He had finally found some good news. Now he only ever had to tap his phone’s screen to eat that chemical-laden ramen that seemed even more artificial than plastic. He could not believe the kinds of insanity the dawn had in store for him. The ramen that man served was dangerous enough when you could carefully watch him make it, so who knows what would end up in the bowl when the entire transaction was handled remotely? This was sounding like Russian Roulette Lite or something!

His hopes and expectations were running wild.

Kamijou smiled brightly while watching that departing old man who was not dyed by any of the bright Christmas colors of this decorated city full of happy couples.

What an excellent sight for the end of the year.

“Let’s make sure next year is a good one,” he said without really thinking.

“Do I need to remind you that it’s currently Christmas Eve?” asked Mikoto.
“Did you just get caught in some kind of temporal anomaly or something?”

Anyway, the many people out here did not seem to care about the recent commotion. There were friends, siblings, and couples walking and smiling together to form a strange crowd in this city of colorful lights.

But.

They had not resolved the most fundamental issue.

“That dealt with Neoka, but there is still that outside group he was working with,” said Othinus from his shoulder. “R&C Occultics, a giant IT company that has crawled its way into all sorts of industries using fortunetelling and good luck charms. The world is developing in yet another odd direction.”

Data could spread to any part of the world using the internet.

This crowd here might look happy, but no one could be certain of that. Plenty of boys and girls here were messing with their phones. While they looked like they were smiling together in good cheer, what exactly was displayed on those screens? It could come from simple curiosity, or it could be fueled by a serious complex, but after accessing the website for a mysterious company and learning of the existence of a different form of the supernatural, who would actually try to use it? The seeds had already been sown, so the dormant threat was only going to grow. It was unlikely this problem could be solved solely by Academy City and the science side. Nor could it be solved solely by the magic side magicians outside the city.

This enemy was clearly aiming for the gap between them.

A failure to cooperate would mean time lost and R&C Occultics's influence would be growing all the while. Until they eventually reached a point where you could not get rid of them even if you wanted to, like air conditioning or cellphones.

When looking at the entire world population, espers were a minority.

They had been a powerful minority who everyone had envied.

But.

What if everyone in the world could now use magic?

What if it spread to the point that it need not be hidden and everyone accepted it as normal?

Espers could not use magic.

Those who could not use magic would gradually decline as a weak minority.

But.

Was using that as a reason to fight back really and truly the right thing to do?

What if a new age arrived and that desperate resistance became judged as an evil action?

“...”

(If that really is their aim, then they've found one hell of a way to turn things around.)

Their enemy was a complete mystery.

They did not even need to cross Academy City's wall and sneak in.

They could create an endless supply of powerful foes just by sharing information.

“It’s snowing.” Index looked up with the cat in her arms. “It’s really snowing! We’re going to have a white Christmas, Touma!!”

Kamijou smiled a little.

There was an unseen threat out there, but they had dealt with everything within arm’s reach. So couldn’t they forget all about it and bask in their victory for one day at least? If they never stopped worrying, their spirits would break before the next enemy even showed up. So couldn’t they enjoy themselves on Christmas?

But just as he started thinking that way...

“Hm, hm, hm hm♪”

He heard a little girl humming.

And he recognized the voice.

He looked back without thinking and a look of utter displeasure appeared on his face. This was the sticky(?) little girl who he had found behind the convenience store last night and ended up carrying around while chased by delinquents. Even in the frigid night, she was still not wearing any real clothes. One of her hands did hold a thin red cloth up to her smooth chest to barely cover herself, but he could not tell if that was an article of clothing or a bed sheet.

However, Index, Misaka Mikoto, and Othinus were here.

This was more than a case of “Danger: Do not mix!”

The little girl’s eyes had perfectly locked onto him. And her gaze was filled with the negative joy of someone who had spotted a possible source of entertainment!!

She spoke.

She definitely spoke while looking right at him.

“Found you☆”

“Please no! I haven’t reached a save point yet!! Beat me up here and I won’t be able to recover!!”

He put up his defenses before anyone could do anything, but she did not care. She slipped through the crowd with shocking ease and moved right up to the trembling boy.

