

そうやく 創約 とある魔術の禁書目録④

あががが……寒すぎて死んじゃうぞ、  
ちくしょう！

病院のベッドからどうにか抜け出した  
上条当麻が降り立ったのは、温暖なはず  
が極寒となったロサンゼルス！？ ……し  
かも全人口消失という異様な状況で……！？

アンナ率いるR&Cオカルティクスが引  
き起こしたこの異常事態下で、上条とイ  
ンデックスは共に事件解決に挑んでいく。

強襲する敵の魔術師を躊躇した先に出会  
ったのは、たった唯一の生存者である  
銀髪褐色の幼い少女、そしてその母親の  
『痕跡』だった——。

母と娘の想いを上条が受け継ぐとき、  
その『暗闇』は打ち破られる！！



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創約 とある魔術の禁書目録④

鎌池和馬

電撃文庫



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KADOKAWA  
ASCII MEDIA WORKS



かま ち かず ま  
鎌池和馬

序盤、神裂はちょっとジョークが多いかな……？ 久  
しづりに上条やインデックスと行動を共にできて嬉しいお姉ちゃんを感じていただければ。彼女も年下の男  
の子をからかうくらいにはレベルが上がったのでしょうか。

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広島の片田舎で、そもそも絵を描いております。

# ロジスティクスホーネット

R&Cオカルティクスが保有している全12機の巨大な空中式宇宙機発射台。地上から気球や小型機で受け取った貨物コンテナを、内蔵のマスドライバーを使って空気抵抗のない大気圏外まで射出する事で、地球上のどんな地域でも20分以内に貨物を届ける事ができる。

# 創約 とある魔術の 禁書目録 インデックス

鎌池和馬

イラスト  
はいむらきよたか

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Girl who lives in Los Angeles,  
which was hit by a big cold wave

**Helcalia Grocery**

Woman who lives in Los Angeles,  
which was hit by a big cold wave

**Melzabeth Grocery**



Designed by Hirokazu Watanabe (2725 Inc.)





# A CERTAIN MAGICAL INDEX GENESIS TESTAMENT

創約

## とある魔術の 禁書目録 インデックス

4

KAMACHI KAZUMA

鎌池和馬

イラスト・はいむらきよたか

HAIMURA KIYOTAKA

デザイン・渡邊宏一(2725 Inc.)

Harvas Spring wasn't really nervous at first. He assumed it was all a big Christmastime prank. Job or not, he never would have been so careless otherwise.

"What the hell is going on here?" he muttered, impatiently tapping his thick fingers on the work van's steering wheel.

They couldn't contact anyone in Los Angeles. Not by fiber optic cable, not by high-speed wireless internet, not by satellite, not by airport control, not by the landline phones no one used anymore, and not even by amateur radio.

No one responded to social media, calls, or email.

Remotely checking their phone locations showed nothing more than motionless dots on the map.

That was all it was, yet someone had decided LA's thirty million people were "missing".

(The Pied Piper must be rolling in his grave. Helium has more weight than human lives these days.)

The large man was wearing his plain work jumpsuit at 2AM because he worked for an internet provider that set up and repaired communication equipment. He was used to having his ear yelled off after being called out in the middle of the night by a Whatever-Tuber when their internet went out, but this was a big one even for him.

*We can't contact anyone in LA, so go check it out.*

Was that really a job for an ISP worker?

Weren't the police supposed to deal with messes like this? He had always gotten stuck with the worst tasks just because he was a big black guy. He was sick of people assuming that meant he was good at basketball, liked dancing and hip hop, and was all macho and tough on the inside.

(This is more than some malfunctioning equipment. You can't tell me every single communications company went dark all at once.)

The trains had stopped for the night and the stock exchanges were closed, but that only applied to the US mainland. The European and Asian exchanges were running high-speed programmed trades that moved billions of dollars around a billion times each second. There was even the Guam market across the date line if you wanted to stick to the USA. That meant the wealthy investors needed to stay in contact. You couldn't tell them to wait until tomorrow morning just because it was after hours.

However, the streets of LA were right where they should be when you checked the Street Eyes that let you search through any city in the world. That meant communications were working. So even if no one could be reached there, it wasn't a problem with the equipment.

It had to be the old-fashioned “pretend you’re not home” prank. And it was being played by the entirety of America’s second most populous city.

“How long are you going to keep the Christmas spirit going?”

LA’s entire population was missing.

Just as the city’s colorful Christmas parties were ending, everyone mysteriously vanished, like they were waking from a dream. It sounded exactly like the kind of event some rich movie industry people would plan. Maybe it was a large-scale promotion for some upcoming streaming drama. People were mostly talking about R&C Occultics lately, but Harvas could see any of the big IT companies pulling something like this. And once one company pushed the envelope, the others would compete to see who could push it the furthest. Morality and laws took the backseat as they all did whatever it took to get their name out there. He could see them beginning a development race to become the first civilian company with nukes...*except it was worse than that*. These days, the big names in browsers and online shopping were bidding on contracts for strategic AIs and supercomputers to support the US military, who claimed to hold the title of world’s strongest.

(It’s the middle of the night and I work at the Las Vegas branch. I’m not even in the right state! I never should have let everyone know I don’t drink. Even the job request program knows I’m the only one in any condition to drive after the partying is done.)

He turned up the volume to distract himself from his irritation. To cut costs, the company van didn’t even have a radio or stereo, so he had his own phone in a stand. The news mentioned something about a major trial coming up in Japan’s Academy City, but it was too gloomy a topic for him.

“Hey, Seri. Give me a playlist of music that’ll pump me up! I’m afraid I’ll drift off and kill someone!!”

“Why not try taking a deep breath and imaging the sweet flavor of your mother’s apple pie back home?”

Modern AI was so flexible. It could even handle witty banter. If he didn’t still owe a lot of money on this fancy phone, he would have long ago chucked it right out the window since his daughter loved it more than him.

Their company did of course have a branch in LA. Normally, that branch would send a worker out to deal with problems in the city. Yet Harvas had ended up with it. That suggested the bastards at the LA branch had joined in on the citywide prank. It was one thing when it was those filthy rich wannabe aristocrats who seemed to live in another world altogether, but it rankled even more to know he was driving more than three hundred kilometers across the state line at 2AM because employees getting paid the same miserable wage as him had decided to join some thoughtless prank. His thoughts turned toward the .45 caliber he kept in the dashboard.

Anyway, his job was to inspect and maintain his company's communication infrastructure. *Whether or not those thirty million people were actually missing was none of his concern.* Once he visited the thirty vending-machine-sized ground bases scattered across the large city, made sure they had power and a signal, and checked that they were functioning properly, his job would be complete. Once he checked all the "no issues found" boxes on his work tablet, he would drive across the Mojave Desert, cross the state line, and return to his home in a Nevada town not flooded with garish lights. In other words, he had to drive back the entire way he had come. Big cities were great for having fun, but he preferred a quiet rural town to live in.

But.

"What the hell?"

He had some trouble getting through the big city's complicated junction to leave the highway and descend to the ordinary roads below, so he failed to notice right away. He was a good way into LA before he commented on it.

