

鎌池和馬  
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新約

禁書ヨコノ錄  
インデックス  
リバース 22

電撃文庫

# **Illustrations**

## A Certain Magical Index New Testament 22 Reverse

The threat of Great Demon Coronzon who wanted to cause the destruction of the world is gone. And after the sacrifice of Academy City Board Chairman Aleister, Kamijou Touma has finally saved the science and magic world.

This is a holy ground for the Anglican Church, Windsor Castle. During his ardent welcome at the victory celebration party, Kamijou sees that Index, Misaka, and Shokuhou are there. It finally feels like peace has arrived.

However...

Aren't we forgetting something? Yes, immediately after the Coronzon battle. Wasn't Kamijou's right hand supposed to have exploded?

And then suddenly, a monster attacks Windsor Castle. A winged lizard shows itself.

This is when magic and science cross paths, and the story that results of that meeting. Don't miss the conclusion to New Testament!



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Kamachi Kazuma

新約ラストではありますが、敢えて特別な写真にはしない方向で。けど、彼らが守りたかったのはこういう雰囲気だと思います。

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A Certain Magical Virtual-On

Illustrator: Haimura Kiyotaka

I am slowly drawing in the back country of Hiroshima.

新約

# とある魔術の禁書目録 22 インデックスリバース

## WINDSOR CASTLE

One of the residences of British monarchs, located on the banks of the River Thames on the outskirts of London. It is owned by the British royal family, and although a part of it is open as a museum and archive, the royal family still uses it as a residence. With an area of approximately 45,000 square meters, it is the largest occupied castle in the world and the longest-used royal palace in Europe. When the Queen visits during the weekends, the Royal Standard flag is raised, and on other days, the British national flag is raised.



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“Let’s review, Aiwass.”

Woman who is a point of contact for the Secret Chiefs

Anna Sprengel







Ruler of the depths and guardian of treasure  
"Dragon"

# **Prologue: The Path to Battle's End**

## **– Road\_to\_the\_Peace.**

The most conspicuous structure in England's capital of London was the Tower of London.

That antique prison sat on the bank of the Thames which was dyed orange by the setting sun. Many citizens had seen its thick stone walls collapse from within during the disaster caused by the Crowley's Hazards.

...In truth, it had not been attacked by those bizarre monsters. Nor had it been crushed by the ancient Egyptian ruins that rained down from the empty sky. In truth, a spiky-haired boy imprisoned there had unintentionally destroyed the facility with his right hand's Imagine Breaker, but that did not really matter.

The restless atmosphere had snuck in there as well.

Repairs were underway while everything was hidden behind gray construction sheets, but the onlookers who hesitantly poked their heads out were aiming their digital cameras and phones toward it. It was an important structure throughout much of English history and uploading photos like this to gather attention would only result in a storm of flaming and criticism, but these onlookers must not have thought it through that far.

And among all that...

“Yes. The battle is over.”

A girl's voice slipped in with the loveliness of a small bell.

It belonged to Anna Sprengel of the Rosicrucians who had an even longer

history than the Golden cabal.

She was the master of their No. 1 temple in Germany.

But no one noticed her arrival.

Even though everyone was holding digital devices and essentially viewing the scene through a single giant compound eye. In fact, not even the Anglican jailers noticed her and they had been careful enough to set up a people-clearing field and several other deception and stealth spells to keep anyone from seeing what lay within the gray sheets.

The Rosicrucian order had the following rule:

A true magician must blend in with the ordinary people and only contact those with an honest heart that had undergone sufficient training.

“Let’s review, Aiwass. I would like to hear what happened while my body was stolen.”

“Very well. Providing information is one of my angelic duties.”

A girl who looked to be around ten walked forward.

Was it Mathers who had said the Secret Chiefs had the physical appearance of those who had drunk the Elixir of Life?

They were a similar yet different sort of being from the Magic Gods.

They were experts with superhuman skill.

Some might call them the people who guided humanity from the shadows while giving approval for the establishment and management of all magic cabals...but that might be trusting Westcott’s claims a little too much.

Technically, he had never said the Secret Chiefs were Rosicrucian experts, but the Golden cabal had undeniably been focused on the Rosen. After all (according to Westcott), it was the Rosicrucians who had given permission for their magic cabal to be established, so the Golden only existed to promote

the Rosen. If the Rosen turned out to be frauds, then their own reputation would take a hit as well.

However, Anna Sprengel was not actually a Secret Chief.

She was something like a priestess capable of contacting them at will.

Comparing Aiwass with Othinus might help clarify the difference between Secret Chiefs and Magic Gods.

“There’s no point in going to the trouble of becoming a Secret Chief when you can set up a position for yourself that lets you draw on their power. Those transcendent beings are like credit cards.”

“Did you say something?”

She climbed through the large hole in the wall.

Her ringlet curls were squished flat at the ends, making them look like fried shrimps. That reddish-blonde hair reached her ankles, so it dragged behind her. The dress that had contained her previously alluring body now had to be held to her flat chest like bedsheets. Her footsteps were those of bare feet because the shoe size had been hopelessly wrong. Too big or too small would only harm her right now.

“I will omit some things since we would be here all day if I explained everything that happened,” began Aiwass. “But the direct trigger was Lola Stuart – that is, Great Demon Coronzon – making a surprise attack on Academy City Board Chairman Aleister.”

“This is already making no sense. Given Coronzon’s bad habit of *disguising herself as someone her target fears or loves*, the result of an attack like that is obvious when you compare their specs. If that Great Demon was taking it seriously, how could Crowley have escaped?”

“Oh, Aleister did die. As a multitude, anyway. But that triggered the release of the more than a billion Crowleys he contained, scattering them across the surface world. Those became known as the Crowley’s Hazards.”

Was there any reason for them to visit this place?

Some might question that.

But what destination would seem more appropriate? Imagining the White House, Buckingham Palace, or the long-since-abandoned ruins of Machu Picchu or Olympia would get you nowhere.

There was nowhere in the world to suit Anna Sprengel.

Which meant she could appear anywhere she felt like that day.

“If that would have worked, Crowley would have just done so in the first place, right? He found his way to the Far East and kept his hands busy there because the flashy invasion route wasn’t going to work.”

“Stop moving your right hand up and down like that.”

“Why, fool? Would you prefer I elegantly wrapped both hands around it?”

“You are giving me a headache... Anyway, everything was already falling apart with the appearance of the Divine Mixtures, an Isis technique to bridge the gap between Egyptian and Greek mythologies. That was when Coronzon delivered the finishing blow using the original Golden magicians. Except they were actually defense devices set up by adding individual traits to the human blueprints that are tarot cards.”

“The originals, huh?”

“Perhaps you can say that because you did not see it for yourself, but Aleister and Mathers were quite emotional. That Christianity-hater even grabbed a bible and drew out the power of its miracles.”

“The Aeon of Osiris? Is that really worth showing off? You can find bibles all over the world. I mean, the Son of God wasn’t even trying to hide it. It’s just that all those people out there who think they understand it are too stupid to get what he was really saying.”

“You might as well be saying there are atoms in front of us, so we should be

able to rearrange them as we see fit, Fräulein. ...Oh, but I suppose that comparison would only confuse a genius *who can do that like it is normal*. My bad.”

If they were captured by the Beefeaters, the jailers and guards of the Tower of London, they would be subjected to a full course of tortures too horrific to be shown off in the wax museum, but there was no hesitation in their step. They walked down the deep and dark stone dungeon and stopped in front of a certain door.

Anna Sprengel stood tall there.

She had roughly pulled the red dress up to her chest, but she was apparently not thoughtful and refined enough to make sure it covered up her rear as well.

“This is the place. I always wanted to have some fun here☆”

“You have the worst taste in fun.”

“Nuremberg was so boring and did not live up to its reputation at all. But London is the home of anti-magician combat and torture tools! Now, I hope I find a truly perverse collection that makes you lose all hope for the advancement of humankind.”

Anna Sprengel sounded on the verge of humming, but the Holy Guardian Angel held his tongue for a bit.

It was an oppressive stone space.

All four walls were covered in blades, hammers, spikes, clubs, belts, and chains that had grown weathered and rusty from heavy use and all the human fat they had absorbed over the years.

Just like the other European countries, England had a folkloric tradition to never refer to fairies by name. They would instead euphemistically refer to fairies as “good neighbors” or “wee folk” so as not to anger them.

Similarly, it would be best not to directly name the items arranged here.

“But what happened then?”

“When not even Mathers managed to stop Aleister, Coronzon lost her cool. In the end, it was most effective for her to deliver the finishing blow.”

“Why wouldn’t she just do that in the first place?”

“That is only a meaningful question for someone who could see the end result from the beginning. Oh, my apologies. I suppose that does not mean much to *someone who can see the end result like it is normal*. Anyway, not even Coronzon could stop herself once she revealed her true nature. The Ceremony of Mo Athair. She intended to smash the physical world at the very base of all mythologies so that all phases would be washed down that giant drain.”

“And that brings us to the realm of Horus? All that big talk is just sad once none of it works out.”

The girl of about ten stopped her eyes on what may have been the most sinister of all the items there.

It looked like a metal chair with a back and armrests, but it was actually a torture device with thick spikes covering it.

“Hm, hm, Meh heh heh.”

“Fräulein...”

“Oh? What is your problem, fool? This is better than the pear of anguish or the neck violin.”

It had no official name.

It was sometimes known simply as a torture chair, but that was not correct.

...For one thing, this tool was never actually used. Generally, spikes and needles would pierce deep within their target when the weight was focused on the single sharp point. There was even a theory that you could gently sit on hundreds of spikes and remain unharmed because your weight was

distributed across them.

It was only meant to set the mood.

By creating a sinister mood that enveloped the victim and brought them to the edge of panic, only the slightest wound would trigger an “explosion”. This was a stage prop meant to prevent any lengthy resistance.

“The world still exists to this day,” said Aiwass.

“What, do you prefer cheap destruction? Then you should have supported Othinus instead.”

“Was this the result you preferred?”

“Yes, I am sick of being a queen. I want to turn my damp eyes heavenward and hold out my hands to catch the rays shining down from between the clouds. I want someone out there to grant me miracles and blessings I can devour while I enjoy my life. In that sense, I do appreciate a world that keeps on going even when it’s attacked and broken.”

“Wouldn’t that feel like an oppressive prison?”

“It is not about the location, fool. If other people force you there, it is a hard and cold solitary confinement cell, but if you decide to stay there yourself, you are living the comfortable shut-in life.”

But...

“Ayah☆”

Aiwass could not stop her in time.

Shockingly, Anna Sprengel hopped onto the spike-covered chair like it was her favorite bed. She was only holding her extremely baggy dress to her chest, so the line from her back to her butt was entirely defenseless. When she sent her body onto the spikes so forcefully, even the advocates of the aforementioned theory would call for a doctor in shock.

However.

Even that was overturned.

“Hmm, this isn’t much different. Nuremberg’s maiden felt pretty much the same.”

“Honestly, with the statistics growing less clear, the world population has apparently grown beyond 7.5 billion at some point, but you are the only one who would happily climb into an *iron maiden*. Even suicidal people will choose a less painful way to go.”

“Fool, sexuality and pleasure cannot be ranked by quality or morality. Even the rose represented by ten petals in Rosicrucianism is a symbol of female reproduction. In other words, it’s a pus-...”

“Don’t you dare speak another word. Do I need to mention there is nothing sexual about a chair covered in spikes?”

“I wasn’t interested in it for that reason anyway. I do want pleasure, though. But when I have not been properly managing myself, my emotions grow unstable. At times like that, I feel like punishing myself with just the right amount of pain. Think of it like habitual and nonlethal wrist cutting.”

Despite her words, there was not a scratch on her soft skin.

Plus, if some red drops did fall, who could say what miracles would spring forth.

“You prefer continuation to destruction and you would prefer to go farther than that if possible,” said Aiwass. “Does that mean your favorite is Kamijou Touma with that right hand of his?”

“No, fool. You seem to be mistaken about something, so it is time I corrected you.”

In the end, it was just a game.

Anna Sprengel was not really interested in being taught information she did

not have. She may have actually been inspecting the entire world to see why the right answer in her head had turned out wrong.

So.

While she crossed her slender legs, stretched her arms up, and leaned back in the chair, she opened her mouth again. The strange part was how her motions themselves looked like someone relaxing in the tub.

And that did not change as she rubbed her slender neck like she was longing for a collar she had never before worn. She also gave a bewitching smile with her unnaturally pure and soft skin exposed.

She even licked her lips.

“It is not Kamijou Touma I long for. . . .*It is the One who Purifies God and Slays Demons.*”

# **Chapter 1: Smile – After\_Battle.**

## **Part 1**

Hi, everyone. Who wants to talk about a cheeky pair of boobs?

“...”

“...”

The room was twice the size of a school's home ec classroom, so it was much too large to call a fitting room. In there, the long silver-haired girl named Index and the short chestnut-haired girl named Misaka Mikoto were both forming small triangles with their mouths.

Their glaring eyes were directed at two mountains.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow... I-I really shouldn't have forced myself to do this.”

Shokuhou Misaki.

Her destructive force was even more powerful than usual since she was *only wearing underwear like the other girls*. Her long honey-blonde hair fell along the curves of her smooth skin and a bewitching tremor ran down her spine as the heater-warmed air directly tickled her bare flesh. That goddess was surrounded by several British royal maids who were doing everything they could to support her body. The foundation they had to work with was on another level. She was the kind of person who would look good casually

flipping her hair back after it got wet in a sudden downpour and would still look stunning in a borrowed baggy dress shirt, so she was very different from those girls whose chests did not feel the pull of gravity!!

So while Shokuhou (who seemed to have plenty of self-confidence at the moment) gently raised her hands in front of the maids and let them take her measurements with a cloth tape measure like it was a bizarre holdup, the two who only had their slenderness going for them (and who were short on self-confidence at the moment) could only glare at her and groan like starving wild dogs!!

“They’re like bombs.”

“No, they’re the forbidden fruit.”

Index put her hands on her slender hips and Misaka Mikoto blushed while hiding her own chest behind her arms and crouched down. The young lady was apparently too preoccupied to realize that pose only emphasized the roundness of her slender back.

Anyway.

This important fact slipped out earlier, but they were in their underwear. The Index Librorum Prohibitorum, who had 103,001 grimoires in her head, and Academy City’s #3 Level 5, who could pick a fight with a cruiser, were only wearing the one piece of clothing. They were not even wearing bras. Being together here was made all the more awkward by the fact that this was not their own underwear. It was thin pink paper underwear similar to that used at aesthetic salons and for surgery.

(It’s hard to relax without my usual bag.)

That was the only thing on Shokuhou’s mind as her slender finger toyed with something bright silver. The silver was painted on rather than being metal. It was the sort of cheap emergency whistle that could be found pretty much anywhere.

But did this mean she found that plastic whistle more important than the bag

crammed full of the remotes needed to control her #5 Level 5 power?

It was currently evening during December, but none of them were shivering or getting goose bumps from the cold while only wearing the paper underwear. Instead of a mechanical heater gently filling the large space, there was an old-fashioned fire in the fireplace to provide heat.

A kitten meowed.

It was a fairly important fact that the calico cat curled up in front of the fireplace actually had balls. But please forgive him for the same reason that young enough boys are allowed in the women's bath at bathhouses.

"I hate that being dressed like this is actually more comfortable than before."

Mikoto emitted faint EM waves from her body, which kept the calico cat from ever approaching her, so she felt a little sad while standing there in nothing but the thin paper underwear and covering her chest with both hands.

"Yes, due to a certain runaway maglev girl I could mention, we were stuck out in the December cold in nothing but a swimsuit and raincoat."

But things were a little different for Shokuhou than for Index and Mikoto.

She had nothing but her forward swept blonde hair to cover her ample chest, but her soft stomach was covered by a substance similar to polyurethane. When she gently raised her arms with her large boobs resting on that, a British Maid of Honor circled behind her and stuck something like a T-handle into her back.

Needless to say, the maid was not turning a spring to wind her up.

"Now, how about we tighten that up a little more? How is this feeling?"

"Oh? My hip feels a lot better now☆ That's great, that's great. Keep going, keep going. And stop. Stop, okay?"

"Umm, mutter mutter, if I tighten it here it would make your hips look even sexier."

“That is not the point here! Um, wait, are you short on sleep ability because you were part of the fighting force here? I said stop☆ Hagygrgrh!?”

Shokuhou Misaki started struggling as the polyurethane tightened around her stomach more than necessary, so the other maids restrained her arms and legs.

The girl with flowing silver hair widened her eyes.

“Wow, should I be seeing this? Some old lady is writhing around while they hide her stomach fat.”

“Old!? Did you just say old!?”

“Don’t say that, you honest little nun. The issue isn’t with her literal age. What makes her old is how talking about her age immediately enrages her.”

“What are you trying to prove here, Misaka-saaan!? We’re the same age, even if your body forgot to grow in certain places!!”

Mikoto ignored that shrill voice and accepted what was to come. She softly spread her arms when she saw the maid approaching her.

She could not look the maid in the eye.

It was a little embarrassing even when they were both women.

The British servant held a tape measure. Chest size was not measured during school health exams anymore, yet now it was happening in another country entirely. The smiling maids showed no mercy.

They kept their distance differently from the people in the classy world of Tokiwadai.

She naturally squeezed her eyes shut, but that made her more aware of the heat in her cheeks. That might be Shirai Kuroko’s fault.

The tape measure suddenly crossed in front of her at chest height.

The ribbon-like cloth tickled her skin. The maid had a fairly powerful presence and had a mole below the eye. She bent over to put herself on Mikoto's eye level and then viewed the numbers on the tape measure.

"Hee hee."

"Did you just laugh?"

Mikoto asked that with a blank expression, but the royal maid was well trained. By the time Mikoto forced down the faint heat in her cheeks and opened her eyes, the maid was back to normal.

Shokuhou Misaki spoke up in slight exasperation after watching all that from the side.

"My, my. I feel sorry for your maid. That job must get monotonous with a body so lacking in curves."

"You wanna repeat that?"

"I mean, look."

The maid did not measure Mikoto a bit further down around the ribs. In other words, she did not measure the under bust.

That was a clear statement of flatness.

She was rounded down to zero and declared not a threat. The circle formed by the maid's tape measure moved straight down to her navel to take her waist measurement.

"Seriously!?"

"It seems some laws are universal."

Mikoto trembled and seriously considered bringing her fist down on the defenseless maid's head. But instead...

"Shokuhou, shouldn't you sit this one out? I mean, that weird hair in

Edinburgh Castle threw you three meters straight up and you fell on the stone stairs. How is your hip doing?"

"D-do not be ridiculous. This country is about to throw a party, so I refuse to be curled up all alone in a hospital bed enduring the pain ability like some poor girl who has to miss the school trip and ends up on the very edge of the graduation photo. Besides, someone has to stand below the spotlight. Everyone should be thankful that the person who can shine brightest there is attend- squeal!?"

A surprise attack sent her voice shooting up by two octaves. As soon as the maids around the honey-blonde girl loosened the corset holding her hips in place, her full weight apparently attacked the source of her pain. She arched her back as if from an electric shock, her hands trembled at an awkward height, tears filled her eyes, and her mouth flapped wordlessly.

"Ah, ahh, akh, khah..."

"You totally have that chest to blame for this. It's called divine punishment."

Also, she was supposedly in pain, but her breaths were oddly sexy. The way she arched her back also pushed out her large chest and jewel-like beads of sweat appeared on her nape. If she was a fighting game character, she would gain fans for the sounds she made when hit or defeated instead of for her controls or how thrilling it was to win with her.

"If you look at – cough – m-my overall weight ability, I am pretty sure it is less than a mass of solid muscle like you, Misaka-san."

"Excuse me, maid? Is this where I need to hit her? With a Chaser roundhouse kick???"

"Wait, stop rubbing the back of my hips!! D-don't lock onto me like that!! Eek, if you insist on punishing me, then I'll offer you my head or butt!! Just anywhere but there!!"

Shokuhou Misaki really was in tears she clung to the other girl and pleaded with her. She was weak in the knees with her legs trembling like a fawn, so

she apparently really was at her limit this time. All that trembling also caused some jiggling, but figuring out where that occurred will be left as an exercise for the reader! She was reduced to this when the brand-name bag full of TV remotes was left in a corner of the room. She might be one of Tokiwadai's strongest and the Queen of the largest clique, but she was still a middle school girl when without her powers.

However.

Why were these girls wearing nothing but paper underwear while maids wrapped ribbon-like tape measures around their soft skin to take some verrrry detailed personal information?

“Lady Shokuhou. I believe you would be best served by taking the waist corset and extending it to cover the bust and hips, adding a long skirt, and including slits and the like to pretty it up.”

“I get the reasoning...but wouldn't that be something like a highly-customized bunny girl costume? Why do people keep wanting me to dress like that?” Shokuhou Misaki swept her long hair back with a hand. “But, well, I supposed that works.”

“It will look flashy at first, but it will cover pretty much your entire torso save your shoulders, so it will be no more revealing than a one-piece swimsuit. That is especially important in your case since we want to keep the support for your hips from being too obvious. It will look open while actually being closed. In other words, we will make up for what is hidden by the corset around your hips by increasing the exposure of your cleavage and legs.”

“You know what? Fine. Suggestive but not actually revealing is the standard ability of the uniformed schoolgirl. So what color will it be?”

“Choose whatever you like from the 96 options.”

“Then make the base color yellow. A bright one would be nice. You can choose the accent color.”

This exchange made it clear she was being measured for some kind of clothing.

Specifically, for a party dress.

And it had to be one appropriate for a formal ceremony.

“I could not be happier I was assigned to you, Lady Shokuhou. It has been a while since a job felt so worthwhile.”

“Oh, dear. I hope you don’t say that to everyone.”

And Shokuhou was not the only one.

When she glanced to the side...

“Pant, pant. Don’t worry. Don’t worry at all. You can win this. I know you’re feeling out of your element so far from home, so let me handle everything tonight... Yes, you’re fourteen, so who needs all that excess fat!? Pant, yes, you’re not thirteen or fifteen; you’re fourteen! That only happens for one year in your entire life... And the true wonder of dresses is in the Cinderella-like transformation between the before and the after! I will transform you into the belle of the ball so you’re ready for an exciting and thrilling night!!”

“Hey, this maid is scaring me! I’m feeling a pretty powerful chill down my spine for a different reason than with Kuroko! I’m pretty sure us both being girls isn’t going to stop her!!”

“My, my. The storybook princess look would definitely be best for you, Lady Index. Hee hee hee. Yes, just like this. A large skirt given a dome shape by the many petticoats within. Hee hee. We don’t want anything sexual here. Let’s eliminate that warm body heat and dress you up like a lifeless doll.”

“I have a number of issues with that, but I still have the right to say no, I hope. You aren’t just looking at me like a French doll, are you?”

At the very least.

Based on these conversations, these maids were not just giving the girls

perfect scores out of flattery. Most likely, they had carefully talked it out amongst themselves and chosen the girls that matched their personal tastes.

(That said...)

Shokuhou Misaki knew nothing could be done about it. She and Misaka Mikoto had been marching around the UK in December wearing a ridiculous combo of a swimsuit and raincoat and the long silver-haired nun had been in a bizarre habit held together by safety pins. They could not have attended a party like that. In fact, they could hardly have complained if the police stopped them for questioning. And the hosts of this dress-code-enforced party were gracious enough to provide a full set of clothing for them.

So why did no one else show this kind of hospitality? The reason could not have been more obvious.

Shokuhou Misaki placed a hand on the side of the paper underwear on her hip, focused on her navel wrapped in the polyurethane, and carefully checked on how her hip was doing. She silently grimaced and then asked a question.

“Will the dresses really be ready on time when you are only taking the measurements now? From making the pattern to completion, it normally takes about two months.”

“You have nothing to worry about there.” The Maid of Honor that served the British royal family gave the perfect smile. “*We are not normal.*”

She did not even use a pattern.

With a sound like a spring-loaded trap going off, eight arms shot out from the Maid of Honor’s back, mostly from the right side. They had several knobby joints and looked more like spider legs than human arms.

“Hyah!”

“Fear not. It might look threatening with the needles and spools of thread, but the *Arachne 8* cannot harm you.”

The honey-blonde girl folded her hands in front of her large chest like a

bipedal cat as the Maid of Honor viewed the measurements of her client listed on her clipboard. ...The fact that she *did not* say she did not know how to fight was likely due to her pride as an official British maid who both looked after and protected the royals. The wooden device had several coats of paint and varnish that gave it a shine very different from Misaka Mikoto's A.A.A. Its texture was similar to a piano that had become the guardian deity of a school music room.

“This spiritual item is normally used to mend damaged armor and habits at frontline bases because the knights and warrior monks will throw a fit and insist they cannot return to the battlefield without their equipment.”

She was still smiling.

Its movements were a little different from the sewing machines in a home ec classroom.

Instead of sewing different pieces of fabric together to give them the shape of the pattern, every piece of fabric was made to order from the original threads. Middle school girls these days – even ones like Shokuhou Misaki – did not often have a chance to see something as old-fashioned as a loom in action.

The eight legs moved so quickly around it was impressive none of them caught on each other. Each time the almost invisibly-thin silk threads crossed vertically and horizontally in the air, the fabric grew thicker and, as it grew thicker, it gained color like glass or ice. It took no time at all. It was not like a sculpture or painting where the general outline was made first and the details were filled in. Every last detail and decoration was woven from one end to the other, but the process was different again from a copier or 3D printer. Perhaps this would be the result if you brought knit wool down to a microscopic size. The unique motions accurately produced the image the maid had described.

The normal embarrassment had been driven away by the unrealistic mood, but once she had nothing to do, its fingertips began crawling up her spine.

Yes, no matter what anyone said, that honey-blonde girl was only wearing that paper underwear at the moment.

However...

“All done!”

A pair of light-yellow panties fluttered through the air.

Not only were the sides tied with strings and the overall amount of fabric fairly insufficient, but it also had see-through lace in places. It took a certain kind of person to pull off that kind of underwear.

Shokuhou Misaki could only hold it at chest height and spread it out between her hands.

The shape of the back could only be described with a letter of the alphabet: T.

At best, it may have been a Y.

“...”

“Oh, do you not like it? I thought it would be best to show you what I could do with something smaller before going for the full dress.”

She understood that.

She really did. It was logical, but this was still a first for that all-around perfect young lady. She had never before spoken with the person who made her underwear and then had to put them on.

Unsure what to say, she mumbled under her breath, could not look the maid in the eye, and fidgeted with the newly-made underwear in her hands. ...The maid's skill was the real deal. The fabric seemed a little too thin for her liking, but it felt nice and light. There was no sign of any elastic or wires, but it was made to stretch and shrink oddly well.

The Maid of Honor took the lack of protest as acceptance and started moving the eight legs on her back to create the next item. Gloves and accessories flew through the air. It was a lot like a faster, more detailed, and more complex version of hand-knitting a sweater, but doubt filled Shokuhou's eyes as she watched the next all-silk item being produced from one end to the other.

“Um, that is the dress itself, isn’t it?”

“Yes, what about it?”

“Well, you made me some panties and gloves, but what about a bra?”

“Eh?”

“Eh?”

They ended up confusing each other.

Despite all the other accessories, her large chest remained untouched.

Apparently, Shokuhou Misaki would have to spend the evening without wearing a bra. She would be equipped with a cursed dress that could not be removed – or rather, that would cause some problems of the indecent exposure variety if she did remove it.

Meanwhile.

Shokuhou was not the only one. Maids gathered around Mikoto and Index who were also only wearing paper underwear that looked like it would tear at the slightest tug. The maids were directly making dresses for them as well, but they had more equipment than just that *Arachne 8* thing.

“Hm, I think using my Valkyrie Swan 3 to produce a body as delicate as glasswork would hit it out of the park tonight. It would be best to show real love to your curves! But not those obscene lumps of fat; I am talking about modest and gentle curves!! Yes, let’s make sure even the bumps of your ribs show through! That way anyone who understand the value of a millimeter can enjoy the true beauty found here!!”

“My ribs!? What kind of freak am I working with here!?”

“Oh, dear. Please do not touch the Habetrot 2’s pulleys.”

“This part goes like this. You’re doing the maintenance wrong. Don’t poke it with your fingertips. That Scottish border fairy would use her lips to spin,

even if it is a little gross.”

Shokuhou felt heat rising in her nape because being seen changing was embarrassing in a different way from simply having her skin seen. But there were no curtain or partitions here, so she had to squeeze her eyes shut and ignore the reality around her. She put on each of the items made for her. This was different from a normal dress. To repeat, there was no elastic or wires used, but the entire thing squeezed around her like a living creature once she put it on.

(It’s like a swimsuit, or...wow, it really is a lot like a bunny suit.)

She slowly twisted her body around to worriedly check on her butt without hurting her hip.

The solid fabric apparently rose partway up her back. It was likely in order to cover up the medical corset, but the hips were located a little higher than with a professional(?) bunny girl.

The nearly T-shape and string sides of the underwear may have been so it could be worn below the leotard-like dress.

(This is only made out of silk, right? I’m impressed they could make it as solid as that enamel material without any guides or wires.)

It was oddly hard and shiny for silk, but that was likely due to the excessive use of dyes. It might be easier to think of it like normal cloth that had absorbed some glue.

The polyurethane protecting her hips was apparently seen as a part of the dress. She belatedly realized the pressure on her hip was less than when she had only been wearing the paper underwear. Just like tailwinds and air conditioning, people could not put up barriers against truly pleasant changes.

(At this point, that thing seems more like a medical robot suit used by nurses.)

The Maid of Honor in charge of weaving her dress stored the eight legs

within her uniform, placed a hand over her mouth, and spoke up in surprise.

“My, what a strange way of doing things. You wrap a large towel around your hips before changing your underwear?”

“This is more comfortable even when we are all women. Do not underestimate the advanced defense abilities Japan’s school culture has developed to deal with pool classes.”

Index was unfamiliar with that culture, so she just removed her paper underwear and put on her silk one like normal. She just stood there and lifted her right then left leg to put it on a leg at a time. Shokuhou wanted to cover her face with her hands when she saw it. She felt oddly guilty for having her eyes open while it happened.

Meanwhile.

The sexy girl brought her hands behind her to tie back her long blonde hair. It was a lot like making two layers out of her hair and then letting it flow down. She had been handed a small crown-like accessory to hold her hair in place. It attached with a band instead of just sitting on her head, so it was similar to the mini hats worn in gothic lolita fashion.

Shokuhou Misaki wore a bright yellow cocktail dress derived from a solid bunny suit that bared her shoulders and had large slits in the skirt to draw attention away from her hips.

Misaka Mikoto wore a dark blue lingerie dress with a shortish skirt that had see-through sections woven in at the navel, sides, and other areas.

Index wore a white storybook princess dress with reddish-purple lines and a long skirt that was softly pushed out from within.

“Yes, that should do I suppose.”

“I feel like there’s an age-based level cap in effect here.”

“I feel like there’s an age-based level cap in effect here.”

The confident Queen looked like a bunny girl colored a sparkling wine yellow with a longish skirt added on. A cheap emergency whistle fell at her large chest and her phone was stored within a flower decoration on the side of her hip. Index, whose long sliver hair was worn up in buns on either side of her head, and Misaka Mikoto, who wore a thin veil on her head, felt the need to protest.

This all seemed simple enough, but there was one crucial meaning found here.

Yes.

The royal family's maids *were not hiding the existence of magic* from the Academy City girls.

Of course, it was unclear if Mikoto and Shokuhou really understand the whole process that started with refining magic power from one's lifeforce.

Their personal possessions (some of which had been childishly strewn across the floor by a certain nun) were temporarily in the care of the maids. The problem was how that included Mikoto's large A.A.A.

The famous electric girl named Misaka Mikoto put a hand on her hip and blushed at how much of her dress was see-through. The look on her face said she wanted to get used to this as soon as possible.

“Honestly, what are we supposed to do about this? I think we’re going to stand out way too much dressed like this.”

“Misaka-san☆”

“Eek!?”

Mikoto's back stretched up because Shokuhou had run her index finger up the electric girl's spine. Her back was left mostly exposed, so the stimulation went directly to her skin.

“Your item is larger than my handbag, so you need to go check it in at the cloakroom. If you try to enter the party with that mass of violence ability,

their men in black will feel the need to restrain you. England is the home of macho men in tuxedos, after all.”

“C-couldn’t I maybe get it to take a less threatening form? Hmm, might as well just go for it. One, two, three...whoa, it actually transformed!!”

The mystery equipment must not have wanted to part with its master and end up in the edge of the graduation photo because it gave an adlibbed response. With the solid clicks and clanks of a 3D puzzle being put together, it became a long, narrow box colored nearly black that was supported by small wheels. It had a lot of wheels, similar to an armored truck, but the overall balance was more like a solid streetcar or police van in miniature.

The long narrow box was about the size of a small bench. The height would make sitting on it more like sitting on the back of a bench, but it was still about right for sitting.

Shokuhou Misaki tried placing her butt on it.

The slight stretching sound must have come from her shiny dress.

The honey-blonde girl had sat down while facing it, so she did so like it was a tallish stool. She kicked her feet without worrying about the slits in her skirt and she had the pleased look of someone soaking up to their shoulders in a hot spring.

“Ahh, this is so much better. This kind of support is a fantastic thing when you’ve hurt your hip.”

“Refuse her, A.A.A.!! Don’t just let her subdue you with her ass!!”

This may have been a problem caused by using the device in tandem so often. Misaka Mikoto was the officially registered user, but Shokuhou Misaki may have become a guest user who could share the same services.

At any rate, they had a mobile save point now.

Shokuhou Misaki carefully stood up and placed her feet on the floor once more.

“Okay, we have our dresses, but what do we do now? Sitting around in the fitting room would be boring, but the party floor probably isn’t open yet.”

“You could take a look around the castle if you like, or you could enjoy yourselves in the game room.”

Surprisingly, it was Mikoto who jumped at the Maid of Honor’s suggestion.

She secretly carried around an arcade coin at all times, so she may have been interested in analog games and not just the digital ones (which she could always cheat at using her electrical powers).

“You mean like darts and pool?”

“Why would you talk about a game that requires bending over at ninety degrees in front of someone who hurt her hip?”

“Or you could follow our customs and kill some time enjoying a cup of tea,” added the maid.

When it came to food and drink, it was obvious who the response would come from.

But surprisingly, the silver LR bun monster seemed cautious.

“Touma gets mad if you eat snacks before dinner!”

“Now, now, Lady Index. You have a perfect memory, but have you forgotten the British way after spending so much time in the Far East? Teatime is a separate category altogether☆”

Shokuhou and Mikoto had no intention of pigging out on the food laid out in the party hall, so there would be nothing wrong with having something on their stomach already. The Maid of Honor led them out of the fitting room.

Then the atmosphere seemed to change.

“Kh.”

Mikoto belatedly bent over and hid her chest behind her hands. She was outside and her lingerie dress showed her navel like lace underwear. She had of course not chosen this herself. Even the slightest breeze tickled at her milky white skin, stirring up her embarrassment. She could sense the sweet scent rising from her heated nape below the hair pulled back behind her head, but focusing on that would not change anything.

Misaka Mikoto had lived a high-class life herself, so it was not like she had never been to a formal party.

But things were a little different this time.

“Hm?”

“Why are you curling up to show off your back, Misaka-saaan?”

The storybook princess and crazy bunny only looked confused by her reaction. They must have had entirely different feelings inside their hearts.

And.

It turned out those girls (and an object similar to a bench-sized streetcar or police van) were not the only ones with nothing to do.

As they walked down the carpeted hallway, they saw someone zoned out in a rest space they came across.

“Ugh...”

“?”

Mikoto’s entire face grew beet red.

The heat spread past her cheeks to reach her nape and even her bare back.

Her eyes widened and refused to shrink back down.

Fluffy Index looked puzzled, but Mikoto might as well have been wearing a body suit of underwear material over her slender torso with only a skirt over

that. Of course she was going to cover her face and blush when she ran across a boy she knew.

Yes.

She had seen a spiky-haired high school boy.

“Why...you...but...”

“??? What’s with you, Biri Biri?”

“Awawawa!!”

“Whoa! Now is not the time for that high-voltage zapping!!”

The older boy frantically held up his right hand to brush aside the bluish-white flash of light that uncontrollably shot from her bangs.

Meanwhile, Mikoto doubled over and crossed her arms in front of her flat chest. She was entirely focused on defense, but she was too flustered to realize the curved lines of her back were entirely visible.

“Are you okay, Kamijou-saaan? Sorry about how uncivilized she is.”

“S-sure...”

They belatedly noticed Kamijou Touma was holding a phone in his other hand.

A cable hung from the bottom.

He must have been messing with his phone, realized it was low on battery, tried to charge it up, and found the plug was the wrong shape. As usual, the boy was clearly plagued by misfortune. And even if he had thoughtlessly plugged it in without considering the current and voltage, the “made in Japan” device would probably have been fried.

And something was different about him as well.

Kamijou Touma was not wearing his usual hoodie or school uniform.

He had instead donned an all-black tuxedo and ascot tie like something from a movie.

“Touma, you’re all dressed up!”

“Yes, yes. And that’s a pretty incredible outfit you’re wearing too. I can’t even see your shoes. Dresses have to be way more work than suits.”

“C’mon, Misaka-saaan. How long are you going to stay crouched down like that?”

“Kh...”

She was trembling.

Mikoto was blushing and looked one small step away from tears, but she slowly stood back up. She relaxed the arms crossed in front of her chest as she did so. She instead moved them behind her to finally show off the entirety of the lingerie dress she was wearing.

“Wow,” said Kamijou Touma.

“Would you mind telling me what emotion that was meant to express? Answer wrong and I might have to blast you!!”

She could only shout in desperation at this point.

It still felt weird to have those crazy maids use her as a dress-up doll.

But at the same time.

When she thought about it rationally, had she ever taken such a large step before?

(Eh? Ahh...he’s so close! And I’m dressed like this!!)

Mikoto was surprised, but she froze up like a cat that physically could not

back up. Meanwhile, Index spoke up while producing footsteps that suggested she was wearing flat shoes.

“They’re going to serve us tea. What about you, Touma?”

“Listen up, Index. When someone offers me something for free, I take it. Being poor is suffering. I’m still ashamed I couldn’t buy those plastic storage containers at the shopping center during the day.”

The calico cat also gave a sweet mew.

He rubbed his small head against her ankle, but Academy City’s #5 did not move.

The honey-blonde girl had been shining in the spotlight before, but now she was acting more like a shy kitten. She must have shrunk down a bit because a stretching sound came from the hips of her shiny dress. She alone could not move out front here. Part of it was her fear. She knew nothing could be done about it, but it still terrified her to be faced with the reality that she could never remain in a certain boy’s memories or mind.

But then it happened.

The spiky-haired boy turned toward her.

It happened without warning and it surprised that rational girl.

Kamijou Touma smiled and spoke to her.

“Why are you just standing there? Let’s get going, Shokuhou.”

Shokuhou Misaki clasped her hands in front of her large chest and spoke with damp eyes.

“...Of course.”

“That was enough to win you over!? What happened between you two!?”

“.....

.....Sigh.”

“Wait, hold on, what is that maiden-like silence supposed to mean? I was expecting you to deny it. Don’t tell me something really did happen!”

Mikoto was freaking out, but Shokuhou was not about to explain everything here.

Most likely, the spiky-haired boy did not even remember it.

He had called out to her like he would anyone else.

But he had no idea how many miracles were at work there.

Even this would be lost.

She knew that.

But...

She bit her lip to bear with something.

(That’s right.)

There was no reason to hesitate.

In fact, she could brush the issue aside. Shokuhou Misaki took a single large step forward.

She did not need the remotes in her brand-name bag.

She was fine without her powers at the moment.

As long as she had her memories and the promise whistle hidden at her chest.

(Today is for celebrating our victory, so there’s bound to be at least some miracle ability at work!)

## Part 2

Let us move back in time just a bit.

Now, what was Kamijou Touma doing there waiting all alone?

Windsor Castle was on the bank of the Thames on the outskirts of London.

It was not a tourist location like Osaka Castle or Versailles that had long since been vacated. Part of it was opened as a museum and archive, but the British royal family still used it as a residence, making it a true queen's castle.

The overall structure was a round tower in the central courtyard with angular stone structures shaped like three sides of a square on either side. Together, it all formed a large rectangular frame, but there were no walls surrounding the grounds as a whole. That structure itself was the castle.

St. George's *Chapel* existed on one end and the State Apartments for receiving visitors and press conferences was on the other end.

Unlike the pointy castle found in the center of a world-famous amusement park, British castles were generally wide. Unlike Japan, guns and cannons had been introduced to Western warfare relatively early, so each country and era came up with different ways to handle projectiles flying in parabolic arcs. Some used height and others used width. Castles in flat areas would create more horizontal distance and castles in the mountains or on cliffs would use the height they already had.

This was an informal gathering, but Kamijou had still done his best to dress up by copying the others around him. He found himself on the side with the State Apartments. That meant the living area which was off limits from the tourist side. Unlike Japanese castles which were built up on top of the stone walls, the courtyard here was surrounded on three sides by giant stone walls. It may have looked something like a school building linked together in a

complex fashion.

It was winter, so the sun set early.

“We normally invite guests to the reception area, but this is meant to be a private affair with mostly people we know, so mother decided using the residential area would help everyone feel more at home. I do apologize for how absurd she can be.”

The person who lowered a cup of tea with a slice of lemon floating in it and whispered to him was someone he would normally only see on TV.

She was First Princess Riméa.

She had shoulder-length glossy black hair and an old-fashioned monocle. While Kamijou and the others were nervously dressing up because the event demanded it, this princess always wore a blue dress that showed off her bodylines. ...If the pointy-haired boy was being honest, he found it hard to believe this was really a princess in front of him. And what was she doing here anyway?

“Hm.”

Riméa continued casually speaking with him while showing no sign of getting up from her seat.

The boy tried sitting down at the same table and noticed the pattern carved into the table.

It was *a rose*.

“That is hardly a rare symbol,” said the first princess after a sip of tea. “They say the rose symbol was even displayed on the Round Table. It is not unusual for symbols of an older age to be used in ways that surpass their original purpose.”

“Uh, oh... I-is this actually some incredible relic or something?”

Kamijou was unsure where to put his right hand.

He had destroyed quite a lot in the Tower of London while following Othinus's instructions.

Riméa smiled thinly.

"Good point. This is the private space where normal tourists are not allowed, so you will find some rare spiritual items lying around. You might avoid some careless accidents if you stick with that grimoire library while here."

Her words were belied by how little she actually seemed to care.

Did she simply trust the boy that much or did she only see the national treasures here as no more than household odds and ends since this was her home?

"Are there any obvious signs I can look for?"

"There are so many it would only confuse you. For example, the dragon is used to signify the devil, yet it is also used in house crests."

The word "dragon" caught in the boy's chest a bit.

Roses and dragons.

But that aside, what was the first princess doing here when the party was starting so soon?

The monocle princess returned his gaze with a fairly melancholic one of her own.

"Oh, I will not be going to the party."

"Eh?"

"I have no intention of mourning a traitor like Aleister and I do not want anyone thinking otherwise."

Come to think of it, the state funeral was set to be held once the country had gotten over the entire crisis. Although Kamijou was unsure what was normal

since he could not imagine what the process for a Western funeral even was. Was it more normal to hold the celebrations or the funerals first immediately following a war?

At any rate...

“Castle parties are like a gathering of devils who all use their official titles to get their way. Oh, I just can’t stand it. I’m feeling sick to the stomach just thinking about those people gathering around me just because I am a princess. Cinderella had it good. She could be the belle of the ball and then slip away once the time came. That is why I wanted this chance to meet with you before the party started. Before all those unnecessary official titles get involved.”

...It was sounding like the oldest of the sisters had precisely zero interest in the official ceremonies. The second sister, militaristic Carissa, had been thrown deep inside a prison, so the third sister, shy Villian, would be forced to pick up the slack.

Riméa spread some strong goat butter on a thin cracker and ate it before continuing.

“So now I can give you my thanks as *no more than* Riméa, boy. Thank you for protecting the country of my birth. I have no interest in social status or position, but the lights of the city seen out that window are an irreplaceable treasure to me.”

“...”

“The only light that will remain bright all on its own is the legend of Christian Rosenkreuz. The ordinary city lights must be preserved through effort. And that is what you did.”

Kamijou glanced out the window for a moment.

He viewed the scene outside. It may have been different from the flood of lights that formed the million-dollar view of a metropolis like Hong Kong, New York, or Shinjuku, but each of the lights he saw dotting the darkness

was someone preparing dinner, a child working on their homework, someone checking and rechecking the TV or internet for news about the end of the war, and other scenes of ordinary drama that had been allowed to continue.

Finally.

“...Heh.”

“?”

Riméa silently tilted her head when he laughed quietly.

She was a gloomy princess, but that made her sensitive to the damp sort of atmosphere she claimed as her own. She could tell the boy’s laugh was not simply one of joy.

The teenage heart was not that simple.

“I didn’t do anything. It was Coronzon who kept her plot going until she had revealed her true nature and it was Aleister who put himself at risk to oppose her. They both took their convictions past the point of no return. From beginning to end, I was only along for the ride. I was walking forward as they pulled on my hand, but I kept regretfully looking back at where I had come from.”

“I still can’t get used to people talking about Crowley like some kind of savior.”

“But that’s what he was,” sighed Kamijou.

He had not been a perfect human being by any standard. It was an undeniable fact that he had brought suffering to a great many people. But if Aleister had not decided to protect this world and continued fighting until the moment his heart ceased beating, history would not have survived to this point.

“All I did was survive to the end. I wasn’t at the center of this and I couldn’t reach the core of it, so I was stuck in the safe position of an observer the whole time.”

A lot of people had not survived.

Aleister and Coronzon had been at the very center of the incident, but they were no more.

They had died at war.

That concept was so foreign to a Japanese high school boy that he was unsure how to process it. He may not have been able to really come to grips with it yet.

“But,” softly added Riméa. “Call him a hero or a great warrior if you like, but he did not protect this country and this world all on his own, did he? That magician could only reach those heights because he knew he was not alone. That is how you protected this country. Just as all the other British people created a country that was worth protecting.”

“In that sense, it was my right hand that gave him the last push after he walked right up to the precipice. Even though I might have been able to grab his hand and stop him instead.”

“If the magician had wanted that. But if you had done that, I imagine Crowley would only have repeated history. He could not have escaped his life of suffering from setbacks and failure in some corner of the world.”

“...”

“What someone considers the best possible choice cannot be determined by anyone else. If that is what that criminal chose, there is no negating the action he took, no matter how we might judge it. For me, Magician Crowley is still an eccentric pervert who could not compromise with the society around him and drowned himself in magic, drugs, and boys. But the Board Chairman Aleister you knew was different, wasn’t he? Then go tell people about the person you saw from your position by his side. Throw out all those official titles and tell people about Aleister Crowley simply as a human.”

With that, First Princess Riméa silently stood from her chair.

Kamijou looked up without thinking, so...

“I said I am not going to the party, didn’t I?”

If the veteran Maids of Honor saw an opening, they were clearly ready to tie up that princess and drag her to the party hall, but Riméa’s expression remained calm.

“Enjoy yourself today. You earned it for winning and coming back alive.”

## Part 3

“It’s only tea.”

“I get that, Index, but keep it away from the cat.”

It was the short period of time before the actual party started.

