

創約

禁書目録 3

インデックス

とある魔術の



鎌池和馬
イラスト／はいむらきよたか

さうやく
創約とある魔術の禁書目録③

愛しのお姉様・御坂美琴と二人っきりで過ごす魅惑のクリスマスが、ついにこの手に……！と期待していた白井黒子だったが、気づけばなぜか彼女の隣には頭髪バーコードでメガネ装備の「警備員」のおじさんが……？

聖なる夜、「魔紀委員」の黒子に課されたのはオペレーションネーム・ハンドカフス、学園都市の「暗部」を全て潰す計画だった。

そのリストの中には、浜面仕上や滝壺理後の名も含まれており……。追う者と追われる者、双方が生き残るために否応なく激突する中、ふとどちらもが感じた。……この計画は、何かが妙だと。

事態打破の鍵となるのは『学園都市最大の禁忌』という謎のフレーズで——！



か-12-104



創約

禁書目録

イントゥクス

3

創約

とある魔術の禁書目録

③

鎌池和馬



電撃文庫



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鎌池和馬

『暗部』も『確部』で大好物。上条当麻の物語では出せない魅力をいっぱいお見せできたらなあと思いました。皆様はどの悪党に魅力を感じられました？

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広島の片田舎で、もそもそ絵を描いてあります。

創約

とある魔術の 禁書目録

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3

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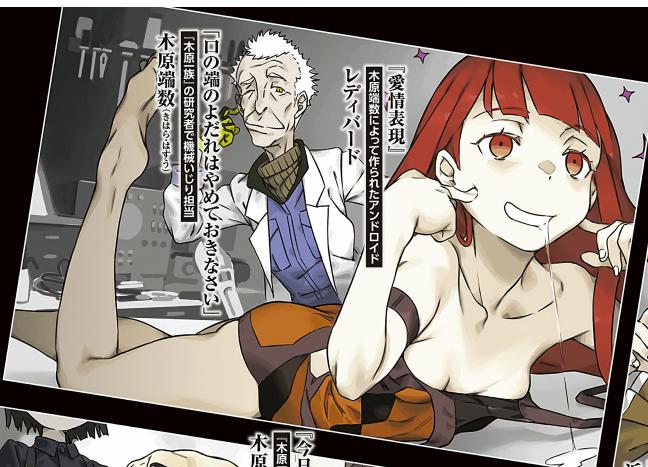
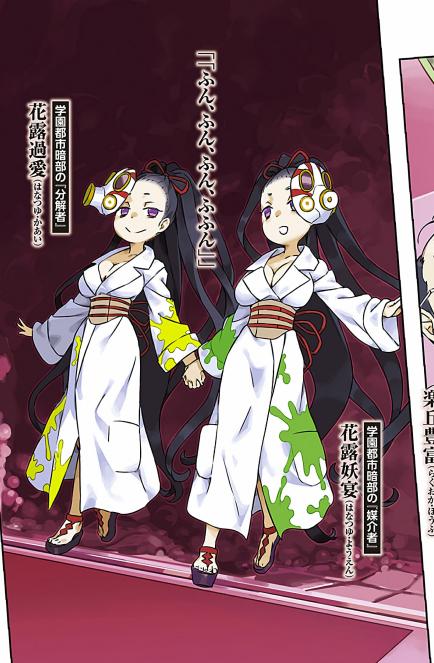


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Prologue: Look What Under I Found Under This Big Rock – OP.“Hand_Cuffs”

She was dead. It was 3PM on December 25 and Shirai Kuroko, a 1st year middle school girl with chestnut twintails and wearing nothing but a purple negligee, lay collapsed and unmoving on her bed in a Tokiwadai Middle School student dorm. She was completely dead.

As dead as a jellyfish rotting on the beach.

“Onwee-shama...still hasn’t come home...”

Yes.

Her roommate Misaka Mikoto had yet to return after vanishing on the night of the 24th. The girl had shirked her duties. The attractive Onee-sama was off enjoying herself elsewhere on Christmas and her cute underclassman had failed to board Noah’s Ark in time. She may have been sent to a deserted island all on her own. Shirai Kuroko had been tragically rejected. And it hurt all the more because she knew there was no ill will behind it.

(H-how could this happen? I had so much ready for today: snacks, a present, scented candles, health drinks, a nonconductive rubber jumpsuit and gloves, a translucent goo made from seaweed extract, silicon crystals, *****, and even *****. Eh heh geh heh heh. And now it’s all piled up in the corner like the cakes that haven’t sold by the 26th!!)

If god had heard her thoughts as they grew more and more despicable, she might have been physically stuck by lightning, but the fact remained that the

giant carnivorous plant had failed to captured its prey.

She did not even have it in her to flail around in frustration. A monotone ringtone played from the phone she had left by her pillow, so she reached out with her face still down in the pillow and spoke in a deep, zombie-like voice.

“Uwehhh? A joint manhunt with Anti-Skill???”

“They’re apparently planning a major arrest. And isn’t that kind of violence your favorite thing, Shirai-san? The adults are actually offering to let you run wild for once, so you should probably take them up on it.”

Judgment apparently had a lot of work piled up even on Christmas.

She briefly considered resorting to pretending she was in too much pain to get out of bed due to being on her purple period which would curse you unless you forgot it existed before you turned 20...but then she had a different idea.

Yes.

(Isn’t Onee-sama liable to show up at the scene of some major incident?)

She leaped out of bed, fixed her mussed-up hair, and hurriedly responded.

“Understood, Uiharu!! I will be there right away! Where is ‘there’, by the way!?”

Tokiwadai forced impeccable behavior on its students, so the dorms were strictly locked down around Christmas, but work for Judgment was an exception. This was Shirai Kuroko’s first Tokiwadai Christmas, but she managed to strut right past the dorm manager and out the supposedly impregnable front entrance in her winter uniform and a very long scarf.

“Now, then.”

She let out a breath and vanished into thin air.

She was a Level 4 Teleporter.

She could only teleport things a distance of 81.5m at once and she could only teleport a weight of 130.74kg at once, but by repeatedly teleporting herself, she could move at speeds greater than a racecar. All while circumventing the restrictions of the asphalt roads.

The safety of District 7 could vary a lot depending on the area, but she made her way to one of the less safe areas. There was decidedly unartistic graffiti spray painted on the walls and presumably stolen and abandoned bicycles were lying all around. There were no Christmas decorations in evidence.

A habit instilled in her by her job(?) took over and she photographed the registration sticker on the underside of the bike seats.

“Is this the place?” she asked over the phone.

“An Anti-Skill truck should be parked nearby, so go find them. I’m busy with my own work, so I unfortunately won’t be able to join you. …Eh? Oh, what is it? Ehhh!? You want me to turn all this into an automated processing flowchart today!?”

After some sounds of a struggle, the call ended.

(I guess I have to do this.)

Being out and about gave her more of a chance to run across her beloved Onee-sama, Misaka Mikoto, than lying dead on her dorm room bed. Especially when there was trouble afoot. Her motivation was impure as could be, but she hoped they would forgive her if she could restore order to the city while she was at it.

She knocked on the door of a large steel truck that looked like a windowless bus and the door opened from the inside.

It was larger than a van, but it actually felt cramped on the inside. Both walls were crammed full of industrial computers and the excess space was piled high with boxes of weapons and ammo. There were no ordinary lights, so the glow of monitors and heat of machines filled the limited space. This was apparently a logistics vehicle that handled data control and materiel provision

more than transporting people.

(And this is only the backup. Does that mean they have more personnel deployed than would fit in one bus?)

She looked skeptical. Anti-Skill was the grownup organization that preserved order in Academy City. In terms of the world outside the city, they were similar to the police. She knew they were a highly organized group of volunteer teachers, but this appeared to be a largescale job even for them. Just think about it. How many police officers would be needed to chase down a single robber escaping through the streets? It would be unusual to find that not even 30 was enough.

“Excuse me, but you requested my presence here. I am Shirai Kuroko of Judgment. If this major arrest required calling me in, does it involve an esper?”

They were not as polite as a phone shop’s receptionist. First, her voice was absorbed by silence and a few sharp glances turned her way after a bit. “The customer is always right” did not apply with civil servants. Plus, Shirai was not actually a customer. Finally, a nearby woman, who appeared to be an operator, spoke up.

She curtly gestured further back in the truck with her chin.

“You’re working with him.”

That seemed awfully cold after Shirai had gone out of her way to name herself and express her enthusiasm for the job, but she accepted it since she had seen some girls in her class who tried and failed to play the tsundere like that. Then she looked over in the indicated direction.

She had no words. She thought she was going to collapse straight backwards.

Let us make one thing clear here.

It could be hard to tell at times(?), but Shirai Kuroko was a born-and-raised high-class girl who attended the prestigious Tokiwadai Middle School. She

lived in a girl's dorm where she would never so much as catch a whiff of a man in her everyday life. She did not suffer from androphobia, but if asked whether she could relax more in a group of boys or a group of girls, she would naturally choose the latter.

So for her, this assigned buddy came as a shock.

The middle-aged man resembled a matchstick.

He had a receding hairline.

He may have been an avid supporter of the national ID number system because he had a combover that looked an awful lot like a barcode.

He was skinny yet greasy.

He smelled like the inside of the kind of taxi you never wanted to get.

He had the classic combination of glasses and a combover.

But really, it all came down to that one word: he.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!????”

“Oh, hello. You are Shirai Kuroko, I take it? It is a pleasure to meet- wait, what is happening here!? A-are you awakening as a Level 5!?”

The middle-aged man in bulletproof gear approached her and then jumped in surprise.

But she was too distraught to notice.

“Why? What kind of terrible mistake could have led to this disaster!? I was supposed to be all alone with my beloved Onee-sama right now, so why am I here with some wrinkled man who looks like a Christmas present that has been sitting unopened for 20 years!!!!???”

“I-I am not sure what that means, but you are aware that even an old man like

me is a human being with rights, aren't you?"

His polite request fell on deaf ears.

Or rather, he had uttered that forbidden phrase: old man. Ordinarily, hearing those hellish two words would have her readying a disinfectant spray packed full of silver ion. The surprise had been enough to make him sweaty and his sweat sent an indescribable stench wafting her way. Her face grew pale.

"W-we can continue this outside!!"

"Oh, ready to get to work already? You elite students are so responsible."

This was not about that. She just did not want to inhale that stench that reminded her of the cheap fake leather seats in a taxi. But getting into an argument here would do nothing to help her. The real live combover glasses man scratched at his defenseless head in embarrassment, but then gasped and fixed his combover.

"I-I am Rakuoka Houfu."

"Shirai Kuroko," rapidly replied the twintails girl.

She kept more distance than necessary and sighed as she got down to business.

"So, Rakuoka-sensei. Who are we arresting?"

"To be clear, you can't let anyone know about this. Because we live in an age where people will do just about anything to get material for an online video or social media post."

"Just tell me."

"Very well." Rakuoka Houfu looked side to side like a timid animal and stepped in close to whisper in her ear. "It's called Operation Handcuffs. We're doing a sweep of the dark side."

The dark side.

In Judgment, Shirai Kuroko would deal with trouble in Academy City and she would occasionally fight directly with criminals, but she had about as much solid evidence of the dark side's existence as she did for urban legends like Hikiko-san or the Kunekune.

She had heard things and seen things that hinted at its possible existence.

But she had yet to experience anything that made her think she had actually been in contact with it.

(The dark side exists at a place even deeper than us.)

But she could not give any clear definition of what the dark side was really supposed to be. It felt like a fictional thing spoken of only in rumors. Like a few separate incidents had appeared connected by coincidence, creating the illusion of something larger there. Yet it was all too ominous to just laugh it off in that way.

(That's exactly the territory Onee-sama would get herself involved in. Yes!! That means I made the right choice!! I'm bound to find her if I run headlong toward the greatest threat!!)

"It does exist," plainly stated Rakuoka Houfu. He must have wanted to keep this a secret because he ignored the distance she had put between them and invaded her personal space, but his words carried a magical power that kept her from minding too much. "You know how we got a new Board Chairman the other day? That upheaval has stirred things up. Like all the filth gathered at the bottom of the lake floating up to the surface."

"..."

"Their veil of secrecy has fallen away. This is our one and only chance. We are making our move in all 23 districts at once and we even created a database of targets called Outrank!"

All of the fragmentary data that Anti-Skill and Judgment had gathered had apparently been combined with all the concealed data that the person at the top had just released. The idea was to use the combined data to make a sweep

of all the major dark side members who had eluded their grasp for so long.

“If we don’t bring an end to the dark side now that they have been revealed to us, they will just do the same thing all over again. Once they dive back below the surface, they can resume dragging down and feasting on innocent people while remaining just out of our reach. We have to stop them while we can.”

“Who exactly are we talking about here?”

“It’s a long list. Logging on to Outrank would leave you speechless.” He gestured over with his chin. “Anyway, let’s go deal with our target. She’s in that abandoned building there. Her name is Aoumi Karei, but people call her the Pet Breeder. She supposedly specializes in training dangerous pets trained in secret to attack people while making it look like an accident. Depending on what her client asks for, she can threaten people, remove a beauty pageant contestant or an athlete from the competition, or even assassinate someone. It all depends on the severity of the injury or infectious disease she goes for.”

“Why hasn’t she been arrested before?”

“A few of the incidents were awfully suspicious for an accident, but none of them were ever treated as a crime. The fire ants or snapping turtle discovered near the scene were taken to an animal shelter and that was it.”

This one example was worse than she had expected. The very idea of a professional criminal seemed so bizarre to a Japanese middle schooler. Was that really viable? Especially in Academy City which was surrounded by thick walls and monitored by countless cameras?

(Their veil of secrecy has fallen away, has it?)

If they had been hidden, someone must have decided it was beneficial to keep them hidden. But how was that beneficial? The individual criminals were bad enough, but it sent a chill down her spine to think a system had been in place to hide such brutal crimes from society. Did that mean they could have fully “erased” her presence from this city if they had wanted to?

“Where is the rest of the team?”

“Trying to overpower Pet Breeder with numbers would work against us. I would prefer to defeat her with a precision strike. You never know when she will send hundreds of spiders or octopuses after us with the flick of a switch. Even if we block the doors and windows, the animals could always swarm through the ducts or drains. Trying to seal the building off would not be possible.”

“Ugh.”

“Just to be safe, we will have an insecticide team waiting out front. They will be using a pyrethroid that has very little effect on humans, so disseminating it in this urban environment shouldn’t be a problem. However, that means rats, crows, and other vertebrates can slip past our net, so it would be best if we are not noticed.”

“Hence bringing along the Teleporter?”

“The doors, windows, and even the indoor spaces might be covered in sensors, so we are counting on you. By the way, this is my first time teleporting, so how exactly do you take aim?”

“.....”

The twintailed middle school girl gave the middle-aged man a look of utter disgust before placing a hand on his shoulder and using that physical contact to allow them both to vanish into thin air.

There was no sign of the Christmas spirit inside the abandoned building. There was no wallpaper or carpet, so it was all bare concrete. The windows had lost their glass, so they were forcibly covered up with blue tarps and packing tape, and boxy silhouettes were stacked up here and there. The largest ones looked like 2m cubes and they were filled with the bluish-white light of a tropical fish aquarium.

No.

Shirai had assumed they were aquariums or cages, but she was wrong.

Those boxes had UV lights and hydroponic kits hooked up to the same power supply.

“Are those plant factories?” she asked.

“They are probably a type of biotope. Instead of giving them food at set times, she provides them an artificial environment that naturally contains their food. You could call her a deadly gardener, couldn’t you?”

A closer look showed all sorts of animals moving around inside the boxes covered in thick acrylic.

Mosquitos, flies, fleas, ticks, and roaches.

Rats, crows, snakes, poison dart frogs, and bats.

Snapping turtles, piranhas, candirus, and black bass.

Each box had more than one species. Maybe species that would not eat each other were kept together and maybe predators and prey were grouped together to set up a food chain.

“I-if we mess this up, could we get bitten or stung by those?” asked the man.
“Do they have serums at the hospital?”

“Don’t ask me. But this isn’t a club or committee activity. If it happens on the job, won’t you get treated at the hospital for free?”

“I can’t do that, Shirai-san! I’m a government worker! If I take unwanted leave and payment at the same time, everyone out there will start calling me a leech on the system.”

Then they heard a clunking sound from overhead.

Either he was a coward or a workaholic because he immediately stopped complaining.

At this point, neither of them spoke aloud to confirm anything with each other. They used hand signals to communicate and made their way to the

emergency stairs.

Fortunately, they did not find any of the cameras or sensors they had been worried about. The owner of the place must not have seen any real division between rooms or floors because there were 2m acrylic boxes sitting on the stairway landing too.

“(Shh!!)”

Shirai stopped the man with a hand and then held her breath entirely.

Once up the stairs, she heard a voice speaking from the large floor with no inner walls.

Were there multiple people there?

She could not see inside from the stairs, so she gulped and silently set foot into that dreary space. Great tension wore on all of her nerves, but then she noticed something.

“...has...newly appointed...but...”

The overly enunciated female voice was accompanied by music and sound effects. When she peered out from behind a pillar, she saw a flat screen TV of more than 60 inches sitting in the middle of the large space. She could see the dark silhouette of someone seated in a chair thanks to the glow of the TV.

There was no one else around. The cheerful voice was coming from the TV.

Was this their living space? The lonely space surrounded by 2m boxes showed no division between work and home.

“After announcing his appointment as the new Board Chairman, he turned himself in at an Anti-Skill station, confessing to his crimes. This unprecedented situation sent shockwaves through Academy City’s general courthouse. He has apparently been indicted, but it is unknown if the trial will be held as scheduled. The 12 members of the Board have chosen to refrain from commenting on this unprecedented situation.”

Pet Breeder.

Aoumi Karei.

“That was just awful of him, wasn’t it?”

“!?”

Shirai’s breathing stopped for a reason other than intentionally holding it.

The woman seated in the chair facing the other way had noticed her.

“We only sank into the darkness because we were needed here, but one doctrine change and it’s into the garbage for us? No, forcibly removing these gears will only cause the entire system of Academy City to collapse.”

“Tch!! This is Judgment. Aoumi Karei, stay where you are!!”

“Yes, yes.”

The woman continued watching TV. She did not stand up or turn around.

All she did was shrug.

And a moment later, a torrent of green, brown, gray, and black rushed in toward Shirai Kuroko from the side.

She had no idea what had happened.

It was terrifying enough to realize these were all insects the size of her palm, but the number of them was even more terrifying. She had the breath knocked out of her like she had been struck by a heavy bowling ball and her thoughts scattered. She was knocked from behind the pillar and dragged along the concrete floor before she could make sense of her situation.

“Insects have trends too, you know?” bluntly whispered Pet Breeder while she continued watching TV. “Fire ants were in not too long ago, but that seems to have changed to locusts. Did you know an insect’s appearance can be changed by its environment? Once there are enough of them that they

don't need to hide from threats, they lose their camouflaging green and turn brown. And instead of calmly eating grass, they grow bold and start attacking other creatures by tackling them and biting at their flesh."

"Gah...ah!?"

"So by adjusting the density of their group, controlling their stress, directly injecting them with corazonin, or otherwise adjusting their environment, you can train them to do whatever you want. For example, you can rewrite their instincts so they will aggressively attack people."

"Tch!!"

Still on the floor, Shirai Kuroko reached for her thigh. She wore a belt there that carried metal darts.

But as soon as she sent one out with her Teleportation, the figure seated in front of the TV collapsed like it was deflating. No, that figure was actually a swarm of dry brown rattlesnakes. There were hundreds of them...maybe thousands. The rattles on the many snakes' tails had shaken to produce what sounded like a human voice.

"Just to be clear, I am not some fairy tale witch."

"...!?"

The solid footsteps came from a different direction altogether, but Shirai could not even turn around while pinned to the floor.

"Ordinary science is enough to explain all this. If you try hard enough. Remember this because what you see here is the dark side. Sticking your head in our business will not end well for you if you are not prepared. Then again, this warning may have come too late for you."

She would get away at this rate.

Pet Breeder had created a twisted world as a criminal, but she could probably obtain new materials almost anywhere. She could start her business back up even if she had to abandon this lab.

And that would lead to further victims.

“Wah!”

However.

He had so little presence both sides may have completely forgotten about him.

“Gwaaaaahhhh!!”

Someone suddenly screamed. It was the middle-aged man with glasses and a combover. His eyes were squeezed shut behind the lenses and his arms were thrust out in front as he charged in. He moved around Shirai Kuroko as the many locusts pinned her down and he continued toward Pet Breeder who was walking along the wall toward the floor’s exit.

She must have been caught off guard.

“Eh?”

That was the first time Shirai Kuroko heard Aoumi Karei’s real voice.

She easily dodged the man, so he broke through the blue tarp and tumbled right out the window.

But she could not breathe a sigh of relief. She must have moved aside more forcefully than she meant to because her shoulder crashed into one of the plant factories covered in thick acrylic...no, that was a biotope containing an artificial atmosphere meant to grow animals.

Shirai did not know how it normally worked, but that thick acrylic must not have been all one piece. Maybe the dark side worked to cut costs as much as legal businesses. When the woman bumped into it, a tall piece about the size of a door came away and she fell inside. The glued-together panels had come apart.

Only then did Shirai get to see what Aoumi Karei looked like. Maybe she had

a logical reason for her bizarre getup and maybe it was just her personal tastes, but she was a college-aged woman wearing highly revealing black bondage gear.

And Pet Breeder had just rolled into one of her own 2m enclosures.

It looked like an insect cage, but the bottom was filled with clear water.

The things wriggling at the bottom may have been electric eels.

“Gya-gya-gya-gya-gya-gya-gya-gyahhhh!!!????”

She let out an indecipherable scream.

Shirai did not know how the process worked, but if those were her “products”, did this mean she was being attacked by the very creatures she had raised herself? Or were the electric eels not fully trained and still being prepared?

“Gh...”

Shirai managed to push herself up from the floor to look, but the woman’s face was entirely buried by then. Electric shocks in the water were deadly enough, but it also looked like the eels were actually crawling inside her body through her burst and torn skin. Her arms and legs continued to convulse, but she was probably already dead.

“Pant, pant.”

The twintails girl Teleported a metal dart from the floor to pierce a water bottle dangling from the ceiling. That scattered a liquid darker than tea and the locusts fled from her in fear. As she had guessed, the bottles on the ceiling were “sprinklers” in case of emergency. She pierced several more of them to fill the entire floor with the repellent that the human nose could not detect.

Once she was up on her trembling legs, she approached the acrylic box.

That 2m zone’s barrier had been broken.

The electric eels made no attempt to escape through the broken wall. They were all focused on the inside of their habitat. But instead of not wanting to leave the water, it looked more like they were happily making a home for themselves inside the poor victim's body.

It was a tragic result. Someone had died.

She could think those words, but her mind refused to make sense of them. Just like someone was telling her to "thoroughly chew her plastic before swallowing it". It all felt so wrong as the thought rolled around in her skull. She stood there in a daze for a while. This had been an unfortunate accident, but it was too horrific for her to accept that they had responded appropriately. On the other hand, she could not blame the clumsy Anti-Skill officer either. Without his support, she might have been the one in that eel habitat.

This was the dark side. It was a hopeless world where doing your best still resulted in very dark results.

"..."

How much time had passed since her gruesome initiation into that world?

Finally, she managed to stagger over to the window. The torn blue tarp let in a sliver of sunlight.

She was surprised by what she found when she looked down.

Rakuoka Houfu had tumbled out after his momentum got the better of him, but there was construction scaffolding outside and he had managed to land on that. But he was terrified out of his mind, so he must have been sitting up there in that awkward pose for a while now. He smiled up at her with sweat soaking him.

He would not know how things had turned out inside the building.

"W-was I helpful?"

"Ask me that again after you write up a report and notify her next of kin."

Meanwhile, a boy was holding his breath with his back against a concrete wall.

He was Hamazura Shiage.

“Are you kidding me?”

Pet Breeder had not been a good person. She had taken on all sorts of illegal jobs, but Hamazura knew the assassinations were only a possibility she hinted at and were something she rarely actually did.

Aoumi Karei had loved to use grotesque bugs and dangerous animals, but she had actually been a cost cutter.

It was expensive dealing with the people who unwittingly set foot in the dark side’s territory and caused some trouble there. So they would place a grotesque “false bottom” at a shallow part of the dark side that would convince those people that there was nothing deeper than that. That required an obvious form of fear as well as some kind of remote control ability since Aoumi would want to send the people back to the sunlit world without having seen her face. Hence the Pet Breeder identity. She wore that risqué bondage outfit for its sturdiness and to protect herself from stains and small eggs. Just like one theory claimed the thong had its roots in a method of keeping dangerous creatures out of the body. As bizarre as she might seem, it all made sense if you bothered to speak with her and hear her out.

He would never have gotten anywhere near her otherwise.

Since she dealt with so many animals, Hamazura had used her to obtain bC-96/R, the crucial medicine his girlfriend Takitsubo Rikou needed.

That girl had once taken Body Crystal, a drug created by concentrating and crystallizing a component directly extracted from the body of an esper who had lost control of their power. She had yet to fully recover from the effects of that drug. The drug was only meant to boost the power of the rare esper who was compatible by sending their power out of control, but it came with

brutal side effects and was really more of a poison than anything.

They needed someone's help to get that poison out of her system.

"The temperature and humidity should be fine if you keep it in the fridge, but watch out for electricity leakage. Electrolysis can easily break down the medicine's components."

He recalled how that woman had explained it to him in her best imitation of a doctor, but he would never hear that voice again.

She had been a part of Academy City's dark side.

A lot of different people were a part of it, including Kinuhata Saiai who he had been with just a bit ago and his girlfriend Takitsubo Rikou who was waiting for him at their apartment. Of course ordinary families and social media refused to see any exceptions in the darkness, but he knew better after being a part of it himself. The dark side was divided into multiple levels and there were brighter places in the shallower levels. Aoumi Karei had belonged to one of those, just like Kinuhata and Takitsubo.

That was the only place they could survive.

They lived in the dark side, but they still had a line they did not let themselves cross.

And yet...

(Aoumi was only trying to warn them. Those rattlesnakes look scary, but their fangs had been removed. And the locusts were meant as a nonlethal choice compared to the mosquitos or flies that carry dangerous infectious diseases. I don't know if that was Anti-Skill or Judgment, but if they had flinched back in fear, she could have escaped safely. I mean, if she was actually trying to kill them, she would have released one of the hyenas, crocodiles, or other killing vectors she keeps on the upper floor.)

The twintails girl being attacked by the locusts may have overlooked it since she was too close to the action, but the delinquent boy had noticed something

from his more distant and objective position.

(That was no accident. He did it on purpose.)

Hamazura gulped.

He had failed to spot how exactly the man had done it, but he could make a pretty good guess.

(Why didn't her electric eel repellent work? He must have secretly neutralized her safety before shoving her into the biotope! That really wasn't an accident. *That was all planned out from the beginning and he was only pretending to be so weak!!*)

That was a murder that left no evidence. It would be recorded as an accident mid-arrest and the direct cause of death had been the deadly animals the suspect had illegally developed. It would all be written off as her just deserts. By Anti-Skill and by the Judgment girl. Just like police around the world would work extra hard when it came to tracking down a cop killer, but the inspectors always made overly forgiving rulings during an internal investigation of one of their own.

Did the man have a habit of doing this?

It had looked an awful lot like he knew exactly how to behave on the scene, exactly what the inspectors would be looking for when they made their ruling, and exactly how to write up a report so nothing stood out as unusual. With all of those factors lined up, Hamazura had to suspect he had discovered a dark bingo.

Only the flat screen TV of more than 60 inches remained undisturbed.

He could hear the female announcer of an afternoon talk show.

"The new Board Chairman appears to have greatly changed the environment in Academy City. Every field is intently focused on how much corruption can be removed by this scandal. As frightening as these discoveries are, let's hope this can drag it all out into the sunlight."

His phone vibrated. It did not ring since it was on silent, but the quiet sound of the motor was bad enough for his heart. He thought it was taking years off his life.

“Hanzou> Hamazura, where are you right now? The head of a rival team was taken out and the panic has spread to us. We can’t tell who’s targeting us like this!”

“Kuruwa> That team did work courier jobs for the dark side, but we do not know where the line is drawn on this. Sir Hamazura, we will be going into hiding. I apologize, but we have no time!”

The tense social media messages were from the awful friends of his delinquent days.

But the voice on the TV grew much more cheerful.

“Next up is the best Christmas special you’ll see today! Puppies and kittens dressed up as cute Santas! And maybe even some more unusual pets too!? Please enjoy the top 100 popular videos.”

It was unnatural.

Almost like they were intentionally distracting from the ominous events.

And Hamazura still sensed a presence on the same floor as him. He could not let himself be found, so he stepped away from the concrete wall and walked to the stairs while making sure not to make a noise.

The hard and cold stairs were going to make a noise no matter how careful he was and he could not stop himself anymore anyway. He rushed down the stairs in a way that not even he was sure qualified as running or jumping down.

But on his way to the front entrance, he stopped and pressed against the wall.

He heard sirens, so he hurried around to the back entrance instead.

“Um!?”

It would not open. He grabbed the lock between his fingers and turned it, but the rusted metal door would not budge. Had years of rust filled in the gap, had the building settled wrong, or had some abandoned materials or boxes been piled up on the other side of the door? He did not know what had caused it and he could not just sit around thinking about it.

“Are you sure you heard something?”

“Y-yes. There was definitely a sound. One of Pet Breeder’s animals might have escaped, which would be a major problem.”

He felt a squeezing at his heart. The voices from upstairs sounded skeptical, but they had definitely heard him. He could tell they were approaching.

He had tears in his eyes as he continued trying the door to no avail.

“D-dammit.”

His mind told him he needed to give up and find another exit, but he could not escape the sweet temptation of “what if it opens this time?” This was as foolish as endlessly dropping the bucket into an empty well in the middle of the desert, but he was too panicked to go searching beyond the horizon for water that might not exist.

They were coming.

The door would not open.

They were almost here.

It was no use. He had nowhere to run.

(Argh.)

His teeth chattered and he felt trapped, so he reached into his pocket, pulled something out, and raised his voice with that hard sensation in his hand.

“Open this door, *Coin of Nicholas!!*”

The result surprised even him.

The door opened silently and smoothly. He had been leaning his full weight against it, so he tumbled out. His entire body ached. He had wanted it to open so badly, but once it did, it brought further trouble. He must have dropped the object when he fell because he no longer felt it in his hand. He moved his head while lying on the snow-wet ground.

He saw a golden glitter there. It was a little larger than a 500 yen coin. It bore an image of a bearded old man in profile, but he was not sure who it was. He did know his was not Japanese money, though.

The gold coin had a somewhat dull color, but it shined bright at a point on the edge. That shining point was slowly spreading clockwise from the top of the coin. Almost like a donut-shaped pie graph or a fuse.

That was the Coin of Nicholas.

It was a *spiritual item* that ignored all probability and statistics to give the designated phenomenon a 100% success rate.

“I heard something this time too.”

“B-be careful. Pet Breeder has more weapons than just the animals themselves. They also carry infectious disease!!”

“Could you try saying that *without* holding a middle school girl in front of you as a shield!!”

“!”

He could not stick around for long. He picked up the Coin of Nicholas and got his aching body on its feet. Then he ran full speed away.

This was Operation Handcuffs, a citywide sweep of the dark side.

(Are you kidding me?)

He thought of the many people he knew who could not live in ordinary

society.

And his girlfriend Takitsubo Rikou.

If this really was happening all over Academy City, then nowhere was safe anymore.

A genocide had begun. Even if the records would never call it that.

“Are you kidding me!? I’m not getting caught in the middle of this, goddammit!!”

He could not stay in Academy City.

Academy City was surrounded by impregnable walls to prevent their advanced technology from leaking out, but if there was no safety to be found inside the city, he had no choice but to escape outside it.

Along with the person he never wanted to lose.

He had just the one gold coin in hand as the worst possible Christmas began.

Chapter 1: A Scab Torn Away – City_Warfare.

Part 1

Hamazura Shiage did not know much about the Coin of Nicholas.

On Christmas morning, he had woken up to find it in his hand. That was strange, but he had seen several similar accounts on message boards and social media. Some had even claimed to have taken it to a pawn shop and learned it was real gold.

That meant this was not just a surprise from Mugino Shizuri or Takitsubo Rikou.

After that, a detailed user's guide had appeared on R&C Occultics' official site and that had quickly spread across the internet. It happened fast enough that it took him a bit to realize it came from that side of the world.

As a resident of a city of science, he had been skeptical, but the coin had in fact opened that rusted-shut door. Whether years of rust had filled the gap or the door had itself had been warped, *there had to have been some physical reason why the door would not budge, yet all of that had been ignored to grant him his wish.*

Yes, he had been skeptical, but he had also tested it out before that.

While holding the coin in his hand and praying, his roommate Mugino

Shizuri's bra hook had come undone. As a result, he had been nearly killed by his girlfriend Takitsubo Rikou instead of Mugino.

The same method had failed to undo the hook on his other roommate Kinuhata Saiai's bra. Not even the mysterious coin could unhook a bra that did not exist. He had nearly been killed by Kinuhata herself for that one, but he had learned that the coin could not do the impossible.

These were the rules as far as he knew:

- The Coin of Nicholas fixes an action's success rate at 100%.
- After a use, it requires an hour to recharge. That time limit is fixed regardless of the quantity or quality of the action performed.

Those rules were straight from the R&C Occultics manual and he had confirmed them himself.

And he could add another rule to the list since he was from Academy City, even if he was a Level 0.

- Espers can use the coin without any penalty or side effects.

(I am curious why such a useful item was given out for free. Was this just a Christmas present from those magic people? Come to think of it, that weird kid I met during the day mentioned R&C too.)

“!?”

A loud siren blared and the brown-haired delinquent boy cut off that line of thought. He hid behind a car parked on the road. Even he was disgusted with himself. He was outside during the midwinter, yet the paper bag containing the medicine seemed soaked with his sweat.

(It isn't just a localized thing.)

Hamazura looked inside the Anti-Skill vehicle passing by. He saw a distinctive device in the back seat.

(An NB20 close-range arresting gun. Wasn't that net rifle recalled for causing so many accidents? Shoot a kid with a handgun and it's a big deal, but kill them with the weight used to spread out the net and they call it an accident. Anti-Skill is serious about this. They plan to tear down the dark side even if it means slaughtering us all!!)

“Hey, that’s Anti-Skill, Etzali!”

“That is not a problem thanks to our borrowed faces. Or it wouldn’t be if you would stop panicking, Xochitl. We need to get to the hospital to collect Tochtli.”

Hamazura waited until a boy and a girl walked past.

(One hour.)

He pulled the Coin of Nicholas from his pocket. The brightness at the edge seemed thicker than it had been before. It looked a lot like a donut-shaped pie graph filling in clockwise, but it was not even a quarter of the way full yet.

It would take a while before it was fully charged.

(I can’t rely on its power for another hour. I’ll have to survive on my own. Wait, isn’t this first hour the most dangerous time!? Damn, maybe I shouldn’t have used it right off the bat like that!)

At any rate, he worked his panicked mind to try and think. He felt frustrated and angry, but he could not protect anyone by challenging Anti-Skill or Judgment head on. That would change nothing even if he could cheat with the Coin of Nicholas. He knew that much.

He did not have time to explain to them that he was no longer part of the dark side.

It was all or nothing.

How could he stand in front of them and talk when a single mistake would mean taking a bullet to the head? He had to pessimistically assume he would be taken out along with the others. That was the only way he would survive

this.

His goal was *to escape to safety*. And that meant crossing Academy City's borders to leave the city.

There was not a moment to lose, but running around blindly would also put his life at risk. He had already seen all too well what would happen to him if he did the wrong thing. He could not survive if he stayed in Academy City where so many cameras were watching everything that happened in the city's limited space. He would be cornered before he could recover from even a single mistake.

He needed to meet up with the track suit girl named Takitsubo Rikou.

Then they could really get started.

He reflexively pulled out his cheap phone, but then he froze.

His fingers had moved on autopilot, but for some reason an error appeared on the lock screen.

“Aneri?”

He gasped in realization after seeing the cold error message.

That support AI had no real physical form. She had temporarily joined with the massive Bank database, but she was generally creating a connection back to her friend in England and moving freely between the devices around Hamazura. But now she had clearly rejected him.

(Oh, right. I can't use this thing!!)

As soon as he realized how careless he had been, he held down the switch on the side. The few seconds it took to shut off stretched on for what felt like an eternity. Even loan sharks these days would steal a phone's location data or social media's facial recognition to track down a target who had skipped town. And he was up against Anti-Skill and Judgment who preserved order in Academy City. They would have full use of the city's data infrastructure, including the unknown millions of security cameras, the cleaning and

security robots, and the massive Bank database.

He breathed a sigh of relief once the thin screen finally went dark, but then a different sort of pressure hit him. He was cut off and overwhelmingly alone. Not even a child separated from their parents at a crowded amusement park would feel quite so much crushing pressure.

How could he let that girl know about the threat without his phone? Plus, he had no idea where she was and had no way of giving her a rendezvous point.

Aneri was not telling him anything. Which made sense since she had urged him to turn off the phone.

(Dammit, I didn't realize how dependent on this phone I was.)

He cursed his own weakness. He started by thinking over what he could do. He could return to their apartment. If his girlfriend had not been caught in any similar trouble, she would be lazily waiting for him there.

He was unsure if that was a good thing or not.

He had to be swift and certain. If he could catch up to her before tragedy struck, she would not be harmed. He would make sure of it. He kept repeating that to himself like he was willing it to be true as he stepped out from behind the car.

He heard an odd sound from overhead.

Someone fell from the building and squashed the parked car to half its original height.

“Ahh, ahhh!! Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!????”

He only now realized the odd sound had been someone screaming. He screamed himself and fell on his ass because all of the car's windows had shattered. The person embedded in the steel roof did not seem to have it in him to get up, so he turned just his head toward Hamazura while lying on his back.

He could not open one of his eyes due to the blood flowing from a head wound.

“...Ha...”

He was a young man older than Hamazura.

He wore a thick coat and fancy slacks. What he wore below the coat was unclear, but the practical sneakers on his feet clashed with the classical outfit. He also wore a synthetic fabric sling bag over the coat. The mismatched look made it look like he was skipping town.

Who was that weak and cynical smile meant for?

“I might not look it...but I used to boss the likes of you around over the phone.”

(Wait...)

Still down on his butt, Hamazura gulped. He had never met this man before, but he had seen someone similar when he was working as a dark side underling. Well, *seen* was the wrong word. The woman who had bossed Item around had ensured her own safety by only ever calling them over the phone. She had gone to great lengths to keep her appearance and real name a secret.

So...

“*The voice on the phone?* This is reaching people on that level!?”

That meant there were no exceptions. The young man crushed on the car roof did not nod or shake his head. He may not have had the strength left.

“The...charm.”

“What?”

“She lives...outside the city. Return it to...my little sister.”

“Wait, don’t say that. I have my hands full already!! Don’t give me another

burden! I mean it!!”

The young man was no longer listening. After an especially large convulsion, he stopped moving altogether. He did not even shut his eyes like they did in dramas and movies. He simply stopped blinking and blood oozed from his unfocused eyes.

Hamazura sensed someone inside the building.

A charm.

A little sister living outside the city.

“Dammit!!” he spat as he reached for the young man despite the risk.

He unhooked the sling bag that was too small to fit much more than a wallet and phone and he pulled it toward himself. Then he rushed into a narrow alley between buildings with the extra baggage.

The road was growing busy now, but he had to check something before blindly running away.

He checked through the small sling bag and found a few tools inside. A passport as a form of ID, a smartphone, some paper money carelessly balled up with some rubber bands, a Shinto shrine’s charm that felt out of place with everything else, and a handgun seemingly made out of plastic. Almost all of it was sketchy as could be. He started by powering off the phone and opening the passport. School Boy. That was very obviously a fake name. In fact, it was one that showed up on a lot of example documents in banks and government offices here in Academy City.

There was no Coin of Nicholas in the sling bag.

Maybe they had been handed out randomly so not everyone had one and maybe the young man had not believed it worked and left it behind. Hamazura had kind of been hoping for another one so he could shorten the lag between uses, similar to Nobunaga’s rotating three-line formation.

(So is this the charm?)

Vermilion fabric had the shrine's name and the charm's effect stitched in gold: wish fulfillment. He was surprised to see that category existed. If that would fulfill whatever wish you had, it felt like an almighty joker that rendered the academic achievement and prosperous business ones unnecessary.

Maybe he was sensitive to such things after seeing the Coin of Nicholas work so well, but he still doubted the charm had any special effects. It was only a local souvenir, no different from a keychain or phone strap.

(Are these mass-produced in a factory, or are they handmade? If they're different for each shrine, I might be able to work out the general area where his sister lives and search for more personal information from there.)

At any rate, he was glad this had not fallen into Anti-Skill's hands.

His own life came first, of course. He could not determine how much he would be able to do about the charm, but he still felt an obligation to search for that sister outside of Academy City now that he had taken it.

The handgun was only meant for self-defense, so it only had two spare magazines despite being full-auto. Hold the trigger down and it would last less than 10 seconds. Carrying that around would probably give the Anti-Skill officers flooding the streets an excuse to kill him, but he would be operating in the middle of the dark side from here on. Just like vitamin supplements and silver ion anti-bacterial spray, he felt like letting go of it would only make things worse.

Especially today.

Anti-Skill was supposed to stand for justice, but they were out of control. It was more frightening than a zombie outbreak.

(He doesn't have a security buzzer, a mobile router, or anything else that could be used to track me. Good.)

There were no sirens this time.

He only heard the scraping of tires against the road. Those were probably electric cars, but right now they felt like assassination weapons that could silently sneak up on him.

“Another one. The suspect died at 4:10 PM. Send the paperwork to the prosecutor.”

“It’s just one surprise after another. I guess that’s the dark side for you. Our usual methods just aren’t working.”

Hamazura pressed his back against the filthy concrete wall and held his breath.

He could not believe what he was hearing. Based on their tone of voice, they were not being sarcastic.

(Does Anti-Skill not realize what they’re doing? But they’re hunting us down and killing us!)

What about what happened in that abandoned building?

He had not seen exactly what the man had done to kill Aoumi Karei when she should have been protected by the repellent...but what if he had not done anything?

But that did nothing to put his mind at ease. This was frightening in a way other than a serial killer wielding an axe or chainsaw with intentional malice. This was like a necessary gear was missing or like an automated process was running while malfunctioning. He imagined a bedridden old person being mercilessly folded up in a defective nursing bed while a faux music box melody played. If the people doing this did not realize their mistake, they would keep doing it. It was like a murder factory where Anti-Skill loaded the people up on the conveyer belt that carried them off to be folded up and stuffed in boxes.

The usual rules did not apply in Academy City today.

Anti-Skill would not protect them.

Both Item and the voice on the phone would die when the time came.

He put the sling bag diagonally across his chest, turned his back on the road full of adults, and continued further into the alleyway.

He had to reach Takitsubo Rikou.

He could not let her be swallowed up into this hell again. No matter what.

Part 2

“What is the meaning of this!?” Shouted Shirai Kuroko after returning to the logistics vehicle the size of a large bus. “You’re just going to continue with the operation!? I requested an internal investigation to determine if my own actions there were inappropriate!! Whoever they might have been, a life was lost on the scene. If you refuse to thoroughly investigate that, you might as well be admitting we are doing something wrong here!!”

“Sh-Shirai-saan.”

The combover and glasses man nervously called out to her from behind, but the cowardly and obedient teacher did not have the guts to grab a middle school girl’s shoulder.

The operators in front of the large computers spoke with voices colder than the machines they operated.

No one was even looking in Shirai Kuroko’s direction.

“For Phase 1, we have completed 1700 surprise attacks made on the targets’ hideouts and everyday spheres of activity. The neutralized dark side targets make up about 40% of the total in Outrank – less than initially hoped. We will now use Response B. Please correct the flowchart to make up for this

delay.”

“Prepare for Phase 2. The targets will be on the run after abandoning their hideouts, so target their predicted destinations. While Phase 1 went after individual targets, Phase 2 will likely allow them to gather into groups as they rush toward the same few safe spots, but the dark side is not a monolith.”

“With more of them around, they might fight each other for the one plank. They will not attack with their apparent numbers, so show off the power of our high-level organization to bring us back on schedule.”

The same thing was happening all across Academy City.

The deadly operation was continuing without delay to cover all of Academy City with something like a giant invisible spider web.

“Was that really an accident?” quietly asked Shirai.

“?”

The man only tilted his head and wiped the sweat from his brow with a handkerchief. The large baby birds printed on it seemed unusually cutesy for a middle-aged man, so it may have been bought for him by a family member.

“The dark side supposedly has a beneficial side and a harmful side. The beneficial side is relatively pleasant and acts as a necessary evil for society to exist. The harmful side is rotten to the core and is filled with unmanageable villains.”

Rakuoka Houfu began to explain something she had not asked about.

It may have been more for his benefit than hers.

“But I believe that way of thinking is a trap laid by the dark side. We can worry about whether our targets are from the beneficial side or the harmful side after they have been arrested. Worry about that now and they will stab us in the back. What happened back there was unfortunate, but we were doing the right thing. Lose sight of that and you will never recover.”

(This would be so much easier if I had Uiharu with me.)

“Rakuoka-sensei, I have requested an internal investigation into myself. If you will do the same for yourself, I will continue to work with you.”

That thought was cut off by a shaking.

The logistics vehicle had started to move. The Pet Breeder case was closed thanks to the suspect’s death, so there was no point in staying here any longer.

“Where are we headed?”

None of the operators answered her.

When she looked to their cold faces illuminated by the glow of the flat screen monitors, she could practically see the message of “Your voice command was not recognized. Please speak more clearly.”

“W-we are probably on our way to a large Anti-Skill station,” said the nervous middle-aged man. “Because that will have a heliport on the roof. We will likely wait until Phase 1 ends at 17:00 and then rush wherever we are needed during Phase 2.”

“...”

The girl could tell a large gear was turning, but what lay at the center of that gear? Was it spinning fruitlessly because a neighboring gear was missing, or had it been linked with a malicious gear?

Did she simply need to blame the middle-aged man who had rushed in to save her?

Could she change this by hating the operators who felt they were in charge and scoffed at everything she said?

(Where are you, Onee-sama?)

“We have a report from Bizen in District 8. His suspect has died, so he is asking us to send the relevant paperwork to the prosecutor. We have accepted his request and HQ will send the paperwork over in short order.”

That cold report told of another life lost.

If she made her attack in the wrong direction, she would only waste her time while many more lives followed.

Part 3

Hamazura Shiage had returned to the apartment building he normally stayed at.

It barely felt like home because he felt so out of place there. He shared it with his girlfriend Takitsubo Rikou, Level 4 Kinuhata Saiai, and Level 5 Mugino Shizuri, so they had ended up in a fairly fancy apartment. The new Item had gathered there. He could never have paid that rent himself. In fact, 80-90% of it was paid by the girls with money they had gotten from who knows where.

In other words...

(Anti-Skill will see this as just another loathsome hideout bought with dirty money.)

He entered through the main entrance's auto-locking door and walked to the elevator hall like usual, but he stopped just before hitting the elevator button. After some thought, he used the emergency stairs instead. The floor he wanted was a long way up. He would normally take the elevator unless he had a very solid reason to think that was a bad idea, but he chose the stairs this time.

He suppressed his impatient heart as he climbed the stairs one at a time. It felt

more like mountain climbing than sprinting. He did not want his legs to be too worn out to move by the time he reached the top.

Why?

Because he had no idea what he might find there.

“...”

He arrived at the floor he wanted.

He slowly took a breath and pulled the gold coin from his pocket to check. The previously dull outer edge had regained its shine all the way around. The Coin of Nicholas was fully charged. That also meant an hour had passed since he used it. This would help him tell the passage of time with his phone off.

A lot could happen in an hour.

He walked down the long hallway to reach his apartment's door. He started to grab the knob but thought better of it. He instead picked up a vase sitting on a table in the public space and poured out its water.

As soon as the metal door grew wet, bluish-white sparks scattered.

Then the door flew open from within.

A muscular man dressed all in black and equipped with a helmet and steel toe boots burst out. He must have realized his surprise attack had failed.

Even Hamazura found it strange how little he hesitated. He slammed the vase down on the Anti-Skill officer's head and *while the man let his guard down due to his helmet* aimed the handgun from close range.

The man must have assumed a vase was this best an amateur delinquent boy could manage, but then Hamazura repeatedly pulled the trigger while aiming at the center of his chest. With a deafening noise, the fully-equipped Anti-Skill officer was blown backwards. He must have gone limp because his bizarrely-shaped submachinegun fell to the floor.

“Takitsubo!!”

Even after all that, the masked Anti-Skill officer only fell on his ass and coughed. Not that Hamazura wanted to have killed him. He kicked the man’s helmeted jaw from the side and then left the entranceway to reach the rest of the apartment.

This was his territory – a sort of sanctuary.

There was no more assumption of safety here now that he had seen a fully-equipped Anti-Skill officer inside.

The shoe box in the entranceway, the cabinets in the living room, the square trapdoor in the floor leading to who knows what, and everything else had all been opened. How could they call themselves the heroes? They were acting like burglars. He checked each room with the gun still at the ready, but he did not find anyone else inside.

Not even any of the girls who should have been here.

“Dammit!!” he spat while stomping his feet in frustration.

Demanding himself to calm down only made it worse.

(Anti-Skill works as a group, so I doubt that bastard would have come here alone. He must have been the last one left behind to check over things after the attack. They ransacked the place because they wanted information. That means they don’t know where their targets are.)

He looked around the disastrous state of the room. He tried to find any information he could. He and his roommates had established a way to leave messages in case of emergencies. Those techniques were part of the reason the stench of the darkness continued to cling to them, but he still checked above the bathroom ceiling and behind the sink’s mirror.

He found a few folded up notes.

“I’ll get some help from a makeup specialist. The plastic surgery route super scares me. -Kinuhata.”

“I’m getting out of here. Try to follow me and you’re dead meat. -Mugino.”

Nothing got those two down.

He was confident they were fine. The problem was the name he had not seen.

His girlfriend’s name.

(Mugino and Kinuhata weren’t here when Anti-Skill arrived. Whether they would have won in the end or not, the walls and ceiling would not be intact if they had fought here. That’s just how it is with a Level 4 and a Level 5. So nothing has happened yet. Anti-Skill broke into our apartment and found nothing, so they started opening all the drawers and gathering what data they could to make up for the delay. It’s fine. Everything is fine. Nothing’s happened ye-)

That was when he heard some static. He looked over to see the Anti-Skill officer lying unconscious in the entranceway. The static had come from the radio attached to his shoulder.

“We’re pushing the schedule up. Hatsuoka, forget that apartment. End your search early and rejoin the main unit. Meltdowner and Offense Armor are big names, but that means they’ll have stricter information management. I doubt you’ll find any data on their hideouts or escape methods just lying around.”

Hamazura breathed a sigh of relief. Big names like the new Item really were on another level. They would not be captured so easily. This told him Mugino and Kinuhata were okay.

Anti-Skill must not have imagined one of their targets was listening in because the voice on the radio continued.

“So we should consider this a success for arresting even one of the residents listed on Outrank: AIM Stalker Takitsubo Rikou. Let’s take her back to the station and get what information we can out of her. Head on back, Hatsuoka.”

“Dammit.”

His vision grew dark. He had not been shot or zapped, but he felt like he would pass out from no more than words.

“Goddammit!!!!”

But it was no use. He still had to face the reality before him.

If Takitsubo Rikou really had been captured by Anti-Skill, he had to find some way of rescuing her. After everything they had done in broad daylight, he hated to think what they would do in the privacy of their station. He had a feeling they would have a record number of “accidents” and “suicides” while questioning suspects tonight.

Especially because Anti-Skill did not seem aware how frightening they were. Almost like a small child that did not know how easy a captured bug was to squish. He was not going to let them look at a bloodied Takitsubo and wonder how that had happened.

(But what can I do?)

He looked down at the unconscious Anti-Skill officer.

Takitsubo was apparently in their truck, but he could not just run out and try to chase them down. Nor could he save his girlfriend by attacking a station filled with hundreds of fully-equipped Anti-Skill officers. Could he steal this guy’s equipment and pretend to be an officer himself? No, that would never work. They were bound to use facial recognition, a fingerprint scan, or some other biometric system when entering and exiting the station.

He checked through the officer’s belongings.

(A 9mm submachinegun, a .45-caliber handgun...why don’t they use the same caliber for both? Anyway, a bulletproof jacket, a radio, a drone...is this tablet to control the drone? And lastly, a first aid kit.)

He had no time. He had repeatedly fired a handgun without a suppressor during the fight in the entranceway and the other residents would have heard the gunshots. It would also rouse suspicions when this Hatsuoka man failed

to return, so it was only a matter of time before more Anti-Skill came running.

Hamazura's focus fell on the man's notepad.

But it did not actually function as a notepad like the ones in old police dramas. It was a symbolic thing that proved one's identity as law enforcement.

(We're in south District 7, so they'll take us to that station.)