He noticed a white stain on the work van's windshield and then it rapidly spread across the rest. At first, he thought the glass was cracking, but it was not.

With his vision gone, he reflexively slammed on the brakes.

"Did it freeze over in an instant?"

Using the wipers and switching on the van's heater were not enough to melt the thick frost. Surprised to find he could see his own breaths, he parked on the curb and left the boxy van.

He found a biting cold out there.

He sensed danger the instant he stepped outside. The frigid environment caught him by such surprise he might as well have rubbed his eyes and climbed out of bed to find himself in the middle of a snowy mountain.

White frost covered the guardrails, the streetlights, and the billboard with a big grinning image of President Roberto, making them all look like the inner wall of the grocery store's ice cream freezer.

Utter silence surrounded him.

When he stood still and listened, the silence was downright painful.

His habit of checking his phone when he felt nervous came back to bite him here. He grimaced at the unwanted alert from the weather app.

It was minus four degrees Fahrenheit. He had never seen a number that low since buying this phone. In Celsius, that was around minus twenty. Harvas briefly assumed his phone had broken, but the cold piercing him right through his work jumpsuit told him this was very real.

Small specks glittered in the phone's backlight.

He was truly dumbfounded when he realized the moisture in the air may have frozen.

(A cold wave...really? This is LA.)

He could imagine this happening in New York or Washington DC, but LA was around the same latitude as Kyushu, Japan. He had never heard of a cold wave here that could freeze all the moisture in the air.

Feeling something rough on his skin and in his hair, he held up his hand and rubbed his fingers together where he could see.

“Sand?”

Where had everyone gone? Was this really just a prank?

He finally shivered, but not from the cold. The darkness only partially held at bay by the bright streetlights suddenly felt a lot more hostile. Leaving his van may have been a mistake. The windshield wasn't bulletproof and the boxy vehicle did not provide much defense, but he still felt dangerously exposed out in the open air.

He wanted to pretend he was only protecting himself from the cold. He felt like admitting to his real fear would cause *something* to attack him. It was absurd, but he could not shake the feeling.

Then he clicked his tongue.

The van's door would not open. The slight gap must have frozen.

“Damn it!!”

Whether he was going to complete his job or say to hell with that and escape, he would need that van. LA was a massive connected metropolitan area that combined more than ten cities and it had been deemed worth developing it until drinking water had to be piped in from 375 kilometers away. He was in the very middle of all that. He could never check all of the ground bases on foot. Not to mention leaving the city.

If he could melt the frozen door even for a moment, he could get it open.

Once he was inside, he didn't care if it froze again, so he took a look around.

(Is there anything here I can use as hot water? Even a coffee vending machine would do.)

His head stopped at an unnatural angle. He had seen something his brain refused to process.

He had failed to notice it earlier because of its unusual location. When people were looking for a car, they would check the road. When looking for a train, they would check the tracks. So they could easily overlook something right in front of them when it was not where they expected it to be.

Something was embedded inside a building wall.

A black, boomerang-shaped bomber was crashed halfway up a fashionable forty-five-story building.

But that was not all. Once he really focused on his surroundings, more and more things popped out at him like a piece of trick art. An attack helicopter lay on its side after knocking over a roadside tree. An eight-wheeled armored truck was stopped after trying to force its way up the stairs down to a subway station. Were those waterproof military tents covering every last inch of a basketball court situated between two skyscrapers?

Those were not the personal possessions of LA's residents.

Harvas was not an expert on such things, but even he could tell something was wrong here. This was not the American police that had militarized in the name of stopping the flow of drugs from Mexico, but it was not the actual military either. Any American would notice something wasn't right. It was like ordering an ordinary burger and getting a teriyaki burger instead. These were not US military weapons.

But then who did they belong to?

And *why was that mysterious armed force missing as well?*

It all would have made some form of sense if *they* had done it.

He did not dare approach the malfunctioning vehicles or crashed aircraft in case they exploded, but they were obviously deserted even at a distance. Anyone hiding inside them with the heater off and the hatch open would freeze to death. He could not imagine any reason to intentionally let the white frost fill your vehicle. Had they fled, entirely forgetting the fundamental principle of destroying your weapon to prevent it from being stolen or analyzed, or had they vanished into thin air before they could even do that?

Was this an attack?

Was it an accident?

Or was it a natural disaster?

Everything was left out in the open and plain to see, but the more he learned, the more confused he got. He had trouble even deciding which category it belonged to.

Something flew by overhead in the deserted city. An R&C Occultics delivery drone was leisurely hovering through an ended world.

That one slice of the normal in a very abnormal situation actually scared Harvas. Perhaps that was a sign he was being taken over by the abnormality of the situation.

“What in the world happened?”

His ordinary danger sense had been overloaded by this. He was filled with too many questions to even know what he should do. He did not know where to go or how to protect himself, so he slowly lifted his phone in both hands His ordinary habits took over as he tilted it on its side and prepared to take a photo of the bomber.

But then he noticed the antenna icon in the corner of the screen. It signified the last thing he wanted to see right now: no signal.

“ ”

He remained motionless for quite a while.

*Ksssshhh.*

He heard something reminiscent of rippling waves.

It seemed almost abstract. He still felt like he was watching this on a screen from the safety of his living room. Yet if he really was in LA and someone really had maliciously emptied it of people, then their invisible blade had to have reached his throat by now.

*Ksh. Ksssshhhhh.*

*Oh, he thought, belatedly realizing what that staticky noise was.*

But what good did that do him?

Was finding the correct answer powerful enough to rescue someone caught in its grasp?

What could he do when he had already suicidally focused on that small screen instead of the reality around him and left his defenseless back exposed to the threat?

The darkness of LA, that had erased thirty million people, rushed in from every direction to swallow up Harvas Spring's mind.

# PROLOGUE

---

**A Picture Book that Slipped Through the Cracks.**

*Magic\_Side,Open.*

“...mour...”

Lights out had passed, so the hospital had gone dark. A hospital at night was the source of so many different fears and a voice seemed to echo up from the depths of the earth inside one room containing six girls.

The voice belonged to Shirai Kuroko. The twintailed thirteen-year-old wore a see-through purple negligee as she slipped out of her bed and crept toward another bed in the same room.

“It’s amour time, Onee-samaaaaaa!!!!!! They say people are influenced by their environment and there are no end to the impure and erotic rumors surrounding a late-night hospital room! Things are bound to work out better than in our ordinary dorm room! Christmas is over, but the 26th is still too soon for New Year’s. Plus, everyone relaxes their guard during winter break. Weh heh heh. No reaction to all this noise? You must be exhausted indeed. But this is why you should always be careful, Onee-samaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!!!”

The prestigious girls’ school student teleported above the target bed and then dove toward the lump in the blanket with perfect diving form.

But she soon realized her mistake.

“What...she’s gone!? This lump is no more than another rolled-up blanket! That explains why the chest looked awfully large for Onee—bgwahhhh!!!???”

After crawling on the bed like a dog and pulling back the blanket, Kuroko felt a powerful blow to the back of her head.

“It’s 2AM!! Try to keep it down, geez.”