They were in a large space in a corner of Windsor Castle.

Although it was impossible to tell whether this counted as a big room or a small room for this castle.

At any rate, when Kamijou grabbed the calico cat to pull him away from the tea set (since the cat would either bite or kitty punch anything he was interested in), Index grew upset in her fluffy dress that looked like it had to be hot.

“Why do you always do this, Touma!?” complained the girl in the white dress with reddish-purple lines. “You never let us do anything. Even Sphinx is going to go delinquent if you keep this up.”

“Oh, shut up. I know it isn’t as well-known as onions and chocolate, but

you're apparently not supposed to let cats have caffeine either. Besides, you shouldn't be giving the cat human food in the first place!!”

“What!? Then how do you explain the Japanese culture of cat rice!?”

“That term's roots go back hundreds of years. The source there might be just as old as the idea that Bakeneko lick up lamp oil during the night!”

Kamijou Touma was used to figuring most things out on the fly, but even he had to give up when it came to a formal tea set. What did you put in where and how many minutes did you wait? There were even two different hourglasses for measuring the time.

He kept opening and closing the lid of the white porcelain pot since its silhouette was at least familiar.

“I don't get this, but do I just have to stick the tea leaves in here and pour hot water in?”

“I want my tea as soon as possible.”

“So these boxy things are the tins of tea leaves, right? Are they all the same thing? Then I'll just open one and dump it in there.”

“Waaaaaaaaait!! There's a measuring spoon!”

“Waaaaaaaaait!! There's a measuring spoon!”

When Kamijou started using it like a small Japanese teapot, the Tokiwadai ladies shouted in unison to stop him.

You apparently had to measure out the tealeaves to match the volume of the pot.

When the girls leaned forward, the blue chest and yellow hips of their dresses made stretching sounds. This was very unlike jeans or a leather jacket. This was a dangerous noise that made it sound like they would be torn open like a present handed to a small child if they caught on anything.

Kamijou's face grew red for more reasons than one as he frantically shouted back.

"I-I knew that! This is that kind where you put the hot water in and let it steep before pouring, right!? And the hourglass used for that is right here. Kamijou-san understands everything!!"

"Shut up! There are a lot more steps than that!!"

Mikoto stretched over the table to snatch the teapot away from him and realized too late that left her unable to hide her see-through lingerie dress.

The short-haired girl heated up even more than the porcelain pot as the other girl spoke up.

"I see you still haven't changed your bad habit of endlessly talking to claim the initiative when you feel cornered. Sigh, what a troublesome girl you are."

The girl in the shiny, bunny-style fabric breathed an exasperated sigh.

Mikoto worked to correct his mistakes one at a time.

"First of all, why are you just talking about 'tea leaves' like they're all the same!? What kind of tea do you want and how strong do you want it? The astringency and acidity change a lot depending on the kind of tea leaves used, the amount you use determines the strength of the tea, and how long you steep it and whether or not you expose it to the air completely changes the final flavor."

"You also need to choose how you prepare it depending on whether you want to drink it straight or add some lemon or apple as an accent. In a more extreme case like royal milk tea, you had the process ability wrong from the moment you mentioned pouring hot water in."

Kamijou started trembling and could only ask one thing.

He could tell this was too hard for him from the moment he heard that using hot water could be wrong when making tea.

“So what am I supposed to do first?”

This boy’s ability to ask for help instead of faking it was his one saving grace here.

Kamijou was looking something like a wet puppy and Mikoto winked at him (since she had apparently grown numb to her own embarrassment).

“What kind of tea are you in the mood for?”

“The kind where you can unscrew the plastic bottle and drink it right away.”

The Tokiwadai ladies were loving enough to suppress the urge to tell him to go running to the nearest store.

“Then how about some normal Darjeeling?” asked Shokuhou.

“What a wasted opportunity. We’re in the country of tea, so we could try something truly monstrous like this Assam from a royal warrant holder.”

Mikoto leaned forward (stretching her bare back in the process) to grab one of the tea tins that was otherwise out of her reach, but...

“Misaaaka-san☆”

“Hey, stop poking my back!!”

She protected herself, but the honey-blonde girl did not seem to mind.

“That isn’t a bad idea, but isn’t that brand ability all about enjoying the astringency. I doubt a commoner with common tastes would like it☆”

“Hold it, Shokuhou. Why does it sound like you know that idiot’s tastes?”

“Take a wild guess.”

The honey-blonde girl smiled while toying with the silver emergency whistle hidden at her chest.

Mikoto and the honey-blonde girl quickly prepared the tea while chatting. They did it so easily the pointy-haired boy was not entirely sure what they had even done. If you did not know what to focus on, you could not learn much from a demonstration. Kamijou Touma may have been like a small child watching their big sister in the kitchen.

“Nhh!”

“Calm down, Index. Now is the time to wait.”

But even he knew what to do while the sand was spilling down within the hourglass.

Mikoto rested her head in her hand and kicked her feet crossed below the table while she waited until all the sand had fallen before her eyes.

“There, that should be good. We don’t need to let steep it any longer than this.”

“Is it like starting on your cup noodles before the three-minute mark to enjoy the not-quite-done texture?”

“If you ruin this classy atmosphere any further, I really will hit you.”

Mikoto grabbed the porcelain pot and poured the tea into cups for them all. Instead of pouring it in directly, she poured it through a fine filter. And instead of filling up each cup in turn, she slowly filled them all up bit by bit.

“What are you doing?”

“This way everyone gets the same amount. You can have the last drop as a special service.”

Kamijou took his first sip and then obediently reached for the case full of sugar cubes. Index plopped two sugars in before even tasting hers. They only learned you were supposed to enjoy the aroma first when they saw the Tokiwadai ladies swish their cups of tea around a bit without drinking any.

But since he had started drinking his already, there was no turning back for

him.

He trembled as he tried bluffing.

“I totally knew you were supposed to do that?”

“It doesn’t really matter. Everyone enjoys it in their own way.”

He thought they were going to make fun of him, but they actually accepted him. Apparently, this was not a fighting game where you wore down each other’s stamina. Unfortunately, that left Kamijou Touma at a complete loss regarding what to do next. But then...

“C’mon, quit holding the sugar pot. You already got your one sugar, didn’t you?”

“Eh? Huh?”

“Here, I will give you a teaspoon of honey instead. Although I’m sure this had less to do with the flavor than it did with trying to look good in front of the two girls who clearly knew what they were doing.”

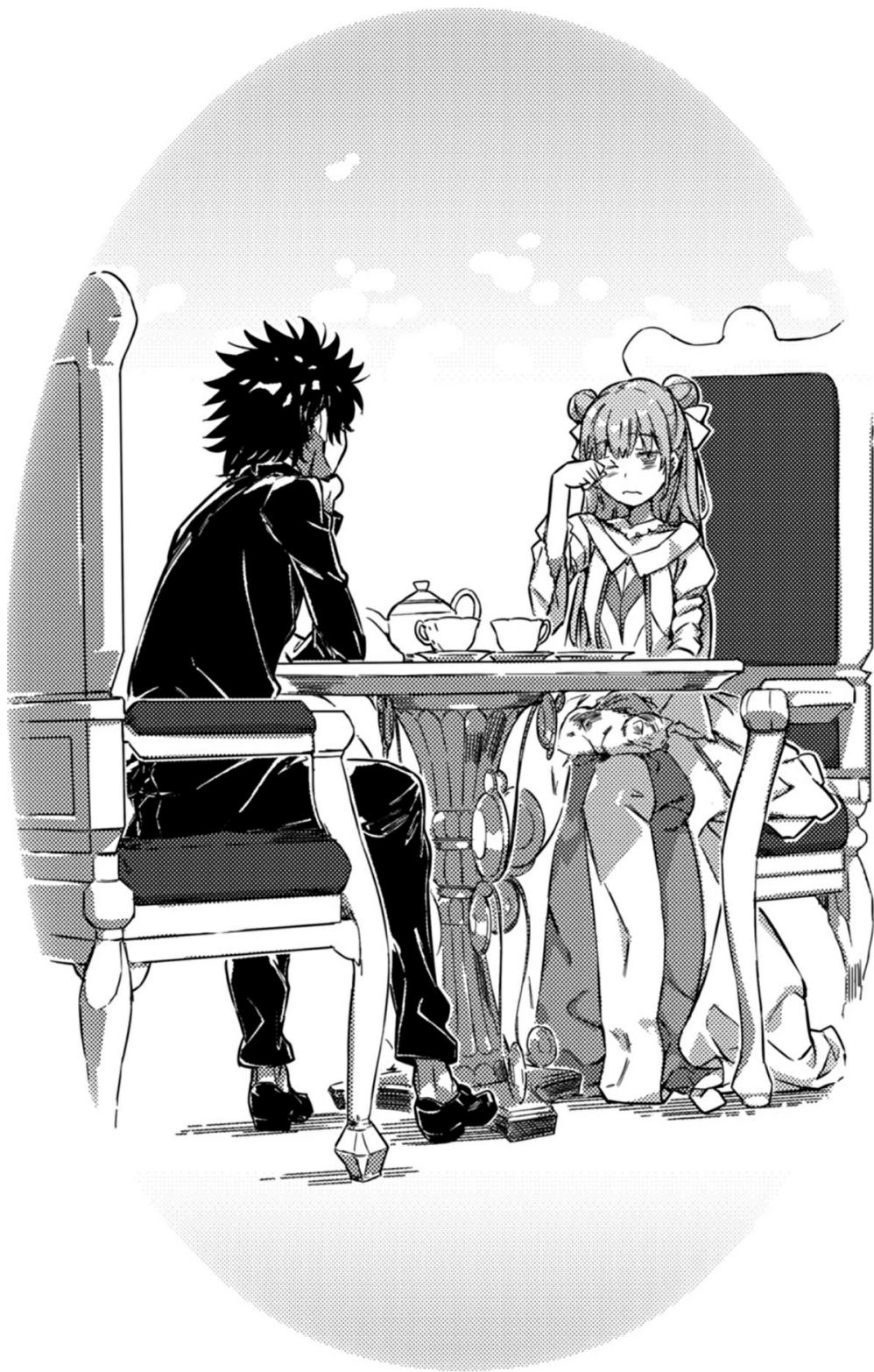
The honey-blonde girl kept things moving for the unnecessarily cautious commoner.

She herself did not use sugar or milk. She instead scooped a spoonful of apple jam into her cup before taking a sip.

“I so love this, even if some people say it’s wrong. That said...hm, I guess this gets a passing grade. Although you might have gotten some help from the water.”

“The water, huh? You do know drinking that mixture is going to make you sick to your stomach, don’t you?”

They did not want to fill themselves up too much with a dinner/party coming up, so the only tea snacks were thin, unsalted crackers. But Index resorted to desperate measures by grabbing five of them at once to gain some real thickness.



“Geez, really? Index, quit chowing down on those! You’re getting crumbs all over your dress!!”

“Nhh.”

“Are you feeling sleepy? All you’ve been saying is ‘nh’.”

“Nhhh.”

She was apparently too sleepy to respond properly.

That would probably change once the caffeine kicked in, but Kamijou had no choice but to look after her for the time being. He used a handkerchief to wipe off her mouth and the lace around her neck before brushing the cracker crumbs off of her dress. They were unsalted crackers, so the calico cat licked at the ones that fell into her lap.

And...

“...”

Did he notice the honey-blonde girl with the apple jam tea silently narrowing her eyes?

She watched the pointy-haired boy smiling bitterly as he looked after the small girl.

What was she reminded of when she saw that?

## Part 4

And.

With that.

“The British crisis beginning with the Crowley’s Hazards and ending with Great Demon Coronzon has come to an end. We must raise our glasses here in memory of those who were lost. Raise an earnest prayer and never forget to enjoy yourself with the life you still hold! Now, a toast!!”

Queen Regnant Elizard was the same as ever.

She would not allow the gloomy atmosphere to remain that way. Terrorism, war, disease, and disaster. No matter what troubles were thrown at her nation, that nation would be helpless if she could not find the words to inspire them. For example, if a horrific terrorist attack shook the country, the self-proclaimed sensible people who would snap at everyone but the actual terrorists, telling them to restrain themselves and be more considerate, were actually indirectly giving the terrorists what they wanted. No matter the situation, they had to preserve their normal lives. If a leader was to act as an umbrella standing protectively above the people, perhaps this was a necessary skill.

They were in one of Windsor Castle’s dance halls.

...This was technically in the private residential part of the castle, but this was the royal family and they may have enjoyed ballroom dancing in their everyday lives. When you thought about it, it was hard to imagine where else they would practice dancing.

The meal took a buffet style.

The British Maids of Honor were gathered in one corner of the hall.

But not because they were employees standing aside so as not to get in the way of the guests. This was a day for celebration, so they were enjoying the party too.

In fact.

They were surrounding the Eastern blood that had crossed the vast ocean to visit them here.

Due to the gender ratio, that corner alone carried a scent much like a girl's locker room.

They were all head over heels for that Japanese boy.

"Really? You came here all the way from Japan? That's incredible."

"Here, let me hold your hand. I can help you clean up."

"Here, here. Eat this. I'm really proud of this one. I-I mean, if you want, of course. Now, say 'ah'."

The maids were answered by a meow from the floor.

The Japanese calico had an extremely rare genetic makeup, so it was a rarely-seen breed in England. It was about as unusual as the hairless cats created by repeated selective breeding.

Just like with Akita and Shiba dogs, something that was common in Japan could gather a lot of attention overseas.

That three-colored guy was getting all the focus.

Even though he was only washing his face with his front paw.

"Kyah! Oh, I just wanna- kyah, kyah!!"

"Kyah! Oh, I just wanna- kyah, kyah!!"

"Kyah! Oh, I just wanna- kyah, kyah!!"

"This is way more upsetting than it should be."

Resentment filled the pointy-haired boy's voice even though he could not understand any of the English being spoken by the mountain of maids.

That said, this had definitely been arranged so everyone could relax and enjoy themselves.

This *home party* had not been revealed to the political or economic worlds and the press had been thoroughly shut out. They could walk around and chat much more easily than in some stuffy ceremony and it helped drive home that the war was over.

Index pointed all over the place while wearing her fluffy white princess dress with bright reddish-purple lines.

“Touma, there’s tons of food prepared over there and over here!”

“Is that so?”

“I’ll get some for you too. I hope you’re ready to see I can play the big sister when I want to!!”

“Wait just a second, Index-san! I honestly don’t trust your taste in food. A person’s buffet plate is a reflection of their heart. This isn’t going to end up being meat, meat, the occasional carbs, more meat, a sprinkling of fat, and lots and lots of sugar, is it!?”

The sound of her flat shoes disappeared into the crowd. Incidentally, that taste in food had been developed by the shocking diet he had given her in his dorm, but the pointy-haired boy did not think it through that far.

Meanwhile, Misaka Mikoto and Shokuhou Misaki had nonchalantly moved their way toward the Japanese section of the available food. Those middle school girls were casually chatting with the blonde maids, so they seemed utterly bizarre to the high school boy who struggled with even a normal English textbook.

That said, this was odd.

Why were they not in the center?

He wondered if they were feeling homesick, but apparently not.

“Hey, ladies. Why are you hanging out by the wall like this?”

“...”

“...”

The two girls responded to his question by wrapping their arms around their dresses and not looking him in the eye.

Their cheeks were a bit red.

And they breathed exasperated sighs.

As if to call him dense.

Apparently, the girls did not want to be seen by so many strangers in those extreme dresses the maids had chosen for them. ...Although they were apparently so busy guarding their chests they forgot that curling up only accentuated their alluring backs.

And besides that...

“Well, um...it’s mostly British food, you know? And, yeah, that makes sense given who invited us, but still.”

“Their combination of tea and cakes hits it out of the park, but I hear opinions grow much more divided once you get to the heavier foods☆”

“Eh?”

Kamijou had a horrifying thought.

He quickly turned around, but he could not tell where Index was in the crowd. He could not even imagine what kind of food was going to be piled up on the plate she returned with.

“And that’s why you’re here in the Japanese section?”

“Chinese would have worked too. It’s not quite as ubiquitous as the world-famous burger, but Asian food has been accepted pretty much everywhere in the world.”

They apparently planned to use this section as a starting point and then check

out the rest for anything passable.

But when Kamijou glanced over at the food here...

“Check out this futomaki. This says it’s a new winter product: the Cambridge roll.”

“So it’s not even a California roll!?” exclaimed Mikoto. “If they’ve ruined the Japanese food too, we might be out of luck tonight!!”

“Anything that puts avocado in sushi rice should really just be called American food,” said Shokuhou. “We aren’t about to claim it as our own.”

The problem was how it was actually pretty good once he tried it.

It was something like tenmusu with some cheese as an accent.

With the visual of fried fish and cheese placed between the seaweed and rice, claiming it was Japanese food would probably get you quite a look from the people of Nara or Kyoto, but the students of a city of science were more flexible. If you thought of it like a bizarre rice ball flavor found in a convenience store, it was not all that outlandish.

“Munch, munch munch. ...Munch? Munch!!”

Shokuhou Misaki had trouble with the futomaki because she was unsure how you were meant to eat it. You were apparently supposed to do it European style and cut it into bite-sized pieces with a knife and fork, but her common sense as a Japanese person worked against her here. She held the thick thing in her slender fingers and stuffed it into her mouth like the one eaten at Setsubun.

The embarrassing and sexy middle school girl was entering some dangerous territory here, so Kamijou could not keep watching and instead lowered his gaze to the (globally-accepted) futomaki he held.

“Maybe the food here is safe after all. I mean, it’s all gotta be made by pro chefs who cook for a queen and princesses. I don’t know how the hierarchy works here, but they have to be the crème de la crème of British cooks,

right?"

"Touma, I'm back with the food. They say this is like ketchup and they boiled a bunch of beans in it!!"

"Excuse us," said the two ladies as they chose to keep their distance.

Just like conveyor belt sushi and ramen ordered with extra fatty pork, you were not to leave anything on your plate at a buffet. Kamijou Touma knew that. From the moment he accepted the plate handed to him, his honor as a growing high school boy would demand he commit seppuku if he broke that vow.

He wanted to gather his resolve and start eating.

However.

It was beans.

Not meat. Not fish.

Could beans really be a primary ingredient?

These were not processed into tofu or something. These untouched beans had an entirely different sort of impact.

"The fact that it all looks so bright and red only makes it seem weirder. I thought beans were plainer than this."

He lamented.

He lamented, but it did nothing to change the amount on the plate.

Some days were just like this.

Index had a perfect memory and she proudly reported that this dish had the "OK for Cats" label, so Kamijou considered feeding it to the calico cat at his feet, but that only got him a cat scratch on the back of his hand. Now that the kitty had experienced fancy cat food, he had no interest in human leftovers.

That meant it was time for Kamijou to pick up the fork...except this was more of a job for a spoon. He scooped some up like it was the kind of bean soup rarely seen in Japan and made another attempt at the fairly densely-packed bean army.

For one thing.

Was he even ready to eat beans that were not edamame or soybeans?

He could not even think of any other than adzuki and green peas.

The fact that they were not even available in Japanese supermarkets was proof of how few Japanese people liked them. Not all these beans had the same worldwide acceptance as peanuts and cocoa.

There was one thing he had to mention before even getting to the flavor.

“This is like a soup, but it feels so dry in my mouth.”

This was the fearsome side of beans at their beaniest. But what could you expect when their main selling point skipped straight past flavor, aroma, texture, or any other food-related attribute and went with nutritional value and preservability? Not even fava beans felt this dry.

“Hwa hwa hwa ni ha ha hwa hwa ni?”

“And I see you’re chowing down on them like you do everything else, Index. I swear you can eat the food in any part of the world.”

Incidentally.

A lot of people wearing tailcoats and dresses were gathered in the dance hall, but this was not everyone who had participated in the battle. And those missing were not just the ones like Aleister whose names would have been carved into a war memorial.

Mikoto breathed an exasperated sigh as she looked around.

She was blushing and crouching down a little due to the blue lingerie dress,

so she looked more like a small animal than usual. But the lady with her short hair worn back did not consider what that hunched over pose meant for her smooth back.

“I know it was an emergency, but I’m still amazed we weren’t arrested. None of us got our passports stamped, did we?”

“I don’t even have mine,” said Kamijou. “I mean, we were the ones attacking England when we used the chaos caused by the Crowley’s Hazards to cross the Strait of Dover.”

“Um, Kamijou-san? I feel like I need to ask this again: what were you doing that led you to this country???”

The Kamijou and Index pair had arrived in the country in a very different way from the Mikoto and Shokuhou pair, so there were bound to be some misunderstandings there.

And the others they had crossed the Strait of Dover with were not at this party.

They had ended up in different positions.

The most obvious example was the lack of representation from the science side here.

Accelerator had gone missing along with Qliphah Puzzle 545, the artificial demon created by Coronzon. Hamazura Shiage had apparently shown signs of fighting alongside the great demon at the end there. Karasuma Fran had started out as a pawn working for Lola (aka Coronzon) and had brought the Kamisato Faction to Academy City to cause chaos there, making her a spy who indirectly led to Aleister’s death. It had been half forgotten during all the mess with Aleister and Coronzon, but she was supposed to have disappeared into the world outside of Academy City along with Tsuchimikado Motoharu. Given her situation, she was in no position to make an appearance at Windsor Castle even if the war was over.

War could not simply be called good or evil.

That was a hackneyed saying and it could be an unpleasant one given how often it was used by those who spoke of war in a detached sense that ignored the actual tragedies and hatred produced by war, but Kamijou and the others had found themselves in the slim gap created by that thinking.

They had won and they were not to be punished for the laws they broke along the way.

Even though someone who had not been here could not have won the battle no matter how hard they tried.

“This is going to leave behind some thorns.”

“You mean the people in the most central roles will be pushed away from the cheerful parties?” Mikoto smiled bitterly with her hair worn back with a large veil over it. “I don’t think that’s quite accurate. Whether they lived or died, *if they were capable of choosing to flee*, then they must have been afraid of something.”

“?”

“We didn’t stay here instead of running away because we knew England would welcome us once the fighting was over. They could have arrested us, interrogated us, and found us guilty in court. But we still stayed here to explain ourselves properly. And that’s why we get to attend this party. Whether those other people lived and ran away or died satisfied, they must have been afraid of *an uglier* ending. Thinking of the risks made them tremble, so they decided to call it quits.”

Misaka Mikoto did not sugarcoat it.

That may have been because she had seen those clone “sisters” of hers who had seen so many of their own killed but decided to go on living without letting themselves be dyed by the desire for revenge or victim complex that others might try to force onto them.

And after a somehow mature sigh, the fourteen-year-old girl laughed.

“In that sense, even this was a victory on our part. Not a victory in the war that has brought such great joy to the UK, but a victory in the small gamble we made with ourselves.”

“Yeah, I hear the celebrations in the UK’s big cities are quite something right now,” cut in Shokuhou Misaki who wore her honey-blonde hair up (revealing her bright milky-white nape).

She turned her attention away from the calico cat purring at her feet and waved her phone at them. Her bunny suit style of dress had no pockets, so she stored it behind the ribbon decoration on the side of her hip.

“It seems the normal people are only aware of those monsters that arrived from the sea. Crowley’s Hazards, were they called? Everyone’s splashing alcohol on each other like they’re celebrating a big soccer victory.”

“That might be why the queen decided to make this an informal home party.”

If the party was held in the name of the country as a whole, who knows how many millions of people would have come pushing in for an audience. On a day like today, that really could have happened.

The war was over.

The threat of Great Demon Coronzon was gone.

As the boy thought about how best to accept that, Queen Regnant Elizard approached with Knight Leader by her side like a secretary.

“Enjoying yourself, boy?”

“I’m making an attempt at your country’s cuisine.”

“Try just going for it without thinking about it too hard. Our food is a lot like beer – it’s an acquired taste. To be honest, I stuck my tongue out at it a lot when I was a kid. My father had to get after me a lot when he caught me sneaking a lot of French sweets.”

Her comparison was a difficult one for a high school boy to grasp.

As classy as they were, Misaka Mikoto and Shokuhou Misaki were still not used to making audiences like this, so it was amusing how quickly their backs straightened up. The queen of a developed nation was a little much even for them. They also tried to cover themselves with their arms because of the bunny suit and lingerie dress the maids had given them. ...They were apparently unaware of the basic rule that girls became much more noticeable when they grew embarrassed.

Meanwhile, the pointy-haired boy was as ill-mannered as could be.

“What about you? I know your oldest daughter isn’t here.”

“Riméa has her own way of enjoying herself, so do not worry about her. She has probably changed into a leather jacket and jeans and found her way into a pub in the city. But not as First Princess Riméa. She will be emptying a huge beer mug while surrounded by people who only see her as some ordinary woman.”

Unlike her delinquent sisters, Third Princess Villian had attended the party. She was shrinking down in one corner of the party hall while surrounded by a great many knights. She had not accomplished much of note at the end of the fighting, but the virtuous girl had treated a lot of injured soldiers. She had apparently gathered their support in a different way from Carissa who dominated them by force.

“What’s your opinion of today’s battle?”

“We did what had to be done.” Elizard answered without hesitation and then relaxed her shoulders. “That is what it means to protect your country. It just so happened that the problem was so large it reached the surface this time. Nations must be supported. Peace will not last forever all on its own. In fact, how you position just one of the supports can change the basic structure from good to evil. Then everything will change. So you can never let your guard down even for a day. I will not allow this country to fall and I will not allow it to stray in the wrong direction. Even Adam and Eve were cast out of paradise, so you cannot expect any absolutes in a mere manmade country.”

## Part 5

“Sphinx, it’s time to come back!”

Index called out for the cat while dressed like a picture book princess.

Cats were generally very territorial and were famous for being very shy if brought on a trip, but this calico cat was far too fearless. He slipped into any gap he could find – below the long tables of food, behind the cooking booths by the wall, between the legs of ladies wearing gorgeous dresses, etc. – and curled up in those safe spaces.

The girl’s flat shoes sounded on the floor and her white and reddish-purple skirt fluttered in a dangerous way despite how long it was.

“I guess I’ll have to lure him out with food.”

“You just want to eat the food. Besides, all those maids already fed him an unbelievable amount of cat food, so I bet he’s had enough.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?”

“Give him some after-dinner exercise?”

The pointy-haired boy pulled out a decorative flower he had picked up from somewhere. It was no more than a wire with an imitation rose at the end, but it worked as a makeshift cat toy.

“C’mon out, calico kitty.”

Kamijou Touma crouched down and worked to drag out the cat.

He made a valiant attempt to face the cat hiding below a lady’s long skirt, but he only ended up with another scratch on the back of his hand and the lady’s smooth high heel in his face.

“What do you think you are doing!?”

He thought he recognized the voice, so he looked up to see a familiar female knight with her face blushing red. She had always been wearing armor and riding a warhorse before, but she was apparently a high-society sort of person otherwise.

## Part 6

Shokuhou Misaki breathed a soft sigh while wearing a distinctive dress designed similar to a bunny suit and colored the bright yellow of sparkling wine.

She was accustomed to parties like this. It was not all that unusual for someone like her to speak with a British knight or even someone with a legit noble rank in this day and age.

But there were some gaps between her smiles.

In the short spaces between visiting with others, she found herself toying with the cheap emergency whistle she wore.

Misaka Mikoto was giving her most sociable smile next to her.

That girl was not suited for nobility.

She was crouching down in a way that only accentuated her bare back. And she was speaking to...

“Th-the kitty cat? I want to give him some cat food too.”

“Hiss!!”

“That hurts, you know!?”

(The animal is only reacting to the EM ability you emit from your body, so there is nothing you can do about it. You really do love wasted effort, don’t you?)

Animals did not exactly like Shokuhou either, although that had nothing to do with her powers. But speaking of her powers, Mental Out only worked on humans, so she did find herself avoiding cats and dogs. But from the looks of things, Mikoto would have to use her as a shield. The calico cat did seem to like her and he kept rubbing his head against her ankles.

She was pretty sure Kamijou Touma was doing a lot to help them out.

This looked like a lively party hall, but Shokuhou and Mikoto did not know many of the British people here. Of course, the honey-blonde girl was used to these social scenes and was confident in her ability to put on a perfect smile, say all the right things, and blend in, but she was much less confident that would put her mind at ease.

Kamijou knew almost everyone here, yet he was sticking with them. That would be his way of not leaving Shokuhou and Mikoto alone in this unfamiliar place. Although he may not have been aware he was doing it.

But that was exactly the point.

When he went to the restroom, the surrounding activity seemed to fade away.

“That means we must have fought alongside each other on the highway between England and Scotland. I’m shocked. That was more or less your first anti-magician battle, wasn’t it? And you were up against the original Golden members who were even more powerful than the rumors suggested.”

“Yes, I suppose so.”

“I was helpless against them. My duty is to Her Majesty and the state, so I never expected to be taking a boy I barely knew to the battlefield. Speaking of that boy, I can’t believe he just tried to crawl right into my skirt...”

“But most of the actual fighting was done by that super-strong girl over there.”

She felt uneasy even as she had a pleasant chat with a blonde female... knight?

She knew her mind was wandering, but her focus was not on the short-haired woman in front of her.

It scared her that she was no longer in his field of vision. His memories and awareness of her had remained in place *by some kind of coincidence*, but when she considered the possibility that it would all reset once he walked back in through the door, she could not calm herself down.

(I'm so pathetic. I thought I had accepted this long ago.)

“Oh, your glass is empty. Allow me to bring you another drink. Of the non-alcoholic options, would a Saratoga cooler be acceptable?”

“Make it a Shirley Temple, please. The ginger ale’s dryness ability is a little too-...kh!”

Shokuhou Misaki’s milky-white back straightened up unnaturally.

At the same time, the long narrow box that accompanied Misaka Mikoto everywhere gently and silently circled around behind her. It moved into position for her to sit down as she staggered.

She was surprised to find it lifted her butt up to the height of a stool, which lifted her feet off the floor. Mikoto took a sip of her broad glass while making sure not to look toward Shokuhou who had been freed from the pain in the back of her hip. Mikoto was drinking a Florida, which was basically a mixture of different fruit juices. It could be made at a family restaurant’s soda fountain if you had the guts.

Mikoto whispered while worried about anyone watching them.

“Selfish girl, you might have a polyurethane corset under your dress, but you’re only fooling yourself for now. You were attacked by that...Great

Demon? Well, by that weird hair, so make sure to get some rest from time to time.”

“...Why are you doing this?”

“I could ask you the same question. Why don’t you just use Mental Out on yourself? If you wanted to, you could remove the pain or even turn your mind into a happy flower garden.”

“I have my reasons. Not all of them logical.”

She sounded like a stubborn child.

But maybe the boy who had shared that summer with her would think this was more like her.

Her large chest rose and fell in a sigh and she crossed her long legs.

Although that was not a sign of confidence. She was trying out the movement out of fear that the pain would come back. The calico cat chased after her foot like it was a cat toy or laser pointer, but that was probably because of the sparkling heels.

“This is certainly something. I never thought the day would come I let you see my weaker side.”

“You’ve seen plenty of my weakness.”

“It’s fine when I see it. After all, I’m the fixer with lots of behind the scenes ability☆”

She knew that was a selfish way of looking at it.

She liked to control others and view everything as a single large stage and some might view that as a fear of something happening without her knowledge and catching her by surprise, but she did not care if they thought that. She was afraid of having her bonds severed and she was afraid of getting excited all on her own.

*So she took control.*

When you got down to it, the Queen of Tokiwadai's largest clique was just a young girl. She feared loss and could not stand to see what she thought she had crumbling away, so she never stopped struggling. ...And it all may have been a reaction to losing her connection to that pointy-haired boy on a certain summer day.

The difference between a superiority complex and an inferiority complex was paper thin.

If she had not been so afraid of loneliness, she never would have worked to create the largest clique in Tokiwadai. If she did not fear missing some crucial information, she would have had no interest in the influence of a being charismatic figure on social media.

“Misaka-saaan.”

“Yes?”

“Are you afraid of anything?”

Mikoto breathed out through her nose with her milky-white back showing in the night party.

She lightly shook what remained of the drink in her glass.

“I still have nightmares of being buried beneath a giant pile off lifeless mannequins. And given how much you had to do with the *prototype*, I know you know what caused those nightmares.”

So.

So of course she was afraid of honestly facing her own heart. Everyone was bound by things like that. Even if they did not have the power to control people's minds.

She was scared.

Even thinking of the possibility terrified her.

But there was pride in living with that fear. If she offered to use her remote to remove the burden of those nightmares from Misaka Mikoto's shoulders, it was unlikely the other girl would agree.

Shokuhou Misaki was the same.

No matter how painful it was, she did not want to lose the memories of that person's smile. No matter what.

"Yes. I have worthless dreams sometimes too."

"Oh? Now, this is rare. You're actually revealing a mental weakness instead of a physical one? So what are these nightmares that make you wake up in a cold sweat?"

"...Scenes just like this one."

The fingertips toying with the silver emergency whistle came to a stop.

This happiness would come to an end. It was bound to unravel at some point.

A certain boy would forget about Shokuhou Misaki eventually. That was unavoidable.

She knew that.

She really did.

But at least she had it for now.

For this one day.

## Part 7

“Dammit, I don’t have a nosebleed, do I?”

The pointy-haired boy held his face as he grumbled to himself.

Getting a high heel to the bridge of the nose by a lovely British socialite was quite a rare experience. He knew he had to be imagining it, but he could have sworn he heard a cracking sound when he pressed his finger against his nose. He had a hard time imagining how much damage had been done, so he wanted to check in a mirror.

That was why he had slipped away as if using the restroom, but he ran across something truly incredible while walking down the straight hallway.

“My, my, my. The planet really is spinning, isn’t it?”

“Wahhh!! How drunk are you, Orsolaaaaaaaaaaa!?”

He could only hold his head in his hands and scream.

Someone was sitting on the hallway floor and leaning against the wall by a window. This woman, who had short blonde hair and a very nice body and who apparently could not even stand under her own power anymore, was Orsola Aquinas. She normally wore a black habit that covered her from head to toe, but today she was wearing a party dress that left her back exposed. And something was wrong. Very wrong. It was falling off of her in places, the zipper was undone, and she was only just barely holding up the silk fabric and cross at her chest with one hand. The nun’s defenses were dangerously low today, so she might as well have been wearing the legendary naked apron.

A warning siren blared in the pointy-haired boy’s head.

His experience spoke to him here.

(This is bad. Even if I just took a high heel to the face, I am not surviving the night if even a single drop of blood drips from my nose right now!!)

The fearsome beast known as Index and the zappy electric girl were in the same building. If he was attacked by both of them at once, he might not ever

make it back to Japan.

Also, some things were lying on the floor around Orsola.

But these were not drink bottles or glasses. The labels were in English, but he was pretty sure they were products meant to increase alcohol resistance. The small brown bottles and bags of powdered medicine littering the floor were the kinds of thing not found in a high school lifestyle: turmeric, liver extract, and other items found on the shelves of the local convenience stores and drug stores.

“Wait, you actually tried to prevent this? Then how bad would it have been otherwise??? And if you know you can’t handle alcohol, why would you drink it at all!?”

“Hee hee hee. Cheers, cheers☆”

Orsola laughed, mimed lifting a glass, and repeated the same word over and over. ...He could picture what happened quite clearly. She did not normally drink, but this was a day for celebration, so she raised the glass the maids gave her along with everyone else. She had not known how strong the drink was, but she was too nice to just throw it out either, so she ended up drinking it. Yes, and because she did not normally drink, that clumsy young woman had poured it all into her stomach at once!!

Also, the arm she raised to mime raising the glass happened to be the one providing what little defense her chest still had. The world lost its last bit of a conscience and the dress’s thin and crumpled-up material fell away.

His mind went blank.

So unfortunately, he could not provide a proper explanation of what occurred before his eyes.

However, the world only knows one word that can express it properly:  
Boing!!

And to be clear, Orsola was not hiding a bouncy ball in the chest of her dress.

“Ahh!!”

“Sigh... Why do I feel so hot? I need to cool myself down.”

Instead of quickly covering herself up, she instead started fanning that fully-exposed portion of her anatomy.

Kamijou held a hand to his forehead as a wave of dizziness passed over him.

Yes.

He was enough of an adolescent to want to circle any dirty words in red when he came across them in the dictionary during class, but this visual actually made him feel guilty for looking.

“That’s right. It was never Index or Misaka. The real skin exposure always comes from Orsola, doesn’t it!? And thinking back, that holds true during the Divine Mixture mess as well!!”

“Burp.”

Orsola’s expression quickly grew serious and a suspiciously strange noise escaped her bewitching lips.

This was not good.

He was pretty sure something was about to happen.

Things had been bad enough when he ran across Misaka Misuzu drunk on the side of the road in Academy City, but at least she had seemed used to it. This was different. Dealing with someone who did not know their limits was a lot more nerve-racking.

“Hey, can you stand, Orsola? Don’t do that here. Just don’t. This castle carpet looks super expensive, so let’s get you to the restroom. C’mon, stand up!”

“Ugh.”

“Stand up on your own two legs!! Don’t lean on me like that!!”

Her alluringly flushed nape seemed to be giving off some kind of invisible sweet gas or the aroma released by those apples you put in the fridge to make sure the bananas grew ripe and delicious, but the way she pouted her lips was like a small child, making it all the more powerful.

“Oh, geez. When I take your arm to lend you my shoulder, you’re all exposed in front. What am I even supposed to do? How am I even supposed to close this dress up???”

“Oh – you – hopeless – boy. You wouldn’t be having so much trouble if you regularly practiced your princess carrying.”

“You want me to be the sad kind of person who mimics abducting people all on his own!?”

“You heard me☆ Kyaha kyaha kyaha kyaha!!”

She started kicking her legs like a child (which tore her stockings, making her legs even sexier than if they were bare) and started pushing toward him while laughing in a manic way she never would have while sober.

“Gh!”

Kamijou Touma made his best attempt at princess carrying her.

But once he tried it, he found his center of gravity was farther forward than expected. He could tell one wrong step and he would slip, sending his face right into those two mounds jiggling there in front of him.

And the way this young woman had pressed her index finger against his lips while saying “you heard me” had been too powerful. He was very glad this was a stone castle with few modern conveniences. ...If he was filmed right now, Orsola might just move deep in the mountains to become a hermit once she sobered up.

And.

They must have made too much noise.

A door other than the one to the party hall opened and a black-ponytailed woman in a multicultural dress that included a Japanese style poked her head out.

It was Kanzaki Kaori.

She must have had guard duty today because the Japanese young woman had her nearly-two-meter sword at her hip. When he saw her, Kamijou began wildly shaking his one free hand.

“Hey!! Help me out here!! Orsola’s in a real bad state.”

“Are you sure you don’t mean you put her in a real bad state?”

“Wait, wait! Um, you’re not like Index. You’re the strongest when it comes to physical attacks, so that would be a bad idea. I mean, Orsola’s the boke and you’re the tsukkomi in this case, right!? A slap from a Saint would be too powerful! I’m pretty sure this misunderstanding is one of the greatest threats to my life to date! Please nooooooooooooooo!!!!”

## Part 8

This may have been what it meant for people to change.

This man had experienced more than enough during the war to change most anyone.

The person in question here was Holegres Mirates.

When he heard a loud crashing coming from the castle, he leapt up from his chair in the guard station.

“What in blazes was that!?”

“The regular patrol just left, remember? We’re keeping in close contact with the security team in the castle, so it’s fine. We would have received an emergency alert if there was a problem. Some knight or magician probably got a little carried away with the festivities.”

Agnese Sanctis did try to stop him with exasperation in her voice, but she knew in advance he was not about to listen. Besides, she was busy staring at the handmade boardgame she and her fellow nuns were playing using bite-sized chocolates instead of chips so they were not actually gambling with money.

“I only know this because the Amakusa mentioned it, but there is apparently an Eastern saying that you should keep your helmet on tight even after victory. Such a wonderful concept! Remain ever vigilant! It is an honor for the victory party to be held in our England as opposed to the other three regions, so I will not allow anyone to spoil it. Thus, I must be going! The patrol awaits me!!”

The chubby knight walked out into the cold with a lantern in hand. He was a high-ranking member of the Knights, but you never knew when he would see a nocturnal fox looking at him and fire his double-barreled self-defense gun while falling onto his ass.

That was why Agnese Sanctis had to grab her Lotus Wand from where it was leaning against the wall and leave the warm guard station to pursue him.

“Really!? Wait, please wait! Take me with you!!”

He had apparently seen no issue with treating the former Roman Catholics and the Amakusas as expendable back when the war began, so this was an odd sort of relationship. For one thing, he had been the person who thought of his own benefit first and foremost, clung to his seat of privilege, and wanted to be the fixer who bossed everyone around, so it was rather odd for him to be actively going on the winter patrols that were normally left to the lowest ranking knights.

A white monster and Britain’s third princess.

His interaction with both had been short, but by giving those interactions the proper weight, it was possible to learn.

It was possible to redo things.

“Ahh!! S-Sister Agnese left without finishing the game!! And she was the one that invented this cruel boardgame.”

“Wait, Sister Angelene. We can continue without her and let her roll for all the turns she missed once she returns. Honestly, and we might as well move her piece for the roll she just made. Um, she rolled a 5, so 1, 2, 3, 4...geh!! Take three chocolates from any player of your choice!?”

The other nuns started complaining about their unluckiness, but Agnese paid them no heed.

Windsor Castle was built horizontally instead of vertically, so making a circuit of the exterior was like a lap of a small jogging course. The tree branches rustled in the chilly breeze, but it was not all that desolate a scene. This was about forty kilometers away from the capital of London, but the occasional fireworks were being set off even in this smaller city of about thirty thousand. It would hardly be surprising if the fireworks had reached a ridiculous scale of fifty thousand set off every minute in London itself. At this rate, the country was going to run out of fireworks before it was time to ring in the new year.

Of course, Agnese did not look delighted as she held her shoulders for warmth and pursued the chubby man while able to see her own breaths.

“This is your fifty-sixth time out on patrol. Are you still doing this because of some curse that prevented a proper event from occurring on a nice, round number like fifty???”

“Hm, nothing out of the ordinary this time either. Good! Exactly what I like to see!!”

...He was not hoping for trouble and was truly delighted to find everything in order, so it was impossible for him to ever decide to stop. At this rate, he

would probably continue circling the castle all night.

So.

Was this small change really a welcome sight for Holegres Mirates? Agnese's habit had a miniskirt, so she rubbed her thighs together to fight the cold as she spoke up.

"Huh? There's something here."

"Mh."

The chubby knight held his lantern out toward a spot he had already passed by.

But he could hardly be blamed for missing it. Agnese had not spotted an obvious intruder or a drone carrying a suspicious package.

The light was directed down at the ground.

An odd mark had been left there.

Agnese had found it, but even she looked puzzled while holding her Lotus Wand between her arms (because it was made of silver and would be too cold to hold for long if she did not frequently warm it up with her own body heat!).

"What is this? A footprint???"

She questioned her own conclusion because it was so very different from a human one. Nor was it a familiar animal track like from a fox or cat. It was much larger and more sinister. It left sharp gashes in the ground as if from a bird of prey's talons, but the size of the area of torn up grass was more like that of a bear.

They had of course never seen anything like this.

This was not a case of them being ignorant. It could only be described in terms of "as if" and "like" because there was no word to describe it

accurately. They were unlikely to find tracks like this in any animal encyclopedia or even dinosaur encyclopedia. It was strange enough for them to even consider the possibility of it being a power-assisted suit given that shape.

“...”

Unlike in the past, Holegres did not hesitate. He drew his left hand dagger in his empty hand. It was a short, defensive sword meant to block an opponent's blade and it had been developed for nobles who might end up in a duel but did not like walking around with a bulky shield. It spread out with a spring-loaded sound. Holegres did not use a sword breaker or main-gauche that had comb-like grooves carved into the thick blade. His parrying dagger caught the enemy's blade on the branch-like secondary blades that fanned out from the base of the sword.

He prioritized a solid defense over a reckless attack.

That decision likely came from the lantern he held in his dominant right hand, but it probably also came from his knightly sense of duty telling him he had to survive and bring this information back to the rest of the knights.

He stood back to back with Agnese who had adjusted her grip on the Lotus Wand and he carefully cast his lantern light around. Then that man who had re-honed his rusty sword asked a question.

“Is there something there?”

Agnese spread out the angel-wing-like flower petals at the end of her Lotus Wand and a twelve-colored shine thinly spread across the sides of the silver wand like a soap bubble or a film of oil on a puddle.

“This was your fifty-sixth time out on patrol. You passed by here not too long ago, didn't you? But you didn't see anything then.”

“Then allow me to amend my statement,” said the tense fat man. “Something came through here. And quite recently.”

## Part 9

Kamijou Touma was walking back from the restroom while still trying to get used to the tuxedo and ascot tie.

On the way, he spotted a curtain fluttering in one of the windows lining the straight hallway. Even though this was the second floor.

“What’s this?”

Then he noticed something.

He looked back down the hallway he had just walked through.

Someone was there.

He had walked past without noticing, so they may have been hiding behind or below one of the showcases lined with precious metals and pieces of artwork.

Nevertheless, Kamijou Touma spoke with the look of someone who had spotted an old friend.

He clenched and opened *his right hand* to see how it was doing.

He seemed to be continuing something that had been left unfinished.

“*Took you long enough. I was sure you would be here sooner than this.*”

The other person said nothing in response.

A few lines colored a sky blue and bright lemon yellow not found on any natural creature danced in his vision.

Without a word, an arm was swung horizontally and enormous claws audibly burst from the hand.

These were the all too sinister claws of a dragon.

## Between the Lines 1

“.....”

The woman wore mourning clothes and had the ears and tail of a cat.

Black Cat Witch Mina Mathers was curled up in a corner of the RV. She was tearfully puffing out her cheeks in protest.

The frog-faced doctor sighed.

“Did she finally figure it out?”

“You have no one to blame but yourself for this one.”

The golden retriever named Kihara Noukan sounded exasperated. Technically speaking, Aleister had instructed the doctor to do this, but that human was no more and blaming him would accomplish nothing.

Within that gloomy mood...

“You said you were Allan Bennett. I opened up to you and revealed so much because you said you were Golden Magician Allan Bennett. But who even are you really?”

Mina Mathers was muttering to herself (with the chest of her mourning clothes physically opened up to reveal her cleavage) and it seemed unlikely a logical conversation would get through to her. In fact, she was digging her nails into the knit doll with red hair, a white dress, and a black box that she had made in her free time. It had been such good friends with the black

mourning clothes kitty doll, but now it was audibly tearing.

The frog-faced doctor realized he would have to deal with this like he was in the pediatric ward.

“Would you be willing to forgive me for a corndog?”

“American food in the UK!?”

If trying to claim a position of authority did not work, it could be effective to make yourself look a little silly instead.

“Uhh,” someone groaned.

It came from Lilith in the crib. She could no longer speak human language and she loved her bottle. No matter what method was used, this was what happened now that she had a physical body. She could no longer wield miracles as an exposed soul that could be snuffed out even more easily than a candle’s flame.

The war was over, her father was dead, and there was a lot of noise outside the RV. London was setting off so many fireworks one had to wonder if they were trying to set fire to their city. The RV was parked on the curb, but it might be a good idea to move it elsewhere if the excitement grew any further.

What did this scene look like from the daughter’s perspective?

Lilith was not to blame here, so Mina let go of the knit doll she had made, got up from the floor, and began preparing a bottle.