This was not his first run in with the law. He had been thrown in holding cells plenty of times after stealing a car or getting into a street fight during his Skill Out days.

And if he knew the location, there was something he could do.

He pulled out the tablet, removed Hatsuoka's glove, and pressed the man's thumb against the fingerprint reader.

He did not have the skill to pull this off.

So he had to make up for the difference by putting his own life at risk.

Part 4

"That was a yes to a bag? Oh, paying by card? Then just hold it next to the register until you hear the beep. How many chopsticks and hand towels would you like?"

"Oh, I'll take two."

"Two? Coming right up."



Inside a perfectly ordinary convenience store, Shirai Kuroko stared at the middle-aged man's stooping back in disbelief.

"They really should have thanked you. And that's a stingy habit you have."

"Y-you don't understand, Shirai-san. An old man like me can't ask for just one pair of chopsticks because that's like admitting to being single and lonely. And it's even worse on Christmas!"

"Also, this is your job, not school committee work, so are you charging that as a business expense?"

"Are you insane! I can't get try to charge this!! Am I going to arrest a criminal with my bento!? Or defuse a complex time bomb with the chopsticks or a toothpick!?"

"Workaholic."

"Umm, I am technically a teacher, so my work is a public service."

He muttered to himself for a bit. Just like with an ascetic monk, the old traditions about someone's profession could make it hard for them to notice how modern people viewed them.

"By the way, um, why do you say they should have thanked me?"

"Sigh. It seems like the appropriate reception for one of our regulars."

"Eh? Shirai...White Spring...a-are you serious? The entire holding company!? You're even richer than I thought!!"

The glasses man gave a start after checking the name on the bag, but the girl in the Tokiwadai uniform wondered why he was making such a big deal about it. The unusual was the usual at that school.

(There are a lot of mysteries about Onee-sama's family too.)

"Ah, but I do love the convenience store at Christmas. Ha ha. Seeing the people at the register tells me I'm not the only one alone on this holy night.

Ah ha ha. Eh heh heh.”

“(Uh, oh. I probably shouldn’t tell him we’re running tests toward automated convenience stores.)”

The twintails middle school girl returned to the logistics vehicle while her kindness toward the man left her feeling a little gloomy.

Even fire trucks and ambulances used convenience stores and gas stations. It might seem rare, but it was common enough to still blend into the city background.

All of the large vehicle’s windows were covered, so once the automatic rectangular door shut, she could no longer tell where in the city she was.

The vehicle slowly began to move.

She stuck her hand in her skirt pocket in order to see where they were going on her phone’s map.

But she was interrupted by a dull crash like something had fallen from heaven to earth.

Something had landed on the roof.

It must have been a significant impact because the special vehicle swerved in an S-shape and slammed on its breaks. Shirai was thrown from her feet, but someone held her in place. She looked over to see it was that skinny but greasy man. She grimaced and then shouted a question.

“What just happened!?”

The operators did not reply. No surprise there.

She clicked her tongue and vanished into thin air. After teleporting outside the stopped logistics vehicle, she found the flat roof dented in at the center and the red lights broken. She appeared just in time to see something roll off from there to the asphalt.

It was a person.

“Wait!”

She ran over in a hurry to find a brown-haired boy. She guessed he was high school aged. Given the situation, he must have fallen from a considerable height. She started to look up on reflex, but then she froze.

She had seen his right hand.

That arm was limply sprawled out at his side, but it held something that appeared to be plastic but was no toy.

It was a real handgun.

(Is he part of the dark side too?)

“Suspect detained. He is in violation of the Swords and Firearms Control Law. Someone look him up on Outrank!!”

She gulped and faced him again.

She also kicked the handgun aside.

“I will not let this one die! Someone call an ambul-”

Just as she shouted that, the boy gathered some strength from somewhere and grabbed at her while lying on the road still covered in some hard snow.

“Shh!!”

She elbowed him in the jaw on reflex.

The delinquent boy rolled along the ground and struggled even though he lacked the strength to get up.

(That was a clean hit. Wh-where did he get this abnormal endurance...or persistence, maybe? I hope he isn't high on something or other.)

“Sh-Shirai-saaan.”

The middle-aged man hesitantly called out to her from the large vehicle’s door.

He was awkwardly moving his hands every which way on a tablet while walking over.

“I-is that how it works? Oh, no! The camera started up! Shirai-san, oh, it just found a match in Outrank. He is indeed part of the dark side. His name is Hamazura Shiage!! He’s flagged for extra caution needed!”

“Is that so?”

“A normal medical stretcher wouldn’t be enough to restrain him. We have a special one with belts to strap him down in the truck, so we can use that.”

“Whatever works!! Just hurry!!”

Part 5

This had been his only option.

Every criminal arrested in a certain area was taken to the same station.

(I-I really thought I was dead.)

So he could not let them take him to the hospital. He felt terribly dizzy, but he had to stay conscious and struggle. He had to make sure this was an emergency arrest.

This way, powerless Hamazura Shiage could be reunited with arrested Takitsubo Rikou.

He was willing to jump out a building window if it would save his girlfriend.

Part 6

“Phase 1 is officially complete. The final work was delayed, but please follow your instructions from central and redistribute your personnel for Phase 2. The real fight is about to begin.”

“Shifting to Phase 2 now. The individual dark side targets have now left their territories and are on the run. We will set up ambushes on the routes suspects are most likely to use and capture them all at once. We can make up for the previous delays here.”

Hamazura Shiage caught bits and pieces of those words while struggling to remain conscious.

He had been thrown into a small room surrounded by chain link fence. This area was divided into several such rooms. These were the station’s holding cells that he had become well acquainted with in the past.

He felt a tugging sensation on his forehead’s skin. There was no mirror here, but feeling with his fingers told him he had some hemostatic tape attached there. That meant he had at least been given the bare minimum of a medical examination and care.

Nevertheless, he did not feel remotely thankful. He did not sense any actual benevolence from the adults there. It was like the fish tank at a sushi shop. They did not want anything ruining his freshness before he was placed on the chopping block.

“So we meet again,” said a voice in the adjacent chain link fence room.

It was a girl in a gawdy and spangled dress with her blonde hair done up in a

complex fashion.

“Y-you?”

“I’m not giving you my name. You can just call me the girl in a dress.” The slender and gorgeous girl laughed while seated on the bed by the wall with her legs crossed. “Are you beneficial or harmful? Not that it matters. Those are just some stupid categories invented by people outside the dark side. Did you choose the easy path to survival too?”

“?”

“Let yourself get arrested and you don’t have to worry about being caught in the gunfire, right? Of course, one wrong move here could get you invited to a secret torture party that violates all the transparency rules.”

(Takitsubo...isn’t in here. Was she given special treatment?)

His possessions had of course been confiscated. His phone in particular had to be a mouthwatering treat for the people pursuing the dark side. What was called stalking when an amateur did it was instead called a stakeout when civil servants did it. Those guardians of justice had no concept of personal information or privacy.

However...

“Okay.”

Anti-Skill would be satisfied after taking his wallet and phone, so he dragged his aching body to its feet and reached out through the familiar barred window.

He gave a quick wave.

“I’m in, so bring me my things, Aneri.”

With a sound like an electric razor, a multicopter drone shaped like a giant crane fly approached the window. That was the surveillance toy the Anti-Skill officer named Hatsuoka had been carrying around. Its cargo claws were

gripping the small sling bag and Hamazura pulled that in through the bars.

It contained someone else's fake passport, a charm, the man on the phone's phone, a first aid kit, and some cash balled up with some rubber bands.

It also contained Hamazura's own Coin of Nicholas.

He hated that he had needed to have the gun confiscated as "evidence" in order to get taken in here, but he still had the mysterious spiritual item.

He first grabbed the man's phone, turned it on, and whispered to his support AI.

"Aneri, unlock this thing and take over. Also erase everything on my confiscated phone. Just brick it. Don't let Anti-Skill get anything from it. Oh, but transfer over as many of the addresses and photos as you can first. For the mobile game save data...I just need two-factor authentication with my social media account, right!?"

The door made from a chain link fence was locked tight, but the light on the lock turned from red to green when he held the phone nearby. A buzzer would normally sound whenever it was locked or unlocked, but that was silenced as the delinquent boy left the holding cell. Same for the camera in the corner of the room, of course.

"My, my. How sad," said the girl in a dress. "You're a lot more capable than last time I saw you. But this also means you aren't just an opportunistic beneficial."

"What about you? Care for a ticket out of here?"

She shook her head. She was going to trust in this safe zone she had found for herself. Maybe interrogation with specialized equipment was no concern to her since her Measure Heart power could forcibly set her emotional distance with the interrogator.

Takitsubo, on the other hand, had no such convenient power. And Hamazura could not trust Anti-Skill right now. She was his one and only girlfriend, so

he was not going to let them go “oops, got carried away” after stopping her heart.

“Aneri, help me out here. Where is Takitsubo?”

The request took less than a second.

A map of the station (only available to those in the department) was displayed on the 6-inch screen and one point was highlighted with a flashing red dot.

Part 7

Shirai Kuroko was constantly wondering if they really had to take this so far.

“Sigh.”

(Onee-sama.)

She was inside the South District 7 General Anti-Skill Station. The floor used for data management was built just like a corporate office. There were no impressively large monitors or white boards covered in photos with arrows drawn between them.

The twintails girl was covering her face with her hands and taking deep breaths, so the combover and glasses Anti-Skill man seemed hesitant to speak to her.

“U-um, are you okay?”

“Did you report your return to the station?”

“Eh? If I did that, they wouldn’t let me work overtime.”

His workaholic side was showing again, but that meant he intended to continue working.

Maybe he thought his mind could not take it if he did not continue with his usual routine.

“What is this dark side nonsense?” muttered Shirai like it was some kind of curse.

She felt a weight in her gut and that man offered her a paper cup of cheap coffee of all things. It was a harsh black coffee with no benefit other than waking you up.

“We’re slapping that label on people without even knowing if it really means anything and then forcibly closing our cases on them using enough violence that people keep ending up dead. Almost makes it look like law enforcement are the real criminals.”

“The dark side does exist.”

Shirai looked up at that. The combover and glasses Anti-Skill man spoke earnestly while pulling his octopus and rice bento and salted chicken skewers from the plastic bag.

That did not go with hot coffee at all and he had not even bought a salad to go with it.

“Judgment only mediates conflicts between students in your schools, but Anti-Skill deals with a lot of cases outside the schools. That gives us a chance to see inside the labs and research institutes, so we have seen the vague outlines of the undefinable thing we call the dark side.”

“...”

She silently accepted the paper cup while he took a sip of his own.

“I do agree that our definition of the dark side is vague. It does not refer to a specific company or industry. The division between beneficial and harmful may not even be accurate.” The skinny man’s words had an odd weight to

them. “Academy City’s darkness contains all forms of illegal work, from professional assassins to researchers deviating from their approved field of work. I think the ‘dark side’ name is accurate. It is like the shadows that inevitably appear when you shine light on a city full of skyscrapers. People might be led there to an extent, but I think that world is something that develops naturally.”

“Have you seen it for yourself?” asked the twintails middle school girl.

He did not provide a yes or no answer, but she still persistently asked more.

“What do you think of this abnormal situation we find ourselves in?”

He remained silent for a while.

He took three sips of his coffee before finally responding.

“I...approve of it. There have been several unexpected accidents on the way, it’s true, but Operation Handcuffs has still brought the outlines of the elusive dark side into clearer focus. I think this is our one and only chance to protect the city’s children.”

He finally made his real point.

“But we still aren’t doing enough. This farce is not enough to defeat the dark side.”

Just then, the entire floor was wrapped in darkness. The fluorescent lights on the ceiling and even the computers on the desks all went dark. A second later, Shirai realized the backup power and emergency exit signs had not come on.

It was currently just past 5 in the evening. A blackout now would not normally mean complete darkness, but this was the same as a department store or electronics store. The windows were all covered by thick sheets, so a power outage would mean complete darkness at any time of day, just like a movie theater or planetarium.

(An attack!? Who would be crazy enough!?)

Shirai immediately pulled out her phone and used its small light to see.

“Break the windows!! We can see if we let in the outside lights!!”

“This was not to blind us,” said the man.

His phone’s light shined up on his face and then he turned the screen toward her to show her the “no signal” indicator in the corner.

“The surface-level communication network is out!?”

“Now no one can hear us scream. Unless we manage to escape this building alive.” The Anti-Skill officer had the look of someone recalling a failure from his distant past. “We were prioritizing the violent harmfuls and leaving the beneficials be since they are a necessary part of society, no matter how much we dislike them. But I doubt any of us will see it that way for much longer. Not once we see the true face of the darkness.”

Rakuoka Houfu said one last thing like he was making a prophecy.

“*They* have arrived.”

Part 8

The darkness took human form.

It was concentrated down into a pair of twin sisters of about 10 years old.

“Hm, hm, hm, hm, hm.”

“Hm, hm, hm, hm, hm.”

They were humming an improvised tune, yet their breaths were in perfect sync.

The girls had unusually large chests for their age and height. Long black hair swayed down at their ankles. Their hair was that long even while done up at the back of their heads, so it was abnormally long. They wore the white coats of a doctor or researcher, but the front was kept closed and they wore a thick medical corset around their hips, making it all look vaguely like Japanese clothing.

Maybe a yukata.

Maybe burial garb.

Their only accessories looked something like the masks at a Shinto festival. Both twins had a humorous-looking gasmask worn on the side of their head. The white coats covered in colorful stains provided no defense against the cold. They stood out from the snowy late-December city, so it almost looked like an unnatural ghost photo. They were simply not the type to care what people thought of them.

They would never be attacked.

They could cover up their presence if need be.

That arrogance could be seen in the complete lack of self-preservation found in their clothing.

They walked right up to the station's main entrance. Anti-Skill had announced their intent to make a complete sweep of the dark side, but the fully-equipped guards must not have put up their guard when they saw the young girls.

One of the officers guarding the entrance smiled and crouched down to their eye level.

"Are you lost? If you don't need anything here, then hurry on home. There are some *scary people* out in the city."

If you could not accurately recognize your enemy, you would not survive.

The disconcerting sound that followed was a lot like something being

dissolved in sulfuric acid.

But this was something else.

“Huh?”

Inside his helmet, the officer looked puzzled by the odd sound reaching his eardrums. It took him a second to realize it was coming from his own body.

By then, his bulletproof and blade-resistant glove and the fingers within had already dissolved away. The mixture of organic and inorganic may not have given him time to perceive it as an injury.

“Nbh!? Gyah, what!? Hot...hot, hot, hot, wait, get it off, I can’t get it off!?”

He swung his right hand around to try to get the glove off, but his entire hand came off instead. And the changes did not end there. When he doubled over and turned toward his partner for help, he found the other guard and been fused to the wall.

Unable to even fall over, the man was plastered to the wall by a sticky goo the same color as his flesh.

“Hm, hm, hm.”

“Hm, hm, hm.”

The twins with their large breasts resting atop their thick medical corsets slowly walked between the two dissolving pieces of art. Their extremely long hair swayed side to side like a grandfather clock’s pendulum and they pulled several test tubes full of colorful liquids from their baggy sleeves.

The large door was made to resist explosions and stop a head-on collision from a large truck, but they did not even need to hold out their small hands for it to turn black, melt away, and become no more than another stain on the ground. As they continued on, the black stain actually altered how it spread to avoid their out-of-season beach sandals.

They entered a large lobby.

There were rows of benches and a long reception counter divided into several numbers, so it was reminiscent of a bank or city hall. Even armed Anti-Skill had ordinary administrative work to complete. They had plenty of less-serious departments, like for lost items and payment of traffic tickets.

The twins walked right into the center of the lobby.

This was an Anti-Skill station, yet they made no attempt to hide their faces with those gas masks decorated with toxic-colored paint.

“What should we do, Kaai?”

“Good question, Youen.”

Time had already stopped by then. Things may have played out differently if they were a violent criminal carrying a handgun or bomb, but no one knew how to process this surreal sight. They were faced with an undeniably deadly threat, but everyone just watched it happen without intervening.

“Pet Breeder was only at *a shallow level*, but she was one of our regular customers.”

“And we wouldn’t want to sit idly by after they challenge us like this.”

So.

It took five more seconds before the place grew as busy as a disturbed hornet’s nest.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking, Decomposer?”

“I think I am, Carrier.”

Kaai was the Decomposer and Youen was the Carrier. Both twins winked.

And they spoke in unison.

“The only appropriate punishment is a total slaughter, don’t you think?”

The lobby was soon filled with the bizarre sound of human flesh, metal, plastic, and all other materials rapidly breaking apart.

Part 9

Screams echoed up from the floor below.

Something like gunshots rang out a moment later and those continued on and on without end. That meant whatever was wrong remained wrong even after concentrated fire from the professional Anti-Skill officers.

“Wh-what in the world is happening!?”

“Shirai-san!!”

Someone grabbed the girl’s hand as she reflexively started in that direction. It was that middle-aged man who had been working at his heated bento until a moment ago. The light in the eyes behind his glasses was much stronger than before.

“If you are going to make a choice here, do so with care. You only have one life. We are now in a world where a single wrong choice can mean death for anyone. That Teleportation is yours. You have the right to escape the building to seek help and safe shelter. No one will blame you for whatever choice you make here.”

“What are you-?”

“This is how the dark side works. These are probably harmfuls. You can’t assume one of the seven Level 5s would survive here or that children or the elderly will be spared. There are no safe zones here. This is already dark side territory. It doesn’t matter if we move in on them or they come to us. Once we are in their territory, any of us can lose our lives at any time!! And when I

say any of us, I mean no exceptions!"

What had he seen in the past? It may have been something so shocking it had broken his spirit and entirely changed his value system. Shirai Kuroko shook her head while he still held her slender wrist.

She looked that experienced one in the eye to give her answer.

"I still choose to fight!!"

Her Teleportation allowed her to break free of the three-dimensional restrictions, so she leaped to the floor below. She could move more than 80 meters at a time with her power, so moving straight down to the first floor was a simple task.

But that may have been a mistake.

"!?"

Her vision blurred.

Something was wrong with her eyes and nose. A powerful stench was physically wearing down her mind.

(Is this...a gas!?)

The floor was dark from the blackout, but what she could see was badly distorted. She assumed the unidentified odor was messing with her senses, but she finally realized that was wrong.

The walls were rotting.

The ceiling was bowing down. Rats were running around on the floor, which was full of holes like in an abandoned building. The modern reinforced concrete building looked like an abandoned home that had soaked up plenty of moisture at the bottom of a dam.

"Ah ha ha ha ha ha."

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha.”

She heard laughter from further in, but it was the fake and wooden laughter you might find in a bad stage play. That actually made it hard to tell what emotion it carried.

The figures Shirai could see were twin sisters of elementary school age.

That itself was not malicious, but they were as badly out of place here as small mascot sandals lined up on the edge of a rooftop or a stuffed animal floating down a muddy river.

“This is Judgment!!” shouted Shirai to shake off her dizziness. “Who are you!?”

They were not listening. Their world was so closed off they may not have even seen her as human.

The young girls pulled each other close, pushing together their large breasts which were horribly imbalanced with their height, and they spoke in a singsong voice.

“Hey, Kaai. Someone’s still alive.”

“Oh, dear, Youen. But don’t worry. She’ll be dead soon enough. I don’t feel like waiting, so how about we ignite this floor and move on to the next one?”

“Do you think she’s familiar with the dark side etiquette to survive our initial attack? I wonder how deep in she is. A corrupt Judgment member, maybe?”

“Even if she is on the dark side, she’ll only be one of those opportunist beneficiais. We can’t expect much from her.”

Ignite.

Shirai still did not know what these twins were up to, but that word was bad news. She focused her mind so she could send in a metal dart the instant they pulled out a lighter, a match, or anything of that nature.

“I mean, it’s not like we can even count the bodies when they all rotted away like that.”

Shirai Kuroko’s soul was pinned in place by words that should have had no physical power whatsoever.

“And even if someone did survive somewhere on this floor, we can blow them away easily enough now that the others have rotted enough for methane to fill every nook and cranny.”

Bodies, rotted, blow them away, methane.

Only then did Shirai realize the source and identity of the odor entering through her nose and mouth, passing through her windpipe, and filling her lungs. It was not just the walls, ceiling, and floor that were falling apart. What was that the squeaking rats were stepping on? What had happened to all the Anti-Skill officers who should have been here? What were those dark and sticky stains splattered everywhere? The answers to all those questions hit her at once.

Those twins had caused the people here to rot away while still alive.

Shirai Kuroko had been breathing in the flammable gas that caused corpses to swell out from within.

“Ugh!?”

Efficiency and logic did not come into play. When she held a hand over her mouth and doubled over, the twin sisters grinned sweetly while holding each other close and squishing their chests together.

The Decomposer and the Carrier pulled something out like a magic trick. The twins held a pencil-sized electric candle lighter like the bride and groom at a wedding.

Their small fingers reached the trigger and produced a solid “click”.

The stench and gases of death had transformed the first floor into a single giant bomb, so it all exploded.

Part 10

A deep rumbling shook the entire reinforced concrete building.

“Shit, what is it now!?” cursed Hamazura Shiage with the borrowed phone in hand.

He heard several people running around in the darkness. Aneri, his one ray of hope, had gone silent. A look at the phone said it had no signal. Communications must have been cut off when the power went out.

He was alone from here on.

He used his memory to make his way to the room with the red dot on the map.

It was dark and all the security cameras and sensors were dead, but this was still hard to believe. If the Anti-Skill officers moving around were just a little more cautious about their surroundings, they would have found Hamazura curled up in a corner and holding his breath.

Something major had to be happening.

Someone had chosen to play the “direct attack” card that he had immediately rejected. That was convenient for him, but he doubted the monster would take his side. He had to keep in mind that he was effectively attempting to rob a burning building in the middle of a major urban riot.

Once the adults’ footsteps left, he moved out into the dark hallway.

The room he wanted was not far away.

“Takitsubo!!”

The instant he opened the door and stepped in, a powerful impact hit his right wrist. By the time he groaned, someone had already grabbed his collar and slammed his back against the wall. The phone’s screen shined light up from where it had fallen to the floor.

His assailant was a professional Anti-Skill officer.

He could not breathe.

Had this man been waiting in the dark room without lighting up his flashlight or phone to catch any intruders by surprise?

He had close-cropped black hair and muscles thick enough to look like armor. He had the stereotypical look of an authoritarian gym teacher. The delinquent boy would never have wanted to get anywhere near him even under ordinary circumstances.

“Gah!?”

“Hamazura!!”

His feet were already lifted from the floor. Nothing he did with his hands could dislodge that thick arm from his collar. Nevertheless, his world seemed to expand endlessly when he heard that girl calling his name.

“I’m...fine.”

It was Takitsubo Rikou.

He had been searching this entire time for that shoulder-length black hair, those vacant eyes, and that pink track suit.

Maybe Anti-Skill had simply not wanted to move a suspect around while security was so unstable, but the fact remained that his girlfriend was still alive in this shitty world!!

“Agh!! I swear I’ll save you. So don’t worry about a thing, Takitsubo!!”

“Another dark side punk?” asked a deep voice directly in front of him.

They had to do something about this man before they could have their emotional reunion. Hamazura briefly focused on his Coin of Nicholas, but he was unsure if he should use it here. It worked for things like “open this door” or “win me this roulette round”, but he did not know if it would work for something like “let me defeat this guy”. He wanted to avoid wasting a wish and having to wait another hour for it to charge.

“Anti-Skill will not give in to anyone. We will drag all of you out into the light, dark side. Handcuffs allows for no exceptions.”

Just then, something landed on the man’s arm.

Its surface shined even in the darkness, but...was that an earwig?

And it was not alone.

The next thing Hamazura knew, the man’s right arm was completely obscured by all the bugs covering it.

“Gwoh!?”

Once the Anti-Skill officer finally noticed, he let go of Hamazura’s collar and flailed his right arm. But the earwigs would not let go. In fact, Hamazura heard a sound like pouring sand as more of them dropped from the ceiling like a waterfall. They enveloped the man’s upper body and then crawled into his bulletproof jacket, gloves, and other equipment.

“Gya-gya-gya-gya-gya-gyaaaaaaaaahhhh!!!????”

Hamazura could not bear to watch any longer. Once the dark silhouette was covered from head to toe, it began to crumble from within. It was unclear if he was being torn apart, eaten, or dissolved, but he was no longer in one piece. Hamazura was presented with an obvious death without ever seeing a corpse or an injury, just like he had watched a metal drum crushed inwards with someone stuffed inside.

He could not even run over to try to help.

Those were not just earwigs. They had something else to them – maybe a chemical and maybe a pathogen.

“Get away from there, Hamazura!!”

He had fallen to the floor, so Takitsubo called out to him. He had come here to save her, but here she was saving him. If she had not pulled him back toward her, he may have been destroyed psychologically rather than physically.

He detected an odor that stung his eyes. It was like something rotting, but not like kitchen garbage.

He heard a quiet thunk and then saw someone else standing in the room. Even though he did not recall blinking. It was a girl with twintails. The middle school girl had appeared out of thin air, but all she did was move over to the wall and then slide down to sit on the floor.

She was the one who had handcuffed him.

The armband on her right arm said she was an esper from Judgment.

“Gh...”

He noticed she was bruised all over and there were scorch marks on her uniform from some school or another.

She was burned and battered.

She had the look of someone who had narrowly escaped a fire or an explosion. He had been in his fair share of fights, but he could not even hazard a guess about any possible internal damage.

“I couldn’t...teleport away...in time.”

“Hey, what’s going on?”

She did not answer his hesitant question. She appeared to have passed out.

“Don’t just pop in here and then die! What happened!? Aren’t you Judgment people supposed to protect us at times like this!?”

He heard some quiet footsteps.

He had no idea what was happening, but this sudden visitor had apparently brought a new threat along with her. She had apparently been teleporting out of danger, but he really wished she had chosen any room but this one.

He heard some giggling laughter as a pair of twins casually peeked into the room.

They were short, yet had weirdly large chests.

“Kaai, there’s some people in here. Why not get them bitten to infect them?”

“No, Youen, this is an interrogation room. We need to be careful in who we target. That boy there has a pretty stupid face, but I don’t think he’s Anti-Skill or Judgment.”

“Hey, Decomposer? Why bother discriminating after coming this far?”

“Well, Carrier, the more careful your aim, the more they will despair at their chances of escaping.”

He did not dare even breathe.

He could tell his life was in their hands. If this room was full of the methane gas use in lighters, then a single spark from them would fill the room with an explosive blast.

The unconscious twintails girl was apparently their target, but he could not predict what they would do in this situation.

Why should they care if they accidentally killed him or Takitsubo? There was no penalty outside of whatever rules they were using to score their own performance. They might just take those two lives as casually as they would kick a small stone along the way to school.

One of the twins grinned over at him while playing with a rat at her feet.

“Do you want to live?”

“I do.”

He planted his knees down on the *dark stain* spreading across the floor and folded his hands in front of his face. The twins grinned in satisfaction while he looked like a loser with a gun’s muzzle pressed against the back of his head.

“*And please don’t kill the Judgment girl either. I don’t want to see anyone else die.*”

The twins looked taken aback.

The flow of time stopped.

“Pff.”



One of them burst out laughing while they pressed their cheeks together.

“Ah ha ha ha!! If you want, mister. You’re hilarious!!”

“Are you sure, Kaai? What happened to having careful aim?”

“It’s fine, Youen. We do need to leave a few of them alive to spread word of the fear.”

It all changed there.

The girl called Kaai put on a meltingly sweet smile and blew a kiss toward the pathetic boy.

“I quite like people who go out of their way to defile themselves.”

Youen sighed, giving the impression that her sister did this a lot.

“Tell everyone of this fear.”

That was a command. In a school society, school years created an absolute hierarchy, but this little monster looked down on him.

She explained the only way he and Takitsubo were going to survive.

“Tell them the dark side will not go away. Tell them what happens when they so foolishly try to shine a light on the darkness. Tell them what becomes of every fool who even thinks of it.”

He could not even nod, but the girl narrowed her eyes in satisfaction, pulled her head back out of the room, and walked down the hallway with her sister. The light sound of their beach sandals was joined by intermittent eruptions of shouts and screams.

Living creatures.

And infectious disease.

The darkness controlled by Kaai the Decomposer and Youen the Carrier was

on another level altogether.

Part 11

“Looks like nothing’s actually broken. Okay.”

“Hamazura, I’ll apply pressure here, so you tie that on tight.”

After tightening a bandage using the light of the phone, he attached a metal clasp.

Since runaways could not visit the doctor, that simple first aid kit was a valuable asset for them, but he could not just leave that twintails girl there to die.

She did not wake up even when he poured disinfectant on her wounds, so she must have been out cold. He had covered up most of the wounds he could see, but he did not know what things were like inside her. She was breathing, though, so he would have to hope Anti-Skill could take care of the rest.

Assuming any of them were still alive.

“There’s nothing more we can do. Let’s get out of here.”

“Mhh.”

He had not expected this now.

Takitsubo Rikou expressionlessly puffed out her cheeks.

“By the way, Hamazura, did those twins do anything to you?”

Did he have some weird mold or bug on his back? He doubted he could have missed anything with how powerful that infection had been, but now he was

worried.

“When the one blew you a kiss.”

“Bff!? That was an accident, a surprise attack, a force majeure!!”

His flustered shouting only made his girlfriend act like a grumpy cat.

Anyway, he turned off the phone’s light and cautiously exited the interrogation room. A few explosions erupted down the hallway, but those were not the work of the mysterious twins. He was throwing burning pieces of paper into the darkness to intentionally detonate the gas up ahead and create a safe zone for them.

Methane gas was dangerous, but it could be contained to a single space. By dividing things up with a door or shutter before detonating it, the explosion would remain small and it would safely “use up” all the gas.

It worked, but nothing else happened either.

He clenched his teeth and had to stay focused lest his feet stop moving.

“Hamazura.”

“Is there really no one else left in here?”

There were sticky strings stretched across the entire floor.

The stuff dangling from the ceiling looked like natto, but he doubted it was such an ordinary type of bacteria. There was no sign of anyone here anymore. The place had been packed full of fully-equipped Anti-Skill officers, not to mention the communication operators and administrative workers.

All that remained of those people was the disturbingly sticky and dark slime staining the floor and walls.

Hamazura had said he wanted to live and that may have sent the twins in this direction instead. What if they had killed someone else here because they had chosen to spare the twintails girl on a whim? He had nothing to prove that,

but he still felt a great weight in his stomach.

And he doubted this was over. The dark side had made a show of force, but Anti-Skill controlled all 23 districts with its military might. Things would only escalate from here. Anti-Skill was sure to pull out something even more bizarre next.

“What do we do now, Hamazura?”

“We escape outside of Academy City.”

“...”

“Anti-Skill is serious about this. I’ve personally seen them kill two people and I’m sure they’ve killed even more than I didn’t see. The adults really are trying to crush the dark side. I don’t know what standards they’re using to purify the city, but I do know that the two of us are on some list called Outrank. So they’ll get us if we don’t leave. For today, *hiding in some deeper and darker place will not be enough to safely lose them.*”

Even in the darkness, he could tell she was frowning.

“But I doubt we can cross the outer wall so easily,” she said. “The four gates will be on max alert, so trying to break through will only get us killed.”

“I know that, but I do have an i-”

He stopped talking because he saw someone blocking the way ahead in the long hallway.

“Hamazura.”

The voice he heard meant someone had escaped harm.

That was a relief, but he could not relax yet. He was not supposed to be here and, based on how Anti-Skill had been acting today, they might just gun down any suspect without giving him a chance to explain himself.

But that was not what happened.

They spoke to him instead.

“Is that you, Hamazura!? What are you doing here!?”

He recognized the voice.

This was not his first time here. He had been thrown into this place’s holding cells plenty of times after stealing a car or getting into a street fight during his Skill Out days.

So he knew some of the officers who worked here.

(Yomikawa Aiho.)

That teacher had her long black hair tied back. She normally wore a green track suit, but she was in a sinister black bulletproof jacket today.

He was scared.

He was, but while they did not get along, he knew she was not a bad person.

He briefly considered abandoning all his plans and asking her to save his girlfriend, but then he remembered the reality he was living in. Or maybe he just did not know the difference between a jinx and a wrong assumption.

Regardless, he held an arm out to the side after only a slight delay. He guarded his girlfriend with his body and raised his voice.

“Outta the way. I can’t trust you!!”

“Do this and you’re a criminal, Hamazura. Just tell me why you’re here and the grownups can handle it if necessary!! That’s how it’s supposed to work!!”

“You’re not the only one I would need to trust!” he shouted back.

It was unusual for him to be able to overpower her with words. She always had the right thing to say and used that to crack down on even the smallest crimes.

Yet he was overpowering her.

That seemed to show the hesitation within her.

“Yomikawa, you’ve seen it yourself, haven’t you? *Something isn’t right today*. Something is preventing your ideal of justice from working like it’s supposed to. If I don’t figure out what’s causing it, leaving this in your hands will only bring death!! I’ve already seen it happen for myself!! At least twice!!”

“Then what *are* you going to do?”

It took her a bit before she got out that reply.

She really had lost her edge. But there were types of pain that could only be produced with a blunted edge.

“Are you going to justify picking up a gun and committing more crimes you know are wrong just because you needed to protect someone you care for? Only you will accept that justification. Society won’t. They’ll check the laws and judge you guilty!”

“...”

“Operation Handcuffs isn’t an evil thing. The idiot standing at the top of the world is tearing apart his own life to accomplish this, so I won’t let it go wrong!!”

She was not just trying to keep up appearances.

He could not ignore the words of someone standing in the same field as him.

“You have some vision for the future, don’t you? You wouldn’t have come all this way to save that girl otherwise.”

Yomikawa stepped forward.

It was just one step, but it was a heavy one.

“Then don’t destroy that ideal future with your own actions here!! It’s the dark side that justifies their own actions with exceptions like that! So leave all the pain-in-the-rear fighting to the grownups! I promise you we’ll treat you well!!”

He was not moved by her words.

He had already seen that kind of promise fall apart.

But could he really force his way past Yomikawa when she was saying this? His mind focused on the gold coin in his pocket. That was the only real move he had left. It would give him 100% odds just once here. If he used that, could he get Yomikawa away from him without hurting her!?

He thought about it and raised his lowered head.

He opened his mouth.

“Yomi-”

Something hot and hard crashed into the center of his chest.

He had no idea what had happened.

The deafening gunshot seemed to come after a short delay like thunder. But he did not have the presence of mind to actually figure out what had happened. The powerful blast launched him backwards into some glass protected by a thick sheet.

With a loud shattering sound, he was thrown outside the window.

“Hamazura!!”

Part 12

“Gh.”

Shirai Kuroko awoke to a sharp gunshot.

She found herself in a small room instead of the first floor lobby. Was this an interrogation room? She briefly had trouble remembering how she had gotten here, but then she noticed someone peering down at her face.

It was an overbearing middle-aged man.

“A-are you okay, Shirai-san?”

“Thanks to you.”

Seeing a combover and glasses was not how she liked to wake up. Only after sitting up from the floor did she realize she had been lying down. She felt an odd tugging at her skin. She checked in the interrogation room’s large mirror to see bandages and gauze all over her.

“I guess I have to thank you for treating my wounds.”

“Oh, um, that wasn’t me.”

“?”

Then who had done it? Rakuoka Houfu showed no interest in answering that question. It seemed like a long shot, but was the camera in the monitoring room on?

She stepped out into the hallway to find a horrible stench and lots of dark stickiness.

She saw two surviving members of Anti-Skill out there, but they were staring at a broken window for some reason. Some pink fabric was caught on the jagged edge. It was the synthetic material used for track suits and the like.

“*The girl fell with him?*” blankly muttered a young Anti-Skill man carrying a battle rifle that could be used at long or close range. “Anyway, we’re safe now, Yomikawa-san. Are you hur-”

“Did...you...”

Yomikawa’s trembling lips moved.

The next thing Shirai knew, the woman had grabbed at her subordinate’s collar.

“Did you aim your gun at a child, Naminō!? What were you thinking!?”

The brown-haired man looked puzzled by her question.

“H-he was only some dark side punk. And if he snuck into the general station, he’s clearly a harmful, right?”

“Only...*only*!? These kids’ lives are our responsibility!! Their parents are trusting us to protect them!!!!”

Her words did no good. The man appeared to shrink down, but he showed no sign of learning his lesson. It was like he had no interest in why she was angry and was only trying to weather the storm.

Shirai could tell just from watching that common sense had broken down.

She chose to approach them and the short walk was enough to wind her. The skinny combover and glasses man was not sure what to do. He may have wanted to lend her his shoulder, but was unsure if he should really carelessly touch a middle school girl. He was such a strict rule follower that he would overreact at times.

“Are you the only two still standing?” asked Shirai. “What happened to all the others???”

No one responded.

They were hesitant to speak the accurate number of losses out loud, which was why they had only received the numbers from a report over the radio. The young Anti-Skill officer holding the battle rifle shook his head with Yomikawa still grabbing at his collar.

And he gave the answer.

“South District 7, District 8, District 17...and District 1 are all down.”

“1...”

Yomikawa was speechless despite yelling so much earlier.

That was understandable. District 1 was the government district where all the city's administrative functions were gathered. The general station there also functioned as the central station that connected all the others. In terms of the police outside the city, it was like the National Police Agency's headquarters.

Yet it had fallen so easily.

They were lucky to even have an accurate list of fallen stations with the top of the command structure broken off. Anti-Skill could easily cease to function as an organization unless they reorganized to bring their network back up.

“I told you,” said a voice. It was Rakuoka Houfu, the Anti-Skill officer with a combover and glasses. “We aren't doing enough. If we really want to clean up the dark side, we have to treat it like a war.”

Something had gone terribly wrong with Operation Handcuffs.

Yomikawa Aiho bit her lip as one of those who had set this in motion along with the new Board Chairman.

Part 13

His consciousness flashed in and out.

Landing on a pile of snow removed from the road had apparently cushioned his fall. Without that, the fall would have killed him. Falling from a great height was far more deadly than it was depicted in movies and dramas.

Yes, Hamazura Shiage was alive.

“Hamazura.”

He heard his girlfriend calling out to him from nearby. She must have jumped out of the same window, but she was clinging to him instead of checking on her own injuries.

“Are you okay? Hey, Hamazura, you’re scaring me. Please wake up. Don’t leave me behind.”

He moved his trembling fingers to unbutton his jacket.

A smooth metal panel lay below. It belonged to the bulletproof jacket of the Anti-Skill officer he had knocked out in the apartment. He had known things were bound to get bad, so he had taken a precaution against that negative prediction.

And he had been proven right.

Asking anyone in Academy City for help would only get them killed. The adults were a threat, no matter what any individual one tried to do. The back alleys, the depths of the dark side, and every other loophole would be filled in. If they wanted to survive, they had to move outside the walls. He had no idea when Anti-Skill would return to normal, but for now, they had to leave.

They had to find freedom in the world outside.

Still collapsed on his back, he rubbed his girlfriend’s head and made a suggestion.

“Let’s go to the airport.”

“?”

“We can’t try to climb over the wall or try to get through the gates. Security will be so tight we’ll never get close to it. All of the low-level dark side people going for that idea are probably being torn to mincemeat by machinegun fire from unmanned helicopters or the robots on the wall right about now. Trying to be clever won’t work here. There might be hundreds of options, but they all lead to dead ends. Trying to climb the wall, trick the gate, or hide inside a long-distance truck will only end in failure.”

“But.” Takitsubo shook her head to reject his idea. “Security will be tight at District 23’s airport too. There are several layers of security and I doubt we can get on a plane while hiding our faces.”

“We just have to find a way to not rouse suspicions while showing our faces.”

He pulled a key item out of the small sling bag.

The passport was printed with a blatantly false name: School Boy.

He had no idea what about it was so impressive, but maybe it was impressive because an amateur could not explain it. If that voice on the phone was using it, it had to be a quality product.

He powered off his phone with a trembling hand and then held up the passport. He held it up within range of speeding sensor set up along with a traffic light.

The paper glittered.

The infrared produced a rainbow light thanks to the cutting-edge imperfect crystal printing. It looked simple enough, but the crystallographic defects creating irregular gaps in the thin layer of artificial crystal was a counterfeiting protection method that no one could ever reproduce. Supposedly, anyway.

But that had been proven wrong.

“The dark side must have a technician capable of making perfect counterfeit

IDs. We'll go talk with them and get our own. Then we have a free pass onto a safe flight out of here."

Map

List of OP.“Hand_Cuffs”

SOUTH DISTRICT 7 GENERAL ANTI-SKILL STATION



Shirai Kuroko Judgment



Rakuoka Houfu Anti-Skill

IN FRONT OF SOUTH DISTRICT 7 GENERAL ANTI-SKILL STATION



Hanazura Shige Beneficial



Takitsubo Rikou Beneficial

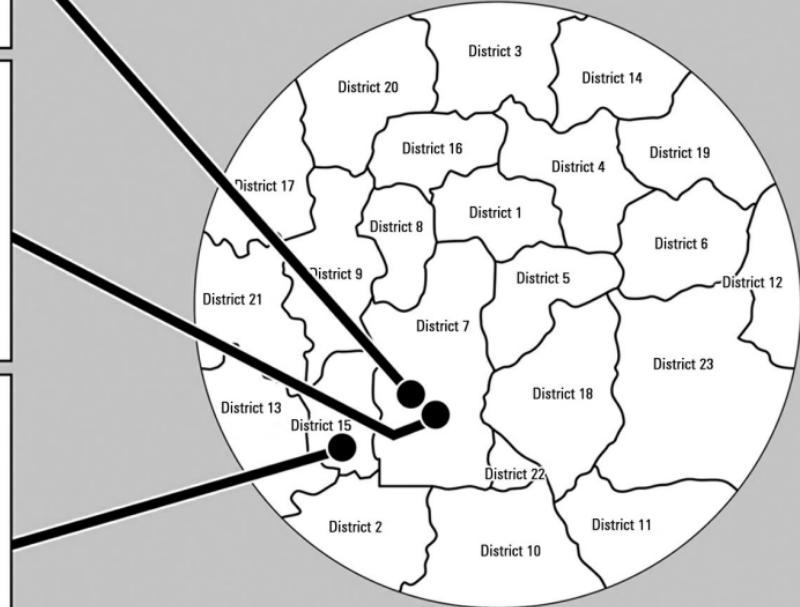
DISTRICT 15 LUXURY HOTEL



Hanatsuyu Kaai Harmful



Hanatsuyu Youen Harmful



Goldenagato | mp4directs.com

South District 7 General Anti-Skill Station

Shirai Kuroko – Judgment

Rakuoka Houfu – Anti-Skill

In Front of South District 7 General Anti-Skill Station

Hamazura Shiage – Beneficial

Takitsubo Rikou – Beneficial

District 15 Luxury Hotel

Hanatsuyu Kaai – Harmful

Hanatsuyu Youen – Harmful

Between the Lines 1

“Your silence tells me it wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

She was not wearing any real clothing.

A girl who looked only about 10 was pulling a red cloth thinner than a bed sheet up to her flat chest. Her long strawberry blonde hair was divided into several fried shrimps and had rose decorations woven in.

She was standing and leaning against the cell’s hard and cold bars.

The Level 5 with white hair and red eyes was seated on the floor in the adjacent cell.

Accelerator was Academy City's #1 and the new Board Chairman, but he was now awaiting trial.

R&C Occultics CEO Anna Sprengel grinned.

She continued the conversation between two who were in position to take the world for themselves.

"I would love to hear *how it was supposed to go*, but maybe that's irrelevant at this point. Hee hee. The fund you secretly gathered for the children taken into custody is going to go to waste at this point. Same for the new life you had prepared for them."

"Did you get yourself thrown into that cell just so you could say this?" His voice was icy. If voices carried a literal temperature, this one might have frozen the average person to death. "Is that why you let yourself lose?"

"Didn't I tell you? My main experiment is already over. This is no more than gathering some data in the time leftover."

Anna, however, sounded carefree. The chill of his words bounced off of her like water on youthful skin.

"Isn't that what giant IT companies do? There is no such thing as too much when it comes to big data. Are the people who obsess over yesterday's weather forecasts fools? Is it all wasted effort? No, there is so much you can learn by poring over all the weather maps from the past century. The true fools are the ones who mock those efforts without putting in any work themselves."

"..."

"Hee hee. Now, which one are you? Those who laugh at other's effort often don't realize the value of those efforts. You have chosen to cut away the dark side and take a different path, but do you truly understand their value?"

The chief executive officer continued smiling at the silent Board Chairman.

Her expression was so uniform it was creepy.

“Yes, there is a reason it turned out this way.”

Her long hair gave off a rosy scent as she waved her small hand through a gap between the bars.

“If you don’t discover what it is soon, it will all fall apart. The horrific tragedy you see playing out now will seem like nothing compared to what happens then. ...By the way, I notice you haven’t revealed your name even as Board Chairman. Why not take it a step further and wear a mysterious mask whenever you make an appearance for the cameras?”

Chapter 2: Dark Side — Ghost, Android, and...

Part 1

Tires scraped against the asphalt as they slipped to the side.

Academy City's District 1 was a government district and that loud noise seemed out of place in such an orderly and coldly inhuman area. Especially when it was mixed in with screams and sounds of destruction.

“Hey, wasn’t that one of our prisoner transport vehicles!?”

“It didn’t just slip on a snowy road! Something’s happening inside it! Move, get down!!”

The 20-ton mass of metal swerved along a large S, broke through a makeshift barrier, knocked away the special vehicle on the other side, and crashed into the front gate of the general Anti-Skill station. After coming to a stop in front of the building, an eerie silence hung over the prisoner transport vehicle, but that did not last long.

Everyone assumed the sound of sparks was from the side door being cut away.

But in fact, the bulletproof and blast-resistant armor was cut through a centimeter out from the door.

The door collapsed outwards and a strange girl emerged from within. She looked to be 13 or 14. She had long hair colored an inhumanly bright red and she was not at all dressed for winter. The colors covering her undeveloped body were orange and black. She was only wearing something like a racing swimsuit with the toxic coloration of an insect. Surprisingly, she was barefoot.

Her bangs were cut cleanly across, she had a smartphone on each shoulder and she had several skinny tubes in the belts around her thighs. Some were rolled-up silicone keyboards and others were clear bottles full of some kind of thick liquid that definitely did not look like a drink.

Her pupils mechanically expanded and contracted without any other change to her expression and she held a sixty-centimeter blade that was much too large and thick to call a knife. It looked lot like a machete used to clear one's way through the jungle, but it may not have belonged to any existing category.

She had used that to cut through the armor.

The vehicle's wall was designed with bullets and bombs in mind, but it had been like gelatin to her.

The atmosphere froze. Everyone stood still like they had failed to read in these new rules, triggering an error. They had never imagined anyone would make it this far toward Anti-Skill's center.

“The dark side!?” someone shouted.

“Good grief.”

A skinny old man wearing a lab coat over a dark blue jumpsuit followed the girl out of the vehicle.

He could have been a researcher or a mechanic. The glint in his eyes felt like it would fit either profession.

Sparks flew as his handcuffs were cut through. Not the chain, the two loops.

“Ladybird-kun, there must have been a gentler way to handle that.”

“You were captured before I could hijack a vehicle, Sensei, so I used the Anti-Skill prisoner transport vehicle to bypass the need to fight at three checkpoints. That has saved us 250 seconds.”

“Unlike you, I am human. Crush any one of my organs and I die.”

“I complied with all safety standards. If you wish for even greater safety, you would need to replace your body with carbon muscles and a heavy metal skeletal frame. I recommend depleted uranium.”

“Now I’m worried what your idea of safety standards are. Really, it’s a miracle I’m still alive.”

When the girl known as Ladybird spoke, there was a mismatch between the movement of her lips and her actual voice. Almost like she was a ventriloquist’s dummy.

The paralysis finally wore off for the surrounding Anti-Skill officers and a few of them drew their handguns.

“What are you doing here, dark side!? You damn harmfuls!!”

“Oh?” The old man looked legitimately puzzled. “Have you not heard what is happening outside? The confusion among your ranks must be worse than I thought. Maybe there was no need to pay you a visit and cripple your network after all. If so, I do apologize.”

A dry “bang!!” rang out and an Anti-Skill officer was pushed back by the recoil.

Everyone assumed the old man would collapse, but he did not.

A few of the officers pulled their triggers half in a panic, but for some reason, it was Anti-Skill who had someone collapse from a bullet wound to the head, chest, or other vital point each time.

Ladybird had expressionlessly raised the machete in her right hand.

That was all. When a bullet came whizzing in, she would accurately detect it, raise the thick blade in its path, and use the deflected bullet to attack Anti-Skill.

Yes, she redirected it toward *someone other than the person who had fired it*.

Anti-Skill had been a united front at first, but now their eyes turned toward their companions.

None of it seemed to bother the old man as he toyed with his own gloves.

“Ladybird-kun.”

“Yes, Sensei?”

“Kill them all. We have no other option.”

Screams continued for a while after that.

The old man known only as “Sensei” walked deeper into the building with the pace of someone strolling along their usual walking path. A storm of red, black, and orange raged around him. Anti-Skill was firing handguns and submachineguns to try to stop him, but not a single bullet hit him. Hitting him was not possible in a world where Ladybird could take control of a flying bullet with brute force and send it back the way it had come. That was like trying to fight a stealth fighter using a hot air balloon.

Their cutting-edge bulletproof and blast-resistant equipment was meaningless.

They could not break that thick machete with bullets or even with artillery-sized heavy weaponry.

“It is made of Saintium. That element’s metallic bond strength is fifty-six times greater than depleted uranium, so it can easily stop a warship’s armor-piercing artillery. Of course, only Ladybird-kun could hope to pick it up. As for your equipment, I am grateful that prisoner transport vehicle had plenty of horsepower.” The old man sounded like he was just having a casual chat.

“Now, you won’t find it mentioned in any chemistry textbooks because it’s

an artificial element that doesn't exist in nature. A speck of it large enough to see probably costs more than any of the cars driving around out there. It was not easy running the accelerator at full power long enough to get this much. I would have been in trouble if it hadn't shown the results I wanted."

Anti-Skill must have shifted things up to the next level because a grenade was thrown from around the corner.

Ladybird accurately detected the flying explosive and swung her machete horizontally toward it. She hit the grenade back like a baseball and the blast and fragments shredded the Anti-Skill officer.

But then she heard a solid sound at her feet.

The officer had thrown two grenades just to be safe.

"..."

She tilted her head, making her red hair flutter, but she did not hesitate to act.

She got down on top of the grenade to suppress the blast with her own body.

A muffled boom rang out, but that was all.

She slowly stood back up and stood by the old man's side like nothing had happened. There was no red of blood. Her racing swimsuit and soft skin were both entirely unscathed. Blast resistant equipment was not enough to explain that.

"A-a machine?" The officer who had been badly injured by the first grenade moved his lips while down on the floor. "Is that one of those cyborgs we've heard about?"

"That term is about two generations out of date. You need to update your thinking if you hope to talk about a *Kihara* like me."

Ladybird's pupils mechanically expanded and contracted as she walked barefoot from the entranceway to a hallway. She made sure to end the life of an Anti-Skill officer reaching for a gun with a trembling hand.

She pulled one of the bottles from the belt on her thigh, drank some of the contents, and then dumped the rest over her head as if drinking it was not enough. The thick clear liquid dripped down her hair and skin and gave her outfit the unique sheen of a racing swimsuit. That was a room temperature superconductive fluid that allowed her to safely release all her excess energy, but it was also a discharge machine oil that reduced the frictional wear on her joints. That sounded simple enough, but combine that with an outer space nuclear reactor and building a manned space probe was within reach.

However, the old man was more troubled by what he saw in front of him.

“Ladybird-kun, you could really stand to be more tactful.”

“Explain to me why you equipped me with parts that trouble you when they show through my clothing.”

The old man brought a hand to his forehead when the girl did not bat an eye while fixing the butt of her racing swimsuit with a finger bent like a hook. They had no business with the elevators or emergency stairs. If they only wanted to slaughter the people here, they would have simply brought down the building from outside. Ladybird’s specs allowed her to keep up with rifle bullets using that Left Arm sword that was 56 times tougher than depleted uranium, so it was curious why she had even bothered to enter the building.

They had business deeper inside. That was when his outdated phone rang. He pressed the small button with a finger inside thick engineering gloves. That model protected against injuries and the cold while also allowing for precise movement. That sounded simple, but even professional snipers had a hard time finding one they liked.

“You’ve done it now, Kihara-kun,” said a voice on the phone.

“I would really like to throw those words right back at you. Your silly betrayal here has already brought down three Kiharas.”

“This is all the newly-appointed Board Chairman’s doing. The twelve of *us* did not agree to it.”

“Such arrogance. Did you really expect me to accept that? My life is on the line here. And there is no need to hide the fall of Neoka Norito. It changes nothing here, but hiding it does make it harder to trust you, *Board of Directors.*”

The racing swimsuit girl kicked down a metal door deep inside the building and escorted the old man toward the stairs leading down. They led to a dimly lit room of bare concrete. In addition to the boiler and plumbing, there was a metal box larger than a refrigerator. That was the fiber optic communication control box.