After sneaking from her bed at some point, a pajama-wearing Misaka Mikoto slammed her heel into the other girl’s head. That attack was her idea of being considerate. Phones were fine in the hospital room since no special medical equipment was in use there, but

who could say what effect a billion-volt surge of power would do. Being too powerful could be inconvenient at times.

Mikoto had shared a room with Shirai Kuroko for long enough that she knew to keep her guard up. Her sensor was not so lax she would allow the girl to attack in her sleep.

But on the other hand...

(I know spending the night at the hospital has her excited, but it isn't like her to lose control in the middle of the night and cause a scene.)

Shirai Kuroko was a self-admitted pervert, but she also managed to fit right in working for Judgment. It felt wrong for her to just give in to her desires and throw all the public rules and manners out the window.

And if something out of the ordinary was happening, something out of the ordinary must have caused it.

Misaka Mikoto had a pretty good guess what that was. Another girl staying in this very room excelled at that sort of thing.

"Shokuhou!! Did you use just a liiiiittle smidge of Mental Out to sic Kuroko on me *again!*?"

She yelled at the adjacent bed, grabbed the lumpy blanket, and swept it aside like a bullfighter, but then her eyes widened.

"Sh-she's gone?"

The bed was empty. The lump in the blanket had only been a rolled-up blanket stuffed below.

"Damn, she used that commotion to slip out, didn't she!? That's just like her!"



"Hm, hm, hm, hm."

The cheerful humming did not at all suit the late-night hospital hallway.

Shokuhou Misaki, Queen of Tokiwadai, let her long blonde hair sway side to side as she walked to her destination in a skimpy babydoll with a cardigan over it.

Misaka Mikoto subconsciously radiated weak microwaves and she could use the reflection of the EM waves to instantly and perfectly detect any moving object in all 360 degrees around her. She had reached the point where she could detect and accurately shoot down

the countless porcelain shards blasted her way by a bomb, but even her senses would be dulled while dealing with a commotion like that.

(She has no problem breaking the rules when she can play the justice card, but she never lets anyone else do the same. So I have to get creative if I don't want her demanding my hall pass every time I set foot outside the room☆)

But Shokuhou Misaki did not just want a bit of freedom from her cramped hospital life.

She had a distinct objective in mind. She started toward the elevator on habit, but thought better of it, deciding it would be too noticeable. Instead, she climbed the plain emergency stairs one step at a time.

Misaka Mikoto and Shirai Kuroko of Tokiwadai were not her only acquaintances in this hospital.

(If only Dolly...’s sister could have come to this hospital to play.)

The honey-blonde queen briefly pictured two identical girls, but she was no longer in charge of that. She had not received word from the *chaperone girl* since Handcuffs began, but she assumed no call for help meant the girl had escaped on her own. There were plenty of ways to set things up so she would be alerted if that girl really did go missing. Like the innovative electric water boilers that prevented the elderly from dying alone.

Making a fuss could actually end up giving any enemies extra clues. It was like the scab over a half-healed wound. The Queen had to mentally work to avoid picking at it.

“Pant, pant, gasp. The stairs really take it out of you...”

She worked to calm her sweet breaths and wiped the sweat from her brow when she arrived at her target floor. She quietly peeked out into the hallway. It was identical to the floor she had just left, but she sensed a special, unseen pressure there. Bluntly put, she was nervous. Her Mental Out power made her the #5 Level 5 and she had every form of mental power at her fingertips, but this she could not fight. It was too fleeting and precious for her to blot it out with her power.

*He* was in this same hospital.

He was a true Level 0, yet he would charge toward certain doom faster than anyone. He would die if he failed, but self-interest played no role when he chose what to do.

She thought it was ridiculous.

Especially from the perspective of the #5 Queen who could control individuals and groups alike and could manipulate everything to her benefit more easily than move her own fingertip.

But maybe she longed for him so much because he existed outside her hierarchy of control and because her power could not reach him.

“He definitely deserves *something*,” she muttered to herself.

He had been beaten within an inch of his life. He had risked his life to fight the monster named Anna Sprengel and just barely managed to protect the two girls and the entire city. She knew he would simply smile and say he couldn’t stand to see tragedy. She knew he would say no one owed him anything for it.

But she could not just rely on him forever.

After all that effort, he deserved even greater happiness in return.

*Even if he was destined to forget every single thing Shokuhou Misaki might give him.*

She pressed a hand against the center of her chest and took a deep breath in front of the door.

She was fine. Her throat was not shaking.

She was the Queen of Tokiwadai and the leader of the largest clique, so she hated how she always became no more than a younger girl when she was around him.

But she would do this.

And she would enjoy whatever it might lead to.

“K-Kamijou-saaan?”

She cracked open the door and called softly inside.

Then she slipped inside. This was not a private room and would be shared with several other boys, but she did not particularly care. If any of them were still awake, she could aim her remote at them and zap away their memory of seeing her and their ability to notice her for the rest of her stay. It was selfish, but she did not hesitate.

She had done her research.

She knew exactly which bed was his.

“Now, how about we take another stab at Christmas since our first attempt was so rudely interrupted? Don’t worry. My elimination ability will take care of every last thing that might try to interfere this time☆”

But there was no response, so she hesitantly pulled back the blanket.

“H-he’s gone?”

She blinked thrice after seeing the rolled-up blanket placed below the main one.

Then her head snapped over toward the window.

She could not see anything from here, but he had to be somewhere out there. And since he had felt the need to sneak out, he must have had some reason that required doing so.

Yes, Kamijou Touma never got a day off and the 26th was no exception.

Shokuhou Misaki held her head in her hands and screamed.

“Oh, god!! I should have known!!!!!”



The pointy-haired high school boy named Kamijou Touma had walked to a nearby park while still covered in bandages and gauze.

“Kamijou.”

Hearing his name, he turned to see two familiar faces. They were his classmates Fukiyose Seiri and Himegami Aisa. They were both girls with long black hair, but they had very different looks. Himegami was the calm, traditional Japanese type while Fukiyose was the energetic class rep type.

Either because it was winter break or because of the late hour, they were both in their casual clothes. Fukiyose wore a down jacket, a hoodie, and skinny jeans. Himegami wore a duffle coat, a knit sweater, and a long skirt. It was strange seeing them in something other than their usual uniforms. And they were dressed tastefully, unlike the pointy-haired boy walking around outside in his hospital gown.

Fukiyose frowned at his obvious runaway getup, but she still handed him a large paper bag.

“What, did you really escape the hospital to get here? Well, I had a hunch this was trouble when you asked us to bring you a change of clothes in the middle of the night.”

“Thanks a lot.” Kamijou’s face lit up when he checked inside the bag. “I feel bad having you run an errand for me. And looking after the cat too.”

“Don’t worry about it,” bluntly replied Fukiyose. “(I actually always wanted a cat, but our stupid dorms don’t allow pets. I’m all for following the rules, but only the ones that make sense! Yes, winter break is looking up this year. I get to spend it with a cute calico kitty☆)”

“(Well, at least I know where he hides his spare key now.)”

The pointy-haired boy was too focused on the bag to notice the slight change in the two girls.

He even stuck his hand inside and rummaged around for the most important item.