“Merry Christmas,” whispered her childish lips.

She held a phone in her hand.

It was the same one she had held when they first met.

And she was clearly operating it in some way with her small fingertip.

“Just a quick update to the homepage. Sorry about talking about work like this.”

“You...”

“*R&C Occultics*. It has reached the point of a trend, but I still need to directly look after it until it really gets on track.”

Othinus’s eyes widened in shock.

Needless to say, she was not reacting to the negative little girl’s state of undress.

“Wait, are you...?”

“Othinus?”

“Get away from her, human!! She is like me in a way!! Except she has deviated from being a Magic God to become-!!”

None of it mattered.

The little girl placed her index finger to her lips.

Everyone recognized that gesture of silence, but how many people in the modern age knew it had its origins in an ancient Egyptian ritual?

She grinned and spoke with her finger still on her lips.

“Does my apparent age bother you? I have not taken this pitiful form of my own free will, I assure you. Doing *that* is such a pain, but this is a special day, so perhaps I should make the effort.”

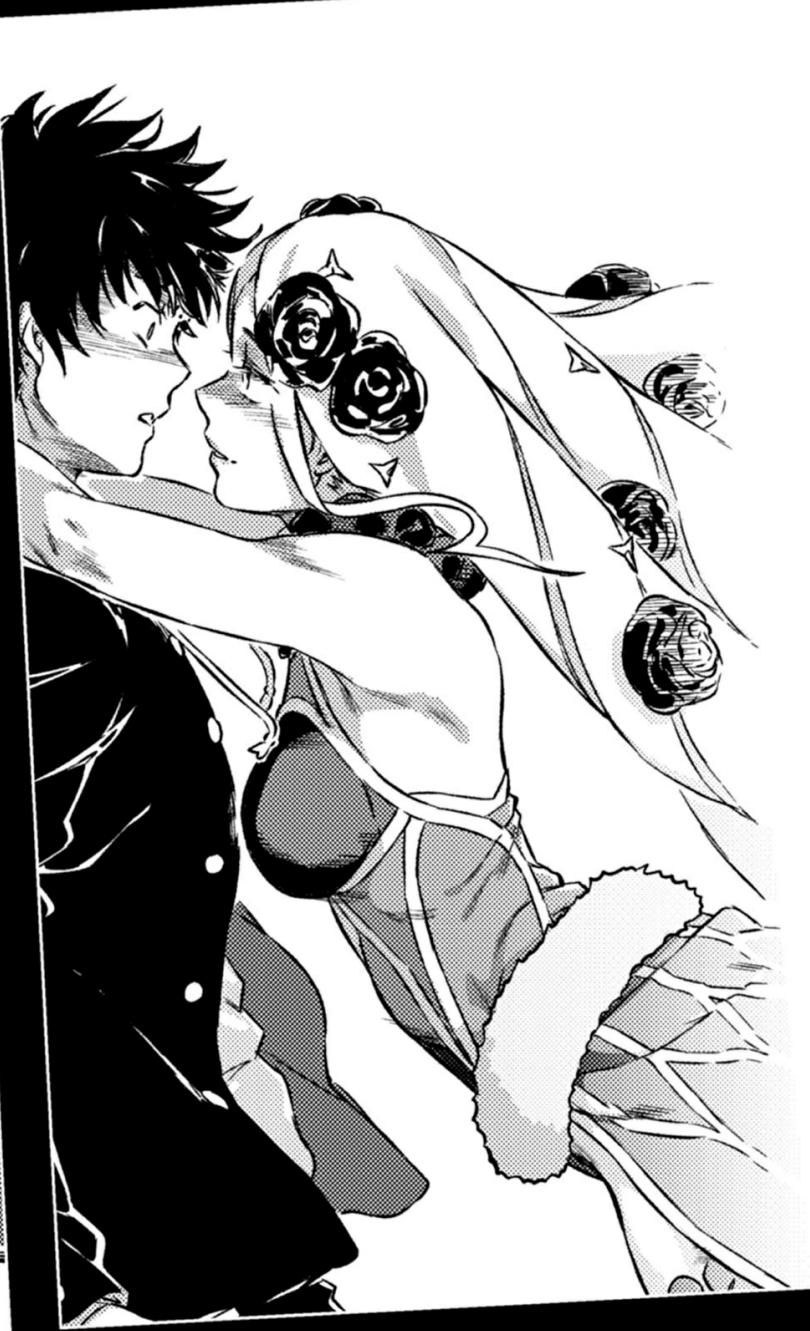
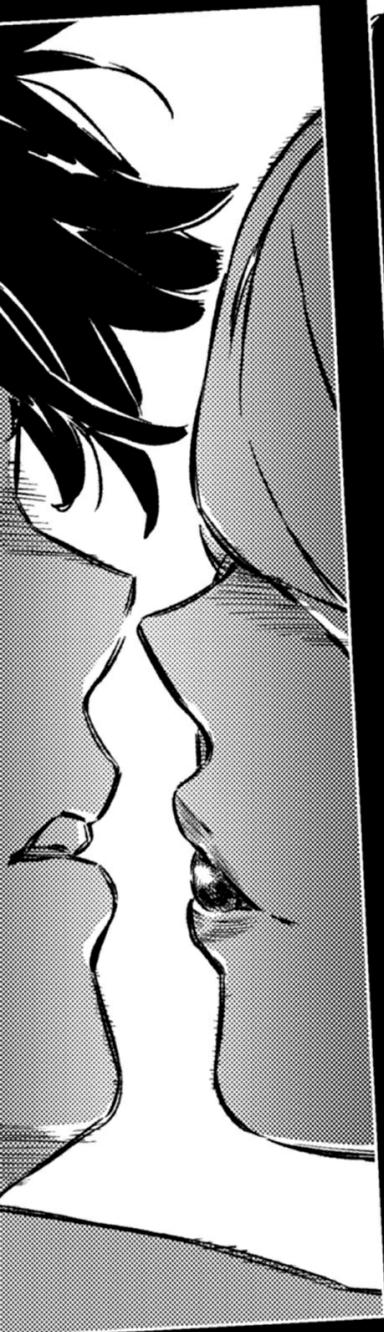
She toyed with something in her small hand.