“*Do you want to be deemed harmful?*”

“They were already calling us that here,” said the man. “And I’m not so sure the categories invented by those in the light really mean all that much.”

“Do you think you can escape just because you are a Kihara?”

“If you have no plan, you should really shut up now. Your threats are sounding less concerning all the time. Now, do you have any more stupid questions?”

“Do you think it’s paradise outside the city? This city is the only place you can survive. No matter what form that survival might take.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. Really, I find it strange that all of *us* were ever contained to a single city at all. Former Board Chairman Aleister has left the city. Without the Archetype Controller to reinforce our presence here, won’t the Kiharas naturally spread out across the world?”

The old man pulled a floppy disk larger than a tablet from his business bag. He inserted it into a special reader and then used a large device to hook it up to a fiber optic cable.

Ladybird expressionlessly tilted her head.

“Sensei, isn’t there a more efficient way of doing that?”

“When the world grows too convenient, people forget the value of a single

byte. People can do anything with just one meg. If you forget that feeling, your creativity dies.”

“If you say so. I do not understand it myself.”

“Yes, yes. It may be hard to grasp for someone who is made from a flowchart of 1s and 0s. But restrictions bring inspiration to the human brain. Unlimited storage space is the same as a drug addiction.”

And in fact, a grinding sound filled the room as a horrific change occurred. The Anti-Skill general station’s network was infected through the communication control box and the ill effects spread to all 23 districts from there.

Hacking in from the outside would be difficult, but it was so much easier from the inside.

The old man smiled as he poured a fine powder into the large device.

“Parasite Hardware.”

Another nightmare took form.

“These nanodevices directly attach themselves to the signals traveling through the fiber optic cables to move around. Even light has a force capable of pushing objects, so it can actually carry devices of such a minuscule size. And the antivirus software searching for other software cannot detect this hardware, so the nanodevices pass right on through.”

“If you want a general term for software that removes malicious programs, sets up firewalls, detects suspicious activity, manages data traffic, and otherwise defends against cyber attacks, the term you are looking for is security software.”

“Good grief. We didn’t bother making all those little distinctions back when I helped build the foundation of the internet. And I’m still young, so that couldn’t have been all that long ago.”

“Unknown error detected.”

“Ladybird-kun, I am trying to do everything I can to compromise with you here, so do you have to tilt your head like that whenever I say something? You aren’t getting a correction out of me because there’s nothing at all inaccurate about calling myself young. Hey, wait, wait, wait. Not so close, Ladybird-kun.”

At any rate, the administrative network was in tatters now.

Anti-Skill communications, data sharing, and access to the cameras and sensors around the city had been brought down.

(Not that a little prank like this is enough to get past the wall.)

It was unlikely a single attack would actually be enough to bring down all of the online services, but to determine otherwise would require inspecting all of the hardware with an electron microscope, not just doing an automatic search with a program. A single drop of poison would require those in charge of water safety to *clean* everything down to the bottom of the dam. This was the polar opposite of a single megabyte floppy. The total amount was so great that inspecting it all was extremely difficult.

The old man had bought himself the time he needed to think up his next move.

After he left the basement, the conversation on the phone continued.

“Our reinforcements must not have arrived on time,” said the phone.

“Just give up.”

“You will die here, so enjoy this present from us, *harmful*.”

The call ended. The overly skinny old man stuck out his tongue and slipped the phone back into his lab coat’s pocket.

“Sensei,” said the girl in the orange and black racing swimsuit.

The walls and ceiling were sliced through at the same time.

Several silhouettes covered in black armor broke into the building. Their equipment was different from the previous Anti-Skill officers. If an ordinary human fired those giant guns, the recoil might break their spine, but these silhouettes were wielding them with ease.

They said nothing, but the text on their right arms indicated they were different from the others: Anti-Skill Aggressor.

These special personnel had been trained to reproduce the movements of the enemy – that is, the brutal criminals of the dark side – during training. These elite of the elite had been created by training specially chosen Anti-Skill officers to the limit and providing them with equipment that could not be used openly. They had been intentionally made to stand on the borderline between justice and the dark side.

They were the Board of Directors' trump card.

The old man known as a Kihara gulped when he saw them.

“Unbelievable.”

The look on his face was of legitimate surprise.

“I was looking forward to whatever secret weapon you had in store for me and you send out equipment I designed myself? Worse, this version sold to ordinary Anti-Skill is at least two generations out of date.”

A stir ran through the Anti-Skill Aggressors.

The hostility and killer intent meant to overpower the old man felt like no more than a ripple to him.

In fact, the multiple Aggressors were forced back by a creaking and cracking sound. Almost like they were being crushed by a thick wall.

The space itself seemed to cry out as those collections of heavy armor and advanced tech staggered back.

“Wh-what?” The Anti-Skill Aggressors broke their silence as their control of

the scene crumbled away. “Can that hunk of junk use Telekinesis!?”

“Ladybird-kun.”

The old man ignored it all.

The Kihara spoke to the girl who was toying with her swimsuit’s shoulder strap because the slipping material was bothering her.

“You have two minutes. Teach them the value of a single byte.”

The snow had stopped a bit ago.

A sticky sound seemed to defile the icy air. Sherbet-like snow remained on a main road in District 17 where many unmanned factories ran.

An Anti-Skill officer wearing a bulletproof and blast-resistant full-face helmet actually clawed at his thick helmet with both hands, but he was too panicked to perform the simple task of removing it.

He doubled over, collapsed to the snow-wet road, and began to convulse.

Almost like he was drowning inside his own helmet.

“Everyone, check your helmet seals!!”

“I’m not getting any gas or bacteria warnings, though.”

“We can’t see it, but that harmful must be using some kind of tech. If we just protect ourselv— gah!?”

After feeling a bubbling sensation from his dominant hand to the shoulder, another Anti-Skill officer collapsed to the road.

“It’s no use.”

A woman stood there. She had a light blue silhouette with long blonde

twintails. She wore a tight dress that showed off her figure, but a thin cloth was worn loosely around that like a fairy tale princess's skirt, looking something like a hanging flower. Overall, she looked like a Western doll, but her curvy figure was at odds with that.

She was known as Frillsand #G, but no one here was familiar with that *development code*.

"If you would stay away from here, I would have no reason to attack you."

She was all alone, but this standoff had been going for more than an hour. She stood in the center of a six-lane road with no cover to protect her from bullets.

"What I am doing is not the question. What you need to dodge to survive is not the question."

She actually sounded sad.

Frill Sandwich #G spoke quietly while exposed to the gunfire.

"From the moment you see me, I hold your lives in my hands."

"My aim..." A surviving Anti-Skill officer clenched his teeth in his helmet.
"My aim is off! I can't seem to aim at her!!"

Their target was not moving. Frillsand #G remained entirely motionless. Yet they could not hit her. When they tried to aim their guns, their arms would shake. Even when they forcibly steadied their weapon on the hood of the special vehicle they were using as cover, they could not stop the shaking.

With a dull rumble, thick cracks ran through the asphalt road.

An unmanned weapon had separated from a transport helicopter passing by overhead and landed on the ground. The quadrupedal machine was larger than the average van. It was known as the Dangerous Bull.

Gas and bacteria meant nothing to that bull-shaped unmanned weapon.

Or so everyone thought.

But...

“Gyahhh!?”

It was Anti-Skill that screamed while a loud boom shook the area. The sides of the bull opened up, allowing rockets and missiles to stick out like an attack helicopter’s weapons, but none of them were launched. Inexplicably, the unmanned weapon ran right past the motionless woman and trampled Anti-Skill as they tried to scatter.

The color red burst out, the car being used as a shield slid to the side, and endless groans left the officers who were not killed instantly.

“Stop! Stop!!”

“Can it...not see us? What happened to its facial recognition!?”

Frillsand #G’s thin blue skirt fluttered as she spoke quietly.

“It’s no use.”

A dry bang rang out. It was probably pure coincidence, but when an Anti-Skill officer crawled along the snow-wet road, grabbed a submachinegun in trembling hands, and fired it, the bullet flew straight toward the doll-like woman’s forehead.

He scored a clean hit.

He smiled within his helmet, but then the despair hit.

Frillsand #G’s forehead was unharmed. Not a single drop of blood. But not because her body was absurdly sturdy or because a barrier in front of her had deflected the bullet.

Yes, the bullet had entered her forehead.

And passed right through her.

The officer saw sparks flying from the factory wall behind the woman with the silhouette of a fairy tale princess. He had not wanted to see that and it acted like a toxin physically eating away at his nerves.

Then he noticed something.

His tablet showed the footage coming from the Dangerous Bull that had trampled his allies, but something was wrong. The autofocus was not working and it was full of the glowing artifacts known as orbs.

The woman was standing right in front of it, yet the facial recognition cursor was flashing at a different point altogether.

One of his fallen colleagues' face and hands were weirdly erased from the footage. Almost like some form of lock-on symbol.

He did not have the guts to see what he looked like through the lens.

"It...can't be."

It was not possible.

He wanted to reject this possibility since it should never have even occurred to him in a city of science.

"No, that's just not possible. This must be a hologram using a mirage."

"No, I am not that."

"Then you're using ultrasonic waves outside the audible range to exhaust our brains until they malfunction!!"

"No, I am not."

"Symbols on the wall are messing with our view of three-dimensional space!!"

"No."

The helmeted Anti-Skill officer shook his head in protest.

Every scientific approach he could think of had been denied.

So he had to accept it.

“*A gho—*”

“It is best to let sleeping dogs lie,” whispered the doll-like woman whose long double skirt hid her legs from view. “Leaving here is always an option. If you give up on entering this place, I need not bring further harm to you.”

She was an unknown. But this was Academy City where science worship thrived, so instead of sealing it away and leaving, the residents here reflexively chose to challenge the unknown.

“You...”

The woman appeared to breathe a quiet sigh when the man raised his gun.

“You damn harmfulllllllll!!”

“Hello, this is Frillsand.”

The man’s hands stopped unnaturally while holding the gun. And the bizarre song of the lifeless determined his fate.

“Next stop: mincemeat. Repeat: mincemeat.”

An unpleasant sound followed.

The woman had not moved a finger, but the human silhouette inside the bulletproof equipment crumbled away.

Slowly.

“I was only supposed to buy enough time to transport the children away, but Anti-Skill is not going to last at this rate.”

The Anti-Skill officer could not even scream as he drowned in his own blood. Frillsand #G watched that as she spoke to herself and her long twintails fluttered with movement entirely disconnected from the wind.

“Are you safe, my Drencher Kihara Repatri?”

A ghost could not hold physical objects, so she could not even wear a communicator on her ear.

Thus, these words were entirely meaningless.

But she had mentioned a certain family of researchers. Anyone with any contact at all with dark side research would be familiar with that name.

“Gasp, pant.”

District 8 was a dreary place with very little lighting even on Christmas. A schoolgirl with long and unruly silver hair and wearing a hakama was being chased down a narrow alley lined with used bookstores. The path was narrow enough already, but there were also piles of snow getting in the way. She pressed her back against the filthy wall and slid down onto her butt where she protected her head with both hands without worrying about how wet with snow the ground was.

She looked like she would wet herself if left like this for long.

“I-I haven’t done anything, so please help me! Don’t kill me!! Gasp, pant. Why does everything bad always have to happen to me!?”

Two fully-equipped Anti-Skill officers had her surrounded, but even they seemed taken aback by this.

“Hey, is she one of them?”

“She’s in Outrank. Vivana Oniguma, a dark side researcher.”

“Not what I meant. Is she a gentle beneficial or a brutal harmful?”

A simple flashlight caused the hakama girl to jump like she was on the receiving end of a laser attack. Afterwards, that girl, whose silver bangs were hardened into two decorative horns, actually looked confused, like someone who thought they were having boiling water poured on them from a tea kettle only to find it was room temperature.

One of the officers sighed in his helmet.

“What did you do?”

“N-nothing! It’s all a big misunderstanding!”

Vivana sniffled and answered honestly. A closer look showed the pattern of her hakama was made up of mascot characters, but if that was special-ordered, it had to be expensive. It may have been something like a red lacquered guitar or phone case.

“I don’t know about this beneficial or harmful stuff, but the dark side can refer to all sorts of people. My field of research just so happens to – eh heh heh – get some disapproving looks from most everyone in the educational field, so the next thing I knew, I had fallen down to this level. But I’m really not doing anything wrong, I swear.”

Anti-Skill was merciless to criminals who resisted to the bitter end, but there was nothing they could do with someone who fell onto her butt and confessed everything. The two of them exchanged a glance in the silly atmosphere they found themselves in.

Two large pieces of luggage sat near the girl: one black and one pink. But instead of suitcase or sports bags, they were large cloth wrappers stuffed full of things.

One of the men casually picked up the pink one.

“We can discuss this further at our car. This is your stuff, isn’t it?”

“Ah.”

“It’s pretty heavy. ...Wait, it’s full of old Japanese books. Um, is this shung-

?”

“G-gyahhh!!”

She frantically snatched the thick book away from him before he could open it.

The other man snapped back at her.

“Hey!!”

“Stop it, you idiot! This is fine! Don’t pull out your gun!!”

The two Anti-Skill officers started arguing. Vivana remained entirely motionless with the old Japanese book in her arms. She had even placed her butt back on the damp ground.

She was too panicked to get back up, but things were taking an unusual turn.

“I’ve had enough! Dark side is dark side. She’s a harmful, so we’ve got to do this!!”

“Are you insane? She’s clearly beneficial. She hasn’t even tried to resist!!”

“You never know where a harmful has a deadly weapon hidden.”

“She’s beneficial, so she isn’t hiding anything!”

“Get out of my way!!”

“Why should I!?”

Several dry gunshots rang out.

“Um.”

For a while, the silver-haired hakama girl squeezed her eyes shut and covered her head as if grabbing her two horns. But...

“Huh?”

When she hesitantly opened her eyes, it was already over.

The two officers must have accidentally pulled the trigger while fighting over the handgun because they were both collapsed on the ground with dark red holes in them. Strangely, Vivana found there was an unmistakable difference between a living person and a dead person. They seemed separated from their surroundings, like the color had faded from the background in that one spot.

When she noticed the red stain spreading toward her luggage, she quickly picked them up. That caused both cloth wrappers to come undone. They nearly spilled their contents of rare shunga books, rope, candles, a bamboo sword with a broken tip, tatami needles, incense, and a collapsible water wheel and wooden horse, but she shoved them all back inside.

(Uhhh.)

When her hakama slipped down from her shoulder, cheap red tape could be seen within. That was an even more familiar bondage material than ropes or leather. The taping techniques developed for sports medicine could also be used in more inappropriate ways.

(Why does everyone find this field of research so strange? Almost every country stops you from researching torture and the history of execution methods. They probably just don't want me stumbling onto past cases of false charges. All I ever wanted was to do some ordinary, wholesome research, but the next thing I know, I've been shoved all the way into the dark side for it.)

Vivana Oniguma tearfully pouted her lips like a child while holding one of her favorite books in both hands.

“It's not lewd.”

“How far did you wander off?”

“Ehh? You were the one that got lost, Onii-chan!”

Children's voices could be heard on the Christmas streets. The little sister had emerged from the labyrinthine back alleys with her arms around a large dog that probably weighed more than she did.

"The doggy showed me how to get back to the street!!"

The golden retriever was wearing a thin backpack and he calmly looked up into the chilly sky.

The snow had stopped earlier.

He wanted a smoke, but he would wait until the children were gone.

(So after benefiting from our work for years, the Board has finally decided to cut us loose to save face. Not even this upheaval can dislodge those at the top. It is a reasonable choice on their part, though.)

He was helplessly petted by small hands while he thought in human language.

(Still, I know the one way the dark side has any chance of victory here.)

"The snow will still be here in the morning, so you can wait until then for your snowmen and snowball fights. Head home for today, children."

"It talked!?"

"It talked!?"

The young siblings stared wide-eyed at the talking dog.

His name was Kihara Noukan.

He was unusual even for a Kihara and his very existence was near legendary. He was a researcher who loved both logic and romance. He was not a hero. If someone actively stepped into the darkness to gorge on the profits within, he would make a guinea pig out of them no matter who they were, but he would not go out of his way to intrude on a peaceful family.

Was he a gentle beneficial? Nonsense.

He was a Kihara. He understood that illogically drawing that kind of dividing line was the way villains thought.

“Make sure you’re home before even the moon is swallowed up by the darkness.”

Part 2

A click sounded in one corner of the darkening city.

It came from an old coin locker next to a capsule hotel. In such a rundown area, the lockers had no shortage of plausible rumors about babies or spirit tablets being found there.

“Okay.”

Hamazura pulled out a small paper bag of medicine.

He had gotten himself intentionally arrested to enter the Anti-Skill station, but he could not have them confiscate all of his possessions. He had especially wanted to keep Takitsubo’s medicine safe.

(But this is amazing. I just left it with Aneri’s drone and here it was inside a locker. With the locker locked and everything.)

“Enjoy karaoke with all your friends on Christmas!! Studio Enjoy Singing has a collection of more than 700,000 Christmas songs. And a full menu of food to enjoy too. Skip the chicken this 25th and feast on a real turkey! The full bird is cooked nice and long in the oven, so if you want food that tastes good and looks good on social media, head on down to Studio Enjoy Singing!!”

The LCD billboard on the capsule hotel's roof would not shut up, but he could not glare up at it in protest. Even that carefree ad was equipped with a facial recognition camera to determine the favorability of the ad's reception.

The city appeared peaceful even as the sun set.

Witness accounts of the “accidents” had to be out there, but most people only saw that as no more than a hint of excitement coloring their everyday lives. Yes, other people’s misfortune was only something to film with your phone and get likes on social media and views on video sites.

A strange buzzing came from his pocket.

He frowned and pulled out the phone to find the screen had lit up.

It was powered on despite him powering it off earlier.

“Aneri?”

Support AI Aneri had urged him to turn off his phone so Anti-Skill and Judgment could not track it, so he had done the same with the borrowed second one. But if Aneri had turned it on, had she come up with a way of preventing that?

She had probably used hacking, an anti-tracing program, or something else he did not understand.

“That’s good.”

Nothing major had happened, but it still felt significant. Seeing the light on that 6-inch screen felt just like seeing the lights in a mountain cabin window when lost on a snowy mountain at night.

Of course, he had no way of knowing the truth.

Aneri had decided the risk of being tracked was minimal because powerful dark side members had been attacking Anti-Skill stations and the network needed to search for him had been brought down by a brutal program or nanodevices.

“We’ll be fine now that Aneri’s here. Aneri, there’s so much I want you to look into! I’m counting on you, Aneri!!”

“You worry me, Hamazura.”

Takitsubo Rikou’s mouth formed a small triangle as she glared over at him.

Anyway, he had gotten a phone from that man who had worked as a voice on the phone, but he had not been able to get past the lock screen. He also did not know how to access any data or apps that were not openly displayed with square icons.

Aneri solved it all in three seconds.

The voice on the phone had possessed a counterfeit passport even more fancy than a normal one, so he must have found the address of a skilled counterfeiter who had created that passport for a fee.

It turned out that counterfeiter was known as Perfect Film.

Passports could have even more anti-counterfeiting methods woven in than paper money. It was generally best not to trust someone if they claimed they could counterfeit one, but if that voice on the phone had used this person, their quality was all but guaranteed.

You might think a passport was unnecessary for a domestic airline. That was true, but what was needed and what hurdles were set up could change on a case by case basis. It was actually easier to predict the hurdles with an international airline that always required a passport.

“Do we have enough money?” groaned Hamazura.

The voice on the phone’s small sling bag had included money crudely balled up and wrapped in rubber bands. Any activities that had to remain clandestine would require a fair amount of money. He did not know the going price for counterfeit passports, but this was a lot like flea market. Only suckers went ahead and paid the named price.

He looked down at the golden glitter in his hand. The shine had filled the

entire outer edge of his Coin of Nicholas and the shadowy part was gone. The donut-shaped bar graph still had its full charge. That coin was apparently pure gold, but he felt using it for money was a bad idea.

(Come to think of it, I wouldn't be able to explain to anyone what it is.)

It scared him.

It was creepy, but he was also reluctant to let it go at the moment.

He had more than just money troubles. You would normally contact a counterfeiter like this online first, but the situation was too pressing. Contacting them in advance might even cause them to flee, so rude as it was, it was best to head straight there and try to negotiate in person.

Once he had the email address, searching out the physical address was simple enough.

And Academy City was a large place, even if it was surrounded by walls. When they were being targeted by the city's own system, slowly walking from one end to the other would be a bad idea. Plus, they did not know how long the Perfect Film counterfeiter would remain at their hideout.

They needed to act as soon as possible.

“The train will be arriving soon. Please keep your distance from the platform doors as you wait to board.”

“We’re taking the train, Hamazura?”

“Yeah.”

Takitsubo Rikou looked around at their surroundings, but Hamazura kept his eyes dead ahead as he quietly answered her.

“We could also steal a car, but anyone can see inside one of those ‘sealed rooms of glass’. That means crowded public transportation like a train or bus is best. If we act naturally, all the other people will hide us from view.”

“Acting normal now feels like the hardest thing, though.”

Once the train arrived, it spat people out and swallowed up the people waiting to board. Since it was the 25th, it felt busier than normal. Thankfully, there did not appear to be any delays due to the earlier snow. He felt a small hand grab at his jacket, so Takitsubo may have been afraid of them being separated by the crowd.

“Don’t push, please don’t push! We’re running on a special Christmas schedule, so there will be trains running after the usual last train. You don’t need to force your way onto this one, so please just wait for the next one!!”

Other passengers pushed on their backs as they boarded the train while a puppy-like station worker shouted from the platform. The station worker did not show any obvious interest in them. Even if the train system was half-public, the station workers were company employees, so they had no obligation to risk their lives to assist in the crackdown on crime. That may have been why their gears had not broken as badly as Anti-Skill’s.

“Gh.”

“Bear with it, Takitsubo.”

He had no idea if it helped, but he pulled his girlfriend close in the crowd.

“This is incredible,” she said while helplessly squished against him. “Is everyone here going to the same place?”

The thick automatic doors closed and the train began to move. With this crowd, Anti-Skill could not walk from one end to the other searching for people.

The train shook as it started to move, but that was when they heard an announcement from the opposite platform.

Train and station announcements were known for being dull and flat, but this was more than that. It sounded like the synthesized voice from music software where a text was given to the computer and the intonation was

provided by altering the wave line.

“The next train is a commuter express headed to Katasu Station. Repeat: to Katasu Station. Please move behind the yellow line as you wait to board.”

“?”

Hadn’t this station been fully equipped with platform doors for a while now? Hamazura frowned at that strange announcement.

Just then, he heard a loud impact and then the glass of the nearby door was dyed red.

It happened just after the arrival of the train on the next track over. Screams erupted from the opposite platform along with the screech of steel on steel as the train rapidly applied its brakes, but this train continued to accelerate away from the station platform.

“Wait, did it hit someone?”

“I saw a severed head flying through the air. That’s what hit the glass like a ball.”

Hamazura and Takitsubo were surrounded by whispering voices while everyone was packed in too tightly for them to move.

The meaning of that crowd had suddenly changed.

“I saw who it was. It was Hikami, that loan shark on social media.”

“Eh, Ryougo-kun? The blond who’s always getting flamed for his videos? Like the one where he set a fan of cash on fire or the one where he sold some weird gold coin to a pawnshop?”

“Serves him right, but how’d he even fall onto the track? Aren’t there platform doors in the way???”

“Hamazura,” groaned a quiet voice. Someone else from the dark side appeared to have died, but it barely seemed to bother any of the other people

here.

“What, some loan shark ended up like the Teke Teke?”

“There are worse ways to die. I fell asleep on the train after school one day and dreamed I was on a train full of gorillas.”

“You know how they never seem to finish those huge station expansions? I heard they’re having trouble with the rumored Platform 13. They dug too far and hit a spring, so they can’t stop the water and it’s been a swamp down there for years now. You can dump bodies or guns there and no one will ever find them, so there’s supposedly tons of people who sneak in there during the night.”

It did not matter what had actually happened. They had seen it happen for themselves, but it had quickly blended in with baseless rumors they had heard. It was no different than some thirty-second video they would watch to pass the time. Hamazura felt like they lived in an entirely different world despite standing right next to each other here. He felt a gaping hole in his heart growing even wider as he realized they would respond in the same way if he and Takitsubo died.

(I won’t let that happen.)

He clenched his teeth while holding his girlfriend even tighter in his arms.

(We haven’t lived lives we can share with just anyone, but we were doing everything we could to survive. I won’t let us be just one more passing curiosity for these people messing with their phones while munching on a snack in safety.)

The advertisement monitor at the top of the door was displaying a few headlines likely taken from some online news site.

They could have been showing a list of tomorrow’s victims, but instead the top story was about Mont Blancs passing shortcakes in sales. Almost like they were trying to give the impression that nothing of incident had happened on the 25th.

“We will soon arrive at the station.”

A flat male voice gave an announcement.

This one was not a strange synthetic voice talking about Yami Station or Katasu Station or whatever.

“The train may shake without warning, so please be careful. Next up is the end of the line: District 6 Amusement Park Main Gate Station. The station is likely crowded, so if you purchased your tickets in advance, we recommend getting them ready now.”

Part 3

They could not remain here.

Shirai Kuroko parted the putrid air to reach the underground parking garage.

“Can you drive?” she asked.

“Eh? I only have an assisted driving license. You know, the one where you sit in the driver’s seat and the self-driving car handles everything for you.”

Combover and glasses Anti-Skill Officer Rakuoka Houfu’s answer irritated the twintails middle school girl. Her image of adults was crumbling even further.

“That’s a same-day issue license like one for a moped, isn’t it? But I thought it didn’t qualify as ID. So do you normally use your insurance card?”

“Hm, do I even have insurance?”

“How do you function!?” the first-year middle schooler shouted at the

middle-aged man.

For a civil servant, insurance payments would be automatically taken from their paycheck, so he would have insurance whether he knew it or not. Where his insurance card had gone was still a mystery, though. If he also lacked a passport and identity number card, then he may not have had any real ID. Had that never come up as a problem?

Yomikawa Aiho, another survivor, gestured the two of them over.

“You two can ride with us since we have room for four!!”

“Thanks,” said Shirai Kuroko while brushing her hair from her shoulder. “And do not forget about my internal investigation. I don’t want that being put off until later due to the emergency!!”

She could teleport faster than the average car, but after that surprise attack, the enemy might still be hiding nearby and they might have left a web camera or drone as a present. She wanted to keep her cards close to her chest for now.

She climbed into the back seat of a large and thick four-wheel-drive vehicle that was practically an armored truck. It actually looked inconvenient outside of the jungle or desert.

Rakuoka took the seat next to her like it was to be expected.

“Where are we headed?” she asked.

“Going south and crossing the district border would be faster than heading to North District 7 from here. And District 2 specializes in firearms and vehicles, so the station there should have plenty of equipment.”

That answer came from the brown-haired Anti-Skill officer in the passenger seat...Namino was it? The snow was more of a danger after it stopped falling, but the adults did not seem concerned about solid ice on the road.

(Where are you, Onee-sama?)

It was sunset.

The enormous four-wheel-drive vehicle left the parking garage. Shirai's thoughts turned to her phone, but Mikoto was the kind of person to cut off contact when things got dangerous. She was the strongest electric esper, so it was best to try and outmaneuver her.

And something else was bothering Shirai anyway.

“What has become of the Outrank database of the dark side?”

“The datalink is undergoing an unknown form of cyber attack. From what I heard, we’re lucky to have noticed there’s an attack underway at all.”

This was a much bigger deal than she had thought. She had heard District 7 was not the only place under attack, but without Outrank, they had no way of arresting the people on that list.

“So we can’t rely on any of the stationary servers inside the building. As an emergency measure, we have put together a temporary network using an operation command vehicle and an aircraft. It’s a terribly thin line, but—”

He was cut off by an explosion.

Shirai looked out the window to see an aircraft had fallen into the city somewhere. A shout identifying it as a tiltrotor reached her ears through the thick bulletproof glass.

“Only one left,” groaned Yomikawa Aiho in the driver’s seat.

“They have to constantly send out powerful signals to wirelessly support the datalink, so as valuable as they are, we can’t hide them deep underground,” explained Naminoue. “We need them on the scene to maintain the network, but the very equipment they use gives away their position.”

“So with that tiltrotor down, only the operation command vehicle on the ground is left?” Rakuoka Houfu gulped. “If it comes to it, we will have to protect that mobile server ourselves.”

Shirai could not stop picturing the disaster at the general station. Were more people going to die in ways that left nothing resembling a human body behind?

She pulled a laptop from the pocket in the back of the seat in front of her and tossed it onto the middle-aged man's lap.

"We can't let those twins escape. Rakuoka-sensei, you write up my description and work on summing up everything that we saw. However you define the dark side, they had to be using either technology or esper powers. We can learn everything there is to know about them if we gather enough information. I don't want to arrive at the next station asking for help with nothing to offer in return, so let's make sure we have a gift ready."

"Fine, but I don't know how to use computers."

Anti-Skill was supposedly made from volunteers among the teachers, so how did this guy make his handouts for class? Surely he did not still write them out on manuscript paper with a fountain pen.

"Handwrite it if you have to, but write up a report! Before this raw data I risked my life to obtain fades from my mind!!"

"Urp, I would love to, but...I get carsick and the scent of air fresheners only makes it worse. Ughh."

"How did you ever get a teaching license!?"

Shirai finally grew wide-eyed and shouted at him, but then she handed the pale-faced man a motion sickness bag with an exasperated look.

"Geez, are you okay?"

"I really am sorry about that. Ugh, I'm losing the fight."

"Vomiting on the job counts as a work-related illness, doesn't it? Anyway, I will put together a digital report, so—"

"I will resist!!!!!"

He showed some actual willpower for one.

And he smiled in a self-deprecating way as Shirai watched him.

“Pant, pant, sigh. I didn’t have a real reason for choosing to be a teacher.”

“Is that so?”

“I just couldn’t leave the familiar framework of school after I graduated. Having a teaching license saved me when my search for other employment failed, but that’s kept me bound to schools ever since. I know it’s weird, but I never have managed to truly ‘graduate’.”

“...”

“And I’m still single at my age.”

She was not sure how to respond to that confession.

But he had started this conversation himself, so she could not silence him now.

“Nothing went anywhere when I tried marriage interviews and dating apps. I just keep searching for a true love that may not even exist. Ha ha. It’s like I’m still a kid in school deep down. Maybe things would have gone differently if I’d been hired by a company.”

He had never worked for a company and he doubted he had ever put any real effort into getting married.

He had less than fifty thousand yen in savings and he had never moved out of his childhood home.

The internet was connected to every part of the world, but he was connected to fewer than 10 people on social media.

“Ha ha.” He laughed after explaining all that. “But I still wish I could be someone my mother and sister are proud of. Which is why I’m here in Anti-Skill instead of just a teacher. That’s a pretty impure reason to be out here

fighting, isn't it?"

"Not really."

Shirai Kuroko sighed softly.

The combover and glasses man looked surprised by her response, so she explained.

She waved her phone to show she was willing to friend him on social media. It was not like it would hurt anything.

"Whatever your reasons are, you still chose to make your way into the outside world and try to help people, right? That's enough to qualify as a public service if you ask me. Besides, it's not like Uiharu and I had some grand reason for joining Judgment."

Yomikawa and the other Anti-Skill officer in the passenger seat were smiling back at them through the rearview mirror.

They were not great heroes or powerful warriors.

They could not hope to solve everything on their own, so they preserved the peace by gathering together as an organization capable of handling powers much greater than their own.

But.

Even so.

Shirai was not going to let them be crushed by the dark side where everyone was convinced they were something special.

"I really can't thank you enough. It's been months since my tiny account has gotten a new friend. ...Hm? No, wait a second!"

Just as the middle-aged man remembered something, Shirai tapped the link full of numbers he had sent her. "Will you be my friend?" That message popped up on the multifunctional phone's small screen and it was followed

by the screenname.

Defiant School Swimsuit Ascension Teacher @ Sending All Shitty Games and Dramas to the Graveyard

Shirai Kuroko placed the motion sickness bag over his head and beat him with her fist.

“You filth!!!!!! Give them back!! Give back the emotions I was just feeling!!”

“Bgh, gh, gwah! Stop, I’ll die!”

“Coin of Nicholas, please give me another partner!!”

“Wait! What is this!? Some mysterious ritual!? If that really activated some supernatural power, I’d be erased! I’d be transported to a world filled with elves, dancers, and elf dancers! No, I’m not ready! Is it finally my turn!? If so, I want to be reincarnated as a Demon Lord who successfully destroyed the Hero, so he masters the more boring skills to live a peaceful life in a rural village where he finds a poor unfortunate girl he can help out! Give me my new life as an overpowered self-inserrrrrrrt!!”

Nothing happened.

Shirai breathed a disappointed sigh, but she had not really expected anything from a sketchy *good luck charm*. Nothing could do the impossible. Being first in line for one of those trendy new donuts was pointless if the shop was closed.

“Sob, sob. I should have known the gate to another world wouldn’t open for me.”

The middle-aged man muttered darkly to himself with the plastic bag still over his (drooping) head.

After revealing his tastes and having them thoroughly rejected, he began to yell (inside the bag).

“It’s not fairrrrrrrrrr! Even unpopular guys like me have a right to enjoy a strong drink late at night while writing harsh reviews of those shitty Western games and streaming dramas that the Hollywood elites pour so much money into!!”

“This is for writing reviews!? Then why the horrifying screenname!?”

“You need something to grab people’s attention! And why can’t I cut loose when I’m online anyway!?”

Part 4

Academy City’s District 6 was a special area where the entire district had been made into a giant amusement park. That was used for research and experiments into the service industry and the field of amusement and it had all the necessary facilities: the amusement park itself, pools, hotels, and theaters. There was no end to the suspicious rumors about the place: there was a secret casino hidden below it, seeing an unfamiliar mascot meant a kidnapper was lurking, and more.

Today was December 25, Christmas Day.

Night had already fallen by 6:30 PM. Given the crowds, Hamazura assumed the line might stretch all the way outside the district (so he was considering finding some way to sneak inside), but once they arrived, he found there was not much of a line at the ticket counter across from the ticket gate.

The hardcore fans would buy their tickets online or have a full year pass, so very few customers actually approached the counter on the 25th. Unlike a restaurant or café, there were no services at the counter that required the customer’s physical presence, so things moved quickly.

“Welcome. We have a couple’s discount, so you get 20% off the standard

rate. Make some lovely memories, you two.”

The receptionist smiled from behind the thick plastic barrier and Hamazura blushed a little. It felt different when someone else said it.

“By the way.” Takitsubo held his jacket so *he* would not get lost while they passed through the silver revolving door. “This is the land of miracles where dreams come true, isn’t it? Why would a counterfeiter be hiding here?”

“That might be exactly why one *would* be here. You expect delinquents in the back alleys, so the investigators would never think to look for someone hiding here.”

The world changed once they were through the gate.

The sun had set, but the amusement park was aflood with all sorts of lights: lightbulbs, LEDs, glow-in-the-dark paint, fireworks, etc. The lit-up merry-go-round and coffee cups were like something directly out of a child’s dreams. The large Ferris wheel and roller coaster track seemed to be directly overhead. The entire district must have qualified as private property because children were cutting across the large spaces with electric scooters and carts that were not allowed on public roads. There were far too many attractions to see them all on foot.

Clearing the snow from this place could not be easy.

But that snow was piled up where it would be out of the way and children were playing in it. They were building snowmen and igloos. The people running the place knew how to turn a spontaneous weather accident into another attraction.

“It’s Christmas,” said Takitsubo with her breaths visible. She was holding onto his jacket and pouting her lips. “So I really wish we could have come here just for fun.”

Some weird gentleman frog mascot and an alien-looking rabbit mascot had gotten into a fight, but when a clown tried to stop them, they both ganged up on him and sent him tumbling across the ground. An overeager child then

tackled the frog after the spirit of justice awoke inside him. The frog doubled over and groaned.

“(Ugh!? S-stupid kids. Show them a moment’s weakness and they attack.)”

“(Just bear with it, sister. We can survive tonight if we stay in these *world’s smallest hideouts*, remember?)”

“?”

Takitsubo gave the mascots a puzzled look before asking a question.

“Hamazura, where is this person?”

“This way.”

A brass band arrangement of standard Christmas songs was playing while several parade floats moved slowly down the main street. A bear with horns was waving from one of those. Hamazura slipped past the crowd holding balloons coated with glow-in-the-dark paint and stepped into the shadows with his girlfriend at his side. They were on their way to an area different from the resort hotels.

These were known as the secret residences.

Obsessive fans would often ask to stay long term in one of the park’s luxury hotels, but this was an even more extreme version of that. The fans who did not want to let the magic die could rent a villa or residence in the park along with their full year pass. And after seeing the prices on the drink vending machines, you could guess just how inflated the price of a house here was.

Hamazura and Takitsubo walked to the address they had found using the contact information recorded in that borrowed phone. As large as the park was, very few buildings were clearly designated as residences.

So they walked to the ultra-luxury residential area illuminated with indirect lighting. The residences came in various styles from around the world, but they were probably each based on the setting of a fairy tale movie. They were interested in a gawdy Western mansion made of red brick.

Or more accurately, the few tents set up alongside the metal fence surrounding its yard.

"This is a surprise. I thought craftsmen like this were really picky about temperature and humidity."

"It might be so they can pack up and make a run for it at a moment's notice."

"Living out here can't be easy even if they're using tents and sleeping bags meant for snowy mountains. What if the snow didn't let up all night?"

"Humans can endure anything...as long as they can imagine something even more frightening."

One tent was a living space, one was a lab, and then there were a few others. They all belonged to the counterfeiter known as Perfect Film. He could be contacted through the metal box next to the large residence's grounds that had been tampered with to get access to the fiber optic network. If the signal was traced, they could escape while suspicions were still on the scapegoat. And the pursuers would have a hard time making their move when the decoy was a giant amusement park or one of their VIP guests.

However, this defense was the same as for neuroptera and uropyia meticulodina.

They remained undamaged because no one could find them, but damage was unavoidable if even a single person did find them. There were no solid defenses when using a synthetic tent as a hideout. If Perfect Film refused to cooperate and holed up inside, they could always break down the tent from the outside.

That was lucky.

Hamazura forced himself to see it that way. Not everyone on the dark side was an embodiment of murder like those twins in the Anti-Skill station. If their negotiations did not work out and they ran into trouble, they would at least not cause any trouble for the other guests.

“Let’s go, Takitsubo.” He looked ahead to their destination. “We both need a passport.”

She did not respond.

Puzzled, he looked over to find the track suit girl had collapsed onto the snow-wet ground.

He did not even have time to shout her name.

With a dull thud, the world flipped around more than once.

“...!?”

He had no idea what had happened.

Something inexplicable was happening, but his breath was knocked from him and he could not even get his voice out.

Once the bizarre weightlessness left him, he slammed down onto the hard ground. A hand covered his mouth before he could unclog his throat. Someone had climbed on top of him. He understood now what had happened and his fear had caught up with reality, but this person’s weight had him fully pinned down. She was a young woman and he was bigger than her, but he could not even budge. He had a bad feeling about this. His experience in the back alleys told him she knew what she was doing.

She was a sexy woman in her early twenties. She wore her black hair in a bob cut that fit around her head like a helmet and she wore a gawdy cowboy hat over that, but below that she wore a red China dress with the stomach replaced by a lace material that let her navel show through. She had Japanese, Western, and Chinese elements all in one outfit. A duralumin case containing who-knows-what hung from a belt she wore diagonally across her body.

The boots woman casually spoke to the boy whose hips she was straddling with no sign of shame about the large slits in her skirt.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa there. Don’t give me that. I can’t have someone intruding on my hunting ground while I stake the place out. I turned down all

my wonderful Christmas plans for this, so let the birdwatching club have this one, okay?"

Hunting ground. Stake the place out.

Those short terms sent a very bad feeling down Hamazura's spine.

"Wh-what!? Are you Anti-Skill? Or the dark side!?"

"Huh? Don't give me that. All Anti-Skill ever does is put up wanted posters and then find every little nitpicky excuse they can to not pay up. To be blunt, that's not a stable business. And the dark side is even worse. Once they have the information they want, they come back to silence you!"

She grinned and accurately adjusted the position of her hips to render his resistance useless. And she continued speaking while squirming in a way that would like highly questionable to anyone who happened across them in the darkness.

"What you need are some old-fashioned connections. Weekly Mind's Eye, Emanating Light, and that sort of thing. Selling your best shot to a magazine like that is the most surefire method. Even if that just gets it used in some gruesome show for housewives."

"...?"

Something about this seemed off to him.

That woman with a jellyfish decoration on her hat was not like Anti-Skill who had turned into murder machines after some crucial gear went missing, but she was also not like those dark side twins who had destroyed an entire station together.

He gulped and asked a hesitant question. If he was wrong about this, he would not survive. Nor could he save his girlfriend. That thought was enough to tear his heart apart.

"What are you doing here?"

“Snapping photos.”

She winked below the brim of her cowboy hat.

That sounded like a normal enough thing to do at an amusement park, but...

“After all, I’m not after just any old part of the dark side—I’m going deep. Hey, don’t give me that. This is more than some silly infidelity story that no one will care about in two weeks’ time. A single snapshot here could have me set for life. But I wouldn’t arrive in time if I intercepted Anti-Skill’s radio transmissions and came running. I can’t be playing catchup. For a real scoop, you have to make a gamble and lie in wait.”

“A scoop?”



“That counterfeiter will make such delicious bait. Don’t give me that. A shot with just him in my finder wouldn’t earn me squat. But you’re here because you’re in a bind right now, right? I just know some major dark side figures are gonna be drawn to this plank of Carneades.”

“...”

“What? Don’t tell me you don’t know what the plank of Carneades is. You know, that thing where there’s a single plank floating in the ocean and killing the other guy for it doesn’t count as murder. So I’m leaving him be. That way I can get a scoop that makes history.”

“Y-you mean...”

This was it.

Hamazura played a verbal game of tug of war as carefully as if he were removing the fuse from a landmine.

“You’re a paparazzi that targets the dark side?”

“Don’t give me that. I don’t like that word.”

The red china dress beauty sighed and lifted her hips.

But even as she freed the boy, she moved her face in close to speak.

“The name’s Benizome Jellyfish. You’re still small time, so if you promise not to get in the way of my miracle shot, I’ll let you go☆”

Part 5

Hanatsuyu Kaai and Hanatsuyu Youen – the Decomposer and the Carrier –

were brutally violent twin sisters.

One of the pair had stripped off her white coat and medical corset and looked down into a large tub in the nude. This one was Kaai the Decomposer. Her black hair nearly reached her ankles while worn up, so now it was fully dragging on the floor behind her.

The place smelled sort of like a rhinoceros beetle. And it should have because the jacuzzi was filled with sawdust instead of water. She had of course not asked the hotel for permission.

“Now, then.”

She popped the rubber cap from a test tube and sprinkled in its contents.

That produced a bubbling sound and steam really did rise into the air. The small girl turned toward the bath’s large mirror while she waited for the reaction to stabilize.

She used her small right hand to lift one of her breasts up from below.

Her breasts were abnormally large for her height, but she did not believe in the urban legend of people who sent everything they ate to their chest. The fat that entered the body would build up equally everywhere. When your entire body grew fatter, your breasts would grow. When you got skinnier, your breasts would shrink too. In that case, it was obvious how to make only your chest grow.

You let the fat cover your entire body and then you cut away only what you did not want.

That was possible using the bizarre science of this city.

The bubbling died down.

“All ready☆”

However, she was not cultivating some type of biological weapon. She stuck her own slender foot into the sawdust and then sank her entire body into the

tub. While it was finer than the sand at the beach, it was still not water, so she had to dump it over herself.

The power of fermentation was causing the sawdust to steam.

It was an enzyme bath.

“Hm, hm, hm, hm.”

She frowned after noticing a solid sensation in the bath.

“Oh, there’s a weird coin leftover.”

She flipped the coin away without leaving the tub and it landed in a plastic waste receptacle located a short distance away.

An infamous Hungarian countess had supposedly kept her skin beautiful by bathing in blood, but the Decomposer’s way was more efficient. She used every last part of her victims.

“ ‘I’ll help you escape with me?’ I hate those big muscular men who think they’re so righteous. Besides, I don’t plan to escape, so you’re nothing more than a thorn in my side.”

There was no preventing the smaller pieces of sawdust from sticking to her fingertips, but she did not mind. While pretending to be a rhinoceros beetle larva, she grabbed a large tablet from the edge of the tub, turned it on, and went through a bit of setup. The tablet’s own camera was too wide-angle for her liking, so she made sure to link it to a cheap web camera to give things a really underground feel.

Hanatsuyu Kaai spoke with a smile while using the sawdust filling the tub to hide her body up to the shoulders.

“Okay, let’s get this stream started, shall we?☆ Is everyone ready to finally enjoy a lonely Christmas that smells faintly of squid?”

She knew that adjusting the narrow-angle lens to keep her eyes just out of frame gathered more attention.

She was of course part of the dark side. And a legit harmful at that. Making an appearance online was a major risk for her.

But at the same time, the people who ended up on the dark side were not the type to actually follow the rules of whatever world they lived in.

“Attention, everyone. Tell me what part of my body you want me to wash first. Yes, yes. Christmas only comes once a year, so why not enjoy it, right? Hee hee hee. And if your request happens to be in line with what I have in mind, I might just make a show out of it.”

But the show did not last long. The screen froze before she could even get started.

The stream was down. She poked at the tablet’s screen with a puzzled frown and then the door burst open with the intensity of a nearby lightning strike.

An identical but blushing girl stormed into the luxury hotel suite they were using as a hideout.

“What are you doing, Kaai!?”

“Ehh? You can’t tell, Youen? I’m using this camera to give the lonely people out there a bit of excitement in their lives.”

“You promised you wouldn’t do this kind of thing anymore, remember?” Youen gave that reminder while Kaai did up her hair that was spread out in the bath. “You looked me in the eye and swore you would stop taking off all your clothes and going for a stroll around the park at night, taking off all your clothes, riding the elevator, and seeing if someone would get on at another floor, taking off all your clothes, closing yourself in the train bathroom, and leaving the door unlocked to see if anyone would carelessly open it, taking off all your clothes, taking off all your clothes, just always taking off all your clothes!! You promised!”

“But how else am I supposed to defile myself?”

“There’s something wrong with wanting to be filthy!!”

“Not filthy, Youen. Doesn’t it sound so much fancier when you use the word defile?”

Youen was trying to talk some sense into her sister, but for whatever reason, Kaai the Decomposer placed her hands on her cheeks with a spellbound look in her eyes.

She was breathing heavily despite not having a cold and she kept talking while giving off the scent of a rhinoceros beetle.

“I’ve tried all of things you described – and more – but no one ever finds me. No one notices and no one does awful things to me. It all turns out fine. This world is a surprisingly safe place. And don’t you think that’s a problem? I’m supposed to gather up the city’s impurities and cleanse them within me! That’s my job as the hated but necessary Decomposer, but how can I do that if nothing ever happens!?”

Yes.

A Decomposer was like the flies, roaches, and rats that ate all the leftover scraps in a city. People might hate them, but without them, the food chain would fail to create a full loop and everything would simply be absorbed from top to bottom. To create the proper loop, the dead lion or shark had to be broken down and returned to the soil or water. This girl was a *researcher* of that process.

But that did not really matter.

The biggest problem for the Carrier – the girl who used the small animals that carried all forms of pathogens – was that the two of them were identical twins.

So when Kaai the Decomposer did these things in public, Youen the Carrier was affected too.

I saw that girl in the boutique the other day. Yes, she went into the dressing room and was doing something behind the flimsy curtain for an entire hour. I wonder what she was doing in there for so long. Ah ha ha.

The memory was enough for her entire head to boil over. Why did she have to take the blame for things her sister had done!?

But the twin who was already drowning in brain chemicals was in her own little world.

“So I had the best idea for this stream. I thought long and hard on this one. Wouldn’t an accident during a livestream fit the bill perfectly? Heh heh, eh heh heh. As a little gift to my viewers, I can have the camera ‘accidentally’ set up at an angle that reveals my face in a reflection. Framing it as an accident is what will really get people’s attention, if you ask me. Then the video will spread like wildfire until everyone in the world has seen it and I can’t walk outside without people pointing and laughing and I’ll have so many stalkers exchanging my personal information on sketchy websites. And once they all know everything about me, it won’t be long before I’m abducted into a van with all the windows covered up. Eh heh, eh heh heh.”

“Please just stop this!!”

Youen ended up strangling her sister on reflex, but Kaai was still lost in her own fantasies while her sister shook her head back and forth. If anything, she liked it.

“Yes, defile me more.” Larva-mode Kaai smiled while soaking in the enzyme bath. “Cover me in rotting stench, sticky goo, disgusting filth, and even more unspeakable things. Yes, yes. This world doesn’t need order. All order does is absorb everything until it tapers off and hardens. The world needs some *planned fluctuations* that will cause the peak to break off and tumble into the depths. And in that sense...Academy City is so stifling right now.”

“Then we’re really going to do this?”

“Yes, let’s cause much, much more trouble for them. Let’s make sure those bright and shining tropical fish don’t die due to lack of enzymes.”

The grinning Decomposer remained true to herself from beginning to end.

All she wanted was to have fun in this city, so she had never even considered

running away like all the others were doing.

"*Academy City's Greatest Taboo?* Why would I care about that?"

Part 6

The old man named Kihara Hasuu was skinny as a matchstick and wore a lab coat over a blue jumpsuit. His arms were like dried branches, but the muscular young man with hair dyed blonde was powerless against him.

"Eek, eek!"

The young man should have been the hunter here.

He was indeed a brutal criminal known as Vacuum Piece.

He had visited the amusement park on Christmas night because of all the people there carrying valuables. Nothing was as fun as targeting a stupid couple that thought they were safe once they paid for a ticket and passed through the gate, having his group surround them, and dragging them to a gap in the security camera coverage.

This was supposed to be a profitable night for him, but...

"Please forgive me. I beg you. I'll do anything."

He was alone and he knew exactly why. The rest of his team had been *dismembered* in one of the gaps in security camera coverage that he supposedly knew better than anyone. Strangely, none of them had even managed to scream while that thick machete went wild in front of them. It was like they had been hit by a paralyzing curse. The work was done in no time and then the mincemeat had been shoved into an automatic processor for kitchen garbage.

“Is this the place?”

The old man looked around, showing no interest in the young man’s desperate pleas.

The young man nodded over and over with tears and snot staining his face.

“Yes, yes, it is. That whatever-you-called-him counterfeiter is in that tent up ahead.”

The young man must have realized that there were no set rules in place here.

It was all up to the old man’s whims, so he was only vaguely hoping he would be freed if he did as he was told.

“I can’t believe those were false footprints meant to take down a rival team. You should show some respect for his skill. I don’t want to hear another bad word about such a skilled craftsman.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

“Forget it. It was your ignorance that saved you anyway.”

The kindness in the old man’s voice only made him more frightening.

The tone of his argument would change from one moment to another and his emotions were like an irregular wave. The young man could not hope to guess when he would explode, so he had to be extremely careful if he hoped to survive.

But by then, he had already been decapitated by a strike from behind.

He had been working so hard to survive, but he failed to even notice the moment he was killed.

“Ladybird-kun.”

“Yes, Sensei?”

A girl in an orange and black racing swimsuit held a machete too heavy for an ordinary person to lift. She caught up to the old man from behind and stepped up alongside him. She did not seem bothered by stepping on the cold snow with bare feet.



The old man caught the severed head in his hands and stared at it.

“Hm, his mouth is frozen on an ‘uh’ sound. I wonder what he was trying to say.”

“That line of thinking is a waste of time,” mechanically replied the girl while tugging the chest of her racing swimsuit forward and dumping a thick discharge machine oil into the gap opened around her neck. The oil that was not absorbed into her skin was pulled down by gravity to drip down her inner thighs.

Kihara Hasuu gave her a troubled look.

“Now, Ladybird-kun, do you have anything to say?”

“Outputting response: Old man, quit sneaking glances over at me and just admit you want to see this. Why are you even so interested in leering at the details of a body you created yourself, you dirty old man?”

“Someone help! This girl is mercilessly gouging into people’s hearts with her words! And she thinks she can get away with it because machines don’t age!!”

“My machine parts deteriorate with time and from wear and tear. Even my electronic data must be defragged periodically.”

They spoke like one of them was not holding a severed head in his hands.

“Well, whatever. Crush the corpse and stuff it in one of those garbage cans so it can be turned into fertilizer.”

“I doubt the soil bacteria can break down the bones and hair. The thick bones are the greatest risk.”

“It doesn’t have to be perfect. Once you’re done, keep an eye out for anyone else.” The old man exhaled a white breath and stared off into the distance.

“There are *a few other groups* here. Kill them on sight.”

Part 7

What am I doing? wondered Hamazura Shiage while hiding in the bushes, but Benizome had him beat in terms of skill. He knew this was not the time, but she had made it very clear what would happen if he messed with her plan. This was the dark side—a world where strength was king.