“Yes, yes, this is what I wanted! The Transla-Pen! I bought it thinking I might need it sometime and I hated how it just sat around collecting dust!!”

The two girls tilted their heads.

It was an accessory that synced with your phone, but it was only a toy sold cheaply at discount stores in Academy City. The pen-shaped device had a microphone in the tip that would pick up foreign languages and translate them to Japanese. And by tracing the pen tip over a foreign text, it would translate that into Japanese as well. It was cheap enough that they came as a free bonus when you bought language learning material online.

“Does that mean you are traveling overseas?” asked Himegami, her head still tilted.

“Yeah. I’m not sure of the details, though.”

Before Kamijou could clarify on that vague answer, he was drowned out by a rhythmic beating of the air. A powerful gust of wind caused the dark trees of the park to creak around them and Fukiyose held her hair down on reflex.

This was not a helicopter.

The aircraft slowly descending toward the center of the large park was a tiltrotor that could greatly change the angle of its wings and engines. Plus, they were in the middle of Academy City, yet a foreign flag had been hurriedly printed on the side. Assuming it was not a punk rock decoration, that likely functioned similar to a diplomatic license plate.

It was the Union Jack.

That should be enough to know what country it belonged to.

Kamijou Touma let his shoulders droop and made one last comment with his back to the mid-sized transport craft.

“I have a feeling there’s some misfortune in my immediate future.”

# CHAPTER 1

---

**The Full Population of Los Angeles is Missing.**

***26\_the\_West\_Coast\_Warfare.***

## Part 1

The Skybus 550 belonged to the British government.

It had originally been a luxury passenger plane that seated 1200, but all of the ordinary seating had been removed and the layout was thoroughly customized to allow government VIPs to concentrate on their duties and online meetings. It truly was a flying castle. It was equipped with informational stealth protection that allowed it to disappear from ordinary air traffic control radars at the flip of a switch. At 6.5 billion euros, its price tag was even higher than a boomerang-shaped stealth bomber.

“Um,” said Kamijou Touma, standing awkwardly by the wall. He had expected the airplane to be lined with seats like a movie theater, so he was hesitant to approach the leather sofa surrounding a round table.

This was one of the conference rooms protected by thick soundproof glass. When he heard the seventy-inch flatscreen monitor on the wall could send a nuclear launch order, he was even more hesitant to approach.

“The British royal family’s round table? What world have I stumbled into? The tiltrotor alone was enough for a journal entry and now this? Is our next fight an RTS where we fly around the globe ordering armies to fight?”

“If things were that dire, we would never let anyone as thickheaded as you near the queen’s seat.”

That irritated comment was accompanied by the scent of nicotine. They both came from a priest who stood two meters tall. But his long hair was dyed bright red, he had a barcode tattoo below his eye, and he held a cigarette in the corner of his mouth.

Styil Magnus ran an exasperated hand through his hair.

“You are no more than that girl’s chaperone. Not that anyone knows if the treaty between magic and science still means anything now that we have a new archbishop and you have a new board chairman.”

“New leadership, huh?”

“Although it looks like your chairman is already trying to commit social suicide.”

Cynicism was the default for Styl. It didn’t actually mean he hated anyone.

What mattered here was “that girl” he had mentioned.

“How are you going to use *Index*? ”

“This is how she was always meant to be used. Leaving her with you was an aberration. But if you insist on tagging along, you can make yourself a disposable shield for her. We’re paying for the ticket, so you’d better work yourself to the bone to pay us back.”

The priest blew some cigarette smoke into the conference room surrounded by thick glass, seemingly turning it into a gas chamber.

“The full population of Los Angeles is missing.”

To Kamijou, that one statement felt like a thick stake to the heart. Magic could easily overturn the laws of physics that so solidly bound the ordinary world, but this was taking it a bit far.

“The city itself is fine. It’s the people living there who are missing.”

“Um...how many people is that?”

“It’s the second largest city in the US. The official population is around fifteen million, I think. But add in the illegal immigrants, the homeless, and others the government can’t track and that number goes up to more than twenty million. You can also assume that temporary visitors like travelers adds another ten million on top of that. After all, in the broadest sense, Los Angeles includes the movie town of Hollywood and the headquarters of the world’s most famous amusement park.”

And they were all gone.

Every single one of them. Without even a chance to scream or tell anyone anything.

Kamijou had been informed that Anna Sprengel had escaped from her Academy City holding cell after he thought he had defeated her. Her whereabouts were unknown, but the odds were very good that she was directly or indirectly behind this.

He had already seen her toying with people’s lives before.

He quietly held a hand to his chest.

Punching her out had not been the end of it. And just because she had been able to escape—due to no fault of his own—*this* had happened to the world. Then what could he possibly do about it?

(St. Germain.)

“The Anglican Church and Academy City have convinced the US government to grant us permission to act, so a large-scale joint operation is underway from the coast to LA. It’s called Operation Overlord Revenge. That’s why we actually noticed something was wrong.” Stiyl resumed his explanation. “The joint operation is meant as an attack on R&C Occultics’s HQ. Before, no one knew what country the giant IT company was base in, but we finally found a lead after checking through the records of some special Cayman Islands banks...or so we thought.”

“Then is it known the disappearance of LA was something magical?”

“The way we see it, R&C Occultics fought back against the joint magic and science force pushing in from the Pacific and that led to a mass disappearance of combatants and civilians alike.” Stiyl pressed his shortened cigarette into a glass ashtray. “What happened to LA’s people is unknown, but I say the most reasonable assumption is they’re dead. There are benefits to keeping them alive, though. Keeping survivors around makes an enemy more hesitant to bomb you with drones and hostages can be used as a bargaining chip.”

“You sound doubtful it’s either of those.”

It sounded reasonable enough to Kamijou, but Stiyl had an immediate answer.

“Previously, R&C Occultics preferred to spread chaos around the world by distributing detailed how-to guides for magical ceremonies. Their normal MO is to leave the actual attacking to a bunch of people they’ve never even met. By avoiding doing anything directly themselves, they can avoid any unwanted attention. ...But they broke that rule here. That means the joint Anglican and Academy City force looked like an actual threat to them. R&C Occultics is taking this very seriously. They have to be to vanish twenty or thirty million people, don’t you think?”

“...”

“They felt their backs against the wall, so do you really think they would *tie one hand behind their back* by limiting themselves to nonlethal methods? I take the pessimistic view here. And even if they did carelessly slaughter all those people, the dead can still be used as hostages as long as no one can find the bodies. R&C Occultics has remained entirely silent this whole time, so either they’re focused on defending their HQ at all costs, or they’re gathering their things and skipping town.”

“Eh? They’d run away already?”

“In this modern age of loathsome science worship, even the Golden cabals keep their money in electronically locked safes.”

“Oh...ha ha ha ha.”

“During the Cold War, there was even a dictator that would eliminate his political rivals with Voodoo curses. But magicians are meant to be the outlaws hidden in the shadows. If R&C Occultics understands that, they won’t get overly fixated on a temporary victory here. Instead of trying to reign as a king, they’ll prefer to erase all trace of their name and appearance and vanish into the shadows.” Stiyl gave a disinterested click of his tongue. “Will they stay put and defend their HQ, or will they run off and ensure their safety? Their outlaw mentality will settle on those two options, but which way their scales will tilt is harder to say. But whatever their next objective, they don’t need living hostages to do it.”