It was colored too sinister a black to call a large piece of hard candy.

So it was better called a pill.

A change came over her.

She was a beautiful woman boldly showing off her curvy figure, she was an alluring woman with her long strawberry blonde hair worn in what looked like flat fried shrimps, and she was a witch who had adorned herself with rose symbols.



To sum up, she was...

“Anna Sprengel!! I had heard of you, but I never thought you existed in a physical form!”

Even that god shouted in disbelief of what she was seeing.

That legendary magician was a high-ranking member of the ancient magic cabal known as the Rose and she had given permission to found the Golden cabal, said to be the world's largest. She had not even glanced at the position of Magic God, which was said to be the final objective of all magicians. Right now, she draped her arms around the neck of the boy right in front of her.

“Now, let's try this again.”

Everyone was watching as she made an obvious declaration of war with that black pill in her mouth.

“Merry Christmas, my amnesiac enemy. You looked good out there today.”

Her lips met his.

And a pill-flavored attack pierced to the depths of Kamijou Touma's brain.

Afterword

With that, it's time to introduce myself anew. This is Kamachi Kazuma.

A numbering reset!! This marks the start of the Genesis Testament series. We start with a shaken world now that the old leaders of Lola and Aleister are gone, and since the numbering has been reset, we might as well make it so you can enjoy the story starting from here.

The special event here is Christmas Eve!! I hear it can be overshadowed by Halloween these days, but you still want to do something fun then, don't you? The time of year puts it during winter break, but I still included his homeroom teacher and his awful classmate to give it more of a school life feel.

This doubles as a Volume 1 that has to explain the series as a whole, so I included a dynamic esper powers battle and went on to include magic as well. You have to have both science and magic for this series, right?

And the focus was on angels, which are actually focused on a fair bit in this series.