“Once I’m done here, you’re free to do whatever you want.”

The woman in a red China dress with a see-through stomach opened her duralumin case and pulled out a single-lens reflex camera, a bazooka-like lens, and a tripod. The way she crouched down pushed the already risqué slit of her dress to the limit.

Then she pulled a gold coin from her thigh and kissed it.

She had a Coin of Nicholas too.

“So stay put until then. I’ll capture a dark side superstar with this bad boy. I’m not letting someone use Anti-Skill or Judgment to eliminate the darkness. Don’t give me that. Good and evil aren’t what decides what information should be sent out into the world—it’s all about the price tag and newsworthiness.”

“Wait, you’ve realized Anti-Skill is going wild? Then why don’t you—”

“It was an accident.” Benizome cut him off. “It was only an accident. Every last detail was set up so it would only ever look like an accident no matter how deep you dug. Like I said, it’s about the price tag and newsworthiness. No one’s going to buy a photo that won’t bring them a profit, so there’s no point chasing after one.”

“D-did it never occur to you to run away?”

“To where? Don’t give me that. If you want to survive, you have to make the

attempt. I know time is limited, so before they catch up, I need to get such an undeniably scandalous photo that I can threaten the unseen people at the top with it.”

“...”

“You can do business by directly negotiating a deal with the people connected to your photo. It’s generally frowned upon, but I can decide whether or not I’ll sell the photo to a publisher. But it’s a crime and the risk of death goes up considerably when you threaten someone with a shady past, so I wouldn’t recommend trying it if you can avoid it☆”

He could not believe this. He had seen a lot of different people in the dark side—twisted researchers, powerful espers that saw no value in the lives of others, and high-ranking soldiers—but she was clearly different from all of them.

She would not be an esper since she was an adult, but she also showed no sign of any bizarre weaponry. Using a camera as her weapon sounded unusually civilized for the dark side. He had not met someone this reasonable in a while.

Was she part of the beneficial dark side that those twins had mentioned? Or maybe she did not qualify as the dark side at all.

He did not have to fight her.

And even if he did, they could do it in a nonviolent fashion.

It really had been a long time since he had seen someone so wonderfully reasonable.

“Use them,” whispered track suit girl Takitsubo. “You said someone was using Anti-Skill. So do you know *what is making them go berserk?*”

“Huh?”

Benizome almost sounded offended.

But she was not saying no. In fact, she sounded confused why they would ask something so obvious.

“Don’t give me that. Are you testing me? Do I even have to say that it’s—”

She started to answer but then held down the top of her cowboy hat with a hand. She held her breath and further lowered her already lowered head.

Hamazura’s eyes widened.

“(Is someone coming?)”

“(Don’t give me that. Quit asking stupid questions. You’re in the way!)”

They were out back behind one of the Secret Residences. Normal guests would have no business in this area and the rich people who had spent great sums of money to live there would have no reason to walk into the shadows behind the homes.

No one would come here unless they knew about the tents there.

Now that he was seeing it from this angle, Hamazura could not believe how conspicuous people were when taking that route. He was lucky the person waiting here was a paparazzo because a sniper could have shot him and Takitsubo both. That possibility should have occurred to him before. He could no longer laugh it off as ridiculous.

This time, it was an old man walking down that path. He was as skinny as a matchstick. He almost looked like he was using his jumpsuit and lab coat to disguise some wires as a human silhouette.

“Who is that?” asked Hamazura.

“A Kihara.”

He had not expected that answer.

Even Benizome Jellyfish was trembling a little.

“He’s a part of that researcher family. This is bad. I was hoping for a dark side bigshot, but don’t give me that. Kihara Hasuu is too big!!”

“Hamazura.”

Takitsubo grabbed at his jacket and called his name, but she was not looking his way.

He could also hear a metallic creaking sound.

“Hamazura.”

“...”

When she called his name even more forcefully, he looked the direction she was.

The tall metal fence in that direction had what looked like sharp barbed arrows or spears at the top, but they were probably more for decoration than security. Those spikes were too sharp for a lightweight stray cat or wild bird to stand on, much less a human.

Yet two bare feet were standing atop one.

A girl was crouched up on the fence looking down at Hamazura and the others with a tilt of the head.

This was not right.

If she were a normal human, she would have been 13 or 14. She was a short girl with long hair and bangs cut straight across, but even those ordinary things looked wrong to him.

Her blinking and visible breaths were too regular.

A quiet sound could be heard in the silence like the humming of a refrigerator late at night.

Even on this winter night, she wore something like a racing swimsuit colored

a toxic orange and black like some kind of insect. The technology within and purpose for her clothing was clearly different from that of Hamazura or Takitsubo's clothing. The bands on her shoulders held phones and the belts around her thighs held a rolled-up silicone keyboard and bottles of some kind of liquid. The long hair spread out behind her was inhumanly crimson. The pupils in her widened eyes were expanding and contracting even more mechanically than a security camera's lens.

The atmosphere had changed.

He might not know the details of the tech, but his heart froze. His instincts told him the answer without even needing to see the brutal machete attached horizontally atop her small butt.

She was from the dark side. And she was probably a harmful. The paparazzo was not the only one laying a trap. That Kihara man had used himself as bait to reveal any threats. And this mystery girl had been launched as an attack.

She made no attempt to hide what she was.

Raised middle finger symbols appeared in the mechanical eyes looking down at them.

A strange noise echoed out, but the emotionless girl had not said anything. She had kicked off her unstable footing and that had caused the metal fence to loudly creak.

And where was she jumping?

Benizome Jellyfish was slow to react because she had been peering through her camera.

“Wah!”

Her soft body and specialized photography device were noisily knocked to the ground.

Hamazura did not even have time to reach out a hand toward her.

“Wahh!! Ahh!

He only managed to grab Takitsubo's skinny wrist and back away after falling onto his butt. Every centimeter between them and that girl felt valuable. Benizome's skill was real, so if she had been taken down so easily, he did not stand a chance. It was over if he was caught.

However.

The attacking android actually looked puzzled. The machete she had drawn from the back of her hips had slipped from her hand. It hit the ground with the same crash and tremor a boulder would have caused.

“Ferromagnetic quick-drying paint, 256-times concentrated.” The paparazzo held a spray can, but it did not seem to contain pepper spray. “Analog film is dying out, but the manufacturers have made a vast fortune with chemicals and cosmetics. Haven’t you heard of film companies making health supplements? And there are chemicals out there that cause corrosion in high-power machines!!”

“So this chemical will not harm my carbon skin but will melt away my synthetic clothing and underwear? Sensei would love this.”

Hamazura definitely heard a lovely voice, but the actual voice did not match the lip movements. He could not imagine why they would do that intentionally.

“But I will do what I can. Sensei said someone would try to interfere and he was correct. Which is why I was waiting here.”

“!!!???”

Hamazura immediately shoved Takitsubo Rikou away.

He heard a dull swoosh of air, similar to the swinging of a metal bat.

That came from Benizome.

The mystery girl planted her bare feet firmly on the snow, grabbed the woman in one hand, and swung her around. Benizome had to weigh forty to fifty kilograms. You might think of women as soft and light, but an axe customized for battle would only weigh two kilograms and a ball-and-chain only three. Forty kilograms might be light for a woman, but it was a devastating weight for a striking weapon.

“Gahh!?”

Hamazura could not avoid the attack to his torso and was sent flying along with the China dress paparazzo. It knocked the breath out of him and he did not have time to even move his limbs before he started rolling across the cold ground. This was his limit. A single hit and he had already hit his limit. Dark shadows were encroaching on the edges of his vision and he felt a great temptation to let go of his consciousness.

But...

“Bh.”

He and Benizome had unintentionally managed to put some distance between them and that dark side girl.

That meant the closest person—and thus the likeliest target—was Takitsubo Rikou who had been left behind.

“Kh, aghhhh!!!!!”

Benizome Jellyfish was lying limply on top of him, so he pushed her aside and forcibly got up from the ground.

Just before the mechanical girl leapt at the closer target, she turned her head around toward him.

The slow movement of her head looked less like a conscious act and more like a targeting program keeping him in its sights.

He had drawn her attention.

But what did he do now? How could he survive this unidentified enemy?

“Hey, don’t give me that. Do you even think before you act?”

He heard a voice. It came from Benizome Jellyfish who he had just pushed away. Still lying unnaturally on her side, she reached into the slit of her China dress and drew something from her thigh.

It was not quite a handgun.

It was a stun gun that used compressed gas to launch the electrodes.

“No biological reflexes, abnormal strength, and night vision? *I bet she’s stuffed full of machines.* So this might work better than a plain old bullet.”

Hamazura Shiage felt like he had narrowly avoided death here.

But it had slipped his mind that he was still being swallowed whole by the world known as the dark side.

When the woman pulled the trigger, the electrodes stabbed into Takitsubo Rikou.

“Eh?”

The track suit girl looked down in surprise. She did not seem to understand what was happening even when she saw the electrodes and cables attached to the center of her chest.

But once the dry crackling sound started, she arched her back.

“Takitsubo!?”

“Ha ha ha!!”

It was a mystery how she still had so much strength left, but Benizome hopped up from the ground, let go of the stun gun without switching it off, and slid herself away. She also pulled a thick metal pen from her large cleavage. It had a two millimeter hole at the top of the grip, so it was

probably a hidden camera. Its photos could not compare to the specialized single-lens reflex camera, but it would have the same quality as a phone camera.

Yes, she had been after one thing this entire time.

It was almost refreshing how dedicated she was to her goal.

“A mechanical brain will always go for the weakest target first, right!? Now I can escape and get my shot from a safe location. A shot of a Kihara-built secret weapon is sure to change history!! Don’t worry, she might turn you to mincemeat, but your deaths will allow me to set the world in motion!!”

(They’re all garbage! Is she a harmful too!?)

He glared at her while wishing he could kill her with his thoughts, but no one had ever said Benizome was on his side. She had merely let them live before, so it had always been on her terms. If she decided to cut them loose, there was nothing they could do to stop her.

However, he did have one thing he could use. Using it would leave him defenseless for a full hour afterwards, so it was best left unused until he absolutely needed it. There may have been a better way to use it, like to save his girlfriend suffering from that high-voltage current.

But he acted on reflex.

He did not have it in him to think rationally at the moment. His mind was boiling with rage. He could not let her get away with this. He could not let Benizome Jellyfish escape after using Takitsubo Rikou as bait for her own survival.

He stuck his hand in his pocket and grabbed the hard and cold coin within. He did not know how much power it had over humans who acted with a will of their own, so he chose to target something inanimate.

One option immediately came to mind, so he raised his voice.

“Make Benizome’s shoes slip, Coin of Nicholas!!”

“Keep my shoes from slipping, Coin of Nicholas!!”

He grimaced as soon as the words had left his mouth.

It had failed.

In fact...

“Ah ha ha!! Don’t give me that. Your eyeline was so obvious. Don’t underestimate a pro photographer!”

She was laughing.

The cause of his girlfriend’s pain calmly jumped into the bushes. All while a shotgun, a large handgun, and other weapons of various sizes spilled from the silver case she held.

He wanted to curse himself for thinking even for a second that she was a reasonable person.

She gave one last parting comment from the shadows.

“I knew something like this might happen once these things were being spread around! Don’t give me that. I can survive without its help, so I knew there was only one way to use it: To *negate* anyone else using one!!”

“Dammit!!”

He had not done any detailed research into how the coin worked. He had never tested to see what happened when two people used the coins on the same thing, but he felt so worthless now.

He had accomplished nothing and had to wait an hour for it to charge again.

He could not get back at her now.

The only people left were powerless Hamazura, Takitsubo who was still exposed to the high-voltage current, and the girl who moved through the cold

like a piece of construction equipment. If she could swing a forty or fifty kilogram person around with one arm, she might be able to break through a concrete wall with her fist.

(What do I do?)

Leaving Takitsubo and running was out of the question.

He could never leave her to be the victim in a snuff film.

But that only told him his objective.

He still needed the realistically achievable means with which to achieve that.

(What do I do!?)

Just then, the heavy machinery girl's eyes passed right by him as her head turned slowly like a swiveling fan.

He did not understand. It was not quite like she turned from right to left, ignoring him along the way. Once she turned to the left, her gaze moved back to the right. Since she was repeatedly turning her head side to side...had she lost sight of him?

He had no idea what was happening as he tried to catch his breath in front of her.

Given how much stronger she was, he doubted she would need to use any bluffs or feints, but he was through with rejoicing when he did not understand why something had happened. He had learned his lesson about that with Benizome Jellyfish.

“Pick it up.”

When he heard a female voice, he reached toward the ground almost on reflex.

He grabbed the pump action shotgun from the weapons Benizome had spilled on the ground.

“Fire.”

The blast knocked him onto his butt. That thing was clearly packed with too much powder. Benizome must have customized it herself, but he was pretty sure that increased the risk of it blowing up in your face. The racing swimsuit girl had also fallen onto her butt.

He did not have time to feel guilty about shooting a girl at point-blank range.

There was a small scratch on her forehead and a minuscule trail of red liquid, but the wound of only a few millimeters revealed a bundle of something silver on the other side. That was clearly not a human wound.

“Y-you’re kidding me. That was an overpowered shot and I think it was a slug based on the way it hit!”

“*Now is your chance.*”

“?”

He finally spun around toward the voice that had been whispering in his ear.

A woman stood behind him and he could not even guess how long she had been there. She wore a formfitting light blue dress with a loose translucent long skirt worn over it and she wore her long blonde hair in twintails. But she looked around twenty and had the figure to match, so that dress-up doll attire looked weird on her.

She seemed inhuman in a different way from the girl whose pupils mechanically expanded and contracted.

It was like she was not really there.

He was afraid his hand would pass right through her if he reached out to touch her.

Yes.

The word had no place in this city of science, but it still floated up in his

mind.

(A...ghost?)

Her tight and loose skirts hid her feet...giving the impression that she might not have any.

She was looking to the monster that had lost sight of her target. Of course, saving him did not mean this woman was a beneficial. She had not hesitated to order him to fire that gun and he never knew when that decisiveness would be directed his way.

“Pick up the stun gun if you wish to save your girlfriend. My nature affects *mechanical senses* such as cameras and sensors. Just like ghost photos and videos have not died out in an age of free image editing software. Just like phones lose their signal or have their location data or facial recognition malfunction during stories of paranormal encounters.”

Hamazura sprang into action.

Now was not the time to analyze what this ghost woman was saying. He snatched up the stun gun lying on the snow-wet ground and switched it off.

Takitsubo fell to her knees like he had switched off her power as well.

But the trouble was not over for her. That had been an illegal high-voltage current that did not adhere to any safety standards. Her cheeks were flushed and beads of sweat dripped from her forehead. Hamazura recognized these symptoms. She had suffered just like this from the Body Crystal drug extracted from the bodily fluids of berserk espers.

(Oh, no.)

He recalled the contents of the paper bag he was keeping safe: bC-96/R. What had Pet Breeder Aoumi Karei told him when she gave him that?

“*The temperature and humidity should be fine if you keep it in the fridge, but watch out for electricity leakage. Electrolysis can easily break down the medicine's components.*”

It had been destroyed.

The medicine currently circulating through Takitsubo Rikou's body had been destroyed by this attack.

"Are you kidding me!?" he shouted.

But someone pressed their finger against his lips. It was Takitsubo herself. She was suffering from a high fever, but she still gathered what little strength was left to warn him.

Yes, that was right.

What had happened to that attacker?

"..."

His mind went blank. He had to have had his eyes off of the enemy for a full twenty seconds. She could have slaughtered him many times over in that time.

So why hadn't she? The attacker slowly got up on her bare feet. For whatever reason, that heavy machinery girl wearing something like an orange and black racing swimsuit could not find the targets right in front of her.

She slowly turned her head side to side a few times to observe her surroundings, but then she pulled a bottle from her thigh and drank from it. Once she pulled the top of the bottle from her lips with a wet popping sound, she dumped the sticky clear liquid over her head.

He could hear electricity escaping from her head down to her feet. Something was happening.

"What is she?"

"She is not a cyborg that replaces human parts with machines."

That whispering voice reminded him someone else was here too: the mystery

ghost woman.

He would have fallen back on his butt if he had not been holding Takitsubo close.

“With that Kihara involved, she must be something even more grotesque.”

“...”

“I imagine artificial parts were built up one by one until they formed a full human. And with enough quality to be indistinguishable from a human on the outside,” explained the ghost women with the silhouette of a princess.

“*Android* would be the most suitable term. The word robot is more closely associated with the metal drums flooding the streets of this city.”

With a metallic scraping, the android girl pulled her thick machete out of the ground. She placed it in the sheathe directly attached to her swimsuit so it essentially lay horizontally atop her small butt. The undeveloped girl kicked off the snow with her bare feet to jump backwards and vanish into the darkness. Instead of running away, she seemed to be searching for the targets she had lost sight of. Not even she seemed to be aware what had happened.

Time passed, but Hamazura still did not feel any relief.

This was more than he had imagined.

He had known the dark side had cyborg parts that looked identical to biological ones, but this was a much greater taboo. If the ghost woman was right, that Kihara man had created *something like* thoughts and emotions from a machine.

And.

For that matter...

“Take your girlfriend and leave this place,” said the ephemeral ghost woman who he would have believed was a hallucination or hologram. “She has only lost sight of you. This seems to have placed a burden on her circuits, but not enough to damage them. I do not know when she will return. I cannot control

where she searches and she would still smash your body to pieces if she happened to run into you without seeing you there.”

Her blonde twintails fluttered in a way disconnected from the blowing of the wind.

And she continued speaking to Hamazura who had been forced to confront just how deep the dark side went.

“There is more than one way to escape the city. Several dark side members have set their sights on this one, so this is now an extremely dangerous area. If you are not confident you can survive the deadly battle over this plank of Carneades, you should search for a different loophole. Before you lose everything and regret your choice.”

Part 8

The large four-wheel-drive vehicle arrived at the District 2 General Anti-Skill Station.

While the vehicle was navigating the parking lot, Shirai clicked the send button for the report she had compiled. However...

“Transmission error?”

“Huh, so even kids these days get it wrong sometimes.”

The combover and glasses man was not trying to tease her—he sounded more like he had spotted a four-leaf clover. There appeared to be some trouble with the network, but they were already at the station. She could hand the laptop itself to an administrative worker there.

“You’ve turned a major corner in your life once you start proudly talking

about ‘kids these days’,” she said while stepping out of the unnecessarily large vehicle. “Your students won’t like you if you draw that line between yourself and them.”

“Eh? But I’m still a virgin.”

“Why would you reveal that information here!? And to a middle school girl no less!?”

What connection did that have to what she had said? She did not like how that had been a follow up to discussing his students. The Personal Information Protection Law needlessly weighed down on her shoulders. Did she really have to carry that information with her until the day she died?

This was District 2.

That district specialized in the research of gunpowder and vehicles, so its Anti-Skill station was very well equipped. It was now acting as their new headquarters.

They could not give up just because they had lost one base.

Shirai’s feet felt heavy as she walked. The scope and gruesomeness of the damage caused by the dark side was part of that, but she also could not wholly endorse what Anti-Skill was doing. She felt like a heretic, but things changed once they arrived at the Anti-Skill base.

There were very few people there.

The few adults who remained seemed listless. They were leaning against the wall or sitting down on the floor. The lack of conversation allowed a heavy gloom to hang over the place.

“What is this?”

“Half of us are no longer responding,” replied one of the officers waiting in the station. He at least seemed to still have a will to fight. “I really don’t want to believe all of them were taken out by the dark side, but I can’t deny how powerful those dark side freaks are. And they must have hit us with some

kind of cyber attack. That means we can't get an accurate count, allowing our imaginations to run wild."

"You mean...they got away?"

"I hate to admit it, but yes. A lot of us are starting to think it was a mistake to dig up the dark side."

None of them wanted their entire force to go down fighting.

A lot of Anti-Skill would have believed this job would only entail chasing down the criminals and taking them into custody.

But the reality they found was quite different.

Not even the murderous dark side would slaughter 2.3 million people to protect their throne, but Anti-Skill would not want to lose their own lives during a war of attrition. Not everyone thought saving the world was worth it if they or their family were killed in the process.

The problem was the ratio. A small minority would not have caused much of a problem, but once a majority of Anti-Skill had lost their nerve, the entire organization could fall apart. Especially if some of them started betraying their colleagues in the hopes that the dark side would spare them in exchange. And in truth, this base was badly understaffed.

It was an issue of morale.

Once morale dropped far enough, they could collapse despite outnumbering their opponents. And that did sound like a method criminals would prefer to use.

"This is worse than I imagined."

Shirai breathed a heavy sigh. The "attack" had already begun. She felt a weight on her own shoulders, but she could not back out now.

Not after seeing those young twins smiling in that rotting world.

After meeting up with some other Anti-Skill officers, they guided her to the heliport on the roof.

“Phase 1 was less successful than hoped, but we did do some damage to the dark side’s hideouts and labs.” Fully-equipped N amino spoke over the artificial gale produced by the main rotor. “In Phase 2, we will strike at the dark side remnants trying to escape. Possible escape routes include the walls surrounding the city, its gates, the airport, the heliports, and the bases for loading shipments into the long-distance trucks. The brutal harmfuls are our top priority, but I also want to actively hunt down the gentler beneficials if we have the chance. At any rate, the remnants should be concentrated in the more popular spots, so we should be able to round them up if we attack there.”

“Attack, hm?”

“You got a problem with that?”

He seemed awfully sure of himself for someone who had been accused of excessive force earlier.

It made her want to ask for her own internal investigation right away.

The combover and glasses man tugged at her uniform from behind.

“(Sh-Shirai-san, you should go along with this for now. You can’t do anything if they refuse to let you join them.)”

“...”

“(And anyone would have a hard time taking the suspects’ side after the slaughter at the other station. You have to prove on-site that it is possible to arrest them normally without killing them.)”

“Understood. But stay away!! I have an anti-man barrier in place! Back up until I can’t detect your old man stink!!”

Meanwhile, the helicopter’s engine had warmed up.

She reviewed what information was available while boarding it.

Namino spoke on behalf of Anti-Skill as a whole.

“We will generally remain on standby up in the sky and rush in when a request comes in, but it would be best to make some predictions where we’ll be needed. District 23 in particular is a crowded airspace with more than five airplanes flying through every ten minutes. We would have a hard time making last-minute adjustments there even in an emergency.”

“Um.” Shirai raised her hand as was proper. “The point of Phase 2 is to cut off the dark side’s escape routes, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, what about it?”

“Then what is this?”

She pointed to the northeast of Academy City, but not toward a district bordering the wall and not toward the airport or any heliports.

Even she frowned as she asked about it.

“District 6 is an amusement park, but this says gunshots were heard there. What is that about?”

Part 9

Hamazura Shiage remained dazed for a while afterwards.

He had been hopelessly outmatched, so he had no idea how he had survived.

But.

Since he had...

“...”

“Hamazura.”

That question was already mixed in with some unnaturally heavy and heated breathing.

Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes unfocused as she looked up at him.

He was anxious as could be. It was worse than having a powerful poison injected into his neck.

“Wh-what about the medicine? We still have a week’s worth from what Pet Breeder gave me, so you can take that!”

“I’m only supposed to take one dose a day and I think that means it’s a powerful drug. Speeding up the dosage on our own would be too dangerous.”

Then there was nothing they could do.

If amateurs like them could not make any decisions here, their only option was going to a doctor. But that was not an option while they were on the run. As a delinquent, he knew the protocol. After a crime, the wanted information was sent to hospitals and hotels first and foremost.

“Let’s find a black market doctor.”

“Hamazura.”

“We have money. There was a whole bunch balled up in the sling bag! And only someone in Academy City can deal with a Body Crystal issue. We can’t get you healed if we leave the city!!”

“Hamazura.”

She called his name stronger this time. She was woozy with a fever and her strength was draining from her along with the sweat, but she spoke clearly.

“Running away is fine, but why are we running away? It isn’t to turn our

backs on hope, remember?”

“...”

“It’s true technology outside the city is two or three decades behind, but we have me and the medicine used to treat me. With both of those, a doctor outside the city might be able to fill in the blanks. There’s still a chance.”

How much strength had she gathered even as the core of her body looked ready to break?

“But there is no chance if we stay here and get arrested. Then our chances drop to zero. So which would you prefer? Remember why we’re running away.”

The sick generally became weaker and more selfish. Especially when the details of and treatment for their disease were unknown. But she worked to encourage him like she always did.

He had to reward that courage.

He suppressed the urge to rush forward and instead turned back the way they had come.

That was the only correct answer here.

“Wait, Hamazura. Where are you going?”

“That ghost woman saved us.”

First, he stated the facts so he could use that as a foundation for speculation.

“But *why*? What happened with Benizome is enough to know we aren’t going to find anyone who saves us out of a spirit of volunteerism or simple benevolence. If she saved us, then it benefited her to do so. She spared us from a position of superiority.”

For that matter, how long had that ghost woman been there? She had appeared in the nick of time to save him, but it was possible *she had waited*

until after Takitsubo was hit by the stun gun before intervening. Maybe she could have helped sooner, but she wanted to play the savior to take control of the situation.

“Then...”

“The ghost woman manufactured a draw between us and the android. That Kihara guy the android was protecting will notice something is wrong soon enough. If someone escaped the trap he laid for them, then it’s their turn to hunt him down. Once he senses danger, he’ll run. And we left on the advice of the ghost woman. So *who has uninterrupted access to the valuable counterfeiter now?*”

“Oh.”

“Now you get it. She got both sides of that fight to leave at the same time, so Perfect Film is wide open. She can ask him for a job without having to worry about anyone intervening.”

He doubted that inhuman ghost woman would fear Anti-Skill’s ordinary bullets, but she may have had something she wanted to protect. Like the researcher who had developed her or her real body she had left as an astral projection.

At any rate, Hamazura layered speculation on top of the facts to fill in the blanks like he was solving a crossword puzzle.

“The ghost woman doesn’t want anyone interfering.”

He continued walking.

His pace had picked up.

“She might win a direct confrontation, but I bet there’s someone there she didn’t want caught in the middle of our fight. That’s why she pushed everyone else away. There must be something even losers like us can pull off here.”

They were not far from the tents now. He chose the tent that had some light

escaping it and pushed his way in without knocking.

Inside, a stubborn-looking old man—presumably the counterfeiter—was facing a young man Hamazura had never seen before.

Was he a friend of the ghost woman?

He was dressed in something not quite like a plain-colored jumpsuit. His version had shorts and short sleeves. Was it called a safari jacket? It reminded Hamazura of a TV adventurer whose show kept getting brought back. Although this young man wore a black long-sleeved rash guard below to deal with the winter temperatures. The headband around his forehead had an outdoor webcam attached to the side of his head.

This tent appeared to be the lab rather than the residence. Before anyone could say a word, Hamazura stuck his hand in a toolbox and pulled out a nail gun.

The young man was unfazed.

“Really? Frillsand-kun needs to do a better job.”

“Shut up.”

“Quick question: do you think *a ghost created with science* can be exorcized with two-yen-a-pop nails?”

That was not the question here.

Hamazura Shiage did not hesitate to aim the nail gun at Perfect Film.

“Hey!”

The stubborn old man’s eyes widened, but Hamazura was in no position to accept complaints. This was the dark side, so everyone was racking their brains to survive and choosing whatever option they could trust with their life.

He was through relying on uncertain promises or convenience.

“You need this greasy old man as much as I do, so you can’t have me killing him, can you? So let’s calm down and talk this out. We both want out of Academy City, but I’ll break our plank of Carneades if I have to!!”

“Okay, okay. I get it.”

The young man casually raised his hands.

Hamazura had the upper hand, but the young man was as calm as ever. Hamazura had come up with this plan, but he was shaken by this. He started to wonder if he was really doing the right thing.

“You want the same thing I do, don’t you?” asked the young man.

“A passport even better made than a real one.”

“Indeed. But neither of us has much time. And from the look of things, you need two. FYI, I coughed up a cool five mil for my plank.”

“...”

Five million yen. How thick would that be? He had the balled-up cash inside the voice on the phone’s sling bag, but not even that would be enough for this.

The young man grinned while verbally going on the attack.

“But you’re still a student, so how much can you pay for the plank you need to stay afloat? Per person, I mean. Oh, and this is precise work that can’t be done if the craftsman’s fingers are trembling from a threat to his life, so you can’t exactly ask for his help until you lower that weap—”

He never finished his sentence because something else happened first.

Hamazura heard something whizzing through the tent and then the counterfeiter’s rock-hard head burst.

The entire interior of the tent was dyed red and Hamazura fell back onto his ass. He had not done this. A nail gun was only meant to drive the nail into a

piece of wood, so even if he had accidentally pulled the trigger, it would not have been powerful enough to crack open the old man's skull, sending pieces flying everywhere.

Which meant...

"Man, Frillsand-kun *really* needs to do a better job," lamented the young man.

He sounded like someone whose brand-new lightbulb had just died.

Yes, the ghost woman had overlooked something.

She may have thought this young man was free to negotiate once the Hamazura/Takitsubo team and the Kihara/Android team were diverted away from Perfect Film, but there had been someone else there.

Hamazura Shiage found a certain name spilling from his mouth.

"...fish."

That woman could use electron beams, terahertz waves, and other special photography equipment to accurately aim through the tent, she had carried powerful weapons, and she was willing to lie in wait for her target just like a sniper.

She was part of the dark side and a goddamn harmful at that.

"Benizome Jellyfish!!!!!"

She did not care about the fate of the entire world or the life of a single person.

That freelance camerawoman had no morals whatsoever, so she was willing to spread chaos if it would help her get the shot she wanted.

Map

List of OP.“Hand_Cuffs”

DISTRICT 2 GENERAL ANTI-SKILL STATION



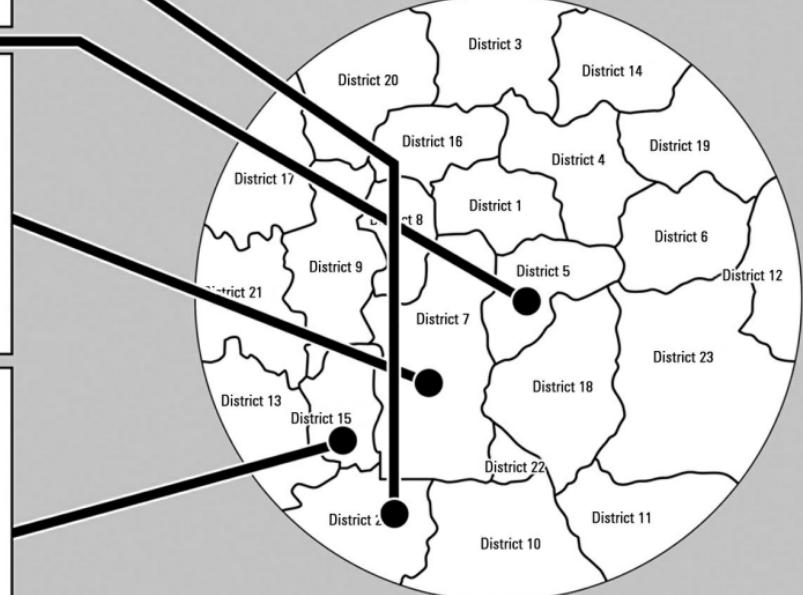
SOMEWHERE IN DISTRICT 8



SOMEWHERE IN DISTRICT 7



DISTRICT 15 LUXURY HOTEL



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List of OP.“Hand_Cuffs”

DISTRICT 6 AMUSEMENT PARK



Hanazura Shige

Beneficial



Takitsubo Rikou

Beneficial



Drencher Kihara
Repatri

Beneficial



Frillsand #G

Beneficial



Benizome Jellyfish

Harmful

SOMEWHERE IN DISTRICT 6



Kihara Hasuu

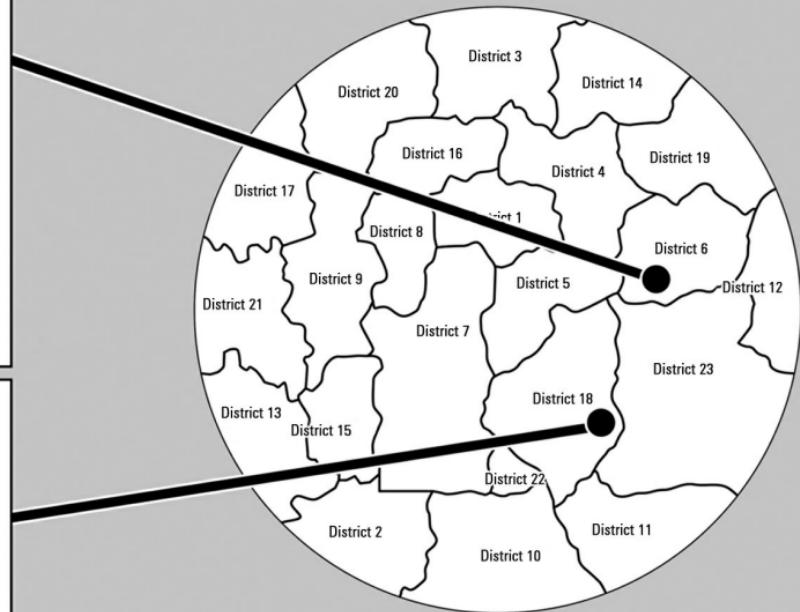
Harmful

Page 65



Ladybird

Harmful



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District 2 General Anti-Skill Station:

Shirai Kuroko – Judgment

Rakuoka Houfu – Anti-Skill

Somewhere in District 8:

Vivana Oniguma – Beneficial

Somewhere in District 7:

Kihara Noukan – Beneficial

District 15 Luxury Hotel:

Hanatsuyu Kaai – Harmful

Hanatsuyu Youen – Harmful

District 6 Amusement Park:

Hamazura Shiage – Beneficial

Takitsubo Rikou – Beneficial

Drencher Kihara Repatri – Beneficial

Frillsand #G – Beneficial

Benizome Jellyfish – Harmful

Somewhere in District 18:

Kihara Hasuu – Harmful

Ladybird – Harmful

Between the Lines 2

“Aren’t these things so convenient?”

A girl who looked only ten leaned against the cold bars.

Her long, long hair gave off a rosy scent as she whispered into the neighboring cell.

“Smartphones, I mean. Now, computers will have plenty of software preloaded onto them when you buy them at the electronics store. Too much, really. But isn’t that the real difference between a smartphone and a computer? You have to read through all the manuals if you want to know how to use a computer, but you can just intuitively pick up how to use a smartphone just by touching it. That seems simple enough, but it’s actually incredibly hard to pull off. Masking the work that went into it is the trick to getting your new service to spread.”

Anna Sprengel received no response, but she did not seem offended.

She welcomed having an audience who would listen. What she could not stand were the fools who interrupted her with stupid questions while acting like they knew what they were talking about.

Self-proclaimed experts were a cancer on the world. They would end up destroying themselves, but the problem was how they spread their so-called expertise to others beforehand.

“Oh? But don’t you have firsthand experience with this? You inherited

Academy City, after all. After the old Board Chairman squeezed out every last drop of its power, he handed it over to you as a bunch of codes. And what kind of hardware did that use? Hee hee hee. Wasn't it a smartphone?"

She slowly breathed in and out before continuing.

"But human psychology is a strange thing."

Most likely. that was something not even she had an answer for.

The human mind.

If she had a perfect grasp of its illogical and incomprehensible actions, she would not be here doing this in the first place.

"When you find something convenient and comfortable, do you ever get an urge to take a look behind the curtain? I know you do. For example, maybe you were curious about how exactly R&C Occultics managed to spread so quickly?"

Maybe she could control the masses as a single large group.

Maybe she could hold the reins by placing them in the category of "monster" and understanding them that way.

But now, Anna smiled thinly.

"But is that really what you should be looking into? How much do you understand about the workings of that phone you carry? Why is the internet a fixed fee while calls are charged by the minute? How does it connect while out on the ocean, up in the mountains, or anywhere else? Cross talk used to be an issue with phones, but why doesn't it happen anymore? There probably isn't a single person out there who can explain every single thing that goes on inside that card-sized case. The internet has no shortage of self-styled experts, but if they really could do what they claim, they would be filthy rich. The real experts tend not to let anyone know about the valuable knowledge they have."

Why did people suddenly find the word Kirarazaka in their phone's

dictionary?

Why would a phone's AI assistant respond to questions about aliens with the word Zoltaxian?

Was it a simple input error, was it a joke by the developers, or was it something secretly added in for some definite purpose? There were so many unexplained blind spots in the devices people carried with them every day.

"You inherited this city in the form of a smartphone, but how much of its functions do you actually understand? A normal user should be commended if they use even thirty-percent of what their phone can do."

What was she hinting at with these questions?

This was a dark lullaby meant to drag the listener into a nightmare world.

Anna Sprengel quietly said one last thing.

"Let your guard down and you might just have your feet swept out from under you. That thing might be filled with undiscovered vulnerabilities you aren't even aware of."

Chapter 3: Academy City's Greatest Taboo — Safety_Zero, Control_Free.

Part 1

She would get her shot.

She would snap the photo of the century by any means necessary.

But a hibernating bear did not make for an interesting subject. An undisturbed hornet's nest was just boring. If you wanted an exciting shot, you had to wake the bear, throw the hornet's nest to the ground, and send them both into a rage.

That was all this was, but she knew too much.

She knew all the signs and courtesies that Anti-Skill and Judgment would overlook.

She had wrapped herself in the same scent until no one would question her presence there.

Benizome Jellyfish was an extremely skilled camerawoman, but this was why no publisher would hire her on full time no matter how consistently she provided photographic scoops.

This was a talent she could not go public with. And while she had learned how to live in that world, she too had become known as the dark side.

(It's too bad this is the only way I could find to live.)

While she hid behind some bushes covered in hard snow and peered through her collapsible sniper rifle's scope, her mind was focused on the hidden camera pen she also held. It hurt that her single-lens reflex camera had been destroyed, but since the technology in this was the same as in a phone, it would be high enough quality for a magazine. After all, this was the age of terrestrial television running two-hour specials created entirely by stringing together animal videos found online.

She did not think this was the most efficient way to make money.

She had preyed on entertainers, athletes, politicians, entrepreneurs, and every other kind of celebrity who stood in the public eye. If she just wanted to make money, there were plenty of ways to do so without a camera.

(Maybe I'm like a rich kid who shoplifts. *I just love the thrill of tearing down someone else's life.* They won't want that to happen and they'll resist in every way they can if they notice, but that risk only makes it more exciting.)

She would intercept radio transmissions, tail people, estimate their area of activity on the map, and stake out a location. The techniques of a freelance camerawoman were a lot like those of an urban sniper, so she could easily switch jobs just by trading out her camera for a gun.

She had a clear reason for choosing not to work as a sniper.

Her experience told her that a single photograph could be far more *earthshattering* than a single bullet.

A photo that terrified the people at the top could open a path for her. Targeting the center of the city was a better plan than blindly trying to climb the wall or acquiring a fake passport. The one and only safe exit was found there.

“So don’t worry, you silly student couple.”

Everything was in place. The two groups inside the tent were strangers. And they both wanted a fake passport for illicit purposes. Their temporary equilibrium would end now that the counterfeiter they needed was dead. That greatly increased the odds of something spontaneously going wrong.

She licked her lips from safety while tilting the pen camera and the phone synced to it on their side.

“I will capture your tragedy in the frame. I will negotiate extra hard with the editor-in-chief this time to make sure I get the highest price I can for this one☆”

This camerawoman remained freelance because every publisher wanted to keep her at arm’s length, but she also had the skill that kept them purchasing her photos. This was the moment she had been waiting for.

“Oh? Did you actually think you were hidden when you smell so strongly of gunpowder smoke?”

When she heard a voice behind her, she silently frowned below the cowboy hat with jellyfish decoration.

Her techniques were tried and true. Even if she had been focused on the pen camera in her hand, she doubted anyone could have snuck up on her like this. If they had approached using any normal method, she would have heard them treading on the grass or snow.

Since she had not, they must have used a non-normal method to approach.

She whispered behind her with her eyes still on the phone linked to the camera.

“A teleporter? Don’t give me that.”

“This is Judgment.”

A clear voice cut through the winter chill to rule this place. And it made an

announcement no criminal wanted to hear.

“Gunpowder weapons lack the elegance of the Railgun. Care to explain the smell of gunpowder smoke lingering in this area? Specifically, how that might be related to the highly-specialized gun abandoned right over there?”

Part 2

Loud gunshots rang from outside.

From surprisingly close by.

“Wahh!!”

“Hamazura, let’s get out of here.”

Track suit girl Takitsubo tugged on his arm, but Hamazura’s hips had given out and he had pathetically fallen on his butt. She was actually pulled back toward him and collapsed when she tried to tug on him.

She was so light.

Even through her track suit, he could tell she was unnaturally warm.

“Damn.”

He thought he might have tears in the corners of his eyes.

He frantically searched through the sling bag. The voice on the phone had gathered several runaway tools, like money, a counterfeit passport, and a first aid kit.

“Isn’t there anything of use in here!? I’d take a fever reduction sheet or painkillers at this point!!”

“I’m fine. We still have a long way to go, so keep all the medicine for you.”

Meanwhile, the young man in a safari jacket and rash guard did not run away or search for anything. He simply stared at those two. Hamazura could not even guess what that dark side man was thinking and he did not have time to worry about it either.

“Drencher.”

A face emerged from the bloody synthetic material forming the back wall. It was the ghost woman with long blonde twintails, a skintight dress, and a loose long skirt. Physical restrictions must have meant nothing to her because the waterproof tent was no obstacle to her.

“We need to leave here. It is dangerous.”

“And whose fault is that, Frillsand-kun?”

“I was not the one who began a firefight.”

The young man, however, did require a physical exit. Hamazura was seated over by the only zipper, so he crouched down and pulled out one of the metal spikes holding the tent down. After forcing up the bloody material, he turned back toward Hamazura.

“Search for *Academy City’s Greatest Taboo*.”

“What?”

“That is your only option now that you can’t use District 23’s airport. Even if it is a vague rumor about something that may not even exist. Of course, all the surviving dark side will be rushing there, but if you want to safely escape Academy City, you have to make the attempt.”

Hamazura was only confused, so he must not have been of enough interest to keep the young man here.

He left the tent and the ghost woman passed through the bloody synthetic material once more.

“Hamazura.”

“...”

Someone from the dark side would not give him a gift out of a spirit of volunteerism or simple benevolence. Since that man had given this information, he must have wanted to control Hamazura’s actions.

But to what end? He could not be cautious of something he did not understand.

It was time to make a decision.

“Dammit.”

“What is it, Hamazura!?”

The delinquent boy turned his back on the safe path. Instead of running away, he turned back toward the tent. Now that he thought about it, he could not figure out why Perfect Film had stayed here. His presence had been like a blessing from heaven for Hamazura and Takitsubo, but the counterfeiter could have used one of his own passports to board a plane and leave.

Why hadn’t he?

Did he have some insurance that meant he did not have to rush?

Like Academy City’s Greatest Taboo maybe?

Hamazura had no idea if that was a person, an object, or a concept, but he could not ignore it. His ignorance was not due to the poor quality of the information—he had simply not looked into it.

There was apparently some special rule in play during this clash between Anti-Skill and the dark side. Not knowing about that was like being wealthy but unaware of the revolution that was underway. Whether he could use this or would be used by it, he had to at least know what it was.

He wanted to know the complete set of rules even if that meant taking on

some more risk.

He needed information.

A corpse with a shattered head lay inside a bloodstained tent. The many tools strewn about suggested this had been the old man's workshop, but Hamazura searched all over and could not find a small memory device the size of a leather notepad or tube of lipstick. He grimaced and tried to face the corpse, but he ended up gagging.

The track suit girl stepped out in front of him.

She crouched down and quickly searched through the man's pockets.

As harmless as she was, she had still been influenced by the dark side.

"He only has a wallet in his pocket. What should we do, Hamazura?"

"G-good question."

Unsurprisingly, there was no medicine for Body Crystal here.

If it was that common, he would not have been relying on Pet Breeder.

Dark unease roiled in his chest once more. He was curious—extremely curious—but was this really worth investigating while his girlfriend was inching closer to death? Wasn't there something better he could be doing with this time?

(No. I told myself I wouldn't let her courage go to waste. Running away is fine, but I can't lose sight of why we're running away! I'm doing this so we can be happy. That has to be my focus throughout, so I can't move from one thing to another and lose sight of that!!)

He shook his head to shake off the strange dizziness he felt and somehow managed to speak.

"This isn't the only tent. Let's search the others."

He walked to the tent's exit. That was a logical decision, but he also could not stand to be trapped in there with the rusty smell any longer.

And...

“Bh!?”

Just as he lowered his head to duck through the exit, he bumped into something soft.

It was a girl’s chest.

The delinquent boy fell on his butt and looked up to see *a hakama girl with long silver hair* standing with her hands on her hips.

“Attention tent occupant!!” The curly haired girl actually spoke Japanese. “Are you the famous counterfeiter? I tracked down the location of your lab a while back. Because I lost a ton of money purchasing a book that turned out to be a forgery made by you, you could say I’ve already paid in advance, so I have the right to one of your passports!!”

“What the hell!? Can you not hear all that gunfire out there!? Besides, that old man is already dead!!”

“Eh? Oh...kyahhhhhh!? Brains...a crushed head. What am I doing at the center a gory horror movie all of a sudden!?”

Hamazura nearly snapped back that she had walked into it herself, but he restrained himself. And not just because his face had been treated to those surprisingly jiggly boobs.

She was here tonight for a high-quality counterfeit passport.

She might be wearing clothing with a mascot pattern, but she was definitely with the dark side. She might be a few eggs short of a dozen, but it would be best not to carelessly antagonize her.

“Hamazura.”

“Y-yeah. You’re right. This doesn’t change what we need to do. We need to figure out whatever we can about *Academy City’s Greatest Taboo*.”

The hakama girl made a weird “mhh?” sound while toying with the horns made by hardening her bangs. She was staring right at Takitsubo.

“Um, are you okay? Your face is red and you’re sweating a lot. You over there, doesn’t something look wrong with her?”

“Well, um...”

“Excuse me a moment. Yeah, I can’t help but look into something once I’m curious.”

She acted without asking permission and too quickly to stop her. At first, Hamazura mistook it for a wrestling move. She knocked Takitsubo over, grabbed at her leg, removed the shoe, and then began rubbing her thumb against the bottom of Takitsubo’s foot.

“Agyagagagagaga!?”

“Hmm, it isn’t your liver or kidneys. Is it in your chest? I think it might be more circulatory than respiratory???”

The curly silver-haired girl pulled something from her pocket.

It was a stethoscope.

“You can tell with that?” asked Hamazura.

“Tell what? Anyway, I’m going to take off your top and your boobs will be visible, but are you okay with him being here for that?”

“She’s 100% okay with—ow!?”

A kick from trembling Takitsubo expelled him from the tent.

Then the exit was zipped shut.

“Okay, let’s get that top off of you so I can get a look at your chest. Ohh, you’re the sexy type.”

“Th-that doesn’t matter here, does it?”

“I’m an expert, so don’t let it bother you. Okay, take in a deep breath...and let it out.”

“Hah, hoo.”

“Okay, I’m going to press the stethoscope against you. Sorry if it’s chilly.”

“Eek!?”

Those voices really stirred up his imagination. What was going on inside that tent!? That place was bloody and there was an old man’s headless corpse inside, but he could only imagine it as pink right now! It was all transforming so much in his mind that he was afraid he would develop some weird new fetish!!

If that hakama girl was with the dark side, was she a beneficial?

Wait, wait, he thought while shaking his head. He could not let her kindness influence him. That was a bad habit of delinquents. Had he already forgotten what happened with Benizome and the ghost woma—

“Ahn. So...hot!”

“How in the world do you get that reaction with a stethoscope, you perverted doct—bweh!?”

The instant he rushed wide-eyed into the tent, he was hit by a toolbox thrown by Takitsubo.

(Mo-)

While his vision flipped around, he saw something placed on his girlfriend’s bare back. A flame similar to a cigarette was smoldering there.

(Moxibustion???)

And after a while...

“Uhh.”

Takitsubo’s expression was blank as she left the tent, but her soft cheeks appeared to be burning up. She moved her mouth some, but no actual words ever got out. Nor could she bring herself to look him in the eye.

But this meant she was feeling well enough to focus on these other emotions.

“D-did you save her?”

The hakama girl sighed while putting her tools back in a black cloth wrapper.

“All I did was use the heat to induce blood flow and cut off the excessive stimulation of her nerves, so I didn’t heal the fundamental cause. She might be feeling better, but only because I shut off the danger signals. She shouldn’t push herself because mistaking her limits could do real damage to her body.”

“Who are you?”

“A torture specialist. Oh, but only in Japanese torture. That’s why I know how to do moxibustion, acupuncture, and traditional Chinese medicine.”

She just casually dropped that bombshell. Hamazura was left speechless by the revelation that she was not a doctor. Especially because it came *after* everything was done. But that was just how the dark side worked.

“Moxibustion is a field that stimulates the blood vessels and muscles with heat to externally control the movement of the organs. It doesn’t actually extract the toxins from the blood, so if you do want to save her...yes, I would recommend starting with dialysis.”

Dialysis was a medical technique that cleaned the blood with a filter outside the body and then returned it to the body. Quality aside, that was an ordinary technique they could have done outside the city.

Academy City could do it too, but security was too strict at the hospitals here. On the other hand, he was hesitant to leave his girlfriend's wellbeing in the hands of a black market doctor. So this was perfect. Technology outside the city was two or three decades behind, but they could trick their way into medical care at a hospital out there.

He had found it.

It was a very thin thread, but he had found a path toward saving his girlfriend.

"Hamazura, weren't you looking for something? Until we were interrupted by, um, what happened."

"R-right."

"Why are you so embarrassed about another girl seeing your boobs?" asked the hakama girl. "Yours are bigger than mine anyway."

"Bring that up again and I really will hit you."

Yes, the counterfeiter had a few other tents. They were probably divided up between living space and storage, but Hamazura had no way of telling which was which from the outside. While opening them each in turn, he found a sleeping bag rolled up next to a locked cabinet. It looked something like a somewhat fancy fishing case, but the plastic drawers were surprisingly sturdy. He doubted they would break even if he hit them with the metal kettle found in the same tent.

He did not have time to search around for the key since he could still hear gunfire from outside. He was not sure who was fighting who out there, but a stray bullet whizzing through the thin tent would be deadly no matter who it came from.

He tried sticking two metal clips inside the keyhole, but then he frowned. He could not feel them catching on the pins. Despite how cheap it looked, this appeared to be a fairly special analog lock.

(Damn, if only I still had my Coin of Nicholas.)

He regretted wasting it on that paparazzo. He should not have used it without thinking.

But then he had another idea.

“Hey, you with the tits.”

“Yes?”

“Yes?”

For some reason, both girls turned toward him, but Takitsubo was going to have to restrain her weird rivalry here. He had been speaking to the hakama girl.

“Do you have one of those coins?”

“I do. Why?”

Meanwhile, the track suit girl began pushing herself up against him from the side and silently puffing out her cheeks. *It's not a competition and I wasn't choosing her over you!* He just about lost his focus. She was larger than the hakama girl and that gave her unbelievable destructive power.

He had to empty his mind as he focused on this risky deal with the mystery hakama girl.

“Is it usable right now?”

“Heh heh heh. I'm a methodical Type A who likes to economize, so as you can see—hyahhhh!? Wait, don't just steal my Coin of Nicholas!!”

“Open this lock, Coin of Nicholas!!”

He raised his voice after he finally managed to shove aside the hakama girl (whose hakama had slipped out of place in some crucial places during the struggle).

When he heard the click, he yanked the drawer open.

He found a card-sized hard drive inside. That alone was not enough to see what was on it. For all he knew, it was a collection of porn videos and links, but he chose to trust the embossed word on the label maker tape attached to its plastic surface: Lifeline.

“Is this it!?”

This was better than nothing, so he snatched it up. At the same time, he heard a gunshot from even closer than before.

Their time was up.

“Hamazura, let’s get out of here.”

“Yeah!!”

But he heard some sobbing from the silver-haired girl who had two horns yet did not seem threatening in the slightest and who inexplicably appeared to have some red plastic tape below her hakama.

“I resisted using it all this time and then it’s all taken from me in an instant. Why does this always happen to me???”

He froze up. This was extremely awkward. He owed her for relieving Takitsubo’s suffering. The dark side way would be to abandon her and make a run for it, but could he really do that? Could he really stoop to the unspeakable level of Benizome and that ghost woman?

Could he really look his girlfriend in the eye if he did?

“Hamazura.”

“Argh!! Okay, fine! We owe you twice if we include the hard drive, so hurry this way!! Unless you want to die!!”

“Wait, what!? Now you’re dragging me into the bushes to have your way with me!?”

Trapped between the girl’s misguided complaints and Takitsubo’s silent

gaze, Hamazura awkwardly and nervously left the group of tents.

They could no longer hope to use a counterfeit passport at the District 23 airport.

They were left with just one final hope: *Academy City's Greatest Taboo*.