“Quick question.” Kamijou Touma spoke softly but stared directly into Stiyl’s eyes. “*What is our objective here?*”

“The destruction of R&C Occultics. And to do that, we need the grimoire library’s help figuring out the trick behind the mass disappearance spell. Any hypothetical hostages are of secondary concern. Besides, the Index Librorum Prohibitorum works for the Anglican Church, so we don’t need her chaperone’s permission to use her.”

“Kh.”

“But.” Stiyl sounded like he barely cared as he stuck a new cigarette in his mouth. “We also aren’t going to monitor every little thing an outsider like that does. You go do your own thing. As long as you’re harmlessly wasting your time on that ‘secondary concern’, we won’t interfere.”

Kamijou Touma couldn’t help but smile.

“I see.”

“Hey, make no mistake here. The odds are 99% that my pessimistic view is right. Again, R&C Occultics has no reason to spare them. They don’t even need them alive to use them as hostages.”

“Then I’ll work toward that remaining 1%. Since the rest of you can’t spare any time for it.”

The menacing priest pulled the still-unlit cigarette from his mouth and clicked his tongue.

Their quick-and-dirty strategy meeting was complete.

When Kamijou opened the transparent door and left the soundproofed conference room, his mind was shaken by the loud noise.

The government plane was fully equipped with everything necessary for a worker's duties and online meetings, but it offered more than that. Since it would sometimes remain in the air for days on end thanks to midair refueling, it had lodging equipment like a shower, a bed, and a kitchen and it had entertainment equipment like a home theater, minigolf, and a bar.

Also, each of those things appeared to have been designed to match an individual's personal interests. For example, the TV, stereo, and other electronics were all Japanese. Japan must have met the exacting demands of the kingdom of rock's queen.

(I can hardly believe it. Does the queen use this like a personal car?)

The wall display—which was larger than a karaoke box's enormous monitor—was playing a news program. It must have been a station for the Japanese people living in the broader Pacific region. Although they were repeating an older story since it was so late at night.

"Our next story comes from Academy City. They will soon be holding an unprecedented trial in which their board chairman—known only as Accelerator—is the defendant. His real name and age remain unknown thanks to Academy City's Personal Information Cleaning System. According to one of our sources, a team of doctors attempted to delay the trial using juvenile law and a mental evaluation of the chairman, but the chairman himself refused the delay. This sets the stage for the trial to be held on schedule. The chairman claims he participated—of his own free will—in a bizarre 'experiment' that required the killing of twenty thousand human clones, so..."

"..."

Kamijou Touma briefly fell silent. He had seen the news story already, but he still came to a stop.

He looked away from the large screen to shake it out of his mind.

And even if that program was for Japanese people, was that really the headline story? There was nothing there about LA. They may have had trouble putting together a story when they were unsure if those thirty million people were actually missing or if it was a large-scale prank. He had heard that *the really bad stuff* started spreading online before you could find it on TV.

Index was sitting at the bar counter like it was her home now.

But not because she needed to take shots of 80-proof liquor to keep her fingers from shaking.

"Oh, Touma!! Look, look!! The fish and chips here are to die for!!"

“I don’t trust your taste buds. You rate anything you eat five stars.”

Kamijou approached with a bitter smile. She had a talent for making people happy, which was very nun-like. If he let himself believe her praise, he would get a big head about his cooking.

Instead of a bartender, a black-haired ponytail woman stood behind the counter. She was Kanzaki Kaori. She worked with the Anglicans, but as her name suggested, she was Japanese. She wore a T-shirt with the bottom tied to show off her navel and special jeans with one of the legs cut off at the very top of the thigh. She also wore a denim jacket since it wasn’t summer, but she was still an eighteen-year-old showing off an awkward amount of skin. And the parts without skin showing still inspired similar feelings in him.

“Do you need something?”

“Give me a mizuvari, barkeep. ...Sorry, that was a joke. It won’t happen again”

Her glare shut him up real quick. He had no real interest in the drinks themselves, but all the colorful bottles lined up like that gave the place a real mature atmosphere. The English on the labels made it feel super fancy. ...Of course, he may have been assuming it was cool because he didn’t understand it, like the people who listened to Western music without understanding the lyrics.

Kanzaki provided an explanation in an exasperated voice when she saw Kamijou’s eyes sparkling in ignorance.

“That’s Drambuie, absinthe, Spirytus, and Japanese awamori. There is also ancient Egyptian beer in the fridge. But don’t touch any of it. As you might imagine from such a bizarre lineup, I think Queen Elizard is sick of her own country’s scotch and sherry. My point is, it would be an international incident if you drank part of the queen’s personal collection.”

“Oh, right. You’re only eighteen, so you don’t drink either—yikes.”

She glared at him again. He was afraid to find out what happened if he angered her a third time. If she was glaring at him like this when he still had extra lives to burn, he couldn’t even imagine what a true game over would be like. He doubted he would get any continues.

“When does this mission start? What I eat depends on that. I’ve got an unsophisticated palate, so my gut instinct is to go with a hamburger steak or omurice, but I’m also afraid of getting motion sickness while trapped up here above the clouds.”

His common way of thinking made Kanzaki laugh.

“We will arrive in Los Angeles at 3 AM on the 26th and the mission begins as soon as we arrive.”

“What? Um, but it was already 2 when we left Academy City. Did I just imagine eating a meal and getting some sleep on the way? And what about when it felt like I was sitting around for longer than the runtime of five movies? How fast is this super magic plane moving? Did we end up flying back in time!?”

“There is none of that fantasy magic at play here. It’s a much simpler and more convenient trick. Did you forget about the international date line running down the Pacific Ocean? Time appears to go back a day when flying east from Japan.”

“Huh?”

The pointy-haired boy puzzled over that one.

(So it’s there and we fly through here, which means...what?)

After a bit, he gave up trying to figure it out. The world was too complicated for him.

“We’ve been on this plane a while, so how much longer do we have?”

“Less than an hour. I would recommend a light meal since you will be moving around a lot.”

“Hm,” he said, grabbing one of the fries from Index’s plate of fish and chips.

The next thing he knew, the fry had vanished from his hand, like some kind of trap had snapped shut. And Index was munching happily next to him.

It all happened so fast he did not have time for a cold sweat.

“Um, uh, Index-san? Did you just, um...”

“The fish and chips here are to die for! ...And this plate is mine.”

She was not going to give him a single bite.

He had been more bored than hungry, so he didn’t press the issue.

But, but, but...

“...”

“K-Kanzaki-san? Kanzaki-saaaan? Don’t give me that ‘you aren’t even going to try a bite’ look. Those sad puppy dog eyes are especially off limits! You might as well be threatening me! Because I sure as hell can’t touch anything on that plate! She’s liable to take off a finger, if not bite down to my wrist bone! Wait...you made this? Really? You didn’t just pop it in the microwave? It was made from scratch? Okay, fine, I’ll—oww!!!????”