“In other words, Westcott was a *cloud*.”

The upset kitty widow(!?) Mina Mathers pouted her lips like a sulking child and started speaking.

Kihara Noukan tilted his canine head.

“A cloud?”

“The Rosicrucian texts are so deep that there are multiple interpretations. There are even some groups who claim some of the interpretations known to the public are bait meant to hide the truth and that the true group and true purpose of their existence lies elsewhere. ... That is why no one was willing to listen when Johann Valentin Andreae revealed that he made it all up.”

Whether from magic or science, explaining things had a way of putting intellectuals in a good mood.

The frog-faced doctor and Kihara Noukan knew this well from their own experience, so they let Mina continue.

In fact, if they tried to interrupt her when they did not know what they were talking about, they would only trigger a great eruption.

“The Sprengel Letters that Westcott showed off so much in the Golden cabal were undoubtedly fakes he created. He clenched his teeth and pursued realism to the point of studying how to write like a German lady and he kept writing those letters back and forth to himself.”

“That is quite a life to live.”

“But even if Westcott’s letters were faked, that does not prove that the woman named Anna Sprengel did not exist. It is always possible a real one existed separate from Westcott’s letters to himself.”

Mina Mathers lifted Lilith from the crib and brought the end of the warmed baby bottle to the baby’s mouth.

She continued speaking while skillfully dodging the baby’s lips that had locked onto *the real deal*.

“That is what I mean by a cloud. Westcott knew that Lady Sprengel existed, but he intentionally lied to hide her from the other Golden members. Once his plausible lie was revealed for what it was, everyone would assume there was nothing more to it.”

...Aleister had used the Sprengel Letters to set up a clash between the

Mathers and Westcott factions.

Westcott would have known he was being set up, so had he been devoted enough to the real Anna that he had to keep up the charade?

He had felt the need to hide Anna Sprengel's presence even if it meant causing the Battle of Blythe Road. Because if he let a great conflict break out over his failure, it would only make the "he faked the whole thing" theory sound more convincing.

However...

"What a pitiful man. A cloud is much like those scammers who will reject any opposing theory. No matter how many times they are disproven, the people who do not want to believe they are wrong only need to point and say one simple thing: all the rest of you are the clouds."

"..."

"Once you start down the path of a cloud, there is no end of it. Because the Lady Sprengel that Westcott believed in may have been yet another cloud. And if you start doubting everything and peeling back the layers of the onion one by one, what do you have left? You can only hope you do not peel more and more and more until you suddenly realize nothing remains in your hands."

The golden retriever stepped out of the RV and into the outside air.

He did so because he could not smoke around the baby now that she had a physical body, but he noticed something after cutting the end of his cigar with a blade. The English words "no smoking area" were painted large on the asphalt out here.

There were some days when even a dog wanted to cry.

(Ehh? But there's so much fireworks smoke it's obscuring the stars.)

He was so very disheartened.

He decided he needed to start some R&D on airtight smoking doghouses that were collapsible for easy portability and would let him smoke anywhere without causing anyone any trouble. And he would intentionally not get it patented so it could be freely spread around to create a wonderful world void of bias and discrimination!!

Also, something was bothering him enough that he did badly want a smoke  
Human Aleister.

But it was not teary sentiment that filled the golden retriever's heart.

His nose as a researcher was telling him something.

"Although the Kihara category was partially supported by Aleister's Archetype Controller."

So.

This was what he wanted to say.

"I can still smell *his* presence."

# **Chapter 2: Meager Laurels – Party\_for\_Winners.**

## **Part 1**

They all heard the glass shattering.

“Touma!”

That white dress with reddish-purple lines must have been difficult to run around in. Index had to lift up the puffy skirt with both hands like a storybook princess as she rushed down the hallway.

Sharp sparkles were scattered around.

The shards of the broken window had fallen onto the carpet.

By the time Index arrived with her long silver hair worn in buns on either side of her head, a few people besides the pointy-haired boy were already there. For example, Kanzaki Kaori and Itsuwa. A lot of the Anglican magicians had declined to attend the party and instead worked as indoor guards, so they seemed to be inspecting the broken window and the footprints left on the carpet.

The small calico cat was trembling and on alert. Could the animal pick up on the tense atmosphere?

Kamijou Touma himself smiled bitterly and held up his phone in his left

hand.

He waved his right hand that must have been clenched into a fist a moment ago.

“Damn, the battery’s dead. I really wish I could have charged it up and got a photo of that.”

“Y-you weren’t hurt and that’s enough. What if you pursued this and something happened to you?”

Itsuwa spoke up nervously, but despite seeming so anxious, her bodylines were displayed by the quite short and provocative dress she wore. Yes, this looked more like something Oriana Thomson would wear. Let’s just say she could not be allowed to stand on a London street corner past 9 PM dressed like that. Had she even been the one to choose that dress for herself?

Kanzaki Kaori held a palm to her ear with her long black hair worn in a ponytail.

"The report from Agnese Sanctis of the outdoor guard unit does not sound promising. The footprints in question apparently disappear all of a sudden."

“They disappear?”

Kamijou looked skeptical and Kanzaki shrugged in her combination Japanese-Western dress.

“Maybe it jumped between branches in the forest and maybe it *used wings* to fly in from above. If what you say is true, then we can’t exactly deny that possibility, can we?”

Index and the others turned to look at the pointy-haired boy.

—A monster larger than a human.

—A mass of sky-blue and lemon-yellow.

—A creature more like a quadrupedal lizard than anything.

—Entirely covered by something like muscles with large wings on its back.

—Thick claws shot from the human-like forearm.

“Hold on, wait!! Stop looking at me like that!! Stop writing down every little thing I say with those solemn looks!! It’s scary!! I was more than a little panicked after being attacked out of the blue!”

“But your testimony is the biggest clue we have.”

The Japanese-Western dress must not have had pockets because Kanzaki Kaori pulled a memo pad with decorative Japanese paper on the cover from her ample bosom(!?) and she was too busy writing in it to look up at Kamijou. But...

“I mean, that was right after you hit me. My brain might have been malfunctioning.”

“You don’t have to bring that up again.”

Kanzaki shut her memo pad and blushed a little as she drove that point home.

She also pouted her lips like a small child.

“The sky-blue and lemon-yellow coloration seems odd, but if we focus on the shape... a winged lizard is not an unusual symbol in the field of magic. A tempter, the devil, and the guardian of the depths and of treasure. In other words, a dragon.”

Kanzaki may have only been listing off what came to mind.

But Kamijou’s shoulders jumped at what he heard.

“...A dragon?”

“The motif is famous enough to show up in video games, isn’t it? They are commonly equated with the devil, but they are also used by the Knights as an emblem for one’s house and bloodline, so it is a strange symbol. A mixed symbol like that is extremely rare in Christian culture, which strictly divides

good from evil and destroys any and all ghosts as evil beings without taking their circumstances into account.”

“...”

The ordinary high school boy finally fell silent.

A dragon.

He kept repeating that word in his mind.

When he looked down, he saw the calico cat growling on the hallway floor covered in broken glass.

Was it the cat’s good eyes, ears, or nose? Something may have lingered here that only an animal could sense.

Kamijou glanced down at his right hand so no one else would notice.

“If it ran away, maybe we should give chase. Who knows what it will do if we give it a chance to recover and it might not just attack here. If it’s after money or food, it could break into a house or shop around here.”

Kanzaki sighed at that.

“And why would we have to rely on you for that? We are the forces prepared for that sort of thing. Besides, an unidentified individual has broken into Windsor Castle while the queen is present. That alone is enough to declare a state of emergency and set up checkpoints all around here.”

“Priestess. C-could this be a leftover part of Coronzon’s forces? We have heard reports of her creating an artificial demon.”

“No, Itsuwa. For the initial investigation, we should throw out all our assumptions and leave all possibilities on the table. This could be some other dangerous element like a magic cabal that wishes to break free of Anglican control. With the UK’s foundation shaken, they might think this is their chance.”

Kamijou spoke up without thinking.

“All possibilities, huh?”

First of all, was the threat to the UK by Great Demon Coronzon really and truly over?

Was there no possibility of *someone else lurking beyond even her*?

A false bottom.

Thinking about it felt like trying to grasp at a *cloud*.

The sound of someone groaning reached his ears.

Most likely, the same concern and anxiety had reached everyone here.

Or.

This might be entirely without evidence, but what if someone had set up this situation where the defeat of Coronzon led everyone to loosen the country's reins in celebration? What if they were building up to something and the openings spreading in their hearts now was a part of it all?

No one actually said anything.

Yet the anxiety grew within all of them.

“Strengthening security needs to be our priority. We can leave the outside investigation to another unit. Since we do not know what they are trying to accomplish, I want to avoid splitting up Windsor Castle's personnel.”

After that announcement, Queen Regnant Elizard whispered to the Amakusa Saint in charge of the indoor security.

“If necessary, I will approve the use of service work. You can wait until after the fact to submit the official paperwork to the royal family.”

“Understood.”

Elizard clapped her hands twice to break through the gloomy mood that was setting in.

“Eating and drinking out in the hallway is not part of our culture. If you wish to stand and talk, then return to the dance hall. You can do it just as well there, plus you can enjoy some delicious food and drinks at the same time.”

That set people in motion.

Index picked up the mewing calico cat and started back toward the party hall.

Kamijou began to follow, but he decided to ask Kanzaki a question.

“What is service work?”

“Special measures that allow the Tower of London’s prisoners to temporarily leave their cell and assist in some anti-magician combat while under beefeater supervision. That would mean sending Second Princess Carissa, and William Orwell, a saint just like myself, into combat.”

“Yikes, really!?”

“It is a last resort. Plus, those two are not interested in shortening their sentence that way.”

Come to think of it, those measures had not been put into effect during the pressing situation when London nearly fell to the Crowley’s Hazards. That must have been a switch they would never press as long as they had any sense left at all.

“Kamijou Touma. You saved this country, so do not worry about all this and have a memorable night.”

“But...”

This was the usual way of things.

Kamijou always got involved whether it was necessary or not, so Kanzaki laughed.

“Do not worry. The enemy’s objective is unclear, but if they intend to destroy this peaceful atmosphere and spread civil unrest throughout the country, then responding in kind is only giving them what they want. In that sense, ending the party and returning to the battlefield is out of the question. So leave the security work to the security personnel. Keeping everything the same as always is enough to give an unshakable power to society. So please assist our investigation for the sake of peace.”

“Putting it like that is cheating...”

“It is.”

Kanzaki Kaori gently pressed her index finger against his lips.

The perfume-like aroma of her long black hair tickled his nose.

“Have you forgotten that I am older than you? I have had more time to learn how to use my words.”

## Part 2

Index’s flat shoes sounded from below her princess-like dress as she stopped by a different room before returning to the party hall. She did not seem to notice how dangerously her white skirt with reddish-purple lines was fluttering as she moved.

“Come here, Sphinx.”

(Touma always finds a way to get himself hurt, so I need to get some bandages for him.)

She was at the medical room.

Windsor Castle was a fancy place, but people still lived there. Nevertheless, there were AEDs in brightly-colored waterproof bags hanging on the walls on each floor and it had its own medical facility. That would be incredibly strange under normal circumstances, but it may have been a sign of how much they wanted to eliminate even the slightest possibility of disaster.

“Excuse me.”

She knocked quietly and opened the door.

Inside, she found a female doctor in glasses and about three nurses, but as soon as they saw all the cat fur covering her from the lace neck decoration to hem of the long skirt, their faces stiffened in shock. A blonde nurse quickly had her leave the cat out in the hall and sprayed Index’s hands and dress down with something or other.

Was this how they responded to a lost child, or had they gone into pediatric mode?

“What brings you here?” asked the doctor (with the look of someone who could not at all predict what the other person would do next), so Index raised her hands and hopped up and down on the spot.

“I want a first aid kit for Touma!”

They did not give her a first aid kit.

The doctor in a tight skirt instead handed her a small bag made of thick plastic. It was something like an overnight toothbrush set, but it contained disinfectant, adhesive bandages, non-adhesive bandages, and more. This level of preparation might have been for the gardeners who looked after Windsor Castle’s large grounds. The castle’s medical room would generally treat the royal family and any tourists who fell ill, so they kept it a secret that they would actually be overwhelmed if they had to deal with every little scrape and bugbite the many workers suffered while maintaining and inspecting the castle.

The front of the package displayed a cross on a three-stepped pedestal with a

rose decorating the center.

And...

“Ugh... when did my head get so heavy?”

Index heard a sluggish voice from beyond a curtain partition.

She tilted her head, walked over, and opened the curtain.

It was like slamming her nose into a thick but invisible wall.

The sweet smell pushed in at her all at once now that the seal had been broken.

Someone lay on the bed behind the curtain. She must have collapsed in the middle of changing from the fancy dress to her black habit because she had given up with her arms only sort of in the sleeves. Instead of lying face down, it was more like she had been on all fours when her arms gave out. In other words, her butt was sticking up high.

The person groaning with her face in the large pillow was Orsola Aquinas.

She was flushed from ears to nape.

“Ohhhhhh! Wh-what are these awful memories rising from the deep, deep depths of the ocean? D-did that really happen? No, it couldn’t have...”

She was apparently fighting with herself at the moment.

Index tilted her head, shaking her silver hair in the process.

“What are you doing?”

The sexy blonde woman’s trembling came to a sudden stop.

She also lost her balance and rolled over onto her side. She curled up in the fetal position and stuck her thumb in her mouth. It was all very cute, but it also increased her dangerously sweet allure as a young woman.

Incidentally, Christianity generally advocated ascetism, but it had no real restriction on drinking alcohol. In fact, the consumption of wine played a role in the crucial sacrament of holy communion.

Of course, gluttony was one of the seven deadly sins, so moderation was always recommended.

“I know this isn’t the best day for it, but would you mind if I confessed my sins to you?”

“We can see each other.”

Index had a perfect memory, so she did not like the idea of hearing someone’s sins and worries in an open environment like this. Plus, ask that starving nun for advice and she was liable to tell you to fill your stomach and go to sleep.

The bespectacled doctor said Orsola had been passed out near the restrooms.

Orsola herself had to have been extremely nervous what with the Divine Mixture incident during the war. Part of her would not have wanted to see the others, so it was not that surprising for her to have reached for a glass of something stronger than she would normally ever drink.

Index sighed.

“Don’t worry. This isn’t the end for you. Just get some rest today and you can speak with everyone tomorrow.”

“No, come comfort me. Please do not leave me alone here!”

“Is she even listening!? It’s hard to tell, but I think she might still be drunk!”

## Part 3

Now.

Why had Misaka Mikoto, who had a veil swept behind her head, and Shokuhou Misaki, who had her honey-blonde hair worn back in two stages, not appeared in the hallway during the commotion?

“Hghh!?”

“Yes, yes, I get it! That startled you, so your body suddenly tensed up.”

The tearful honey-blonde girl slid onto the A.A.A. to use it as a chair and Mikoto sighed while also curling up her body out of embarrassment over the blue lingerie dress.

And once straddling the A.A.A., Shokuhou let out an odd noise.

“Oh, ohh?”

The A.A.A. looked like a streetcar or police van with plenty of wheels likely made from portions of the motorcycle’s tires, but the front had started swelling out roundly where Shokuhou had placed her butt on it. Before long, she was essentially sitting on a balloon a size larger than a beachball.

“Wait, hold on, Misaka-san. Is this a balance ball? You might have thought this soft material would help, but it really hurts my hip! Hghh!!”

“Th-this isn’t me! A.A.A., calm down a little!! And, Shokuhou, stop bouncing up and down like that!!”

Mikoto had to wrap her arms around the honey-blonde girl’s stomach to stop her from becoming a lot like an innocent young wife who grew a bit too careless at the gym. That left the lingerie dress girl’s back entirely exposed.

This must have really been hurting her hip because Shokuhou had tears in the corners of her eyes and her skin was damp with sweat. Even her nape was flushed a light pink.

“Okay, you can deal with the parts you can reach, but I’ll wipe off your back.”

“I start giving off a sweet aroma when my circulation ability improves, so I can’t help it.”

“Those pouting lips look wrong on you. C’mon, I need to get your nape too.”

Mikoto rubbed a handkerchief down the back of Shokuhou’s neck and also fixed her blonde hair. Shokuhou Misaki must have been a queen to the core because she just let the other girl do it.

“Hm, that would earn about a 70. Misaka-san, with a bit more training, you might make a good servant.”

“A.A.A., bounce her up and down.”

“Abwa abwa ah ha ha!!”

The honey-blonde girl started making odd noises as her hips bounced upwards. Various parts of her body were trembling from a tolerable level of pain. This was doing nothing to eliminate the suspicions about her weakness to bike seats.

After deciding the other girl had been sufficiently relaxed, Mikoto ordered the machine to stop.

“So what was that noise anyway? It sounded like glass breaking.”

“Ah, agh... I just hope that boy did not knock over a rose vase in the hallway.”

That was perfectly plausible.

The artwork and antiques in a place like this would generally have expensive insurance policies, but the monetary insurance payout would not necessarily be enough in a lot of cases. And people had a way of screwing up most when they were specifically trying not to. Mr. Kamijou, Man of Misfortune, seemed like the kind of person who would stumble and set off a bizarre chain reaction that ended up breaking something like that.

“Oh, he’s back.”

Mikoto was looking back toward the door in a way that made her back bend smoothly like she was performing some defenseless warmup exercises on the poolside.

But those few words were enough for Shokuhou Misaki's heart to skip a beat.

She pressed her palm against the emergency whistle hidden at the center of her chest.

The pointy-haired boy waved at them like it was perfectly normal. But that normalcy was like a powerful attack on the girl's tear glands.

He remembered her.

The miracle would continue for at least a little while longer.

And the first thing Kamijou Touma said ruined the atmosphere entirely.

“Hey, ladies. Either of you got a phone?”

“What?”

“What?”

“Mine's dead, so I failed to snap one hell of a picture. And I can't recharge it since the outlets are the wrong shape.”

“...”

“...”

“But then I remembered a neat trick! You can recharge phones wirelessly, right? If we mess with our phone's settings a bit, I can use yours as a mobile battery. I just want half a charge...no, just a third! Won't you give me enough battery to get a photo if the timing is right next time?”

He started with this and did not even tell them what had happened out in the hallway.

And then Index walked in and supplied some further information in a low voice.

“Touma... Did you hear that Orsola was found half-naked by the restrooms?”

“Hm!?”

The timing could not have been worse.

The atmosphere surrounding the two ladies of the prestigious esper development school of Tokiwadai Middle School changed entirely.

Instinctually sensing danger, the cat slipped from the silver-haired girl’s arms and moved away.

“Your phone was dead...”

“...so you failed to snap one hell of a picture?”

“Wait, it’s not about that. This is a serious issue. And as an educated high schooler who knows a lot of tricky words, here’s a lesson to you dumb middle schoolers: we need to obey the principle of *non bis in idem*. This is really basic issue, but I was already punished for this once when Kanzaki hit me, so if you keep digging it back up, I really am going to die!!”

But as usual, Kamijou Touma forgot to explain himself properly.

His words did nothing to eliminate the feelings roiling in the girl’s chests. In fact, the dangerous light in their eyes only intensified. They looked a lot like that kabuki makeup art used for anti-shoplifting posters.

The silver girl spoke on behalf of all three.

“Touma, are you saying you did something worthy of punishment?”

“Ahhhhh, what a pain in the ass!! Besides, I was wrongfully accused!! Orsola was already drunk when I found her!!!!”

A series of solid sounds followed.

The A.A.A. transformed from the balance ball and back into the small bench-sized streetcar or police van. Shokuhou Misaki was elegantly sitting on the edge portion, so she gasped as her butt slid back to about the center. It was a quite a visual thanks to the slits in her long skirt.

It was ready to charge.

The #5 girl spoke while riding that bucking bronco.

“Sigh... Misaka-saaan.”

“Sure thing.”

“Go☆”

The bench-sized mass sent the pointy-haired boy flying while the Queen of Tokiwadai was riding it.

Far from getting *non bis in idem*, he did not even get innocent until proven guilty.

## Part 4

It was a chilly night.

An intermittent orange light very different from a firefly glowed below the frigid sky. But very few people who saw it would consider it ephemeral or fleeting.

It was the embers at the end of a cigarette.

The cigarette belonged to Stiyl Magnus.

He stood nearly two meters tall and had shoulder-length red hair. He was

wearing a formal suit instead of his usual black priest's habit, but he was still the same person. He was a Necessarius hitman who destroyed magic with magic. He had a different history than Kanzaki Kaori or Agnese Sanctis who had arrived here for more complicated reasons.

Equally-tall Tatemiya Saiji of the Amakusa Church spoke with exasperation in his voice.

"Oh, you were here? I thought you were off wasting time somewhere in the name of serving the first princess."

"I just refuse to stay long anywhere I'm not allowed to smoke," replied the priest while waving the cigarette between his fingers and leaning back against Windsor Castle's wall.

In truth, he had found it impossible to stay there for another reason.

The silver-haired girl had looked far too bright in that dress.

Everyone wanted her to smile and Stiyl was no different, but that smile also had a way of stabbing into his heart. Because that smile was directed at someone else.

Did she remember them or not?

That was the insurmountable dividing line between that boy who had been granted happiness and Stiyl who had not. Seeing her like this was a painful reminder of that fact.

(The seven deadly sins, hm? I don't know if this is Satan or the Leviathan, but if mere emotions are eating into my heart this badly, I clearly need more training.)

Tatemiya's presence reminded him of someone else.

What did that man's superior, Kanzaki Kaori, think about all this?

Had she reached an understanding with herself, organized her feelings, and placed it all in one of the drawers of her mind?

Stiyl softly shook his head.

He had hoped smoking would help him focus and calm down, but it was only tightening his blood vessels and increasing his blood pressure. His thoughts never went anywhere good when he felt more like the cigarette was smoking him.

The priest spoke to distract himself.

“What about you? I thought the Amakusa were in charge of the indoor security.”

“This is nothing too out of the ordinary considering *he* is involved. After checking over the broken window and the hallway, we decided it was time to take a look outside too.”

Tatemiya smiled and looked up at the second story window.

But this was a castle and each room was quite large, so the ceilings were positioned high up. You could not think of this like a normal house. A fall from that height would mean at least a broken bone.

“But I don’t see any damage to the stone wall. Does that mean it jumped right up to the window instead of crawling up the wall? I can see why Agnese’s group would report that it might have flown.”

“The bigger question is why it went straight for the second story. If it wanted to sneak in, the first floor should have been good enough.”

Was it lucky or unlucky that it had run across Kamijou Touma first and foremost? His right hand had driven it away before they could figure out much of anything, so all they knew was that it used some kind of supernatural power. The boy himself was a complete amateur and he did not know what mattered most in a report, so it was hard to imagine the attack scene based on his statements.

“He really does have a way of causing trouble.”

Stiyl stopped talking there.

He did not really care if the conversation continued.

But in that case...

“Things are going to get a lot busier around here.”

“You were assigned to the first princess, weren’t you? If you want peace and quiet, I would recommend slipping out of the castle in the name of searching for Princess Riméa.”

He would have loved to do that, but it did not appear to be an option.

Being around that girl was painful.

But make no mistake. Some fools would convert their love into anger or hatred, but Stiyl was not that sort of person. Rule #1 for him was to eliminate any and all threats around that girl. The mental pain and injury he received was of secondary importance.

So...

“The footprints suddenly disappear.”

He released a card printed with a rune.

Instead of attaching it to a surface, he had it fly in the night breeze to create a flame that hovered like a will-o’-the-wisp. This was just the one card, so it would not last long. The laminated card burned away and it swept away the darkness only when the plastic seemed to bubble up.

It revealed a few nonhuman footprints.

More than the shape, the distance between them was clearly too great. It looked more like it had been jumping in a straight line than walking or running.

And the bizarre footprints completely disappeared after approaching the artificial forest surrounding the castle.

“Did it move through the branches, or was it making a running start to break free of gravity and fly?”

All of this fit the report from Agnese and Holegres who had been in charge of outside security.

The scattering of lights moving through the trees would be the maids and nuns searching through the forest and grass for any further traces of the intruder. They must not have found much because some equipment like spider legs was creaking with nothing better to do.

But Stiyl was interested in something else.

“It bothers me how skillfully it broke in and escaped. This is Windsor Castle, the queen’s second home. Breaking in is not that easy.”

“Are you suggesting this monster understood the British style?” Tatemiya looked skeptical. “I know we were pretty desperate during that war and it did feel like we revealed quite a bit of our hand, but still.”

Did that mean it was a local or foreign magic cabal or even another sect like the Roman Catholics or Russian Orthodox? They still did not know how far Lola Stuart... no, Great Demon Coronzon’s reach had spread, so it was hard to say if her influence had been entirely eliminated.

Looking at it that way might have made sense, but...

“That said.”

“?”

“There is no sign of any magic being used.”

With a quiet popping sound, Stiyl’s flimsy will-o’-the-wisp burst into nothingness.

His search had ended in failure.

“There are no traces of magic power. Is that really possible? That would

mean they understood international-level magical security well enough to slip through it yet used no magic of their own. Did they gain something from that restriction? Or..."

"The culprit might not be acting alone. Maybe the person who actually snuck in doesn't know as much as the person giving them advice."

"You mean someone like that girl with 103,001 grimoires in her head? But who could that be?" Styl breathed a sigh mixed with cigarette smoke. "The lizard is an obvious threat, but I'm also concerned about their adviser."

## Part 5

There was some luck to found in this unfortunate situation.

The bright sky-blue winged lizard that Kamijou Touma had seen did not repeatedly attack in the same way. That was good because the party did not have to be called off, but it also left them with zero clues as to the culprit's identity.

"Sigh..."

The pointy-haired boy held the back of his hips and let out a white breath.

He was on the balcony directly connected to the dance hall.

The celebration was continuing like everyone was trying to laugh off the bad mood trying to set in like a fog, but they were taking it a little too far. If he stuck with them to the end, they might just toss him so high into the air in celebration that he ended up in heaven.

"Touma."

That was when he heard a girl's voice from behind.

She wore a white princess dress with reddish-purple lines and her long silver hair was worn up in buns on either side.

The pointy-haired boy turned around.

"I feel like I've figured something out."

"?"

He smiled bitterly when Index tilted her head.

"Maybe I just didn't want it to be over."

"What?"

"Board Chairman Aleister is gone," said Kamijou Touma.

He was not just talking about the fate of his enemy. That ending would affect the lives of this boy and girl as well.

"So is Lola Stuart who stood at the top of the Anglican Church as archbishop. We were sort of lodged into a gap, but the walls on either side are gone and the crack has grown into a great ravine. There's nothing holding us in place anymore."

Index, who had memorized all there was to know about magic, lived in Academy City, a place ruled by science.

Yet they lived together in that student dorm like it was normal.

The adults who had ensured that could continue had suddenly disappeared. This was not quite like having both your parents die in an accident one day. His opinion here was more colored by the pure pros and cons, so the teenage boy was unsure how to accept it.

So...

“I thought if we fought, I could preserve the place we had.”

“...”

“As long as Aleister and Coronzon’s battle continued, I thought we could live in Academy City forever. So maybe I wanted to find some big mystery leftover and for it to take physical form and attack us.”

But that was selfish.

Aleister and Coronzon themselves must have been fighting to bring an end to all the fighting. He could not demand they extend their suffering just because he wanted to protect his own temporary lifestyle.

He knew that.

He did, but Kamijou Touma still bit his lip.

“What do we do?”

Index had two paths open to her: stay here in England, or head back to Academy City.

“What are we supposed to do now?”

And Kamijou Touma also had two paths open to him.

Aleister was gone. His plan was no more. Would he return to an Academy City with no scheming villain, or would he choose another path by heading into the world of magic while relying on his right hand’s power?

Imagine Breaker worked on any supernatural power whether it came from science or magic, so perhaps he had no reason to stay in Academy City any longer.

Index did not say anything for a while.

She was thinking.

Then her lovely lips opened just a bit and she spoke.

“I want to go home.”

“Kh.”

She had made her choice.

Index wanted to go home. Of course she did. It had always been unnatural for her to be in Japan’s Academy City.

Kamijou knew he had to make his choice now.

But Index smiled and said more.

“*So let’s go home to Academy City.* I mean, isn’t that what we were fighting for? If we don’t do that, what were we even risking our lives for?”

“Are you really okay with that?”

He was trembling.

But he could not quite figure out why that was.

“I mean, this is where you were born and there’s nothing tying you to that city anymore! If you want to return here, you can!! So are you really sure!?”

“There is something.”

The silver-haired girl in the princess dress smiled a little.

This was not the usual smile she gave.

“There still is something tying me there. But it isn’t a bad thing. So let’s go home, Touma. The place I’m thinking of now has to be where I’m really meant to be. That isn’t something I can abandon so readily.”

He had no words.

Even though he knew he had to say something.

If Index stayed in London, she would have plenty of use for her talents. And there were people here waiting for her, like Stiyl and Kanzaki. There was no need for her to force herself to return to her life in Academy City. He wanted to tell her to think about this more carefully so she could make sure she had made the best possible decision for herself.

But he could not.

He could not bring himself to do it.

As ugly and as despicable as it might be, Kamijou could not possibly say anything that had the slightest chance of making her change her mind.

So silence naturally fell over them.

They simply stood there on the otherwise empty balcony looking into each other's eyes.

Someone must have been shooting off fireworks to celebrate the end of the war because the many colors of those fiery flowers illuminated the winter darkness outside the balcony. But the boy and the girl did not turn to look.

"Index..." he said.

He naturally placed his hands on her slender shoulders.

Not even he may have known what he was trying to do.

His fingertips must have touched the buns on either side of her head when he placed his hands on those shoulders because her silver hair came undone.

It shined brightly in the moonlight.

Index softly looked up at him.

And like that, she ever so slightly angled her head.

But just then.

Something swooshed through the air to leap over the second-story balcony's railing.

## Part 6

There was destruction.

The shockwave was a blend of shattering glass and splintering oak.

“Tch!?”

The tackle was intense.

As soon as the enemy leaped over the balcony railing and charged forward, it slammed into Kamijou's side at full speed. They broke free of gravity's bonds and flew through the air, leaving Index behind. They crashed through the window and rolled across the party hall's floor. The enemy's claws tore into the luxurious carpet as they grappled and desperately struggled to come out on top.

Everyone there saw it.

Many screams and shouts mixed together.

A sticky luster came from something like countless threads that flowed along the lines of the body's muscles. Overall, it was made up of a few sky-blue and lemon-yellow lines. It was similar to a tropical snake or frog, but this likely did not exist in nature. It was more than two meters long, it had four legs – except with a clear distinction between arms and legs – and its head displayed a prominent set of brutal crocodilian jaws. It also had the thin membrane-like wings of a bat and a thick tail brimming with power from

base to tip. It was unclear if the swishing of the tail was really a sign of irritation, but it was unlikely to be a friendly message.

A winged lizard.

In other words, a dragon.

That strange motif was a symbol of the devil, but it was also used in the emblems of houses and organizations. In the Western world that clearly divided good from evil, a single symbol crossing that divide was unusual.

“So we meet again.”

It had attacked a second time. And had it even fled the first time? Had it instead been in hiding, waiting for this chance?

Even the small calico cat was bristling his fur.

It was the dragon that ended up on top. Pinned down, Kamijou Touma felt a nervous sweat soaking not just his face but his entire body, but he still forced a smile.

For a brief moment, two strange colors flashed in from somewhere.

Shocking pink.

And emerald.

Had they come from the fingertips of his right hand?

“And I’m glad. I really am. With a mystery like you leftover, I can forget all about those terrifying thoughts!!”

With a roar, the dragon swung its right hand horizontally. With a sound like a spring-loaded device, several thick claws burst out.

But the pointy-haired boy was not decapitated with his head sent rolling across the floor.

“What is that thing!?”

The intruder must have noticed the other gazes on it.

Misaka Mikoto had raised her voice while blushing and holding her body to hide the blue lingerie dress that was see-through in places.

She shook free of the embarrassment and removed her right hand from her body to hold it out in front of her.

A shockwave erupted in the party hall with a sound like someone beating a drum taller than she was and all the surviving windows shattered. She showed no mercy. She started off with her railgun. The arcade coin was accelerated to three times the speed of sound and it left an orange trail behind it as it mercilessly pierced the monster’s side.

Its side broke.

There was a squishing sound.

But it was not enough to stop it!?

With a deep boom, the monster swung down its right arm again. A meteor fell with a sky-blue light. Kamijou moved his right arm instead of his head.

Had the railgun attack thrown off the monster’s aim?

It just barely missed and tore through the carpet and the hard floor beneath.

An injury to the wrist could easily be fatal, but that was not the dragon’s intent.

Imagine Breaker.

That boy’s right hand carried great meaning.

“Ha ha! I see. Is that your plan!?”

The dragon did not wait for Kamijou’s belligerent laughter and attacked

again.

Were the raised claws really targeting the pointy-haired boy's right hand?

Was it trying to cut it off and take it for itself?

Some of the magicians might have thought so.

But that was not it.

That monster had just one reason for being so fixated on Kamijou Touma's right hand.

An odd sound burst out.

It happened on contact.

It happened as soon as the winged lizard's claws touched Kamijou Touma's Imagine Breaker.

The sound of destruction spread from there.

That must have loosened its grip somewhat.

“Hah!!”

The pointy-haired boy laughed as he bent his knees, placed the soles of his shoes on the strange dragon's belly, and then kicked up.

His opponent did not put up any more of a resistance.

Cracks ran through it while it rolled across the carpet. The lizard's skin, which appeared to be made up of bright sky-blue fibers, gradually broke apart like it was a hard shell.

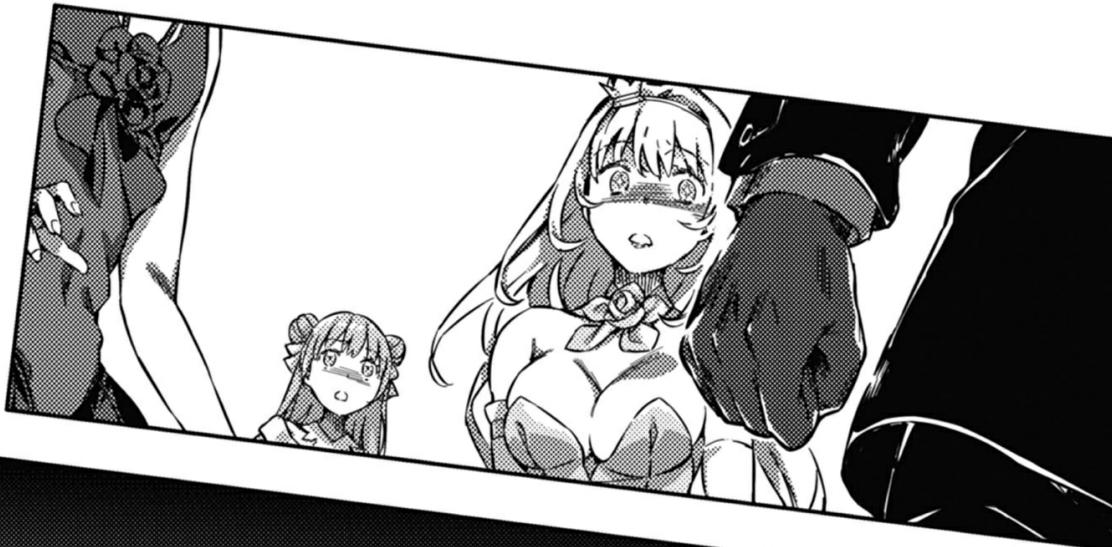
And once it crossed a certain threshold, the sky-blue and lemon-yellow swirled around the center point. No, it was technically swirling around the winged lizard's right foreleg—or would you call it the right hand? The bizarre outer shell was sucked in toward the wrist there. It all flowed there

like the bathwater once the drainplug was pulled.

It was like there was a large bat hanging from that wrist.

But even that was fully drawn inside.

Once the sky-blue exterior was gone, the rest was naturally exposed.



Only the interior remained.

This was the true nature of the beast.

The enemy they must defeat was being revealed.

The opening conflict had ended. Everyone's tension naturally grew. They would soon have to struggle like their life depended on it.

Everyone in the party hall gulped as they all became witnesses.

Witnesses of what appeared from within the winged lizard.

Witnesses of what had caused all of this.

It was a pointy-haired high school boy.

A boy they all recognized was revealed to the world.

## Part 7

So what exactly had happened?

To understand that, we must change our viewpoint and move back in the timeline a bit.

“Ah, ahhh,  
ahhh  
hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!????”

The sound of something bursting open sounded on the thick ice covering the sea between Great Britain and Ireland. This was just before the end of the war when everyone was focused on the *Queen Britannia* as it sank along with Coronzon and Aleister.

But something else entirely had been happening then.

It was a much smaller and more personal issue than something influencing the fate of nations or the entire world.

Particles of ice had blown up like a blizzard, so Index must not have been able to see what happened even while she dangled from the Bunny Gray balloon.

Kamijou Touma's right arm had exploded at the shoulder.

Nothing external had caused this.

In fact, it was blown away from within by a power it could not contain.

“\_\_\_\_\_!!”

The pain was too much to bear.

He had no idea what he was shouting as he held his torn right shoulder with his other hand, collapsed to the thick ice, and rolled around. The wallet and phone fell from his pocket, but he did not have it in him to pick them up. He was too busy making sure he did not bite his own tongue.

Even so, he could not bring himself to shut his eyes.

Something was happening in front of him.

(What the...?)

It was his right arm.

It was floating in that empty white space like it was defying gravity.

No, this was not all that strange. He had seen it several times before. He had just always turned a blind eye because it had always worked out in his favor, so he could not start calling it creepy as soon as it fell out of his control.

The end of his detached right shoulder twisted while dripping with red blood.

No.

There was a small clicking sound.

(What is that?)

Just as he wondered that, a strange artificial-looking triangular prism appeared about fifteen centimeters away from the bloody end of the detached right shoulder. The sides were divided into keyboard-like squares that were moving in and out all on their own.

There was no way he could ignore this.

That strange object really was there in front of him.

“Kazakir—*no, this is different!*” he shouted.

The triangular prism shined with a pale platinum light and he grimaced.

It happened silently.

The triangular prism gained a head and a right arm past the shoulder.

It all fit together perfectly and resulted in an identical boy standing there in front of him.

This went well beyond wondering where this other boy had come from or how he had appeared here.

Was there no way to explain this using nothing more than biological science?

And the monster was wearing the exact same clothing that Kamijou was.

“What...?”

He could only just stare blankly up at him.

No, staring blankly did not qualify as choosing an action.

With his right hand gone, there was nothing at all Kamijou Touma could do. He could only say one thing to the identical pointy-haired high school boy.

“What are you!?”

“*Imagine Breaker* is just one card in your deck? You’re the one in control?”

There was obvious mockery in his voice.

A cracking sound shook the air.

A shocking pink light flashed at the corner of his mouth and an emerald one at the corner of his eye. They were pretty colors, but did it mean he was unsure how to process the parts that were not quite the body’s surface but not quite inside either?

And he used that extremely lifelike right hand to calmly pick up the phone that had fallen on the thick ice.

“Don’t make me laugh, you snot-nosed brat. Once this right hand’s taken from you, what have you got left? Who would ever accept you as Kamijou Touma now?”

There was a sound like long, wet hair splatting against a concrete wall.

Kamijou Touma’s right shoulder should have had nothing attached, but sky-blue threads twisted around to fill that empty space. They formed what looked like powerful muscles and quickly grew to the silhouette of a human arm. Once it was complete, he felt a lessening in the intense pain causing sparks in his mind. The other boy had grabbed the phone, but Kamijou used this new arm to reach for the wallet at his feet.

(An arm?)

But something scared him more than the bizarre visual.

It frightened him that his body was accepting this situation before his mind just because the pain was gone. The ordinary decision to only believe what you saw with your own two eyes could bare its fangs when you saw

something truly unbelievable and hard to accept.

The thing he saw here was a part of his body.

It was not something to be rejected.

(This psychedelic thing is... my arm???)

He did not have time to question it.

With another bursting sound, the sky-blue arm opened back up like a giant maw. And it worked to swallow up Kamijou Touma himself instead of the enemy before his eyes.

He no longer had anything to stop it.

Imagine Breaker had gone to the other boy.

“How can you call yourself Kamijou Touma without *this*? ”

That other boy grinned while clenching and reopening those fingers.

As if to show off the power that should have belonged to Kamijou Touma.

“It’s time you learned firsthand what happens once it’s gone.”

## Part 8

So.

So.

So.

“Which one is the real Kamijou Touma?”

Queen Regnant Elizard’s words rang through historical Windsor Castle’s dance hall.

Two things stood out from the scene.

A cracking noise echoed out.

One of them was a pointy-haired boy in the same tuxedo and ascot tie as before.

The other was a high school boy with a bizarre replacement right arm jutting out from his shoulder that had muscles colored a sky-blue reminiscent of artificial dyes.

They mostly looked identical, so everyone’s attention naturally gathered on a single point.

Yes.

The differences in the right arm that a certain boy had always relied on.

“B-but.”

The boy they all knew opened his mouth.

In other words, it was the boy in the unfamiliar tuxedo who had been smiling with them in the peaceful party this whole time.

“I mean... isn’t that obvious!?”

He sounded nervous.

He had trouble getting the words out.

He acted as innocently suspicious as anyone would when questioned by the police or falsely accused out of the blue.

*“Imagine Breaker in my right hand can negate any supernatural power. And didn’t this all start when I used that hand to save Index when she wandered into Academy City? Yes, that’s right. Stiyl was the first to attack, but the next fight against Kanzaki was the real threat! Um, um, oh, right! In the end, I had to fight the John’s Pen installed in Index herself, but... yeah, now that I think about it, that must have been Lola’s... no, Great Demon Coronzon’s doing.”*

It all sounded accurate enough.

The boy with the sky-blue and lemon-yellow arm narrowed his eyes a little.

There was no surprise in his voice. It was like he was answering a question he knew was coming.

Elizard had received reports from the Anglicans on what had happened with the boy named Kamijou Touma and there was no protest from Agnese or Lucia who had come running after hearing the fighting.

But.

The one oddity was the suspicious look on Index’s face.

*“I can tell you everything that’s happened. If you want, you can hook me up to a lie detector or whatever you call them. Oh, I know! You can have Shokuhou there check! Her Mental Out is the real deal, so she can do anything she wants with the human mind. If she peeks into my mind, she should be able to tell you I’m telling the truth about all this! See, I can tell you everything I should know!! Right!?”*

Again, none of it was wrong.

Mikoto had seen the tuxedo boy’s phone. She had recognized the location of the small scratches.

“He is the one that can use Imagine Breaker,” said Itsuwa.

“D-doesn’t that settle it?” added Villian.

But...

“...”

A silent change came over Kanzaki Kaori's gaze. Her expression switched from one of observation to one of suspicion.

How many people here had realized that being able to mechanically rattle off all the right answers was in fact the wrong answer?

Misaka Mikoto felt like her suspicions were confirmed when she saw the crumpled-up look on the face of the honey-blonde girl who she was supporting from the side.

“I'm right, aren't I? You can tell which one's the monster by finding out whose memories are accurate, and since I know all this, it means I'm Kamijou Touma! Right!? I mean, the opposite wouldn't make any sense at all. Just put it to words and you'll see how silly it sounds. *Why would the one without Kamijou Touma's memories be the real Kamijou Touma!?*”

“...!!”

Even if some of them felt something was wrong, there was nothing they could do if they could not put it to words... or if they were working off of a little-known fact.

There was a sticky luster.

Those sky-blue and lemon-yellow colors did not exist in nature, but the light was too lifelike to call it a weapon or tool.

“My right hand *broke*.”

The “monster” seemed to be forcing out his voice.

He was being forced to explain something he could not even explain to himself.

He held his transformed right hand while squeezing out those agonized words.

“I know this is going to be hard to believe, but there was something more to my right hand!! And he holds that secret. I mean, another me appeared from my—”

The tuxedo boy reached out to the side.

He grabbed something from the silver tray held by a dumbfounded maid with a mole below her eye.

And then.

He used it to hit the high school boy with a sky-blue arm.

He mercilessly bashed the other boy in the head with a wine bottle held upside down.

“Gah!?”

Everyone flinched back from the violent cacophony of shattering glass.

Was it the normal people who would act more suspiciously at times like this? The tuxedo and ascot tie boy smiled and slowly exhaled.

His shoulders seemed to relax.

That right hand that had always hesitated to kill now held a glintingly sharp weapon.

“We don’t need to listen to this crap. Letting him speak will only confuse us. I’m not letting this bastard trick anyone after rushing in and making up some crazy story.”

But the sky-blue arm boy did not fall.

He doubled over and clenched his teeth to bear with it.

Was that red wine or human blood dripping down his brow and temple?

The calico cat mewed and rubbed against him.

The cat chose the monster with the bizarre and brightly-colored arm over the boy he had been with until now. Even though cats generally disliked strong smells and would not normally approach a mixture of blood and wine.

But.

The tuxedo boy must not have liked having any difference between the two of them.

With a slight spasm near the eyes, he used his other hand to shove the silverware off of a long table. The sharp forks loudly crashed down toward where the cat was.

“Sphinx!?”

Index had been unsure what to do while holding her emergency medical set, but even her cry of sorrow did nothing to change the tuxedo boy’s expression.

The cat growled as if threatening him with his entire body.

He had just barely avoided being badly injured, but that was no more than a coincidence. Cats were not made to jump backwards, so if the forks had landed just a little differently, who knows what would have happened.

But.

Even so.

The boy holding a broken bottle in his right hand looked across the crowd and made an announcement without even bothering to glance over at the girl with tears welling up in her eyes.

“The war is over and I’m sick of fighting, so I’m not letting this guy cause trouble. I refuse to lose anyone. We got past the war, so I will not allow anyone to die now.”

He did not let go of the broken bottle.

The boy with the sky-blue and lemon-yellow arm tried to keep his balance while bearing with the pain. And he made an effort to not knock over the food lined up on the long table as he did so.

So.

The boy who raised his leg and kicked over the long table with the sole of his shoe was the one in a tuxedo.

That may have been because of the sashimi knife, the thick metal hook used to hang up a large fish for carving, and the other sharp objects in the Japanese section of the buffet. It may have been to keep any possible weapons away from the other boy.

It may have been a logical action.

However.

He ended up squashing the bizarre futomaki that had likely been prepared with that boy and the other Asians in mind.

For a brief moment, some odd colors flashed: shocking pink and emerald.

But they did not come from the broken bottle or the wine dripping from it.

The boy brandished the jagged bottle like it was a knife.

“And I’ll do anything to ensure it. That’s what it means to be Kamijou Touma, right!? Am I supposed to give up just because my right hand’s power doesn’t work here? Not a chance!! I’ll use anything at my disposal. In fact, when I’m up against someone I shouldn’t possibly be able to defeat, I’ll use any cheap tricks I can find to snatch victory from the jaws of defeat and protect whoever needs protecting!! Isn’t that the Kamijou Touma way!? Am I wrong!?”

If no one said anything, he was going to stab the other boy to death.

Elizard raised her voice against that extremely simple action.

“We can figure this out later. For now, just restrain them both and confine them to separate rooms!!”

That seemed to decide everything for everyone.

Elizard had taken action to stop the killing.

But who had she been trying to protect when she did so?

However.

The tuxedo boy knew everything.