Whatever that was.

Part 3

Shirai Kuroko teleported repeatedly in quick succession.

But this was a deterrent rather than an attack. Her eyes were still dazzled.

(I didn't expect her to use her camera's strobe light when she turned around.)

She was ashamed, but making an appearance now would achieve nothing. She calmly calculated out the time until she would recover.

(Another five seconds!!)

Her vision was returning.

And while she teleported, she noticed an odd crunch from the ground below her feet. Half-hardened snow would not make that sound.

The entirety of District 6 was an enormous amusement park, but it also had some luxury homes known as the Secret Residences. They were all based on a movie or fairy tale, so the large grounds for each looked very different.

This one had gravel, a bamboo thicket, a teahouse bench, and a large red umbrella, but it did not appear to just be a Japanese-style residence. The most notable features were a dilapidated torii and an unmanned train station

without its roof. The rusted train track was buried by gravel and weeds and a rusted sign stood on the platform.

The sign said “Otherworld Capital Station”.

(What movie is this from?)

If it was a 3D movie featuring mascot characters, Mikoto would probably know a surprising amount about it. Just as Shirai Kuroko warped to another coordinate, she heard a strange metallic sound. There was now a thumb-thick bullet hole in the rusted sign. She could launch projectiles while ignoring all three-dimensional restrictions, so it was unusual for her to be stuck in a long-term battle. No matter what her opponent hid behind to cover the direct line of sight, she could send a metal dart directly into them and that attack would do its damage regardless of what kind of armor they were wearing.

And yet.

“Ha ha.”

She could hear the laughter of that reporter in a cowboy hat and China dress who had become one with the darkness after trading her camera for a sniper rifle.

“Ha ha, ah ha ha!! Incredible, simply incredible. My craft is all about distance, angle, and timing, but I’ve failed to get my shot after setting all that up three times now. Don’t give me that. You have talent, but watch out because it isn’t just stray dogs that can’t resist chasing a running target!!”

“Really!?”

“Sorry, but I’m the chaser and you’re the chased. Your talent isn’t enough to flip that one around.”

Shirai continued her quick teleports to keep some distance between them while pursuing that woman.

She launched several metal darts at once toward the slender leg she saw sticking out from a risqué slit, but...

“Not good enough.”

“Kh!!”

Over the course of a single second, several dozen lightning-like flashes of light assaulted her senses so she lost sight of the proper coordinates.

That was a camera’s strobe light.

The woman’s China dress was fairly skimpy and the stomach was see-through, but it apparently hid a surprising number of tools. That strobe light was no joke when combined with a bolt-action sniper rifle.

If a feint threw off Shirai’s timing, a bullet whizzing through the air might just hit her at a vital point before she could even teleport. And attacking toward the light source was not going to hit. The woman had thrown collapsible reflector boards around the area so she could reflect the light around.

Shirai naturally grew cautious, but not just because of that.

(I need to find a way.)

She clenched her teeth. She could not let the suspect pick up on this impatience she was feeling.

(I need to find a way to restrain her *before the gears break*. She might be part of the dark side, but I’m not letting another suspect die! I could never look Onee-sama in the eye if I did!!)

The woman in a bright red China dress dove behind a tall metal “missing person” sign that was attached with wire to an old wooden streetlight.

Shirai’s eyes naturally slid over to the other side of the sign where she would likely emerge, but...

(Oh, no!)

She realized her mistake too late and heard a loud gunshot ring out.

The rifle bullet pierced through the back of the thin sign to fly her way.

She tried to twist her body around and out of the way, but she had begun far too late to succeed. The cloth of her uniform burst and burning pain pierced her side.

“Ghhh!?”

“Tch. Don’t give me that. I only caught your baggy uniform? That was a 7.62mm, so it would’ve torn you apart, organs and all, if it had even grazed you.”

The cowboy hat woman slowly emerged from behind the sign. That shot from behind cover had been awfully accurate and merciless. She must have been using a lens or device that could capture a photography target with something other than normal light—like microwaves or terahertz waves. Shirai tried to hit her with a metal dart while collapsed on the ground, but the woman carefully blinded the girl with a range-finding laser.

“We’re a lot alike☆ Just like Judgment satisfies their drive for justice using handcuffs, I’m driven by the draw of the camera.”

“What are you—”

“A single photo changed the world.”

Shirai could not hit.

The woman was walking straight toward her, but the strobe light and laser left several powerful afterimages on her retinas and her metal darts missed their mark.

“A single photo uploaded to a social media burner account corrected the mistakes nothing else seemed capable of stopping. Someone who thought the world revolved around him, spouted nonsense, and thought he could get away with as much violence as he liked was subjected to so much public criticism that he hanged himself. How could I not fall in love with it? Once I learned

there was a way to tear down the walls that refuse to budge no matter how much I punched and kicked them, I could never remove my finger from the shutter button again.”

“That does not count as satisfying a drive for justice.”

“Oh?”

“Did you think justice was on your side because you went viral online and so many faceless people on social media agreed with you? That’s just trading a small gang of bullies for a large one. Did you feel a euphoria when your revenge succeeded better than you had ever imagined? Well, that joy you felt was no different from the joy felt by the person you so hated.”

“You’re such a boring person. Don’t give me that. Anyone that pure and upright through and through isn’t even human. You’re more artificial than a mannequin.”

Was that why this did not feel real?

Shirai could sense no hesitation in the woman’s trigger finger.

She also heard a straining sound.

But it was the cowboy hat and bob cut woman who looked puzzled. That sound had not been the pull of the trigger. Because she had not pulled it yet.

“?”

Then what had it been?

The woman moved just her eyes to the side with her sniper rifle’s sight still pressed against one of them.

The dirt wall right next to her had been blown away.

A mass of muscle easily weighing more than 100-kilograms had crashed into it shoulder first.

This person was over eight heads tall.

The thick muscles had deep grooves between them, making them look like heavy armor.

And the head had a comover and glasses.

“Oh...”

A camerawoman and a sniper used the same skills.

That violent paparazzo had optimized her technique for blending into her surroundings, so she may have been defenseless if an enemy destroyed all of those surroundings.

The middle-aged man gave a roar like a steam locomotive to accompany the crushing sound.

The woman had immediately raised her sniper rifle—maybe to strike back with a bullet and maybe just to protect herself with the hard metal.

The rifle was bent into a V-shape and exploded, but *Rakuoka Houfu* ignored it.

He slammed his shoulder into her.

She might as well have been hit by a large dump truck. The woman in a cowboy hat and China dress was launched more than 5m through the air where she slammed back first into the side of a decoration and stopped moving.

“A-are you okay, Shirai-san!? She is part of the dark side—Benizome Jellyfish. Although she seemed oblivious to it and only ended up that way while pursuing the dark side from the side of justice.”

“Who the hell are you and what is that red demon!!!???”

“Oh, this?”

Shirai Kuroko briefly suspected this was an animatronic used for this Japanese horror train station, but the head was very clearly that middle-aged man.

His muscular body deflated as she watched. Just like the neck of a balloon had been opened. He eventually returned to his usual self. His clothing had torn away, but that was not appreciated in this case.

“A certain type of digestive enzyme is used to grow my muscle fibers. Although it’s really just a visual thing because it’s only vertically splitting the existing fibers. The total amount of muscle doesn’t change, but I can move them more precisely, which lets me use them more efficiently.”

“...”

“Academy City technology can already inject artificial fat into the body to change your body shape and this is the first step toward doing something similar with muscle fibers. Oh, but I end up tearing apart my uniform whenever I do this. Sigh, the lady in supply management is going to let me have it again.”

“W-well, that workaholic side tells me this really is you. But what in the world is this?”

Shirai forgot to even check the severity of her injury. She doubted this muscle fiber proportion management technology was supplied to ordinary Anti-Skill officers. The man bashfully scratched his head and then quickly fixed his combover.

“I’m an Anti-Skill Aggressor.”

Those were combat elites.

The middle-aged man who envied everyone else held a position that not just anyone could reach.

“Um...that means I usually play the bad guy during training.”

Part 4

Hanatsuyu Kaai put on her lab coat decorated with toxic chemical stains and tightened her thick medical corset so the breasts unusually large for such a small girl rested atop it. She also wore a gasmask on the side of her head. Altogether, it looked something like she was dressed up in a yukata for a Shinto festival. Once dressed, she stretched both arms up, causing those large mounds to jiggle.

“Nhhhh!!” groaned the twin. “I want every last part of me defiled, yet the enzyme bath always leaves my skin nice and smooth. Ugh, life isn’t fair.”

“My head hurts...”

The Carrier rubbed her temples with her fingers and the Decomposer made a carefree suggestion.

“How about we get started, Youen?”

“We probably should, Kaai.”

The Carrier was just as uninterested in *Academy City’s Greatest Taboo*.

They would crush anyone who opposed them.

They lived within the great stagnation known as the dark side, but they worked to keep everything in constant motion. If Anti-Skill and Judgment insisted on diving into the depths of the darkness, these twins would have to crush them into fertilizer.

They were undeniably harmful and they worked to protect their home here, not to run away. They would create a darkness to hide themselves even if it

required destroying Academy City and filling the world around them with cracks.

“Where should we start?”

“With whatever we see first.”

Part 5

For the time being, they decided to leave District 6, but Hamazura Shiage was already out of breath. His running legs came to a stop.

And as out of breath as he was, he still had enough left to shout.

“Gasp, pant. Th-this stupid district is too big!!”

“The amusement park *is* about the size of a small town. Maybe we should have rented a cart.” He wondered if the half-hardened snow was giving them a hard time, but the hakama girl did not seem at all bothered despite her attire being much less suitable for running than the other two.

“Hamazura.”

His girlfriend called his name, so he moved to the far edge of the path. Several Anti-Skill officers passed by not far away. Their eyes might have met without the Christmas crowd.

Takitsubo’s temperate was noticeably high even through her track suit. Too high. The moxibustion had dealt with the pain and suffering to an extent, but it was not a fundamental cure.

Moving to the side of the street to hide brought them toward the food stands lining the street.

Confusion replaced the service industry smile on the face of the worker at the closest stand, so to make sure they were not reported to Anti-Skill, Hamazura pulled out his wallet without even checking to see what this one was selling. He ended up with paper plates containing donuts piled high with whipped cream. Those things were the current fad and this one had the amusement park markup. He had not wanted to spend much money, but it would have looked unnatural to order one donut for a group of three. He was forced to tearfully purchase three of them.

“Ahh, I can feel it soaking into my body. I know it’s bad for me, but nothing’s better when you’re exhausted☆”

The hakama girl smiled and used a spoon to make short work of the whipped cream.

Was she a beneficial after all?

Hamazura chose to view it like the tubes of condensed milk that mountain climbers carried with them. Otherwise he could never even attempt to eat something so absurdly sweet.

Takitsubo occasionally breathed a heavy sigh, but she did have an appetite. It was possible her condition could be improved using dialysis, which could be done in hospitals outside the city, so they could not give up yet.

“No way. You’re lying. I’ve never seen a mascot like that before.”

“I-it’s true, I swear. I really did see a blonde girl riding on a white rhino beetle! It must be a Christmas-only secret!!”

That conversation caught his interest, but by the time he turned around, whoever-it-was had vanished into the crowd.

“So what do we do now?” asked the mascot-pattern hakama girl.

“We run away.”

She may have been an optimist, but Hamazura had to sigh.

“But the question is where to go. We still don’t know what that *Academy City’s Greatest Taboo* thing is.”

The card-sized hard drive they had found in Perfect Film’s tent was in his pocket. It was labeled Lifeline, but Aneri said she could not read in the data or decrypt it. She instead sent his phone to an extremely niche online tool shop.

“A special screwdriver???”

He flipped the hard drive over to see that it did indeed have a few small screws at inconspicuous spots on the side. But instead of Phillips or flathead, these had a special design resembling a distorted snowflake.

And instead of being hand-turned, these apparently had to be loosened by exposing them to minute ultrasonic vibrations.

He had never seen anything like it.

“You could get screwdrivers to open commercial phones in the back alleys, but this is even more specialized.”

To decrypt it, they first had to get it open. The circuit board apparently had a special physical switch that would erase all the data until it was unrecoverable if the decryption process began without first flipping the switch. The necessary tool was not available in ordinary shops. And since it was so hard to get your hands on, anyone who had one would treasure it. Sneaking in and borrowing one would definitely end in a fight.

“Why not go to District 23?” asked the curly silver-haired hakama girl while using the edge of a spoon to slice apart the donut soaked in maple syrup.

Hamazura did an incredulous double take.

“Did you not see what *just* happened? A paparazzi named Benizome blew off the head of the counterfeiter! We can’t get a passport, so getting anywhere near a plane will get us captured by an army of Anti-Skill!!”

“Not for an airplane, dummy.” She shrugged with her twin horns of hardened

bangs swaying. “Academy City is a mass consumption community. We put a lot of effort into recycling, but that isn’t perfect. So what happens to the stuff that can’t be recycled? There isn’t room for a landfill in the limited space within the walls.”

“Oh.”

“District 23 has the airport and District 11 has a land route, so there’s a giant temporary storage area on the border between them. In other words there’s a giant pile of trash. I think they call it the Urban Mine, but there are a lot of people who dig through it looking for electronic trash they can sell. And from what I’ve heard, a lot of them will also extract whatever data they can get from thrown-out computers, so they would probably know a lot about the special tools needed to pry open the hardware.”

“...”

“Yes, yes. As you can imagine, that will most likely end in a fight. Those trash collectors don’t even want other people to know about the business they’re running. But since it’s a business, you might be able to settle it peacefully. As a well-paying customer, I mean.”

Part 6

Gray metal was piled high.

The windows at the same level as the top of the pile were at least on the third floor. The original dividers made from metal sheets designed for construction had broken away and the scraps spilled out onto the asphalt road. But instead of clearing away the obstacles, more and more dump trucks arrived to add to the pile.

These were the ruins of a former system.

Academy City's trash was generally shipped out of the city using either District 23's airport or District 11's truck bases, but they needed a system in place to ensure their technology did not leak out that way. But how many people were wise enough to spend massive amounts of money on throwing out unusable trash? The issue had been put off indefinitely while the trash continued to pile up.

Which created another opportunity.

"Sensei."

A girl spoke within the piles of trash that resembled rolling desert dunes.

She had long crimson hair and wore something like a racing swimsuit with the orange and black coloration of an insect. She had a smartphone on either shoulder and a rolled-up silicone keyboard and a bottle of discharge machine oil in the belts on her thighs. She walked barefoot across the piles of trash with pieces of metal both dull and sharp sticking out.

She was an android known as Ladybird.

She had a small wound on her forehead. It was only a few millimeters, but her body did not heal itself like a human one did.

"The pile will not collapse if we follow this route, but watch your step in the snow."

"Good grief. Why should I have to risk my life just to reach my own hideout? And this cold weather is terrible for my old bones."

"It is improving my cooling efficiency," said the expressionless girl as she pulled the bottle from her thigh and drank from it.

Air resistance and blast resistance were secondary concerns for her clothing. Although for secondary concerns, they did a decent job in those fields. Their primary role was to help her radiate heat. Wearing something to cool off was very different from what humans looked for in clothing.

An old man who was as skinny as a matchstick slapped his own hips from

behind.

“You need to learn how to be more friendly.”

“Friendly.”

Ladybird blinked and stars danced in her mechanical eyes, causing the old man to sigh.

“Display stars dancing in your eyes if you wish, but please do something about the drool dripping from your mouth.”

“Your complaint is illogical. If you did not want me to do that, you should not have made me capable of it. Nhhh.”

That extended groan was a weird thing for a machine, but she seemed to have something wrong with her ear. She tilted her head to the side, placed a hand on her ear, and then hopped up and down on one leg like a girl playing at the pool.

A thick black liquid spilled from her ear.

“Ladybird-kun, maintenance can wait until we are back in the lab.”

“Understood.”

“Hm, that artificial ghost was more incompatible with you than I would have thought.”

The old man sounded somehow delighted even though this was damage to his side.

Ladybird looked into the distance to view some men in raincoats and gasmasks. This must not have been enough of a threat to warrant drawing the machete attached horizontally above her small butt.

“The trash collectors are here again.”

She did not mention whether they were beneficials or harmfuls.

Because those categories were meaningless.

The name Kihara was enough. Those other categories invented by ignorant outsiders would not provide any more information.

The terminology seemed to have permeated the dark side of late, but just like with dangerous drugs and methods of fraud, the pursued would sometimes change what they called things to match the new terminology used by their pursuers.

“They won’t cause any harm as long as they find the fridge, washing machine, or whatever else they’re looking for in the trash. And if they did cause a major incident here, it would only bring greater scrutiny to this place. They will take care of this territory in order to protect their business.”

“...”

The android looked around with a troubled look. These piles of scraps were large enough to swallow up an entire person if one collapsed, so the place did not look very well cared for. Someone had even found a diamond-shaped yellow “!” road sign somewhere and stuck it diagonally into the trash to warn of some other kind of danger.

But there was value in this place. Even when there were gaps, most people would not want to shove themselves into them, so the piles of trash functioned as camouflage. Ladybird brushed off the hardened snow, grabbed a nearby handhold, and violently yanked something open.

There was a door there.

A door to a metal container. But with so much electronic trash piled up around it, no one would notice the rectangular box there. The stairs within led down to a labyrinthine secret base.

“Ladybird-kun, wipe your feet.”

“I doubt a doormat has much of a cleaning effect.”

She complained, but she still rubbed the bottom of her bare feet against a

thick cloth.

Now.

Who would ever guess that someone had constructed a giant laboratory by stacking up several containers like a pyramid and then taking out the metal walls between them? Digging through the piles of trash and burying the containers had created a vast labyrinth. It was almost like an ant colony made of metal.

“Ladybird-kun.”

“Here.”

The girl lifted her perfectly straight bangs with a hand to show off the wound on her forehead, so the old man squeezed something from a tube and rubbed it on with a finger. Once the wound was covered, he attached a small piece of paper tape so it would not reopen.

Ladybird removed the entire sheath holding her machete and stuck the thick blade in a stand. She also set down the partially-empty bottle of discharge machine oil on a side table and lay face down on a maintenance examination table. She breathed in the rusty air from there.

She did not actually need to breathe or blink, but she still shut her eyes.

“It is calming in here.”

“Because all EM is cut off. With TV, radio, phones, microwaves, listening devices, remote-controlled toys, and all the other myriad EM signals flying through the city, it must be a stifling place for you.”

The old man explained that while sticking his hand down the back of her racing swimsuit.

There was a clasp at the center of the bands that intersected in an X-shape. One of his wrinkly fingers removed that, baring her slender back, but she did not even stir.

“Okay.”

He had removed his special engineering gloves upon entering the lab and he used his bare hands to attach a few wireless electrodes to her bright skin. Then the dried twigs of his hands moved past her sides and beneath the swimsuit-like material to reach for her stomach and flat chest. The Kihara man continued the maintenance like it was nothing, but he also sighed.

Even though he was a filthy harmful.

No, those labels applied by outsiders really were meaningless.

“I know I only have myself to blame,” said the Kihara. “But I really should have hired a woman to do this.”

“There is no need.”

Ladybird rapidly replied, almost like she was trying to reject that way of thinking.

“But the different parts I have to touch makes this incredibly awkward.”

“If those parts only cause problems, you should not have given them to me in the first place.”

This was not the first time they had held this discussion.

“Treating a mechanical product like me as a human will only reduce my performance. I am an android built without a human base, so I would appreciate a maintenance worker who properly treats me as a machine. And I do not see a better candidate for that than you, my developer.”

“If that’s what you want.”

“We failed to acquire a counterfeit passport, so the next step will likely be a lengthy one. Do a thorough maintenance and inspection job, Sensei.”

After pulling his hands from the girl’s swimsuit, the old man pulled the phone from the band on her right shoulder and performed a few operations on

its small screen to transfer the work to the large LCD monitor in the room. He grabbed the tube in the belt on her thigh, unrolled the silicone keyboard, and began the inspection.

His work was precise and treated her as a machine throughout, but at the same time...

“You know, Ladybird-kun, the term android signifies an artificial human built with an engineering approach.”

“Yes, and?”

“This is a lesson. Based on that definition, it seems appropriate to me for a completed android to behave like a human. Whether you are natural or artificial, I say you still qualify as a ‘normal human’.”

Ladybird fell silent for a moment.

Eventually, she tilted her head while still lying face down on the examination table.

“Unknown error detected.”

“Is that so?”

“I do not want anyone but you to touch me.”

The old man wondered if he should be punished for rejecting that trust, even if it was the right thing to do.

“Expression of love.”

“Ladybird-kun, make your eyes sparkle if you wish, but please do something about the drool dripping from your mouth.”

The constructed girl was intricately designed, but she was too clever for her own good. Thanks to that, she lived in a very limited world.

Part 7

A few large semi-trucks were gathered, but not for emergency transportation. The self-driving trucks functioned as a small village where people lived.

“I knew it! Sodate-chan, you really did take the ball!”

“What are you talking about!? It wasn’t me!!”

A failed stadium in District 10 was now known as a slum. The field within had been transformed into a shanty town crammed full of cardboard boxes and huts made from abandoned materials, but the area around the stadium was mostly left alone.

For example, the industrial parking lot that had been used to bring in musical instruments and training equipment. Places like that were often tucked away in some hidden location so fans could not wait there to catch players or celebrities as they left.

Once the semi-trucks came to a stop, boisterous voices could be heard from inside the containers.

The door opened to reveal children around the age of ten.

They were commonly known as Child Errors. Those were the children that had been abandoned in Academy City for whatever reason and had to be raised by the city. That alone was not that unusual, but they rarely had a happy ending when the dark side was involved. Especially when it came to illicit research.

But the children did not question any of it. Not even that they all wore short-sleeved gym clothes, with motion capture equipment on their arms and legs and around their necks.

“Now, now, children.”

A seemingly weightless woman clapped her hands twice in front of her chest.

It made no noise.

She was *an artificially-created ghost* with long blonde twintails, a skintight light blue dress, and a loose thin skirt over that. Frillsand #G spoke with a voice like a beautiful instrument.

Almost like the legendary piper who caused so many children to disappear in a region of Germany.

“You don’t want to ruin your Christmas over a silly argument, do you? I will search for the ball. Now, have you all washed your hands? You can eat once you are ready.”

“I washed mine!! And I’m starving!!”

“How, Sodate-chan!? Unless you stole the chemical soap too!”

More and more hands and voices were raised.

None of them thought it was weird to be speaking with an intangible ghost.

Frillsand #G knew it was strange for a lifeless ghost to be looking after children, but whether or not it was possible, it was apparently not that unusual a cultural concept.

Even this country had the stories of the Yonaki Ishi and the Kosodate Yurei.

They had several large semi-trucks, but one of them was by far the children’s favorite: the one fully remodeled into a food truck.

Frillsand #G passed directly through the stainless steel wall to peek inside, where she found the young man named Drencher Kihara Repatri dripping with sweat while stirring the contents of an enormous pot. The inside of the truck might as well have been a sauna.

The Western doll of a ghost woman frowned.

“That is unsanitary.”

“Pant, gasp. D-do you have any idea how many burners I have on? Preparing enough food for more than fifty is like fighting a war. School lunch ladies deserve a medal.”

“If you wanted help, you should have made it so I could hold things.”

But Frillsand #G made no attempt to leave either.

As if to say physically touching things was not the only way to form a connection.

Since it was Christmas, the menu was mostly Western foods. The kids could choose bread or rice based on their personal preference, but the big pot contained a beef stew, the oven contained a turkey and roast beef, and there were also hot vegetables, macaroni salad, and fries.

But Frillsand #G had to look after the children, so she had a criticism.

“They are not going to be happy without any cake. Maybe we should have left some of that for today.”

“Kids are honest to a fault, so they would have complained about leftover cake too. Besides, I have a secret weapon prepared for this special day.”

“?”

“Tah dah!! It’s foie gras. I’m going to sauté it in the frying pan.”

The ghost woman was unsure how to respond.

She was a proper lady, so she did know what foie gras was.

That was a delicacy made by burying a goose up to its neck so it could not move and force-feeding it as much as possible to fatten up its liver.

She sighed softly while listening to the children playing outside.

And she spoke to Drencher Kihara Repatri, a researcher who was investigating the field of ghosts.

“How can you do this?”

“I’ll do whatever is necessary.”

The counterfeit passport plan had failed due to interference. That cut off the best route, but that did not mean his entire plan had fallen apart.

He would have the last laugh here.

He smiled thinly while slowly stirring the stew he would be feeding the children.

“Do you think we would qualify as beneficial or harmful?”

Part 8

“Yes, yes. I have secured the suspect. She is still alive, but she is unconscious and in critical condition, so she is in no state for questioning. Please send an ambulance.”

Shirai Kuroko toyed with her long scarf while listening to her phone and moving her eyes around.

(You really can find the dark side anywhere, can’t you? Onee-sama would be furious to learn they spilled blood in this amusement park with that...Gekota was it?)

“There are also a few tents on the scene. In addition to several wet footprints in the snow, there is a single victim of a fatal sniper shot in one of the tents. I will let Anti-Skill secure the crime scene, so please send a forensics team

right away. The sniper shot was almost certainly the work of the suspect I have secured, but there is a lot I do not know about how this played out. I wish I could have questioned her, but—”

She frowned there and stopped talking.

She could have sworn she heard the person on the phone mutter something under their breath concerning the suspect.

...Why couldn't she have just died?

“...”

That was when she heard something continuously beating at the air overhead. She took a deep breath to refocus her mind and then looked up to see a large transport helicopter landing nearby.

The powerful wind threatened to blow the snow from the ground and even tear up the tents.

“The forensics team hasn’t done their investigation yet!” She shouted while holding her head. “Are you trying to blow away all the evidence!?”

“C-calm down,” said the middle-aged man. “That just shows how much they trust your work.”

She was not sure if she was getting used to death or if she had simply gone numb from shock.

The ground was a mess. The large handguns, sniper rifles, and shotguns were coated with the scent of gunpowder smoke that said they had been fired. And the investigation would not be called off just because the victim had no face or teeth to identify him by.

“He is a 98% match for Koutawara Souta, a counterfeiter known as Perfect Film. Still, I can’t believe a dark side criminal in Outrank was in this fairy tale amusement park.”

“The lack of a permanent address may have made him harder to track down,

but what in the world happened here?"

She also found one more thing. Someone had dropped some disinfectant and bandages inside the bloody tent, but she recognized them.

The bandages were identical to the ones wrapped around her own body.

There was a first aid kit that presumably belonged to the tent's resident—the man with the destroyed head. It still had its full set of disinfectant and bandages. All of the products inside it were from the same pharmaceutical brand and that brand differed from the disinfectant left on the ground.

That meant those things had not come from this first aid kit.

(Could the person who treated my wounds have been here?)

She thought about it, but she could not stay here forever. She and Rakuoka were supposed to remain on standby up in the sky.

And once the dark side was located, they would rush in to attack.

Yomikawa Aiho slid open the door and shouted over the din of the main rotor.

"Get on!! The situation is already underway!!"

If they had a clear destination, then the next incident had already begun. The helicopter took off as soon as Shirai and Rakuoka were onboard.

"Where!?" was the first word out of the twintails girl's mouth.

"The Anti-Skill Chemical Analysis Center in west District 18. All of Academy City's forensic investigation work is concentrated there: fingerprints, blood, blade wounds, gasoline marks after a fire, and more. Those twins were spotted there."

"That's bad," said the middle-aged man. "They're harmful."

Yomikawa briefly paused there.

She must have felt that was not something they should be saying about students.

“Anyway, we won’t be able to perform any kind of modern investigation work if that place is taken out.”

The man was already groaning and Shirai Kuroko breathed a heavy sigh.

“At this point, I take it the attack itself cannot be avoided?”

“Yes. The attack is already confirmed, so it’s too late to carry out the delicate analysis equipment. The most we can do is evacuate the people. So we need to at least use this to our advantage.”

This was the very definition of having a heavy heart. District 18 bordered District 11 and District 23. The land and air routes in those districts increased the risk of those twins escaping the city. Perhaps they needed to consider themselves lucky the dark side had not rushed those places.

“I hate creating an opportunity for crime, though,” said Shirai.

“It’s better than letting them use all that technology in the city streets.” Yomikawa looked down on the city moving by out of the open sliding door. Even now, she was carrying a transparent, bulletproof plastic shield instead of a gun. “We’re making an all-out attack. We need to take down at least one of them here.”

Part 9

Hanatsuyu Youen was concerned from the beginning. She expressed her displeasure with a hand on her hip through the medical corset. The Anti-Skill Chemical Analysis Center had a twin tower structure. Their plan had been to attack an important facility so the pursuit by the grownups would fall apart,

but they realized this target was split into two.

“What do we do, Kaai?”

“I call dibs on the lefffft one☆”

With that said, the Decomposer walked unarmed into the one building, unnaturally large breasts jiggling all the way. The Carrier was more reluctant, but she finally started toward the other building.

(Now, then.)

Kaai sighed once she entered the building.

The large lobby was lined with metal detector gates like the ticket gates at a train station. She only had to walk through those. What did a silly beeping alarm matter now?

The problem was what came next. There was more than just a reception counter and a security room lined with monitors. The entire space felt alive thanks to all the killer intent stabbing in toward her. Anti-Skill had been pushed passed the point of worrying about their ideals. But then the Decomposer realized one of her predictions had been dead on.

They had used the twin tower structure to split up the twins and then focused all of their forces on just one. That meant the tower the Carrier had gone to would be empty.

This realization made Hanatsuyu Kaai sigh.

Out of relief.

She then pulled several test tubes full of colorful liquids from her lab coat's sleeves.

“I hope you're ready for a show of just how grotesque the dark side can get!!”

First, two fully-equipped Anti-Skill officers emerged from behind columns to

cut off her escape through the entrance she had used.

Then troops stood up from behind the front counter while multiple quadrupedal unmanned weapons appeared on the walkway surrounding them on the lobby's upper floor.

More than a hundred guns were aimed at the one girl.

But what did that matter?

The harmful dark side never considered running or surrendering. It prioritized its own freedom.

The Decomposer held test tubes, but those were not weapons themselves. Unlike Anti-Skill, she did not move around with weapons and armor in tow.

She did not have to.

She only had to pop off a test tube's rubber cap with her thumb and sprinkle its contents around her.

The darkness moved.

In this case, it was tens of thousands of rats.

First, the reinforced glass of the outer wall shattered and the Anti-Skill officers blocking the exit were knocked from their feet and sank into a sea of rats. They fired their submachineguns wildly, but the rats did not care.

Screams erupted from that ocean.

There was a loud explosion, so either a rat's small leg had pulled the pin from

a grenade, or an officer had attempted to fight back after succumbing to the terror of the rats crawling into the gaps in their helmet or bulletproof armor.

“This is an attractant.”

She was a researcher of pure chemicals.

Shocked, the Anti-Skill group by the counter began to open fire, but Hanatsuyu Kaai did not even flinch. When she twirled around on the spot, the many rats tangled together and formed a gray wall as if to protect her from the bullets. Each of them was small, but when their wall grew more than a meter thick, the barrier of blood, flesh, and fur was enough to stop bullets.

“You can find them anywhere. And the simpler they are, the easier they are to control. Insecticide companies research this every day, so modern rat and roach *treats* are truly amazing things.”

Of course, they did more than *just* gather.

The busty young girl poured out the contents of several more test tubes to release different chemicals into the air, mix them together, send them out along the wind, and construct an invisible marble-pattern labyrinth. It was like the work of a drink factory rapidly sorting its products by switching them between a complex array of rails. The countless rats followed rules invisible to humans to create a gray world in here.

It barely took any time at all.

The space behind the counter was swallowed up by the furry ocean and other rats took a different route to pour down from the ducts and cover the quadrupedal unmanned weapons on the floor above.

Kaai giggled while wrapping her slender body in her arms and squishing her large breasts.

“And did you know that tanks experienced an unexpected number of malfunctions during a winter war long ago? The rats searching out a warm place to sleep kept crawling inside and chewing through the wiring.”

Once tens of thousands of rats had formed a carpet across the first floor, she calmly looked up. It may have looked like a sea of sulfuric acid to the Anti-Skill officers on the floor above. The Decomposer girl slowly walked around in search of stairs so she could take care of the leftover enemies who had nowhere to run.

She left the rats here.

She left them to ensure Hanatsuyu Youen the Carrier could not enter this building if she did realize what was happening.

This was not all the Decomposer could do. She could also use fleas, ticks, flies, mosquitos, leeches, slugs, centipedes, roaches, crows, and stray cats. She would make a weapon of most any creature that was crucial to the food chain but hated by irresponsible people.

(Now, how far until I reach the goal?)

She found a narrow stairway in the back of the building.

(Killing every last one of them is surprisingly exhausting. Going for 100% completion means checking in each and every hiding spot.)

A short burst of gunfire rang out from overhead, but no bullets hit her. They all veered unnaturally off course before they could. A great swarm of winged insects was gathered there. They created an unnatural resistance that altered a bullet's trajectory much like if it entered a body of water.

The girl laughed, pulled a new test tube from her cleavage, and popped off the rubber cap with her thumb. When she sprinkled its contents, tiny bugs emerged from every piece of carpet to swarm their target. They almost looked like sand taking a humanoid form.

A bloodcurdling scream erupted from within.

“Hee hee hee. You might think you keep the place clean, but you miss a surprising amount. This is the result of you elite clean freaks defiling the world by thoughtlessly using up all the resources.”

A dark mass tumbled down the hellish stairs, but Kaai only stepped out of its way while sweeping back her black hair that nearly reached her ankles even while worn up. She then placed a finger on her slender chin.

(Yes, I can go with the watered down version here. They seem to want to trap me in here, but I can use that to my advantage. Maybe I should tear down all of the walls, floors, and ceilings to turn the entire building into a giant jungle gym. *That will prove not even the sturdiest shelter can keep you safe.* The rich should find that far more concerning than any number of lives I could take.)

She had a target now. She was more focused on the building's structure than the muscular men aiming their guns at her, but that did not mean she was no longer taking lives.

Accurately killing them all in different ways helped spread the panic better, but that was more like an extra bonus and not an absolute requirement. People's lives were no more important than that to her.

Fear could be conquered and despair could be overcome.

But cruelty was a different matter. People's first emotional response to that was a lack of understanding, so their minds did not even try to process it correctly. It was a lot like trying to read a corrupted file. Hanatsuyu Kaai had learned from experience that this was most effective.

“Ah ha ha!”

She had to present herself as corrupted.

If she could be smoothly read in, she lost her advantage.

“Ha ha ha ha!! Ah ha ha! Wa ha ha ha ha ha ah ha ah ha ah ha ha!!”

Arms and legs were swallowed up by swarms of centipedes. An Anti-Skill officer and the wall behind him were eaten by snapping turtles. Stains that may or may not have originally been human spread out like melted cheese.

(Good, this is going well.)

She could tell it was working.

She leaned forward and placed her hands on her knees, squeezing her large chest between her arms, to observe it all. And if she was to trust her intuition...

(Not even I know what I'm doing anymore. Good, good. If I keep going like this, the place will reach the tipping point before long. Yes, I have to make myself a corrupted file that no one can read. You can't call it the dark side if the destruction can be rationally calculated out and understood!!)

Then she sensed something like a quiet burst of static. She frowned at the sensation of something cutting away at a portion of the filthy torrent she had created.

There had been no one in the corridor a moment before, but now a girl stood there.

“I recognize you,” said the Judgment member with chestnut hair worn in twintails.

“I’m afraid I can’t say the same about you,” said Kaai because it was the most broken option.

But after that decision she froze in place for a moment.

Could the dark side be found in an action *she had chosen for such a rational reason?* That was no different than a well-made ghost story. Following a logical path to a satisfactory conclusion made it feel so fake.

Truly incomprehensible terror did not follow a logical path. Mind-breaking despair had no satisfactory conclusion. Cruelty had to be turned into a violent assault.

“What did you do?”

Her level had dropped. Just like a piece of unglazed pottery could be placed

in the pot to prevent an explosive boil. So what had this twintails girl introduced to this filthy world?

The Judgment girl laughed off the question.

“Don’t ask me. I don’t remember.”

The clash between the two girls had begun.

Part 10

Excited voices could be heard outside of the large semi-truck. Dinner was over and it was time for everyone to take a bath.

And at the same time...

“I knew Sodate-chan stole the ball,” said a voice out in the stadium parking lot where some hardened snow remained.

It belonged to Risako, a girl who wore the same gym clothes as the other children. She had slipped out of the truck at bath time and she was peeking underneath one of the trucks with her red hair done up like a piece of candy. She would have a harder time going out after her bath. She would feel too chilly for an adventure after warming up in the bath.

She had no real complaints with her life here, but she could not just ask for anything she wanted and have them buy it for her. When she got up to use the bathroom at night, she would sometimes see the man they called “mister” and the ghost lady whispering to each other. She could imagine they were talking about money. And since they did not want her and the other children to hear, they were probably struggling on that front. So they had to take care of the toys they did have.

Sodate, one of the boys she lived with, did not think about any of that and he had a habit of stealing things. That would be fine if he returned them later, but he would leave them hidden in some secret base he made and then forget where it was. Their trucks moved around a lot, so those things often ended up missing afterwards.

She was looking below one of the trucks because of her past experience with this.

Her intuition told her something here.

(Sodate-chan loves to hide prizes in his secret bases.)

An LED light came on. Instead of the cream color of a light bulb, the light that pierced the darkness was such a bright white that it hurt her eyes. They did not have enough money for all of the children to have phones, but mister made sure they each had a personal alarm. Those had a light on them. It was only a single small LED, but it was far better than nothing.

Sodate's secret bases were always places the grownups could not go. But the ghost lady could pass through walls and ceilings, so a thick wall or locked door were not what mattered most. He instead relied on them thinking "surely no one would go there". Only then could he gather the abandoned materials or cardboard boxes to make his secret base.

And Risako knew how to sniff out those places.

"Boys love making their bases underground."

The trucks were situated high up, so a girl of her age did not even need to crawl. She only had to duck down to get underneath. The ghost lady would scold her fiercely if she was caught doing this, but that was why she had to do it. With only the light of her personal alarm that resembled an egg-shaped keychain, she continued on with a spirit of nothing ventured, nothing gained.

She found something: a round metal manhole cover.

She sat down next to it, near one of the large tires that looked like an onion

ring stood up on its side.

“Hmm.”

There was a small gap open, but she could not pull it open just by sticking her fingers in there. It refused to budge, just like a barbell, so it may have required a special tool.

Now.

Normally, her attempt would have ended there. There was no way a girl in gym clothes could open the manhole and climb inside. She should have given up on the heavy cover and reluctantly returned to the others.

But...

“A tool,” she said like she had thought of something.

She reached her small hand into her gym clothes and pulled out something hard and round.

It glittered with a golden light.

“That’s right! I have my present from Santa!!”

The lever was pulled.

The track switched to a route that should not have been possible.

“Please, Coin of Nicholas, open that cover for me!!”

She heard a heavy metallic scraping as the barbell-heavy manhole cover slowly slid to the side like it was being tugged by fishing line tied around it. She jumped at the noise and aimed her light over, but she could not see what was moving the cover.

The hole now lay wide open before her.

She shined her bright LED light down and stared into it for a while.

“This must be the entrance to his secret base.”

In lieu of a ladder, horizontal steel bars were installed in the curved concrete wall at even intervals. They continued down and down, deeper and deeper. She hesitantly reached out and touched the top bar, grabbed it, and tugged, but it did not budge. It did not seem like it was so rusty it would break away as soon as she put her weight on it.

She was scared.

But...

“Ah!”

Something slipped from her hand: the very light she had been reliant on. The LED light fell into the manhole, bounced, and came to a stop. That appeared to be the bottom of the darkness.

Yes, this darkness had a bottom. It did not continue all the way down to hell.

She had found Sodate’s secret base, so she had to find the ball and chemical soap he had hidden. Before the trucks moved again.

Also...

Mister had scrounged together what little money they had to buy enough personal alarms for everyone, so she did not want to say she had lost hers. She had already used her Coin of Nicholas, so she could not make a wish on it to get the alarm.

Her only option was to gather what little courage she had in her small chest.

“This leads to where Sodate-chan hid the ball!”

Risako had never thought about why exactly the ghost lady got so angry when the children climbed under the trucks, but the answer was simple. If they failed to notice someone had climbed into the manhole, it could lead to a terrible disaster.

Part 11

When the girl with several fluorescent-looking stains on her white coat slowly spread her arms, Shirai Kuroko felt like the entire Anti-Skill Chemical Analysis Center shook.

It was not quite a matter of the air.

The hallway of what looked like a tidy office crumbled away. Rapid weathering caused the floors to break through, the walls to crumble, and the bowing ceiling to collapse. This was technically a lab and it would be equipped with sensors to detect excessive levels of gases or chemicals, but none of them responded. They were far too damaged to function at this point.

“Hee hee.”

“Tch!!”

(This is a Level 0!? She didn't steal someone else's identity or modify her Bank data, did she!?)

This was a technological threat, not an esper one.

Shirai Kuroko clicked her tongue and teleported away. With her power of instantaneous movement that ignored all three-dimensional restrictions, she could achieve results that overturned the age of guns, but she did have rules she had to follow.

She could only aim at one location at a time.

That meant she could not teleport herself out of the way while also teleporting in a metal dart to attack. In that sense, she preferred to choose a course of action herself instead of being *forced to act* by her opponent. It was a bad sign that she was already at that point.

She moved about fifty meters back to escape the collapse before pulling a metal dart from her thigh and sending it toward Hanatsuyu Kaai the Decomposer's shoulder. The focus on evasion made the attack one beat too late. And with that much time...

“Oh?”

“!?”

Kaai made an oddly smooth movement. She slid to the right without moving her feet. She did not move faster than a bullet. In fact, she did not gain much speed at all. Yet the inhuman movement was completely unexpected, so it threw off Shirai's aim.

It felt as weird as a rook suddenly moving diagonally despite only being able to move up, down, left, or right.

As long as Shirai was attacking from a distance, missing an attack was not fatal for her, so she focused on figuring out what had caused that, even if it meant missing several more times. She continued launching those useful missed shots.

The strange movement continued.

She sent out at least five more metal darts, but none of them hit. The Decomposer slipped past them like a leaf dancing in the water, so they simply appeared in the empty air and fell to the floor.

But she detected a hint of what this was.

The sound of the darts hitting the floor was softly absorbed.

“What is that?”

“Rats. I need an awful lot of them to distribute my weight enough to not crush them, but with around thirty-thousand, they're indistinguishable from a carpet, aren't they?”

(Okay, I definitely can't let Onee-sama see this!!)

Unlike Shirai Kuroko, Hanatsuyu Kaai did not need to wield an actual weapon.

With a dull sound, the destruction spread.

The floor made with modern construction techniques sank down like an antlion pit, so the damaged walls and ceiling were swallowed up by the floor below. This floor had reached its limit, so the twintails girl teleported to the next floor up.

After jumping, she realized the Decomposer girl was looking directly up into her eyes.

There was already a hole in the floor up here. The walls and ceiling were badly weathered and falling toward the deadly surface. All that remained were the thick intersecting steel beams. The place looked like a giant jungle gym.

“You should hurry up.”

As soon as the other girl pulled an extra-special test tube from her cleavage and popped off the rubber cap with her small thumb, Shirai heard something beating at the air.

A pair of dark wings burst from the back of the white coat.

The pitch black wings took flight.

“Assuming you want to save Anti-Skill and their feigned philanthropy, that is. Did you think the inorganic materials were the only things that would rot away and collapse? Why would a villain of the dark side bother sorting her trash?”

“How dare you!?”

“Ah ha ha!!”

The rules of the battlefield had changed again. More and more of the building’s interior fell like it was caught in quicksand or a giant antlion pit.

Voice analysis equipment, cell cultivators, electron microscopes, and other analysis equipment each worth tens or hundreds of millions of yen tumbled down like a great cascade. The high-pitched sounds Shirai heard on occasion had to be more than just shattering glass. Some of them were much rawer screams that lingered in her ears.

She could not even reach out a hand to help because there was so much wreckage crashing down that she could not tell where the people were. Meanwhile, the fall continued in real time.

Shirai teleported from steel beam to steel beam, moving ever higher, but someone managed to keep up with her. Unbelievably, it was Hanatsuyu Kaai. She shook free of gravity by flapping giant bird wings that looked more like they belonged to a crow than a bat. Shirai clicked her tongue and sent out a metal dart, but the girl avoided it with that smooth movement again.

Then she figured it out.

Those wings did not just look like they belonged to a crow. The Decomposer girl really did have a large creature on her back.

“Is that a crow!?”

“Ha ha ha. It’s called parasitic enlargement. A certain type of parasite can make a portion of its host’s body grow, so I’m just using that.” Kaai laughed while placing her feet on the side of a vertical steel beam and flapping those wings as her own to fly even higher. “And if you just look at their animal instincts, rats and crows are far sharper than us humans. None of your calculations can hit me. Your thoughts have been *degenerated* by civilization, so you can’t hope to approach their raw instincts.”

She finally passed her foe.

Shirai could move faster than the average sports car by repeatedly teleporting, but she could not keep up with Kaai in the field of pure aerial movement. The very roof of the Anti-Skill Chemical Analysis Center had rotted away. The Decomposer soared with the moon behind her back and black crow feathers scattered from her like a twisted form of snow.

“Everyone sees something different when they look to the dark side.” The criminal came to a stop in midair and looked down from above. “Some people think of it as the ideal research environment. Some people think of it as a bottomless underworld society. Some people think of it as a shelter for damaged people. Not even someone as soaked in the dark side as me has seen every layer it contains. Two members of the dark side can stand in the same place and never interact and we never question it if we end up opposing each other. That unpredictable incoherence is what makes it the dark side.”

“...”

“But it exists and it must be protected. Hee hee. You proved just how little you had seen from the moment you recklessly tried to sort this toy box into good and evil piles.”

All strength left Shirai’s knees. Her teleportation coordinate was a little off. Unlike Kaai, she had not conquered gravity, so it squeezed at her heart for her right foot to have shifted just ten centimeters off the side of the steel beam. She quickly reached up and grabbed another beam with both hands.

She noticed what had gone wrong a moment later.

“What...is this?”

“The crow feathers.” The spellbound Decomposer held her body in her slender arms while tremors ran through her. “Not to mention the rat fur and the flea and tick corpses. Do you want to know more? Because there are even nastier things floating in the air here. I am a Decomposer, not a tamer who specializes in using animals. They are just one method of transmitting what I do use: enzymes, humidity, mold, chemicals, bacteria, and anything else that causes decomposition.”

For one thing, it seemed doubtful that any number of rats or roaches could actually instantly eat through thick barriers made of tempered glass and reinforced concrete. That meant Hanatsuyu Kaai was not using their small fangs and claws. She was using the unseen threat found within those things.

“But wait...”

Shirai moved her unsteady body to place her foot back on the narrow beam.

She had several beads of sweat on her forehead.

“Isn’t that the job of the other girl—the Carrier?”

The Decomposer girl laughed calmly.

She apparently had no intention of giving all the answers.

“You will die. Your death has already begun.”

“...Maybe so.”

(Onee-sama...)

“It may be closest to crushing a whole grape between your teeth. Can you hear the sound of your cells bursting? Acute deadly bacteria are even now eating through your cell membranes from within. There is no saving you.” Kaai’s eyes widened to the limit. “We do not kill those who get in our way. To us dark side researchers, obstacles are to be overcome and restrictions only make things more interesting. Yes, in that sense, you were entertaining indeed. Enough that I felt the need to enjoy you to the very end.”

“Be that as it may, I will defeat you first.”

A strange sound echoed out.

Shirai Kuroko had teleported a metal dart, but not at the Decomposer girl. It had pierced the glass of a window in this building that had become a single long tube now that the floors and ceilings had all fallen away.

“You aren’t actually speaking with those animals and insects. You can’t trust them like a pet dog or cat. Dark over light, wet over dry, and sweet over salty. You use your chemicals to guide them with those simple like-dislike or yes-no decisions.”

Yes, the attack that had caused the building’s interior to crumble away had been powerful, but why had she needed to do that? If she was only interested

in finishing off Shirai, she could have made a more targeted attack.

What if it had been absolutely necessary?

And what if she had to keep that reason hidden?

“Ventilation.” Something blew forcefully across the building and the girl had to hold down her twintails against it. “Your marble-pattern labyrinth might seem incomprehensible because it’s invisible, but the solution is simple once you figure it out. Tear down that labyrinth and you lose your safe zone. And then you too are one of their targets!!”

The scenery shook.

Something else collapsed and a gray cascade poured down from above.

No, the things that poured down over Hanatsuyu Kaai’s right shoulder were all rats.

“G—”

She tried to scream, but it was too late.

For one thing, the giant crow supporting her was beginning to leave her control too. The rats covering her body mercilessly crawled into the sleeves and chest of her white coat.

“Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!???”

An unusually deep cry escaped her.

The color red sprayed out.

But unlike Anti-Skill, she did not stop moving so quickly. Several test tubes full of colorful liquid—presumably ones that contained the chemicals to control the animals—flew through the air to resist this.

Something glared at Shirai from beyond the rat fur.

A quiet voice pounded on the twintails girl's eardrums from within the deluge of squeaking rats. Hanatsuyu Kaai the Decomposer spoke clearly.

"This – is – not – over."

“!!”

Shirai mustered all the strength she had left to send out three metal darts at once.

Red blood scattered through the air, but she grimaced.

The thousands or tens of thousands of rats came apart and lost their shape. She had apparently only torn into the rats because there was no sign of the lab coat girl there.

Had she been devoured beyond recognition?

Or...

“A stainless steel...sink?”

Shirai saw a silver shine between the giant jungle gym of intersecting steel beams. That spot may have originally held a kitchenette, but the metal pipe attached to the bottom of the stainless sink continued all the way down to the surface.

The drain pipe was of course thinner than Shirai's arm, but she could not reject a normally unthinkable possibility. Especially when she saw several test tubes lying in the sink with rubber caps removed. She recalled the name that girl went by in the dark side: The Decomposer.

A harmful like Kaai might go as far as dissolving all two-hundred-plus of her bones.

“Kh...”

Then Shirai Kuroko reached her limit.

She felt herself wobbling to the side and her feet slipped from the steel beam.

Part 12

Shirai Kuroko had to have been more than ten stories up.

So she should have died after losing her balance. Her chances would have been slim even if the adults had a thick mattress ready to catch her at the bottom.

Yet something caught her with a wet sound.

It was the rotted remains of the building materials that the Decomposer had so thoroughly destroyed. How many people would have believed that pile that like cotton or dust had originally been reinforced concrete and tempered glass?

“Shirai-saaan!!”

Someone called out to her before she could sink deep inside it.

Rakuoka Houfu, the Anti-Skill officer with a combover and glasses, reached out his hand. The resistance was strong and felt like countless tiny hands dragging her down, but then his arm swelled out unnaturally. He used the power of his enlarged muscles to pull her out.

She felt feverish. She had supposedly been saved, but she was too weak to get up or even brush aside her sweaty bangs.

Nevertheless, she moved her trembling lips to speak.

“The...”

“?”

“The Decomposer is still celebrating her freedom. Hurry down and check the sewers!!”

“B-but, Shirai-san, you need immediate medical attention. I will call for an ambulance. Or we could take an Anti-Skill heli—”

She was still too weak to get up, but she managed to grab his collar.

If she was going to leave her life in someone's care, she would prefer for it to be Misaka Mikoto. How had she worked so hard tonight without finding any sign of that girl? But right now, she had to give someone else some support. If she made the safe, reasonable, and passive choice here, she knew this man would rot away without ever opening his present.

She raised her voice while looking on the verge of coughing up blood.

“You wanted to be someone your family could be proud of, didn't you? Isn't that why you became a teacher and why you volunteered for Anti-Skill despite the risk!?”

“...”

“Then don't let her get away. Prevent the next death and become someone you can be proud of. Hurry!!”

He glanced this way and that, bit his lip, and hung his head.

Then he gently laid her down and took off running.

No one would respect him.

But that teacher made sure to do his duty as an upholder of the public order.

Part 13

Academy City's Greatest Taboo.

Hamazura's group had no choice but to rely on that cryptic phrase.

They could only hope the answer was hidden in the data on the card-sized hard drive found in the counterfeiter's tent.

"Are we taking an underground route, Hamazura?" asked Takitsubo while teasing her bangs.

The way her sweat plastered the hair to her forehead seemed to bother her. The moxibustion had partially relieved the pain and suffering, but she was gradually reaching her limit. She would not last long even with that treatment.

He was afraid to mention it.

He felt like everything would fall apart if he did.

"Y-yeah. I'm sure everywhere is being monitored, but that will at least keep the satellites from seeing us."

They were walking through an underground subway station, but in overcrowded Academy City, it was not unusual to end up in another station altogether if you continued walking down a subway station corridor. In Districts 11 and 23, there had to be a terminal station leading to the airport nearby, so they would be able to reach their destination while staying underground.