He didn't even get the whole sentence out. Whether you called it a reckless challenge or a youthful test of courage, the end result was the bear-trap girl's jaws snapping shut on his hand and him writhing in pain for a while.

"D-damn it. This is why I didn't want to. Anyway, we're on a special mission with a small team of elites, huh? Sounds like a movie."

But the fate of the world came down to a skinny glutton of a nun instead of a former special forces macho man, so things were not looking good. It was the perfect setup for a tear-jerking tragedy, though.

"A spell was used to make an estimated thirty million people disappear, so overwhelming numbers are unlikely to work. Instead, a group too small for R&C Occultics to detect will sneak in close, investigate the disappearance spell, and destroy it. The bigger fighting force will be called in after that is done."

"What is R&C Occultics so desperate to protect?"

He doubted they would throw some nuke-class magic out there just for a skyscraper of reinforced concrete. It didn't fit the Anna Sprengel he had met. He had trouble imagining her even paying money to buy something.

Kanzaki had no solid answers there, but...

"R&C Occultics is not just a magic cabal. They have built up a giant IT company in line with the modern trends to disguise themselves."

"And?"

Search engines, online shopping, social media, and phone makers—every Japanese high schooler was aware how little people actually knew what was going on inside the companies involved in every part of their lives. And the stories about them tagging the entire world population to manage them or using AI speakers and personalized advertisements to create a new digital religion were, for the most part, nonsense.

"Instead of laughing off the extremely worldly powers of money and data, R&C Occultics has thoroughly researched them as their own trump cards. They are a magic cabal with a brand new set of values. It might not sound like much, but it is a major development. Normally, these cabals, cults, and other occult organizations will shun those worldly powers the more devoted they are."

"Eh? But I thought those phony cults were all rolling in dough."

"The phony ones don't count as part of the magic side."

"Then, um...what was I thinking about? Oh, right. What about Birdway's Dawn-Colored Sunlight? That little girl has a real wealthy aura to her, don't you think?"

“(That segue makes it sound like you’re calling the Dawn-Colored Sunlight a phony cult, but I guess I don’t need to defend one of the magic cabals we’re supposed to hunt down.)”

“?”

Kamijou frowned and Kanzaki sighed.

“It is true some of the more powerful cabals have plenty of funding, but that is dirty money. Think of them like a gang. They have money, but if their misdeeds come to light, that money is taken away. It’s all an illusion that can vanish at any moment. R&C Occultics, on the other hand, has earned their money above the board.”

Kanzaki quietly added that even accused witches had their assets seized.

She leaned against the fairly tall bar and Kamijou felt the need to look the other way.

“???”

She was confused, so she must not have noticed how her large chest was resting on the counter.

“Living simply is a virtue, but it doesn’t give you the power needed to defeat your enemies. But corrupting yourself and gathering dirty money will only destroy you in the end. So money is most effective as a weapon when earned honestly. R&C Occultics has a terribly *realistic* understanding of that.”

“So you’re saying they might actually be fighting for nothing more than money?”

“That isn’t quite the right nuance. They’re big enough to use money that way, so it isn’t just that they greedily want money. For Miss Sprengel, it might be like having pieces of her completed collection stolen from her.”

“She doesn’t want her stuff taken?”

“Doesn’t that monster seem like the type to shriek and throw a fit even after insisting something is only a game?”

She did indeed. He could easily imagine her throwing the gamepad across the room and cussing people out on an online game when someone else delivered the finishing blow on the boss or took her rare item.

She seemed weirdly fixated on minor details for a mysterious historical figure. She had an abnormal temper whenever even one little thing didn’t go her way. So to prevent that, she would immaturely use major spells against non-magician amateurs, trying to smash them to pieces. Even Kamijou had come to understand that individualism ran rampant on the magic side, but Anna was even more childish than *Crowley and Mathers*. Which was what made her actions so scarily hard to predict.

“Anna Sprengel probably did it on purpose.”

“Did what on purpose?”

“Getting captured and escaping was all part of her plan. It was a show of force for Academy City, demonstrating she could come and go as she pleased. She was telling them to give up trying to stop her.”

If so, was it possible Anna hadn’t been fighting seriously when Kamijou and St. Germain had been pouring everything they had into the battle? The difference in strength may have been so great that she had struggled to find a way to lose convincingly.

Kanzaki leaned on the counter and calmly continued her explanation. She smiled and watched Index happily scarfing down some bite-sized fried fish, but the words coming from her shapely lips were sharp.

“R&C Occultics can use every part of the online industry as a weapon—from individual mobile devices to the global infrastructure. Even if it requires buying out a company that specializes in whatever tech they need. They appear to be using online shopping as one primary pillar there. But that would be meaningless if the distribution centers and shipping routes could be used to locate their HQ. That is why they focused on drone deliveries.”

“Drone deliveries? So unmanned ones?”

“They can’t be captured and tortured for information, they can’t be bought or threatened, they do even the most dangerous work without complaint, and they won’t give in to intimidation. ...Even I was once moved to emotion by *a washing machine*, so I know how impressive modern machines are.”

The drone launch pads and product warehouses were located all over the world. R&C Occultics logos and billboards were as common a sight as traffic lights and hot spring symbols. But the flying drones never traveled to and from the R&C Occultics HQ. If all of the simple warehouses could be abandoned at a moment’s notice, then no one could find the giant IT company’s HQ by chasing after the drones.

Kanzaki sighed softly and scratched her smooth cheek with her index finger.

“But that doesn’t mean they are without flaw. With fiber optic cables and high-speed satellite communication, it takes less than a tenth of a second to send data all the way around the world, but following the many paths taken by all that data ultimately led us to LA. This is the R&C Occultics HQ. It matches the financial data hidden at the Cayman Islands, so there’s no doubting it.”

Kamijou was surprised to hear a magic specialist had used such a digital method, but then he remembered that this was a joint unit that included Academy City. Both groups must have played to their strengths.

The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

They had needed to accept that old adage in order to corner R&C Occultics like this.

“I doubt they can so easily transport away their giant drone management servers since they cover a space larger than a basketball court. I won’t say it is impossible, but they would have to buy a lot of time to separate out those parallel processing units and load them on trucks and helicopters. And buying that time would require making themselves extremely visible.”

“...”

“They see their money and data as a trump card on the same level as their curses, talismans, summoning, potion mixing, and spiritual possessions.”

“You mean like that sword you wear at your hip?”

“Yes. So they will protect it. They will work just as hard to protect the lowly power of money as they would a spiritual item or temple. But if we can prevent them from escaping here, we can take it from them. We can forever remove their power to repeat this nonsense.”

A soft tone sounded and Kamijou looked up to the ceiling just as a gentle flight attendant made an announcement.

“We will soon arrive at Los Angeles International Airport. Please take your eats and fasten your seatbelts before we begin landing.”

“This is going to be a rough landing,” cautioned Kanzaki with a cool look. She made sure the bar’s bottles and glasses were held in place by their special stoppers and locked the glass doors that covered the shelves. “The flight control and other airport workers have vanished. The Skybus 550 is a large plane, so the cockpit is reliant on sensors to see below. This will be a late-night emergency landing with no guidance from the ground radars and guide lights. Even professional airborne troops could crash in those conditions. We need to pray to our God in heaven the belly of the plane isn’t torn open by the shock.”