I-I finally used German words in a battle, but don't laugh! Since they once had their No. 1 Temple in Germany, I thought that would be the simplest hint. Not to mention the R&C name that doesn't even try to hide it. Although that uses the English spelling. I imagine a lot of people saw it coming from the moment they saw the Table of Contents.

In the battle against Maidono Hoshimi, I think summoning a high-speed unmanned freight train to throw at her enemy stands out above even moving

the ground and skyscrapers around. And I thought I could show off her complex by having her insist that her power is stronger than the Railgun in terms of pure destructive power.

Also, I especially like how you can see just how twisted Academy City is in how Kamijou saying that he “certainly wouldn’t want your power” so thoroughly shattered Maidono’s pride. Yes, no one is going to look up to you if you *only* have destructive power. Who children admire can become a piercing attack when it works against you. And no matter how much money is moving behind the scenes and no matter how much risk of death there is, that admiration is what matters most to the people on the front line. Level 5 and 6 are no more than a standard used to gather admiration based on a common set of values, so they do not always seem like a necessary goal to the people who have seen a wider variety of viewpoints after fighting so many deadly battles in the past.

She cannot use chopsticks.

She cannot do what she had always taken for granted.

That was a bombshell that threatened to eliminate the value of all the pride that Maidono (who was once the class rep who could do everything impeccably) had stored up.

To put it another way, no matter what your official Level is, you win in the end as long as you become someone people admire. Take that into account, and you should have an easier time seeing what Kamijou Touma and Accelerator are trying to accomplish no matter how much it harms them and their everyday lives. There is no reason to push themselves so hard and they could safely retire, but they choose not to. It’s a simple thing, but I think the way they risk everything to have their way is the most entertaining part of the children’s society.

Online fortunetelling and online stores for magic goods might seem absurd, but there are actually some sites just like that. Sending not just your own information but information on your crush seems really dangerous to me, but I guess everyone has different values. Partially because the setting has almost

always been in Academy City or London, I thought it would be fun to have a magic cabal run amok using the internet as their base and keeping the location of the headquarters a mystery. This is an age full of dangerous toys like herb mixing and 3D printers. ...Just like VR goggles, 3D printers are interesting from a technical standpoint but seem to still be a step away from really taking off.

About Accelerator, this was the answer that naturally came to me when I was wondering what he would want to do first if he gained the absolute authority of Board Chairman. If he had no one standing in his way, he would obviously want to crush the dark side and lower that burden from his shoulders. In NT22 Reverse, he regretted that he could not be the kind of #1 who made a good example for everyone, but that is all the more reason why I think he would do exactly that once he had the freedom to do what he wanted. How did you like it?

And then there was the sticky little girl who came in for the attack. I debated with myself on whether to have her do that last part while still small or in her proper form. To be honest, she would not have appeared in the Prologue if this were NT23. I think it would have been enough of a surprise for her to show up at the end to reveal that the villain who had made a move on him outside of Academy City had now made her way inside the city. But with the numbering reset, I tried to make it work as a single closed loop within this one volume. As far as playfulness goes, she is on the same level or even greater than Aleister and Othinus in their prime, so I do think this was the right answer. It seems wrong for Anna to be seriously scheming in the shadows. But unlike Leivinia who has a playful side but also makes her authority known as her organization's boss, I wanted to make Anna more decadent and "sticky". ...But in that sense, Fiamma of the Right was more the serious schemer type. Maybe his life went off the rails because he did not have enough playfulness in his heart.

I give my thanks to my illustrators Haimura-san and Itou Tateki-san and to my editors Miki-san, Anan-san, Nakajima-san, and Hamamura-san. This day

only comes once a year. Yes, it is Christmas Eve, which has to be a real pain for drawing backgrounds!! ...I really am sorry for all the trouble I cause you. I do hope you stick with me, though.

And I give my thanks to the readers. How did you enjoy Christmas Eve in Academy City? On this special day, I do hope you were turning the pages while wishing happiness for the characters. I am truly grateful you continue to read these books after all this time.

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.

You and junk food really are a perfect match, Kamijou Touma.

-Kamachi Kazuma