So he smiled and jabbed at someone’s Achilles’ heel.

“*Shokuhou.*”

“Kh.”

He was the thorny flower.

He was the center of the mystery, the distortion, and the oddity and he lured in the honeybee.

He did not even look over at the dress girl whose shoulders shook.

“*Which one do you think is Kamijou Touma? Which one will come running when you blow that silver emergency whistle? Answer that and you will know which one of us needs your help.*”

“What!?”

The reflexive anger did not come from the honey-blonde girl herself.

It came from Misaka Mikoto who was supporting her from the side.

“That’s obvious BS! Is this Metamorphose? Or maybe a body tissue version of Creation? Either way, you have some guts getting that close to us pretending to be someone we know. Shokuhou, let’s work together to kick

this piece of shit's ass!! I'll do the physical part and you do the mental part!!”

She was certain that was what would happen.

At the very least, the idiot she knew was not the kind of person who would hit someone with a wine bottle and try to stab them in the gut with the jagged edge. The fact that this boy had his phone still bothered her in a corner of her heart, but when she thought about it, it was perfectly possible he could have stolen it from the real one. That was far from being conclusive evidence.

But.

She suddenly realized the previous change to the atmosphere was gone.

All sound had vanished from the dance hall. This place was ruled by the awkward silence after someone said something horribly inappropriate.

Had her opinion not been generally accepted?

No, *it was not that.*

“Shoku—...hou?”

Misaka Mikoto realized something and slowly looked to the side.

She looked to the person right next to her.

She knew she had to have a look of utter disbelief in her eyes.

“Shokuhou, this has to be a joke. You couldn't have!!”

She saw a crumpled-up face there. She saw Shokuhou Misaki still holding the TV remote she had removed from her brand-name bag. That was not the Queen of Tokiwadai Middle School's largest clique and it was not Mental Out of the seven Level 5s. It was only a lost girl driven to the edge of the cliff and still unable to find the answer.

The remote slipped from her slender hand.

But Tokiwadai's Queen had not surrendered or come to her senses.

There was a dull sound like something popping.

*"I'm sorry."*

Was this the right thing to do or not?

She may have already known the answer.

But human beings were creatures who could not always do the right thing even when they knew what it was.

Even as the calico cat mewed at her feet, that lonely girl could not stop.

She had lost control of herself.

And the power to control the human mind through the manipulation of the body's moisture went berserk.

*"But he remembers me. I don't care if it's a miracle or a coincidence. I was never hoping for a logical answer. But... but whatever he looks like and whatever he might do..."*

She was crying.

Tears streamed down her face.

She knew what it meant to do this, but she could not correct her mistake.

The mini hat wobbled atop her honey-blonde hair.

That false crown shook.

*"But if there are two Kamijou-sans out there... and one remembers me and one doesn't..."*

She controlled all the victors of the war in the dance hall, including the queen regnant.

She took control and made them hers.

Shokuhou Misaki bit her lip to suppress the sobs as she wept like a lost child.

And she raised her voice as if to break through the solid barrier of the one girl she could not control by normal means.

All while squeezing the cheap emergency whistle in her hand.

*“That’s the Kamijou-san I shared that summer with!! So I’m sorry, Misaka-saan!!!!”*

A dry popping sound followed.

She had lost control of her power to manipulate moisture on the microscopic level to control the human mind. The large turkey on one of the long tables burst like a dustball and the venomously red wine spilled on the floor boiled in the blink of an eye.

If this power happened to hit it, even silver armor would crumble away like it was made of sand.

The destruction tore a loose band across the dance hall like a searchlight sweeping around the honey-blonde girl and finally directed itself toward the skull protecting the #3.

It was as violent as performing brain surgery with a chainsaw.

“...!!”

That pushed Misaka Mikoto over the edge as well.

The obstinate and childish #5 was telling her something.

That girl had been driven to the very edge of the cliff and could only choose the wrong answer as she trembled there.

So.

She was telling Mikoto to do the right thing in her place.

Mikoto felt an intense headache piercing her temple, but it faded away almost immediately. She could not reject it, so it was making its way into her mind.

“Gh-h-h-kh...”

She had no time.

There was not much she could do.

This was not like the past. Mikoto had been spared Mental Out's effects before thanks to a combination of the unique traits of her Railgun Level 5 power and the solid wall of her powerful distrust of Shokuhou Misaki's power itself. But now Shokuhou was forcing her way through while prepared to lose control of her power. At this rate, her power really would reach Misaka Mikoto's brain.

That said, reconstructing those defenses on the fly would be difficult.

Because that would have been the same as looking at the weeping honey-blonde girl and remaking her own mind to think the girl deserved this.

Could she really do that?

She did not know what summer Shokuhou was referring to.

But despite having the power to control minds, that girl had never aimed the remote at her own head. No matter what happened and no matter how painful it was, she had not wanted to lose those memories. Could Mikoto barge in and mock those broken feelings?

This was not even the usual Mental Out.

Taking over all of Windsor Castle with no external support was not normal.

The noise in the back of Mikoto's mind was growing.

She likely had less than ten seconds left.

So...

(Top priority is making sure that idiot isn't surrounded. I don't even know if I can escape Shokuhou's control. I allowed her in too much while we were working together... I'll be caught in Mental Out's web like this!! But what am I supposed to do!?)

She heard some meowing.

The small cat was trying to say something from the floor.

Yes.

*Shokuhou Misaki's Mental Out only worked on humans.*

This was not some great power or weapon, but that entirely harmless meow told her how to fight back. At the very least, this would be better than running out of time before doing anything.

(Thanks for the assist!!)

“Ahhhhh!!”

Her target had lost its form as a dangerous weapon to act as a chair to support Shokuhou's aching hip.

It looked like a many-wheeled streetcar or police van about the size of a small bench.

In other words...

“Do it, A.A.A.!!”

Mental Out could not control a purely mechanical product. Mikoto gave a manual command before control of her own mind was taken. It was an extremely simple one to make sure the other girl could not interfere.

The next sound was like a great bell ringing.

It came from the boy with an arm of a sky-blue and lemon-yellow found nowhere in nature.

No.

It came from Kamijou Touma as he was mercilessly knocked from the floor and thrown out the second-story window.

“This is in... your hands now.”

Mikoto smiled a little as she watched that brightly-colored boy escape all alone outside the ring of controlled people.

He vanished from view.

But that was fine.

He was out of her reach, but some hope remained.

“A girl is crying after being driven to the edge. I know you’re not the lousy kind of guy who can sit idly by after seeing that!!”

That was her limit.

Academy City’s #3, the Railgun, lost consciousness.

Intense noise rushed in from the back of her mind and stole away the view before her, starting from the edges of her vision.

The jaws of Mental Out snapped shut.

The victors of the war were swallowed whole and a new threat made itself known.

This was an absolute rule, but it was so absolute it was twisted into unchanging stagnation.

It was something that could be called a great evil.

## Between the Lines 2

“Hm, hm, hm, hm.”

A lovely sound of what seemed to be the voice of a girl no older than ten rang cheerfully within a closed room of the Tower of London that was covered in fearsome blood and shadows.

The flattened fried shrimps of her reddish-blonde hair were swaying.

This was Anna Sprengel.

The frightening appearance of the torture chair had made the world tremble even if it had never actually been used, but not even it could hold her interest for long. She left the chair and now sat directly on the floor with her legs below her.

But...

“Ooh, that’s cold.”

“Do not lift your butt. Can you please get some clothes that actually fit you?”

Holy Guardian Angel Aiwass was standing on the ceiling.

Or perhaps he was floating upside down.

Anna Sprengel was holding the too-large dress to her chest and that left her with defenses no greater than a naked apron, but that was not what made her pout her lips.

“I do not like this design or fabric in the slightest.”

“Well, to match your actual age, we would have to rewind the fashion styles by nearly a century.”

“Boo. There are plenty of tailors with signs bragging about being established two or three hundred years ago, but they’ve all lost sight of the traditions they started with.”

While they discussed this, the (person who looked like) a young girl lowered her butt directly onto the cold stone floor while some thin but tough rope extended around her like a snake. She held something in her fingertips. It was a round object smaller than a coin. Boxes of caramels or chocolates lay around her, but that was what this was.

In a way, this was a pill of immortality.

Although there was no guarantee it would satisfy the many people who sought after the legends of the rose.

“Ahm.”

She casually popped it into her mouth and moved her mouth to squish it between her alluring tongue and the inside of her soft cheek. It was crushed more easily than meringue. She used her slender throat to swallow it into her stomach.

And then...

“Your quality is not what it used to be, *St. Germain*.”

“That is your only thought after ingesting a brain-eating bacteria, lady?”

After that dry yeast-like mass had nearly spread across Academy City, it had been carefully preserved and shipped by air to England since they specialized in magic. In other words, Anna Sprengel was playing with the highly virulent St. Germain that was being imprisoned here. This was not the weakened version secretly secured and modified by Kihara Yuiitsu. This was the extremely dangerous original.

However...

“The St. Germain of my generation left more of a tingle on the tongue. Oh, it’s already melted.”

Anna Sprengel rubbed her small hand on the bare navel below the dress she had to hold up. The St. Germain must not have been enough to satisfy her because she tossed a bite-size chocolate into her mouth. The two would mix together in her stomach, but her expression suggested she was not thinking about St. Germain at all anymore.

“Honestly. What a waste of a miracle,” complained Aiwass. “Anyone from a hygienic lab would probably foam at the mouth if they saw this.”

“Science is such a fleeting term when it comes to medicines, immunity, and everything else really. It’s a meaningless word.”

“Because it was Aleister and his Archetype Controller that split the world between science and magic?”

“No,” bluntly answered Anna Sprengel with the look of someone who was fed up being praised and supported. “This is a deeper issue. Originally, people were open to anything. And then along came Francis Bacon to eliminate the four idols and propose a thought process that emphasized observation and experimentation. *In other words, the father of modern science was a Rosicrucian.*”

In truth, it was not the candy she had needed.

It was something else.

A quiet but hard sound repeated itself.

“Now – then.”

Either she had gotten used to the cold or her own body heat had warmed the stone floor.

With her butt directly on the cold floor, she had roughly stacked up boxes of small bite-size caramels and chocolates all around her. But nor was it the empty boxes that Lady Anna Sprengel had wanted.

It was the silver wrappers and the clear plastic films.

She followed a certain set of rules to attach them to the tough rope crawling around her.

“Alllll done.”

“Your chest!”

It was like a giant necklace with crude decorations attached.

When she excitedly lifted it with both hands, the dress fell from her flat chest.

She pouted her lips and roughly tied the too-large fabric around her small body before grabbing both ends of the rope once more. She bent it into a gentle U-shape and then stood up.

“Jump rope, jump rope. That should cover every direction.”

She placed her bare feet together and lightly jumped on the spot.

She made a nice rhythm with her hopping.

“Fool.”

“Yes, yes. I will switch it over. Obeying your requests is my job after all.”

Aiwass did something with he stood there on the ceiling and the type of lighting changed with a buzz.

It became a cold blue.

The jump rope had silver paper and plastic film attached at set intervals like a giant necklace and it reflected the light while leaving an afterimage behind.

“I kind of wanted to try this out.”

“You mean those toys that write a message in a fan using flashing LEDs?”

“That and VR.”

The display area took the form of a jump rope, so it was like a large egg surrounding Anna Sprengel's body. Or it was like an aura. From her perspective alone, a new scene was displayed around her in all directions.

That scene was Windsor Castle.

The old Rosicrucian magic cabal had a great many legends with supposed material evidence, including a flame that would never go out and a drug of unaging immortality. This was another of those many legends.

According to a scroll found in the seven-walled tomb of Christian Rosenkreuz, that being known by the abbreviation of CRC had created a perfect miniature of the world and he could understand all things about the world by reproducing the past, present, and future of all things in his miniature garden.

The people who loved to attribute the pyramids, the Moai statues, and everything else to UFOs and aliens might think of it as a giant simulator built by an ancient supercivilization, but the truth was much simpler.

There was no metaphor here.

You only had to create the miniature garden for yourself.

While Anna Sprengel hopped in place with her many fried shrimps shaking around her, she focused on a certain point of the temporary scene displayed around her. Windsor Castle was accurately formed from bluish-white light, but the people moving around inside it were colored yellow instead.

“It’s too bad.”

Instead of admitting to a mistake of her own, she sounded like someone lamenting the tardiness of a train that was two hours late for its stop at an unmanned station in a remote area.

She also pouted her lips at her own lack of a chest to jiggle as she jumped.

“If they had been a little quicker to give the go sign for service work from the Tower of London, I might have encountered England’s main forces.”

“Your dress is about to slip off of you.”

“If it bothers you so much, wouldn’t placing a coat over me be the gentlemanly thing to do?”

Anna Sprengel did not even glance over in Aiwass’s direction. She continued casually jumping rope while looking around the fake image of Windsor Castle.

The image was only visible from the inside of the jump rope, but Aiwass had no trouble knowing what she was seeing.

“You have no intention of making a mess of this, do you?”

“Not really, no. Butterflies and honeybees are the same. They’re most fragile and at risk immediately after emerging from their chrysalis or pupa stage. They should not be touched by human hands at that time. Not until their thin wings have dried anyway.”

She giggled just before the rope hit her bare right ankle.

The egg-shaped display area cut out and the temporary image of Windsor Castle vanished again.

It did not seem to bother her, so she forcibly retied her dress around herself and casually spoke the most crucial part.

“Are you familiar with the concept of magical memory, Aiwass?”

“That is one theory that spread like ripples from what I told that human.”

Anna Sprengel made the recommendation this time, which may have been a violation of their standard method.

She was the magician who had bridged the Rosicrucians to the Golden cabal, but she also had no direct connection to the Magick system that Aleister Crowley had independently proposed.

That was like a blind spot or a mutation.

Although that was why she needed Aiwass to fill in the gaps of her knowledge.

“That is the idea that, if you follow your memories back in stages, you will eventually acquire the memories of someone else or of a past life. I believe it was a modification of Allan Bennett’s meditation method. Aleister in particular believed that a new soul settled into place a few months after fertilization of the egg, so he focused on cases where the time of death of a famous magician corresponded with the estimated time at which a new child’s soul settled in. He believed it was possible the magician had been reborn.”

Anna gave a snort of laughter and tossed a caramel in her mouth.

She really must have entirely forgotten about the St. Germain she ate and *killed* earlier.

She might desecrate the world, but she was not the type to waste food.

“Munch, munch. He practiced replaying people’s words backwards when recalling his memories? Are you sure that tantrum-throwing child wasn’t just forcing reincarnation into his worldview as another way to thumb his nose at Christianity since they firmly rejected the idea?”

“You could be more charitable and say he was strongly influenced by Egypt and Asia’s belief in the cycle of reincarnation. And the memories in this case are not a proper explanation in chronological order. For example, you might be able to acquire Oda Nobunaga’s tactical knowledge, but you could not state what he ate for breakfast on a particular day to prove you had his memories.”

“Well, isn’t that convenient.”

Anna clearly wanted to say she could pick apart the flaws in this all day.

Of course, that may have been the way of things for a genius who had never

looked up to another person.

“Aleister himself gave a warning when he proposed the idea. Energizing your soul to draw out the memories hidden within was all well and good, but he said starting the process based on a delusional foregone conclusion that you had a connection to, say, Cleopatra would only lead to self-made delusions of grandeur.”

“Really, he went that far? Well, it is like him to mix in some dark humor to take a jab at Mathers’s supposedly logical arguments for being a proper noble... So what did Crowley himself ‘discover’ like this?”

“He claimed to have inherited the memories and techniques of Magician Eliphas Levi.”

“Wait, really? He’s pretty famous and connected to the British branch of the Rose.”

Aleister had come out on top in the conflict within the Golden cabal that had Rosicrucian origins and eventually developed his unique Magick, but this would mean he also had the memories of the person who had helped spread the British branch of the Rose. It was said Levi himself had belonged to that branch. The circular result was a lot like a snake swallowing its own tail.

The girl swallowed her candy.

“Ridiculous,” she spat out. “Memories are not that conveniently linked to someone’s value. People are who they are whether they have their memories or not.”

“Then why are you pitting those two against each other?”

“The clash itself was unavoidable, but it was *that outsider girl* who tried to classify people based on insufficient information. You can’t blame me for that one. Make no mistake: my decision was based on something else.”

That girl who looked only ten smiled in a way that looked all the crueler because of that young appearance.

“Besides, he was already in tatters. Aiwass, you said Kamijou Touma had suffered severe brain damage more than once, didn’t you?”

“The first was for Shokuhou Misaki. The second for Index.”

Anna messed up her jump roping a few times in a row. It may have been due to her ankle-length hair.

But she did not seem all that bothered by it.

Instead of trying to have fun, this may have doubled as a way to adjust to her shrunk body.

“In other words, he carries damage of both scientific and magical origin,” continued Aiwass.

“Didn’t I already bring up Bacon? Those categories aren’t all that important. Knowing he was in an unstable state due to multiple instances of damage is enough. It is hard to believe that boy was even moving around in that state and then he underwent another great stimulus.”

“Crowley’s recovery magic.”

“If your report is accurate, that probably was the only option after he took Coronzon’s attack. Without that, he would have died... or rather, he was already half-dead. But cutting off his right hand and casting the recovery magic obliterated what little balance still remained.”

“But I imagine the recovery magic was not convenient enough to bring back his lost memories.”

“Why would it, fool? And that much should be obvious from some external observation. The boy is still wandering the world without his memories. Sometimes when you try to stabilize an unbalanced house of cards, your touch can become the finishing blow.”

“Reminds me of the Fool in tarot.”

“Oh, now that is a nice observation. Well done. Come to think of it, there are

different factions split over the decision of where in the other 21 cards that #0 card should go. And depending on that, the exact same arrangement of cards on the table can have entirely different meanings.”

She stopped jumping rope and let out an oddly heated breath.

And then she spoke.

“The important part here is that Crowley cut off the right hand first.”

She folded the jump rope in half, held it in one hand, and then spun around on the spot.

“That is more important than the formless memories. In other words, he was healed and his brain’s network was reconstructed based on the assumption that the lack of his right hand’s power was his proper state.”

“Then what about his leftover right hand?”

“Yes, that is the question. His entire body seemed to be fully healed, but just as the rest of you are vastly overemphasizing, he did not appear to regain his past. So where did it go? Couldn’t the two unnecessary parts have gathered together instead of going off in separate directions?”

She wiped the sweat from her brow and then grabbed the jump rope in both hands once more.

“Forcing yourself never ends well. You will always pay some kind of price. Magic God Othinus did not show much restraint, but even she never messed with Kamijou Touma’s head, such as directly altering his personality.”

“He was already in an unstable state.”

“And Coronzon’s repeated severings must have pushed it over the edge.”

“The wandering #0, hm?”

In this case, #0 did not refer to the right hand or that born from it.

Even if the power to negate the supernatural had been stolen from him, he was still himself.

“At this point, *that* is a different being acting entirely independently. Both in mind and body. Hee hee. But what does the Fool indicate here? Even when the number and arrangement of the cards is the same, people’s opinions differ on that point. Well, if you ask me, the quickest way to end this would be to kill the dregs that were just chucked out the window.”

She jumped rope to once more display Windsor Castle in the bluish-white afterimage.

Even this was a game to her.

“I mentioned honeybees, didn’t I?”

“You mean about the pupa stage?”

“That does more than just let the bug grow from larva to adult. Inside the hard pupa, the larva destroys its own muscles and organs and uses that to create its adult form. You could say they are remaking their old self into a new self. Aiwass, surely you can tell what this is a metaphor for.”

“The acquisition of a new self. The goal of joining a magic cabal is to overcome the judgment of death and obtain the light of god. But if you only wish to surpass your physical form and elevate your soul along the Sephiroth, couldn’t you have simply tamed Coronzon who guards the borderline known as the Abyss?”

“Fool, have your thoughts dulled as much as your body? That is not what matters. Why do magic cabals like us open our doors to newcomers? If you thought we were doing it out of the kindness of our hearts, you are quite a sucker. We can take them for all the money and land they own. Just think of John Dee who gave his woman to a friend because the friend claimed to have received a divine message saying they should share their wives.”

“...”

“You judge your old self and gain a new self.”

Anna Sprengel grinned.

And she tore apart her own smile by parting the corner of her lips with the tip of her tongue that still carried the sweetness of the caramel. She casually placed her legs together and tried jumping rope again. It was only an afterimage displayed for her viewpoint, but an accurate view of Windsor Castle appeared in bluish-white light.

The Rosicrucians claimed a few different goals, but one of them was to tear down the old monarchies and create a nation ruled by philosophers.

So that ideology likely applied to other fields as well.

For example, they might question the simple and fixed idea that humans were in control of their powers.

A dragon.

She spoke while thinking of that strange symbol that crossed the duality of good and evil by being counted as a filthy devil but also being used to signify proper families and organizations.

“Let’s watch, Aiwass. *The One who Purifies God and Slays Demons* has appeared. What will he destroy and what will he create within his chrysalis? I hope it will more than surpass my expectations.”

# **Chapter 3: Reverse Position – Winged\_Lizard.**

## **Part 1**

It hurt like hell.

A straining pain erupted all across Kamijou Touma's body, but he did not have time to scream like normal.

“...!!”

Even though there had been a soft lawn below instead of hard asphalt, there was still something wrong with being able to move so soon after having his back slammed into the ground after being tossed from a second-story window. He hated to admit it, but this had saved him here. It was a dark night and flickering lights very different from electric ones were aimed his way from all across the artificial woods. Those will-o'-the-wisp-like lights were probably lanterns using actual fire. He had no proof of it, but he felt like fire had a way of drawing out the hostility of a pursuer more than a normal flashlight. He did not know if these were knights, magicians, priests and nuns, or even maids and butlers, but none of the answers would be a reason to relax. His joints were as stubborn as if someone had poured glue into them, but he forced them to move as he got up and ran in the direction with the fewest lights.

He did not even make it three steps.

A carrot-like plant with a split end shot vertically up from the ground right next to him.

And his eyes met with *the eyes of the creepy root*.

(What!?)

“Knock it away, human!! If you are within range of its scream, the vibration will pass from your inner ear and rupture your heart!!”

He trusted the voice he heard and acted accordingly.

He swung his sky-blue arm around to strike the mystery plant that had shot up to face height and launched it into the distance just before a high-pitched noise erupted out like someone scratching at glass. Some crows and nightjars fell to the ground. Their nests in the trees must have been in range of the scream. This was more brutal than concussion grenades that were meant to rattle the brain.

“...”

But Kamijou trembled over something other than the plant’s power.

He feared *the change to his own body that had allowed him to react in time*.

He felt like he could deflect a bullet with a sword if he had a guide to follow.

Meanwhile, something circled above his head with a sound like sheets beating at the air. It was a bird of prey larger than those crows and nightjars. It was equipped with handmade reins made of cheap leather straps so a palm-sized fairy could ride it around.

The fairy’s name was Othinus.

“I never thought they would mass-produce mandrakes in a greenhouse to use them like anti-personnel mines just because they can’t extract the medicinal ingredient properly. But this is the home of anti-magician combat, so I guess they’re willing to use whatever works. They think about things fundamentally differently from your average magician.”

“Othinus, I screwed up. *I couldn’t save anyone!*”

“I can tell. And now is the time to withdraw. This is supposed to be the celebration of the war’s end, so I am not letting this turn out like the Kamisato panic all over again.”

The loud detonation of the “landmine” must have given away their position.

Staying put would be a bad idea.

Kamijou Touma clenched his teeth and ran across the lawn. Voices from behind demanded he stop and more lights shined on him. The ones who gave a warning were the ones who still had some sense leftover, but once they knew he was an enemy, they showed no mercy. Beams of magical light more frightening than a handgun or shotgun flew toward him.

He glanced down at his right hand and clicked his tongue.

He only saw a sky-blue light there.

“So you do understand.” Othinus sounded somewhat impressed as she freely controlled the bird of prey with a wingspan of two meters. “Human, you do not have Imagine Breaker at the moment. The danger of each and every piece of magic is much greater than before. Do not lose your life before reclaiming what was stolen. And I am not just talking about your right hand.”

“...!!”

“There are people who only you can save. For this one battle, there is meaning in being Kamijou Touma and not even Zeus or Odin would make an adequate replacement. So if you wish to sulk and claim you are unnecessary, do it later. Right now you need to focus only on surviving.”

At times like this, Othinus showed no mercy.

But that was what made her his understander who immediately told him how serious the problem was. She knew that comforting someone and not telling them about the wound in their back could lead to them dying from a wound they could have healed.

“From up here, I can see they have released some trained hounds in addition to those root landmines. Do not let them pick up your scent. As long as they cannot follow a direct trail, you can shake them. Do it!!”

Something swirled around.

Kamijou Touma’s sky-blue right arm broke apart and beat at the air like a bat’s wings. After opening like a great maw, that outer shell reminiscent of colorful fibers or muscles surrounded the high school boy once more.

It had a sky-blue surface and the lemon-yellow lines.

The winged lizard had crocodilian jaws, thin wings, and a thick tail.

Its colors were even more bright and toxic than a poison dart frog.

Or perhaps it was a dragon not found in any mythology.

“This is so damn scary!!”

“But you have to rely on it. I don’t know what *fell away from Imagine Breaker and ruined the balance*, but this is another form of your own power!”

His first order of business was losing the dogs. The only idea he could come up with was cutting across the central courtyard to the north so he could reach the Thames.

His footstep exploded out.

He was not walking or running. His body made more and more leaps along shallow parabolic arcs like a flat rock slipping along a river. A few mandrakes popped up from the ground along the way, but he was moving fast enough to pull away from them before they detonated in midair.

He left the artificial forest and made his way toward a city full of boxy buildings.

At this speed, the difference between land and water was not all that important.

Windsor Castle was a royal palace on the bank of the Thames. That representative river of England was fifty meters wide, making it wider than a school pool, but the sky-blue reptilian legs stepped directly on the water and jumped two or three times without sinking.

After reaching the other side, he grabbed the metal pole of road sign with one hand and partially tore into the concrete surface of the embankment with his claws to stop himself.

The sign bent diagonally.

Although the fact that he had not sliced right through it with his claws may have been a sign that he had tried to minimize the damage.

The sky-blue shell gathered around his right arm, spread out as thin wings like a falcon on the falconer's wrist, and revealed the boy's face once more.

But the look on his face was far from excitement at having acquired a new weapon.

He had the disgusted look of someone who had shoved their hand down their sink's sticky drain.

Something about this bothered him.

It had taken him just a bit longer to "return" after relying on it this time. If that delay continued to grow the more he used it, what would eventually happen?

A dragon.

A symbol that crossed the simple divisions of good and evil.

(I need to get used to this and fast. If I don't do something, *I won't be able to remove it.*)

“Were its restraints removed, or did it start to rapidly grow after it broke?” His understander spoke from overhead. “Or is it like an atomic nucleus and losing a piece has caused it to rapidly react while breaking down? Is it like removing petals from a complete flower? We need to investigate this further.”

The wings of Othinus’s bird of prey audibly flapped as it landed on the badly bent sign.

“Not even you know what this is?”

“No. Although I do know Mathers intentionally destabilized the harmony found in a single element to use it as a powerful attack.”

At first glance, that might not seem like much of an admission.

But she had fully destroyed the world after Gungnir’s completion. And that was not a figure of speech or simply referring to the small planet known as Earth. *She had really and truly done it.*

“When I restored the world, I released a single formula and the world endlessly expanded from there. Just like a single speck of dust absorbs moisture to create a snow crystal. Not even I fully understand every last part of the crystal.”

“But still...”

“Yes.”

Othinus herself appeared to have failed in her attempt to look good.

She seemed somewhat awkward, but it may have been because she was with her understander that the arrogant god admitted it instead of hiding it.

“This is not about the very edges of the crystal, by which I mean the farthest reaches of the universe no one has ever seen. I fully restored this world using the reference point of Imagine Breaker. Imagine Breaker is the core I allowed to carry the fate of the world, but this means there is some black box within it that not even I, Magic God Othinus, can explain.”

“...”

“Do you understand the gravity of the situation now? That means *this is a function that did not exist at the point that I created Gungnir*. Although I cannot say if it is a result of an expansion or a collapse.”

His palm was made of psychedelic colors now, but he could still feel a cold sweat there.

And that humanness only made it creepier.

He did not know if something had been added or if something was missing, but he did know that something was happening in some unseen part of his body. He himself felt no pain, but that did not make him feel much better. He felt the same unknown fear as someone who had a strange shape on their X-ray but was sent home by the doctor with a “take care” and no explanation.

He felt a chill because he had no way of reaching a conclusion about this.

He had too little information.

“(A dragon, sky-blue, lemon-yellow, a right arm. A guardian of treasure, the ruler of the depths, the devil, a symbol of what must be defeated, a house crest, separation, that which breaks the balance.)”

The small understander was muttering some things under her breath.

Othinus was probably using all the knowledge in her head to search for any kind of clue.

In that sense, it was a real shame that he did not have Index with him. That grimoire library had memorized 103,001 original grimoires.

Othinus sighed from atop the bird of prey perched on the twisted sign.

“At any rate, we lost their pursuit. That should mean safety for the time being. Now you won’t be thrown into the Tower of London and dissected to discover the nature of what is happening to you. But on the other hand, you

are up against an impregnable royal palace filled with the fierce warriors who survived to the very end of that war. I am a war god who has overcome many different wars, but this does not look like it will be an enjoyable fight.”

“I know that. This is all about the rust expelled from my body: my right hand.”

Index and Misaka Mikoto.

There had also been someone whose face he could not recall and whose name he was pretty sure he did not know.

But he could vaguely see the tears spilling from the eyes of *someone with honey-blonde hair*.

“Something must be done.”

So much had been stolen from him, but he could still speak those words.

They were fierce, savage, and wild words that seemed to throw cold water on humanity’s bright possibilities, but his understander girl actually smiled and gave a satisfied snort.

She seemed to be saying she would have hit him had he still tried to act entirely selflessly and treat himself as unnecessary after everything that was done to him.

So.

While watched over by the god of war, magic, and deception, Kamijou Touma – *the kind of ordinary high school boy you can find anywhere* – looked up to the moon and declared war.

Just like a sinister dragon raising its head and roaring into the heavens.

“And it has to be me that does it.”

Now.

The world's smallest battle was beginning, so it was time to take back everything that had been stolen.

## Part 2

All sound had stopped.

Or had time itself ground to a halt?

“...”

The girl with her honey-blonde hair worn back in two stages had gone entirely pale.

The throbbing, splitting headache must have been the price to pay for pushing her power past its limits and losing control.

But Shokuhou Misaki's reactions were dull.

As if the pain were the least of her worries.

Had she finally realized the gravity of what she had done? She did not seem to care about the sharp pain occasionally running through her hip now that she had nothing to support it. She did feel the pain, but the part of her mind that worked to avoid it had numbed over. Just like someone who had come to accept the abuse as just a part of life after suffering through it for so very long.

She held the cheap emergency whistle in her hand, but it did nothing to calm her heart.

A cat meowed up at the girl as she simply stood there.

Was he the only one who had escaped? But she was too overwhelmed to crouch down and look after him.

“Hmm.”

Meanwhile.

A cracking sound came from somewhere.

The boy in the unfamiliar tuxedo spoke bluntly.

Queen Regnant Elizard and Knight Leader.

Villian and the female knight.

Stiyl Magnus and Kanzaki Kaori.

Itsuwa and Tatemiya.

Even the maids and nuns.

That was a perfect but frozen world. In that sense, Shokuhou Misaki may have become a dictator who placed a solid lid over everyone’s heads.

On the other hand...

“I guess you can’t control just everything, huh? *Looks like you only claimed control over about twenty percent.*”

The pointy-haired boy looked around to inspect the frozen people while making sure not to touch them and he spoke in a purely impartial way.

“I’d been curious whether the science side or magic side was superior, but this makes sense. They refine their lifeforce into magic power. I don’t know how exactly it works, but it looks like magicians as a whole know how to handle problems affecting the mind. They must have some kind of auto-fuse that shuts down their mind as soon as something tries to take control.”

“...”

“Was it Niang-Niang who mentioned having a false funeral to fake her death and gain freedom? There might be some similar magic in the West.”

But that was no reason to relax.

Even the greatest warrior was done for if they were stabbed while unconscious. In that sense, Academy City’s #5 had accomplished something truly frightening.

“That would be easy enough to break with my right hand, but this thing isn’t great for precise control. This would all be a waste if I destroyed Mental Out’s effects along with the magical safety system. Worse, once I touch them, *I can’t tell from looking at them* whether they’re really still under your control or not. …So it would be best not to touch them.”

But as powerful as the #5 was, those words were enough for her tear glands to start to give up.

Once he decided to fight, it did not matter how bad the situation looked. He would gather up all the information he had and search for a loophole. His bright and approachable personality hid a clever side that was greater than Shokuhou Misaki’s and had no relation to surface-level academic achievement. He was such an oddly unreadable older boy.

Even during the greatest of risks, he had always turned a pure smile her way.

She thought back to those summer days.

She could not stop herself from seeing that same thing in the person here.

“Shokuhou.”

“Ah.”

The cat at her feet was bristling all his fur.

There was a good reason for that when it came to Misaka Mikoto.

Her power caused her to constantly emit faint EM waves that the animal

disliked.

But.

What about in this boy's case?

"Or would you prefer I called you Shokuhou-san? Ha ha. It's wild how people grow up. You look older than me now."

Shocking pink and emerald.

The boy in the unfamiliar tuxedo covered his face with a hand as if to see how it felt. Some kind of dry sound came from behind his hand on occasion.

"But, well, who would have thought that female knight's high heels would do more damage than the monster? ...Anyway, I just hope I haven't broken open somewhere."

For a brief moment, Shokuhou Misaki saw those unnatural colors dancing somewhere in her field of vision. Even though the only thing in front of her eyes was the pointy-haired boy's face. It seemed to come from the corners of his eyes and the corners of his mouth.

But once she blinked her eyes, it was gone.

She just had to tell herself she had been imagining things.

"If you're going to eat something, you should do it now. Oh, yeah. You won't eat anything with artificial additives and preservatives, will you? But a dinner made for British royalty should all be health food of the highest quality, so even a hamburger and fries should have the proper care behind it. You liked that kind of thing, didn't you?"

The girl's teeth were chattering.

Some hair fell down onto her nape and an unnatural wrinkle formed in the dress prepared especially for this day, but she did not bother to fix either thing.

She thought to herself while growing unkempt.

This was nothing coming from the outside. She felt an overwhelming warmth pushing up from within her heart. But she could not let it carry her away. She had to resist it. Once she gave in, she knew she would fall and never recover.

“It’s hard to tell if the magicians will be any use at all. And to be honest, twenty percent isn’t enough. Which brings my attention to Misaka. She’s not a magician, after all. *Damn, there’s that misfortune.* If only there’d been more of a science side presence here... But, well, it would help a lot if we could get Tokiwadai’s #3 on our side, but can you really do that? There’s bound to be a gap between the #3 and the #5, but can you control her?”

“...I don’t know.”

Her small decorative hat – the false crown – swayed as she moved her head.

She shook it side to side.

Some more hair came undone and fell to her nape.

Accelerator, Kihara Noukan, Hamazura Shiage, and Takitsubo Rikou. Shokuhou had no way of knowing some of it, but was it fortunate or unfortunate that those other major science side members had not been here?

“To be honest, it probably depends on Misaka-san herself. If she is hopelessly disappointed in me, then the cracks of rejection ability will probably have grown quite large. In that case, she might be pretending to be controlled and waiting for an opportunity to strike. Using her as a foundation of our fighting force would probably be a bad idea, don’t you think?”

“Hopelessly disappointed in you?”

The pointy-haired boy tilted his head with an emerald light scattering from the corner of his eye.

“*Why would she be?*”

“Kh.”

That girl who sought salvation had shoulders that seemed more delicate than glasswork, but they shook violently now.

She immediately held her hands in front of her large chest and trembled like a timid child who had been forced to play goalie in a sport they had barely played.

In truth, Shokuhou Misaki was human, so she had had a goal in mind. She wanted to believe she had not simply lost control and used her #5 Level 5 power at random.

Mental Out.

As far as she knew, it did not work on that boy. Or more accurately, it could alter his mind, but the alterations would be removed as soon as he touched his head with his right hand.

So.

What would happen if she pretended to do what that tuxedo and ascot tie boy said, pulled out her remote, and used her power on the boy himself? If he ended up standing there mindlessly, wouldn't it prove he was some hideous monster with no connection to the events of that summer?

That had been her plan.

And yet...

"Shokuhou, you made the right choice and drove away that grotesque monster. Misaka has no reason to be disappointed in you."

"..."

She was shaken again.

Her Mental Out had not worked on this boy. Or rather, the attack had initially worked but had been negated by the power of his right hand. That was why he could walk around of his own free will.

And the other boy had fled without using his right hand.

So...

In that case...

*She had lost yet another reason to tear out the pillars supporting this impossible situation and let it crumble away. The explosive she hoped to use to break free of this fleeting dream had grown damp and useless.*

Everyone wanted to dream.

No one wanted to wake from a pleasant dream.

Everyone had a reality in their heart that they wanted to be true and that belief would conveniently continue as long as they were not presented with incontrovertible proof to the contrary.

Shokuhou Misaki's eyes would not stop wavering.

That may have been because she had crossed a point of no return.

...What did this boy have to have to be Kamijou Touma?

Was it the memories they could think back on together?

Or was the power in his right hand?

“That was one hell of a monster.”

The boy seemed to spit out the words.

And there was a brief flash of shocking pink at the corner of his mouth.

He ignored the growling of the cat and waved his right hand.

“I bet he was planning to ask you to help him, get you to use your power, and then go ‘sorry, don’t remember you’ and make a quick exit. Yet he has the nerve to act like he was there to ‘take back what’s his’? Don’t make me

laugh. If he hadn't shown up, nothing would have happened and we could have just enjoyed the party.”

“...”

“Pursing that outsider won’t get you anywhere. It won’t take you back to that summer. You can blow *that silver emergency whistle*, but he’ll only tilt his head. Because he doesn’t share those memories with you.”

The girl’s shoulders shook, but the pointy-haired boy only grabbed an olive from a large plate left in the party hall.

He spoke to her like he always had.

With the same voice and smile in those memories she never wanted to lose.

“I’m the only one who does.”

## Part 3

Windsor was on the outskirts of London, but it was not that big a town. It only had a population of about thirty thousand. This probably had not been the initial intention when the castle was built, but for the royal family who moved between Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle, the latter was a lot like a second home to get away from the hustle and bustle of the capital during the weekends.

“Oh, dear. Windsor Castle was taken over? First the *Queen Britannia* and now this? I just hope our country’s crucial facilities haven’t gained a weird cuckoldry fetish.”

...And that naturally limited the places for people to gather.

It had already been a meeting place for emergencies.

Kamijou Touma, a bunny who could die from loneliness, and Othinus-chan, a Viking who could fix her mood by eating and sleeping (the same thought process as Index!), made their way to a restaurant open at night to hold a strategy meeting, but then he remembered his wallet only had a bit of Japanese change and a point card to somewhere or another.

The dejected Japanese boy had been spotted through the window by First Princess Riméa who had changed into a more comfortable outfit, so she stepped out of a pub full of noisy festivities to celebrate the end of the war.

“Well, I haven’t been informed of the details, but it sounds like you’ve been caught up in a lot of trouble.”

“That’s the story of my life, honestly.”

“So the boy I saw at Windsor Castle wasn’t you, hm? …That was a high-quality imitation since I managed to hold a conversation with him without noticing anything out of the ordinary.”

Was that how you would view it if you looked at it like AI research?

Riméa wore a leather jacket and tight pants. She would have looked at home riding around on a large motorcycle in the country of rock (except for her monocle), but then a bearded drag queen with his sequined dress half removed laughed and spoke to her in a falsetto voice.

“What’s this, what’s this!? Caught yourself a boytoy, have you!? But he looks like he’s still in his teens! Someone’s living on the dangerous side! Oh, I must hear all about it!”

“Shut up or I’ll kill you, you drunk☆”

The smile and statement were the polar opposite of the usual Riméa.

Kamijou had to suspect she was more relaxed in places like this.

He initially tried to hide his sky-blue arm inside his hoodie, but the people

here did not seem to care. After all, they were all drunk from the celebration. There were a lot of youths swaying side to side with the British flag painted on their faces. It was a lot like after a victory in a major soccer tournament.

“What’s that thing? Bluh, blue? You’re Japanese, aren’t you? So why blue? Shouldn’t it be white and red? Hinomaruuu!”

“Ah, hey, wait, stop! Don’t just walk up to me and start speaking English! It’s scary!!”

“Oh, is that for your football team!? Is it geisha blue or something? Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!!”

A red-faced middle-aged man started talking to him and laughing like crazy, so Riméa shoved him, sending him rolling across the floor.

The blue-armed idiot tilted his head at one word he had managed to pick up from that surprise practical English test.

“What was that about football?”

“He didn’t mean American football. That’s what we call soccer here.”

...That made him wonder why not just call it soccer if that was what they meant, but he decided it would be rude to ask any further questions. He was not sure how he would respond if a British person called out to him and asked why red was called “aka” in Japanese.

Riméa breathed a mature sigh.

“I don’t know what happened, but you’re lucky that arm wasn’t a bloody red or something. This way it looks incredibly fake.”

She also gave him a warning.

“And since I’m sure you won’t be drinking anything alcoholic, make sure you at least order something with a tomato or ginger base so it looks alcoholic. In this pub, sitting there weakly drinking a glass of orange juice or apple juice will get you stripped in no time. Arms of all genders will be

reaching in toward you from every direction.”

“Are you serious?”

“And on a night of celebration like tonight, things get especially crazy. Unless you’re into perverted women who will gladly look after your every need, then I would recommend avoiding that.”

“I absolutely am not!! It’s comforting dorm managers for me!!”

At any rate, Riméa had apparently already downed several large drinks, but she was still sensible enough to not recommend the same thing to a high schooler. She pushed over a large plate full of junk food you would not find in Windsor Castle: thick slices of bacon, potato chips, popcorn, etc. But instead of opening a bag and dumping it on the plate, it was apparently all handmade by the pub. And potato chips that were literally fried by hand were not something you got to eat every day, so it was an interesting experience.

“Why do these use seaweed salt? We’re in England.”

“We have learned how to use seaweed salt and pollock roe from your great Eastern potato chip nation. Butter and soy sauce flavor was easy enough, but the dashi flavor is a lot harder to get right.” She reached for the mixed nuts on the plate. “So what brings you out here at this hour? Running into me was a coincidence, so did you have some other plans?”

“Um, we didn’t have specific destination in mind, although I would be lying if I said I didn’t want something to eat. I had plans to meet someone on this street.”

“Was it another Asian boy? Because there’s one getting stripped over there.”

“Whoa!?”

He looked in the direction she pointed with her thumb and saw a pale Hamazura Shiage being thrown into the air by a bunch of drunk men and women after being stripped to his boxers. His girlfriend in a pink track suit and fluffy sweater was standing nearby with a blank look on her face, so it

was all being seen by the #1 person he would not want to see it. A girl with short red hair and a fluffy white dress was also standing nearby, but instead of helping, she was holding her black box to her stomach and roaring with laughter.

And.

The word #1 brought an ominous thought to Kamijou's mind.

Even a stupid high school boy could figure this one out. He bet even his English teacher would have trouble making sense of the meaningless shouts and cries, but there was also a series of cracking and breaking noises coming from the door labelled with the word "toilet".

A white monster pushed that door open and stepped out.

"You're late. I ended up breaking through all the stall walls."

"You're such a badass, master. You're like the underground emperor! No one is better suited for getting into fights in the bathroom."

It was possible that translucent demon would praise him for any display that made him look strong because she folded her hands in front of a chest unusually large for her short height and an enraptured look filled her eyes. She literally had hearts in her eyes. There were probably a few reckless drunks lying collapsed in the bathroom. There was no restraining that strongest idiot when such a cute girl kept praising him based on her limited value system.

...No one seemed to care that a translucent girl was floating around, so they may have thought someone was taking advantage of the celebratory mood to film a hidden camera video. Some middle-aged men were swaying side to side while holding beer mugs far larger than any seen in Japan and otherwise making a scene behind Accelerator and the demon girl. They apparently assumed there was a camera filming those two and wanted to place themselves in that fictional frame. They might end up confused by their own memories when they woke up with a hangover the following morning, but they would probably just assume they had gotten so drunk they hallucinated

it.

“Argh, get away from me you drunks!!”

Othinus was as cautious as a grumpy cat while sitting on Kamijou’s shoulder. Apparently some of the drunk “gentlemen” had mistaken her for something like a high-quality pet robot and were curious where the “Made in Japan” label was. If she was not careful, she could get stolen away like a pickpocketed wallet or a snatched purse.

Incidentally, Kamijou Touma was short a phone due to various circumstances, so he generally had no way of contacting people. Using an outdated payphone required local money. He had only managed to arrange a meeting here by tying letters to the legs of the birds of prey that Othinus captured. A communication method with no reliance on electricity was rare in the modern day. The recipients may have felt like they were being attacked from above, but that just meant it was a rare experience for them as well.

Was it because they were handmade or was it the British way?

The thick potato chips oozed grease when Kamijou bit into them and he sighed.

“Who’s that girl with you again? The same goes for Hamazura’s side, I feel like there are a few new faces here.”

“I say you’ve got the most explaining to do.”

Accelerator clicked his tongue while plopping down in an empty chair.

His eyes were on that sky-blue right arm.

The #1 had already experienced the local cuisine, so he gave the large plate of snacks an irritated look and opted not to eat anything.

“Out with it, trash. Use your Level 0 brain for what little good it’s worth.”

“Shouldn’t someone save boxers boy from those drunks first?” asked Riméa.  
“I think his head is going to hit that ceiling fan if they keep tossing him up

much longer.”

“If it bothers you that much, then go do it yourself,” replied the #1. “I’m not doing it.”

“Oh, is that so?”



She loudly clapped her hands as a signal to the elderly barkeeper who began handing out a round of Irish whiskey which was well known for being smooth but strong. This seemed to be taking a lesson from the sun in the North Wind and the Sun. As soon as the drunks drank the amber liquid that was reminiscent of cough syrup, they lost the energy to keep tossing the boy in the air and curled up on the floor.

Kamijou Touma, Accelerator, and Hamazura Shiage had gathered together.

However.

With those three here, they also had the palm-sized fairy Othinus on Kamijou's shoulder, the artificial demon Qliphah Puzzle 545 next to the strongest Level 5, the seventy-eight-card tarot set and Golden magician Dion Fortune rolling on the floor and pointing at boxers boy with tears in her eyes, and Aneri on the phone inside the pocket of the removed clothes. Kamijou Touma also guessed that pink track suit and fluffy sweater Takitsubo Rikou was not your average girl if she had survived this far. He realized nearly half of the people sharing this table with him were not strictly human, even though he had not been reincarnated into another world. The amount of variation was a little crazy.

(Although I can't call anyone else a monster when I'm the one turning into a lizard.)

Actually getting something to eat must have given him a blood sugar spike and brought the exhaustion rushing in at him because Kamijou leaned back in his chair and sounded like he was lamenting his misfortune.

"This mess has two causes and I'm one of them."

It may have been more accurate to say a portion of his ability was one of them.

They had seen a few cases of an ability itself gaining independent thought, such as the glasses girl named Kazakiri Hyouka or the #2 Kakine Teitoku.