“I-Index!!”



After smoking three cigarettes and leaving the thick glass conference room, Styl Magnus icily commented on the scene before him.

“What do you think you are doing?”

“K-Kanjaki-shan...?”

Kamijou was in tears. He had pushed Index to the floor and laid protectively over her, but then nothing happened. They had a perfectly smooth landing. And the black ponytail woman only covered her mouth with a hand and laughed.

“I think it’s fun. It reminds me of our time with her, Stiyl.”

## Part 2

The British government’s plane had arrived safely at the Los Angeles airport.

But leaving the plane proved to be a challenge. Once they got the thick door open, the cold pierced right through Kamijou’s twelve-hundred-yen synthetic jacket. He also realized just how far up the door was from the asphalt without a stair car. They ended up pulling out something like an inflatable slide to get out.

Once Kamijou, Index, Stiyl, and Kanzaki had their feet on the ground, the next step was already underway.

The plane cut away the balloon slide(?), shut its airtight door, and slowly pulled away from the landing runway. Kamijou was nearly run over by the giant wheels and started to move out of the way, but Kanzaki grabbed his collar in a hand. He realized a moment later he had nearly run into the exhaust of the turbofan engine hanging from the main wing. The massive plane was turning around so it could move to the takeoff runway.

The boy shouted at the ponytail woman so the great din would not drown him out.

“What!? Why is the plane taking off!?”

“Everyone on the ground here disappeared, so it would be dangerous to leave the pilots and flight attendants here. They will fly outside of LA and wait out over the ocean so they can provide us a relatively quick escape if we need it. They can wait there indefinitely with the help of a refueling aircraft.”

He was also surprised to find such a large plane could turn without the assistance of a tow truck. Kanzaki said they had given it that ability so they could leave a foreign airport on their own if diplomatic negotiations went bad.

At any rate, it was now just the four of them in Los Angeles.

Thirty million people had disappeared in this city. The silence of the night actually felt painful. It was easy to forget this was a metropolis greater than Tokyo.

The police would not arrive if they called 110 or 911 or whatever else. None of the usual assumptions applied on this silent battlefield. The thought made Kamijou shudder. There was no one here to stop whatever might happen.

At the very least, this was not a natural phenomenon.

It was an abnormal situation caused by someone's malicious action. And he had just flown in there.

He noticed something else once the airplane's exhaust heat and noise were gone.

"Brr, it's cold. I can see my breath."

"Count yourself lucky a blizzard or whiteout isn't reducing visibility. The city is apparently under an abnormal cold wave with temperatures twenty below freezing. You might just feel cold for now, but you need to worry about your fingertips and ears before long."

"..."

How could that sexy woman say that when she was wearing a T-shirt that showed off her navel and jeans with one entire leg missing? She was the old-fashioned samurai type and she may have been that one kid in every class that always wore shorts in the winter. Or had she actually trained herself below a frigid waterfall, not noticing how see-through her wet clothing was?

Standing around on the runway was not going to accomplish anything.

"But what do we do now? Can you just walk out of an airport?"

"What, were you planning to steal one of the fuel trucks or tow trucks to smash through the fence? The terminal is made for people to pass through, so I would recommend using that, numbskull."

The grumpy priest's retort shut Kamijou up.

Speaking of the trucks, a nearby fuel truck was coated with white frost, like the inside of a freezer. Before even worrying about the engine oil and battery fluid, it was doubtful they could get the door open. Kamijou was afraid his hand would stick if he touched it. Styl's fire magic might be able to defrost it, but Kamijou was afraid *that* would cause an explosion.

A high school boy like him also didn't know much about cars, so he followed after the priest.

"What will we be checking first?" he asked.

"The R&C Occultics HQ takes precedence of course, but 30 million people wouldn't have up and disappeared if it was safe to just walk straight there."

They were on a path that must have been meant for the fuel trucks. Stiyl stepped on a "no open flames" warning painted on the asphalt and lit a new cigarette.

"So I want to start by investigating what happened here. How far can we safely go and what triggers the disappearances? I want to know all the rules regarding an approach to their HQ. If the people vanished against their will, there must be some records left at the police stations, in the hospitals, and at the field base for England and Academy City's joint unit. If we can dig up their dying message, we should have a better chance at survival."

Dying message.

Stiyl already viewed the people of LA as dead and gone. That may have been the most reasonable viewpoint since there was no reason to take an optimistic view of R&C Occultics CEO Anna Sprengel. ...But at the same time, it felt like Stiyl was hoping Kamijou would be able to pull off an unexpected outcome outside of that more dire viewpoint.

"(Male tsunderes can be so hard to read.)"

"Whoa, Othinus!?"

Kamijou began some frantic whispering when he heard a girl's voice from within his collar, but the fifteen-centimeter god had no intention of remaining hidden. She squirmed on out of his jacket.

"(What, did you really think I would stay behind and watch over your dorm room? Hmph, the other girls around you don't know how the game is played. You don't wait to be given a role—you create a role for yourself.)"

Her confidence was fine and all, but did that stupid god know what a passport and immigration control were? But Kamijou was afraid to ask that out loud since he knew she would just insist that a god was unbound by human law.

"Huh?" said Kamijou once they arrived at the terminal building. "What is that? Packing tape?"

"It's duct tape. I guess you don't see it much in Japan."

Thick, waterproof-looking tape had been applied to the glass double doors. A long vertical strip went right down the center to cover the gap there. No, there was more than that. A closer look showed the makeshift weather stripping running along the top and bottom and even along the hinges.

“Were they trying to keep something out?”

“But what?”

They peeled the sturdy tape away and Index easily opened the door. Yes, she only had to grab the knob and turn it. It was not locked and there was no makeshift barricade of tables or chairs pressed against it on the inside.

But that made the thorough tape job a mystery. It definitely wasn’t normal, but if they went to all that effort, why hadn’t they locked it the normal way?

“???”

Kamijou tilted his head but still stepped inside. The world seemed to change around him. He had not paid much attention to it outside, but the warm air forced an odd sense of relief into his heart. It was 3 AM, long after the last flight would leave. The lights were all out, but the heat was on. Was that for the late-night maintenance and janitorial workers?

They were using the terminal building to leave the airport. They could travel through the deserted facility however they liked without anyone yelling at them, but the path intended for this purpose had to be the easiest one.

An electronic alarm began to sound.

“Hyahhhhhh!? Wh-what, what, what!?”

“Ah ha ha! It’s okay, Index. It’s just a gate alarm. ...Wait? A gate?”

Kamijou laughed, but then the smile froze on his face.

It was hard to tell with no one at the reception desk and the lights out, but what gate had they just walked through without permission? Styl and Kanzaki didn’t seem to care as they continued on ahead, but Kamijou rapidly grew nervous when he looked alternately between their leaving backs and the gate he had just passed.

“U-um, Othinus-san? Please tell me that doesn’t say what I think it does.”

“Try studying the language before traveling somewhere. That is the immigration control gate. Welcome, illegal immigrant, to the land of freedom where anything goes.”

“Oh, no, no, no, no!!”