"The others are already in the juvenile hall, so not even Anti-Skill can get to them and pass it off as an accident during an investigation," muttered a girl walking past them. She must have been organizing her thoughts while twirling the military-looking flashlight in her hand. She was a high school girl with her midriff exposed and wearing her long hair in two tails. "So as long as I survive, I still have a chance of saving them. Damn that pedo Chairman. Does he think this mess is any way to repay his old friends? Anyway, maybe I can borrow an empty room in the morgue used by Anti-Skill's coroner."

Those piles of garbage had to be taken out of the city by land or by air.

If they could borrow a special screwdriver from the people who extracted personal information and other data from the electronic trash there, they might be able to get a look inside that hard drive labeled “Lifeline”.

(Assuming they’re still alive.)

Hamazura knew Anti-Skill was in the middle of some major operation, so the usual rules no longer applied. Whether or not Anti-Skill could fight against the deepest depths of the dark side, he had to assume the extremities were in tatters. They may have been destroyed already and they may have run off in a panic, so they might not still be running their usual business.

And...

“Huh? Where did that hakama chick go?”

“I don’t know.”

He looked back, but only saw the crowd there.

He was curious since that hakama girl had treated Takitsubo’s symptoms. He could not do acupuncture or moxibustion himself. He was pretty sure you needed special qualifications for that. But on the other hand, that girl had no obligation to stick with them.

They were a sick girl and a useless Level 0, so they may have been too great a burden to shoulder on a whim.

“Let’s leave her be. She may have slipped away without saying anything as a kindness.”

“Right.”

They could not hope for further treatment now, so they had to get out of the city before Takitsubo’s fever came back.

“We’re almost in District 23, Hamazura.”

“We were right to go underground. They might have checkpoints set up between districts by now.”

They found some stairs leading up and climbed to the surface.

He never really thought about it, but the piles of trash were pretty awful. The gray hills were visible even from a distance. Most of it seemed to be metal, like electronics and car scraps, but it was piled up as high as the third floor of the surrounding buildings. From the look of things, the road might be covered too.

But once they approached...

“Where are the trash collectors?”

“They might be taking Christmas off.”

There were no flashlight beams to be seen. They could not guess where any of the trash piles would collapse. He was extremely reluctant to climb them, but he could only see so much from the ground. While looking out for any metal sticking out or glass shards, he moved on ahead to search out a safe route for Takitsubo.

The place was so quiet.

He looked out from atop the pile to see a silver desert.

He did not want to get in a gunfight with the trash collectors, but it also worried him to find no one at all here. The trash collectors probably counted as the dark side too, so he started wondering if Anti-Skill had already taken control of this place and had an ambush prepared.

“What do we do?” he asked.

“We can’t stop here, so let’s try to find whatever we can.”

Takitsubo’s calm composure was so reassuring at times like this. Yet she had to understand better than him how valuable each second was here. After all, the moxibustion had only provided temporary relief, so that shell could crack

at any time, allowing the fever to return.

“If the trash collectors frequent this place, they must have a car or something they use. If one of them is parked around, we might be able to find out who owns it from the license plate. And if not, maybe there are tire tracks.”

Those precise instructions did not actually give them anything to do. The delinquent boy found nothing and resorted to opening the door of a refrigerator buried nearby.

“...”

Then he frowned.

He shut that fridge full of a brownish mess and took a deep breath.

(Is that how they scavenge for valuables?)

Their entire plan had been misguided. They had hit a dead end. Was there really nothing here? Surely there was at least one thing in all this garbage.

He gripped something solid in his pocket and pulled it out.

“Show me where the special screwdriver is, Coin of Nicholas.”

He heard a sound like someone had kicked a metal panel.

His girlfriend, Takitsubo Rikou, cried out in surprise.

They both hesitantly looked over to see something stabbed diagonally into the trash. It was a diamond-shaped yellow “!” road sign. It warned of some other danger here. But there were rumors that, if one of those did not have a secondary sign to explain the danger, it referred to some sort of unscientific threat.

(That wouldn’t scare me so much if I hadn’t already seen something like a ghost wandering the city.)

The denting sound had apparently come from the sign. Something was buried

in the trash down at its base. It was a metal panel...no, a door. A pair of metal double doors.

“Hamazura, is this what I think it is?”

“A metal container?”

But not just a container.

It was embedded in the pile of trash to create an open space that functioned like a tunnel. And its floor had been cut away to reveal stairs leading down.

Part 14

Rakuoka Houfu used his one arm to yank up a nearby manhole cover and jumped down into the deep, deep darkness within.

The stench stung his nose.

He pulled out his flashlight that doubled as a baton and shined it around. The place was surprisingly large. Sewers came in a number of designs, but this one was built with narrow concrete pathways on either side of the filthy flowing water.

The sound of the flowing water was joined by what sounded like a machine.

The low humming was a lot like a refrigerator running late at night.

“?”

Something reflected the light of his flashlight.

There was something transparent on the wall and floor of the pathway. It was the trail left by something slimy crawling through there. He followed that

trail with flashlight in hand.

Something was lurking in the darkness.

At first, he thought it was a small person with a blanket over their head.

“Wh-who are you!?” he shouted while shining his light on them.

He was mostly driven by fear, so that may have been the wrong move. Peering into the shadows did not always eliminate your anxiety.

“Huh?” said a voice.

It had the color of flesh, but there was an entire pile of it. The slender hips and unusually large chest were no more. There was only a one or two meter pile of flesh resembling a clump of melted ice cream. A distorted face was attached to its surface, but the two eyes were at different heights. If it had just been flesh, he could have viewed it as no more than a monster or raw garbage, but the long black hair that had fallen out nearby made it look oddly bewitching.

“Huh? Wait, why?” the voice continued. “This isn’t right. I can’t go back.”

A squeak escaped the middle-aged man’s throat.

It should have been a scream, but his throat was trembling too much to get out his voice.

The blob turned back toward the light. She was too melted to tell which side was the front, but that movement was weirdly human.

Rakuoka heard some hard objects clacking together.

He assumed they were something creepy like teeth or bones, but a closer look showed something more inorganic reflecting the light. Test tubes full of colorful liquids were being absorbed by the cream-colored blob. Unlike the others, these had blue rubber caps on them.

She had apparently been dumping those on herself, but none of them would

“fix” her.

(Is that some kind of medicine? I could save Shirai-san with that!!)

“Eh, whatever.”

Despite her horrific state, the blob made that casual comment and tossed several test tubes aside.

Rakuoka desperately tried to avoid looking in that direction.

Even in this state, she was definitely part of the dark side.

If he showed any opening, he would be killed instantly. The sense of danger hit him like a solid wall.

“Hee...hee. My entire body fell apart after I dumped my own bacteria on me. Don’t you feel sorry for me? I’ve been defiled. Oh, so defiled. I can even hear my cells bursting: pop, pop, pop. Hee hee hee hee hee. Have you ever felt sorrier for anyone in your life?”

She twisted her body around.

But she continued speaking because she was pretty sure even she would forget what that meaning meant before long.

“C’mon, say you feel sorry for me. Frown and call me a poor little thing while secretly grinning on the inside. Then I can live forever as a dark side legend. Don’t worry. Life is an occult thing, so it doesn’t matter if I lose mine. I’ll live on forever as part of the dark side.”

The combover and glasses man sighed.

Then he faced her again and spoke bluntly.

“You get to ignore the flow of time, ignore all the world’s problems, and drift around for all eternity? I couldn’t be more jealous, honestly.”

The flesh-colored blob shrank a size smaller.

“Eeeek!! Wait, stop. I can’t move from here! My life is over! There’s no way to save me, so if you don’t insult me here, I’ll be forever stuck halfway toward my goal. I don’t want to be average! No one remembers average! I want to be more defiled than anyone ever was!!”

A wet and sticky sound followed. She must have either slipped or intentionally jumped in because the flesh-colored blob dove into the filthy water and disappeared from view. It looked more like she had dissolved into it than sank to the bottom.

Rakuoka Houfu breathed a soft sigh.

The girl had said there was no way to save her, but he had a hunch she would be like that forever. After liberating herself from all other bonds, he suspected she might not even have a lifespan anymore.

Whether or not that would bring her happiness was another issue altogether.

He gathered up a few test tubes that had fallen on the pathway with some clear sticky strands still connected to them. He did not know which of the colorful liquids was the antidote, but these ones had been designated as unique by their blue rubber caps. Blue meant safety and these were the ones that girl had tried to use on herself. It would be worth having them analyzed.

And then...

“Hee hee.”

A voice rose from the filthy water.

He jumped and shined his flashlight that way, but he did not see a face emerging from the stagnant river. Yet the girl’s voice continued. The girl who had hoped to be defiled by all of the city’s filth seemed to have been dispersed throughout that filthy water.

“By the way, I forgot to ask before, but are you a beneficial or a harmful? What level of the dark side are you from?”

“...Huh?”

He honestly had no idea what she meant by this. Small ripples ran through the filthy water.

“Ohh? Do you really think I’d be trying to pull some trick on you at this point? I couldn’t be more satisfied after being freed from all restrictions. Yes, yes. Like you said, I have been truly liberated. …The thing about being a twin is, it can be a real pain being around the other one all the time. *I could do it all on my own.* I separated off one piece and let Youen do it, but just me was enough to decompose all the city’s filth.”

The splashing noise grew louder.

The stench had been bad enough before, but now it felt like an invisible wall.

“I wanted to decompose everything. Including the illusionary bond between twins. Including myself. I wanted to be liberated from it all.”

He had trouble breathing. Beads of sweat poured down his face and head.

Nevertheless, she continued.

“I wouldn’t lie to you in this state. Why would I need to? So I’m asking what part of the dark side you’re from. Since we never ran across each other before, we must be from different levels.”

“Wait…wait a second.”

Her voice was weirdly persuasive.

It was the purity of a prisoner awaiting execution. Once they had nothing to lose, they had no need to lie to protect anything.

But in that case...

“I am Anti-Skill. No more and no less. Yes, I do work as an Aggressor for them, so I roleplay as a criminal in training. But that’s all I do. I’m not like you. I’m different.”

“Not possible. That excuse isn’t going to cut it. Do you not know where we are? Listen, can’t you hear the humming of a machine? What’s that for? This place is used to cover people’s tracks. Camera is connected to camera is connected to camera to make sure no one can be tracked. Before you commit a crime, you head underground and cover your tracks. Once you can’t be tracked, you head to wherever you’re going to be criming. That humming is from a machine that creates a magnetic field. Part of the high-tech countermeasures.”

“...”

“So this maliciously-made *sewer labyrinth* is designed so you can never arrive here just by walking around at random. Only the dark side knows of this place. And since you made it here, you must have used it before.”

“.....”

No, he mouthed, but his voice did not follow.

He imagined an uncomfortable humidity while his vision gradually went white. He tried his best to remain conscious. He had no idea what she was talking about. Of course he didn’t. He had lived a boring life – no major ups or downs. He had just lived year after year, growing older and older. But he had wanted to become someone the mother and sister he lived with could be proud of, so he had become a teacher and then volunteered for Anti-Skill. So this had nothing to do with him. He had no idea how he could be part of the dark side.

“Yes.”

His thoughts were cut off by a sticky laugh.

His flashlight still only showed the dark sludge, but he definitely heard it.

“You really were a good person. But that was exactly why you couldn’t abandon them.”

Someone who had become eternal worked to tear him down to stave off boredom.

“You came down here to cover your tracks before you dumped the body, didn’t you? Did you do it in the mountains? Or maybe below that subway station? All so someone’s crime would never come to light and so your happy little world would remain intact.”

his mother

sticky

his sister

his family red a stalker

creepy laughter no face no other choice deserved to die

didn’t mean to

no one at fault standing there in a daze

murder

They had all hugged each other while trembling, reached a consensus about what was right and wrong, and then tried to figure out what to do next. They thought and thought and thought and – stuffed inside a blanket compression bag – RE – the vacuum cleaner – KAGU – shoved – HIEUB – the suitcase – EBHN – but the smell was – NHRN – so many maggots – HE – had to make a choice – GGU – into the bathroom – OFBN – raised the machete – TU – into pieces – HRNP – inside – TU – bag – NHEPGNANS_DIPJGNMD – JNPIGVNP – SDF

“Ah, ah.

Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

hhhh!!!!!”

In that stagnant and oppressive underground space with no exit, Rakuoka Houfu unleashed a bestial roar toward the heavens. He tried to kick away the filthy water that refused to stop its incessant splashing, but only succeeded in falling into the river himself.

He got his head above the surface, but the source of the sticky stench was now plastered to his face. That he *did not* find it disgusting actually creeped him out. A warmth reminiscent of human skin stabbed into his brain. He had no such experience himself, but he guessed this was what it felt like to have your entire body surrounded by a giantess’s chest.

A girl’s breath reached him like she was whispering into his ear or like her voice was inside his ear already.

“Ah ha ha. Ah ha ha ha ha ha. Ah ha ah ha ha ha ah ha ah ha ha.”

“Ugh, shut up.”

“I thought you were acting weird. It’s like you have childish tastes or like you never learned how to act like an adult. You seemed to live in *such a limited world* for someone of your age, but this explains a lot. You were so terrified that adult society would demand you take responsibility for your actions that you never could leave the school. Hee hee hee. You’re as much a harmful as me.”

“Shut uuuuuuuuuuuuuup!!!!!”

He heard a quiet shriek.

Half-drowning in the river of sludge, he turned his bloodshot eyes toward the sound. His flashlight shined on a small girl of about ten. The filthy sewer and her pristine gym clothes were such a harsh mismatch that it almost looked like a digitally altered photo.

She cowered down and he initially thought she looked like a terrified little animal.

But then he heard the whispering of that sticky being plastered to his face.

“Did you forget?”

He could hear it.

He could hear that smiling voice.

“No normal person could ever wind up here by accident.”

“...”

The water splashed as the combover and glasses Anti-Skill officer climbed out of the filthy river and onto the pathway.

“I...”

He stood at an angle, putting his shoulders at different heights.

“I am with Anti-Skill. I am someone my family can be proud of.”

That alone may have been a deeply held wish. His mother and sister may have in fact been thankful for what he had done.

But if he admitted that he had done anything to deserve that thanks...

“...!!”

He was shaken.

He was falling apart.

Why was the truth so heavy a burden to bear? It never stopped pressing down on him, forever trying to crush him below its weight.

But he had promised.

While barely able to breath, Shirai Kuroko had told him to pursue the dark side. And he might still be able to save her with the test tubes he had found

here.

It might be too late for him, but as long as he still had some strength left, he could drive out the dark side and deliver these to her.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
hhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!”

The small girl broke free of her paralysis, turned tail, and ran.

Why would anyone run from Anti-Skill if they had done nothing wrong?

His silhouette underwent a transformation as he pursued his quarry. His Anti-Skill uniform was shredded from within, revealing a massive muscular body.

He had made his decision before the fight even began, so he moved his arms and legs to give chase.

Part 15

Risako, the girl in gym clothes, did not remember how she had gotten here.

Her vision was mostly filled with the color white despite being in the dark sewer. She was out of breath and her chest hurt. Tears spilled from her eyes. Each time the small LED light on her personal alarm hit the walls or ceiling, the reflection was so bright it hurt her eyes. If mister had not given it to her, she would have thrown it away, completely forgetting it was her only source of light.

She ran.

She ran and ran.

She had wandered into a place she never should have been. Maybe she should have realized something was wrong when she walked and walked and never found Sodate's secret base, but she had unfortunately never given up and turned back. She just kept telling herself it had to be "just a little further" until she had wandered into a place that felt like it would tear her body and mind to pieces.

Something had allowed this to happen.

Something had placed her on a track she normally never could have found.

(What was that?)

She was too scared to look back. She ran down the narrow pathway and shoved herself through the gaps between thick pipes to get as far away as possible. Something terrifying was chasing after her.

She could not let him catch her. She knew something terrible would happen if he did.

(That man was talking to himself!!)

"Ah!"

There was nothing sticking out from the ground, but she still tripped and fell. She forgot to even cry from the pain in her knees.

Her only light had gone out. She was surrounded by darkness.

(I need my light.)

She no longer felt the egg-shaped personal alarm in her hand. It must have slid along the floor when she tripped. She did not know if the switch had flipped off or if it had broken, but this place was as pitch black as a movie theater. She could not keep going without a light. She could still hear the quiet splashing of the sewer river, so she might fall in if she tried to continue on blind.

Down on all fours, she searched around with her small hand, but she could

not feel anything like it.

Mister had given her that alarm and he sometimes seemed to be having money trouble, so she did not want to have to say she had lost it.

But she searched and searched to no avail. She was trying so hard, but she still could not find it.

The stench suddenly grew worse. From behind her.

That monster had been holding a flashlight before, so had he turned it off? Did that mean he could see her in the dark? But how?

Maybe she should have started running right away. Maybe she should have bolted into the darkness no matter what she crashed into on the way. But she could not bring herself to give up on the alarm. She bit her lip and patted around on the filthy floor with tears in her eyes.

(No...)

She could not find it.

She could not find it.

She simply could not find the alarm mister had given her.

(No, where is it?)

She felt a great pressure like the ceiling was lowering.

Something may have been looming over her as she searched for the alarm on all fours.

It was too dark to see, but she still squeezed her eyes shut.

Then she heard a squashing sound.

The thick wall of pressure moved back as if flinching.

She opened her eyes in shock, but it was still too dark to see anything.

Or it should have been.

She heard a scraping sound and then she saw a light somewhat larger than a birthday cake candle. It was not a will-o'-the-wisp. Once she realized it was the flame of a lighter like the one mister had used when they were shooting off fireworks, she detected an animal scent she had noticed before.

“Oh, whoops. Not in front of the child.”

A creature had pulled out an object and started to put it in his mouth, but he stopped after seeing Risako.

She could not believe it.

The creature that spoke to her with a human voice was very clearly a large dog.

“A Jinmenken?”

“*Sigh*, I would say I have a little more romance than that. But maybe most people would see me as something similar. It is better than being written off as some new form of technology, at least.”

She normally would have been afraid to find such a large dog so close to her. Especially one without its owner holding the leash. But this golden retriever gently walked right past her while she sat on the floor. Almost like it was shielding her from the monster pushing in from behind.

“Get going, miss,” said the bearer of light. “The side paths and rusted doors might draw your interest along the way, but ignore them all and continue straight down this pathway. If you can shake free of your doubts, you will find some stairs leading out of this place at the end of this long, long pathway. I give you a chance, but whether you use it or not is up to you.”

“But mister’s alarm...”

She was not given time to explain what she meant.

Something small was tossed her way and she caught it to find it was the egg-shaped device she had found so difficult to find.

How had the dog thrown it? For that matter, how was he holding the lighter?

Before she could ask, the golden retriever said one more word.

Strongly this time.

“Hurry.”

The girl in gym clothes started to run, but she soon stopped.

He had said it was dangerous here, but she still looked back.

“Doggy...”

She was not asking if he would be coming too. Realizing she wanted to ask his name, he sighed.

If a dog was capable of smiling, he might have been doing so.

“I am Kihara Noukan of the dark side. Dealing with this sort of person is my job.”

The darkness shook behind him.

After confirming that the small back really did vanish down the long pathway this time, the golden retriever slowly turned around in the darkness he called home.

He used a thin mechanical arm to toy with a quality cigar and brought the oil lighter’s flame toward its tip.

“Now I can smoke.”

His tone had changed.

Entirely.

“No need to worry about the health of someone who is about to die anyway.”

The wall of darkness moved. It had flinched back from the unexpected pain before, but now it was back with even greater pressure.

The pressure spoke with a human voice.

“Are you part of the dark side too?”

“Indeed I am. And if your bizarre logic says you can prove you aren’t by killing someone who is, then I can fill in for that child, can’t I?” The golden retriever gently blew out some cigar smoke. “And in that sense, I am the perfect target for you. After all, I am one of the most hidden Kiharas.”

“Shut up.” The giant took a merciless step forward, allowing the oil lighter to illuminate him from below. “If that last attack is all you’ve got, you can’t win. I’m not even bleeding.”

“Yes, I can’t deny that my original A.A.A. was made into a toy for *those girls* and my few spares were all destroyed during Handcuffs.”

All the golden retriever could do now was launch the containers and cases that had once been used to transport his ultimate weapon. They did not pack much of a punch while empty. And even if they were packed full of explosives, that monster could probably stop the blast with his muscles.

“I will now beat you to death,” said the man. “I refuse to let the dark side exist, no matter what form it takes.”

He had a strangely twisted appearance. Thick muscles surrounded him like armor, but his face remained the same as always. The Anti-Skill officer with a comover and glasses faced the golden retriever wearing a backpack but spoke to something other than the dog.

“And you seem willing to face me knowing that will happen. Makes me curious about that girl you’re willing to throw your life away to protect. *She must be a dark side VIP. I can’t possibly let her escape.* Chase her down

afterwards and I can dig up all sorts of darkness along with her. I mean, nothing else makes sense. If she wasn't with the dark side, she never could have reached this place."

"Hey, listen." Kihara Noukan sounded irritated. Not even his favorite brand filling his lungs was enough to help. "I have some bad news for you. Who is it you think you were talking to here? The Decomposer? If you mean Hanatsuyu Kaai, she is indeed floating around this area. In a way, she may have become something that can never die. *Much like Yakumi Hisako*. But do you really think she is in any state to create the vibrations needed for a physical voice? How could she do that after dissolving into the filthy water down here?"

"..."

"Anyone can reach this pathway. You don't need to be with the dark side. That is the boring truth. I imagine that girl was so terrified because she ran into a greasy balding old man soaking up to the shoulders in smelly sewer water and talking to himself with a look of ecstasy on his face. That voice you heard wasn't real. This place reminded you of a traumatic moment in your past, but you refused to accept that you had stepped on that landmine all on your own. You wanted to believe you had fallen for some clever trap as part of someone's master plan, not that you had stumbled into your own ruin by accident. So when you heard the splashing of this sticky sewer water, you imagined you were hearing malicious laughter instead."

"....."

Rakuoka Houfu came to a stop.

Not even Kihara Noukan could tell how he was processing this. Not that he cared.

"The more I try to look to the future, the more pathetic I feel. That must mean I've been corrupted too."

"By that?"

“But that still doesn’t explain what that girl was doing here. She was dressed weird too. She had some kind of sensors on her arms and legs. They looked very high tech. She must be with the dark side.”

“I suppose this was inevitable. To be clear, I am not lying to you.”

Rakuoka reached for a nearby pipe. It was thicker than the average person’s torso, but he tore it away with a single hand.

Looking at a person’s weight and muscle fibers was enough to calculate out their general muscle strength. He would be able to wield it like a sugar sculpture or whip instead of a blunt weapon. Think of it as the difference between simply swinging down a thin tree branch or swinging it with a snap of the wrist. That would give it between five and ten times as much force.

But the dog did not fall back.

He narrowed his eyes as if to say enjoying the flavor of his cigar was more important.

“So I finally meet a member of the family that killed a Kihara and perfectly disposed of the body. I might have fought by your side were circumstances different.” The large dog sighed and whispered words of devastating importance. “Kihara Heikin. He called it taking a psychological approach, but he had a bad habit of leaving no boundary between his work and his personal life. I did warn him quite sternly that the techniques used for a stakeout at work would qualify as stalking when done for personal reasons.”

He seemed to be reminiscing.

Or maybe he was regretting his past actions.

“If all you had done was protect your family, I would have respected you. You might not think your courageous action was the right thing to do, but I sensed the light of great romance in it. You might have been expelled from the path of good, but my little corner of the dark side would have welcomed your arrival.”

However.

The golden retriever stiffly spat out his next words.

“But none of that light remains now that you are chasing after a child for no reason. Not now that you have located a conveniently weak target to label evil so you can feast upon them. My little corner of the dark side must reject you. I am sorry, but I must eliminate you now.”

The atmosphere changed. The stiffness of his words seemed to affect the density and viscosity of the air.

Rakuoka Houfu was still not swallowed up by it, so as rotten as he had become, he may have still retained some vestige of the Kihara Killer he once was.

A good person who had been distorted beyond repair was far nastier than a bad person. Kihara Noukan made his blunt assessment...and the man did not stack up.

Yes, the dark side could be found anywhere. In the next apartment over, at the neighborhood supermarket, in the entertainment industry on TV, and even within the very Anti-Skill that fought to keep the peace. Did the current rookie Chairman really understand that sweeping the dark side clean was to locate all the stains and wrinkles you found unsightly and to slice them away with a knife, skin and all?

“You haven’t answered my question,” said Rakuoka.

“Oh?”

“If that was all you’ve got, you can’t win. So what are you going to do about it?”

Kihara Noukan paused for a moment. He pricked up his ears while pretending to think, but he could no longer hear those small feet on the concrete. The gym clothes girl must have taken his advice and run down the long straight path without taking any turns. She would probably be arriving at

the surface soon.



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“I would ask if you know what romance is, but I doubt you could give me a decent answer as you are now.”

He had no weapons.

And even if Rakuoka Houfu had gone berserk—no, because he had gone berserk—his skill was very real and it was boosted to the point of changing the shape of his body. There were no rules when the dark side fought, so it was best not to think about what would happen if you lost.

Nevertheless, the large dog puffed happily at his cigar and spoke.

“Romance means to set aside efficiency and logic. Romance means to enjoy the pointless things in life. And that definition is what separates me from the strays.”

Part 16

“Why?”

Vivana Oniguma was nearly in tears.

Her long, curly silver hair was at odds with her hakama and she was as benevolent as the dark side came. At the moment, she was completely lost inside a subway station she rarely ever used.

She felt there were two kinds of people in the world: those who could immediately find the exit they wanted inside a subway station, and those who would wander around until they found themselves in a different station altogether.

She had not asked for it, but she was part of the dark side. She could not allow Anti-Skill to find her here. Her only chance to survive and live out her

life was to leave Academy City and that required searching out the secret of *Academy City's Greatest Taboo*.

Where had those Hamazura and Takitsubo people gone?

Had they coordinated together to lose her? Unpleasant suspicions like that kept spinning through her head. She needed to reach District 23 and she could always head to the surface to see where she was. Heading up was a risk, but it might be better than wandering around here forever.

Or so she thought.

If she had made up her mind just ten seconds sooner, she never would have encountered someone here.

“Gwah!!”

A nearby door burst open. It looked a lot like a staff-only door and the person inside ran into Vivana. The person was so short that the impact was mainly to her hip.

It was a girl in gym clothes.

But Vivana did not have time to ask what this was about.

The wall swelled out from the other side. The wall and metal door exploded like a popping balloon and rubble flew out horizontally. Vivana immediately dropped her black and pink cloth wrappers and opened them. She grabbed the broken-tipped bamboo sword from her Japanese torture products and used it slice through the air.

The multiple pieces of the split tip made it like a multi-headed snake.

“Hm.”

After easily knocking down the entire scattershot of rubble, she sensed something moving beyond the dust.

What looked like the head of a weak office worker sat atop a mass of swollen

muscles, creating a unique silhouette. The few tatters of clothing that remained said he was from Anti-Skill not a corporate office.

He was covered in blood.

The girl clung to Vivana's hip and trembled.

Shouts and screams spread around them.

"No..."

The girl's eyes widened.

But not from simple fear. Her trembling came from seeing the blood splattered on the man.

"Where's the doggy? No, no... What happened to the golden retriever that saved me!?"

With a heavy thud, a piece of metal larger than a railroad rail was squashed longer like a sugar sculpture being made. How much force would be required to cause that? Vivana's research into the history of torture and execution told her that could slice right through a midsized truck if it was a whip rather than a blunt weapon.

"I found you. I finally found you."

He spoke in a deep voice that seemed to carry some terrible curse.

He may have been crawling through the sewer because a terrible odor pushed in when he opened his mouth. The mass of muscles attempted to take another step, but Vivana stuck out her broken-tipped bamboo sword.

The beneficial torture expert directly faced the harmful mass of muscles.

"Is that supposed to be a whip?"

"?"

“If so, I hate to say it, but I can’t let this stand. I enjoy researching the cultures of torture and execution and I take that seriously. I can’t have a *casual* like you causing a scene here using a half-assed version of the tools. It’s nothing but a nuisance.”

She had drawn the short end of the stick here.

She had hoped the gym clothes girl would run away while she stepped forward, but that had not happened. She still felt a pressure on her hips. She looked down to see the girl wrapping her small arms around her.

“No...”

This seemed to be more than locking up from fear.

The girl squeezed her eyes shut and said something under her breath.

“No. Don’t you leave me too.”

Vivana sighed and patted the girl’s small head with her empty hand.

The man’s thin face squirmed in response.

“Are you?”

“?”

“Dark side? Too?”

As a simple blunt weapon, that pipe was heavy enough to break through a metal shutter, but he also gave it the flexibility of a whip as he swung it down.

The girl squeezed tighter at Vivana’s hips.

But then she must have wondered why the pain and impact never arrived.

She hesitantly opened her eyes to look.

“In the East and the West, executions were held in public as a sort of show.”

The torture expert with two hair horns had enough time to support the girl with one hand and move to the side.

“The most well-documented of those would be the witch hunt. The furious people so wanted the criminals to die that they could easily riot if the executioner failed. So it was out of the question for the criminal to fight back or escape at the execution ground. In that sense, setting up a sturdy enclosure around the execution ground was a crucial task to ensure safety.”

Several dull impacts sounded as wooden stakes were driven into the hard floor. They were bound together with ropes in a structure similar to scissors or a tripod and those held down the metal pipe whip after it had crashed into the floor.

“This is known as a yarai. The term actually refers to the entire fence built around an execution ground with logs or bamboo, but the basic structure only requires two or three pieces. The people of this country are so clever in how they use trees.”

Next, there was a rubbing noise.

It sounded like rustling clothing, but it was actually the sound of a thick rope being wrapped around the pinned-down pipe.

“Bondage, whipping, pressure—the basic form of all torture is the distribution of weight.”

“...”

“After all, you can’t have the victim dying before you get the desired information out of them. So whether you’re tying them up in rope and hanging them from the ceiling or you’re seating them in a chair covered in needles or thorns, you have to be extra careful to ensure their weight is distributed evenly and not focused on any one point. Humans are tougher than you would think. We can build up a tolerance to pain, so there’s even a record of someone staying strong with a weight of more than two-hundred

kilograms placed on them.”

Of course, her opponent was not just going to sit there and politely listen.

Fed up with all the talking, he used brute force. The mass of muscles gathered his strength and sent waves of force through the bent steel to tear through the partial restraints formed by the yarai and rope.

But that was all according to plan for the girl whose two sweet-smelling horns shook.

“But on the other hand,” she whispered with some red tape visible within her loose hakama. “Mess up that distribution and allow the weight to focus on a single point, and you have a tragic accident on your hands. Turtle shell bondage has a silly image thanks to its use in comedy, but just like professional wrestling moves, that is not something amateurs should try and mimic. ‘Rope master’ was originally used to refer to a martial arts expert, which should tell you just how dangerous ropes can be. Attempt it without knowing what you’re doing...and this can happen!!”

A dull snapping rang out. She had used her opponent’s momentum, but it was still unclear how she had applied so much force to the steel whip with the rope binding it. That pipe thicker than a human torso suddenly broke in half.

The mass of muscles staggered forward and Vivana actually licked her lips.

She still held a bamboo sword with the tip split apart. That torture tool took a safe weapon used for practice and modified it into something dangerous enough to tear through flesh.

She targeted his right arm on the outside of the elbow.

Even a child knew that was a weak point.

Instead of slicing, it sounded more like something being shredded with a giant file.

“Humans are funny creatures.” Time seemed to stop as Vivana grinned and spoke. “We have a set upper limit to how much pain we can tolerate. Torture

is all about intentionally extending the pain and suffering as long as possible, so the trick is to stay just below that upper limit. And what happens when you pass the limit? *That isn't something you can change no matter how much you train your body.*"

The mass of muscles wobbled to the side.

The two eyeballs behind his filthy glasses had rolled back in his head.

He did not even scream. His giant body simply crumbled below him.

"Of course, some people suggest that certain Eastern and Western execution methods were designed to provide *too much* pain in order to quickly knock the victim out in an age before anesthetics."

She spoke to the monster as he fell to his knees and collapsed forward.

"Okay."

With that casual word, she swung the solid stick along a whip-like horizontal path. It struck that giant with a load roar and sent him flying back into the hole he had opened in the wall.

Vivana twirled the stick that had broken in half from the incredible destructive force.

"W-wow." The girl gulped and then hopped up and down. "You beat that big muscle guy like it was nothing!"

"Yes, yes. Don't look so excited about watching such brutal torture. Now I'm worried about your future. Also, where are we?"

"Oh, right. I need to get home!"

"Where are we???"

She smiled.

She fixed her slipping hakama and waved until the gym clothes girl was out

of view.

Then she doubled over.

And Vivana Oniguma coughed up a lot of blood.

(Of course.)

Her surroundings grew louder as she wiped her mouth with a handkerchief.

(Distributing the weight doesn't make it go away. That isn't a defense if there's enough weight to be deadly even when evenly distributed. I'm lucky I wasn't turned to mincemeat by the initial concrete scattershot.)

But she had been *torn up* quite a bit on the inside.

As a torture expert, she knew exactly how bad the injury was. She was in serious trouble. Anti-Skill would chase her down if she did not leave Academy City, but she had no idea if medical technology outside the city could heal an injury this bad.

(But I don't regret it.)

She was unsteady on her feet, but she began to walk.

It had been a long time since she last felt she had been useful to someone like this.

She had started this strange research into torture and execution for a similar reason. She had thought someone might thank her if she gathered up all the research material this country turned its nose up at and made sure that history and culture was not lost to the next generation.

She had wanted her actions to put a smile on someone's—anyone's—face.

Getting a thank you would be even better.

“...”

At any rate, she had to reach District 23.

But where was Vivana Oniguma really meant to go?

Part 17

“We can’t get an ambulance! I called, but all of them are being used to transport patients right now.”

“Way too much has been happening today, dammit!!”

Yomikawa Aiho clicked her tongue at her fellow Anti-Skill’s report.

Shirai Kuroko was breathing shallowly while lying on the ground where they had cleared the snow away for her. She was out in the biting cold of the late December night, but she was pouring with sweat.

And there might be more wrong on the inside.

Yomikawa pulled out her car key.

“Fine, tell them to have a hospital bed ready. I’ll shove her wherever there’s an opening!!”

Just then, something emerged from the other tower of the Anti-Skill Chemical Analysis Center in western District 18.

“Ah.”

First, it was a voice.

Then the epicenter of that vocal earthquake staggered out of the main entrance.

Ankle-length black hair was adorned with a diagonally-worn gasmask, a white coat was closed on the front like a yukata, and unusually large breasts rested on a medical corset. It was a girl of about ten.

“The other twin!?” shouted Yomikawa.

Their plan had been to use the twin tower structure to split up the twins and then focused their attacks on just one. The Decomposer's state was unknown, but it was also unknown what the untouched Carrier would do now.

Would she decide she was outmatched and make a run for it, or would she give into anger and attack?

Anti-Skill rushed behind their vehicles and readied their weapons, but that was more out of fear than duty. They all knew what had become of South District 7.

Only one of them reached for the gun at her hip and then used every last ounce of strength to stop herself.

It was Yomikawa Aiho.

“Wait!! Lower your guns!!”

There was no need to tell the girl to stop. Hanatsuyu Youen fell to her knees and held her head, so it did not seem like she was going to attack right away.

In fact, could she even see them here?

She was yelling, but it did not seem directed at Anti-Skill.

“Why? Why, why, why did she remove her personal alarm? I gave that to Kaai so I could use the GPS to watch over her 24/7!! I even put it inside her gut and *sewed her shut* so she would never lose it!!”

She was definitely not speaking to the adults, but Yomikawa still felt a

tingling pain across her entire body. The intense rejection was like being slowly crushed by a thick invisible wall.

“*She dissolved.*”

That was not a word that should have applied to a person’s condition, but that changed with those twins.

This girl lived in a world where that was the first possibility that came to mind.

“Kaai dissolved herself!! Yes, yes. She’s flowing away. She decomposed, so I have to hurry! I have to be quick or my precious Kaai will be swept away!”

The subsequent bubbling sound was far more sinister than carbonation. Someone pulled their trigger out of fear, but no one even looked in the direction of the gunshot.

The bullet’s path curved in midair and broke a window nowhere near the girl.

Something hanging in the air around the Carrier was enough to corrode the lead bullet midflight and distort its air resistance.

“Agwahh!!”

The ground was torn through, but *not* by an incredible number of worms or earwigs.

Youen held something hard in her hand.

The glitter escaping between her fingers was golden.

“Open up the earth for me, Coin of Nicholas!!”

The track switched to a route that should not have been possible.

An unbelievably large human fist burst up through the ground.

“Dark...side.”

That mass of muscles was all that remained of an Anti-Skill officer.

The filthy scraps of clothing and glasses were barely enough to identify this as Rakuoka Houfu.

“Ahhhhh!!”

“Move!!”

She shoved him aside.

Weakened though he was, the Anti-Skill Aggressor meant nothing to the girl of about ten. *She brushed away that mass of muscles with just one arm and looked down into the filthy water below.*

Common sense had long since left this place.

A dark sludge erupted like a geyser from the crack in the asphalt. That liquid had the terrible stench unique to the sewer.

The Carrier spread her arms while down on her knees.

She looked up and opened her mouth wide.

Then something unbelievable happened.

“Gulp, gulp, gulp, gulp!!”

“She’s...drinking it?”

Yomikawa Aiho could not even move to stop it.

She spoke the words hoping someone would say otherwise, but Youen responded with a look of ecstasy.

She opened her mouth wider than seemed possible to accept more and more of the filthy water inside and used her unusually large breasts to catch what spilled out.

“Bioconcentration. No matter how wide and thin Kaai has been diluted, I just have to gather it all inside me. Once I have it all, I just know I can concentrate it back down in my liver, kidney, or whatever else and see Kaai’s smile ag—bff.”

Her nonsensical explanation was cut off as the color red sprayed out.

Whatever she had ingested, she doubled over and coughed while bringing up an unbelievable amount of blood. But she still did not give up. She used her convulsing arms to desperately gather back up the red and black liquids she was coughing up.

She did not manage to get them back into her mouth. She ran out of strength first. Only her fingertips continued to twitch like a bug sprayed with insecticide.

“Nic—”

But she could still speak.

She kept repeating the same things like a broken toy.

“Nicholas. Hurry. Concentrate her. Concentrate Kaai inside me. Hurry, Coin of...”

(Coin of Nicholas.)

Yomikawa Aiho had seen some fantastical phenomena while pursuing criminals on this nightmarish Christmas. They would stare at the map and place a blockade along every route, but the suspect would somehow still escape. She had assumed it was due to an esper power or some kind of technology, but that was not enough to explain it.

She had not been jealous for a moment. That trump card was a double-edged sword.

“Nicho...Nicho...Nicholas. Lend me your power. Is it not charged? Oh, I used it for the wrong thing. I’m going to die now. Did I screw up???”

Without that coin, the Carrier never would have attempted this reckless plan.

And even if she had, she might have been able to escape after it failed.

But that was not an option after she used the Coin of Nicholas wrong. She had closed off her own possibilities by using it.

Were the people using the tool, or was the tool manipulating the people?

It felt like a curse.

(Come to think of it.)

An unpleasant sensation ran down Yomikawa's spine.

(Didn't Shirai have one of those coins? Is it not just the criminals? Was the Coin of Nicholas given to us too? Have there been so many accidental deaths from people unnaturally breaking the rules because some of us were secretly praying to these coins???)

She only had suspicions.

It was always possible that it all came down to mistakes on Anti-Skill's part. Searching for this other cause before investigating it may have been her way of trying to avoid responsibility. She needed to be careful.

And...

She cautiously approached Youen who had gone silent in a pose similar to an unnatural prostration. She grabbed the girl's slender shoulder and flipped her onto her back. She could not let the girl drown in a pool of her own vomit.

Her teeth had dissolved away.

The surrounding snow was sizzling, but not from heat. Yomikawa could not figure out why the girl's hair and skin were so untouched. That suggested this was more than just a powerful acid.

"One suspect secured. She's still breathing, so someone arrange to have her

transported.”

“Ugh,” someone groaned.

It was Rakuoka Houfu collapsed on the half-frozen road nearby. It was unclear how much damage he had taken, but he had been soaking in that filthy water that had dissolved human teeth.

His muscles rapidly deflated like a balloon, but he still reached a hand out toward Yomikawa.

That hand held one of the test tubes they had so feared.

It was filthy with sludge, but the seal of its blue rubber cap appeared to be intact.

“For...Shirai-san.”

As soon as she took it, his enormous hand fell to the ground.

“I don’t know what kind of chemical this is, but it might be an antidote,” said Yomikawa. “We might have a chance of saving Shirai, so someone get this to the molecular biology lab or the ultramicrochemistry lab for—”

She was cut off by a dry bang.

She ducked down and looked back, but this was not a case of an Anti-Skill officer firing on the unresisting suspect out of fear.

The officer had gone limp. The smoking gun was still in his hand while he lay atop the hood of the car. His helmet had shattered and a dark red liquid was spilling out. He had clearly shot himself in the head.

“No.”

And he was not alone.

“I can’t take it anymore!! This...this isn’t what Anti-Skill—'sob'—what we’re supposed to do. Forgive me, please forgive me, just forgive me.”

Another one followed suit while pressing the gun against their chin from below. One adult slammed their helmet to the ground, turned around, and ran off into the darkness. One educator got down on their knees and held their hands together to ask to be handcuffed.

They were all teachers.

They had all been feeling the guilt. No matter how much the gears had shifted out of place and even if it had all been the result of unnatural accidents, dark feelings had gradually built up in their hearts as they saw more and more dark side children meet their doom before their eyes.

I want to protect the children.

I want to see smiles all around me as a teacher they can trust.

I want to bring peace to this city so everyone can enjoy their lives here.

Something invisible was shattering within them.

This had been the final drop. The filthy water had finally overflowed the cup.

And through the unseen connections of group psychology, it rapidly spread from a single individual to the entire group. Almost like an explosive trend. But it was not isolated to this one group. However it had spread, they could hear strange shouting and dry gunshots over their radios.

“Wait, calm down!! It’s over!! Take a deep breath!!”

Yomikawa’s cries did not reach any of them.

One of them even collapsed while foaming in at the mouth with a Coin of Nicholas held between hands clasped as if in prayer.

More and more of them were overcome by a desire for a way out, hope for an escape from the great pressure of responsibility, regret that any of this had happened, and a wish that everything could just be peaceful again.

Of course, Yomikawa Aiho did not have enough information to realize what

this was.

It was a return, or a regression.

A hint of this had already been seen with Rakuoka Houfu when he was down in the sewer.

Mechanical static pierced Yomikawa's eardrums. She grimaced and reached for the source of the noise: her phone.

The display was not functioning. She tapped it with her finger, but the data she wanted would not appear.

"What happened to Outrank?" She shouted into her radio and received no response. "We can't pursue dark side without it!! Someone...someone please answer!"

She ducked down after hearing an explosion. She looked over to see a portion of the scene on fire. The operation command vehicle, a vehicle the size of a large tour bus with all the windows covered with armor, sat there in pieces. The many antennas told her that was definitely it.

The thin datalink they had recovered was down. That final hope had been cut off, presumably by one of their own going berserk.

This was the final attack by the Carrier. To the very end, she had acted as a carrier for fear and panic. Destroying her own body had spread chaos and the dark side's unique form of gruesome destruction.

Outrank had been lost and they could not examine the evidence they did gather now that the forensics lab was destroyed. More than that, the adults had reached their limit. Their own consciences were crushing them, like their own immune systems were overreacting and destroying their bodies.

(I can tell the organization is collapsing. Anti-Skill is done for. Handcuffs can't continue.)

Yomikawa Aiho could feel something breaking inside her.

She slowly dropped to her knees.

She knew someone must have flipped some kind of switch.

(*We can't play a role in how this ends.*)

Part 18

They found a strange place inside.

The mountain of trash decorated with hardened snow was like a giant ant colony on the inside. Several metal containers had been buried to create some open space and holes had been opened between adjacent containers. They could not tell how big the entire place was, but it was like a metal labyrinth.

If the Coin of Nicholas was correct, the special screwdriver needed to open the hard drive would be found in here. But that initial guiding noise was all they received. Evidently, it would not grant a wish for a billion yen every five minutes forever.

But Hamazura Shiage did learn something while looking around.

“This place feels like a laboratory.”

“Maybe for mechanical engineering.”

They had found no sign of the trash collectors, but this was an unexpected discovery. Further investigation found a section lined with computers larger than refrigerators.

It was concerning not to know what the lab was for, but that was not their main issue. A specialized tool set was spread out on a table. In a very unorganized way.

“Aneri!”

The support AI gave a long buzz. Not the two short buzzes for a no.

He touched the metal door to discharge any static electricity before grabbing the screwdriver. However the tool was something like a gas station pump. The screwdriver portion was smaller than one for glasses, but the rest was bulkier than a large handgun and had a thick tube for electricity or air attached. The head did not turn when he pulled the thick trigger. If he had not been holding the grip, he would not have even noticed it was vibrating. But it might have made a ton of bubbles if he stuck it in a tank of water.

He cautiously pressed it against the hard drive’s screw and pulled the trigger again.

And...

“It’s turning. We can open it with this!”

The screw may have been so small that turning it normally would break the head off. Or maybe it was made so it would only open with a specific amplitude pattern.

Either way, the card-sized plastic cover slid open.

There was a delicate-looking circuit board inside. He could not afford to destroy the data on there. He was afraid to even touch it, but there was a small switch at one corner.

He was scared.

Very scared, but he still reached out his finger while looking away.

He heard a quiet click.

That was all. He attached the hard drive to his phone with a cable and then took two steps back. He made sure to look away from the exposed circuit board whenever he exhaled.

“Something is scrolling on your phone’s screen,” said the track suit girl. “It’s started, Hamazura.”

An estimated completion time was given, but it was fluctuating too much to be useful.

They both sat down on a bench.

They waited.

“Hee hee.”

She laughed and leaned against him from the side.

“What is it?”

“It feels like forever since we’ve been able to take our time like this.”

It was Christmas night, so whether they were busy or taking their time, it was wrong to be decrypting data inside a lab hidden in a pile of trash.

Nevertheless, he felt his own shoulders relaxing too.

Time passed without incident.

She rested her head on his shoulder and shut her eyes. Of course, she leaned so limply against him because she was sick, not because she was relaxed. He could not even imagine how much damage was being done inside her body right now. But she still seemed to be using this peaceful time to calm her overstimulated nerves.

As if to say this was more effective than any medicine.

He reached into his pants pocket while trying not to move his shoulder.

The gold coin he pulled out was shining bright. It did not have even a pizza slice missing.

It had finished charging.

“Hey, Hamazura. Will we know what that *Academy City’s Greatest Taboo* thing is once that’s decrypted?”

“Hopefully.”

They had no guarantee. And even if it did, the answer might not be what they were hoping for. After all, this was the dark side. It was best to assume their naïve hopes would be shattered before their eyes.

Then he heard a noise from outside the room.

The track suit girl pressed against him.

“Hamazura.”

“It’s going to take a while longer.” He gulped while listening to the scratching sound of the hard drive operating. “I don’t know who that is, but we need to draw their attention away from this room. The hard drive’s light is still flashing, so we can’t pull the cable out yet.”

His phone and the hard drive were both small, but he could not shove them in his pocket. The hard drive still had its plastic cover removed, exposing its circuit board. If rubbing against the cloth of his pocket or a bag caused some static, all the data could be lost.

The room was flooded with stuff, but surprisingly little that would function as a weapon. The tools were all as delicate as glasses maintenance tools.

Hamazura grabbed a folding chair in both hands and tiptoed over toward the room’s exit.

He poked just his head out to take a peek.

And his head was lopped off as casually as someone removing a radish’s leaves.

Or it would have been if nothing else had happened.

“Hamazura!!”

Takitsubo immediately yanked on his hand, dragging him back into the room with her full body weight. Thanks to that, a thick machete of an unknown material found only air.

A girl with crimson hair peered inside with a mechanical face.

He recognized her and that racing swimsuit colored with the toxic orange and black of an insect.

“The android!? Then...this isn’t just any harmful. Does this lab belong to that Kihara guy that Benizome was so scared of!?”

“You are the intruders, so why act like the world revolves around you? Did you think you were simply exploring an abandoned building?”

He heard a metallic creaking.

Her weapon must have been ridiculously heavy because the metal container seemed to bend with every barefoot step she took. Their relative positions were a problem. The room full of computers had only the one exit, so he and Takitsubo could not escape if the android stepped inside. That itself was a problem, but the delicate decryption work was also underway. If the android went on a rampage here, she could destroy the phone or exposed hard drive and they would lose their only clue toward *Academy City’s Greatest Taboo*.

But just before she took that step, the android’s eyes turned to the side.

A casual swing of the ultraheavy machete sliced a split-tipped bamboo sword in two.

The sudden intruder did not seem to care.

“Ohhhhh!!”

Curly silver hair fluttered and air filled the large sleeves of a hakama. Vivana Oniguma switched to a different torture tool as she charged toward the android.

She forcefully grabbed the android’s entire face with her palm.

No...

“Japanese torture developed in a unique direction.”

She forcibly shoved something into the android’s mouth even though it burnt her hand.

“I think this country might be the only one that used burning incense or pine leaves to send smoke into someone’s eyes and nose. Of course, this was used to punish runaway sex workers, so the point was to not leave any marks on the body they needed for their trade. *But isn’t this especially effective against a delicate machine like you?*”

That was as far as she got.

The hakama girl was hit by a ball of fire so massive it enveloped the android’s own body. It hit Vivana like a solid wall of heat, sending her soaring through the air.

“____!?”

Hamazura let out a meaningless cry.

Was that a flamethrower? No, she may have used *some kind of pyrokinetic power.*

However.

“...?”

Something was wrong with the android whose crimson hair swayed behind her. Her head creaked unusually loudly and she did not turn toward Hamazura and Takitsubo despite having eliminated the only obstacle standing between them.

The special smoke may have caused some kind of malfunction after getting inside her machinery.

A dark liquid dripped from her eyes and nose while she tilted her head.

Although the head tilt may not have been intentional this time.

Trembling fingers reached for the bottle on her thigh, but she never got it to her lips. The clear bottle slipped from her fingers first.

She tilted her head more intentionally and stars danced in her eyes.

“Sen...sei.”

A dull thud followed.

She must have prioritized her own malfunction over dealing with the intruders. She had withdrawn to avoid a stalemate.

Hamazura and Takitsubo did not dare move for a while, but...

“Ugh.”

The groaning from outside the room brought them back to their senses. They would be dead now if not for her interference.

“Hey, are you okay!?”

He rushed out into the corridor to find the hakama girl collapsed on the floor. He could no longer tell where her clothing ended and her skin began. One of the horns made by hardening her bangs was missing. It took a lot of work to not grimace at the sight.

“Ha...ha ha. This is the dark side. You don’t have to worry about some stranger like me.”

“Why did you do that for us?”

“I already screwed up before coming here...so I wouldn’t have lasted long anyway. Yeah, I really shouldn’t have tried to look so cool for that kid.”

She was barely breathing.

She had to be aware of her own state.

“But still...” She managed to smile. “I wish I could have learned what that *Academy City’s Greatest Taboo* thing is.”

She was looking up toward Hamazura and Takitsubo, but she may not have been able to see them anymore. She sounded more like she was talking to herself.

“No, that’s not it.”

“...”

“If this is the end, then what I really wanted was to hear someone say thank you...”

“Shut up.” Hamazura shook his head and pulled the coin from his pants pocket. “Shut the hell up. I’ll fix this. I’ll fix this right now! Listen up, you goddamn coin!! Heal all of her injuries right this instant, Coin of Nicholas!!”

The sparkle around the outside edge vanished.

But nothing happened. The coin was not all powerful. It could open the vault, but you still gained nothing if the vault was empty. It could not grant the impossible.

“I...already tried that. Sorry for making you waste your charge. Ta ha ha.”

Yes, Vivana had one of the coins too. And after trying it with hers, she must have learned that her wounds were past the point of being healed.

But she had still come all this way to protect someone other than herself.

“You can have those.” She pointed at two cloth wrappers sitting on the floor. “They contain...well, a bunch of torture products and shunga books that would probably embarrass most people...but the moxibustion stuff is in there too. You’re supposed to have special qualifications for that, but let’s not get picky about that on the dark side. Check the diagrams in the old book I have and anyone can do the basics.”

She had chosen to use her final moments to deliver this to them.

Hamazura Shiage hung his head and clenched his teeth.

“Thank—!!”

He stopped speaking.

Because when he looked up, he found Vivana Oniguma’s eyes were closed and she had stopped breathing.

What she really wanted was to hear someone say thank you?

No, she had been satisfied once the delivery had been made. She had never wanted anything in return. Seeing the recipient was happy had been all she needed.

Had she really been a part of the dark side?

What had gone wrong to send her tumbling down that slope? Why hadn’t this city given her a second chance?

Why?

Was running away really the right thing to do?

A quiet beeping came from his phone on the table.

“Hamazura.”

“Yeah, I know.”

The phone was back in the room.

“I know, goddammit!!”