"My right arm was blown away during the *Queen Britannia* incident, but

everything since then has been weird as hell. I gained this strange sky-blue arm and some bastard who looks just like me is wandering around.”

“I want to curse myself for carelessly thanking him back at Windsor Castle. But what is that arm you have now? Did you call it sky-blue?”

Kamijou had no answer to Riméa’s question.

His right hand was moving around while separated from his body.

The boy could not even imagine what was happening to him.

“At the very least, I don’t have Imagine Breaker. Maybe this sky-blue thing is the remaining dregs and most of it went to that guy. There’s nothing left that makes me special.”

“...”

Sharp anger filled Accelerator’s eyes.

But Kamijou failed to notice and took a deep breath.

“If you don’t believe me, how about we try it out? Um, anyone got an obvious supernatural power we can use? Anything works. ...Oh, how about that weird demon floating over there.”

“What!? Who are you calling weird, you 360-degree spike head?”

“Watch this. I couldn’t do this if I had Imagine Breaker.”

“Hwuh...?”

The pointy-haired boy was lost in thought as he reached his right arm out in that direction.

He moved his sky-blue arm toward her translucent shoulder.

But he should have considered what that ‘hwuh’ meant.

“Hwachoo!”

He heard a weird squishing noise.

The demon’s sneeze had shifted where she was floating.

So his palm ran straight into the center of Qliphah Puzzle 545’s imbalanced chest.

The newspaper-dress girl screamed and the white demon wordlessly moved his hand in a slapping motion, no, a clawing motion that tore into the air.

Kamijou Touma had nothing to negate this now, so he and his chair were blasted more than five meters back.

“Avwhoabwahhh!?”

“What the hell? That actually hit you?”

The one who hit him was actually trembling.

Normally, Kamijou Touma might have had all his bones shattered as soon as he hit the floor, but he instead found himself caught hanging upside down from an artificial Christmas tree.

“D-dyoo you get it now? There’sh shomething wrong with my right hand.”

Palm-sized fairy Othinus (who had skillfully kept her position atop the boy’s body like a clown balancing on a ball) spoke up in extreme exasperation.

“I’m not sure you can say anything about misfortune after surviving an attack like that.”

“Ah! Does not having Imagine Breaker mean no more misfortune!?”

Kamijou’s face lit up when he belatedly realized this one.

So it was not all bad.

He had a feeling he was focusing too much on the positives, but...

“O-oh, no,” said the translucent demon. “If they keep the conversation going, I’ll lose my chance to protest what happened.”

No one could blame her for growing tearful.

Now that he was released from the bonds of misfortune, Kamijou Touma was at full power. The world’s morals were entering unpredictable territory with that wild beast unleashed.

“You’re the first princess, aren’t you!? Then say something! This is a test of your country’s morals!!”

“Stop giving out spoilers, you slutty demon.”

Riméa was only an ordinary woman right now, so she responded in an incredibly low voice.

And boxers boy gave a belated reaction.

“Nwah? First pri—eh? For real? That gloomy one!?”

“Shut up! Don’t call me gloomy!!”

The monocle lady had quickly found herself under fire, but fortunately, the surrounding drunks must not have heard any of it. Besides, the partyers in this pub already included plenty of self-proclaimed Bunny Grays and Atlanteans, so a princess might not have been all that impressive.

At any rate.

“Imagine Breaker doesn’t work. That much I know,” said Kamijou as he dragged his chair back over to the table.

Today’s lucky bastard got away without taking any real criticism.

This left the fundamental question of what that sky-blue arm was, but they did not know if something had been accumulated or if something had been

removed. They could not find the answer if they did not know the details or process behind the change.

“Instead of trusting one or the other, everyone in Windsor Castle seemed more like they were skeptical of the situation as a whole. That probably means that not all of them are enemies, but there was one troublesome person. Um...?”

“Shokuhou. Shokuhou Misaki.”

After a slight, unnatural pause, small Othinus got fed up with waiting and supplied the answer from his shoulder.

The #1 grimaced at that.

“A Level 5? That’s one of the others in that silly category I belong to, isn’t it?”

“Right. Right, that was it... Mental Out. The strongest psychological power. She’s taken the other me’s side, so it’s impossible to imagine what the overall breakdown looks like. All the magicians in Windsor Castle might be under her control and she might even turn the normal people of this town into soldiers.”

Even the cheerful drunks in this pub could become enemies at some point.

That would make it difficult to win this in the usual way of putting together a logical explanation to convince the majority of people. Shokuhou Misaki. That... girl? She was a girl, right? At any rate, that esper he had trouble picturing in his head could alter the entire *atmosphere* of this place.

“I haven’t seen him yet, but what does that bad guy want?” asked the boxers boy. “What’s he trying to do?”

That was a simple but important question.

He had memories that Kamijou Touma did not.

Why was that?

And what did he hope to accomplish with those memories?

(Is there a way of figuring out the outlines of the missing memories, like viewing a silhouette or the hole for the last piece of a jigsaw puzzle? Or does this have nothing to do with my brain and he was watching everything I did from inside me?)

Kamijou thought for a bit before speaking again.

“He is my past.”

“Your past?” asked Takitsubo Rikou with a blank stare and a tilt of her head.

That single word cut right to the core of who someone was and acted as a guide to those who heard it.

But Kamijou had difficulty explaining this.

He did not know how.

But at the very least, this other boy had claimed Kamijou Touma’s missing past.

“A forgotten past is a really heavy thing because it points to things I’ve done that I’m completely ignorant of. And it feels like I’m being criticized about every little thing. Like I’m just an illusion because I lack that solid foundation.”

But whatever *that* Kamijou Touma said may not have mattered all that much.

He was afraid of hearing those same things from someone else.

Like from a girl with a link to that missing past.

“I feel like old friends and people with a connection to my past will see him as more meaningful and valuable than me. ...I thought I had finally gotten past all that by being honest about it, but even if they claim to forgive me, how can I never know if that’s what they really and truly think deep down? It scares me to think I’m disappointing people I care for.”

That other boy could probably trace his finger along the data of the past and spread his ring of allies as wide as he liked. He could act like Kamijou Touma and steal away the people and things Kamijou had built up.

That was how much weight the past and memories carried.

If he was asked to objectively prove his claim, Kamijou would always come out on the losing end.

“Hm,” someone cut in. “You sound at your wit’s end, so I guess I’ll help you work through all this data. But only if you come crying to the Great Fortune and bow down to me!!”

That offerer of advice kept a flat perspective instead of treating it like a heavy or light thing.

That magician may have been more like a professional fortuneteller in that sense.

Although she was munching on some onion rings at the moment.

“I am Golden Magician Dion Fortune of Love and Beauty, so I will be looking at this from that perspective. What I’m going to say will be *focused on the magical side of things*, but the actual core of this issue might not actually be on that side. Do not forget that science might use different words for all this.”

She was a girl with short red hair and a white dress.

Kamijou only remembered her from the clash at the shopping center, so it seemed weird to him that he was getting advice from her.

Anyway, the girl proudly puffed out her chest as she got started.

Index, Birdway, Othinus, and Aleister had all been the same. Liking to teach people may have been a standard magician trait.

“Tarot cards are most famous as fortunetelling tools, but they are also a grimoire and a deck of cards that reveals the heart of the spell user.”

“A grimoire? Like Index’s?”

Dion Fortune responded to Kamijou’s question with an index finger on her slender chin.

“Hmm, the Index Librorum Prohibitorum? I was told about that idea...”

“It was actually used, which is why our country overwhelms all others in the field of anti-magician combat. But, well, that international standing will probably suffer now that it turns out Lola was Coronzon.”

Fortune had not seen that girl for herself, but she had to accept it when First Princess Riméa spoke up.

The redhead took a somewhat exasperated sip of ginger ale and grimaced, so the dry flavor must not have been to her liking.

“You must have lived a pretty crazy life to talk about something like that as if it’s normal. ...But to get back on topic, every individual’s tarot has its own unique flavor. For example, this glorious being seated before you is the grimoire colored by Fortune’s individual traits! So whether we are talking about tarot or horoscopes, it is not all that unusual to draw out a diagram of yourself and to examine your fortune. Or it isn’t in our field anyway.”

Hamazura finally let out a groan.

He may have had trouble with studying whether it was magic or science.

Had he already forgotten the slap he received from Birdway?

“Hey, what does any of that have to do with the problem the boss here is facing?”

“Pipe down and listen, you impatient boy. If I was my mistress, you would have gotten scratched for that one. Whatever form it takes, if you have a human blueprint covering all of their individual traits and fill it with some form of power, it will behave like a human. My beautiful body beautiful proves that quite beautifully, don’t you think?”

“Hm... Human, you should have figured this out from the fact that her examples were tarot and horoscopes, but this does not require a big diagram drawn out on paper.”

Othinus re-crossed her legs on his shoulder and gave some advice.

That was when the pink track suit and fluffy sweater girl suddenly opened her mouth.

“I’m pretty sure Anna Sprengel said the crystal ball she gave me didn’t need autonomous thoughts.”

That was a curious statement.

Was the slightly strained atmosphere the result of something like fury erupting from Hamazura Shiage?

At any rate, the girl had mentioned Anna Sprengel. Kamijou had heard that name in relation to the Battle of Blythe Road, but hadn’t she been an illusion created by Westcott?

He was curious, but Dion Fortune did not say anything about it despite knowing the most about the Golden cabal.

Kamijou had not had much contact with her, but Fortune had apparently been in Hamazura and Takitsubo’s group at the end of that war. They might have already exchanged all that information on the *Queen Britannia* before it sank.

At any rate, Fortune reached her slender fingers toward the mixed nuts on the large plate.

“Your right arm must carry a secret of that sort. But is it the blueprint, or the power source? Since we don’t know if it can regenerate or not, taking a single bad hit could kill you, so rashly cutting it off to check inside is probably not the best idea. Then again, the multiple regenerations of your right hand in the past might be related to this secret.”

“Regenerations of my arm, huh?”

Kamijou looked down at his body.

That right arm was a bizarre thing of sky-blue and lemon-yellow at the moment.

Meanwhile, Fortune provided no excessive support and casually licked the salt from her fingers. She retained the flat attitude of someone simply giving impartial advice.

“What’s happening here might be related to all that. For one thing, a severed arm reattaching is in no way normal. Let’s hope you’re not in a state like a deck of tarot cards gathered randomly after being scattered across the floor.”

“So the order would be all jumbled up? Reminds me of #0 The Fool.”

Qlipah Puzzle 545 spoke up (while being very cautious of the boob grabber seated at the same table), but Academy City’s #1 said nothing.

As always, his stance was to not worry about a problem until he could actually find an answer.

Fortune nodded at the comment from the translucent demon with a similar but different structure to herself.

“That’s true. The topic of tarot usually goes back to Waite, but that one annoying card still gets argued about a lot. I think it was Gébelin who put it at the very start before Waite did. Levi put it between #20 and #21 and Westcott gave it the final #22 position. Depending on the theory followed, the Fool can go anywhere between The Magician and The World in the Major Arcana and even at the very, very end after the Minor Arcana as well. It’s the wandering #0 and it almost seems like it’s traveling the world. No one can say where it should go. A-and to be clear, this isn’t just me being inexperienced. Not even Crowley knew when making his Thoth Tarot!!”

Dion Fortune was saying this and she was apparently made from tarot.

The person who widened her eye at this was Othinus, the understander who was always supporting Kamijou in the field of magic.

“Traveling...? Hold on, is that what you’re talking about!?”

“Ahem. Imagine Breaker itself apparently moves between people and things from one era to the next. It seems to have stuck with you pretty persistently, but it always could have moved elsewhere once your right hand was destroyed, right? Right now, both versions of you have a body and an ability. This is not about morality or superiority. You both view the other as a hopeless fool and feel you must immediately take back what they have. And in the end, that includes their very existence. Couldn’t you think about it like that?”

“But the power to negate supernatural things went to him.”

His tone dropped a little. That monster saw him as the fool. From this Kamijou’s perspective, the other one had picked a fight with him and then stolen everything from him, but he may have been thinking back to see if he could think of anything he might have done to the other one.

“(Honestly, the very fact that he’s suddenly standing on equal footing with you is illegitimate. It might look fair, but it isn’t at all.)”

“?”

Dion Fortune shrugged her shoulders in exasperation at how unreliable that boy was even though this was his life they were talking about.

“From the look of things, that ability really was completely taken away, but who can really say if what he has is the complete and whole Imagine Breaker? He might be missing something just like your sky-blue arm is. Although he might not even be aware of it. And that pink light you saw flashing from him certainly isn’t normal, is it? At the very least, I’ve never heard anything about that from the things I’ve read related to Blythe Road where the exorcism spiritual item was kept.”

“Both of us are... the wandering #0...”

Kamijou looked down at his right arm.

He looked at that bizarre arm colored in sky-blue and lemon-yellow.

“Then what about that weird lizard... or dragon? Whether or not it’s missing anything, is the sky-blue or the shocking pink the right color for it!?”

Dion Fortune held out a hand to stop him.

She was telling him to stop leaning forward over the table.

“You are more than welcome to bow before the beauty, wisdom, and discernment of the Great Fortune, but this is all just a theory. Imagine Breaker was the greatest secret of the Golden building at Blythe Road and I am far from confident that I read everything accurately. And even if I did, everything I am saying is biased toward the magic side of things. Think of this as no more than something to consider. You might find an entirely different aspect to this if you view it from the opposite side.” Dion Fortune winked with the black box in her lap. “But whatever the case, you need to settle this, don’t you? I don’t think this is about who is right and who is wrong... In fact, who at this table has lived this long doing *only* what is right? I know I haven’t.”

But.

Even so.

“Out with it already. What is it you want to do?” spat out Accelerator. “You lost your footprints? You’re being attacked for it? Who the hell cares, trash? I mean, I’m not some stalker, so I haven’t memorized every step you’ve taken in the past. *I never knew any of that crap about you.* So what does it matter if it’s gone? How does that affect you while you’re talking to us right here and now?”

“...”

“To be clear, I’ve never told you anything either. I’ve never told you what school I go to or what my job is. *Hell, you don’t even know my real name, do you?* That’s all the truth is worth. We live in an insane age where anyone can hide their name and appearance online and build up a relationship to the point

of marriage, so worrying about the path you've taken since birth is pretty damn old-fashioned."

"I know it's weird for me to ask this, but why do you any of you believe me? I don't have Imagine Breaker and I can't explain my own past. There's even something blatantly wrong with my body. No one would think this is normal."

"Why should I care?"

Kamijou chose his words carefully, but Hamazura Shiage responded readily.

"It's all about who you empathize with first. If I'd met the other you first, I might've sided with him. But that doesn't just apply to you two."

"Really?"

The #1 looked kind of pissed off, so that may have been Hamazura Shiage's personal opinion and not the general opinion of everyone at the table.

"Have you forgotten? I sided with Great Demon Coronzon to achieve my own goal. And you were fighting to protect Aleister. If someone saw that without everything that led up to it, they'd probably think we'd gone insane. ...But we had our reasons and we risked our lives for them. Isn't that how deciding to fight works? You don't need a good argument or universal acceptance. You're always making excuses while you fight." Boxers boy's expression was 100% serious while he pressed his shoulder against the pink track suit and fluffy sweater girl's shoulder. "Besides, *who even is Kamijou Touma?* Boss, I've been to your dorm once, but that's really all I know about your life. Yet we had a serious fistfight, we've relied on each other, we've fought some more... and here we are facing each other again. That's all you need for some relationships, right?"

There had never been a current carrying him where he went.

There had never been a connection in advance.

Kamijou Touma would find a girl in need, start gathering information, and

then fight the villain at the center of it all. Academy City's #1 and this Skill-Out boy may have been included in that list of villains. And while it looked like a single connected line to him, what did it look like to them?

A pointy-haired boy had suddenly arrived on the scene and stolen the show.

That was all it had been for them and the earth kept spinning just fine.

The people around him did not care all that much about his starting point.

“Are you sure...?”

There was a period of time he had lost and one he had created anew.

It was all about him, so it may have been wrong to rank one over the other.

But.

However.

“I can never remember what happened. I can never judge how valuable any of it was. When you look at the whole path I’ve walked since birth, the part I know is only the very end. I mean, it’s not even half a year.”

“Foolish human,” muttered the understander on his shoulder. “What meaning is there in fearing what you do not know and denying the things you do know? This is your life. What could possibly take higher priority than living it the way you want?”

Then came the finishing blow.

It came from the two who truly had no connection to him.

“Good evening, I am Qlipah Puzzle 545, an artificial demon created by Coronzon. This isn’t the same thing as the philosophical death that a certain top-ranked group likes to put into practice, but this is my first time meeting you, so I don’t know anything about you from even a second before we met here. ...Isn’t that all there is to it?”

“Inputting memories as data will not fundamentally change a human. I can guarantee that as someone created as a defense system just like she was. I was created to be Fortune, so giving me Crowley’s memories would not make me act like that pervert. It isn’t memories or the lack thereof that changes people. That change comes from faith and love.”

Surprisingly, it may have been the words of these complete strangers that cut straight to the core of the issue. What looked like the biggest of problems to him was no big deal to the people around him.

Kamijou Touma relaxed his shoulders.

Thinking this way may have been ungrateful. He may have been badly hurting someone he could not even remember.

But.

The solution to that was not found in the past. Because he could not rewind time and redo things. Even if it would hurt people, bring them to tears, and fill them with despair, this boy had to face forward.

He had to look to the future.

He had to find those flaws and apologize.

So.

*“I will put myself first. And I mean this me right here.”*

He had his answer.

It might have been a simple answer anyone could have reached, but it still carried the great power to break the chains binding his soul.

And once he had decided on a direction, he was quick to action.

He really was.

Whether his opponent had been the strongest individual or a monster as a

group, he had torn through them. No matter what it took. That was the kind of person he was.

“Come to think of it, he hasn’t done anything all that tricky. Even Othinus tried damaging me by messing with my relationships with other people. Kamisato tried it too. I don’t know what this guy is, but it must have taken him this long to make his move because he couldn’t choose when to come out.”

That meant this opponent was different from Great Demon Coronzon or Human Aleister Crowley.

He had no master plan or strategy.

He had found himself out in the world, so he had to make do with what he could do now.

If that was the extent of this guy’s planning, how could Kamijou let him take everything from him?

“I don’t know what happened in my past.”

This was not about good or evil.

This was about that boy’s pride. He did not care if he was ultimately judged evil.

The tone of his voice made that clear enough.

“Maybe I did something worthy of criticism, but it isn’t some phantom from the past who gets to criticize me. If I need to be punched, there’s someone else who should do it. I’m not letting him claim to be my replacement and have his way with my life.”

And it was the very people who could criticize him who had become victims here.

Index and Misaka Mikoto.

And that honey-blonde girl who he was pretty sure had been there but whose name and appearance he could not recall.

“To hell with him.”

Kamijou Touma did not fight the urge bubbling up within his chest.

It was pathetic.

It was ugly.

But he had already learned that this was human nature. There had been plenty of global crises after World War III: Othinus, the many Magic Gods, Kamisato Kakeru, and Aleister and Coronzon. He had risked his life against them and he was not about to let anyone say he had not gained anything from that.

It could look old fashioned, but he had found people he wanted to take back no matter what.

He had found them in the short time he could remember.

“To hell with him!! Maybe he’s some incredible key to the mysteries of this world and maybe he’s some pillar at the deepest parts of the person named Kamijou Touma, but I don’t give a crap! None of that matters to the me sitting right here!! I don’t need a good reason! The second I see his face, I’m punching it into a bloody pulp! I’m not fighting over some yes or no answer. I don’t care if I’m wrong!! I’ll fight for the people who trusted in me and got me this far!! And I’m willing to put my life on the line to do it!!!!”

“Keh,” spat Accelerator while rudely placing his feet up on the same table as the food and drinks. “Do you ever shut up? If you knew the answer already, then what was the point of all this talking? You didn’t need all of us here.”

“Ohh? As your biggest fan, master, I’m pretty sure I see a happy smile in the corner of your eye th—gyobfhhh!? No, master, not my tail! Don’t squeeze it so harrrd!?”

Accelerator ignored the newspaper demon who was thrashing about in the air

like a helium balloon on a very windy day.

“You just had to list out the necessary information. This might be happening on the other side of the globe, but I get the feeling Academy City could be dragged into it if this isn’t resolved soon.”

“You’re worried about Academy City as a whole?” asked Kamijou. “That seems weird from you.”

“...Don’t act like you understand me”

“There it is again, master! I can tell just how happy you ar—bwahh! Not the bottom of my foot!”

That one was her fault for floating around barefoot.

Kamijou ignored the person receiving a foot massage(?) and asked a question.

But not of Accelerator. Of the other boy here.

“What about you? Do you have any reason to support me in this issue?”

“It’s a simple issue of give and take,” said Hamazura. “I’m gonna get that guy there to promise he’ll protect our everyday life.”

“?”

Kamijou frowned at that because Hamazura was pointing at the white calamity known as Accelerator.

Did he mean Accelerator would protect them as Academy City’s #1 Level 5, or *in some other way*?

Hamazura Shiage must have already figured it out for himself and he was not interested in discussing it too much because he changed the subject.

“But why did that other you show up now?”

“His appearance itself was an irregularity, so I’m guessing my right hand was at its limit or something.”

Kamijou’s answer only made Hamazura tilt his head more.

“I know I asked this before, but what’s he trying to accomplishing by pretending to be you? Is there any reason why he has to play at being Kamijou Touma? People can always hide when they have some kind of special power. I mean, she’s that gloomy princess and he’s Academy City’s \_\_\_”

Accelerator lightly stomped down one of the feet that had been resting on the table.

He was apparently telling Hamazura to shut up.

So Hamazura continued in a somewhat lower tone.

“So why should that other you even bother fighting? If he disguised himself and ran away, couldn’t he have gotten to the other side of the globe and created his own little world there?”

The idea that running away was a win may have come from the values instilled in Hamazura during his time in Skill-Out.

No two people were the same.

By using that psychological blind spot, he never would have had to worry about pursuit once he had successfully escaped. He might seem to have the upper hand after taking over Windsor Castle, but he was also taking on a great risk by the mere fact that he had created a clash between two identical people.

If he had done nothing at all, he would have been just fine.

The fairy on Kamijou’s shoulder commented on that.

“This may actually be a way of shaking pursuit. Even if no one else in the world knew he existed, *there was always a possibility* that my human

understander would remember what happened to his right hand. It is not that hard to imagine he wanted to rid himself of that worry before running off and creating his own harem on some tropical island.”

“But...”

Hamazura did not seem entirely convinced, but Othinus was not interested in absolute agreement.

Perhaps one understander was enough for her.

“All we have are guesses with no objective evidence to back it up, so we need to consider any and all possibilities. He might have mechanically decided on a list of things he must destroy and is simply going down that list or he might be driven by a bizarre desire no normal person could ever think of. All we know is that his actions will only harm this human here and that harm will spread across the entire world if nothing is done. Just like taking too much medicine is a good way to poison yourself.”

Then Riméa sighed.

She judged this incident from a different viewpoint than the others.

“Well, if you have decided on a plan, then we should act sooner rather than later. Delaying will do nothing to improve our situation.”

“Is there something really dangerous hidden inside... um, Windsor Castle, was it?”

That question came from Hamazura (who had actually performed the incredible feat of reconstructing Dion Fortune from scratch) and the first princess responded in her comfortable clothing that blended into the Windsor night.

“My mother was in the castle, wasn’t she? ...In that case, the things inside Windsor Castle are not the real issue.”

“?”

“I always did think that right hand could do some horrific things if used wrong... Like in the deluge, purification means destruction. Especially when you are trying to clear away a clog and open a path toward your own goal. It was probably only your conscience getting in the way that prevented you from considering it before.”

## Part 4

“Ugh...”

Queen Regnant Elizard silently laughed at herself when she belatedly realized that groan came from her. She could never let the British people hear that.

What had happened since she lost consciousness?

Before she could even start thinking about it, a silver flash cut by from right to left in front of her.

It was the flat-tipped ceremonial sword named Curtana Second.

A pointy-haired boy was crouched in front of her with it casually held in his left hand.

A pink light scattered from the corner of his mouth and he spoke with a hint of a bitter smile in his voice.

“Sup?”

“!?”

“I’ve been thinking and I’ve decided that releasing all of you would be such a waste, so I’m gonna make use of you. Although I was worried my right hand would destroy Shokuhou’s Mental Out along with your mental auto-fuse.”

“Do you have any idea what you have done?”

The only one capable of moving freely was the calico cat.

Unfortunately, he was not quite enough to call a queen’s bodyguard.

“You make it sound like I’m the villain here. He was the one that smashed through the window to enter this off-limits castle.”

The boy’s words were technically accurate.

Elizard might have believed him if she were reading a report about something that happened on the other side of the planet. His words were accurate, but they were spoken in bad faith. She could detect that sort of underhanded scent here.

This was a detour he would not have had to make if he had truly done nothing wrong.

They appeared to be in a room other than the dance hall. The villain boy wearing an unfamiliar tuxedo and ascot tie had defeated Elizard and now he was trying to make use of her authority.

“What is happening here?” groaned the queen.

“Nothing really. Kamijou Touma has been here all along. And isn’t it about time you repaid me for everything I’ve done?”

“...”

“You don’t want to ruin the party, do you? So I’m asking you to help me out. We need to kill that son of a bitch who caused this tragedy.”

There was a loud popping sound.

She had fired a beam of magic without Curtana, but it had not reached the pointy-haired boy.

However, she could see something like cracks running through the fingers of

his outstretched right hand. Bizarre colors showed through the gaps.

Those lines were colored a shocking pink and emerald not found in nature.

The cracks seemed to writhe before silently vanishing before her eyes.

“You really wanna keep doing this?”

“...”

“I mean, do you really think you can make your whole body glow and trigger a big explosion faster than my fingers can reach Curtana Second?”

Elizard stopped moving there, as if she had gasped.

Yes.

He was holding the sword in his non-dominant left hand because he knew what would happen otherwise.

“I got quite a welcome in the Tower of London, you know? Although to be honest, given the chaos at the time, it’s possible word of it never reached you.”

Shokuhou Misaki’s Mental Out was not the only threat.

In fact, it may have been better if she was only being mechanically controlled by that girl’s power.

Neon light seeped from the corner of the pointy-haired boy’s mouth as he continued.

“But things seemed similar enough in Edinburgh Castle and the *Queen Britannia*, so I can make some decent guesses about Windsor Castle. There’s something hidden here that’s necessary to protect the UK as a whole, isn’t there?”

“You really think you can understand it? That would require having infiltrated London for a full decade.”

“Oh, I don’t care about all the finicky details.”

The boy held out his right palm to keep the queen from saying more.

That was not the main point here.

“I just need to know that it’s here and that my right hand can destroy it. After all, this is the private residential area I normally wouldn’t be allowed in. I bet I can find all sorts of valuable things if I take a look around.”

“Hold on,” said Elizard, but he was not listening.

No.

He turned his back on the queen regnant and casually walked toward the fireplace on the wall. Specifically, he was approaching the trinkets sitting on the mantelpiece above it.

“I don’t need to worry about what color it is, what shape it has, how it’s used, or what its effects are.”

He was going to touch them.

He was going to trace his fingers across the staff, crystal ball, vase, and painting on the mantelpiece.

And he still lazily held Curtana Second in his other hand.

“I mean, they’ll all be destroyed the instant my right hand touches them, right? And their destruction would be a major blow to the UK as a whole, wouldn’t it?”

“Wait. I get it, so wait!!”

“It’s a little late now, but what was that thing?”

“...”

“Maybe I need to destroy a few more to show you I’m serious. Keep in mind

there's no repairing them."

"Kh. Those are spiritual items used to protect the divers retrieving our country's equipment from the sunken *Queen Britannia*. Specifically, artificially-adjusted divine punishment will befall anyone who touches royal treasures without permission, so these are intervening in the security to deactivate that function! If that function resumes working normally, the magicians on the scene will all die of heart failure!"

The explanation she hurriedly rattled off established their positions here.

They had just overcome a large war.

There was no archbishop to lead the Anglicans, so that faction was effectively nonfunctioning at the moment. The chain of command for anti-magician combat was in complete disarray.

So what would happen if these foundations of national defense were destroyed?

There would be a great many people who saw it as an opportunity. This was a large country that had earned many grudges both domestic and foreign. Very few individuals and organizations could actually make use of that opportunity, but once those initial few got the ball rolling, the festivities would come to an abrupt end and they would be back to a chaos similar to the Crowley's Hazards.

There was little risk of that chaotic destruction posing any danger to Elizard or her daughters.

It was the ordinary citizens who were vulnerable to the kind of opportunistic attacks this would lead to. And Elizard could not assign a bodyguard in black to each and every one of them 24/7.

She could only clench her teeth.

Nations had to be supported. Peace would not last forever all on its own.

The boy made a blunt suggestion when he returned to Elizard.

“Well, you get the idea. So give me a helping hand this time. I want to defeat that monster. It’ll be the reverse of how you used me to overcome your national crisis. ....Shokuhou’s power can only control about twenty percent of the people here, so I want something done with the other eighty percent. Your job is to convince those British-born magicians once their auto-fuse cuts out, Elizard.”

“Are you threatening *me*? The queen regnant!?”

“I’ve always been no more than *a weak human*. Kamijou Touma is the kind of ordinary high school boy you can find anywhere, so I’ve always had to take inspiration from those proper heroes we call espers and magicians and fake my way through it all. I don’t think I’ve ever had a fight I could’ve smoothly resolved all on my own.”

Kamijou Touma – or this boy who looked just like him – did not bat an eye.

This was a side of him that occasionally showed itself.

It was the opposite of intense emotion or spiteful persistence that led one to keep getting back up no matter how many times they were knocked down. When standing on the brink of death, he would calmly analyze his opponent’s attack and come up with a move that threaded the needle to victory. That cold core had definitely been a part of him.

Of course, it was a last-ditch choice only made when truly pushed to the edge.

But what if he learned to consciously wield it?

An emerald line flashed in the corner of this boy’s eye for just a moment.

“So I’ll use everything at my disposal. *Back then*, when I had to help the injured Index, I didn’t hesitate to rely on the ignorant Komoe-sensei. Elizard, surely you understand since you’ve used so many people to protect your country. I’m not some perfect person who can solve everything on my own.”

“I wasn’t using them—”

“Don’t give me that crap. What did the British coup d’état have to do with my life? You stole Index away for your own purposes and dragged me into it when I had no idea what was going on. And if I’d died, I bet you wouldn’t have done anything more than shed some crocodile tears for the cameras. And it’s not like you gave me anything after I survived either. You’d set everything up so you wouldn’t lose anything no matter what happened. Am I wrong?”

Despite his sharp words, the boy did not seem to carry any powerful hatred over this.

In fact, he seemed to be using it to his advantage.

As if to say it was the only way to live with his misfortune.

“All I’ve got is power as an individual, so how did I end up in a position where I could influence a huge conflict like British Halloween or World War III? I find the weaknesses in people and my influence spreads from there like falling dominos. In the end, that’s all Kamijou Touma ever does. Whether you consider that a good thing or not comes down to whether it helps you or not. I bet my enemies see me as some hypocrite who preaches at you while using the dirtiest methods available.”

“...”

“Use it.”

There was a dull thud.

It was the sound of the pointy-haired boy tossing Curtana Second to Elizard’s feet without hesitation. He spoke with a shocking-pink light scattering from the corner of his mouth.

“Either way, I can’t do anything with that spiritual item, so I’ll give it to you. Let me make this very clear, Elizard. *If you want to protect your people, then work for me.* Use your authority and whatever else to control all the magicians in this castle as my pawns. Unlike that other guy, I know

everything. I've even got your Achilles' heel in my head here."

It was all to support her country.

To protect everyone.

"This will not last, boy."

"Ha ha. So the friendship ends once I work against your precious country's interests, does it? I risked my life fighting for you, but none of it's worth risking your own life, huh? It was the same when I was fleeing with Othinus in Denmark. You didn't say a word until you thought I could win. Eternal friendship sure is a fleeting thing."

When Elizard spat out her words, the pointy-haired boy only gave her a cynical smile.

But the queen's hand reached for Curtana Second's hilt on the floor and, more importantly, she was speaking in Japanese. That seemed to establish the pecking order here.

"Even if you win this battle, you will not win the future you want. From now on, you are an enemy of the UK as a whole. And that is true whether you are Kamijou Touma or something else."

"You're going to retaliate? But how?"

He only laughed.

He snorted with laughter while an emerald glow leaked from the corner of his eye.

"There's only one name and face this time. Just this once, *your enemy and your ally are Kamijou Touma*. So if I play my cards right, I can shove all the blame on that son of a bitch and claim the future I want. That's the whole point of this fight, after all."

Shokuhou Misaki was too kind.

Because she had given up once her powers failed to control them.

That may have been the logic that developed inside someone blessed with a great ability. But the pointy-haired boy did not have that luxury. If he did not find some way to make it all work out, his doom was assured.

Strength and weakness were not just about measuring a simple power level.

He thought it also had to do with how many continue tickets you were given to use when you screwed up.

A Level 0 had no chance of getting ahead.

He did not have incredible athletic ability, a great academic mind, or artistic talent.

He had not been blessed with wealth or an influential family.

He knew all too well that, when someone like that made a single mistake, they were not given a second chance.

So.

A weak person like him had developed a unique sort of strength that allowed him to dig his heels in even when he was at a disadvantage. Someone like a queen would never understand that persistent strength.

“...Where are you going?”

“I’ve got the general path laid out, so now it’s time to untangle some of the hairier problems.”

The boy thought of some of the fighters here.

Once Styl Magnus and Kanzaki Kaori knew that staying with *Kamijou Touma* would work against Index, they were sure to agree to fight.

Once Kanzaki Kaori agreed, Tatemiya and Itsuwa of the Amakusa would be dragged along with her or at least shaken.

Orsola, Agnese, and the other former Roman Catholics would be unable to keep their hearts in balance if the new home they thought they had finally reclaimed might be taken from them again.

It all came down to this.

Once Queen Regnant Elizard grabbed Curtana Second against her own will, the dominos would begin to fall in every direction around her.

Yes, she herself had said that nations had to be supported.

And that how you position just one of the supports could lead it to collapse.

In their experience, this had all started with the Crowley's Hazards, but they were at least vaguely aware that Lola Stuart had caused it as much as Aleister if you looked back to the source. And the problem had spread to the entire world. As the top of the royal family, Elizard knew quite well that "it was all the Great Demon's doing" and "we didn't know anything about it" would not be accepted as valid excuses.

They were in a similar position to the Roman Catholic Church after Fiamma of the Right manipulated them.

That Church had managed to neatly avoid taking the blame, but if they had failed to properly clean up during the aftermath, all their nations and organizations around the world would have had all assets stripped of them.

There was no point in winning the war if your country collapsed afterwards.

What about the Amakusa Church, the former Agnese Forces, and even the ordinary citizens who knew nothing of magic?

She had to protect all the people relying on British land even if it meant dirtying her hands. She had chosen that as her absolute duty as the one who supported this nation.

And yet.

The demon before her was well aware of all that, but he still cut in.

“Itsuwa, Orsola, and...yeah, it’s a shame Lessar and Oriana weren’t here. Regardless, it might be fun to try going at it from a different angle than the benefit to their organization. People get overwhelmed when their processing power is pushed too far and then they do things they never would have imagined otherwise.”

“Damn you...”

That boy had boldly added people to the circle around him and built up a great web of people. That had sometimes meant intruding on their twisted hearts to stop them from losing control. And now this person was trampling all over those truly precious treasures.

However.

He could transform that violation into the worst kind of rusty blade.

Instead of cutting, it caused rot.

“You know all about that, don’t you? I learned a lot from the way you threw me into that coup d’état and world war for your own purposes. ...Oh, right. I had a question for you as Villian’s mother. Is she quick to fall in love? If you send her into a panic by setting up conditions A, B, and C, will she forget all about the person she originally had feelings for and fall for you instead?”

“Don’t you dare!!”

She roared at him, but the tuxedo boy only waved his right hand and turned around.

He had not been serious about that. The Third Princess always prioritized people’s feelings and had trouble making pragmatic decisions, so she would not be easy to ensnare by any normal means. ...Although it might be interesting to see what she did if she was told Acqua was about to be executed in the Tower of London.

He had been exposed to so much malice, so he felt he knew quite well how to wield it himself.

He knew what he could say to hurt people. Because people had so often manipulated him, used him as a shield, and hurled malice at him.

He had wanted to see how sturdy Elizard's "shackles" were.

"Honestly."

He would use everything at his disposal.

So.

To put it another way, he would not let anyone else use him.

Even if he did lose control of Academy City's #5, Shokuhou Misaki, that would not be the end of his story.

A slight shocking-pink light spilled from the corner of his mouth.

And he spoke to no one.

"This was all unnecessary, Elizard. If you had only let Mental Out control you, you might never have been driven to the edge like this."

## Part 5

That Windsor Castle dance hall was in ruins.

Shokuhou Misaki had curled her back to hold her knees between her arms while sitting on the carpeted floor.

The slight squeaking sound may have been her back or her hips rubbing against the floor.

A few locks of unkempt hair had fallen onto her milky-white nape and there

were large wrinkles covering her all-silk dress that was based on a bunny suit design. Decadence. She had the strange allure of a ruined temple or a crumbling goddess statue.

Her power was so complete and perfect that it had stagnated.

She was the dictator needing to be overthrown.

That pose was far from comfortable due to the aching hip she had earned in the war, but it also looked like she was seeking out the pain.

She started to squeeze the cheap emergency whistle...and she realized she had started to hesitate to make even that simple action.

But not because her fingers were trembling.

Because she knew she was no longer worthy.

The box-shaped A.A.A. left by Mikoto was rubbing up against her like a pet dog, but she could not bring herself to sit on it for some relief.

It was said guilt could be a trigger for habitual wrist cutting.

It came from a desire to hurt yourself to escape the fear of your crimes because you were afraid someone else would punish you for them.

Even though doing so did nothing to change the reality of the situation.

That girl had fallen to a very dark place where she sought out pain and welcomed filth.

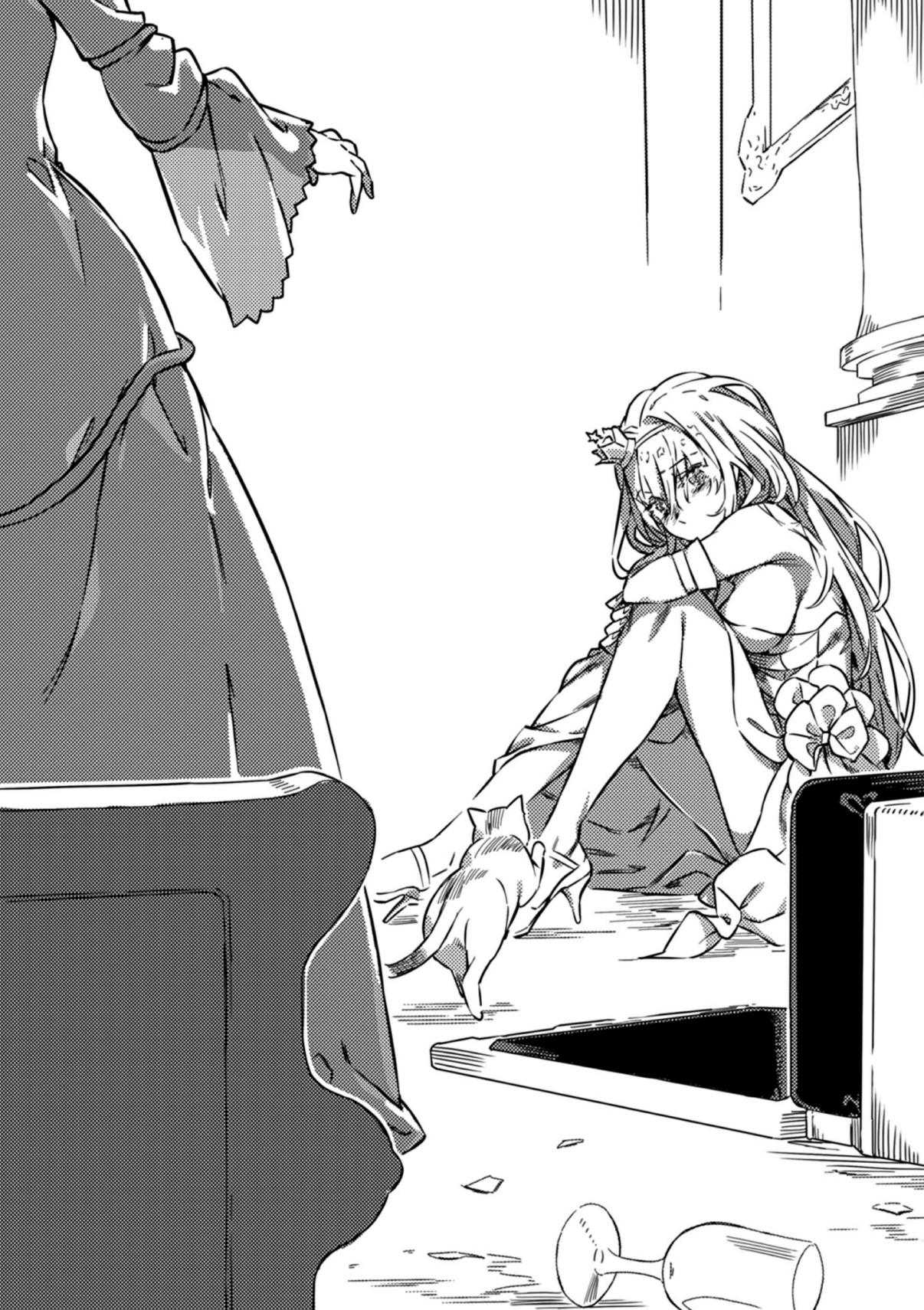
“Hey.”

She spoke.

Even though she knew there would be no response.

Her voice was unnaturally hoarse and her eyes were red from rubbing them over and over. She sniffled while speaking to someone within a meter of her

in that room.



The honey-blonde girl was curled up right in front of a nun with long silver hair swept back behind her. That slender girl wore a storybook princess's dress that was colored white with reddish-purple lines. That girl had likely spent time with him that Shokuhou Misaki knew nothing about. And that girl held the position that she might have had if things had not gone wrong.

The small cat meowed in a loving but also lonely way.

The silver-haired girl did not respond with her head stuck at a tilted angle.

"I envy you. I really, really do."

And.

If you wished to argue her case, you could point out that it was wrong to expect Shokuhou Misaki to have judged the situation properly. After all, this war had been *her very first full-scale anti-magician battle*. Kamijou Touma had been the same once. After driving back that mysterious figure named Styl Magnus and carrying the injured Index through Academy City's night without any clue what to do, had he really been as calm as he was known for being in those extreme situations? For example, had he maybe gotten his ignorant and small teacher involved? When someone was under even more stress than they were aware of and it led them to make a mistaken choice they never normally would have, it would be cruel to demand they take personal responsibility for it.

It could be easy to forget when you were so familiar with the strange beings known as Academy City espers, but on a fundamental level, human beings had a way of losing their cool when they first encountered the supernatural.

It could take the form of mania or depression.

In Kamijou Touma's case, it had just so happened to pay off. In Shokuhou Misaki's, it had led to a terrible mistake.

But whether they barged into Komoe-sensei's apartment with an injured person or ruined a national (albeit private) party, their actions had both been triggered by very similar explosions of unexpected emotion.

Shokuhou Misaki had been working with Misaka Mikoto by sharing the A.A.A.

But she had really been chasing after that boy.

She had made it this far because he was here.

He had been the light of land she could just barely make out while out on the stormy seas of her very first magical conflict in which she had felt entirely surrounded. So what if she was suddenly told that lighthouse might be fake?

Was it really right to come to a stop and let the waves drag her below the surface?

Was it really so wrong to approach that light, whatever it might be, to find out if there really was land there?

Sky-blue and lemon-yellow.

She had told herself those colors could not be him.

All while turning a blind eye to the shocking pink and emerald flashing before her eyes.

“Why...?”

In the end, that was the sort of pressure surrounding the honey-blonde girl.

It just so happened that her power was too strong.

Her voice was hoarse.

She was wrapped in an alluringly-bright, enamel-like fabric, but her eyes and nose were as red as a small child's.

“Why did I have to ruin everything?”

She had been terrified of him forgetting her.

She had known it would happen eventually, but that tiny miracle had continued nonetheless.

That party had clearly been an unnatural thing from the very beginning, but she had been afraid that pointing it out would cause that happy dream to pop like an overinflated balloon.

And.

Was she aware that this agony was the same thing that boy had experienced when faced with that silver-haired girl who was forced to have her memories artificially erased every year?

Most likely, no one would blame her.

Even that other boy, who had been defenestrated after she treated him like a monster, would not say anything to spit on that honey-blonde girl.

But.

That was exactly the point.

It was all so complete and perfect that it had stagnated and she could no longer move.

The girl who sought pain could only bury her face in her knees, sniffle like a lost child, and speak to herself.

“I’m so stupid.”

There was no answer.

Because she had made it that way.

That was why she was the queen and that was why she was alone.

Just like always.

Only the small cat remained and placed his front paw on her foot.

That's enough of a reason, don't you think?

Who needs all that big talk about the magic side and science side?

It was high time someone saved that princess who had fallen to the depths of the earth.

And this time, do it right.

### **Between the Lines 3**

Windsor Castle's restroom had a large mirror behind the sink.

“...Ow.”

The pointy-haired boy in an unfamiliar tuxedo and ascot tie groaned quietly in pain.

The face reflected in the mirror was not looking good.

He had not taken any obvious physical damage after the sky-blue and lemon-yellow winged lizard tackled him on the second-story balcony.

So this was not from that.

No matter how many times he washed his face with cold water, the heat burning below one layer of skin refused to go away. And he could tell all his body's senses were gradually dulling.

A sound like thin ice cracking rang through the restroom.

That was an accurate comparison. A few straight cracks were indeed running

through his smooth skin around his right hand.

The lines of color showing through those cracks was shocking pink.

And emerald.

Was this the opposite of the external shell worn by the attacker? They were unnaturally bright for anything born in nature, but they had too vivid a shine to be called a weapon or equipment.

There was more than one pattern.

The tuxedo boy whispered into the mirror.

“The cat.”

Cracks ran through the back of his hand and a pink glow rose to the surface.

“The female knight.”

Just as the cat scratches vanished, more cracks appeared around the bridge of his nose.

“Kanzaki Kaori’s slap, the A.A.A. chair Shokuhou was using, and Elizard’s spell.”

This was a history of his wounds.

The boy grinned as they each appeared in turn.

“But, well, I’ve come this far and I still haven’t taken a single attack from him. Ironic, isn’t it?”

There was of course no one to answer him.

He was the only person here. The psychedelic cracks on his fingertips silently withdrew.

“Surely.”

He was all alone.

He held everything in his hand, but he had no one to listen.

The shocking-pink and emerald cracks tried to rise to the surface with their cracking sounds acting like the ticking of a clock, but he forced them back down. He was still fine. He did not have to worry about it breaking through.

They were not mirror images of each other.

His opponent was sky-blue and lemon-yellow while he was pink and emerald, but anyone familiar with color theory would know those were not opposites of each other.

And that was fine.

He was not seeking an understander as a partner. He was interested in the opposite. He was approaching the perfection of an individuality that could never get along with anyone else.