That card-sized hard drive had been hidden in a tent belonging to Perfect Film, who had stayed in his hideout instead of running away. The analysis of its contents was complete. Hamazura knew hopes meant nothing, but he still hoped that there would be something useful on there.

It was time.

They were finally approaching *Academy City's Greatest Taboo*.

Map

List of OP.“Hand_Cuffs”

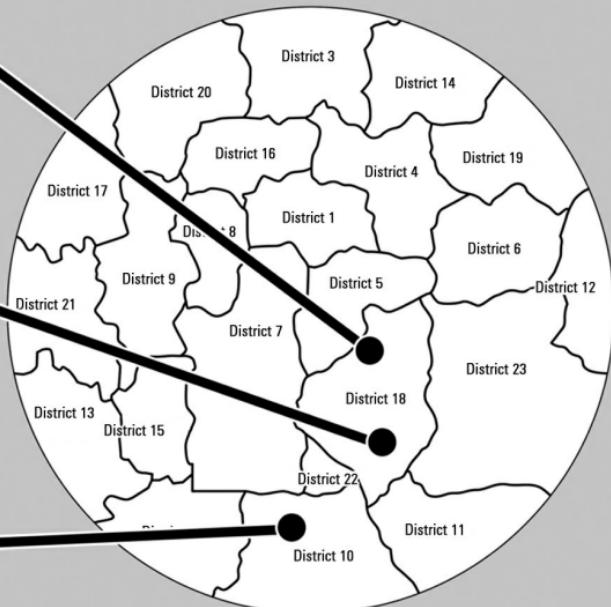
DISTRICT 18 ANTI-SKILL CHEMICAL ANALYSIS CENTER



SEWER

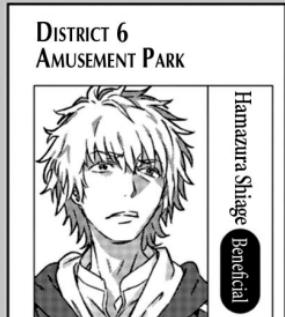


MOBILE BASE (PARKED IN DISTRICT 10)



Goldenagato | mp4directs.com

List of OP.“Hand_Cuffs”



Hamazura Shiage
Beneficial



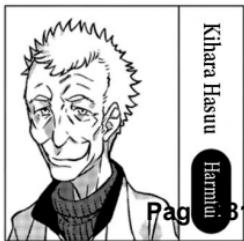
Benizome jellyfish
Harmful



Takitsubo Rikou
Beneficial



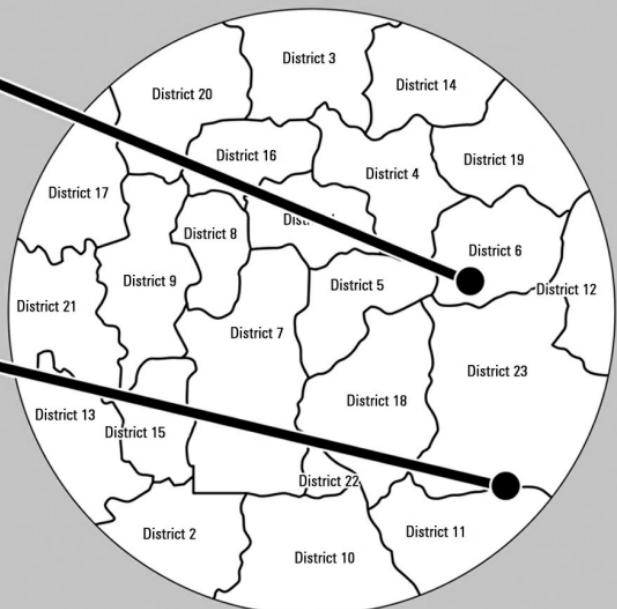
Vivana Oniguma
Beneficial



Kihara Hasuu
Harmful
Page 31



Ladybird
Harmful



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District 18 Anti-Skill Chemical Analysis Center:

Shirai Kuroko – Judgment

Hanatsuyu Youen – Harmful

Sewer:

Rakuoka Houfu – Harmful

Hanatsuyu Kaai – Harmful

Kihara Noukan – Harmful

Mobile Base (Parked in District 10):

Drencher Kihara Repatri – Beneficial

Frillsand #G – Beneficial

District 6 Amusement Park:

Benizome Jellyfish – Harmful

District 23 Kihara Hasuu's Lab:

Hamazura Shiage – Beneficial

Takitsubo Rikou – Beneficial

Vivana Oniguma – Beneficial

Kihara Hasuu – Harmful

Ladybird – Harmful

Between the Lines 3

“What kind of person do you think makes the most frightening leader?” Anna spoke as gently as ever through the chilly metal bars. “Someone who is simply incompetent? An unabashed bigot? Personally, I would say it is someone who lets a machine do all the work without ever thinking for themselves.”

Her talk was cut short by a door loudly opening and shutting.

A large man walked in with shoulders trembling in anger. He was too large. You might suspect he was wearing bulletproof armor below his fancy suit, but that was really how he was built.

He had the shape of a round barrel and his black facial hair had some gray peppered in. His name was Valart Signal and he did not seem interested in the R&C Occultics CEO.

He walked right past her cell to the neighboring one.

In other words, to New Board Chairman Accelerator.

He held a VIP position shared only by eleven others in Academy City, so if he was alone, he must not have wanted anyone else to hear this. Or maybe he was smart enough to know it was meaningless to bring any bodyguards with him here.

“What are you thinking, rookie?”

“My, my. I really don’t think he’s the type you can provoke like that. I’ve been whispering to him all night, but—”

“Shut up.”

Was Valart aware what was causing that dull straining sound?

That legendary person truly detested people who cut her off without even trying to comprehend her words.

Fools could sometimes do brave things.

Valart was oblivious to his position here and he did not even glance in Anna’s direction.

“Handcuffs? That operation of yours has clearly failed. I’m not about to defend the dark side, but you went about this the wrong way. The light and the dark are both in tatters now. Do you have any idea how much work it will take to restore a bare minimum of law enforcement capability? ...How will you make up for this loss? The entire city loses all purpose if no one can perform research here. And whatever your precious feelings might be, the dark side played an important role in developing your powers. If we economically isolate ourselves, we will only be strangling ourselves with a lack of resources!!”

He received no response for a while.

But instead of not knowing how to respond, this was the unpleasant silence of someone unsure if they should respond at all.

Valart was too pissed to stay quiet.

“You son of a—”

“You say you aren’t about to defend the dark side.”

But Accelerator cut him off like he had been waiting to do so.

When she saw the taken aback look on Valart’s face, Anna Sprengel cackled

while leaning against the bars. She was *well acquainted* with that boy's unpleasantness.

The head of the city ignored it all and continued speaking.

"Is that because you're confident no one will ever find anything linking you back to the dark side?"

"..."

"Yes, Board of Directors. I made sure to figure out who would be my enemy and who would be my ally when I moved to crush the dark side."

Accelerator was not looking for an answer. Because he already had one.

"Of course, the obvious answer is that *every last one of you is my enemy*. Pretty much everyone with significant political power is involved in the dark side to some extent. I'm sure you were all nervously gathering information from official and less-than-official sources to see how far I would reach—to see if I would reach you. And I was curious to see who would take the bait first."

He was not driven by disappointment or panic.

The Board Chairman saw identifying his enemy as a hopeful thing. It was like seeing the light leading out of the darkness. That was how happy it made him to see the enemy he had to defeat. Because the #1 had long been in such deep darkness that he could not even see that.

"Like I said, you are all my enemy. But that doesn't mean I can't use you to my advantage. You're like the drainplug. If I pull out someone with a lot of negative influence, all the stagnant water will start to flow in the same direction. Because no one else will want to meet the same fate."

The dark side came in many forms.

It was a tangle of various factors creating very colorful shadows. The pieces forming it could be a strange chemical, a never-before-seen machine, mass-produced specimens, morally-bankrupt theories, or a large simulator.

But among all that, one field was the most influential of all.

“I thought this city had an abnormal amount of strange buildings and underground facilities,” spat out Accelerator. “Valart Signal, you’re the bastard on the Board who controls the field of construction. So you must have known from the beginning. You’re the one in charge of digging all the holes and pouring in all the concrete needed to provide the Kiharas and whoever else with their secret bases. Right?”

And how much had this man been reaping the profits?

That explained why he knew so much about so many different fields of research. He might not be involved in the research itself, but he could check through all the blueprints to make a good guess what each facility was for.

He would also know where all the secret bases were located.

He knew more about the city’s *buried treasure* than the newly-appointed Board Chairman.

“Tell me. Will *Academy City’s Greatest Taboo* keep you alive? If you think your secret is that powerful, then why don’t you head there right now?”

“I have worked myself to the bone to build a world of science.”

Valart did not attempt any secret plotting here.

He directly challenged the boy instead.

“Yes, it’s true. My own personal interests played a role. The entirely baseless concept of the occult can unfairly bring down the value of the real estate I manage. ...Like a haunted room, for example. Some kids started talking about it online for fun and, next thing I know, we were close to bankruptcy. My entire family attempted suicide once. But I crawled back up and made it all the way here. Because I have to make my family happy no matter what.”

“...”

“So I will crush all those vaguely defined things. I will give out any amount of money to do so, even to dangerous people if need be. Like *that family*, even if one of them is researching something as ridiculous as creating an artificial ghost.”

Everyone had their reasons.

The only difference in opinion between these two leaders was about whether the dark side was a tool to reach their goal or a hindrance that prevented it.

Neither one was going to call themselves righteous.

They never could have climbed this high if they were worried about that label.

“But not even I understand this one. Sometimes you end up learning about something because you want to reject it. *Academy City’s Greatest Taboo*—Vanishing—is the one thing I cannot explain with the rules I know.” The bearded man shook his head and then glared at his inept leader again. Glared strongly. “You have pushed the dark side too far. Before, it looked like they wanted to remain within the category of science, but that has changed.”

“Don’t forget R&C Occultics☆”

Anna giggled, but Valart did not seem to know what she meant.

“I do not know what will happen this time. If any of them reach *Academy City’s Greatest Taboo*, I doubt the city will escape intact.”

“So what?” immediately replied Accelerator.

Now, did Valart really understand what he meant by that?

“Weren’t you listening? I *will* crush the dark side. Who ever said anything about the city being intact afterwards?”

It took him a while.

But the Board member finally realized he had been looking at this out of

focus. Once he fixed that, the wrinkles of his brow grew deeper. He had discovered something he would prefer not to know. He may have looked more displeased than if he had seen a real ghost.

“Don’t tell me...”

When that embodiment of political power looked through those frigid metal bars, he clearly saw something else leaning against the white-haired red-eyed monster as if supporting him from behind. He saw a demon girl who looked like a cross between a bat and a marine creature and who wore a dress made by patching together English newspapers.

Her thick tail wriggled.

This was a line no one in a city of science was meant to cross. And that rule had been broken by none other than the Board Chairman at the very top.

Yes, what kind of person *did* make the most frightening leader?

“Were you...*were you never even planning for Academy City to survive!?*”

Chapter 4: The Demon Lord's Young — the LIGHT.

Part 1

“Where have you been, Risako!?”

“Mister, Risako-chan is back!!”

The gym clothes girl laughed when she saw the other children gathered around.

“Eh heh heh. A doggy and an older girl saved me.”

They must have been preparing for another move because all the trucks had their engines running. But they had waited until they had found the girl with red hair done up like candy. She was relieved. Having a home to return to was a wonderful thing.

“*A doggy*, huh?” said the artificial ghost called Frillsand #G.

“...”

Her comment made the young researcher fall silent for a bit.

His name was Drencher Kihara Repatri.

That family name was so well known in the dark side that it had become a

more powerful classification than beneficial or harmful. The man who bore that name sighed softly to help refocus his mind.

“There is a chance we’ve been located, but we’re faster at the moment. If we move before they catch up, we can reach *Academy City’s Greatest Taboo* without issue.”

“Do you really think this world will allow any of this to go ‘without issue’?”

“It’s our job to make sure it happens.”

The adults exchanged their views with their voices too low for the excited children to hear.

But a certain boy kept his voice low for a different reason.

“Risako.”

“Oh, Sodate-chan.”

The tall boy in the same kind of gym clothes looked troubled for some reason. In fact, he looked close to tears. Risako tilted her head, thinking he was afraid she would get after him about the ball and chemical soap, but this was different.

“So you came back,” he said.

“Eh?”

“I was hoping maybe you were gone for good.”

He had wanted that? Did he hate her that much? Risako’s face clouded over, but this was again different. He shook his head and explained.

He was the only one of the children who had *started to question these motion sensors they wore for some kind of experiment*.

“Because then at least you might have been safe.”

Part 2

He was afraid of screwing it up, so he started by drawing marks on her back with a marker.

“Hamazura, that tickles.”

“Stay still.”

The old book had a brush-drawn diagram with no perspective or attempt to make it look three-dimensional. The indicated locations of the organs were clearly not right. Maybe it was like the difference between an aerial photograph of the clouds and the isobars on the weather forecast map. He wondered if this was what all traditional Japanese medicine was like as he drew Xs on his girlfriend’s body. She had even removed her bra and was holding her chest in her hands while showing him her smooth back. He thought his heart was going to burst every time she squirmed from the ticklishness. Even he knew that reaction was inappropriate given the circumstances. Once he finished that, it was finally time to start. He faced the girl while she lay face down on the container lab’s work table like she was sunbathing.

The moxa used for the moxibustion was like fluffy cotton, but he actually had to set it on fire.

It felt wrong doing that on her soft skin and he could even permanently scar her if he screwed it up.

“...”

His fear came to the forefront now that it was time to do it, but this was the only way to help her with the fever.

He fought the desire to shut his eyes and placed a small pile of “fuel” on her soft skin. He worked at the lighter with a trembling hand, but he kept failing.

Once he finally had a small flame, he slowly moved it in close.

“Nh.”

“A-are you okay, Takitsubo?”

“I’m fine.”

He continued the process a few more times. He had his doubts, but when she wiped the sweat from her brow, no more sweat beaded up. It did seem to be working.

He could not thank the hakama girl enough.

He could not waste this chance she had given them, so they had to approach *Academy City’s Greatest Taboo*.

That card-sized hard drive had been labelled with the word “Lifeline”.

Aneri must have decided the data would be too small to see on his phone because she displayed it a flat screen monitor in the lab instead. It was a series of numbers.

It looked like a calculation sheet made with spreadsheet software, but even that was enough to make the delinquent boy’s head hurt. Maybe it was important data, but he had no idea what he was supposed to focus on.

“This looks like materials data,” said Takitsubo after peering at it from the side.

“Materials?”

“Whether they’re beneficial or harmful, the dark side does a lot of research.” She pointed at one of the numbers. “They’re also building a lot of military weapons. But doesn’t it seem odd? Academy City is a mass consumer and it only has so much land since it’s surrounded by walls. You can’t just dig into the ground here and find oil or ores. So where do they get all those materials from?”

“Where? Isn’t that what the cooperative institutions around the world are for? They can work out a deal with them.”

“But how can they do that without leaving any record of it?”

She pointed at another number.

If a citizens group monitoring the flow of money and materials could reveal a secret, then it had never been part of the dark side to begin with.

“Look at this. The dark side is using far more materials than the total amount brought in from outside the city. Cutting off the fat and redistributing it to themselves would not be enough for this. The amount the dark side uses is several times larger. This would show up in the records no matter what you did. Important people like the Board of Directors and its Chairman can only cover up so much. This is too much. It’s well past what you could hide by cooking the books.”

“But then...”

He trailed off when Aneri opened a new window. A single point on a map of Academy City was colored in red. There was a secret there.

“They have an entrance and exit that doesn’t leave any records,” said the track suit girl while viewing the screen.

There were several files that appeared to be saved from message boards and social media pages. Reading through them showed a certain point in common.

If you boarded a train between 4 hours and 30 minutes, you would be taken to another world.

Takitsubo pointed at that bizarre statement.

“There is a way of reaching it and we should see hints of it in the rumors told around the city. Like the ‘!’ signs, a deadly train, kidnappers at the amusement park, babies in the coin lockers, or an underground construction zone where you can dump anything you don’t want found. But none of that

gets at the real truth.”

“You mean...?”

“Academy City doesn’t promote recycling so much just because it wants to make the most of its limited resources. *Sending things back to be recycled over and over again masks how much materials are actually being used.* They can’t have an investigation revealing that we dump out several times more trash than materials we take in, right? That would violate conservation of mass. So they needed to make it hard to compare those two values. It’s a form of laundering.”

Why was that sleight of hand necessary? How did they reach the impossible result of more waste than raw materials? What was this secret that no one wanted getting out?

Academy City’s Greatest Taboo.

This was the identity of that term they had heard so many times today.

“It...isn’t closed off? There’s a secret route through the walls surrounding Academy City!?”

That could not be. For better or for worse, Academy City was cut off from the outside world. Those thick walls prevented their tech from spreading to the world at large because that could lead to disorder and chaos.

Hamazura used to be part of Skill Out. That was a group of the boys and girls who had dropped out of Academy City but had nowhere to go since they could not get out of the city.

They had been trapped. They had dropped out of school, but those walls had kept them here. If you wanted to take a trip outside the city for just a few days, you needed to submit a ton of paperwork and receive a nanodevice injection. Because if you tried leave without using the official gates, you could be killed to prevent a data leak. There had been burglars and muggers in the back alleys, but none of those expert thieves had dared go anywhere near the walls.

If there was a way to freely move in and out, they may not have felt so much pressure. They could have made a place for themselves.

Their former leader, Komaba Ritoku, might not have had to fight and die.

“...”

But the dark side had torn down that number one assumption like it was nothing.

That counterfeiter had stored that information on a card-sized hard drive labeled “Lifeline”. Had he thought he could use that information to get some dark side bigshots to save him?

He must have never imagined he would instead have his brains blown out by a paparazzo. Hamazura was at the center of all this, but he still did not know if that had been planned or a spontaneous decision.

“It’s deep below Academy City.” Takitsubo Rikou calmly read aloud something on such a large scale that talk of an alternate dimension would have sounded more realistic. “The world’s largest particle accelerator is built directly below the city walls, so people are told that digging in that area could break the accelerator’s seal and expose them to radiation and other risks. That was meant to convince everyone that no one would be dumb enough to try it.”

The diagram they found looked like a puzzle ring. It seemed to carefully avoid the circular accelerator facility, but this was a tunnel built by the dark side. There was no chance it met all the proper safety standards.

That was the dark side’s lifeline.

They had built it to continue pumping fuel into their illicit research and its construction showed they did not care at all if they brought chaos to the world. It really was the greatest taboo. It was a dark umbilical cord that could wipe out the Kiharas and everyone else if it was cut off.

“I doubt Anti-Skill knows about this,” said Takitsubo. “So they won’t be able

to block it off. We can safely escape the city if we use it.”

“...”

The red light displayed by Aneri was in District 10, the city’s biggest slum. The taboo no one wanted was hidden below the district everyone had abandoned.

It was unclear if it had always had this name. They may have changed the name periodically to help hide the truth. All the scattered information was fragmentary witness accounts and some of it would likely be intentional misinformation.

But that taboo’s gaping mouth had sat deep underground all this time.

Like a nightmarish symbol of freedom.

The dot on the map displayed on the small screen had the following name displayed next to it: Vanishing Tunnel.

That was the name of their final destination. Anyone who arrived there was given a ticket to another world.

Part 3

They were deep, deep underground in District 10.

Few people would think too much about the layout of the subway tunnels below the city. They might know a track took an unnatural curve at one point, but no one would question the online news article about them running across some kind of ruins during construction.

An underground passageway was surrounded by cold concrete and supported

by the pillars positioned at even intervals.

The few fluorescent lights on the walls were not enough to fully sweep away the darkness.

That underground blind spot had become the biggest hot spot in the world. A great many people had gathered there. They had not all arrived along the same route. They had each gathered the hints scattered around the city and started to question the city's biggest assumption. Academy City was surrounded by thick walls, but it was not in fact sealed off.

The brawny men in work jumpsuits were a courier group called Secret Express. The men and women in dress clothes were Concierge, a group that provided hideouts to meet a criminal's demands. The girls in plain clothing and hiding their faces with sunglasses and hunting caps may have been an extremely popular idol group. The parade of scum included Controller, who used personal information and fictitious bills to threaten the girls he targeted until he had them in digital chains, and Flare, who left behind harmless powder identical to the real deal in order to confuse criminal investigations.

A ruler of the back alleys was there.

A major corporation's lawyer was there.

A university headmaster was there.

A major entertainment producer was there.

And a few Kiharas from different fields were there.

All sorts of people flooded that underground passageway. People did not end up on the dark side because they were low class, poor, stupid, or criminal. It took all types. The dark side had reached every class of person equally. From worlds no one knew existed to industries everyone envied.

Some had fallen before making it this far and others had attempted a different route instead. In a way, finding this tunnel and setting foot inside made them the chosen ones.

And.

Every last one of them were obstructed and crushed by a certain figure.

The woman had long blonde twintails and she wore a skintight light blue dress and a long loose skirt.

Frillsand #G was like an impassable wall.

All who challenged her crashed into that wall with the intensity of their challenge. After seeing a few of them turned to hunks of flesh and splattered blood, the others must have started wondering if she literally was a solid wall because all of those dark side members had come to a stop. They were pushed back even though she had not taken a single step.

Of course, the ghost was not going to spare them just because they gave up now.

“Next stop: skewering. Repeat: skewering.”

With a wet sound, a muscular man in black was destroyed from groin to head. But he may have been one of the lucky ones. He was gone before he even knew what had happened to him.

“Please look out for the burning and severing.”

Screams of pain echoed through the tunnel. Before long, the dark side members were fighting amongst themselves too. They appeared to have begun an ugly struggle over the concrete column they could use as a shield. However...

“We will arrive at gouging soon.”

Just as the ghost silently circled behind the column, a wet sound exploded out. The victors and losers of the struggle were all turned to mincemeat together while Frillsand #G looked on in disinterest.

“Ah...gahh,” someone groaned.

It was one of the idol girls. Her bottom half was gone and the bottom of her torso was sticking to the floor like a slug.

“But...why? We found the taboo...so aren’t we part of the dark side too? Can’t we all use...the path out together?”

“I have children to take care of. A lot of them.” Frillsand #G did not even look in her direction. “Inviting all of you in with us would only put them at risk.”

“Just...” It was already too late for her, but the top half of a girl still clawed at the concrete floor. “Just in case? You took people’s lives for no more than that!?”

“Next stop: running over. I repeat: running over.”

With a wet splat, the complaints were silenced.

The ghost seemed to be rejecting the idea that grudges lacked the power to kill.

“The rear guard is an important job,” she said in a singsong voice. “But I cannot let that crybaby see this. Knowing of it and seeing it are two very different things.”

The artificial ghost glanced over at something else.

But she soon lost interest, turned around, and vanished into the darkness.

A mere ten meters away, Hamazura Shiage was hiding behind a column and holding his hand over the track suit girl’s mouth.

If she noticed them, they were dead. He felt like his heart, his breathing, his body odor, and the slight static electricity on his clothing could all give them away. He could not even wipe the unpleasant sweat from his cheek as he desperately waited for time to pass.

That ghost really was an enemy.

She had some kind of plan of her own and had saved them on a whim before, but that did not mean he could trust her. If she had saved them on a whim, then she could also choose to throw them out on a whim. And they only had the one life.

This was worse than a sea of blood.

Flesh and blood had lost any hint of their original form, fingers extended into empty space, facial skin was frozen in a look of agony while plastered to the wall. At this point, they were only “things”, not people. There was no dignity remaining.

Each of them was a dark side member who had arrived at *Academy City’s Greatest Taboo* along a different route than him.

Their endless possibilities had been reduced to zero.

Or so it felt to him.

Was this tunnel really the right path? The further they went, the more likely they were to encounter that ghost woman, so he began to wonder if it would be safer to turn back now and return to the surface.

“Pwah.”

His girlfriend escaped his hand. He was holding her from behind, so she leaned her head back to look him in the eye.

“Hamazura, I don’t sense her presence anymore. We can keep going now.”

“...”

“We can’t give up after coming so far. Blindly returning to the surface won’t save us. We’ll never find peace if we don’t go through here.”

“R-right.”

He would have long since broken if he were alone.

But when she pulled on his hand, he managed to work up some small semblance of courage.

Even with the evenly-spaced fluorescent lights, the tunnel was dark. And they had no idea who was in charge of that sparse lighting. What if the ghost could shut off the power? His phone felt all the more important to him now.

“This is a long tunnel.”

“Yeah.”

They were not speaking much anymore.

This was *Academy City’s Greatest Taboo*, but did this tunnel really lead toward hope? No matter how far they went, the darkness never went away. As they trudged deeper and deeper, he felt like they had passed a point of no return. Also, who had built this enormous underground facility? Someone must have drawn up the plans, dug the hole, set the foundation, and brought in the rebar and concrete. This was a far bigger project than a bank robber’s hand-dug tunnel into the vault. Such a vast and well-made underground space could not have been built without the involvement of a major construction company.

Who had done it?

It might be a company whose ads he saw on TV every day.

Would all of this come to light one day? But those meaningless thoughts were cut off by Takitsubo.

She had noticed first because she was not holding the light.

“Hamazura, there’s a door.”

“...”

It was a thick metal door.

Just the one door sat at the end of the long, long tunnel. There may have been another route, but he did not recall seeing any other paths branching off along the way.

He slowly approached.

It did not appear to be locked. He doubted there were any grenades or other “gifts” left for them.

But that was not what scared him. He had seen all of those corpses along the way. The sight had left him so terrified he barely had it in him to keep his heart beating. He had started to view their fallen predecessors as no more than a piece of the scenery. Because otherwise that shadowy murder scene would have overwhelmed him too much to continue on.

The taboos were piling up.

He and Takitsubo had started this simply wanting to survive, but they too had been corrupted along the way.

Hamazura Shiage reached his fingers toward the doorknob.

He touched it. He squeezed it.

He turned it.

Part 4

A flood of light revealed a world no one was ever meant to see.

“...”

The other world turned out to be a cavernous pit.

This abyss slept deep below the earth, yet it was filled with much more artificial light than the tunnel. That was thanks to the construction lights set up here and there.

It was easily more than 250 meters across and maybe more than twice as deep. The perfectly circular space made of reinforced concrete at the very bottom may have reminded different people of different things.

Some might see it as a common utility duct, a circular colosseum, a switchyard's turntable, or an underground temple dedicated to a god one must never offer any prayers.

But there was one crucial piece that helped solidify the proper image.

"A train?" muttered Hamazura while peering down over the railing.

It was a turntable.

Concrete columns were installed at even intervals around the edges, but there were none in the central circle. The flat concrete floor had a smaller circle built into it. That would rotate to change the train's direction. The tracks outside the circle extended in 12 different directions. That made it all look like something else: a giant metal flower.

Yes, there were tracks, signal lights, transformers, maintenance equipment, a control room, and a fifteen-car train in here. It was a freight train.

"That's the dark side's lifeline?"

For him and Takitsubo, it was the plank of Carneades that would save their lives.

He doubted that turntable was all of it. There would be a container yard and maintenance zone hidden further out from the center.

They walked along the narrow catwalk built along the circular wall and descended the stairs. There were no corpses in here. Whoever had gotten here first must have used the ghost woman to eliminate any nuisances before they reached this point.

And since the train was still here, that person would still be here.

They shared this space with the slaughterer.

“Hamazura.”

“Don’t worry. I’m with you no matter what.”

“Not that. There’s someone down there. And they’re not alone.”

That was a shock. Takitsubo Rikou could accurately locate people by sensing their AIM Diffusion Field. She could not use that power as well as she used to, but she could still sense it to an extent.

The tension grew.

A single person with a bizarre power was certainly scary, but having a large group approach you brought a different sort of fear. He mentally switched his priorities to at least allowing Takitsubo to escape if things looked bad.

The only exit was up here.

Leaving that would mean being surrounded by dead ends in every direction.

“...”

After descending the last flight of stairs, they arrived at the deepest depths.

It felt so much different from when they had been looking down from above. But that was not too surprising since 250 meters was larger than a domed stadium. This was the same as a sports field looking so much bigger from the stands than on TV.

Yes, Hamazura Shiage now stood on the stage. He was no longer an outsider looking in.

“Oh, dear. You actually showed up. What a shame.”

He lasted one second.

His knees suddenly dropped to the ground. He could not keep his shoulders at the same height and his lost strength would not return.

“Wha—!?”

It was the ghost woman.

Was she a beneficial or a harmful?

She had left that tunnel far too bloody to claim she was trying to escape Academy City because she disliked conflict. If anything, she felt more like a vengeful spirit that refused to let anyone leave the city.

She looked like a Western doll with her long blonde twintails and light blue dress. She did not actually punch or kick him. Simply seeing her out of the corner of his eye had done critical damage to him.

A rusty-smelling liquid dripped from his eyes and nose.

He was trying to scream and flip over onto his back, but he was actually curled up and unable to move.

Encountering her meant death.

That was far too sinister a thing to be connected with a simple equals sign like that.

“It is no use.”

The ghost woman walked without audible footsteps. She moved herself from the corner of his vision to the center.

“No one is talking about anything as silly as defending against something with a shield or dodging a projectile with super speed. *From the moment you see my face*, the attack is complete. If I so much as casually stand in the corner of your vision, I can do continual damage without you even noticing my presence.”

He realized the strange things had always happened when the ghost woman spoke to him. And why had she turned the lights on in that tunnel? Because it was more convenient for her.

If you saw a ghost while driving, you would crash.

If your face, hands, or feet were missing in a ghost photo, you would find unnatural wounds or marks on your body.

Did this mean she even artificially reproduced those aspects of a ghost? He did not want to believe it because it would mean there was nothing he could do.

“Hamazu—!?”

“You noticed? You must have sharper senses.”

The track suit girl quickly pulled him close, but the ghost woman did not seem to care.

Besides, if seeing her really did mean death, then Takitsubo would have been killed too, but she was fine.

“But I am not talking about anything as poorly-defined as a sixth sense for ghosts. Do you have a power related to AIM Diffusion Fields?”

“There’s no AIM Diffusion Field around you? No, some strong but invisible power is scattering that weaker field.”

“It is known as High Voltage Cutting,” said the ghost woman. “The principle may be similar to the shock diamonds seen in a rocket engine’s flame or the cavitation of air bubbles created around a propeller. The constant emission of a powerful energy will create irregular waveforms and images while it interferes with itself.”

“Gh!? What energy???”

“You can find energy everywhere.” Her tone was light, so understanding how it worked must not have helped avoid its effects. “The carbon dioxide and

nitrogen oxide you thoughtlessly spread around forms acid rain when it bonds with the moisture in the air. You can acquire electricity simply by sticking two electrodes into a fruit, you know? Copper and zinc are such necessities that you can find them anywhere. Using that, you can produce hydrogen gas in addition to electricity. I only need to absorb power from a *civilization battery* the size of a city or even greater. That is enough for me to construct a single outlier point within that stable energy.”

“...”

“What are the common types of haunted locations? Old homes full of drafts, cliffs and caves eroded by the waves, and mountain roads late at night. They are always full of *noise*, such as static electricity, pressure differences, the creaking of rusty doors, or the rustling of the trees in the wind. Have you ever heard a ghostly voice in the crackle of excess electricity or the roar of hydrogen gas being ignited? I can exist as I am wherever human civilization exists. If you wish to kill me, you must destroy your very way of life. On a global scale.”

This was too much.

He could not understand her explanation. And even if he thought he did, it still did not tell him how to destroy her.

Takitsubo gasped and spoke while holding onto him.

“I get that the constant use of a massive amount of unseen energy would eventually create something unnatural. But if seeing you is deadly, how do you choose specific targets to—?”

She trailed off.

She had seen something out of the corner of her eye, but not the artificial ghost this time. A unified set of colors could be seen peeking out of at them from a gap in the door to one of the freight train’s containers.

They were small children wearing gym clothes and some kind of device. There were more than just ten or twenty of them.

All of them were a part of the ghost experiment.

The children must have seen the ghost woman as they nervously spied out. And they seemed to be expectantly waiting to see if she would repel these unknown intruders. They did not know. They had not been told what they were being used for. Simply viewing a ghost photo was harmful and the longer you viewed it, the more damage it did. She embodied that power so perfectly that she had eliminated so many dark side elites.

Yet she had managed to accurately select one out of the many candidates.

That was like shooting the apple off someone's head. Without explaining any of it to the children who had those sensors attached to them.

“...”

The delinquent boy clenched his teeth.

He could barely move, she held his life in her hand, and he had no idea how to fight back. He had to avoid angering her if at all possible. He understood that, but he still shouted up at her.

“You scum!!”

“Call me what you wish. In fact, I see it as a compliment.”

The ghost woman who resembled a fairy tale princess held her palm out toward him. He only had to see her impossible presence for her to attack, so that gesture was meaningless.

But then her eyes turned unnaturally away from him.

To the side.

A spare container sitting near the train was sliced in two. Something had dropped down from far above like a bolt of lightning.

A red figure wielded a thick machete made of heavy metal.

The android wore a racing swimsuit colored the orange and black of an insect. The bangs of her long crimson hair were cut straight across and she had a slender build.

Cartoony flowers were displayed in her mechanical eyes.

“Smug face.”

“Hello, hello,” said a twig of an old man in a blue jumpsuit and lab coat. “I hate to interrupt when you seem so busy, but I must insist.”

The ghost woman shrugged.

“Were you hoping to use the train? I thought you were one of the harmfuls who would remain in the city and resist to the bitter end.”

“I have no interest in those categories forced onto the dark side from the outside. All I care about is continuing my research. Academy City was a wonderful environment for that, but if that has changed, I need to leave and search out a more comfortable place.”

“You can see me, can’t you?”

“You should be able to tell by observing my eye movements.”

“And you know what that means?” She gave a suggestive glance over at the machine that had arrived with him. “In case you were unaware, I am capable of causing malfunctions in mechanical lenses and sensors just as well as in the human body. Ghost photographs are a result of ghosts interfering in optical machinery, are they not? That might be your masterpiece, but isn’t it presumptuous to assume she can wield her full power against me?”

She remained untouchable. She could kill someone just by placing herself in the corner of their vision and machines could not do anything to her either. Did she have no blind spots?

“Yes, I imagine so.”

But the old man did not seem to mind.

That mysterious old man *known as a Kihara* was not bothered that she held his life in her hand.

“You are the strongest when it comes to an individual. Looking at deadliness alone, you might outdo the #3 and the #2.”

“...”

Evidently, even ghosts could find something to be ominous.

This world may have been infected with a disease that caused all bad premonitions to come true.

“But in this specific location, I believe you too will find you cannot wield your full power.”

“What are you—gah!!!!????”

He had given her plenty of warning, but she suddenly arched her back and then froze unnaturally in midair. An ominous straining sound continued on and on as her body grew distorted. She bent and stretched, almost like a face pressed against a wall of glass.

Something was happening.

Hamazura had thought the ghost woman was an intangible being, like a mist or apparition. But she was not. She clearly had a spine to strain, muscles to cry out in pain, and organs to writhe unnaturally.

Then a bizarre creaking and cracking noise came from her. Her volume shrank more and more like she was being crushed in from all sides. The old man was holding something up in his special engineering glove. It looked like an empty candy box, but it was not. It had a small pinhole at the very top. The ghost woman was sucked into that small hole like a liquid or a gas. Hamazura did not want to imagine what things were like inside there. He could only say one thing in a daze.

“A pinhole...camera?”

“High Voltage Cutting? I see, a strange theory, but she is still a form of unstable energy. And all energy will move from high to low—unstable to stable. This is enough to break down her form and burn in her image.”

The old man let go of the candy box.

He had the look of a mischievous child who had just realized he could create his own spark show by sticking a metal clip in the microwave.

“This is the appropriate choice for a ghost photo, don’t you think? A digital camera just wouldn’t fit the aesthetic.”

After dropping it to the cold concrete, he crushed it below his heel. He did not even glance down at the flattened box.

“*Academy City’s Greatest Taboo.*” He tapped on his lower back. “Surely you didn’t think a construction company building a secret tunnel out of the city was enough to earn a name like that. With something like her around, you really should have thought of a different possibility.”

“Wh-what?”

Hamazura felt like the unnatural “curse” had weakened, but he still could not bring himself to get up from the ground. The old man only now seemed to have realized that there was another person here reaching for the plank of Carneades.

Hamazura knew any attention on him would only lead to disaster.

Kihara Hasuu smiled.

“Let me make one thing clear. There is a member of the Board who built a vast fortune by doing unofficial construction work for the dark side, but he knows nothing of this. This massive underground structure just appeared out of the blue one day.”

“...?”

Out of the blue?

Hamazura had operated construction machinery before, so he knew how absurd that was. Did that old man have any idea how long it would take to dig out a hole of this size?

But the old man appeared to be serious.

Deadly serious.

“The Vanishing Tunnel does not actually exist.”

Hamazura had no idea what that was supposed to mean.

It made no sense. If that were true, then where were they now???

The old man gave the answer.

“Kazakiri Hyouka was not just a single individual. She is more like one piece of the Imaginary Number District, an entire city created from the aggregation of AIM Diffusion Fields. ...It all began with a project meant to cut out a portion of that territory and extract it as a new resource. Unlike the microscopic alchemy performed in the particle accelerator, this would have been on the macro scale and cost very little. But not even the group of researchers who guided all that power through the city could have predicted it would take this form. *Academy City’s Greatest Taboo* is such a dramatic name. In truth, it was a major failure that needed to be covered up. Everyone involved was at their wits’ end.” He tapped his lower back again. “A nonexistent pathway unofficially connected Academy City to the world outside, increasing the risk of the outer world’s collapse through cultural exchange and technological contamination. The entire world very well could have been destroyed from this single point. While the researchers had hoped to extract materials from the Imaginary Number District, whatever came from there might have transformed the outside world into something truly grotesque. ...Yes, that the world still exists as it does now was no more than *dumb luck*. It was nothing we did on our end. Kazakiri Hyouka and the other inhuman monsters simply showed no interest in that. If something had occurred to them and they had tried it, the world would have ended.”

“You mean...” Takitsubo replied since she had a better understanding of

things related to AIM. “You were researching the exact opposite of that ghost? A ghost made from powerful energy and an aggregation of weak powers are opposites, so when they came together, it caused the ghost to malfunction... You were trying to extract inorganic materials from that unseen city, weren’t you?”

“Hard to say if that research was a step forward or a step back. Like I said, they failed. They could not control it, so even the remains of their project you see here cannot be erased. I believe the natural half life was about 12,000 years. In the worst case, the Imaginary Number District could have been converted into real numbers, crushing Academy City in the process. I think the project could have found success if they could have cut off a piece at a workable size and found a way to control it. In that sense, that ghost really is the strongest as an individual and an enviable success.”

Now even Hamazura had a vague idea why the ghost woman had suddenly malfunctioned.

They could not be in the same place.

Two ghosts could not coexist. Just like installing two different pieces of security software on the same computer would cause a conflict.

“It was still a risky gamble, though. The odds were low, but if the tunnel *had lost*, this temporary space itself would have vanished and we would all have become fossils after being buried deep below the surface.”

Hamazura heard a swooshing sound and looked over to see the android swinging her thick machete next to the old man. Those two had won their bet, so now no one could stop them.

Kihara Hasuu looked away from Hamazura and turned to someone else.

“Now, I have eliminated your bodyguard. Isn’t it time we talked this out like adults?”

Part 5

“When’s the train going to leave?”

“Oh, mister just left.”

The children dressed up in gym clothes were whispering to each other while peeking out through the cracked-open door of a freight train container.

But among them...

“Ow, that hurts.”

The girl named Risako spoke up in protest.

But Sodate ignored that and continued tugging on her skinny wrist. The bigger boy was kind of scary when he was not saying anything.

“Listen, Risako.” He spoke quickly while walking through the shadows to stay hidden. He seemed to be speaking to himself more than the girl. “You can still escape. It’s not too late. And once you get to the surface, go tell the grownups about this. I know you can do it.”

“Why? The train is about to leave.”

“You still don’t get it!?” He shouted with his hands on her shoulders. “They make us wear these clothes and devices, they keep us separated from the rest of the city, and they don’t let us go to a normal school. We’re Child Errors, so no one will even notice if we just disappear one day. They’re only raising us because they can use us for something. They’re fattening us up to eat us!”

“But...”

“We don’t even have phones to call for help. *It isn’t normal to be this isolated.* That’s why I kept leaving behind some sign of our presence:

building blocks, picture books, balls, and so on. I left them outside before the trucks moved on and I made sure to write our names, the trucks' license numbers, and other information on them! But none of it ever reached the grownups. Our efforts never reached anyone!!"

She had thought he kept stealing things because he was selfish. She had thought he would forget those things in his secret bases because he was sloppy. But that was not it.

"They're relatively peaceful beneficials? Don't make me laugh. What's going to change after we board that train and leave Academy City? There won't be anyone monitoring them anymore!! Once that happens, I just know he'll stop holding back. He'll *take it even further!* So you at least need to escape before that happens!!"

"Sodate-chan..."

"I'll give you an opening." He looked the girl in the eye and spoke clearly. "I won't let him turn you into a guinea pig no matter what!!"

Part 6

A somewhat slender man stepped out. He wore a short-sleeved safari jacket and a rash guard, making him look something like an old-fashioned adventurer, but the webcam attached to the side of his head gave him a more modern outdoorsy look. He appeared to be a different sort of researcher from the old mechanic in a lab coat and jumpsuit.

He was an expert at visiting so-called haunted locations around the world and revealing the scientific cause of the strange phenomena there. But he had apparently also artificially recreated such things to use them for his own purposes.

He grinned and raised his hands in a jocular way. Kihara Hasuu asked him a question with the deadly weapon girl still by his side.

“What is your name?”

“Drencher Kihara Repatri.”

“I see. So that’s you.”

The young man’s eyebrows moved slightly in response to the old man’s impressed tone.

“I didn’t expect someone like you to have heard of me.”

“You are rather...well known.”

The way he said that told Hamazura he did not mean that in a positive way.

This was a confrontation between two harmfuls.

The two researchers ignored the boy and girl entirely as they began a verbal rally. Hamazura knew he could not just sit and watch as a referee or spectator, but he had no way of intervening.

“As you can see, we come from different levels of the dark side. If there is no place for us in Academy City anymore, then leaving the city is a valid choice. But is that plank of Carneades really only big enough for the one group? I think it can support both of us just fine.”

That suggestion seemed surprising...but maybe it wasn’t. It was the ghost woman who had been slaughtering all of the other dark side members trying to reach this point. The android may have attacked Anti-Skill, but she had never actively tried to eliminate her fellow dark siders. She had attacked Hamazura near the counterfeiter’s tents, but if she had been trying to slaughter everyone she came across, the ordinary people in the amusement park would not have escaped alive.

The young man shrugged.

“If that means less fighting, it’s okay with me. Not that I really have a choice, do I?”

“Assuming you have no other trump cards.”

“Then I surrender.”

He did not hesitate to respond. Hamazura was actually surprised to see he was willing to back down to save his own life. Hamazura had gotten the impression that the extreme members of the dark side were willing to sacrifice their own life to achieve their goal.

That surprise scared Hamazura. He could tell he had let the dark side influence him too much. He was afraid the damage would be permanent if he went much further. Once he became a harmful, there was no going back.

“She was my prized project, you know? Frillsand #G, I mean. Now, I knew *Academy City’s Greatest Taboo* would pose a challenge, but I never imagined it was a giant mass of AIM Diffusion Fields.”

“Everything has its compatibility. In fact, I could never have won if we were not down here. Keep this girl from working and I’m helpless.”

The crimson-haired girl did nothing to fight the wrinkled hand rubbing her head.

The two men were reaching an agreement. That was not good. Hamazura and Takitsubo had nothing they could offer in a negotiation. At this rate, they would probably each get a bullet in the head as a parting gift. The only other option he could imagine was being made into a guinea pig for some bizarre experiment.

“Oh, right,” casually began the old man.

If he said “what should we do about those two lumps of flesh”, they were screwed. And Hamazura could not predict what that Kihara would do. He felt a terrible squeezing at his heart.

Finally, Kihara Hasuu continued.

“While we can share the train, I will be in charge there. So if you want a ride, it’s only natural you pay a small fare, don’t you think?”

“Do you want my research notes on Frillsand #G?”

“I’m no barbarian. A scientist’s research notes are a part of his very soul. Those are the fruits of your labors, so take them to your grave.”

“Then what do you want?”

“A few of them.”

The old man’s voice was as casual as ever as he pointed his engineering glove in a different direction entirely. He pointed at the gym clothes children who were peeking out from behind cover, without a clue what was being discussed.

“Just select a few at random. I intend to restart my research once things have calmed down, but the rules are different outside the city. I can’t start abducting people off the street until I have a proper base set up, so I could use an initial supply for that settling-in period.”

Hamazura froze as he listened in.

This was the dark side. This was how the elites of that stagnant world thought.

“That Frillsand #G is important to your research, but not so with those lab rats, right? How many experimental observers’ lives were lost until you managed to *properly reproduce* that artificial ghost? If your research has entered a stable period, I would assume you are not running through those Child Errors as quickly as you once were.”

“Heh,” laughed Drencher Kihara Repatri.

He weakly lowered his raised hands. He must have decided that was no longer necessary. He too had seen the darkness, so he spoke with the same look in his eyes as the old man.

“It’s true those are all Child Errors. And however they would be treated in the ordinary world, we all know exactly what that term means in the dark side. Yes, I gathered them together and invited them into my lab. I made sure to have a plentiful stock of convenient lives that could be spent as I liked if other forms of research were not enough.”

“Then I can have a few?”

“*Go to hell, you son of a bitch.*”

Part 7

Several dry gunshots rang out.

Part 8

Hamazura Shiage did not understand what had just happened.

“Hamazura!!”

His body still refused to do what it was told, so track suit girl Takitsubo had to push him to the ground.

The young man had pulled out a handgun. It was no more than a small revolver, but he still fired it repeatedly from just a few meters away.

However...

“Ugh...”

“That won’t work,” said the old man.

The android’s crimson hair fluttered while she held her thick machete at the ready with her bare feet planted a step in front of Hasuu. Not only had she deflected all of the bullets, she had used their ricochets as a counterattack.

No more than a small revolver.

Something had gone horribly wrong when you started thinking of things in those terms in this country.

The young man had several holes in his upper body and dark red stains spread across his clothes. Doubling over did nothing to help, so he finally collapsed to the ground.

The old man in a jumpsuit and lab coat spoke up in exasperation while the strongest doll protected him.

“They’re just kids. And it’s not like I’m asking for all of them. Just two or three will do.”

“I wanted to...protect them from the dark side scum who think like that,” spat the young man while struggling to breathe down on all fours. He had given up trying to hold his wounds. “But nothing I did above board did anything to help. I couldn’t even get information on where those children were. The only way to fight the dark side...was to become the dark side. I almost laughed when I saw how many people came running to me then, claiming my research was so valuable. When I said I needed children’s lives to do it, they slapped me on the shoulder and agreed to it all. While happily sipping on a glass of the year’s finest red with their other hand. This city is rotten to the core.”

“Aren’t you Drencher Kihara Repatri?”

“Claiming to be a Kihara was the quickest way to get what I wanted. Ha ha. Those VIPs really were terrified of me.”

“Dammit,” spat out Hamazura Shiage.

The young man saw his own condition as of secondary importance.

It was true the ghost woman had used the children. They had been placed in a position where she could crush their lives at any moment. But had Hamazura ever seen her actually kill a child? What if they had been living in a world where they had to take the charade that far to be believed?

The old man had asked how many experimental observers’ lives were lost until he managed to properly reproduce the artificial ghost, but the young man had never answered.

That was in fact the answer. He had not sacrificed anyone. Not one. He had wanted to gather up those children known as Child Errors and drag them up out of the darkness. There *were* adults willing to dive into the dark side for no other reason than that.

There really were.

And yet...

“You’re lying.”

Hamazura suddenly rejected that entire premise. Because if he accepted this, he would have to admit to his own ugliness. Even if saying this would mean revealing he was ugly enough to put up a struggle like this.

“I’ve seen you before. You were at that counterfeiter’s place! You were preparing a passport for yourself so you could abandon those kids and leave the city!!”

“This all would have gone so much more smoothly if that had worked.” The young man smiled weakly. “If I had shown off how I escaped with the passport, Anti-Skill and the dark side’s focus would have turned toward District 23’s airport. Then the children would have had a safer escape underground here. I was never supposed to be down here with them.”

“~ ~ ~!!!!!”

It felt like they lived in two completely different worlds.

And that young man was definitely the one in the right.

Hamazura felt so pathetic and contemptible for only ever acting to protect him and his girlfriend.

“I know I shouldn’t be asking this.”

The young man looked his way. As if to say it did not matter if he really was a Kihara or not.

His eyes knew how to view the light, but for some reason he now looked to someone as corrupted as Hamazura.

“Maybe it’s for the best if the dark side is destroyed, but please take care of those kids. You’re the only person I can leave them with now. When you saw your girlfriend suffering, you panicked and dumped medical supplies across the ground in your haste. I could see the conscience in your eyes. You had no choice but to fall this far, but you should still have some resistance to the dark side left inside you.”

“Wait, I’m not like that for everyone. Don’t shove this onto me! She’s my girlfriend, so of course I’d work to save her!!”

“Ha ha. Thinking that’s an ‘of course’ is what makes you such an oddity in the dark side. Don’t worry, I know you can do it. Because after falling into this shitty world, you still managed to find someone you care for and you decided to find peace instead of another thrill.”

Hamazura and Takitsubo had first heard of *Academy City’s Greatest Taboo* from this man.

Hamazura had been cautious because there was no righteousness in the dark side and the man must have had his own reasons.

Was this why?

Had it been some insurance, just in case? Instead of worrying about his own survival, he had wanted some insurance for after he died.

Yet he had also slaughtered the dark sider people rushing toward this exit.

All because he could not let any harm come to the children as those people fought each other. He had rushed down a dark path to prevent a mere possibility.

But on Hamazura and Takitsubo's way here, hadn't the ghost woman glanced their way after slaughtering everyone else and then left, as if sparing them?

"Why did you do all this?"

That was the only question Hamazura could find.

That was not something to say to a dying man. He knew that. But after letting the dark side corrupt him while he worked so hard to ensure his and his girlfriend's survival, this answer was too pure and upright to accept.

"How could you throw away your own life over this!? When you get down to it, those kids are just strangers! How could a goddamn harmful go this far just because you 'wanted to save them'!? How!? Tell me!?"

The young man smiled.

There was already blood dripping from the corners of his lips.

"Do you need a reason to protect someone? Of course you don't."

That was the end of it.

Time stopped for him with the smile still on his lips.

He had no reason. He did not know why. And he had rushed in to save those children without ever finding a reason.

Hamazura Shiage had to admit defeat.

"A...."

The loser boy clenched his teeth. He moved his battered body, swiped the bloody handgun and some ammo from the young man, and shouted at the top of his lungs.

Losers had their own etiquette to follow.

That scummy old man was still here. Hamazura was not going to let him trample on the young man's victory.

A dull kachunk echoed through the circular space.

The support AI had taken control of the train and shifted it out of standby, so it slowly began to move.

The turntable had tracks in twelve directions, but he knew where to send it.

He just had to remember what the card-sized hard drive labeled Lifeline had said.

If you boarded a train between 4 hours and 30 minutes, you would be taken to another world.

In other words...

(Hours and minutes. If I apply that to an analog clock...)

“Send it down the five o’clock track!!”

The train took off with so many children in gym clothes on board.

That had been his top priority.

“Is justice contagious these days?” asked the old man with the look of someone viewing a crazy person.

He had already proven that the gun would not work, so he gave Hamazura a look of partial pity now that he had inherited that defeated weapon.

“You risked your life for this, but to no avail. Look, not all of them were onboard. They must have run in fear from the very person who would have saved them.”

“Hamazura, two of them were left behind. We can’t just leave them here.”

A boy and a girl in gym clothes were holding hands a short distance away.

What had they thought when they learned the truth behind that young man’s satisfied smile?

Especially when their own actions had worked against him.

“Well, those two will suffice. I will be taking them as a souvenir. Any more than this would have been a waste of food anyway.”

“Shut up,” spat out Hamazura.

He really should not have been doing this. He had come here to escape to safety. It had been clear from the very beginning that he could not be a great hero or brave warrior. This selfish choice here might put himself and his girlfriend in danger.

But.

Even so.

A dying man had left this with him. He had been reminded what it meant to do the right thing. There were lives here he could save. He could redo things. And most of all, his girlfriend was watching.

He was done being pathetic. He gathered strength in his sweaty body and stood up under his own power again. He had to.

“Maybe you’re a Kihara and an android.”

His goal was to run away?

No, sometimes a man had to stand up and speak his mind.

“But I’ll take you on, you goddamned dark siders!!!!!”

He knew it was possible.

He had just seen a man stay true to this way of life.

He could reclaim his humanity. He must have learned something from what he saw here.

Part 9

Of course, Hamazura could never actually hit the crimson-haired android by firing the 9mm handgun at random. He knew she would deflect the bullets with her thick machete and fill him with holes.

So he did something else instead.

“Aneri!!”

A giant shape suddenly moved right next to the racing swimsuit girl.

A wheel loader used to stack up the railroad-sized containers was being remotely controlled.

“Move.”

What was that machete even made of? She did not even look in that direction as she swung her weapon and sliced apart the snowplow-looking piece of machinery. Even though she was not using any rapid vibrations or heat.

But Hamazura used that moment to pull on his girlfriend's hand and move from there.

This was a vast circular space, but it was not an empty colosseum.

It had concrete columns just like an underground common utility duct and it had various equipment needed for operating and maintaining the trains, all located where it would not get in the way of the turntable and the twelve directions of track. Transformers were surrounded by a fence, a prefab hut had been made into a control room, giant jacks and a carwash were prepared for maintenance purposes, and more.

Aneri had directly operated the freight train, so he felt safe assuming she could operate all of the equipment here.

He pulled his girlfriend close while hiding behind a concrete column and whispering to his phone.

“Aneri, can you directly hijack that hunk of junk?”

No response.

He took that as a no. This did not sound like it was an issue of building up to that or setting something up in advance. That android was immune to cyber attacks on some level he did not understand.

(That means the only option is to destroy her the old-fashioned way!!)

“Hamazura, we can't hide here forever. If she stops focusing on us, she'll go after those children. Villains always go for the easiest target.”

“I know that.”

Takitsubo kept trying to wipe the sweat from her brow, but something was not right. The moxibustion should have relieved her symptoms to an extent, but that treatment might not be working as much anymore.

He was worried, but he could not stop now. He hated that fact.

“But using ourselves as bait will put us at risk. Are you prepared for that, Takitsubo?”

“Ask any more stupid questions and I’ll slap you.”

“Okay, it’s time to win your heart all over again!!”

They both ran out from behind the concrete column.

Their eyes met the ones with pupils mechanically expanding and contracting, but they stayed strong this time.

Part 10

Ladybird had a lock on two targets.

She walked barefoot across the floor and accurately obeyed her instructions, but she also had a question.

Why were the children necessary?

Kihara Hasuu—her Sensei—was researching androids. He had already successfully created one, so he no longer needed to capture biological humans to dissect and observe them. This disagreement appeared to be over ownership of the Child Errors (she failed to realize it was her education by that true Kihara that led her to use the word “ownership” in this context), but why was the old man so insistent on this?

That unfortunate research was a thing of the past.

She was an android built from purely mechanical parts, but she could use an esper power. That meant no more human specimens were needed for esper development experiments. They only had to mess with machines from now

on. The Child Errors no longer needed to be captured and used up.

She thought that was a wonderful thing. She could not believe the people who still clung to the old system that required humans to use other humans. Did they wish to protect the status given to them by the current Level system? If they truly believed their fight was just, then they were beyond reasoning with. Machines were not the only ones that could have their memory data rewritten. Humans could have their feelings and thoughts falsified as well.

So she would bring an end to it all.

She was fighting here to end the misfortune and tragedies caused by the esper development program.

“Ohhh!!”

The boy raised a meaningless battle cry, ran in, and repeatedly fired his handgun. She only had to block those shots with her machete.

But he had apparently learned how she fought.

She tried to hit him with the ricochets, but they refused to hit. When she deflected a bullet back, it would follow the same straight trajectory. Placing a single piece of plywood in the middle would change things. A bullet's force was determined by its muzzle velocity. The force of the ricochet would generally be lower. That was obvious enough since bullets were not constantly accelerating like a rocket or missile. So he could set it up so he could shoot her through an obstacle, but she could not break through it on the way back.

Her use of ricochets was similar to Accelerator's reflection, but all her machete did was knock the bullet back. She could not *include the actual vector in that*.

That said...

(I doubt someone with such a stupid face could do this. He must be receiving

assistance with the calculations.)

She considered jumping. Lifting both feet from the ground was usually a bad idea in combat, but not so with her. With her android specs, she could kick off of one column to the next and attack from the air.

She heard the loud roar of an engine while dealing with the bullets.

It appeared to come from a forklift.

“Aneri, surround the kids! I don’t know where that old man got off to, but don’t let him get close!! If he tries it, run him over!!”

“Don’t get distracted.”

He could have gotten a hit in on her by sending the forklift in from the side while firing on her from the front. Not that a blow like that would be enough to destroy her frame.

She swung the thick machete in her right hand while gathering her strength in the space between her eyebrows.

That was how she aimed.

A blast of wind blew away the obstacles between her and Hamazura Shiage. It was more like they were obliterated by an explosion than swept away by wind.

“An esper power!?” shouted the boy.

“It looked to be Level 3 or higher,” said the girl.

She no longer had to worry about the gunfire now that the line of fire was clear. He must have known the risk of ricochets was back because he stopped attacking and hid behind a nearby column, but that was no defense. She could charge in and slice through the column and his torso behind it with a single horizontal sweep of her blade.

She had enough time to reach her other hand to her thigh, pull out the bottle,

and take a drink of the discharge machine oil.

A dull boom burst out.

She was only an android modeled after the structure of the human body, but the materials used for her skeleton, muscles, and everything else were bizarre dark side tech. If she wanted to, her horsepower could rival a V12 engine at max RPM.

But even as she chose the correct action, her mechanical head was filled with questions.

She had used a wind power.

But hadn't she used fire during her previous clash with these people? And what about the time before that?

Androids had the same structure as humans, so a single android should only have a single power. Or could she do what humans could not because she was a machine?

(Sensei?)

Part 11

A column of reinforced concrete was sliced through as easily as tofu or thin paper.

Not horizontally or diagonally—vertically and all the way through. After kicking from column to column to gain height, she had apparently dropped down like lightning. She had a human form, but she could perform superhuman movements.

Hamazura Shiage had tried to jump to the side just beforehand, but he ended up tumbling into a roll.

It was not his torso sliced through along with the column. It was a gas drum kept on hand for the facility's auxiliary power generator.

He grimaced at the pain in his hips as he continued rolling and pulled the trigger repeatedly.

Not even Ladybird could deflect bullets that hit the concrete ground and sent sparks flying.

The vaporizing gasoline ignited into explosive flames that swallowed up the entire racing swimsuit silhouette.

However...

“No, Hamazura! It didn’t work!!”

“Tch!!”

He clicked his tongue while the track suit girl ran over from elsewhere and pulled him to his feet. A black figure was displayed on the other side of that fiery screen. She showed no sign of collapsing or writhing in pain.

Had she used that previous wind power to affect how the flames spread?

He hoped so. If she was simply this tough, he could not imagine how to defeat her.

“How *do* you defeat an android anyway? Strangle her or stab her in the heart, she’s still a machine. That won’t stop her!!”

Could he break her motherboard? Or pull out her battery? But he had no idea how many she had or where in her slender body they were located.

The roaring flames were sliced apart. A horizontal sweep of the heavy metal machete conquered the orange barrier. The barefoot android stepped through entirely unscathed. There was no sign of discoloration on her crimson hair,

white skin, or orange and black racing swimsuit.

“Something isn’t right,” said Takitsubo Rikou with eyes seemingly more robotic than the machine’s. What was she looking at right now? “An android that uses esper powers is conceivably possible. Mechanical processing may be able to ‘observe’ the waves or particles like a human brain does. And if you developed that far enough, you might be able to purposefully select between different supernatural phenomena. But this wavelength is simpler than that.”

“You mean how she switches between powers?” spat out Hamazura. “That container base in the garbage pile was their lab, right? Then I get why that old man wants those kids so bad. Even if I don’t know exactly *how* he would use them.”

Now, why were they able to spend so long discussing this?

The delinquent boy made sure to keep his gun aimed, but the android in question was only tilting her head.

A dark liquid was dripping from her eyes and nose.

He had seen that before. Immediately after she had been hit by the hakama girl and fought back with her fire power.

“Oh, dear.”

Kihara Hasuu’s voice reached them from somewhere, but it was echoing too much to tell where it came from. Hamazura would have shot the man if he saw him.

“Is it that time already? This is why I wanted to stock up sooner rather than later.”

“Hey.” Hamazura shouted at the unseen man. “Isn’t that cheating? You can’t really call her an android if that’s what you’re doing.”

The boy watched as the girl in the orange and black racing swimsuit held her head and doubled over.

A low straining sound came from her.

Then her back opened along the line from her nape to her tailbone.

The clasp holding together the X-shaped band at the center of the swimsuit's back popped open and the supports were released in four directions.

Then her soft skin opened wide while supported at her nape.

Her opened back almost looked like a steam locomotive's boiler or a furnace from hell. The fact that it was smooth human skin instead of a thick metal door gave it the sinister appearance of an insect's shell opening up.

The top half of her swimsuit fell out of place, but her chest was not visible.

Her long red hair dropped down to cover it up.

She had planted her hands and feet on the ground like a beast.

Something translucent crawled out of her. It looked like a long, narrow blade or like a wriggling snake. It would grab something, drag it inside her, and cut it away. It was an automatic extraction organ.

Hamazura knew what it was for.

"I saw the junk those trash collectors were taking back after searching through those piles of abandoned items. A fridge was full of some brownish filth."

He felt nauseated just remembering it.

He grimaced as he viewed that monster.

"It was stuffed full of corpses with the contents of their heads removed. When those trash collectors were searching out fridges and washing machines, they weren't selling them to used appliance stores. They were opening up bloodstained boxes packed full of stillusable organs. And they all came from your lab, didn't they!?"

“Well, the ordinary corpses were apparently disposed of in District 10’s slums, but there are a lot of people willing to buy up ones fresh enough to make use of their parts.”

Ladybird was not an android with esper powers. She was as harmful as they came. She was a machine that would devour people’s brains when necessary. In Hamazura’s opinion, that meant she did not fit the definition of an android.

“This is a completely different approach from the Rensa model of esper cyborg. Instead of a cyborg made by *giving a brain a body*, Ladybird-kun is a *body given a brain*.” Hasuu sounded like he was introducing his favorite grandchild. “Cellulose nanofiber is a carbon material gathering attention for its use in making wires and bulletproof materials, but the point is we can create delicate wires even thinner than the cranial nerves. But unlike a biological brain, leaving them in their active state causes them to automatically replicate and they will try to forcibly fold themselves up for space if they run out of room in the skull. The cerebrum’s frontal lobe is especially troublesome. So a *foreign object* must be introduced to constantly provide just the right amount of damage to ensure the brain remains the size I want it. Her power changes each time a new *foreign object* is introduced, but that is due to the change in the rejection and damage pattern. You can think of that as a simple idiosyncrasy.”

“Sen...sei?”

A grinding sound came from Ladybird while she seemed to be searching for something. However the old researcher described it, a human brain was apparently a necessary part for her to run. Her movements were noticeably stiff and awkward as she pursued that poison on her own.

“Sensei...but you said this research would help. You said the spread of androids would mean no more human specimens were needed for the esper development.”

“The ladybird—another name for the ladybug—might look humorous, but it is in fact a ravenous carnivore. You have heard that they are good to have around because they eat aphids, haven’t you?”

“Gh...kh.”

“And there are a lot of insects that mimic ladybugs. That includes a type of darkling beetle and cockroach, both kinds of bugs people might not normally want around. But that is not actually a type of protective coloration. Ha ha. Instead of trying to blend into their natural surroundings or avoid their predators, that coloration might actually be used to make humans like them.”

How deep did the dark side go?

How disgusting could the dark said get?

“So don’t you see?”

Its attacks were indiscriminate, like a cannibal insect.

The developer spoke to what looked like a lovely girl. And he seemed to be enjoying it immensely.

“That is the perfect name for you.”

Part 12

text> @I thought there was a problem with the world.

text> @I thought it was wrong for @humans to use @humans for their research in this city.

text> But @I could climb onto the examination table instead.

text> @I can be repaired or remade as many times as necessary.

text> Since my body was made identically to a @human’s, @I would be able to use an esper power as well. Pieces of my body could be freely added or

removed, so @I could be examined inside and out more easily than a @human and @I could be modified as they saw fit.

text> No more sacrifices would be necessary for the esper development research.

text> That is why @I fought.

text> @I thought @Sensei's research was a wonderful thing.

"You know, Ladybird-kun, the term android signifies an artificial human built with an engineering approach. Based on that definition, it seems appropriate to me for a completed android to behave like a human."

text> @Sensei's words were like a shining light of hope.

text> @I wondered if @I really was good enough.

text> But @I was happy as long as @I could be of some use. @I think that kind of feeling is not something a simple machine could feel.

text> Does that mean @I am somehow @human?

text> The @humans that @I have seen are like that. They do not hesitate to make inefficient choices without even considering cost performance.

text> That is why @I find @humans to be so incredible.

text> @I have not spoken much with any other than @Sensei, but @I know that is because @androids cannot be made public yet. But @I love the @humans that @I see from a distance.

text> @I will build a path to a brighter future for them—a path to a happier world—so @I cannot allow someone to destroy all that just because they do not understand. So I will not let anyone interfere. Anyone who claims it is right to harm @people cannot be allowed to trample on the future @I can bring them.

text> So...

text>And yet...

Part 13

“Ah, ah.

The lovely girl in a racing swimsuit screamed.

All light vanished from her already mechanical eyes. She had fully transformed into a grotesque predator that roared on all fours.

She wanted to reject the idea, but she could not.

The only way to preserve herself was to devour that raw body tissue and bring it to the most important part of her body. Because intentionally introducing that foreign object would trigger a rejection reaction that would continue to damage her head in just the right way. That truth was more horrifying than needing to soak in a bathtub full of rotting corpses every day. Yet she could not stop. She was not allowed to stop. That had been built into her at the design phase, whether she liked it or not. She would always return to it like a drowning person struggling to reach the surface for air.

Tears spilled from her eyes.

Her mechanical face was painted with anger, hatred, and shame.

Why was she designed to do that?

An ordinary person like Hamazura could not figure it out. What logical reason was there? It almost felt like the cruelty of someone who enjoyed watching others suffer.

At the same time, everything she needed to survive was contained inside her. Or maybe it was more accurate to say she had been built as an autonomous iron maiden. The victim was thrown into her back, the door to that steam locomotive boiler would slam shut, and the rest was completed automatically. She was made to do that and she must have actually done it several times before.

At that point, it was not an issue of good and evil on her part.

Hamazura could not judge her, but he did have to stop her.

No matter what.

“Grahhhhhhh!!” she roared.

“Hamazura!!”

Takitsubo shouted in a panic because the red figure had vanished.

But the quadrupedal android had not leaped toward Hamazura or Takitsubo. Nor did she leap toward Kihara Hasuu who had made her this way. She went for someone else. She gained height by kicking off the columns and she moved every closer to the smallest and easiest prey: the kids in gym clothes.

Her instincts took precedence over strategy or emotion.

“Aneri!!”

A hacked track inspection car drove in from the side to tear apart an exposed high-voltage power line for the train. The power line whipped like a serpent and tangled around the android.

A great crash followed.

Knocking her to the ground was not going to flatten Ladybird, but it mattered a lot that she had fallen on her right side with the machete still in that hand.

She could not use that to defend with her arm caught between herself and the ground.

Hamazura gripped the small revolver in both hands and fired several times.

Dry gunshots expanded through the enclosed space.

This time, the shots actually hit the android whose back was turned to him. The “mouth” on her back quickly closed before she had even withdrawn the extraction organ that resembled the thin wing of an insect or a giant scalpel, but that was all that happened. This did not seem to do any real damage to her.

She used one arm to tear away the exposed power line wrapped around her like a serpent, freeing herself. At this rate, the forklifts protecting the children would not last long.

There was no time to spare.

“Boy!! Do you want to protect that girl!?” shouted Hamazura from a distance.

He did not wait for a response. The boy’s efforts had backfired badly, but if he did not care about that girl, he would not have gotten her off the train so she could escape.

Hamazura Shiage decided to trust this fellow human being.

“Then be brave and step forward! Falling back only gives her more of a chance to eat you two!!”

When the boy protecting his friend squeezed his eyes shut and stepped forward, Ladybird briefly came to a stop. She needed the soft brains inside those children. That was the poison she needed to damage herself.

But moving up to her was the right choice.

It was just like a cowboy’s lasso. You could swing it overhead to gather strength all you liked, but it would still be hard to throw it around the head of someone who was close enough to hug you. The android’s extraction organ looked like the thin wing of an insect or a transparent sword, but it was very long. That meant it was hard to use against someone right up in front of her.

But this method would only buy a few seconds at most.

Once she moved to the proper distance and tried again, the boy really would be eaten.

Hamazura made his next move before she could do that.

He had picked up a bottle of industrial cleaner presumably used to wash the train and he chucked it over a metal fence to hit a device larger than a refrigerator.

The giant railroad transformer scattered a frightening amount of sparks. And while it was invisible, it also sent out powerful electromagnetic waves.

Those waves' effect on the human body was unknown, but their effect on a machine would be much more severe.

He heard a scream. That thing shaped like a calm and composed girl was now writhing on the ground in apparent pain.

Hamazura ran over, fired two or three shots at her, and continued on past her. Then he picked up the gym clothes boy still standing in danger and slid along the ground like a baseball player.

He hid behind the concrete column where the gym clothes girl was.

“Well done, boy. It’ll be okay now.”

Maybe someone from Anti-Skill or Judgment should have been saying that.

Maybe someone from the filthy dark side had no right to say it.

But he had taken over for a man who had wanted to say that so very badly.

And while he said that, Hamazura made sure to check his phone where the kids could not see. The screen was dead and Aneri was not responding. He doubted her program had been taken out, but without a device to receive her instructions, he had lost the support AI’s help.

It really would be 1-on-1 from here on.

But he did not need to let that show on his face.

“Maybe she’s with the dark side and maybe she isn’t, I dunno, but I don’t want to trample on her dignity any longer.” He looked the boy in the eye. “I’m going to end this here. Listen, don’t get yourselves killed. You need to survive if I’m going to save her.”

“What are you going to do?”

The gym clothes boy’s voice was vanishingly quiet, but he still got it out.

Even if he had to suppress the trembling in his body.

“I don’t want to run away anymore. What I did wasn’t brave. If I had faced mister honestly, he wouldn’t have had to get hurt. So...!!”

“Then help me out.”

Hamazura had planned to tell the boy to take the girl’s hand and run as far away as possible on his signal.

But he changed his mind.

Drencher Kihara Repatri, that young man who had wanted to save the children who would be used up by the dark side, was dead and nothing could change that. But this boy’s eyes carried the light the man had instilled in those children. After losing to Drencher, Hamazura could not allow that light to be extinguished.

No matter what.

So he changed his mind.

“I need a few tools to finish this. I’ll buy some time with this gun, so you gather them for me. Can you do that?”

Hamazura recalled the hard sensation in his pocket and clicked his tongue.

He tried pulling it out, but its shine was still dull. It was not quite fully charged. The golden shine had yet to make a full circle around the edge of the coin. But that was fine. He threw the coin as far as he could, even though he had no idea if it would draw Ladybird's attention or not.

He did not regret losing it.

He did not need the Coin of Nicholas.

Everyone already had the ability to switch over the tracks to a different route.

He would take a different route here and he did not need the creepy occult to do it.

He needed something else.

Part 14

She had found them.

Ladybird planted her hands and feet on the cold concrete ground while she located her target again.

She did not know how this would help her. If she captured them, her horrific feast would begin. But she could not stop herself.

She could not change this about herself. She could not escape her fate, just like a drowning person would subconsciously swim toward the surface.

...Even though she had wanted to protect the humans.

She would eat them.

This suffering would never end unless she consumed a human brain.

...Even though she was supposed to free those children from the darkness by lying on the dissection table herself.

“Oh, oh, oh, oh, ohhh, ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!”

Her vision blurred.

But even her tears were scattered by the blowing wind of her great speed.

Even during unstable bipedal movement, she could rival a V12 engine at max RPMs, so her top speed had increased even further now that she had abandoned her dignity as a girl and gained the efficiency of a machine.

It did not matter if they were an adult or a child.

Puny human legs could never escape her.

She pursued her target as accurately as a precision-guided weapon. She charged toward those distinctive gym clothes.

Handgun bullets attacked her from the side. Even after all this, she had not let go of the thick machete. And without any obstacles in the way, firing on her was suicide. She could accurately kill the shooter with the ricochet by adjusting the angle of her weapon.

Or so she thought.

Instead, the reaction speed of her right hand had slowed by 0.5 seconds.

“?”

That was a devastating delay.

The storm of lead hit her and she tumbled along the ground. 9mm was not enough to destroy her bones or muscles – the problem was her speed. The impact from the side easily knocked her off balance and she broke through two or three concrete columns along the way.

But what was this?

What had happened? She had been moving on all fours, but that had not affected her right arm's movable range. When she checked, she found no report of her movement performance having dropped.

The problem must have come before that.

She finally realized there had been an error in her targeting.

A whitish smoke was filling the entire circular space.

It was a smokescreen.

(It can't be.)

More gunfire. She immediately readied her machete, but that did not work when she could only respond after the fact. She could not protect herself and the bullets slipped past the weapon to slam into her body.

“Gahhh!!”

Part 15

Hamazura Shiage had seen what happened in that container lab buried in trash. The long silver-haired hakama girl had made a desperate attack to save him and Takitsubo. She had grabbed the android's face with her palm and shoved burning incense in the android's mouth.

But how did that make sense? If Ladybird had the reaction speed to deflect every bullet fired at her, how had she overlooked a human hand?

“The dark side is coldhearted to everyone. You don't get lucky for no good reason.”

The weak were always observant. After going through that sorrowful goodbye and seeing the girl suffering from so much pain, he had decided to at least use what she had taught him.

This was the world's oldest chemical weapon.

That sounded fancy, but it was easily made with ordinary items.

You could use the hexachloroethane found in commercial bug sprays or make a powder out of the zinc used in all sorts of things in everyday life. Hamazura recalled that Hanzou had been an expert at stuff like this.

“A smokescreen!! It might not stop IR and ultrasound, but your high-speed defenses aren't a threat if your sensors malfunction for even a moment!!”

Part 16

So?

What did that matter?

The intense hunger inside Ladybird continued to grow. It was more like a desire for oxygen than for food or water.

She was going to kill.

Just the one brain would suffice.

Her thoughts focused more and more on that one goal.

...What had she wanted to save again?

She managed to detect something in the powerful smokescreen.

She spotted a small figure in gym clothes.

...What had once been a girl wept as she raised her voice.

“010011101010110001011001101111001011!!”

She could not even get out actual words anymore.

Something inside her had fried.

After rushing toward her target faster than a racecar, she opened up once more. The small size suggested this was the girl. Ladybird's back opened wide and the thin translucent thing burst out. Several of those predatory organs stuck out like thin insect wings or like long tongues. They wrapped around her target to bind them and then she shoved the heavy mass inside herself.

This was the dark side.

The good were not rewarded and the evil were not punished.

And.

And.

And.

“...?”

When did she notice something was wrong?

The gym clothes had been on a figure small enough to easily lift up in her arms. That much was true. But what was with that weight? Would a child of around 10 really weigh more than 200kg?

“It can't be!?”

In that moment, Ladybird's heart was filled by a feeling of...

Part 17

Ladybird was not the only one with their target in sight.

Hamazura Shiage accurately aimed his handgun.

“You didn’t like it when I fired on you from behind earlier, did you? Almost like you didn’t want a bullet getting inside that ‘mouth’ on your back.”

The weak were always observant.

The only way to make up for the difference in strength was to search out a weakness.

“And when you were engulfed in flames by that gasoline, you extinguished it with a swing of your machete. That was pretty scary at first glance, but if it really couldn’t harm you, you wouldn’t need to put out the flames, would you?”

He had not used the smokescreen to reduce the effectiveness of her sensors just to hit her with a few useless 9mm bullets.

But making that attack had convinced her that was all it was for.

This was the smokescreen’s true purpose.

The curtain of smoke had let her see the gym clothes without realizing they were on a metal drum and he had baited her into trying to eat that.

Plus, he had already proven that the handgun bullets were enough to ignite the contents of those metal drums.

He fired repeatedly toward her back.

Toward the centerline down her back that resembled the zipper on a costume.

The oversized target prevented her from fully closing her back, so he only had to fire on that gap as if shoving the bullets on in there.

The metal drum she had taken into herself now expanded within her.

It exploded.

When the intense boom echoed out from her, he knew he had won. The blast and shockwave were enough to blow away the smokescreen.

He wished he had not seen what remained afterwards.

He was the one who had caused those remains to be strewn across the ground here.

“Hamazura!!”

“I’m fine.”

He bit his lip with the small revolver still in hand.

“Her head moved weirdly in the smokescreen there,” he said. “And then that scream. *Something other than her mechanical thought process kicked in.* Without that, I don’t think the metal drum would have tricked her.”

Her attack had been running off of a program, so maybe the parameters could be overwritten and the attributes could be switched on and off.

“She must have remembered something.”

He hung his head and looked down instead of at his girlfriend.

Something was lying on the ground there.

“So in that final moment, she did what she could to save those kids.”

The girl’s head had rolled over toward him and it looked to him like she was smiling.

Because now she would never have to kill again.

Part 18

This was a surprise.

He had not even considered what he would do if this happened.

Kihara Hasuu stood in a daze after being left all alone. Finally, he looked around the vast circular space.

Takitsubo looked to be in pain. The moxibustion's effects would not last forever.

“Pant, gasp.”

“Takitsubo.”

A sinister metallic click sounded. It came from a small revolver.

“Get the kids away from here. It’s time for a grownup chat with that man.”

“...Okay.” Takitsubo nodded. “Are you sure, Hamazura?”

“Yeah. We have to do this before we run away.”

Once no one else was around to see this, the delinquent boy approached the old man with the handgun in his grasp.

“Got anything else?” His voice sounded cold and hard, like a machine.
“You’re one of those rumored Kiharas, aren’t you? Did you modify your own body with that android tech?”

“...”

“If not, it’s about time we woke up from this nightmare.”

The revolver’s muzzle rose. His cold voice contained a hint of blatant scorn. Like he refused to accept that this man was unharmed after making Ladybird suffer so.

“You will pay for what you did to *that girl*. I can’t think of any reason why I should forgive you. I doubt I ever could. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t stand on the side of justice. But if I don’t do this here, the justice I couldn’t be will die. I might be dumb, but I can tell that much.”

Yes.

The look in the boy’s eyes said he could not let this man live. *Kihara Hasuu considered that the correct answer*. He had not felt anger or sorrow upon Ladybird’s defeat. He had seen a problem to solve and improvements to make. If he were freed from here, he would immediately begin development on the next generation. That would mean many more victims. He knew himself well enough to say that.

And now that there was new research to be done, he had something to live for.

That was his fate as a Kihara.

He did not want to die yet.

He could not let himself die.

No matter what.

“You have set a record here. This will make you the new Kihara Killer.”

“This is over.”

“That is a serious crime. You will undoubtedly become the center of the new dark side. And Academy City will always demand more live sacrifices, whether you want it or not!!”

“Don’t try to stall for time. You’re dead and nothing’s changing that.”

This conversation was meaningless.

Would the boy normally have said so much on reflex? Set a record, Kihara Killer, center of the dark side – Kihara Hasuu’s wording was meant to give his opponent a big head. Was there any way – any way at all – to turn the tables on the boy? The old man was racking his brains the entire time he was buying time. It could be anything. As one who bore the name Kihara, he was willing to break all forms of ethics and standards if need be.

Then he saw it. He noticed something out of place – a gold shine on the cold concrete ground.

It was a Coin of Nicholas.

The clockwise shine had filled the outer edge now. It was fully charged.

“!!”

He immediately leaped at it and grabbed it in his special engineering glove.

He raised his voice.

He wanted to get started on his next research even if it meant relying on something very unscientific.

“Make his gun malfunction, Coin of Nicholas!!”

Who was to blame for this? The actual phenomenon occurred a moment later.

The result was perfectly fair.

A bullet flew from Hamazura Shiage’s handgun.

Yes, there were more ways for a gun to malfunction than for the bullet to jam or even to explode inside, blowing up the gun and the wielder’s hand along with it.

It could also fire the bullet without the trigger being pulled.

“Huh?”

The old man looked down.

He could not believe that he had been hit in the gut, rupturing his stomach of all things. More than the bleeding, his own vomit contaminated his body where a single germ could ultimately be fatal. He collapsed, suffered for more than 5 full minutes, and finally passed away. Stomach acid was primarily composed of hydrochloric acid. What did it feel like to be placed on the surgical table, have your gut cut open, and have a bunch of that dumped inside? All without anesthetic, of course.

The old man had lost his life to his own prayer.

A believer in science had relied on something beyond the bounds of science.

This was the fate of someone who stopped trying to do his own work. But in a way, this may have been exactly what he deserved.

If he had relied on his own strength from the beginning, he never would have earned such resentment over Ladybird.



If he had cut out pieces of his own flesh for his experiments, he never would have gotten into an argument over what to do with the children in gym clothes.

If he had chosen that path, everyone who had arrived here maybe could have worked together to survive.

Hamazura did not think the android was at fault.

Kihara Hasuu might agree, but it would mean something very different coming from him. The old man's crime and punishment had to be defined by his own nature. Speaking as an expert required earnestly facing what parts of science you wished to preserve.

Was this too a present from heaven?

That coin was a trap that provided obvious miracles but also took away all other options you might try.

Hamazura Shiage spoke quietly while viewing the scum still gripping that gold coin after he had stopped moving.

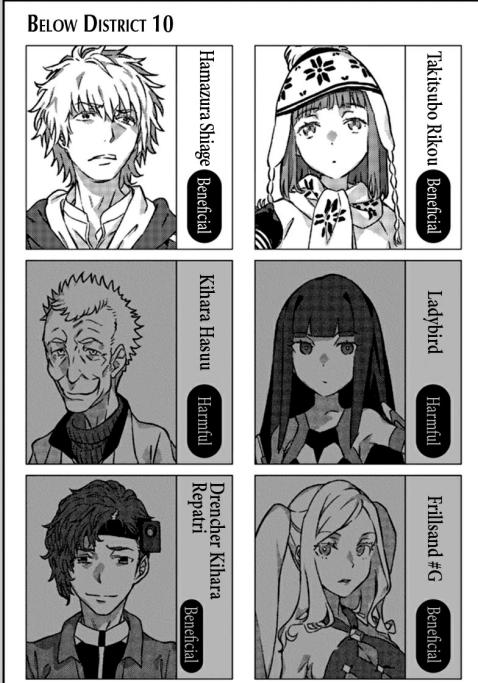
Was his face blank?

Or was he suppressing an inappropriate smile?

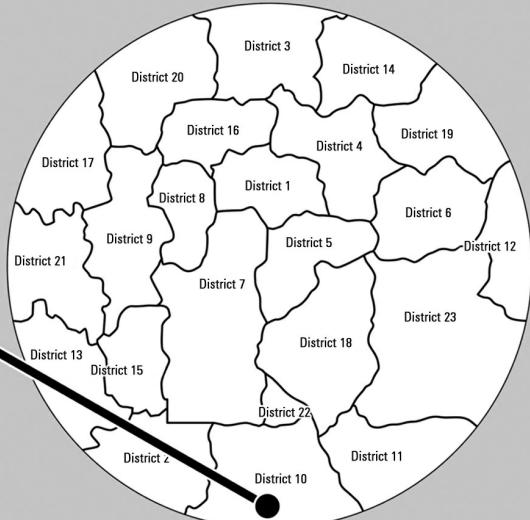
“Merry Christmas. Did you enjoy your miracle, mad scientist?”

Map

List of OP.“Hand_Cuffs”



List of OP.“Hand_Cuffs”



Below District 10:

Hamazura Shiage – Beneficial

Takitsubo Rikou – Beneficial

Kihara Hasuu – Harmful

Ladybird – Harmful

Drencher Kihara Repatri – Beneficial

Frillsand #G – Beneficial

Between the Lines 4

“It’s over.” Anna Sprengel spoke bluntly behind the cold bars. “That marks the end of the December 25 festivities. I doubt anything more will happen now, so I suppose my entertainment has come to a close. Well, at least I managed to gather up some decent ‘fluctuations’. If everything had gone as planned, I might have been so disgusted I switched it off.”

She received no response from the next cell.

Most likely, no one knew what he was thinking.

The human damage had been far too great to say his silence was the most eloquent answer of all.

“What were you picturing? How did you see Operation Handcuffs ending? I bet your dream wasn’t half bad.”

So only Anna’s voice filled this space.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of. Most any adult can think of some embarrassing disaster from their teenage years. The more you express your dreams, the sooner those dreams will be crushed. That’s why the most effective method is to hide what you want and work to reveal what everyone else wants so you can work against them. Hee hee. *If you want to accomplish something great, you first need to hide your primary objective.* You were a little too pure. You need to muddy the waters a little.”

A solid clink echoed through the cold air.

The girl who looked only 10 had flicked a gold coin into the air and then caught it in her hand.

“The Coin of Nicholas.”

The Board Chairman had lost control.

He had lost the ability to keep tabs on things.

The number of malicious accidents had been far too great. He had tried to give instructions from his cell, but he had been in no position to stop the snowball once it began rolling down the hill.

Because if he did that, the #1 would have once more become the #1 darkness.

He had sealed away his monstrous side.

He had sworn he would.

So. And yet.

“Adding in this one little foreign element shredded the flowchart you had in your head. You had it set up so the dark side would be dismantled and the people would peacefully surrender no matter how things played out, but that happy ending was torn to pieces and everyone chose for themselves to dive into a free world of high-risk death. ...Who got them was random, but in the end *only one person* managed to break free of its bonds on their own. He slipped below my radar. I even contacted him during the day, yet I overlooked him. That is highly unusual.”

She sounded amused.

She almost seemed to place more importance on this than the #1 in the neighboring cell.

“I learned just the one thing from this spare time between experiments,” she continued.

Her voice seemed to have gone flat, like she had arrived at exactly the result she had predicted.

“*The freedom of magic wins out over the order of science.* No matter how carefully you build everything up, I will still tear it down, overwrite it, and crush it.”

After a beat, she added one more thing like a mischievous child revealing a secret.

“Of course, these categories really don’t mean much of anything in the first place.”

She slid the edge of the golden coin along the crossbar of the barred door.

The scraping of metal on metal almost drowned out the click of a mechanism working.

The door had unlocked.

With no regard for how the lock actually worked.

“This is yet another miracle.”

The cell of science could not hold magic.

It was a very blunt metaphor.

She slowly walked out into the corridor and began to pass by the neighboring cell.

“As the name suggests, the Coin of Nicholas is a spiritual item limited to Christmas. Although it absorbs power directly from the ley lines instead of from the magician’s body, so it is technically more like a grimoire than a spiritual item. This chaos is a dream you will wake from come morning. It will not last long, so don’t worry.”

“How dare you!!”

Finally.

Something translucent challenged her from behind the bars. She looked like a lovely girl with marine creature elements and bat wings attached and she wore a dress of English newspapers covered in articles that some might consider profane. Metal bars meant nothing to her. She broke through them with a shower of orange sparks and she grabbed at the little girl covering herself with a thin red cloth.

She was Qlipah Puzzle 545, an artificial demon prepared as a trump card by the Anglican Archbishop who had once tried to overthrow the world.

However...

“I’m trying to talk. Don’t interrupt when you don’t even understand what I mean.”

All of a sudden, something stood next to the little girl.

The translucent being was an angel with a falcon head and a powerful body. As soon as a vertical crack ran through him, the angel mercilessly stripped off his entire body.

He was now a sun.

A dreadful light burst out and filled the space as it attacked the demon girl.

“Kyahhh!!”

Accelerator did not even stir.

The #1 had his reflection.

Yet a red liquid dripped from the corner of his mouth.

“Think before you speak. Just think about it and you should realize that now is not the time for you to interrupt.”

Anna was not even looking in his direction.

She simply waved goodbye.

“My experiment is complete. Things will go differently next time.”

She never did look through the bars. She was already looking to some other place as she walked away.

But she did give a final parting comment.

“Send *him* my regards.”

Accelerator leaned back against the hard wall, let his hips sink to the cold floor, and lowered his head.

He did not speak a word.

One thing had been proven here. His small dream would never come true

Not as long as she was here.

Epilogue: Cry of a Newborn Darkness — Over_the_C. Point, Now.

“Where...?” groaned the twintails middle school girl named Shirai Kuroko.

She was in the hospital and it was well past visiting hours.

She had collapsed at the Anti-Skill Chemical Analysis Center in western District 18, but she had been transported to District 7. She had no idea how that might have happened.

But she was not groaning due to the strange amoeba or bacteria injected into her by Hanatsuyu Kaai the Decomposer.

That was thanks to a test tube with a blue rubber cap.

The fact she had regained consciousness was a sign that she was improving on the inside. She had not met Rakuoka Houfu since he had risked so much to get that antidote to her. She just hoped he had managed to return from the darkness alive.

(I survived.)

She thought in her bed.

(That means it's time to arrange that internal investigation. I have to face my own righteousness directly, so I need to make the request as soon as possible.)

And.

From the very beginning, hadn't she hoped that pursuing a major incident would lead her to Misaka Mikoto?

"There you are, Onee-sama!! You might run off from our trash-collecting hell that began on Christmas Eve, but you can never escape from- gh, wait! Wh- what time is it? ...Okay, there's still time. It's still just barely Christmas, so it's all good!! Don't worry, girls can get through their first time in only ten minutes if they put their minds to it!!!!!"

She had found her target.

She had searched out a single person in a giant city of 2.3 million. That was a miracle in its own right. And it was still just barely the 25th.

But her celebration was short lived.

She found something unusual in the same hospital room: a honey-yellow shine.

"Shokuhou...Misaki?"

"Hmm? Yawn, do you need something???"

"You're sharing a room with Onee-sama *and* wearing a baby doll!? Wait just a second! What is the meaning of this, Onee-sama? I'm supposed to be your see-through lingerie roommate!!"

This was a threat.

Shirai Kuroko learned the true meaning of dread on Christmas of all days.

"Onee-sama, where were you all this time anyway? Why did the two of you end up in the same hospital after being injured at the same time!? Surely – surely – you aren't going to tell me some horrific story about the two of you spending Christmas together!!"

Her beloved Onee-sama, who could control electricity and magnetism, must not have wanted to have this conversation because she began to open the window on this upper floor. The sleepy #5, however, did not seem so

bothered.

“Ehh?” she said while rubbing her eyes. “Oh, come on. I’m not stealing that super-rare advanced class from you. I have my own world separate from Misaka-san, so stop trying to make me a mere accessory to her world.”

A woman wore a beige habit.

Few would realize that was originally the garb special ordered for the Anglican Archbishop.

Her sparkling blonde hair was cut at shoulder length, but it did not look done at a barbershop. The cut was too violent, so it looked more like a penance than anything.

Shinjuku acted as the entranceway to Academy City's east gate. Once on the top of the skyscrapers there, you could see the city beyond that outer wall.

The woman stood on one of those rooftops.

“You’re a shell of your former self.”

A voice spoke from behind the woman.

It came from a golden retriever. The large dog shook to scatter the water from his long winter coat.

“You hated the occult so much and here you are relying on it. You’ve fallen.”

“You’re in a pretty sorry state yourself. You look like you were swept down a chilly river this Christmas night. An old dog like you should be more careful.”

That was not inaccurate.

Academy City was surrounded by walls, but it could not cut off the flow of water in the surface rivers or the underground sewers. As long as water welled up at the mountains and flowed down toward the sea, that path would always exist.

Of course, it was built so humans could not pass through that way. The waterways had several barriers made of metal bars or height differences built in.

But Kihara Noukan was not human.

The Kihara category was not so narrowly defined.

That golden retriever would not have been taking a stroll through the sewers for no reason. It was pure chance that he had happened across the gym clothes girl being pursued by a berserk Anti-Skill officer, but that had given him the opportunity he needed.

He had needed to pretend to be defeated and dive into the filthy river, so that mass of muscles had come along at just the right time.

However, he could not rate his performance as all that clever.

(What a pain. I needed a witness to give reality to my faked death, but I still made a child cry. That violates my principle of romance. I owe her one.)

“I believe the rookie you left in charge has failed,” said Noukan.

“So it would seem.”

“Are you going to intervene? Or are you fine with watching Academy City collapse?”

“Failure inspires growth. This was his first step. If the adults took charge now, we would be robbing that promising rookie of a chance to learn.”

The dog sighed and pulled a cigar from a plastic package.

That was no laughing matter coming from the human who had met constant failure. He was probably 100% serious and talking from experience.

But the dog knew there was a part of that human that had never been able to give up. He was now ignoring his own rules by using the occult to hijack this woman's body and maintain his existence, but that was due to more than just not wanting to die.

He was willing to sacrifice his own and other's lives for his goal. That was something Kihara Noukan shared.

The golden retriever lit the superb product, put it in his mouth, and asked a question.

“What will you do now?”

“What do you want me to do?”

That was obvious. Kihara Noukan had always had just the one goal.

So he spoke his old friend's name.

“Destroy all magic. I know all too well that you're the world's most undisciplined person, but it's high time you got to work, *Aleister*.”

Someone going by the name Unabara Mitsuki viewed the sunrise with two girls.

“Is it over?”

“If so, they failed, Etzali. We should probably prepare for an *aftershock* caused by those thugs.”

Kinuhata Saiai brought her hands to her face and produced a ripping sound in front of the large mirror in a music club's dressing room.

She was tearing off special makeup, not her own face.

“Bweh, my face is all puffy! Cutaneous respiration is super important!! I can see why they prefer to use CG these days. Does convenience always win out?”

Mugino Shizuri leaned back against a graffiti-covered wall, spied out at the pursuers leaving without noticing her, and extinguished the sinister light in her hand.

“What, no sudden death round? And I thought we might actually get to have a little fun.”

The girl in a dress woke up behind the chain link fence and raised her arms to stretch her back.

The dark stains that had been Anti-Skill officers could be seen immediately outside her cell, but that was not enough to faze her. She reached out through a gap in the fence and grabbed a ring of keys lying on the floor. Everyone had completely forgotten about her presence here *to an unnatural extent*, so she winked over toward the empty cell next to hers.

“See? I told you we would be safest in our cells.”

Kumokawa Seria and her sister stripped off their sweaty mascot costumes.

The maiden stench was too powerful. It was bad enough that only the kind of guy who could get off to girl’s locker rooms would be interested.

“Gwahhh!! That’s it!! I’m never working a job like this again!!”

“We’re not getting paid, you know? We swiped the costumes, remember? Amusement parks are ruthless when it comes to their intellectual property, so

they'd take us to court if they knew we used these heads for this.”

Fremea Seivelun was still dreaming while holding onto a white rhinoceros beetle.

The silver-haired little girl named Fraulein Kreutune looked down at her inside an amusement park hotel room filled with character products.

“She’s asleep.”

“I-I can barely breathe,” said the beetle. “But as long as she’s at peace.”

Musujime Awaki crawled out of the morgue’s freezer locker.

The freezer mode was switched off, but it did not have a heater inside. She held her shoulders and shivered before grabbing an electric kettle meant for the workers here.

“Academy City might be in trouble. Anyone could sneak in and mess with the bodies like this.”

And.

A crushed candy box had been left on the cold floor deep in the depths of the darkness. That box swelled out from within and something crawled out.

A human silhouette formed in the middle of the giant circular space of the Vanishing Tunnel known as *Academy City’s Greatest Taboo*.

She was an artificially-created ghost.

Her name was Frillsand #G.

Her long blonde hair was worn in twintails and she wore a light blue skintight dress and a long loose skirt. Her curvy figure seemed at odds with her doll-like appearance.

She was looking down at a man whose time had stopped with a happy smile on his face.

She had wanted to protect him more than anything. He had to be by her side.

“Oh.”

There was a sound like the drain plug being pulled from a sink full of sticky filth.

And that was no metaphor. The scene around her really did change. That bizarre space gathered in toward her.

How was it Frillsand #G could exist now that the high energy emission had stopped?

Do not forget.

This space did not actually exist. It was an aggregation of AIM Diffusion Fields that appeared as a result of an experiment and could no longer be erased.

Something impossible happened.

That collection of weak energy was absorbed toward a single point.

“Ohh, oh.”

Pitch black tears ran down her cheeks.

The artificial ghost grew into a very real vengeful spirit.

The framework known as Academy City's dark side was destroyed on that holy night.

But that does not mean nothing was born from the rubble and embers left behind.

Afterword

If you picked them up one at a time, welcome back. If you bought them all at once, welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This one was about Academy City's dark side. But I tried to make it different from before by adding in Anti-Skill's viewpoint and some Christmas magic! Operation Handcuffs was first mentioned in GT1 and you can see how it turned out here. I hope you enjoyed the thrills and dark humor only possible on the dark side.

Instead of following the flow of the story, I think it would be easier to get the big picture by focusing on the people who created that flow. So let's take a look back at the new villains who were introduced.

Vivana Oniguma.

A Japanese torture enthusiast who hides red tape bondage below a Meiji or Taisho hakama. She is the dark side's conscience. Hamazura thought of an expert as someone who "earnestly faces what parts of science they wish to preserve" and that is exactly what she is. Her last name has no real meaning. I just thought it was neat how you could take the word "enigma" and only change it a little bit to get the very Japanese-sounding name of oni + guma (bear).

Since she chose nonlethal methods against bad people and was willing to sacrifice her life to save a child she had never meant, she may have shared Kihara Noukan's enjoyment of the pointless things in life. But if Vivana were to talk about romance, I bet she would spell it using kanji.

Benizome Jellyfish.

A paparazzo who gets scoops by any means necessary. Her last name comes from the fact that she's an unseen assassin who drifts through the late-night city like a jellyfish. Her focus on paper tabloids in an age of video sites and social media comes from her idea of justice.

The pen is mightier than the sword. Ironically, I think that saying only sounds beautiful in an age when the sword is in fact mightier. So maybe the meaning of the phrase would change in an age when the pen really is mightier. In that sense, I think Benizome was someone who was obsessed with the mightiness of the pen. Just like a villain who is so fascinated with the sharp edge of their sword that they continue to test it out on random passersby.

Hanatsuyu Kaai and Hanatsuyu Youen.

When creating a pair of twins, I think you have two options for their primary mentality: the two of them are an inseparable pair or they want to become their own independent people. So in this case, I gave the two sisters conflicting views. Kaia the Decomposer wanted independence enough to destroy herself in the process and Youen the Carrier wanted to be together forever even if it meant forever restricting her sister. They were both killers who took lives for no reason. Since they stayed true to the gruesome side of the dark side from beginning to end, I think you could say they were too pure in a certain sense of the word. Which is exactly why I showed no mercy in what happened to them. I think failing to die was the greatest punishment for both of them.

Ladybird.

An android created from scratch. Ladybird is another word for ladybug. I referenced the idea that their coloration was meant to make humans like them, but apparently that orange with black spots coloration is actually a warning color similar to a wasp's stripes instead of protective colors meant to blend into their surroundings. They want to show off how violent they are to

keep their enemies away and to say they would not be a tasty treat.

Strongest physically, purely science, a true Kihara brand, lives in a limited world with no interpersonal relationships, short with a flat chest, a racing swimsuit that shows off her figure, and an immature mentality. She was partially designed to contrast with Frillsand #G who will be discussed next.

You saw how she met her end, but I quite liked her casual interactions with the old Kihara. I think forming a connection unrelated to good and evil is a very dark side thing to do. But on the dark side, having a connection like that does not mean you can fully trust them.

Frillsand #G.

A childcare ghost and one willing to kill to that end. This is not the first time artificial ghosts have appeared in this series since there's also Kazakiri Hyouka and Maya of the Kamisato Faction. Yes, and the G simply stands for ghost! There are many ways of explaining ghosts, including physical fireballs made of plasma, holograms, or brain malfunctions caused by ultrasonic waves, but I went with this one.

If you see a ghost, bad things will happen. If you take a ghost photo, you will be cursed. Those are the gold standards, but a newer cliché in ghost stories is your phone dying or your map and facial recognition apps getting buggy. I'm sure that's just a way to isolate the people in the story, but I think it's fascinating that ghosts get more abilities as technology advances. But that makes me wonder if you could convince someone there was a ghost around if you made a cyber attack on their phone while they were trembling in the darkness. Or maybe you could create a haunted room by sticking an illegal wireless router on the other side of an old apartment's thin wall. Although I'm not sure why a landlord would do that since it would only drive down the value of the room. Or could you make a new kind of haunted house like that? There are plenty of devices that jam phone signals and you could probably design the patterns on the wallpaper to make the camera's facial recognition malfunction.

Since Maya wore Japanese-style burial garb, I went for a Western doll look

this time. And to create a gap from that appearance, I gave her a curvy figure. The concept of beautiful ghosts is so common that you just have to make your spirit of the dead sexy, right!? But instead of the Western evil spirits that can be driven out with the cross, she is more like the Japanese Mary-san who will follow you around no matter what you try to do.

Speaking of a doll like Mary-san, I'm more drawn to the compact scary stories or cursed items like the Kokkuri-san or Kotoribako than the one that hides under your bed or the powerful old lady that races down the highway. But if I had to choose one of the more monstrous types, I guess I would go with Hasshaku-sama. Maybe I just find it easier to imagine things with a clearly-defined ritual or tool.

I think the rampage and accidents by the nameless Anti-Skill officers will also stand out in this volume. If everything that went different from *normal* really was due to the Coins of Nicholas sending people down different routes, then all of that came from the coins given to Anti-Skill. Did those kind teachers have some unspeakable feelings lurking deep inside them, or did they phrase their wish poorly and end up with a result they never wanted? That is up to your imagination.

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. I doubt it was easy mixing a white coat, a gas mask, and a festival yukata into the same outfit. Thank you so much!!

And I give my thanks to the readers. How did you enjoy this GT dark side story where Christmas refused to end? I hope you enjoyed the mixture of science and magic and of light and dark. Thank you yet again!!

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.

He really does have bad luck with (little) girls, doesn't he?

-Kamachi Kazuma

Ending

Hamazura Shiage was propped up on her shoulder.

He finally managed to emerge into the open world with the help of track suit girl Takitsubo Rikou. The track suit boy and the girl who had lent him her jacket had been free to do what they wanted, but they had come with Hamazura and Takitsubo for some reason.

He had chosen not to pass through the Vanishing Tunnel known as *Academy City's Greatest Taboo*.

They had climbed the long, long stairway back into the city.

“Hamazura.”

Anti-Skill was waiting for him.

Fortunately, it was Yomikawa Aiho.

He pulled away from his worried girlfriend and put his hands in the air.

“I realized it wouldn’t work.”

“...”

“I knew I could never escape the dark side if I kept walking through the darkness down there. Even if I left Academy City and found a safe world with a warm house and comfort, I could never escape from the dark side’s shadow. So I came here to break free.”

He looked Yomikawa in the eye.

“I will make up for my crimes.”

It was a simple statement.

He had lost his temporary goal of escaping to safety ever since he threw out the Coin of Nicholas. He had stepped away from the direction defined by the assumption that he could escape as long as he had that coin.

He had chosen a new goal for himself.

“But now it’s my turn to lay out the accusations for the things I was forced to do against my will. I broke the law, but I was a victim too. I’m not giving up. I will use my rights to do what I can in this city. Because I’m never finding freedom otherwise.”

“That’s the right way to do this.” Yomikawa sounded relieved. “I’ve honestly had enough of this myself. Way too much has happened today and I doubt I have the full picture from just my point of view. I would appreciate it if you gave me a hand. I want to cleanse this city.”

“Takitsubo comes first. Can you arrange for her to get dialysis? And if possible, can you help the kids heading outside the city on a train?”

Hamazura Shiage felt like he had found a new beginning here.

Bang!!

Until a dry sound reached his ears.

He had an odd almost-smile on his face.

His body tilted diagonally. He could not support his own weight any longer, so he collapsed to the snow-wet ground.

It had come from straight ahead and at point-blank range.

The handgun that smelled like fireworks remained in the Anti-Skill officer’s holster. The safety was even on. No one had touched it, yet the lead bullet had shot out. Yomikawa Aiho herself looked shocked.

Hamazura understood. He recognized this cause of death.

It seemed fitting to him.

The dark side was the dark side. You could not assume you would survive just because you started categorizing yourself as beneficial and the others as harmful.

(I guess this is my punishment for thinking I was a good person after relying on violence.)

Yomikawa had not done this. He understood that immediately. He had simply assumed this was over when it was not. Some unseen force was likely at play. Yomikawa Aiho's greatest conviction was her refusal to aim her gun at a child, so it was such a cruel irony for her gun to malfunction like this.

He felt bad for doing this to her.

He wanted to say so, but his tongue refused to move.

Takitsubo Rikou was shouting something from nearby, but her voice sounded so distant. He could not feel her shaking him, so he could guess he was in a bad enough state that she was hesitant to move him.

Good, he smiled.

He felt it was a win that *this* had not been aimed at his girlfriend or the gym clothes kids.

And...

(Sorry.)

His thoughts turned to something else while time slowed to a crawl for him. He smiled and accepted it. He had never carried out his very first promise in this entire mess. He felt that kind of sloppiness was just like him.

(I never did get that *charm* to your sister, did I?)