A dragon.

That was the ruler of the depths and the guardian of treasure. It was a strange symbol that crossed the boundary between good and evil by signifying the devil and yet symbolizing houses and organizations.

There was a porcelain vase on one corner of the sink. It had a rose decoration on the side. That was a symbol and sign that had worked its way so far into the world that it was found everywhere with no connection to any cabal or force.

It had a few different goals, but one of them was as follows:

...They act based on ethics, standards, and justice. But they understand that the previous generation's rules to judge human good and evil are not necessarily correct. So if they found those rules to be inadequate, they must overturn all laws and treaties to mend justice's wounds.

*Or so it was said.*

“...”

(I'm here because of a wish, hm?)

It was an absurd idea.

And it had nothing to do with the tuxedo boy washing his face in front of the mirror.

“Surely you don't think there's nothing more to that than a colorful shell for you to control, Kamijou Touma.”

People could not necessarily see every part of themselves. Even in the field of magic, people were warned that they had to follow certain steps to achieve a proper understanding or else they would lose control and do things they never imagined when they attempted to follow the Sephiroth to purify their soul.

Did he know about that or not?

Either way, that boy thought quietly to himself.

Question that which already exists. And if you find something inadequate, mend justice's wounds by your own hand.

Humans and abilities.

Now, let us swap out the positions of actor and observer.

# **Chapter 4: Overcome the Barrier of the Self – Break\_the\_Wall.**

## **Part 1**

This battle would never be recorded in history.

But it was also an utterly unavoidable fight for liberation.

Windsor Castle was both a tourist destination and an actual residence for the queen.

It naturally contained daily necessities in addition to antique pottery and musical instruments.

“...”

Elizard stood all alone in her private room.

The chocolate-colored computer on the ebony desk was an all-in-one model so it would not get in the way and it currently displayed a list of more than 500,000 unread emails.

The royal family’s email address had actually been released to the public.

The Vatican ran a dedicated freight train to deliver Christmas cards sent from all over the world, but this was a bit more modern. When the Christmas season rolled around, they received an unbelievable number of emails and

social media messages. But the ones from today were a little different.

These were not from the knights, the maids, the magicians, or the nuns.

These messages were from people who knew nothing of what was really going on.

*“Are you doing well, Your Majesty? I am relieved to find we might actually make it to Christmas this year.”*

*“I invented a new kind of cake. It is a roll cake with a tunnel through the center. Would you be willing to let me name it after you, Queen Elizard?”*

*“I can see the fireworks from the gardin. Wow! I hope you can see them to, your majesty.”*

She said nothing.

She could only bring a hand to her forehead.

She realized she was not worthy of receiving these words. Not after she abandoned an innocent boy for her country and placed professional fighters in his way after being threatened. Kamijou Touma and the magicians being ordered to fight would be biting their lips at this situation. And it was all the result of the orders she had given. This was all happening because of her mistaken command.

She did not think she could go to heaven now.

Her soul would be damned to burn in hell.

But.

Nevertheless.

“I can’t abandon them.”

She agonized over it.

But there was only one answer.

She was not about to call her people weak, but she could not let this great pressure fall on their shoulders either.

After reconfirming what she had to protect, she squeezed Curtana Second tight, and roared all on her own.

“I can’t abandon the people of this country, no matter what it means for me!!”

A chilly December breeze blew and an eerie rustling came from the artificial woods around Windsor Castle.

Security had been beefed up.

It was all on Queen Regnant Elizard’s command.

Many flickering lights moved around like will-o’-the-wisps wandering the earthly realm. Each and every one of them was a lantern carried by former Catholic nuns. The bizarre silhouettes producing the creaking sounds of artificial joints and pulleys would be the Maids of Honor. They had brushed off the festive mood and changed into their combat equipment.

None of them wanted to fight.

Yet a force wielding deadly spiritual items had still been gathered.

(I can’t believe this.)

They all had to be thinking the same thing: How could this happen?

(Why do we have to fight him of all people to protect the place we call home!? How many trials is our Father in heaven going to put us through!?)

It was like a beehive. They looked like a single large group at first glance, but they were actually divided into small “rooms”, each with different

circumstances. The circumstances as Kanzaki Kaori saw them may have been different from the circumstances as Agnese Sanctis saw them. For that matter, not even Agnese and Lucia may have seen it the same. But they were still all directing violence in the same direction, so this may have been a testament to the logic of the angry mob.

Why?

The answer was obvious.

The Anglicans who Agnese and the others were temporarily working with had won the war and yet lost. The original cause of the entire conflict had been Lola Stuart, aka Great Demon Coronzon, who had served as their archbishop. Agnese and the others had been on the side that caused the conflict and that ultimately “lost”, so they could not resist if Elizard, Queen of the United Kingdom, ordered them to take responsibility by ending the current chaos.

Their personal circumstances were overshadowed by the interests of the nation.

(I really wish I could have at least removed these chains from Sister Orsola!!)

It may have been easier on them if Shokuhou Misaki had been the villain and they were all being controlled by her. But it had been Agnese, Orsola, and the others who chose to rise to this nightmarish next stage by escaping that girl’s control using the auto-fuse that used the symbol of a temporary funeral.

Just as Agnese was thinking that, a piece was blasted out of a tree trunk as if from a bite wound.

She clicked her tongue.

“A sniper!? Attention everyone, move away from the light sources!”

But another boom erupted out before any response arrived. Except it did not stop with just one this time. A full-auto spray linked the booms into a continuous roar. She heard multiple sounds like bush branches thinner than

chopsticks snapping. She concluded someone had been taken out.

(Was the first shot meant to work out a baseline they could use to adjust for the wind and gravity!?)

They were likely on the other side of the Thames, but she could not work out where exactly they were located. The muzzle flashes were being hidden and they were probably using a few reflection boards to obscure the source of the noise.

In no time, the grassy ground and the tree bark burst and flew through the air. Dirt and dust filled the air like dry ice, covering Agnese and the others' vision.

She wanted to believe this would work against the enemy as well, but she could see more and more light sources dropping to the ground through the dust cloud. Her fellow nuns were dropping their lanterns after getting shot.

“Sister Lucia, Angelene!?”

“Angelene is down!! But something isn’t right! She isn’t bleeding after a hit from this calib-...!!”

The tall nun’s voice was cut off.

Agnese could have sworn she felt icy fingers crawling along her spine.

A moment later, a familiar nun collapsed to the side after taking an attack.

However...

(The gunshot from the opposite bank didn’t match when Sister Lucia collapsed.)

And as Lucia had said, there was no rusty smell.

A wave-like sound crawled along at her feet. The dust cloud acting like the dry ice at a fancy wedding had grown quite thick all the way up to her hips. And that was not all.

(They weren't knocked out by bullets.)

There was something here.

Something was crouching low and approaching like an animal.

She heard a low electric rumbling similar to a midsummer bug zapper, but was that a stun gun?

(The heavy machine gun on the opposite bank was a distraction!? The real attack is right here with us!!)

By the time she finally caught on, Hamazura (assisted by Aneri) and Golden Dion Fortune approached from the left and right to simultaneously tackle the girl's slender hips.

Another attacker came across a strange situation.

Accelerator lightly clicked his tongue at what he saw after blowing away a few Amakusa magicians with a single kick.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I am not sure myself. I was confiscating this lady's weapon so she would not trip and stab her own leg, and then this happened."

He saw a chubby knight.

It was Holegres Mirates.

But he seemed different from when Accelerator had dangled him upside-down from the top of a tower. A nun with a nice figure visible even through her plain habit was lying gently at his feet. It was likely the nun's scream and collapse rather than the overweight man himself that had called people here. The knight in old-fashioned silver armor was surrounded.

But there was no panic on his face.

And either way, Accelerator and Hamazura Shiage's job here was to act as a diversion.

For this fight alone, it had to be that boy who brought it to an end.

*That bastard shoved this pain-in-the-ass job on me without thinking it through properly. I don't make good bait since my battery doesn't last long. I'll have to buy extra time by switching it off whenever I can.*

"What is with you? You look oddly happy given the circumstances."

"Do you want me to rip that fat from your body, trash?" asked the #1 monster while reaching to his neck to recalculate his choker's remaining battery power. "So how many of you are still sane?"

"To be honest, not many. Princess Villian managed to convince me, Knight Leader, and another knight who was riding Alex, the second princess's warhorse, but most of the others succumbed to the fear and humiliation. Even if it was to protect the people, Her Majesty giving in was a damaging blow."

"Your cheeks sure are tense for someone acting so confident. You had the perfect excuse prepared for you, so wouldn't it have been easier to just be controlled?"

Holegres smiled a little.

"I have already faced defeat once, so I no longer fear loss."

As soon as he drew his blade, it fanned out using springs.

That was a parrying dagger.

It was a defensive left hand dagger used to catch the opponent's blade during a duel.

And of course, he was directing it at an opponent other than the white monster.

"Nics Everblind who embeds artificial objects inside his own body, Ange

Catacombs who manages portable coffins, and Cutia Virginroad who specializes in the use of combinations of noble blood and execution tools.”

“Got any proof of that? How can you be so sure when you can’t see them?”

“The taboo changes the atmosphere. Just like that demon serving you.”

Accelerator clicked his tongue and the fallen December leaves whirled around like a tornado right next to him.

As soon as they burst apart, a translucent girl appeared with her arms around the #1’s neck.

“Yikes... This guy’s a lot sharper than before. I don’t think my war madness would even work on him anymore.”

The tense chubby man did not bat an eye.

The sweet words of a demon would not shake him.

His eyes were focused on a much more important goal.

“And it is a knight’s duty to support Her Majesty when she is unwell in body or mind. So until Queen Elizard can get back on her feet, I, Holegres Mirates, must not direct my blade in the wrong direction.”

Thundering footsteps surrounded them like an intense vortex.

The enemy apparently intended to remake their encircling ring to surround Accelerator as well. They would continue using their dirty methods out of fear of losing. But those proper elites did not seem to realize that they had already lost this round.

“Nee hee hee. What are you gonna do, master?”

“My job is to make a scene.”

They all had their own way of doing this.

The white monster stood back to back with the mysterious cool fatty while he made a threatening roar toward everyone surrounding them.

“But I’m sure you’ve figured out what I’m like by now. Nothing disgusts me quite like some bland-ass teacher’s pets!!”

Battles were beginning all over.

Among it all, a bizarre monster sliced through the dark night.

He was colored sky-blue and lemon-yellow.

That winged lizard had crocodilian jaws, thin wings, and a thick tail.

The palm-sized Othinus spoke to him from the back of a large bird of prey.

“Overall, they have the upper hand. Like Riméa said, the more time passes, the more national-level manpower they can use to their advantage. Do not let them drag this out into a test of endurance. You have no chance of winning unless you end this quickly.”

This was Kamijou Touma’s fight.

No one else would gain anything if he won and they would mercilessly lose their lives if he lost, but some people had still agreed to accompany him in this absurd battle.

He would never have a better opportunity.

He could wait a millennium without finding a better chance at victory.

“This is actually working, human.”

“Yeah.”

The boy’s voice faintly stood out from the snapping of the crocodilian jaws.

Othinus tilted her head while controlling the bird of prey.

“Is this because you lost Imagine Breaker? The luck is most welcome, but it doesn’t feel right. Relying on the people around you is fine, but at this rate, you might start to assume that people will gather around you and give you a chance.”

Dion Fortune had said it was not memories that made someone who they were.

She had said it was faith and love that changed them.

But.

In that case, he had to be all the more cautious.

If his heart changed here, he would finally have nothing left to claim he was Kamijou Touma.

“Falling from the second-story balcony without getting hurt wasn’t because of the changes to my body. *I got lucky* and escaped unscathed. Just like a baby that’s just fine after falling from high up.”

“You know, I feel like you could accept that kind of luck.”

“I don’t want to become the kind of person who gets mad at people for not showing up when I expect them to. So I need to reclaim my misfortune before that happens. That way I can take back the life I know.”

“You have issues. Getting lucky does not deny your skill, you know?”

He could not forget how thankful he had been about what Hamazura Shiage and Accelerator had said at that table:

“—*You’re fighting to reclaim yourself, right? I get what that’s like. I caused everyone a lot of trouble by siding with Coronzon in that war.*”

“—*We’ll only be causing a diversion. Breaking into that castle is your job.*”

“I understand.”

He recalled the people being forced to fight here and the girls trapped inside the castle.

And.

He recalled that honey-blond girl who he could not seem to link to any clear image in his mind.

Perhaps it was the ability to transform those thoughts into a fighting spirit that let this sky-blue and lemon-yellow monster call himself Kamijou Touma.

He would reclaim it all even if it meant crawling through the mud.

He would latch on with his bizarre teeth.

He had no idea what was going to happen with his body, but he still made an announcement in a low voice.

“This is something I have to do myself!!!!!!”

Unleash your soul.

Kamijou Touma charged toward Windsor Castle which had become a prison binding so many people's freedom.

## Part 2

This was Windsor Castle.

Truly deadly battles were developing all over its dark grounds.

But once inside the castle itself, Kamijou Touma's expanded sky-blue skin

sensed a change in the atmosphere.

An orange light was slowly flashing at the end of a long, long hallway.

He could sense the smoky smell from here, so was that another of the mysterious changes to his body? While cutaneous respiration was a minor thing for humans, it was said that it made up thirty to fifty percent of breathing for some animals.

His eyes met those of his enemy.

“Styl Magnus.”

The sky-blue monster realized something only after speaking the name.

Laminated cards were cleverly hidden across every surface to construct this boy’s territory: on the bottoms of the vases, below the carpet, and probably above the ceiling as well.

What threats or temptations had he been presented with?

Kamijou did not know and he did not need to force it out of the boy either. That red-haired priest had always been the type to swallow even mud and keep moving if it would put a smile on that girl’s face.

In that case...

“Is there no way to avoid it, human?”

“Why would I want to?”

Avoiding conflict through compromise was not the only form of friendship.

When he thought about it, this was always how he had gotten along with this priest ever since he had been thrown out into the wide world with no memories. And he could not change that now.

He had a bizarre form.

He had been hopelessly transformed and had even lost Imagine Breaker.

But Kamijou Touma tightly clenched his right fist in preparation.

“Bring it, magician. No holding back.”

He was pretty sure he had a slight smile on his face.

A moment later, orange flames roared out. A straight sword of hellfire erupted from both of the priest’s hands.

He specialized in the witch hunt.

When faced with an unknown form of the supernatural, he would gather information and accurately put together a countermeasure in real-time and then use that to take its wielder’s life. He used both academic and military talents as tools for killing.

But.

Kamijou Touma ignored the tall priest at the end of the hall and instead threw a serious punch toward the wall to his side.

It was almost like both sides had matched their timing.

The thick inner wall crumbled away as a black-ponytailed swordswoman burst through. Kanzaki Kaori’s long sheath crashed into his thick claws.

“Did you use your transformed senses?”

The blow was stopped well before she had expected, so it had to have hurt as bad as swinging a bat into a concrete wall. Kanzaki grimaced a bit from the unexpected pain.

“No, that wasn’t it. Did you notice the change in movement from the bird of prey ridden by that war god, Kamijou Touma!?”

Even after that fearsome surprise attack, Kamijou Touma was smiling within his sky-blue outer shell.

“I did say no holding back.”

Stiyl had destroyed his dual swords to create a fiery explosion...but he was too far away for it to be very effective.

Plus, he showed no sign of using his greatest magic: Innocentius.

Which meant...

“There was no way this would end with a simple one-on-one battle!! You’ve got a Saint as an obvious trump card, so of course you’re gonna use that right at the start instead of working up to it. Even if it gets you labeled as cowards!! Isn’t that right, Stiyl!?”

However, revealing this did not change the difference in skill.

He had gotten past the initial attack using the bird of prey’s senses and his strengthened body, but that would not work again. Also, he was not really sure what was happening to his body. He would hardly be surprised if he swung his arm too hard and it just tore off of him.

But.

That was all under normal circumstances.

Before Kanzaki’s lips could form the word “Nanasen” and before the seven wires could attack him from every direction simultaneously, there was a sound of something soft being twisted.

The sky-blue and lemon-yellow unraveled.

The pointy-haired boy was exposed to the outside air, but he was not disarming himself.

He held something to his chest.

It was a black gardening pot made of flimsy plastic.

And it contained a strange plant that resembled a carrot with a split end but

that also had a pattern resembling a human face.

“Wha-?”

“These were called mandrake mines, right?”

He pulled the string at the bottom of the pot to wake it up like he was activating a party cracker. The awakened(?) mandrake hopped up in front of Kanzaki Kaori’s face.

At the same time, Kamijou covered himself in the sky-blue once more and broke through a nearby window.

The indoor space was filled with a scream even shriller than the shattering glass.

“Gah!?”

Kamijou had unleashed that scream himself, but his skull was still badly shaken. It was this bad even with the sky-blue shell covering his entire body. Was it Othinus who had said the scream traveled from the inner ear to the heart? What would have happened to him without the shell?

And besides that...

(I pulled the string, launched the mandrake, and escaped outside.)

It sounded simple enough, but that meant performing three actions in front of a Saint who could move at the speed of sound.

It was only for a moment, but he had kept up with Kanzaki Kaori’s speed.

This was no time to be thoughtlessly chalking it up to luck. He might never return to being human now. After all, no doctor could explain what was happening to him here. This went beyond simple athletic abilities. He felt like there was something subtly wrong with the world he was seeing and hearing and even the flow of time. Incredible fear crawled along his spine.

Othinus shouted down from the large bird of prey flying overhead.

“Do not let your guard down, human!”

He heard the sound of breaking construction materials from the area the scream had hit and thus where everyone should have been defeated. That was the sound of someone’s merciless grip crushing the stone wall near the windowsill that had stood for centuries.

She was getting up.

Kanzaki Kaori would soon be back in action inside that hallway.

“She is one of the world’s fewer than twenty Saints. A single mandrake born from a sinner’s bodily fluids is not going to kill her so easily!”

“!”

“That only worked because it came as a surprise, but she will overwhelm you once she starts moving in earnest. Your symbol is the dragon. Whether that outer shell qualifies as the Japanese water god or the Western devil, who can say what a hit from Yuisen will do to it. It might even slice through you inside. So stop her immediately. What did Riméa give you!?”

It was time to make a choice.

If that was not enough to bring her down, he would have to use his true trump card.

Kamijou reached into his pocket and pulled out a clear cylinder thicker than a pen. He bent it between his hands and mixed together the chemicals inside to produce a sticky light similar to glow-in-the-dark paint.

These were commonly seen at idol concerts, but he had a different use for it.

Kamijou tossed it toward where Kanzaki Kaori was recovering.

The glowstick was sliced in two before even reaching the floor, but now was not the time to tremble in fear over her accuracy. He raised his voice instead.

“Take care of this!!”

A white dress filled up with air soared through the sky.

The person who crashed down atop the Saint like an artillery shell was another extreme exception on the magic side: Dion Fortune, the humanoid original grimoire.

“Are you kidding me!? Those former Catholics who let their numbers do the talking were enough of a pain, but now you express-summon me here!? That is no way to treat Magician Fortune of the Golden cabal!!”

“Sorry, Othinus, but can you translate her English!?”

“She says she was feeling lonely because you keep ignoring all her many attempts to show off.”

This was a signal Kamijou had been given to inform the others of a priority enemy if he was in trouble, but he only had so many of those. Whether it was Accelerator or Hamazura Shiage, they would have to abandon their current opponent to prioritize the one he was indicating, so he could not overuse this.

They had a plan.

But whether or not it worked out had been partially up to luck.

And here it was working.

He got lucky again. Even though he might start to expect this if it kept happening.

He could not let his heart grow flabby.

He was a sky-blue and lemon-yellow monster right now. He had transformed so far not even his parents would recognize him. If he also let his heart rot away, it really was over for him.

If he wished to still call himself Kamijou Touma, he had to stay true to his usual self. No matter what happened.

“Do not simply rely on them, human. You decided on that yourself,

remember? You can summon them to you from the overall battlefield if you like, but you are the one who will pay the price in the end!”

“I know that! And I didn’t come here to just sit on the sidelines and watch!”

Kanzaki Kaori and Dion Fortune were grappling in the hallway.

But that was not his true enemy here.

That title belonged to Stiyl Magnus.

Kamijou crouched low and ran across the grass along the outside wall, grabbed something sitting by the wall, and crashed through another window to dive inside where Stiyl awaited.

The red-haired priest roared while relying on the rune cards cleverly hidden all around him.

“Innocentius!!”

Kamijou would gain nothing from charging directly at the flame giant. After all, it constantly regenerated itself, so that led to an impasse even with Imagine Breaker. And in his current state, he would only get himself incinerated by the mass of three-thousand-degree flames.

There was no point in staying here long.

He had picked something up outside, so he used the strength of his glowing sky-blue shell to throw it at Innocentius.

It was a bag of synthetic fertilizer.

Specifically, it contained ammonium sulfide.

“Tch!?”

It must have been like a sudden wall of stench assaulting Stiyl’s sensitive eyes and nose.

That was not a substance people should breathe in.

But to be honest, Kamijou had not really considered the specific properties all that much. Any fertilizer or agrochemical would have worked.

After all, his opponent was a mass of three-thousand-degree flames.

Most substances would still leave some trace powder in the air when sliced through, so Stiyl had likely increased his firepower enough to eliminate that. However, that was not always a good thing. He may have had some resistance against heat and lack of oxygen, but an attack coming from an entirely different direction could always be an exception. And even if the priest really could deflect everything, there were ways to take advantage of that like, with Accelerator.

It was doubtful he could use his eyes or nose very well at the moment.

And his ears alone would not give him an accurate location for his enemy.

Stiyl Magnus managed to swing his flame swords blindly even with his senses robbed by an intense pain similar to teargas, so he did deserve some praise for his fighting instincts. A slight misstep could have meant setting himself ablaze, but he remained firmly focused on victory.

And it was all for a certain girl.

“Gaaaaahhhhh!!”

But.

It only took a moment.

Stiyl fell back not because of his flame swords but because he feared running into Innocentius which fought automatically. And once he did that, Kamijou had what he needed.

That large boy was not Kanzaki.

He was skilled in magic, but his athletic abilities were no greater than the

average person's. Those two flames swords may have been more than enough of a threat if Kamijou had nothing but his ordinary right hand to work with, but he was covered by sky-blue and lemon-yellow.

That shell had briefly reached Kanzaki's level.

He did not care if he was pushing himself too hard here.

He rushed in and forcefully swung his right arm which carried thick claws.

A dull sound burst out.

Styl Magnus was thrown to the Windsor Castle floor.

Kamijou had been in too much of a hurry to think about holding back.

Even if the priest was swinging them blindly, a hit from one of those flame swords would have scorched his body.

Was this another example of luck?

“Pant, pant!!”

“This is not over yet, human.”

Othinus hopped down onto Kamijou's sky-blue shoulder.

The bird of prey that palm-sized fairy had been riding may have refused to get close with all the strong chemicals scattered around. Or was the bird not much of an advantage inside a building?

“This is all over if you do not reach the center before you run out of cards to play, human. You are up against the United Kingdom itself. They can call in all sorts of extraordinary reinforcements, so time is not on your side here.”

“I get that, Othinus.”

Kamijou made his way to the stairs while feeling a bit woozy from the fertilizer smell and the extreme tension that refused to leave him.

He did not know exactly where to find the person who was dressed up in his past.

But he did know where to start the search.

As he always had since losing his memories, he would rely on what little information he had gathered with his eyes and ears.

“Let’s check that dance hall that acts like a symbol of his success.”

## Part 3

Takitsubo Rikou, the girl in a pink track suit and fluffy sweater, was seated on the bank of the Thames. She was peering through large goggles that provided night vision with an electronic attachment. Her butt was placed on the ground and her knees were bent and spread out. That indecent pose (which may have been like someone whose hips gave out during a test of courage) was so she could hold the heavy machine gun sitting on a tripod between her legs.

Looking at the size alone, that mass of steel was larger than she was tall.

That large weapon would normally require a group of four to operate, but she was handling it well for an amateur. Although that may have been because she was meant as a diversion and distraction, so accuracy was not a requirement.

She was more than three hundred meters away from her targets.

Given the heavy machine gun’s range, she should have been able to hit a stationary target at ten times that distance, but the boxy buildings and artificial woods in the way meant she did not always have a line of fire.

(Hmm, there's no real reason I have to fight here.)

The deep vibration of the heavy machine gun passed through her entire body and needlessly shook her surprisingly large chest, but she still managed to dryly think to herself in her usual absentminded state. That may have been thanks to her experience deep in the dark side.

That said, she was also right in a way.

This was Kamijou Touma's problem and it was not directly linked to the fate of the world or her group's happiness. She was willing to do her duty, but taking that too far could mean losing the stability they had finally found.

She was willing to say something very basic here: *I refuse to die a meaningless death after coming this far.*

“Dion Fortune disappeared, didn't she? I imagine a request must have come for her, but you should up the barrage. This is too much for that one Asian alone.”

The person using electronically-enhanced binoculars next to her was First Princess Riméa. She was close enough to lean against the girl, but they were still using shared radio earphones to converse. The heavy machine gun would have drowned out their voices otherwise.

Also, it had been the British princess who lent them all this equipment.

Takitsubo was very careful to *not* hit the nuns and maids she saw running around in the artificial woods.

“Hm. That means it's just Hamazura in there. Hm, hm.”

“Did you find some personal rules to follow mid-battle? I'm glad to see this is motivating you in some weird way, but humans really are frightening beings. Is it really that impossible to hold a friendship and romance simultaneously?”

Just then, something cut across in Takitsubo's greenish vision enhanced by the electronics.

She immediately pulled her head back to remove her eye from the scope, but that was meaningless in this case. She reacted the same as if a bug were flying near her face, but with the naked eye, the area three hundred meters away was simply wrapped in darkness.

However.

She saw a bitter look on the first princess's face next to her.

"She's there."

After that comment to herself, she used her radio to call to someone while sending out identical signals from the many drones in the air to disguise the origin of the signal.

"Okay, Villian!! If you can respond, then explain what's going on in Windsor Castle right now. Although I'm sure the answer is not going to delight me!!"

Takitsubo's eyes widened in shock while the rest of her expression remained blank.

She blinked a few times.

"What was that?" It looked like she could not believe her eyes. "Did someone intentionally move into the line of fire and *deflect the bullets with a sword*?"

"Keep that barrage going. That boy on the opposite bank will be killed in no time as things are."

Takitsubo was dumbfounded by Riméa's words.

She had known they were not strong enough. That was why their assistance was only meant as decoys and diversions to fill in the gaps. But it was still much more powerful to hear someone else talk about dying or being killed. Especially when it was based on rational calculations instead of emotion.

"You want to know who that was? Saying you don't recognize her might just qualify as lèse-majesté," explained First Princess Riméa. "That was

humanity's least mature person going on a rampage with Curtana in hand."

## Part 4

An intermittent low rumbling shook the dance hall's floor.

The pointy-haired boy in a tuxedo and ascot tie looked up at the ceiling with a carefree attitude.

"Yeah, that seems about right."

His tone made it clear he did not expect much from the people he had forced to fight. He knew they were an enemy he would have to defeat eventually, so he may have only wanted to wear them down as much as possible before that happened.

"I'm gonna go motivate Elizard a little more. Maybe I should destroy a few more national treasures with my right hand to make sure she follows that command to the letter."

That boy did not know much about magic, but there was one thing he could figure out from his experience.

"The truly dangerous things aren't hung up as some prominent sign or symbol like a huge bell, a statue, a fountain, or a painting. I mean, they're afraid someone will realize how important it is."

"..."

"It's the same logic used when transporting art and antiques. So the true protective signs will be hidden in the creases, patterns, frameworks, and other places that aren't obvious at first glance. That's the kind of things Imagine Breaker destroyed in the Tower of London, after all. If I'm ever in trouble, I

just have to remember that. I'm sure to find the answer there."

He spoke to himself like he was reviewing how to cook something.

There was a Kamijou Touma that Shokuhou Misaki did not know. One was sky-blue and lemon-yellow and the other was shocking-pink and emerald. There was nothing she could use to judge it properly now. She was in such an extreme state of confusion that the waves of emotion had died off. She doubted she would be all that surprised if a third and fourth one showed up now.

Then this boy directed his focus outwards while an emerald light scattered from the corner of his eye.

"Shokuhou, you set things up here. In that perfect way of yours."

The door was standing open.

She could have escaped if she had made a run for it.

But she could not move.

She could not take even the first step beyond the fluttering curtain over the window.

There were no chains, but an invisible weight seemed to be dragging her to the water's depths.

She let out a soft breath and then grabbed her TV remote again.

She had two trump cards: Index and Misaka Mikoto.

She had been told what to do with both of them. She could probably control them both, but Mikoto would be the easier one. So the girl with her honey-blonde hair worn back in two stages walked to that girl first.

She bit her lip.

But after being driven to the edge of the edge, she could not stop her mistake

with her own power.

“I’m sorry.”

She sniffled.

She could not even lift her hanging head.

A wet sobbing sound continued endlessly.

Her self-respect was so badly damaged that her eyes did not even look the same size, but she still moved like a marionette. Her thighs pushed dangerously far from the slits in her dress. The hips of the dress that shined like enamel strained as she moved.

The honey-blonde girl was already unable to get up under the mountain of weights pressing down on her, but further weights of violation were plopped down atop that mountain.

It was similar to being buried under multiple crushing debts.

“I’m sorry, Misaka-san.”

With those meaningless words, her thumb touched the button.

The calico cat mewed at her feet, but that was not enough to stop her.

Unlike the British magicians(?), Misaka Mikoto was a pure Academy City Level 5.

It was still unknown how much of her power the Railgun could deflect, but there should still have been an access point left open for their joint work with the A.A.A. There were decent odds she could control the girl with Mental Out now.

The girl showed no concern over the underwear-like transparent material or her exposed back.

Her skin was not flushed like after a bath, nor was it pale.

It was simply an emotionless milky white.

The black, bench-sized mass resembling a streetcar or police van approached the short-haired girl while she stood entirely motionlessly. It must have received a command from its true master because the A.A.A. changed shape with several mechanical noises. It regained its original form that remade the girl's silhouette into a metal-winged demon.

With that, the weaponization was complete.

That girl was now a fighter who would crush that other boy.

But.

A moment later, one of the weapon arms gave a roar and opened fire on the tuxedo boy standing nearby.

“...!?”

Shokuhou was even more surprised than the target of the gunfire.

The cat could not “scream”, so it instead uttered a twisted meow.

Misaka Mikoto was still unconscious. She had to be.

Nevertheless, the blue veil on her head fluttered like a curtain while her arms and legs were forcibly moved by an external force, as if they were attached to invisible strings. The blue lingerie dress clearly revealed her bodylines, but she made no attempt to hide the milky-white skin seen through the lace and she did not even blush.

And.

A few tufts of black hair fluttered through the air.

Black.

The attack had been too quick to dodge if you reacted only after the oddity had begun.

Did that mean the boy had been considering this a possibility in some corner of his mind? He was powerless, weak, and unable to survive even a single hit. *But that was why he had to be cautious.*

There was a slight flash of shocking-pink.

It came from the corner of his mouth.

“Shoku—*hou!!*”

“No! It wasn’t me!!”

Even as she shouted, her clever mind worked out the answer with a swiftness that disgusted her.

*The A.A.A. is a purely mechanical product, so Mental Out doesn’t work on it. So did Misaka-san change some settings in its programming in advance so it would attack him once it connected to her!?*

That girl would be of no use like this.

Shokuhou could only control Misaka Mikoto who was dangling from the machine like a limp doll. If the exterior A.A.A. had taken control of the human-machine unit, then any stop command Shokuhou sent would be meaningless. That would only start a hopeless arm wrestling match in which Mikoto tried to use her muscles to stop the mechanical arms from moving.

It was possible this was the final branch in the road.

She could have taken this chance by assisting the A.A.A. and shoving on the tuxedo boy’s back while standing closer to him than anyone.

But.

“Help me, *Shokuhou!!*”

He called her name.

With a pleading tone.

That might not seem like much to most people, but to her, it was something she had given up all hope of ever hearing again.

So.

The hand holding the TV remote moved.

She bit her lovely lip so hard she tasted blood.

She knew this was wrong, but she could not escape it.

The cat rubbed against her ankle and meowed as if trying to stop her.

(The other trump card!!)

She targeted the silver-haired girl.

The one in a storybook princess dress colored white with reddish-purple lines.

She apparently worked for the Anglican Church(?) as a magician(???), so Shokuhou did not know if she could actually control her. An auto-fuse that used some system related to a funeral or something was currently in effect, but the pointy-haired boy in a tuxedo had said there was a loophole there.

“John’s Pen.”

That trap had supposedly already been lost, but if the residual memories remained, Shokuhou Misaki’s Mental Out could restore it within the silver girl’s mind. She could not directly control the girl, but that could change if she restored the backdoor previously installed there. It was like restoring your malfunctioning computer to an older state and bringing back a virus you thought you had already eliminated.

“Stop Misaka-san! Hurry!!”

“Warning: Chapter 0, Verse 0.”

Creepy magic circles appeared deep in her lovely eyes.

The silver-haired girl in a storybook princess's dress moved in an inhuman way that may have been even more lifeless than Misaka Mikoto with her blue veil fluttering like a curtain.

(It... worked???)

And.

And.

And.

"Illegitimate contact detected. Response level: top priority. Destroying all possible suspects to restore security stability."

That may have been a taboo she never should have touched.

Shokuhou Misaki knew she was no longer worthy, but she still reached for her chest.

She reached for the cheap emergency whistle she had been unable to throw away.

(Ah.)

But was it really any help at all?

The uncontrollable conclusion had finally begun.

## Part 5

A violent tremor shook the entirety of Windsor Castle.

## Part 6

Directly above the sky-blue jaws that resembled a violent crocodile, a giant chandelier swayed like a pendulum over Kamijou Touma's head and cracks ran through the windows even though he had not touched them.

“What the hell!?”

“This isn’t like our planned disturbances. Something is happening, human. And I don’t think it is those morons outside getting carried away!!”

The electric wiring inside the thick stone walls must have broken because all of the castle’s indoor lighting began flickering unreliably.

He had apparently chosen the right direction.

And besides that, he heard some kind of shrill, ear-splitting noise.

“What was that?”

It was unusual for Othinus to express such obvious confusion.

And she continued with doubt in her voice.

“Was it a whistle???”

“.....”  
.....”

Kamijou Touma had a blank in his memories that he could not remember.

But he definitely felt something in his heart. Wasn’t that sound—that whistle—a sign of danger that he had hoped to never hear?

(Calm down. Stay calm.)

He felt himself growing irritated at this unexpected event that he could not figure out on his own.

He could not assume that luck would always be on his side. If he did that, he would become a true monster.

(I can't let this formless unease control me. I have to stay in charge. This isn't fortune or misfortune. I just have to head to the source of the noise. That's all it is.)

He slowly breathed from the crocodilian jaws and demanded self-examination from himself.

“You can figure this out one thing at a time.”

“Right.”

The mysterious intermittent shaking seemed to come from up on the second floor. The dance hall he had entered before was located there.

He climbed the stairs.

There were no strange traps or unexpected ambushes waiting for him.

But the extreme tension squeezing at his chest did not go away. He was meaninglessly reminded of how haunted houses could not have ghosts popping out at you all the time so they intentionally included long passageways and corners where nothing happened.

“There's the door.” Othinus seemed to notice something from his shoulder.  
“But something isn't right. Is it opened toward us a little? No, the door itself is bent out this way. Has the entire knob structure broken???”

It was like someone had tackled it with all their might.

No, you would need a large explosion inside the dance hall to cause that.

And that seemed likely enough given how much the entire stone castle had been shaking.

“...”

Kamijou gulped and continued down the hallway inside the sky-blue and lemon-yellow outer shell.

He moved slowly, although he had no idea what he was so afraid of.

Othinus had been right. Whether it was made of brass or gold, the golden-glittering knob was broken and bent. The rectangular bolt meant to open and close the door when the knob turned had been snapped by a powerful force and lay there on the carpeted floor. The double doors were swelling out toward him, but it looked like they were originally meant to open inwards.

There was nothing to grab or turn.

He pushed his clawed palm against the bent door and used his weight to open it inwards.

Something immediately leaped into his field of vision.

White and blue dresses flapped in the air.

Two girls surrounded by crystallizations of magic and science were flying every which way in the wide space and repeatedly clashing. It was like walking into a nightmare.

He nearly forgot why he was even here.

The girls showed no sign of worrying about their fluttering skirts or their skin showing through their dress. But there was no time to consider the sex appeal of their backs or thighs when it looked like they might strangle themselves with those mechanical arms at this rate.

He shouted and tried to move between them.

But he had not seen the true depths of this hell yet.

Just as he stepped forward without heeding Othinus's warning, his sky-blue foot felt something sticky.

He also heard a straining sound from right next to the bent door.

A honey-blonde girl was seated there and leaning against the wall. The sound must have been the rubbing of the hard-looking dress that resembled a yellow bunny suit. He did not even notice the slits in the skirt. Her body was unnaturally tilted and the small crown decoration swayed on her head like dead grass. Dark red liquid spilled from where one hand weakly held her side.

It was a blood red.

The way it heavily contrasted with her white skin seemed like the aesthetic of death.

Her other hand dangled down with something gripped in the slender fingers.

“A... whistle?”

The calico cat was endlessly meowing nearby.

That may have helped her stay conscious. The cat had no supernatural power or strategic power, but how much of a help had that small life been to that girl when she felt crushed all alone with no one to confide in?

Once someone died, that was the end of it.

There was no such thing as resurrection beyond what the god in heaven had declared.

Kamijou Touma no longer had that right hand which had stripped away all of his luck.

But was this another form of fortune?

Did arriving before she fully lost consciousness still fall into the realm of “lucky”?

(No, screw that. To hell with that idea!!)

“I knew it...”

A faint breath left the girl’s lovely lips.

The blood flowing from her brow kept her from opening one eye.

But when she saw those bizarre jaws colored a sky-blue and lemon-yellow found nowhere in nature, she managed a smile despite the blood soaking her dress.

“I knew I would be punished for what I did... even if that’s not something a Level 5 made in a city of science ability should be saying.”

“Hey!!”

“What’s that look for?”

Was she in pain or not?

It may have been the same as how someone stranded on a snowy mountain would feel a strange warmth in the very, very end.

What expression did she see on that toothy monster’s face?

“Don’t worry. You don’t have to yell. It might hurt now, but that sadness won’t stay in your heart. You’ll forget all about it in the end.”

“Why...?”

The person before her was no hero or an older high school boy.

In fact, that boy felt so cornered he revealed his own weakness.

“How did this happen!? It’s true—I can’t seem to remember your name or what you look like! That’s why I can’t understand why you did this and I doubt I would remember even if you explained it to me!! So why... why can you smile now of all times!?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

However.

His words only seemed to rid the honey-blonde girl's smile of its stiffness.

"I really did know it from the beginning. I knew that was the real you. That's why I blew the whistle to call for someone else even though he was right in front of me. I'm so stupid. If I wanted to ignore reality and have a nice, convenient dream ability, I might as well have pressed the remote to my own head. And I'm the one who said in the very beginning that would be meaningless..."

"Hey, stay with me!"

"But I just wanted to hear you say my name one last time... no matter what form it took."

"Don't act like this is over!! Look me in the eye! Look me in the eye, dammit!!"

It was a natural smile.

She looked more mature than Kamijou, but that smile was as carefree as could be.

It was a warm smile that reminded him of the summer sun.

It was a fleeting expression he was guaranteed to forget soon enough.

"I completely lost my way, didn't I? I'm so... so stupid..."

Her head slumped weakly to the side.

The silver emergency whistle fell from her hand and to the floor.

And that was that.

No matter how much the cat meowed and poked her with his small front paw, she did not respond.

Her slender shoulders shook with the vibrations erupting intermittently in this space, but there was no human will behind it. It was the same as a rose in a vase.

What was the right thing to do here?

Kamijou Touma realized how fake those drama and movie scenes of wailing and weeping were. When you actually encountered it, you could not organize your emotions properly. When that unorganized impact hit you like a solid wall, you simply stood there in a daze. You could not keep up with the world around you and you grew motionless. He realized that was how it really worked.

There was nothing he could do.

His mind cranked away fruitlessly and could not come up with a single idea!!

“She is showing cyanosis from a drop in blood pressure.” The small Othinus hopped down from his shoulder. “I will do what I can, but that will not amount to much here. Extending the time limit until her death is the most I can manage. And it’s all over if she’s hit by a stray shot from those idiots filling this room with warship-level firepower. Do something about that or what little chance remains will be blown to smithereens.”

“Do something?”

He repeated those words like they were a strange incantation.

He simply parroted them without understanding them.

“Extending the time limit???”

Something rolled over toward him.

It came from Index who was being manipulated by a strange power, although she may not have done it on purpose. It bore the symbol of a rose in the center of a cross. Othinus tore open the plastic package that looked a lot like an overnight toothbrush set and pulled out bandages and a tube of disinfectant that were like a shield and spear at her size.

“I am saying she has a chance if we get her in an ambulance where she can receive a transfusion and stitches. There is no such thing as complete resurrection in this world, so even Christian Rosenkreuz’s corpse simply does not decompose. Even the Chinese Shijie-Xian only has a false funeral to cut their ties to this world, so they do not actually die and come back to life. Death is a holy ground. Once people die, that is the end.”

That god had once destroyed the entire world, remade it as she saw fit, and created a world where all the dead in the world had been saved in order to drive Kamijou to the edge, so now she had to describe the inconvenience she herself had brought about.

“But on the other hand, there is still a chance of salvation if they are kept alive. Plus, do not forget that *a certain doctor* is still here in the UK. Or have you grown so full of yourself that you’re willing to give up on someone else’s life, human?”

With that, the many misaligned gears fit back into place once more.

Or so it felt to him.

“*Panacea*,” said Othinus out of the blue. “Fortune’s tarot explanation was fascinating, but those cards are a means rather than an end. Just like Aleister used them as a simulator and Coronzon as a defense system. So I was thinking about this from the magical side of things to see if I could figure out what acts as the driving force behind it.”

Panacea.

Kamijou did not know what that meant or even what language it was in.

“That is one of the few goals held by the old-style Rosicrucian magic cabal. It generally refers to an all-purpose medicine. While I thought about it, I started thinking that might be the role of your right hand.”

“My hand is... a medicine?”

That was not what he had heard before.

Aleister and others had talked about Imagine Breaker like a ruler or a reference point that could never be distorted. It seemed wrong to suddenly start saying it was something you rubbed on a wound or swallowed.

But Othinus had more to say.

“Who ever said it was a medicine for human use?”

“?”

“The macro universe and the micro human body are mutually linked. That is a common understanding between the Golden and the Rosen... So to use a broader interpretation, creating a medicine that works on humans would also be able to *heal the world*. Human, that is the kind of all-purpose medicine I am talking about. It can either gently heal the bad parts of the world or it can coldly cut them away.”

It could purify.

Or it could slay.

“That wonder drug can also describe the Rosicrucian experts. If it is necessary to heal the world, they will shatter their glass coffin and travel the outside world, but once their goal is complete, they will return to wherever they came from. I thought what came from your right arm might be similar.”

His understander looked awfully grim for what she was saying.

Kamijou did not know what all this talk about the macro and the micro was about, but if there really was a medicine that worked on anything, he wanted to use it on the honey-blonde girl limply approaching death in front of him. Yet Othinus said nothing about doing that.

“But I was wrong.”

She sighed.

In an extremely rare occurrence for that Magic God, she actually announced

her failure.

“I am fairly certain that is the wrong answer. That means not even a Magic God like me understands it! Human, Imagine Breaker may be a reference point for the world and it may be the ultimate exorcism spiritual item said to have been managed by the Golden at their Blythe Road hideout... but it must be *more than just that*. Aleister might be gone, but he discovered something else inside your right hand!! Do not be led astray. That is not some convenient panacea. No matter how convenient it might look, that medicine comes with horrific side effects that eat into you before you even notice!!”

“I don’t care what it means for me,” spat out Kamijou.

He was not talking about himself here.

There was so much more he had to think about instead: the girl being controlled, the girl who had lost control, and the girl who was collapsed in a pool of blood with a smile on her face.

What thoughts did he need if he was to untangle all those threads?

He would not think about solving it all in one fell swoop.

If he untangled them one at a time, he was sure to solve the problem eventually. It might look like taking the long way around, but that had to actually be the fastest way to figure it all out.

So...

“We’ll have an answer to all those questions once I kick that bastard’s ass. I don’t know if it’s from the Rose or whatever else, but we’re talking about magic made by humans, right? Once I get Index back, she can explain everything for us as long as it belongs to the magic side. If that gives us the answer, we’re good. If it doesn’t, we’ll just have to look to the other side. In other words, it must have to do with the science side like Misaka or *that girl*.”

“The Index Librorum Prohibitorum, hm? Even though she never noticed this after being with you for so long?”

“But had this change in me ever risen to the surface before? She might be able to tell us something she couldn’t before.”

Saving everyone was the nonnegotiable goal.

He had made a lot of mistakes getting here.

But the more he had taken from him and the more was whittled away, the more clearly he could see the core of his own being which he could not afford to lose sight of.

There was a girl here who could not even ask for help.

But he was free to reach out a helping hand regardless.

So he would not back down on this. No matter what.

“I can’t believe this.”

A rude voice cut in.

It was the person who carried Kamijou Touma’s forgotten past and had stolen Imagine Breaker.

That bastard clenched and unclenched his right hand from a short distance away.

With a sound like a small child tearing the wrapping from a present, shocking-pink and emerald covered his entire right arm.

He too was abnormal.

Yet this was the opposite of Kamijou’s sky-blue.

Instead of covering and swallowing him from the outside, it burst out from within.

The sleeve of his shirt and tuxedo tore to expose his bizarre arm and neon muscles swelled out, but the boy spoke with the exact same expression as

before.

“I lose Mental Out now? Man, having this thing really does bring in the misfortune, doesn’t it?”

“ ”  
• • •

He dared say that here?

When everyone else was biting their lip despite having their festivities ruined by all this damage and being buried below bad luck and despair?

Was the word misfortune really the right way to describe this?"

“*Why...?*”

Kamijou Touma felt truly overwhelming emotion bubbling up from deep within his chest.

Even though he knew this was an emotion he must never reveal in front of someone like that girl collapsed behind him with a smile on her lips.

*“Why are you still alive?!”*

“Ha ha. Do you think I have some safe zone marked out for myself here!? No, it’s just that I happened to have this right hand. I mean, with all this misfortune, I bet I had more stray shots flying my way than anyone else.”

“Then why!? If you had such a wonderful power, why didn’t you use it to protect haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!!???”

Imagine Breaker's presence could not be proven with just the object itself.

That power only revealed its true value when faced with a supernatural power.

And that was not just true of the ability itself. How one wielded it also revealed so much about the person using it.

## Part 7

“Pant, pant!”

Hamazura Shiage was running through the artificial woods. Now was no time to worry about not leaving any trace on the battlefield.

For one thing, they operated on a different type of logic here.

They made no attempt to hide the rustling of the underbrush as they surrounded him. The lights floating around like will-o’-the-wisps had to be the lanterns held by maids and nuns.

First Princess Riméa had given him a stun gun, but the non-Academy City electronic was of poor quality. Its battery had died in no time. Stun guns were one of those tricky self-defense products that you rarely used but always wanted the battery full. That might lead you to keep the charger plugged in 24/7, but that would wear out the battery.

That was a common mistake for back alley delinquents, but had it been too tricky for a fancy princess too!?

“Further orders!? There’s no way I can do that!!”

Aneri was on his phone, but the device could apparently pick up signals on other frequencies as well. He received a command from Riméa’s radio. According to the translation made by clever Aneri-chan:

*...Contact Third Princess Villian who should be somewhere in Windsor Castle and find a way to connect her to outside communications. That should do wonders to reduce the chaos in England.*

“There’s just no way!!”

He had screwed up.

His role had been to make a mess of things here as a decoy or diversion while receiving support from Takitsubo across the Thames. They just needed the pointy-haired boy to end things in the meantime, so he did not have an ultimate goal to achieve or target to destroy. To be blunt, he could have done anything he wanted as long as it bought them time. However...

(I'm trapped! Crap, and I can't hope for help from Takitsubo's heavy machine gun at this angle!!)

"You are only meant as a diversion and you don't have Fortune guiding you anymore," said his girlfriend through his phone. "Hamazura, isn't it time to leave?"

"How am I supposed to withdraw now!? Besides, I can't back out of this!!"

"Why not?"

He did not hold a grudge against anyone involved, but there was one thought in the back of his mind.

"Because Aleister kicked the bucket before making good on his end of the deal! And you know *who the current board chairman is*, don't you? He says he might honor Aleister's deal if the conditions are right. That means our safety is guaranteed without needing the Parameter List!!"

Like Takitsubo had said, Dion Fortune had vanished at some point, so she must have received an SOS from the pointy-haired boy. That left this Level 0 all alone and he was really nothing more than a delinquent.

"Aneri!! You're my only hope right now, so please do something about this!!"

Hamazura could hardly be blamed for wanting to rely on Aneri, but activating his phone's backlight in the darkness may have been a mistake.

A solemn voice spoke from that darkness.

"I will give you one warning."

The idiot's failure to understand English may have been part of the problem.

A moment later, all the thick trees in that area were sliced through at the same height.

And that height was precisely the same as Hamazura's.

Tree trunks thicker than his torso were sliced through like a hot knife through butter and low enough to graze the top of his head.

He had no idea what had happened.

His legs tangled up below him and he fell to the ground.

While surrounded by the sounds of the scenery bending and breaking, a silhouette holding a flat-tipped sword slowly approached him.

But did he realize that they had been showing him a kindness here?

And not just because of what would have happened had that slash been made ten centimeters lower.

The cut had not gone beyond the third dimension.

If it had sliced through all dimension simultaneously, it would have formed a massive piece of ruined materials that fell like a suspended ceiling to crush his entire body.

"But just the one. Disarm yourself and surrender immediately. Setting foot in the queen's castle without permission is a crime in and of itself."

"...!?"

When he viewed Aneri's translation on the screen, he felt an even greater squeezing at his heart.

People tended to gather information to calm themselves down when they were worried, but he regretted it this time because not knowing would have been far better. That tendency was useless when the information simply

overwhelmed you. ...Now, was he at all aware that a magic cabal from several centuries ago had warned that darkness and ostentation were found in all fields so it was difficult for even a wise man to find the proper path?

Queen Regnant Elizard.

The sword she held was likely different from the Sword of State that Hamazura had briefly stolen from Scotland, but he could easily imagine it had some kind of ability he did not want to mess with. *Not from rational thought, but from the tremor in his spine.* Its destructive power was probably on the same level as Mugino Shizuri's Meltdowner, if not even more powerful. Plus, he had no idea if simple destructive power was really enough to describe it.

(I-I'm supposed to find the youngest daughter, and now the crazy-strong mother has shown up!)

When he did not respond in English, did she take it as a rejection?

The queen said nothing more and simply raised her sword to the side.

Was she going to keep him just barely alive so his screams would lure out his allies, or would she simply lop off his head and begin searching for another target?

“Aneri.”

Relying on her was his only option, but when he viewed the scenery through the small screen, all the predicted escape routes displayed there took superhuman curves that he had no chance of following.

(Am I screwed!?)

Just as his throat dried up, something else happened.

A large shadow blew away Elizard's body as if snatching her away from the side.

He heard a tongue click.

Elizard slid to the side and dug her shoes into the ground to forcibly apply the brakes. And the hand not holding Curtana Second held a girl in a classic maid uniform.

She spoke in a deep growl when she saw the unconscious girl she was holding by the back collar.

“A Maid of Honor.”

The maid had a spidery unit on her back and Elizard tossed her into the bushes to the side.

The person who had thrown the maid slowly stepped out from the darkness.

He had white hair and red eyes.

That monster with a modern design cane was accompanied by a translucent demon wearing a newspaper dress.

“Not gonna ask who I am?”

“It does not matter who you are.” Queen Regnant Elizard once more held Curtana Second in both hands. “Call me below contempt if you like, but I have a duty to protect the people of this country.”

She recalled the reports expressing so much relief sent to the British royal family’s email address.

They did not need to know that the world had fallen to this point.

“The people have enough power to give shape to a nation, but I still cannot force this absurdity onto them. He must be eliminated, but the people will crumble if they are not first given a chance to recover from all the chaos that began with the Crowley’s Hazards. So I will support them. I will support this nation no matter what form that takes. I made a mistake, but I cannot bring myself to abandon this nation!!”

“...”

The #1 was not foolish enough to take his eyes off the enemy here.

But Hamazura Shiage had definitely vanished from the board at some point. Was that boy's skill the ability to take whatever chances were given to him?

"This is a difference in positions, so forgive me. I am not about to call you evil. I will make sure to remember that you both carried a different form of justice from me. In every report, I will say we were equals."

"You...both?"

"Once I am done with you, I will clean up the castle. I am not happy about it, but bringing an end to this chaos takes top priority. I do not know which of you is more dangerous and you might both be dangerous. If necessary, I will cut you both down."

"Master, here it comes!"

The white monster gave a snort of laughter.

A moment later, Curtana Second was swung down with the force of a lightning strike.

The apparent distance between them did not matter.

Not when that queen used her full power.

That sword was an extreme spiritual item that fully united the three factions and four regions of the United Kingdom; it could draw on a portion of Archangel Michael's power while on British territory. If a qualified user released that power even for a moment, a swing of the sword would sever all dimensions at once and giant ruined materials would be created along the line of the slash.

Yes, all dimensions.

*Assuming it could hit,* that extraordinary power could penetrate the barrier between worlds and kill a being lurking in a different phase... for example, Holy Guardian Angel Aiwass who stayed in the layer of physical laws at the

very bottom.

However.

Immediately afterwards, a deafening metal clang filled the air and Curtana Second shot upwards.

“!?”

(Did he alter the course of blade by directly hitting Curtana with a projectile instead of going for the line of the slash!?)

That said, Elizard could directly deflect heavy machine gun bullets with that sword.

To knock her off balance like this would require something on the level of a strategic bombing.

In fact.

When Second Princess Carissa had held Curtana Original, she had ordered a cruise missile strike on herself and used the sword to escape unscathed.

The sword’s unnatural movement pulled both Elizard’s arms up like she was cheering, but Accelerator did not make a further attack. Even though he could have kicked a pebble and manipulated its vector to tear through her organs while her torso was exposed like this.

“A difference in positions? Protecting your nation? ...*So other people’s circumstances don’t matter?* Don’t screw with me, you conceited member of the privileged class. That logic ain’t gonna work here.”

“You simply do not understand—”

“Finish that with ‘this pressure’ and I really will punch you to open your eyes. It’s painfully obvious you’re assuming no one else understand your worries here. You’re subconsciously looking down on us.”

Elizard returned Curtana to proper position.

She also took a step back to readjust the distance between them.

Accelerator was surrounded by the sounds of rustling underbrush. Maids, nuns, knights, and priests. A vortex of hostile eyes turned on him from a wide variety of enemies who were probably all noble followers of good and righteousness.

“I already said I would do whatever it took. I am not fighting this war based on what the historians will think of me. I am fighting to protect the lights of those ordinary homes!!!!”

The white monster was isolated.

But his confident smile remained.

“Is this all the vision you’ve got? Aren’t you supposed to be the representative of the United Kingdom? And here I thought I could learn something from you, *Senpai*. ”

“What...?”

“It wasn’t just the interests and greed of the filthy adults that made Academy City *the way it is*. It was me. I stood at the top as the #1, but I couldn’t give them any real vision. I stifled them. I robbed them of their dreams and left them there to rot. They studied and studied and studied and filled their heads with all sorts of crap, but they couldn’t become anything more than murderous shits. I’ve finally started to think that’s the real problem with that city.”

After spitting all that out, wings with a pale platinum shine erupted from his back.

“You’ll cut us both down just cause there’s a possibility we’re dangerous? How boring can you get? Don’t go placing people’s lives on the scales as nothing more than a safety measure, you piece of shit! I bet it’d make your precious people cry if they could see you now, #1 of the UK!!”

“!?”

“When you stand at the top, you’ve gotta watch how you act.”

That monster spread his wings as he spoke.

“I’m Accelerator, Academy City’s #1. And I’m also someone who needs to become a role model for the entire science side. So I’ve got a question for you. Now, show me how a leader at the top is supposed to act!!”

## Part 8

That battlefield was hell on earth.

As large as the dance hall was, it was still just one indoor room. Index and Misaka Mikoto were targeting each other and firing all throughout that space while controlled by John’s Pen and the A.A.A. respectively. They did not show any ordinary reactions such as worrying about their storybook skirt spreading out or their flat chest’s contours showing through their lingerie-like dress. It was like being caught between two warships engaged in combat. Even if they had no intention of doing so, a single hit would kill you instantly. In fact, Windsor Castle itself might not last if a wall or the ceiling was blown through. The building could crumble and bury them alive at any moment.

But.

Even so.

“...”

“...”

Sky-blue and lemon-yellow.

Shocking-pink and emerald.

Neither of them took their eyes off each other for even a moment.

Even if there were millions of mines buried here and millions of tripwires set up, Kamijou was too preoccupied to go running to those girls.

Of course, that did not mean Index and Misaka Mikoto were not on his mind.

But all the problems led back to this other boy.

Every second and even split second was a waste.

The sooner he could kick that bastard's ass, the sooner he could free those girls and the sooner he could save everyone's lives.

It had always been this way.

When someone's life was on the line, a normal high school boy could become a hero who could overcome any threat and defeat any opponent.

The calico cat's meow acted like the starting pistol.

“Ohhhhhh!!!!”

“Ohhhhhh!!!!”

An explosive roar erupted out.

The sky-blue and shocking-pink slipped through the barrage of light arriving chaotically from either side and raced along the shortest distance across the dance hall.

Every little thing about that other boy pissed Kamijou Touma off.

The enemy's transformation still only covered the right side of his body.

Kamijou gave a roar from his crocodilian jaws, but he did not wait for his opponent to reach full power. If he was going to hold back now, he might as

well sink to the depths of the earth clutching his precious deck of cards to his chest.

That said.

The sky-blue shell was honestly too weak to call a trump card.

It was only the dregs and most of the power had to have been taken by the other boy.

Kamijou himself was unsure how much it could do and his enemy could negate all supernatural powers with Imagine Breaker. That powered suit made of creepy flesh would shatter the instant that boy laid a finger on it. He had a hard time imagining himself rushing straight in and pulling off a win without taking a single hit. That meant he had to come up with a plan that would work even after taking a hit and having everything taken from him.

(Stay low.)

It was true Imagine Breaker had been taken from him.

But Kamijou had learned all too well how it worked.

(I need to charge in with as much speed and weight as I can!!)

That might look like a reckless charge, but there was more to it.

Imagine Breaker was only the right fist.

If he kept his hips so low he was practically crawling along the floor and charged in along a straight line, the villain's only choice would be to swing that fist down at him. Yes, it would have to be an impractical attack similar to breaking tiles in a karate demonstration.

That was a pinpoint attack that could only hit once he was ten centimeters away.

And it would be a downwards blow from above instead of a direct cross counter. Even if he got a clean hit on that crocodile head, he would have a

hard time stopping Kamijou as he rushed in like an artillery shell.

Meaning...

“If I’m willing to take a hit, I can definitely reach him!!”

“You son of a bitch!”

Shocking-pink light shined from the corner of the other boy’s mouth.

In his unfamiliar tuxedo and ascot tie, he flipped over the stacks of plates on a nearby table and threw some full drink bottles, but Kamijou did not need to worry about that. He charged right through them using his reptilian shell made of sky-blue and lemon-yellow lines. He clenched the large jaws to ignore the dull pain.

He only had to remain conscious.

He only had to reach that other boy.

“!!”

A great roar exploded out.

As expected, the other boy swung his right hand down.

But instead of a fist, it was claws.

It was like a shocking-pink lightning strike.

A strange heat raced across the back of Kamijou’s head and he felt dizzy.

The sky-blue shell that had partially kept up with Kanzaki Kaori’s movements vanished in an instant as if unraveling.

But the exposed boy’s speed did not fall.

He clenched his teeth and slammed his shoulder into his opponent. He aimed for the solar plexus. He poured all his weight into it while thinking of it as

lifting up that boy's organs.

The two of them flew horizontally.

They briefly broke free of gravity.

“Gah!!”

“...!?”

And they hit the floor.

They kept moving and bounced along the carpeted floor like flat rocks skipping on a river. Kamijou might have been able to slit the other boy's throat with a thick claw if he could still use the sky-blue and lemon-yellow shell, but Imagine Breaker had already negated that. But to “no more than a boy”, that Imagine Breaker was no more than some claws.

An odd cracking sound continued on and on.

It did not come from Kamijou or his destroyed outer shell. The damage of being slammed back-first into the floor must have affected his target because shocking-pink and emerald erupted from all over his body and his tuxedo was torn to shreds as the colors surrounded him.

No, that was not quite accurate.

While Kamijou had been enveloped by the sky-blue, this boy was revealing the shocking-pink within him.

Kamijou had revealed his ordinary boy's face while the monster roared with giant shocking-pink jaws. They had entirely swapped out their appearances.

The difference in ability was unknown.

But if he had the same or even greater ability than Kamijou, he could reach Kanzaki's speeds at least for a moment.

If that monster was given any freedom, exposed Kamijou Touma would be

more than just torn to pieces.

(I won't let him... use that properly!!)

From here on, there would be no more tricks.

He did not care how dirty it was. They would go for the finishing blow from the start and whoever remained standing would claim everything for themselves.

The shocking-pink monster made it on top first, but the puny boy being crushed below him desperately swung his sky-blue and lemon-yellow right hand. He targeted the leg supporting a table. That table toppled over and dumped a steam oven toward his opponent's head. The boiling water inside spilled from the gaps and poured over that monster.

“Gaaahh!?”

The exposed shocking-pink must have been able to feel pain. Or was it even more sensitive? Kamijou could only speculate.

At any rate, he swung his thick tail around while screaming and Kamijou managed to escape while he flinched.

There really was something different about this.

Kamijou Touma realized anew that humans could not draw out normal emotions at times like this. Everyone was suffering, Index and Misaka Mikoto had been forced into a meaningless battle, and a honey-blonde girl was soaked in blood after dirtying her hands against her wishes.

It was all that other boy's fault.

This had long since passed the point where he simply wanted to dump hot water on him to cause him pain.

He roared.

He roared to burn away the guilt he felt toward this violence.

It was not quite the same thing as a hammer thrower or weightlifter shouting to intentionally release the limiters in their mind.

(Even if he can reach Kanzaki's speeds, we're only talking about something like maximum instantaneous wind speed. He can't do it all the time. If I don't give him a chance to get up to speed, I can still do this!!)

The shocking-pink and emerald villain held his crocodilian jaws but still grabbed a bundle of metal cooking skewers while exposed pointy-haired Kamijou Touma grabbed a still-plugged-in induction cooking plate and swung it down at the monster's face.

The alternating current magnetic field was capable of boiling a pot of water, so it quickly heated up the metal skewers.

“～～～!?”

The monster flinched once more and let go of the skewers. He also spread his wings as some kind of threat.

Kamijou went for another hit.

He was hesitant to use the induction cooking plate, but he still swung it horizontally toward the monster's face like he was throwing a slap. That must have pulled out the plug. It did not provide any heating this time, but it was still quite heavy. That heavy mass of metal was like a brick or concrete block and it knocked the shocking-pink villain to the floor when it smashed into the arm he had raised to protect his face.

Index and Misaka Mikoto had been made to fight for no reason.

A girl had smiled and continually apologized for something while she let go of the reins of her own life.

He thought about the things this person in front of him had trampled

underfoot.

“...I’ll kill you.”

His throat shook with a curse Kamijou Touma never would have uttered under normal circumstances.

If there had been other people gathered here and arguing which was the real Kamijou Touma, those words would have left a bad impression that would only have worked against him.

But he no longer had to fear anyone or watch what he said and did.

Words were born from within.

And that was the feeling within Kamijou Touma as his mind boiled with rage.

He could not have cared less about the duality of good and evil.

He roared in anger. Like a dragon.

“I’ll kill you!! You and only you!!!!”

He raised the unplugged induction cooking plate overhead. If he used gravity to swing it down with all his might, surely it could smash that bastard’s skull as he lay there on the floor.

But that opponent gave a definite smile despite having large crocodilian jaws.

He smiled and threw the many skewers he still held in his shocking-pink arm.

But this was more than just a cheap distraction for Kamijou Touma who only had soft skin now. What did the softness of his skin matter? Not even a specialized stun grenade would have worked against that boy while he was so boiling with rage that he had not even blinked as the hot water poured down on him as well as his enemy.

(Don’t show an opening! I can’t keep up if he gets a chance to accelerate!!)

So those skewers had a different purpose.

Kamijou heard a voice from an unexpected direction as he continued leaning forward.

“Warning: Chapter 5, Verse 2. Enemy attack detected; adding to interception list. Thou shalt remove the binding nail to release the rose from the cross.”

“Index!?”

A change came over the barrage being exchanged by the two girls.

One of the weapons making up the A.A.A. surrounding Mikoto’s body—a giant nail gun taller than she was—slipped past the resistance it had previously faced and fired a nail right past Index’s face, but the silver-haired girl in John’s Pen Mode did not bat an eye.

And her diverted attacks were directed elsewhere.

It was like a destructive searchlight sweeping around.

A thick beam of light shot through the space and vaporized the airborne metal skewers into an orange light. Kamijou barely made it in time. He let go of the excess weight and ducked down just before the induction cooking plate he left behind was erased from the world. Had he been even a split second slower in letting go with his sky-blue and lemon-yellow hand, his fingers would have been vaporized along with it.

And he was actually thankful for this.

If that attack had happened to take his side, he would have been swallowed up by that comfortable good fortune. And then he might have lost sight of everything.

He would have started to assume he would be saved.

He would become an arrogant monster who grew enraged when that did not happen.

(But that let him recover. Is that monster's full speed coming!?)

“You seem to be a very *forgetful creature.*”

He heard a mocking voice.

The shocking-pink jaws snapped open and shut.

“No matter what anyone says or does, you act like it never even happened!! If you never cared about any of it more than that, you don't deserve to have any of it!!”

He would use everything at his disposal to win.

So did that winged monster see the manipulated girls as no more than a usable terrain gimmick!?

“Give it a goddamn rest,” growled Kamijou.

“I've got a pretty good idea what you're thinking,” responded the monster.

A dull sound followed.

It was the sound of him selecting a different weapon. But this was not a long skewer meant to pierce meat, a steam oven, or an induction cooking plate.

He used both shocking-pink hands to lift up the entire long table of food. Large plates of sandwiches and fish crashed to the floor.

He raised that long blunt weapon like a ladder and its far end just about reached the ceiling.

The bastard roared with his claws digging into the table.

“And the answer is yes!! Nothing you do changes that winning is my only option here!!”

It was a bulky weapon to swing, but once it picked up speed, it would be even more powerful than a metal bat. That was obvious given its weight

combined with the centrifugal force.

Kamijou needed something to block it.

His bare hands were nowhere near enough. He grabbed one of the large stainless steel plates from the floor, but he also misread his enemy's intent.

The calico cat ran away with a distorted meow.

That long table was not being used as a weapon to swing down at him.

Its target was at the ceiling.

It struck the giant crystal chandelier up there, making it sway above Kamijou's head.

With a shattering sound, the giant hook was torn through and a solid mass weighing more than two hundred kilograms rained mercilessly down toward him.

## Part 9

“Translate, simplify, and create anew.”

The carpet of Windsor Castle's hallway was torn up, the windows shattered, and not even the paintings and ceramic vases were spared the damage.

Two people fought a fierce battle in the center of it all.

One was Kanzaki Kaori, an Asian Saint with a long black ponytail.

The other was Dion Fortune of the Golden cabal whose silhouette was inflated by her white dress.

“Archetype Processor!!”

Just as seven wires flashed and tore through the air, Fortune held out her palm. Technically, she was holding out a floating black box. The box opened its maw, tore through the wires, took them inside, and remade them into a completely different shape.

Nanasen was partially a ceremony meant to use blades to cut away a space as holy ground to form a sort of rejecting wall or a defensive magic circle.

By adding a physical attack to that rejection and replacing the blade with wires, she could mix in the drawing of her blade to release slashes at unexpected timings. She created a cutting edge that made the entire space her ally.

But now it was distorted.

From English to Japanese and back again.

In a process similar to retranslating a text over and over and over again, the meaning and symbols in a piece of magic were forcibly remade into something else entirely.

That was Dion Fortune.

This was the unconscious rearrangement technique used by someone whose grimoires had been so unique that even the rest of the Golden cabal had suspected they were an original creation with no connection to the main Golden line.

As a result, many broken wax dolls of varying sizes were expelled from the black box with a sticky sound. Not only were they not wires, they were not even metal. Conservation of mass was of course entirely ignored. Only the traits of spilling blood and rejection were retained as it was remade into something entirely different.

Countless needles emerged from empty space and pierced the dolls.

By that point, the wax dolls and Kanzaki Kaori were already linked.

The damage to those dolls, who already had their arms, legs, and head separated from their torso, should have rushed in toward the ponytailed swordswoman, but she did not bat an eye.

“Nanasen.”

There was light.

The curse that should have attacked her was instead tangled within invisible threads and scattered elsewhere.

This was a magic circle made from seven wires.

And it was freely controlled by a Saint.

Dion Fortune clicked her tongue and fell back with her black box.

“I guess you’ve figured it out, huh?”

“You are an original grimoire. I cannot kill you by normal means, but since you lack your own lifeforce, you cannot refine magic power. That means you must be drawing power from the ley lines to use anything resembling magic.”

“I’m pretty sure even a Saint will have a hard time entirely changing that current.”

“Yes, but your supply of power from the earth is not always coming from the same point. Just as gas and water have different sources in different parts of a city, your supply point should change depending on your location and circumstances. If I strike in the instant you switch between sources and your power supply wavers... you may be unable to maintain that form and return to being a deck of cards. A barrier created from a Saint’s body and seven wires should be enough for that.”

(You make it sound so easy,) complained Fortune in her heart.

She had almost immediately found an answer to defeating those seemingly unbeatable Golden magicians.

However.

“I... must protect them.”

Her voice was low, as if she felt cornered.

But this anger fell on the good side of the duality.

“It might be a minuscule thing compared to the UK as a whole and it might not be a large organization with the power to alter the history of the world... but still. To me, the people of the Amakusa Church are worth risking my life to protect.”

“Oh?”

Dion Fortune kept her voice flat as she asked a question.

Perhaps this was her voice as a professional fortuneteller.

“Even if it means killing an innocent boy?”

“...”

“Besides, if you were really trying to kill him, you would’ve sliced through him with your seven or your one before I arrived. Whatever you might say, you’re clearly hesitating. There’s no way you can kill that boy or the other one at the center of the castle like this.”

There was no response.

Not that Fortune was expecting one as she spun the black box atop her index finger.

“I don’t think this is about you being indecisive. You were faced with the ultimate question of having to kill one or the other. But the situation is progressing as we speak. The boy receiving my godlike help seemed to want to save someone. So if that puny Asian is defeated before managing it, what do you think will happen to the girls trapped in this castle?”

She heard someone grinding their back teeth together.

Yes, Kanzaki Kaori appeared righteous at first glance, but she was contradicting herself.

The British forces may have been affected by the war madness before, but Kanzaki had clearly come back to her senses since then.

Dion Fortune narrowed her eyes.

This did not appear to be anything as simple as turning her sword on herself once it was all over. Dion rubbed a slender finger of her empty hand against her temple.

“Are you intentionally pushing your body too far?”

“Why should I answer you?”

There was a painful tone reminiscent of oozing blood in Kanzaki’s voice.

The white dress girl sighed.

“Inertia. Saints can instantaneously break the sound barrier while moving around the battlefield. But there’s still a burden on your body. If you do not follow the rails of the optimal movements, you will destroy your own blood vessels and joints in no time. It’ll be like having your entire body slowly crushed by a suspended ceiling or a press. It looks to me like you’re trying to punish yourself. But if you’re afraid of killing, you could always just set down your sword.”

Even after all this, Kanzaki Kaori still could not kill that boy.

When he had reached the same speed and experienced the flow of time the same as her, she must have bit her lip. She must have been horrified at what a dangerous a thing he was doing. If she had simply swept his feet out from under him to trip him, he would have died so easily, but she could not bring herself to deliver a finishing blow to the boy who had wandered into an unfamiliar world.

“Now I definitely can’t afford to lose this. That kid doesn’t look like he could handle a tragedy.”

“...?”

The Saint had said she would thoroughly disturb this location to rob the grimoire of its power.

She would use her supersonic speed to target the very instant of instability when Fortune switched power sources.

Perhaps it was her ability to actually do something like that made her one of the miracle workers known as Saints.

“A Saint, huh? You really just use brute force, don’t you? Simply relying on your talent doesn’t show any of the intelligence Great Teacher Fortune likes to see.”

“A Golden magician and original grimoire has no right to criticize anyone for being abnormal.”

“*You’re a lot like an esper.*”

Dion Fortune casually dropped a bombshell.

“You aren’t actually one, though. Your skeleton and organ placement are similar to the Son of God’s, so you can draw on a special power. But if you performed some *selective breeding* to reach that point, you would end up relying on scientific concepts like genetics and DNA. Just like the twin synchronicity where twin siblings with identical internal clocks have similar ideas, you may have gained *a world only you can see or reality only you can understand* by relying on the lord’s biorhythm instead of through knowledge or technique. It all comes from the distortions to your mind and perception... It really pisses me off as someone who tried to create a work kit anyone could use.”

“So what? You still can’t do anything about me.”

“Oh, oh? All this fighting wasn’t enough for you to figure it out? My magic

can remake any spell or spiritual item into a form no one could ever imagine. It's like a *cloud*—something that obscures the truth... So even if it only looks like ordinary magic to you, don't you think I could *mistranslate* it into some irregular science?"

"..."

There was a straining sound.

Did it come from the wires surrounding Dion Fortune, or was it the grinding of Kanzaki's teeth?

"And while you might be an irritating Saint who reigns supreme in the field of magic based on inborn talent alone, who can say how you will be shaken if I hit you with the top of the neighboring hierarchy of science. I mean, how long has it been since the concept of the science side came to be? You might be the elite of the elite, but you never did manage to eradicate the concept of science, did you? You can no longer assume you're safe *just cause you're a Saint*. The predetermined top ranks don't necessarily get presented with victory. Surely you've seen some more liberated battles where anyone can break through and strive for victory!"

Dion Fortune was different on a fundamental level.

She did not see a taboo in crossing the line between science and magic.

Kanzaki wrinkled her brow in pain.

"Do you feel no fear?"

"Don't throw me into the same category as you based on your own biases. I am Golden Magician Dion Fortune, the teacher of love and beauty and the pen pal of everyone in need of some advice. I am one of those who went to great lengths to replace all that intentionally confusing magic with a work kit anyone could understand. When you leave those ancient texts in their original forms, you're not even talking about magic anymore. My love-filled grimoires used modern English, not Latin or Hebrew, and I used letters and correspondence education to pass my magic knowledge onto my students..."

Do not let it trap you, young one. People were always meant to use everything out there. The general divisions of magic and science are unnecessary lines that get in the way of claiming all the knowledge we desire.”

Would Kanzaki Kaori forcefully slice through the grimoire?

Or would Dion Fortune rearrange even her opponent’s traits as a Saint?

There was no signal.

Shichiten Shichitou and the black box. With their surefire weapons in hand, the two magicians clashed once more.

“...”

“...”

For a while, they said nothing.

The black box floating in front of Fortune’s palm had opened its lid like a great maw, but Kanzaki’s movements as a Saint had been superior. The box had failed to capture and devour Shichiten Shichitou.

If she could not stop the priestess’s movements, she could not stop the seven wires either.

That was a defensive magic circle with a cutting edge.

Like with gas and water, the point at which she received her power supply from the earth changed depending on her location and situation. If she was attacked during that brief change, she would lose her current form and break apart into a deck of seventy-eight cards.

However...

“I captured it. Maybe I’m just too brilliant for this world.”

“...”

The one who ended up smiling was the redhead with her skinny silhouette forcibly expanded by her white dress.

“Your fear of having your traits as a Saint devoured restricted your actions. Yet if you really, truly hated those traits, you might have rejoiced at this chance to lose them and be freed. In the end, that’s the way it is with gifts. No matter how much of a complex you have and how much you hate yourself, you can’t agree to throw them out so readily. Just like I spent so long clinging to the grand title of the world’s largest magic cabal. This isn’t some particular flaw in you; all humans are this way.”

It was true she had failed to reach Shichiten Shichitou.

But she had never intended to.

For one thing, Kanzaki had yet to draw that blade. Dion Fortune’s black box had chomped down on and bitten through one of the seven wires set up around her. If she had honestly thought the sword was coming, she would have missed her timing and been cut through in that fatal instant.

She had used the *cloud* to her advantage.

Her interpretations were so unique that some said they were wholly original and not even a part of the Golden, and she now used the black box she had completed without even meaning to.

And.

What happened when the preparations ended in failure?

It happened at close range. Dion Fortune spun around quickly enough for her dress’s skirt to flip up and dodged the dreadful sword strike that Kanzaki Kaori finally unsheathed at her hip. They moved at such close range that it resembled moving in and out of a revolving door while back to back. When drawing a sword, the moment after drawing it was the riskiest. The wires of Nanasen were a card she had placed in her deck to shift that timing in the first place.

And before Kanzaki Kaori could return the long blade to its sheath, a dull sound erupted from her temple.

It was the black box.

Dion had slammed its pointy corner into her.

“Saints have similar traits to the Son of God, right?”

Kanzaki Kaori wobbled to the side, could not regain her balance, and collapsed.

“So no matter how many miracles you can use, you can still be surrounded and captured, you can still be betrayed by a friend, and you can still be killed by human hands. You inherit all the fragile aspects along with the powerful ones. All it took was a mere thirty pieces of silver. Surely you understand that.”

There was no response.

Kanzaki Kaori lay limply on her side, but it sort of looked like there was a smile on her lips.

As if to say she preferred to be killed than to do the killing.

Fortune sighed and brushed up her red bangs in exasperation at how far that Saint took it.

“Similar traits, huh?”

(Maybe that's why she's so easy to lie to. Saints are a lot like espers? *Yeah, right.*)

That was another *cloud*.

But yet again, it was all in how you used it. The magicians of the ancient Rosicrucian Order had not lamented over the prejudices that befell them. Instead, they used them to preserve the secrecy of their cabal.

“Intentionally tearing apart your own body through the power of inertia, huh? I wonder if my healing magic is good enough. Then again, a Saint’s own blood probably has a healing effect.”

And she would not let it end here.

Dion Fortune crouched down and peered at the collapsed Kanzaki’s face.

“Well, I am a magician of the Golden cabal. Overcoming this kind of threat will only serve to earn me even more respect!”

## Part 10

His consciousness flashed in and out.

His vision was collapsed on its side and his entire body felt hot. But when Kamijou Touma focused carefully on the sensation in his skin, he could tell the heat came from a few different throbbing wounds.

He must have avoided being crushed by the chandelier itself.

But when rolling out of the way, the shards of crystal crashing against the floor had mercilessly stabbed into him with the force of a horizontal downpour. Every part of his skin and clothes was soaked with blood. Without the winged lizard formed by the sky-blue and lemon-yellow shell, he was only a boy.

He of course lacked that convenient flesh armor after it was blown away by Imagine Breaker and he could only defend against so much with just the sky-blue and lemon-yellow arm to work with.

But the pointy-haired boy realized luck was on his side today. Even in the worst situation, he could still find a silver lining. The boiling rage in his mind

left him unable to feel the pain properly.

So he could stand up.

He could fight.

And it was all for those captured girls.

“What, it’s not over yet?”

He heard the heavy table fall to the floor.

The shocking-pink and emerald monster was a winged lizard with crocodilian jaws and giant bat-like wings. He must not have escaped unscathed either. That storm of shards had scattered in all directions equally, so he had been hit as much as Kamijou.

But he must not have cared.

That was why the villain had not hesitated to bring down the chandelier.

Shocking-pink light scattered from that other monster’s entire body as he opened his jaws wide to roar.

“Just end it already!! If you die, it all ends!! Or is this the misfortune that’s decided to plague me!?”

“What even are you?”

Kamijou Touma had a reason for sticking with this to the point that his clothes were plastered to him with blood.

He had to save the girls being forced to fight to the death and clear the way for someone on the verge of death to reach an ambulance. He had to do it as soon as possible, so he burned the pain and fear from his mind to stand against this foe.

Someone else’s life was on the line here, so he could not afford to lose.

But what was this thing?

What drove him as he slowly approached?

“What do you hope to accomplish by making so many people suffer!?”

“Because I can save them like this.”

His words sounded like a curse.

Kamijou Touma worked his mind in overdrive to search out any weakness and opening in even the slightest comment, but...

“If the fighting ends right this instant, I can save Shokuhou, can’t I!?”

“Wha—?”

Not even Kamijou could respond to that one.

But he had heard correctly. That malicious monster was definitely saying this as he opened his great jaws wide.

“Same with Index!! John’s Pen should have been controllable using Mental Out. And Misaka! If she hadn’t messed with the A.A.A., she never would have been in any danger!! ...where did it all go wrong? If no one had questioned me and they had simply obeyed, this could have ended without issue!!!!”

The foundation of it all was overturned.

Or so it seemed to Kamijou Touma.

“Besides, you should have been able to try a little harder. You didn’t need to give up on those lives if you had used your right hand properly!! What about the Golden magicians? Or Aleister and Coronzon!? Can you really say that conclusion was the best possible one!? Well, can you!?”

Even if the unexpected had happened, he could not back out now. He could not admit it had been a failure.

“Wasn’t that who Kamijou Touma was supposed to be?”

So he played the villain.

He claimed he had always intended to do it while desperately trying to fix things.

All while trusting that he would come up with some way of fixing this if he bought himself enough time.

“When you had nowhere to escape to, you didn’t hesitate to rely on Komoe-sensei. When you couldn’t win with your arm, you held back the magicians with pleas to their emotions. You didn’t care about the suffering girl’s time limit; you were just afraid of losing everything yourself. It’s pathetic, but wasn’t that a part of who Kamijou Touma was!?”

Kamijou had lost his memories and could not recall when he first met the electric middle school girl or initially encountered the grimoire library, so how had that boy behaved at those times?

Did the person observe the ability, or did the ability observe the person?

He felt like everything was flipped around before his eyes.

(You too?)

His mind went blank.

Kamijou had previously seen an ability that gained an autonomous mind of its own and left the person’s control: Academy City’s #2, Dark Matter. But once it happened to him, the pressure on his heart was unimaginable.

(You wanted to save them too???)

Humans could observe their environment to intentionally alter probability, produce various abilities, and control things. That had grown to the point of the Personal Realities that actually altered the world they could observe. That was the basic logic behind the scientific espers of Academy City.

However.

What if the abilities were watching the humans as well? If they had the observer's ability to alter probability, then could that unknown power control not just Kamijou himself, but the interior and exterior of every thinking being of the human race?

For example, even a being like Magic God Othinus could be remade like a puzzle.

Was it the High Priest who had said Magic Gods were the world's crucial gears and Kamijou was their scorer? And if necessary, he could adjust how the gears fit together?

A dragon, a guardian of treasures.

A being who crossed the duality of good and evil.

In other words...

(The One who Purifies God and Slays Demons?)

A medicine to heal the world.

Something used to kindly purify or coldly slay the bad parts of the world.

The panacea theory.

...That should have been a useless fantasy since Othinus herself had rejected it immediately after proposing it, but something about it stuck with him. He could not forget it as readily as what he had for dinner three days before. He felt like it contained something he had to remember no matter what.

Terra of the Left, an expert in the execution of the Son of God, had acted like he understood what Imagine Breaker really was.

...If that right hand's power was related to that, had that man been looking to the power to gently heal, or the power to coldly destroy?

Shocking-pink and emerald.

That monster really was the opposite of Kamijou Touma.

While Kamijou had been remade into a sky-blue and lemon-yellow winged lizard when it surrounded him from the outside, the monster hid his shocking-pink and emerald form beneath the skin of a boy.

That summed it up quite well.

Was it a boy controlling an ability, or was it an ability defining itself as a boy?

In his own way, he had tried to carry everything on his own shoulders.

But it had all fallen apart before his eyes.

Had he played the villain and pretended to be so coldhearted because he had not known how to accept that? Just like Aleister had pretended to see everything coming?

“You didn’t think that ability was nothing more than a colorful shell to cover your body, did you?”

“...”

“I’m here because you wished for me, Kamijou Touma. That’s why I have this form. You made the wish, didn’t you? You knew it was an absurd idea, but during that war you wished *you could have used Imagine Breaker more effectively. You wondered if the real way to use it was hidden in your lost memories.* If it wasn’t for your regrets, I never would have had to think about something as silly as using your lost memories to play the role of Kamijou Touma and using Imagine Breaker more cleverly than you!!!!!!”

“You never would have... had to think?”

“I’m nothing more than an ability: something that distorts quantum physics. I was supposed to have nothing of my own. My sense of self, my personality to overcome any adversity, and my memories that you lack? It all

only exists because you wished it to.”

Then... what even was this?

This conflicted with everything Magic God Othinus and Human Aleister had explained to him.

Had they misread something about the Imagine Breaker in his right hand?

No.

If not...

“You...”

Fiamma of the Right had thought of everything in terms of Christianity, so he had been ineffective against Aleister who viewed all of magic and all of science.

When Kamijou had failed to accept the selfish wishes of the combat-obsessed Magic Gods like High Priest and Nephthys, a portion of its power had leaked out and gained an entirely different nature as Kamisato Kakeru’s World Rejecter.

Then what about with Aleister’s logic?

A dragon.

The ruler of the depths and a guardian of treasure.

What had been the ideal for that human who disliked simple moralization and did not let that limit his options?

What had Nephthys and Niang-Naing wanted from Kamijou Touma?

They had said his right hand was something extra and that the One who Purifies God and Slays Demons referred to the boy himself and not his right hand.

He thought of all those ideas that appeared to be false based on what was happening here. The Academy City Board Chairman had sacrificed so much to bring his grand plan to fruition. He had used everything in order to raise something, but...

“It *wasn’t* Imagine Breaker?”

“You really thought this could be explained with something so cheap, you scum?”

## Part 11

More and more explosive noises rang out.

Accelerator and Elizard’s battle was no longer limited to the ground. They kicked off the castle’s stone walls, jumped up to the flat roof, and continued their persistent clash.

Who was more frightening here? Elizard for continually parrying Accelerator’s attacks that came with his reflection that could kill at a touch, or Accelerator for facing Curtana Second’s omnidimensional slicing without even taking a scratch?

The girl in a newspaper dress spoke while wrapping her arms around the white monster’s neck.

“Accessing Clonoth. Calculation substitution has begun.”

Yes.

Even using strange magic could no longer harm the #1 with an unnaturally distorted reflection.

And his interceptions did not just take the form of physical pebbles and metal nails.

“Don’t assume you alone can use magic. He’s already analyzed that world!!”

Even the course of the physical sword itself was twisted at the moment of impact.

However...

“It would seem you cannot prevent the actual omnidimensional slicing.”

“Tch.”

The child clicked his tongue at the adult’s comment.

“Curtana Second will take priority over all else and cut through all dimensions as long as it is in this country. I don’t fully understand that reflection of yours, but *if I slice through the very coordinates at which the barrier exists*, the damage gets through. Isn’t that right?” Elizard flipped the flat-tipped sword around to change her stance. “Knowing you are not untouchable is enough for me... Now it comes down to whether or not I can focus on finding an opportunity.”

With the sound of something slicing through the air, Elizard disappeared.

Accelerator did not even turn his head.

He took a casual step back just before the giant guillotine of omnidimensional slicing swung down at him from the side. It grazed the tip of his nose, but he was not the type to let anything show on his face.

“I doubt you’re just swinging that thing around at random.”

“You were a little slow to move there.” Perhaps as a sign of respect for his observation, the queen regnant spoke up with Curtana Second at the ready. “Nothing I do can arrive in time in the areas you have already calculated out, but you are only acquiring information through your ordinary eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin. That means the direction you face is a crucial factor.

The difference might be small, but if I keep it up, it will grow to an expanse too wide to ignore.”

“Oh, is that so?”

This might have been a deadly situation for him not long ago.

No matter how powerful it was, Accelerator only had the one ability to use, so having its idiosyncrasies and blind spots revealed was a major risk.

However.

He pulled a phone from his pants pocket and casually operated it with a thumb.

A moment later, an electron beam resembling lightning shot down toward Queen Regnant Elizard’s head.

Of course.

This was not enough to kill Elizard.

“Ohhh!?”

She roared and swung Curtana Second overhead. She released the omnidimensional slicing in the shape of a crescent moon to slice apart the electron attack that could easily bisect an underground nuclear shelter.

The beam of bluish-white light scattered like spray.

“Don’t let this surprise you,” said Accelerator. “If I’m doing this, I’m using everything I’ve got. If you’re gonna harness the power of the UK as a whole to win this, then I’ll harness the power of Academy City… no, of the science side as a whole. All for this one victory!!”

“Damn…you!!”

But it did not end there.

The massive electron beam was only a smokescreen. In truth, there had been a cylindrical hole down the middle like it was a giant piece of macaroni. And that meant there was room to send something down that empty space.

The item had already been launched from the space station to the surface.

“Didn’t I tell you? This is a clash between the #1s who stand at the top. You can stand up to my esper power? So what? That’s just one genre of power held by the science side!!”

“You yourself are just one piece? Even though you are strong enough to deflect Curtana Second!?”

“Again, this is a battle between those at the top. Your sword carries the weight of the entire UK on its back, but you want me to fight without getting any help whatsoever? Does winning a war rot the brain? Don’t just expect everything to work out for you!!”

“Kh.”

“You want to protect your nation? So you’ll do whatever it takes? Do you really think your people will cry tears of joy to learn they’re being used as an excuse for your own cowardice? If you don’t have what it takes to carry the responsibility on your own shoulders, then don’t even start down the path of evil!!”

He showed it off.

He could have operated the phone while hiding it behind his body or below his clothing, but the monster calling himself the top of Academy City let her see the phone that acted as the key.

“I *will* return to Academy City no matter what.”

He might be the pinnacle of evil, but he was up front about it and avoided all that cowardice.

“And I’ll change the entire system of the science side. I’ll create a world where that shit can never happen again. We carry equal weights on our

shoulders, so I'm not holding back, Queen. I'll use everything I've got to beat you down. After all, it's one-on-one: me versus you."

"..."

"Don't assume that was just a bunch of light. I said I'll use everything and I mean it. By destroying *the tunnel*, you scattered it everywhere... I believe in Academy City it was called Mimosa."

They were surrounded by a sound much like the rustling of leaves. But they were on the stone roof of Windsor Castle. Unlike in the artificial woods, there were no leaves to rustle here.

These were microscopic specks of metal.

Those micro-weapons would respond to EM waves by opening and closing their tiny arms and tearing away a human's cells one at a time.

"Tch!!"

Did Elizard realize what it was?

Or had she decided to cut through space with Curtana's omnidimensional slicing to block up the area between them with ruined material no matter what was approaching?

"You want to change the world by wielding some great power?" roared Elizard. "Don't make me laugh, monster! It is the power of the people that changes the world!! We can only ever show them the way! Did you really think the power of an individual could change history!?"

The queen regnant once more swung Curtana Second in both hands.

"I refuse to make a gamble like trying to change the world on my own. I will not attempt any fights I do not know I can win. Because when I make a gamble, it is my beloved people's lives I must use as chips!!"

She did not think she could destroy all of the micro-weapons like that, but if she destroyed the nearby antenna towers, her opponent would likely lose

control of his orbital and microscopic weapons.

It had been like fluff scattered in the air.

And it was not over yet. With control of the Mimosa gone, the prison of fluff was destroyed. And the true threat appeared from within.

It took the form of lovely flowers.

However, these were predatory plants with sharp scythes and sturdy mandibles made of flowers and other plants.

They looked a lot like orchid mantises.

But instead of being camouflaged, these insects really were made from plant material.

“!?”

“Flower Resistance. Cloning and genetic manipulation isn’t exclusive to animals. In fact, with selective breeding, it’s a lot more common with plants... It honestly sickens me to see it, but this kind of shit is free to roam the city if I don’t get back there. And then there’s no changing the world.”

The swarm of mantises would devour human flesh and yet were as beautiful as jewels. They rushed toward Elizard with the force of a sandstorm. These plants moved faster than animals, moved more powerfully than animals, and would feast upon animals. That was the extent of the abnormality made a reality here.

“Don’t worry. They won’t ruin your country’s ecosystem. They’ll apparently somewhat do what you tell them with a remote because they’re susceptible to EM waves.”

The wielder of Curtana Second actually had a wild smile on her lips.

Perhaps it was her ability to smile at a time like this that made her so charismatic.

“This is a lot simpler when I can see what I’m up against!!”

However.

The other voice softly slipped into her ears.

“Oh? It’s simpler is it? Then why are you looking that way?”

“!?”

“Didn’t I tell you? My power as Accelerator is just one science side technology. So don’t expect to see what’s really going on just by looking to the surface. I carry the weight of the entire science side. That’s fifty percent of the planet.”

He was Academy City’s #1.

But was he also... more than that?

“I am *Academy City Board Chairman Accelerator.*”

He made an announcement.

And the monster charged straight toward her.

He moved right up to that frontline fighter to reach her as fast as possible no matter what the risk.

He had such great speed that the sound exploded out only after a short delay.

This was not about logic.

It was okay to start here.

He could work to become somebody who someone might actually look up to.

Which was why this had to be the final trump card he played: #1 Accelerator. Not the orbital weapon, not the Mimosa, and not the carnivorous plants. Even with all those next-generation weapons flying around, he would not hesitate

to deliver the finishing blow if he carried the most appropriate destructive force.

Because.

Because that was his image of the person who had awoken a certain monster. That was the person whose back he had chased after while still walking down a different path!!

“If you’re gonna lay a hand on *my students* for your own selfish reasons, then don’t think you’re escaping this unscathed!!!”

He charged in from dead ahead using no tricks whatsoever and swung his right first toward Queen Regnant Elizard.

There was no loud impact.

That would be because he had complete control over the vectors.

The entire impact of the attack was directed inside Elizard’s body, so it was actually a quiet ending.

His punch was a different beast from the pointy-haired boy’s.

Instead of knocking them backwards, they simply collapsed on the spot.

“Hmph.”

“Ohh? You aren’t going to finish her off, master?”

“Don’t be dumb. Kill her and I’ll turn into the kinda person who kills anyone and everyone.”

Accelerator reached to the side of his neck in obvious exasperation.

He flipped his choker’s switch.

“I’m Academy City’s board chairman, so my actions will color the city’s overall image. In that sense, this is *my first job and my diplomatic debut*. The

Crowley's Hazards, were they called? If the UK endlessly demands compensation for the damage they caused, Academy City has no future. I need to punish both sides to cancel out any debts. That's a lot better than allowing some long, drawn-out conflict."

"Sigh, you are so very mature today, master."

"..."

"Um, master?"

For a while, the board chairman simply stared up at the moon while leaning on his modern design cane.

Meanwhile, a nearby skylight opened upwards.

A small animal of a princess with her long blonde hair worn up climbed out like it was a submarine hatch.

She wore a yellow helmet with "Safety First" written on it in Japanese, so it may have been an Academy City product. It appeared to be too big for her because it had slid over at an angle.

"I-I am Third Princess Villian! I am here to take the rioters into custody. Th-there were no injuries, I hope?"

"Injuries for who? If you mean your mother, she's fine." Accelerator jerked his chin over toward collapsed Elizard. "Everyone else is too worked up to deal with, so can I use you as a contact point for discussing how we continue from here?"

"I-if you like."

"Don't play dumb. Elizard's tactics weren't wrong. I can't access my weapons with my phone with all the antenna towers in the area destroyed. It was your protegee who set up a wireless connection for me, wasn't it?"

Something was floating in front of the moon.

It was Karasuma Fran, the rabbit-ear antennae girl dangling from a UFO balloon.

“With that playing a role, it’ll be hard to say this was a win for Academy City technology *alone*. To put it another way, you just barely managed to let the UK save face here. You act all innocent, but you’re one crafty princess.”

Accelerator had not seen the entirety of the conclusion, but if Great Demon Coronzon had been behind everything, then the hoodie bikini and rabbit-ear antennae girl would be in an awkward position. Back in Academy City, he had also seen her being controlled by a gem in her forehead.

She would need an organization backing her if she was to avoid living a life on the run.

If she had contacted the white monster beforehand, she could have been considered a part of the science side and it would have been entirely Academy City’s power that ended this. But this way, she proved that there were reasonable people left in the UK and that victory could not have been achieved without their help.

(So violence isn’t the only way to work your way into a nation or organization. I don’t want this to be a waste of time, so I’ll learn what I can from it.)

Accelerator exhaled and tapped the roof below his feet using his modern design cane.

He was Academy City’s #1 and board chairman.

But this was all that strongest white monster could do.

“The rest is up to him.”

## Part 12

Kamijou Touma received an immediate response from the monster confronting him.

He was a dragon.

A guardian of treasure. An odd symbol that represented the devil but was also used for houses and organizations.

This was something else that had been restrained by Imagine Breaker.

Of course, it was perhaps not the best idea to simply accept everything he was told by the person he was currently fighting. He knew he had to weigh these things carefully.

Fortune had said she could only talk about it from the magical side.

Othinus had crossed between magic and science, but even she had confessed she was stuck at the panacea theory.

Then.

*Which side* was he seeing Kamijou Touma's power from here?

"I am here because you wished for it."

The monster repeated the words at the source of the curse.

"If you hadn't interfered and hadn't gotten in my way, that happiness would have remained intact. If you had let me take your place for this one day and then let me leave, no one would have gotten hurt. Even if I'm just pink and emerald encased in human skin, I could have had that brief time. That wasn't your time to show up!! That really and truly was nothing more than your own damn ego!!!"

Kamijou Touma had no way of knowing because he did not remember any of it, but when that honey-blonde girl had seen him remembering her and her name, she had prayed so desperately for that miracle to continue.

That was enough of a reason to fight.

“So I will protect this.”

He no longer seemed to care how contradictory this was.

Not even pointy-haired Kamijou Touma had not come this far while making sure every little thing he did was right.

No one was talking about things on that level.

“Since I’m here because of your wish, I will fulfill that wish. Everything leading up to this point was just a bad dream and only happiness lies ahead of us. It might take reversing our positions, but I have to protect this!! I have to gather up everything you let slip from your fingers!!”

“...Is that so?”

After that, Kamijou slowly inhaled while ignoring the crystal shards piercing his soft skin.

The sound of the shards crunching together came from the floor.

“I don’t care what anyone says or how emotionally you describe your position here. If you hadn’t done this, none of this would have happened. Maybe I played a role, but it started with you. You don’t get to run the credits and tie it all up in a nice pretty bow. I can sense your fear in the fact that you’re trying to swap out the problem at hand and get yourself alone to safety!!”

They could point out each other’s flaws all day.

Because in a way, they had been viewing each other more closely than anyone else.

However.

They had long since passed the point for making arguments to get their point across.

They had tried to save the people closest to them in their own ways, but their

paths had never crossed.

They were both bizarre and psychedelic.

And they both clenched their bloody fists.

Past and present, illusion and reality, heartless and passionate, usurper and reclaimer, ruin and conclusion. Salvation and rescue.

Good and evil.



Even with that reference point for the world before their eyes, all the values of the world revolved around them like planets in their orbits.

Was the human viewing the ability, or vice-versa?

It all seemed to reverse itself.

Their gazes collided and they both shouted the final line together.

In order to reach a definite conclusion.

“I can never let you get away with this!!!!”

“I can never let you get away with this!!!!”

Another deafening roar followed.

The calico cat fled along the floor in shock.

Kamijou Touma ran forward while his sky-blue right arm unraveled and surrounded his entire body. If their basic specs were the same, that other boy could not block the sky-blue and lemon-yellow winged lizard's claws with his bare hand. Trying would only get his entire arm severed, so he had been forced to rely on Imagine Breaker.

Instead of going for a solid blow, the shocking-pink light surged out in order to simply make contact and negate the sky-blue and lemon-yellow. The right hand made a sweeping motion instead of a punch and Kamijou Touma's shell unraveled.

But that was fine.

What had that other boy said?

Index had ended up that way because Mental Out had failed to fully control John's Pen. But what about Misaka Mikoto? Hadn't he said he would not have lost control if she had not messed with the A.A.A.?

In other words...

(Only Index has lost control. The mechanical weapon is simply immune to Mental Out and Misaka herself is not attacking everyone on his command!!)

“A.A.A.!! Help me out if you want to protect Misaka!!”

The villain’s shoulders shook when he heard that.

The pointy-haired boy heard an odd noise and looked up, hoping it would be something he could use, but he was almost impressed by what he saw. Instead of just the claws on his arms, the other boy had claws piercing from the bottom of his feet like brutal cleats and he used that to secure a more powerful grip he could use to escape to either side more quickly.

He might seem like Kamijou, but he really was different.

The one boy was swallowed up by the sky-blue and the other let the shocking-pink tear apart his skin to erupt out.

“You...”

But.

Even so.

“You son of a bitch!”

He swung his thick tail around and roared.

The A.A.A. naturally did not respond to the command of someone other than Misaka Mikoto.

But that was fine.

He did not need any help.

He had only needed his opponent to seal off his own possibilities out of fear of the possibility.

*Kamijou Touma would not expect good fortune.*

He had come all this way to reclaim himself and free those who were trapped here.

The shocking-pink and emerald lizard had large crocodilian jaws, thin wings, and a thick tail, but this was not Kamijou Touma's first time seeing any of it. He had worn the same thing and used it as his own weapon.

He knew how it worked.

And he knew its weaknesses and flaws.

Of course he did!!

“Ohhh!!”

With a roar, the ordinary boy mercilessly threw a punch with a right fist covered in sky-blue fibers.

He sent it toward those crocodilian jaws that were too big to miss.

The jaws of course chomped down on his arm.

Unbelievable pain burst in his head like sparks.

But that bizarre right arm had never been simple flesh and blood.

And had anyone really thought he would not put together some kind of plan from the moment the chandelier fell to when he got up and clenched his bloody fist here?

Dark red blood did not just spill from Kamijou Touma's bitten-off arm.

“Gah!?”

It spilled from those jaws as well.

Blood other than Kamijou's poured endlessly from between those brutal teeth.

Kamijou staggered woozily backwards with a cold sweat soaking him, but he had a thin smile on his lips.

“How’s it taste, monster?”

He could not use Imagine Breaker.

But he still had to win at all costs.

He had to free those girls no matter what kind of cheap and underhanded methods it required.

So.

“How’s a fist full of crystal shards taste? *Pant, pant. It’s too late to spit it out now. Your throat and stomach must’ve been shredded!*”

He had used his right hand.

He had used that fist to destroy the supernatural.

“Agh, you, khah...”

Pointy-haired Kamijou Touma held something in his remaining left hand. It had likely been here as a tool for cooking. The large carving knife would have been used for making thin slices of roast beef or something. And instead of the ornamental ones a delinquent might carry around, this was a well-honed blade used by professionals.

This was his left hand, the opposite of the one he had relied on all this time.

But destroying the supernatural power was not enough to end this.

He needed to take it a step further.

This time, he had to destroy the physical body as well.

Othinus had said his strength was not in the amount of direct violence but in his ability to reach out to people without giving up on them.

But just this once, he had to settle things once and for all.

“I see. So that’s why it chose you... *why it flew in from outsi-*”

The bizarre monster had already been shredded on the inside and now an attack from outside pierced the center of his chest.

Kamijou did not need to use much strength.

He only had to lean against his foe and collapse against him as he grew weak.

“Heh.”

The monster did not collapse.

Even with the large blade stabbing him in the chest, he spread his wings wide to catch Kamijou like the boy was weakly leaning against a wall.

“This isn’t over.”

“I know...”

“I am here because you wished it. And you just rejected that obvious answer to have it your way. Do not let them die... If you had used this thing right, you might have been able to save the Golden magicians. At the very least, Aleister didn’t need to die and leave his daughter behind. Don’t you dare make a mistake like that again.”

There was a sound like something twisting around.

The other boy came apart into shocking-pink and emerald that swirled around in the air and gathered around Kamijou Touma’s right shoulder.

As if it had recalled that it should always have been there.

His right arm alone was back to normal.

It fit perfectly to where the sky-blue had been and did not allow even a single drop of blood to be lost.

This was different from the psychedelic shell.

This was the boy's flesh-colored arm that carried Imagine Breaker in the fist.

His reclaimed hand held something: the phone that he had lost.

He had never known ordinary plastic could feel so comforting.

“Sigh.”

He exhaled.

The pain had receded and he could feel his normal arm again.

But this was not over.

A low rumble shook Windsor Castle's dance hall.

Killing that other boy had not been his goal.

He had entered the castle to rescue the captured girls.

So.

“This is where the real job begins.”

The Mental Out girl was still unconscious and her commands apparently remained in place until she actively removed them. Index and Misaka Mikoto continued their clash, so he had to get between them and stop it before one or the other won.

Specifically, he had to stop John's Pen and the A.A.A.

Words were not enough to describe them.

It no longer mattered what their original purposes had been. It was irrelevant that those grand plans had failed and the tools were of no use to anyone.

He was short on blood.

His right hand had returned, but he still had crystal shards piercing the rest of his body.

Nevertheless, he moved his woozy body to take the first step toward the blast site.

He quickly picked up speed and reached a full sprint in no time.

He clenched his fist as tight as could be.

Good and evil did not matter.

This was not about the fate of the world or the future of the human race.

This boy could risk his life for much smaller things.

“Ending this won’t prevent tragedy? A normal high school boy can’t change anything? If that’s what you’ve convinced yourself of...”

After all, this was the power that gave concrete form to those thoughts.

“Then I’ll destroy that illusion!!!!!!”

## Part 13

Index was being controlled by her John’s Pen mode and Misaka Mikoto was unconscious inside her A.A.A.

Magic and science.

If they were allowed to continue fighting, they would keep at it until one or the other had stopped moving altogether... in other words, until they were dead. And who could say how far the damage would spread as that chaotic storm of stray shots continued to fly.

There was only so much Kamijou Touma could do.

His right hand was back.

But that meant he could no longer use that sky blue shell that covered his entire body.

And he was fine with that.

He felt a hundred times more comfortable relying on his right hand's power to negate the supernatural than on a mass of violence that could kill his opponent if he did not control it carefully enough.

Someone had appeared based on a wish of his.

They had been given memories and a personality, but were not satisfied with just that. They had also tried to protect someone in this messed-up world. They had stepped aside to give him that seat, so he could not screw this up.

And with that in mind, Kamijou Touma viewed the entire scene and immediately ran in a certain direction.

He had a single target:

*“Index!!!!”*

He ran toward the girl in a storybook princess's dress colored white with reddish-purple lines.

It also had a collar-like bit of decorative lace.

She had never liked fighting. He did not know where she had found it, but it must have been her concern for those around her that led her to search out that first-aid bag that resembled an overnight toothbrush set. And those supplies had made it to Othinus where they were just barely keeping the honey-blonde girl alive.

Of course, part of it was the fact that Kamijou's Imagine Breaker was useless against the A.A.A.'s simple guns and heavy metal blades.

But there was a more fundamental reason than that.

Mikoto in her lingerie dress with the open back was simply along for the ride in the A.A.A. And that machine was responding to and resisting against any danger to its user, so its hardware or software had not broken, sending it out of control.

In other words.

John's Pen had somehow returned after Mina Mathers supposedly destroyed it, but if he could stop Index from attacking, the A.A.A. would also stop. And this was not something he could persuade with an argument.

Something he could not quite remember throbbed in Kamijou Touma's mind.

There was a collar.

It was the source of all tragedy that robbed that girl of her freedom and dignity by controlling her as a tool.

Something in his mind told him this was something he had to destroy no matter what.

“Ohhh!!”

He raised his voice and ran.

He ran toward the nun who swung her body to the side to avoid a head-on attack from the A.A.A. and attempted to make a deadly attack to the side of Academy City's #3 girl who made no attempt to hide her blue lingerie dress or milky-white back.

The gatekeeper of death must have heard his explosive footsteps because she turned her head.

She turned toward him.

“Warning: Chapter 43, Verse 625. Searching memory data. Saved countermeasure found. Beginning counterattack with countermeasure found

in reserve block.”

Light appeared in both her eyes and two magic circles appeared in the air.

A black crack ran vertically down where they intersected and *something* peered out.

That was bad news.

Something told him not to use his right hand here.

*But.*

*That was why he had to do it.*

He did not understand any of this and he was following some memory hidden behind a heavy layer of static, but...

(I have to do it.)

He could feel himself clenching his right fist harder than ever before.

Kamijou Touma did not fight the feeling in his heart.

(This time, I have to challenge this and overcome it!!)

Just as a pure white beam of light was unleashed, Kamijou swung his body to the side with all his might.

But it followed him.

The beam of destruction swung around like a searchlight, destroying the castle wall all the while. It was a horizontal sweeping attack, but...

(If that's all it is, I can dodge it!!)

He only had to bend his hips and duck down while running so it passed by overhead.

He adjusted his course so he ran side to side in an S-pattern.

His target was not Index.

It was the intersecting edges of the two magic circles. It was the unidentified monster peering out from the depths of that black vertical crack.

“I won’t leave anything undone.”

He could not remember it, but this was something that had once led to his defeat.

It was something he had needed to overcome eventually.

“This all ends here!!!!”

He charged forward.

Whatever it was, if Index was relying on it, it had to be magic... and thus a supernatural power. He could destroy it if he made contact. He could take back that gluttonous and selfish girl who still worried about people more than anyone.

He wanted to see her smile again. That was enough for him. Even if it was selfish!!

“Correction: Chapter 91, Verse 55. Overwriting countermeasure found in reserve block based on newly acquired data. Reinforcing countermeasure and resuming attack.”

“!!!???”

The beam was adjusted to be at hip height.

This was the most difficult height to dodge. If he tried to jump over it, it would hit his legs. If he tried to duck below it, his head would be vaporized. But if he used his right hand, he would only begin a hopeless stalemate. Even if he got down on the floor to dodge the first sweep, the beam would only be swung down at him the next time. That would mean checkmate.

He was still one step too far away.

But just then, a dull metallic sound erupted from directly to his side.

It was Misaka Mikoto.

No, it was the A.A.A. protecting her. The many arms moved while spread out like wings as it charged toward Index who was in John's Pen's grasp. It was working to stop her for even a moment to give the boy time.

A faint sweet aroma tickled his nose.

Had it come from the nape of the girl whose short hair was tied back?

“Stop that, Misaka.”

He spoke up without thinking.

He had his right hand back and his misfortune along with it, and yet...

*“I’m not used to good things happening. You’re gonna shake my resolve.”*

Kamijou did not know how the power controlling her mind worked, but he doubted there was much chance of her hearing anything he said now.

However.

On a level beyond logic, the blue lingerie dress girl’s slender shoulders did twitch just a bit. That was definitely the girl herself moving and not the A.A.A. moving her.

And that was enough.

With the help of someone close to him, he made it somewhere he could not have on his own.

Kamijou Touma took one last step.

This time, he made it right up to the robotic nun with her silver hair flowing

behind her.

The time had come for him to clench his right fist with as much strength as he could muster.

“This is over, Index.”

He would actually end it this time.

He would clean everything up.

He would not lose anything more.

Not even his memories. He would not allow there to be a price.

“Don’t worry. We can all smile together and head back to Academy City.”

The sound of the conclusion reverberated through the dance hall.

That was all it took.

The black crack directly opened in space itself was shattered. No, his fist had clearly reached the *thing* lurking within and trying to break out. With the sound of something solid shattering, the magic circles, the crack, and the unseen *thing* were all destroyed in the span of a breath.

None of it remained.



Kamijou gently caught the silver-haired girl who collapsed limply toward him like a marionette with its strings cut.

Something was floating around them.

White, angelic feathers fell like snow.

But.

Even so.

There was only a quiet popping sound.

Just before one of them touched the back of Kamijou Touma's head, he used his right hand to brush aside that final malice without even looking back.

He did exactly what he should have done at some other time in some other place.

“Like I said, it’s over.”

# **Epilogue: Golden and Rosen – Change\_the\_Rail.**

“I can’t believe this. How could we go all the way to Alaska and not see the aurora? I guess we have global warming to thank for this. It’s all that abnormal weather.”

Yoshikawa Kikyou, a (former?) researcher in a white coat, was complaining about something or other.

Last Order, (who looked like) a girl of about ten, was satisfied simply getting to eat plenty of salmon and she was carrying some canned souvenirs with her.

“Going all the way there and not seeing it means we encountered some super-duper rare weather conditions, says Misaka as Misaka discusses probability and statistics.”

“I don’t care that every face of the die has the same probability of happening!! Not when the entire point was to roll a six!!”

They had returned to the city via Tokyo Bay.

To western Tokyo.

To Academy City, the esper powers development institution with 2.3 million residents.

“The lights are already back on, says Misaka as Misaka celebrates!”

“Looks like not all that many thieves climbed over the wall.”

The girl with a mean look to her eyes who had acted as their bodyguard

during the trip had something to say about that.

She was Misaka Worst.

“Well, people outside the city see it as a den of strange drugs, so they probably didn’t have the guts to sneak in after its managers fled like rats from a sinking ship. Knowledge is important and no one wants to go exploring in an abandoned hospital only to get blown up. *And in Academy City’s case, it’s bound to be way worse.*”

Outside of Academy City, they had also heard strange reports of mysterious monsters going on a worldwide rampage. Something must have happened, but they had overcome that trouble and their normal lives were back.

Problems did not just solve themselves.

It might look like some steps had been skipped here, but that was because people had filled in the gaps in secret.

“Ah!!”

Last Order noticed something within the ordinary crowd.

“Welcome back, says Misaka as Misaka makes sure she gets to say it first!!”

The girl with her arms full of souvenirs ran over and the other person seemed to notice her.

While standing there with his modern design cane, he lazily raised a hand and spoke.

“Yeah, I’m back.”

They were not about to wear swimsuits at this point.

In fact, you may all have forgotten, but it was already December!!

And the all-purpose formalwear for middle school students was their ordinary school uniform. That was something you looked back on with envy once you grew up.

Misaka Mikoto had been so very embarrassed wearing a track suit on the plane, so...

(They actually brought these to the airport for us? I guess having the largest clique comes with its perks. Now, I'm not one to talk since I had to borrow a uniform too, but everyone but the leader of the clique really knows what they're doing.)

“Ahhhhh!! Yes... A-Academy City products really are so much better☆”

Shokuhou Misaki raised her arms and stretched her back to see how her hip was doing while sounding a lot like someone soaking in a hot spring. Her chest was large enough already, so bending her back like that made for quite the visual.

She had apparently been unable to wait for the normal hospital and received a replacement medical corset from the District 23 International Airport's medical room, but...

“Is the exhaustion drawing out your true character, Shokuhou? Your transformation into an old lady has no brakes, does it?”

“(Y-you’re the one who shot a hole in my side!)”

“?”

As much as Shokuhou wanted to complain, that had only happened because she had robbed the other girl of her consciousness using Mental Out, so she had no right to do so.

(It’s almost scary that he healed that without even leaving a scar.)

“But if he could heal the wound in my stomach so perfectly, why did he leave my hip untouched? That doctor really should have healed everything while he was at it!!”

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about, but I’ll bet it was divine punishment.”

“Gh!! W-well, it should only take a week to heal at the most. Enjoy your victory while you can, Misaka-saaan. A fall ability is all the more painful the higher you climb, after all. Ho ho ho!!”

“Um, heating your back when you don’t know why it’s hurting can actually make it worse, so be careful about that. On the other hand, maybe that means pressing a halogen heater to your back is the play here.”

“Stop that, Misaka-san! Really, stop it!! I’ll do anything, so at least look up from your phone and take this seriously! I’m not letting you extend this crisis until the new year!!”

They began fighting over one of the heaters used to cover the areas the general air conditioning could not since the international airport was so large, but in a fight not related to people’s minds, Shokuhou Misaki did not stand much of a chance.

Had that honey-blonde girl managed to organize her thoughts?

She may not have.

There was apparently a girl who had announced the end of her love throughout all of Academy City, but not everyone could manage something like that.

And no one could say what the right answer was.

“I’ll cool it! If it will rid me of this irritating pain, I will cool it myself☆ And it’s December, so I won’t even need ice or cooling spray!!”

“Wait, wait, you idiot!! Don’t do that in public!! Stripping now is seriously taking things too far!!”

The sexy girl’s eyes were spinning and she looked like she really would remove her blazer and blouse if someone did not stop her, so blushing

Mikoto quickly grabbed her slender wrists, pushed her to the floor, and took the mount position.

That was when a mysterious clattering sound reached Mikoto's ears.

She looked over from atop the other girl and saw her twintailed underclassman trembling after dropping everything she was carrying.

"I had a feeling my slice of the pie was being stolen by someone, but what have you done to my Onee-sama, you thief?"

"Wait, Kuroko. This is an airport with strict security and you have your position in Judgment to consider, so think carefully about what you do. And I'm as confused as you are that I've somehow ended up in this role!"

"It isn't like we had to return," said Mugino Shizuri.

She and Kinuhata Saiai had left Academy City, but they must not have chosen to blend into the crowds of the wide world out there.

And the reason why was not some emotional story.

"The outside world has its own rules. And the back alley rules out there are mostly made by the adults in the gangs and mafias. To be blunt, figuring all that out and blending in would be super difficult. We figured out it would be a lot easier to stay hidden in Academy City."

"That really is an awful reason for staying," groaned Hamazura soon after returning.

They had struggled to escape Academy City's darkness, but once they got out, this was the result. They could have chosen to go anywhere, from some remote mountains covered in alpine plants to a tropical island with year-round sun, but after being given freedom, they ended up right back here.

And they could no longer make any excuses now that they had returned of their own free will.

They could no longer claim the adults were using them or that the adults were to blame for all their misdeeds.

“Hamazura.”

His girlfriend, Takitsubo Rikou, spoke to him.

Some people had returned here and some had not been able to accompany them.

Dion Fortune and Great Demon Coronzon.

After thinking about those two, Hamazura relaxed his shoulders.

He sighed and smiled.

“Let’s live the life we want to live. In the end, that’s all kids like us can do.”

Mugino then asked him a blunt question.

He sometimes appreciated her dryness at times like this.

“I don’t know what sentimental crap you’re thinking about, but did you actually find something outside the city? Something to keep the stubborn dark side off our backs?”

“Yeah, you don’t have to worry about that.”

That might technically be incorrect.

Aleister had died without keeping his promise, so Hamazura’s group had no guarantee.

But.

He had gained something as far as connections went.

It was not with Aleister, but it was with the board chairman.

“I feel like something crazy is going to happen here in Academy City.”

Light had returned to Academy City.

At the same time, the students scattered around the world gathered back together.

Aleister no longer stood at the top of the adults.

The grand plan pursued by that human was nowhere to be found.

But people were attracted to something in the city he had built and could not bring themselves to abandon it, so they naturally returned there.

That included everyone from back alley delinquents to the young ladies of Tokiwadai.

They parted ways at the District 23 International Airport.

Academy City's #1 vanished into the crowd with a demon girl who had nothing at all to do with science.

Misaka Mikoto may have been having trouble explaining herself while holding down the Mental Out girl.

The Level 0 delinquent boy disappeared somewhere with his blank-faced girlfriend.

And.

“Ohh. It feels like forever since we left,” said a white nun with a small calico cat on her head.

She was in the kind of ordinary student dorm you could find anywhere in Academy City.

If anything, this may have been one of the more run-down and lower-ranked

buildings.

But.

Even so.

“We really are back,” sighed Kamijou Touma.

He wanted to know what the secret of his right hand looked like from the grimoire library’s perspective, but he could ask about that once things had settled down.

He pulled the key from his pocket, inserted it into the keyhole, and turned it.

Once he opened the door, he was met by a strange smell that seemed both nostalgic and not.

The cat in the white habit girl’s arms meowed.

She spoke up with a big smile on her face.

She spoke the words that everyone repeated on a daily basis.

“We’re home, Touma!!”

# Afterword

If you've been buying one volume at a time, welcome back. If you bought them all at once... how many even is that now?

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

22 Reverse!! I went with a bit of a weird numbering system this time. The old series was about everything leading "up to" the end of the world with Fiamma of the Right, but I think New Testament stands out by showing that the world really will be destroyed when it's destroyed like with Othinus.

And speaking of Othinus, I also had beings known as gods coming to the forefront, I included Kamisato Kakeru's "new territory", and with Shokuhou Misaki and Aleister, I even tried writing stories about the past that were so hard to write because Kamijou Touma had lost his memories. If you reread New Testament as a whole, I think you will see that what happens "after" the end of the world is a lot more dynamic.

Shokuhou herself only really appeared in the novels starting in New Testament.

Like with Saten Ruiko from the Railgun side story, she was one of the characters I had come up with the idea for but would have a hard time saying is really *my* character, so I was relieved when I found I could write her properly.

Overall, I think I achieved a lot more freedom in a number of directions when compared to the old series that simply followed the present Kamijou along a single path, but I think I will leave it to all of you to judge whether I made enough of a difference to warrant the numbering reset in New Testament.

Now, about 22 Reverse.

In this volume, I thoroughly placed Kamijou Touma in the center.

He was driven by a reason to fight while Accelerator and Hamazura Shiage could not stay silent despite not having a real reason. That seems like an unusual structure. It's the reverse of usual, isn't it?

And since Aleister has withdrawn from the center stage, I was also aiming to shift the foundation of the world from Magick to a different system. I think of it like big data, AI speakers, or other terms that create a clear distinction between before and after.

...And I've been thinking for a while that Perfect Queen Shokuhou Misaki's character shines through a lot more when she takes unexpected damage and is driven to the edge. It's like how adding weight can put the scales in balance or something. Maybe she's the captured princess type.

Shokuhou has always been referred to as the Queen of Tokiwadai's largest clique, but that was an important point in this story since it was about how far she could fall from that position. And to make the fall all the more painful... it's cruel, but I had to lift her up beforehand. That's why I had her dress up in a gorgeous dress, find out that Kamijou knew about their past, and get a bit of a lead over the others.

I guess because of the dresses, this volume was really a back festival for everyone from Mikoto to Anna.

And with Index and Mikoto as well, I had them wear princess dresses to add to the symbolism of the "princess" as the person needing saving and the reward for defeating the villain. That might be even more obvious if you think of it like the slaying of a dragon that was used as a theme for OT 17-18.

Since he could not rely on Imagine Breaker this time, I got to write a dirtier battle for the first time in a while and it was quite refreshing. But this was

always who Kamijou Touma really was, right? NT 20-22 were about a large war, which made it hard to write about the mental state of the single boy named Kamijou Touma, so I went all out with it here.

How horrifying a thing is it when Kamijou Touma and Imagine Breaker actively bare their fangs? This might be another obstacle the boy needs to overcome.

I give my thanks to my illustrator Haimura-san, to my editors Miki-san, Anan-san, Nakajima-san, Yamamoto-san, and Mitera-san, and to Itou Tateki-san. We start off with a bunch of dresses and a fancy party! ...I imagine this was a tough one. Thank you yet again.

And I give my thanks to the readers. How did you like the New Testament series? The world was blown apart, lots of Magic Gods showed up, Kamisato caused trouble, the Golden magicians filled London, and there was a lot going on with the state of the world in addition to the characters. I would like nothing more than for at least one character to have found a place in your heart.

It is time to close the pages for now while praying that the pages of the next book will be opened... but what will even happen next time?

And I lay my pen down for now.

How many times did I get carried away and nearly let Shokuhou Misaki die?

-Kamachi Kazuma

# Ending

Tahiti was a sunny island in the Pacific.

He had originally worn the sunglasses and Hawaiian shirt as a disguise, but that did not stand out all that much while sunbathing. Although he did learn the gold accessories were not a good idea since they got quite hot in the bright sunlight.

Magician Tsuchimikado Motoharu sighed while swaying in a hammock between palm trees.

(You tend to think of maids as going with pleasantly cool Europe, but I say a tropical island is where it's at. You can enjoy a classic maid in the air-conditioned restaurants and casinos and you can adore your stepsister's swimsuit on the sandy beach. I have learned the true meaning of the North Wind and the Sun. This is perfect. No view could be more beautiful!!)

The pervert opened his eyes as wide as possible behind the sunglasses. And who could blame him when he was witness to a tropical paradise created by the mysterious cocktail of an outfit made from a school swimsuit, a white apron, and that thing maids wore on their head that his stepsister had chosen based on the process of elimination when the summer heat got to her and she only had the options in her travel bag to choose from. If that sentence does not seem to make any sense to you, don't worry about it. It only means you are normal.

Then he heard some flapping wings.

White feathers floated in the dry air.

They seemed to belong to a pigeon rather than a seagull. People must have

liked them because pigeons were found in every part of the world. They were not productive in any way, but there may have been more of them than chickens. They seemed to grow even more brazen in tourist areas because they showed no sign of fleeing even when a young wife and her dog jogged by.

Three pigeons had flown to the hammock.

Most people would have thought nothing of it, but Tsuchimikado Motoharu was not most people.

This would bring a certain fact to mind for any magician who had thoroughly researched that silver-haired human and the Great Demon he had *supposedly* summoned.

In modern times, that was considered heresy even in the occult world.

But how many of *what* had that human sacrificed to use their blood to summon a Great Demon whose name began with a C?

“...”

The pigeons did not have a message tied to their leg.

But anyone who knew what to look for would see some alphanumeric text in the *splotches* on their feathers. Or maybe it had been arranged so only Tsuchimikado Motoharu would notice it, similar to how you might see a human face in a stain on the wall.

(Is it my own perception being twisted here? If I looked at the moon now, I might not see the rabbit there.)

He pulled out a phone he had altered on the software and hardware sides to make it untraceable and typed in the alphanumeric string he had seen. Just as he finished, the three pigeons unnaturally took flight for no apparent reason.

His phone displayed an online news article:

*New! Academy City's Recovery is Complete*

*Academy City experienced critical infrastructure failure a few days ago, but their press secretary has just announced the official recovery of all city functions.*

*The cause is still under investigation.*

*There has been much speculation after the teachers, students, and other residents were seen leaving the city in some kind of mass evacuation, but more and more residents have been seen returning through the eastern gate near Shinjuku... (Read more)*

But it was not the article that mattered.

It was the comments displayed below. Anyone could post there, but a few of them stood out to Tsuchimikado.

Any text that could be displayed on the screen could be represented with 0s and 1s. By creating new divisions between that massive string of numbers and following a certain set of rules, you could reach a different text altogether:

“Academy City has left my control. Now that the title of board chairman has passed to another, Aleister Crowley’s influence has left it.”

Tsuchimikado Motoharu was relaxing in Tahiti because he had screwed up. He was in hiding because he and his stepsister Maika were being pursued by the entire science side. The board chairman was the big boss there, but there was so much confusion in the data from that battle that it was hard to tell what was true.

However.

Tsuchimikado Motoharu knew that any message from that human would not be so straightforward. He would never just say “It’s safe now, so you can go home.”

He broke down and reassembled the next comment:

“But this also means that I can be found *beyond science*. If you truly do not

want to run into me, then you should in fact return to Academy City at the center of the science side. Assume that all other territories are a gray zone for you.”

And the next:

“Someone who has crossed the Ungrund has appeared. I imagine they will surround Academy City from without and work their way inside. In other words, they will start where you are now. You wouldn’t want to think you had escaped the barrage only to find yourself in the middle of a minefield, would you? Stay there and you will be the first to die. I will not ask that you believe me. Search out the information yourself and reach your own conclusions.”

Tsuchimikado Motoharu frowned in the hammock after reading all that in silence.

The vocabulary did not seem quite right.

That human had a temper yet was weirdly meticulous, so it was unlikely he would have encoded his message incorrectly even if it was mostly just for fun.

The Ungrund.

The deepest depths. No matter how far you descended in that place, the bottom never came into view.

However.

Hadn’t that human preferred to call it the Abyss?

He read the next message:

“Something at the foundation has changed. This entire incident was leading up to this. And like a game of Daruma Otoshi, it happened without disturbing all that lay atop it.”

Tsuchimikado looked puzzled, but there was more.

It had not been a mistake.

That human had understood it from the beginning and was giving a warning.

“This is something I failed to predict even with the Aeon of Horus. If that woman is not yet another *cloud* or fraud, then the world will be filled with the true cross and rose – those symbols of man and woman.”

That human had not expected a response.

By the time Tsuchimikado scrolled to the end, the data had been updated and only those bizarre posts had disappeared from the comment section.

The war centered on the United Kingdom had finally come to an end.

The international airport on the outskirts of London was no longer locked down. That said, all of those Asians had been suspicious people without passports. They had required a royal plane that could skip past all the customs checks.

“I’m honestly impressed you didn’t arrest Kamijou Touma out of spite.”

That carefree comment came from Golden Magician Dion Fortune.

She was at a special gate in that airport.

This was the royal family’s personal gate that was hidden from the public so even the self-styled socialites who always flew first class did not know it existed.

It was a large space much like a relaxation facility.

The glass wall showed a large passenger plane taking off with the British flag on the tail fin.

Fortune had decided not to board that plane.

That said.

The result of that war had been a crucial issue for her. After all, she had been one of the defenses created by Archbishop Lola Stuart, aka Great Demon Coronzon, who had been behind it all.

If she had been captured as an enemy weapon, dismantled for inspection, and disposed of as an evil weapon of mass destruction, she would have had no future.

However...

“Even Aleister Crowley was from here, so it really does all come back to the UK. I have such a headache,” sighed Queen Regnant Elizard. “How can we call ourselves the home of anti-magician combat? If our inept performance here is criticized at an international conference, the power balance of the entire magic side could collapse.”

And...

“I am sorry, Kamijou Touma. I really do keep using you.”

“That doesn’t mean much if you don’t say it where he can hear you.”

Even if the lives of all her people had been used as a shield, she still felt guilty for obeying that villain’s instructions. She was apparently not shameless enough to imprison everyone who had helped put a stop to that just because the law technically said she could.

A UFO balloon flew through the open sky on the other side of the glass wall. It was the hoodie bikini and rabbit-ear antennae girl Karasuma Fran. She had apparently made an agreement to work as the third princess’s protegee at some point, but without her intervention, the UK could not have avoided having the science side and Academy City take everything from them.

Also...

“Are you sure you didn’t want to leave with those Asians?”

“I know you already know the answer to that.” The redheaded girl with her skinny figure expanded by her fluffy white dress gave a mature laugh. “The world’s rules are not truly kind enough to let them leave this country without any kind of deal being made. Someone has to pay the price. And you may have forgotten, but I was born in this country. Both as a human and as a tarot deck. Of course I have my thoughts about the future of the country that gave us the world’s largest magic cabal.”

“What exactly do you propose?”

“Heh heh. I hope you’re ready to quake in your boots over my brilliant perception, Your Majesty. The global power balance is an issue, but the real problem is maintaining order inside the country, right? The UK is supported by the three pillars of the Royal Family, the Knights, and the Anglicans, but one of those was rotten to the core. Try to choose the next archbishop by any normal means and it’s bound to lead to conflict.”

“...”

“So hear me out. I’ve heard about that British Halloween thing. It seems your Royal Family worked with the Knights to cause their own problems recently. That means the people will have a hard time trusting any of the pillars. If the later magic cabals derived from our Golden one fan the flames now, the UK might just burn down around us.”

The word Golden held great meaning for Dion Fortune.

It had been far from perfect and had caused plenty trouble on many occasions, but she still did not want the magic cabals that carried on its name to cause unnecessary conflict.

“Then what are you suggesting?”

“I am saying you have a very beautiful new archbishop right here.”

She placed a hand in the center of her chest.

The redheaded girl made a ridiculous suggestion with a straight face.

“I’m from the original Golden cabal, so you know I have the magic skill. And I was born here, so my desire to protect the UK is real. More importantly, I’m not human, so I won’t betray you. At the very least, this would eliminate any openings for others to use this chaos to usurp power.”

“...”

“To be clear, openings like that are a scary thing. Even a knight like that Holegres did some awful things when he saw an opening. And let’s not forget how much you shook things up at the end there.”

“But you—”

“Yes, it’s true. I am an artificial being that inherits the spell system of Great Demon Coronzon who controlled the Anglicans until now.”

She grinned.

And she presented this as a bargaining chip in her own favor.

“But don’t you think that will keep me honest? The best emotion for keeping people in line is not courage or love. It’s guilt. Only in moderation, though.”

This was a difficult decision for Elizard to make.

If she decided that a grimoire was not trustworthy and that she could not rely on someone created by Lola, then she would also have to stop using Index the Grimoire Library. She would of course have to monitor this carefully, but refusing would mean throwing away a very useful opportunity.

“If it even looks like you are up to something, I will immediately cut you down.”

“But of course. Still, I can’t have all authority shifting over to you, so personally appoint some greedless person to monitor me. To be blunt, this country can’t recover otherwise.”

“Then perhaps I should ask Villian.”

“She would do nicely. Karasuma Fran was also controlled by Coronzon, so she would know best how to search for any traces of Coronzon left around me.”

Elizard sighed.

She was quick to make up her mind at times like this.

“Now, this is a simply out of curiosity, but are you sure about this? I hear that Asian was literally willing to throw away his own life to save yours.”

“Oh? You’re surprisingly behind the times. Hadn’t you heard?”

The redhead girl shrugged and naturally pulled something out.

It was a phone.

It contained an application called Aneri.

And the alternate form of an original grimoire lightly waved the cutting-edge gadget.

“Distance isn’t a barrier to establishing bonds. And not only does Magician Dion Fortune possess love, beauty, and knowledge, but she has always been a master of letter writing and correspondence education☆”

Academy City was back up and running.

However, not all of the problems had been solved.

For one thing, the Windowless Building no longer existed.

A report had arrived that Board Chairman Aleister had died overseas. His body had been given a state funeral in the country he had died in. A photo of his face and a tooth mold sample had been sent to Academy City, but not even those lurking on the underside of the city were sure if they could trust that information. After all, the data they received was of a lovely girl with

long silver hair. Very few people had ever directly met Human Aleister, but not even the few who had could say for certain that was Board Chairman Aleister.

That said.

The fact remained that Aleister was no longer in the city.

And the underside of the city did not care if there was no definitive confirmation.

Something else mattered more to them.

“Based on the previous vote, the board of directors has decided that Board Chairman Aleister can no longer perform his duties. Thus, a successor must be swiftly appointed to fully recover Academy City’s administrative functions.”

A stir ran through them.

Who would be the next board chairman?

They were essentially deciding who would be the king of the science and the network that covered every part of this planet.

The board of directors had twelve members.

Normally, those would be the candidates, but one member, Kaizumi Tsugutoshi, had a headache.

(Their greed here is impossible to miss. Are they planning to start another war that will cover the entire world?)

As a pacifist (although he had to smile bitterly every time he called himself that), Kaizumi knew Oyafune Monaka took a similar stance to him here, but it would be very difficult for those two to make any major changes without any other help. And unlike Oyafune, he was not *strong* enough to stick with his benevolent stance to the very end. If he knew a conflict was coming, he would make swift preparations and fight back as much as possible. That was

how he had survived this long. If necessary, he would have to get help from his Use of Force Unit led by his brain, Kumokawa Seria.

But not to win the war.

To slit the throats of the dangerous elements before the war broke out in the first place.

“Just to be clear, you do not mind if I continue searching for the whereabouts of the Windowless Building and the board chairman in parallel to this matter?”

“Go ahead.”

“And if his survival is confirmed, the new board chairman you decide on will be null and void. That is what I am really saying.”

“That is not how it works. The *former* board chairman has abandoned his duties without permission and is absent from our meetings. Alive or not, he cannot overturn the conclusion that he is incapable of performing his duties.”

Did that courteous yet rude youth realize that the old man was weighing his life on the scales based on this exchange?

Youths who had lived a life of luxury hated the concept of seniority. And Kaizumi himself had no problem with deciding these things based on merit.

However, using merit did not necessarily eliminate the old.

If this youth was going to underestimate the old tiger’s fangs, he could keep doing so right up until the tiger showed his merit by devouring him head-first.

“Then how about we decide this with a vote?”

Shiokishi and Yakumi.

Quite a few of them were gone now. The Board of Directors could be seen as the top of Academy City’s hierarchy, but it also took a toll on its members.

And it was not just being up to no good that put you in danger. Pure Oyafune Monaka had been shot or nearly shot more than once.

To take that seat and not give it up to anyone else required power in and of itself.

The youth young enough to be Kaizumi's grandchild laughed and said more.

"It would seem no one takes issue with that. Kaizumi-san, I think we have heard enough of your *selfishness*. Please do not delay the meeting any further."

Did he really not realize what Kaizumi was after?

Or was he playing the fool so Kaizumi would let his guard down?

Even if they were taking advantage of the Windowless Building and Board Chairman Aleister's absence, everything was moving too quickly. He had to assume some large-scale preparations had already been made. They must have been ready to kick Aleister out and take over as soon as the human showed any kind of opening.

"I do not know who here will name themselves king, but what about the code list? The Windowless Building that managed the city is gone and I am having difficulty believing that is really the chairman's corpse."

"We were already in dire need of reform. This is the perfect chance to update all the unnecessary machinery and equipment while laying out new infrastructure. A war just ended and the expansion of public works will help stimulate industrial activity. Let us ride this wave: the great wave of postwar recovery."

(What a blatant lie,) sighed Kaizumi.

Academy City had recovered, but no one actually knew why the breath of life had returned when it did. That was why they were all so wary of each other. In any other circumstances, they would have handled the meeting via telecon.

Who had the code list?

Whoever that was would effectively be Academy City's leader. If they thoughtlessly started a war and aimed at the wrong person, they could receive a very painful attack in return. Whether you wanted to approach them as an ally, construct a cooperative relationship with them, or feign friendship before murdering them in their sleep, they needed to know who it was first. Which of the twelve face-down cards was the unbeatable joker? That was why they had all gathered here and assumed doing it over the internet would not be enough.

(There must be more to this.)

The old man calmly observed the group of poker faces.

Succumbing to paranoia would not help here.

Instead of letting his emotions take control and deciding some specific person was the enemy, he had to keep a flat perspective and line up every possibility on the table.

Which meant...

(It isn't necessarily a member of the board that has the joker.)

That was when he heard some solid footsteps.

This did not seem to be a secretary, brain, or bodyguard working for any of the board members. After all, he could hear the clacking of a cane along with it. Kaizumi looked puzzled at first, but he could guess what was going on once the only response to the demands of "who goes there" were only answered by sounds of violence.

"Yo."

The person who walked out was a white monster.

It was Academy City's #1 Level 5, Accelerator.

"This is a lot trickier without an obvious landmark like the Windowless

Building, but this is the board of directors boardroom, right? I know it's something of an emergency, but did you really have to be skulking around in the shadows like this? Or were you afraid of being attacked?"

"How did you find this place?"

The atmosphere had changed.

The youth who had been giving the boring speech sounded flustered. He must have believed control of the conversation had been stolen from him.

"This is no place for one of you damn guinea pigs to be!! Know your place, monster. You children have only been given some added value inside this miniature garden that we run!!"

"Sure, sure."

Accelerator did not seem to care.

He may have used his powers in some way because he stepped lightly up onto the long table and walked down the path of honor laid out between the stunned board members.

"I plan to eradicate that way of thinking, but I'll overlook the rudeness just this once. If I let every little thing you brainless people do get to me, I'd have an aneurysm in no time. Even I can mature, so how about some praise, hm?"

He made his way to what looked like the seat of honor at a birthday party.

That one empty seat at the end was different from the ones for the Board members lining both sides of the table.

After plopping down in that seat, the white monster rested his feet up on the table.

No one could speak up and demand he be thrown out.

That was of course partially because there was not much they could do when the great military might of the #1 Level 5 had made it this close. But

information mattered more than military might at the moment. The children were supposed to be under the adults' management, so how had one of them found his way to the secret meeting place of the board of directors?

"Someone left me something in their locker, so I'm here to pick it up today."

He answered them by pulling out a completely ordinary device.

It was the smartphone that a certain human had given him on the verge of death in the United Kingdom.

While toying with the "proof of a king" that contained the code list that provided full authority over Academy City, that monster leaned back in the leather chair and spoke with a confident smile while a demon girl accompanied him.

To those who called espers guinea pigs and who were surely hiding many skeletons in the dark closet they thought would never be lit up, his greeting might as well have been a death sentence.

"Listen up. The name's Academy City Board Chairman Accelerator. I hope we can all get along☆"

"He lost," she said. "Once he got out, the One who Purifies God and Slays Demons lost quite quickly."

"Oh? It isn't often things betray your expectations."

"That's for sure."

She had thought Aleister Crowley would use up Lilith more quickly.

She had thought the One who Purifies God and Slays Demons would win.

And based on those predictions, she had been making gambles that ordinary people could not even see.

So.

She would take action to make up for that loss.

And she would do so silently.

She smiled and spoke while crushing a rose in her small hand and letting drip a red liquid that could produce unknown miracles.

“But that is what leaves some openings in this world.”



The worlds of magic and science had both been badly shaken.

And the people in their respective seats were already looking beyond that.

Anna Sprengel.

Holy Guardian Angel Aiwass.

Together, they belonged to the ancient magic cabal known as the Rosicrucian Order.

So they readily spoke a challenge to the world.

“Do not think this is over.”