“Give up. The three-second rule only applies to food. Hurrying back through the gate doesn’t erase the crime you committed.”

There was nothing he could do. He was no better than the fifteen-centimeter illegal immigrant god. He sobbed and pushed on Index’s back to catch up with the two combat magicians.

But something had already drawn the attention of those British magicians.

Kanzaki looked cautiously around the dark passageway.

“There are no rats or roaches either. It wasn’t just the humans who disappeared.”

Kamijou jumped. She was saying they *weren’t* here, but just hearing the name of those close neighbors made him think about them. He had no real basis for it, but he imagined American roaches were extra big and nasty. And resistant to bug spray too.

Meanwhile, Stiyl pressed his index finger against the window’s stainless steel frame.

He ran his finger along it just like a sister-in-law checking for filth.

“...Sand?”

“Man, they sure were persistent to get all thirty million people.”

Kamijou was out of his element, so he just said whatever came to his mind.

The number seemed too big to him. Or maybe it was the lack of corpses and bloodstains. Whatever the case, it didn’t feel real to him.

“I mean, not even LA’s government has an accurate population number with all the illegal immigrants and homeless people, right? And there must have been a ton of people none of that paperwork can track, like tourists, long-distance truckers, and American-style hitchhikers. Tracking down every single person no matter where they’re hiding in this giant city couldn’t be easy. Sounds like a lot of unnecessary work to me.”

In fact, why even be that thorough?

R&C Occultics had supposedly done *something* to strike back against the joint Anglican and Academy City force, but how did attacking Los Angeles as a whole help with that? It would make sense if all the people near the joint force had been caught in the blast, but would they really bother erasing every single person on the map like this? And if so, why? Eliminating the people at the very edge of the map would do nothing to damage the joint force approaching their HQ.

“Maybe they didn’t need to,” suggested Othinus.

Kamijou looked confused, so Index explained.

“I think she means they didn’t need to target everyone. That would also mean they didn’t have to load up the unconscious victims and carry them away. Hmm, for example, what if they used a spell that detonated a massive bomb in the center of LA and everyone hit by the invisible light it produced was eliminated? Then they wouldn’t have to search every nook and cranny, right? But it also prevents them from limiting the targets. Maybe everyone in LA was hit by whatever it was once it was activated.”

“...”

The cruelty was in the situation, not in Index herself. She had the knowledge of at least 103,001 grimoires stored in her head, so to her, drawing on this knowledge was no different from recalling how to use chopsticks.

“It’s also strange their spell made the thirty million people ‘disappear’ instead of just killing them.” Othinus gave an exasperated shrug from his shoulder. “To restate the obvious, Anna is an undeniably bad person. And if you’re enough of a scumbag to know how heavy a corpse is, you should know all too well how much trouble it is to make a human-sized hunk of flesh disappear.”

“Heh...heh heh heh heh.”

“What, is your poor little brain overloaded? Fine, I’ll put it in terms a good person can understand: try ordering sixty or seventy kilograms of frozen beef online. On the bone. Then drag it into the bathroom and cover yourself up with gloves, goggles, a mask, a hat, and a raincoat and place some plastic sheets over the floor and walls. Then get to work with a knife, a saw, a hammer, a juicer, or whatever you want really. Break down all the flesh and bone, separate it out into bags, and then throw it out somewhere it won’t be found. And after all that’s done, fill a spray bottle with reagent and spray it all over the walls and floor. You can buy luminol for just over ten thousand yen at the click of a button. ...Once all that work is done, you’ll be sweaty and exhausted and the next day you’ll be a mess of pain in all those muscles you rarely use. And no matter how perfectly you think you’ve done, a single drop of blood you missed can be a critical mistake. Washing it away with the shower isn’t enough to hide it.”

The more Othinus explained, the less Kamijou understood.

“And we’re talking about thirty million people. Every last one of them is a real person, not an empty can or plastic bottle being recycled in the factory. Disposing of the bodies is hard enough, but holding them while alive is even worse. The work costs would be astronomical. Besides, where have the victims gone?”

"You mean, um, I guess...it isn't easy to find a dumping ground or storage center no one can find?"

"There is that, but people were going to notice something was wrong no matter what, so why not just leave their defeated enemies where they lay? It's such bizarrely wasted effort, like someone loudly kicking down the front door so they can sneak through the building. Whether you're skipping town forever or leaving on an unannounced vacation, there's no merit to disappearing overnight *unless you make sure nothing else about the situation looks suspicious.*"

Japan's most famous domed stadium could hold around fifty thousand or maybe a little more. This would require six hundred of those stadiums. And they would need a secret garden that no one could ever find in an age of readily-searchable maps and images. ...Everything was bigger in the USA, from the tubes of toothpaste sold in the pharmacies to the Grand Canyon, but Kamijou doubted even they could supply a secret base like that.

Index raised a finger to explain.

"Thus, we can conclude they didn't choose to do this; their magic forced it to happen this way. It can be easy to lose focus with something on this scale, but the situation is actually pretty simple. What we need to know now is the frequency."

"What frequency?"

"Of those 'bomb detonations'." Othinus kept it short to keep him cautious. "If this is a once-a-millennium attack, there's nothing to worry about. But if it happens at the top of every hour, we're in a lot of trouble. We could be caught in the same attack if we wait around. Ever since they abandoned the locals and 'courageously' withdrew from Vietnam, the American military always makes sure to secure air superiority and a supply line before doing anything. Why is that? And why do they love to launch a heavy cyber attack to confuse the enemy's defenses and launch hundreds cruise missiles from the sea before moving in? Because their past experiences have taught them that the result of a war is determined well before the boots are on the ground. When you have a hand you know can bring victory, the trick is to keep using the same tactics to wear down the enemy forces. So..."

Othinus paused there.

Was that because she could only speculate? Or was she unsure if she should tell him this?

So it was Index who ended up blurting it out like it was nothing.

*"So was that initial attack really the end of it? If this is a long-term spell that activates weekly or monthly, then we just opened the oven door and shoved our heads inside."*

## Part 3

He had not thought much of it when going inside, but going back outside was more of a challenge.

They knew all those people had disappeared, but everything else about it was a mystery.

So they wanted to know the rules at play here: what was safe and what would get them attacked? Ideally, they would get that information before attacking the HQ building and without R&C Occultics noticing them.

“Yikes, it’s cold!!!???”

The chill seemed to squeeze at Kamijou’s skin—no, at his heart. Getting used to the heated building had been a bad idea. The cold pierced right through his thin synthetic jacket. He actually started stepping back into the building, so an annoyed Styl had to kick him back outside.

In the empty streets, Kamijou stood in the center of an intersection between eight-lane roads without even paying attention to the light’s color. He felt like he had stepped into another world.

“What’s wrong, Touma?” asked Index.

“Nothing...”

He could see his breaths and his ears hurt. The cold was so bad he was pretty sure a wet towel would freeze even as he swung it through the air, but there was more than just that. He had an awkward sense that he was spying on a place he was not meant to be.

The traffic light’s colors kept changing, but there were no other pedestrians or cars and the large screen on a building wall was loudly playing a cosmetic ad no one was around to see anymore. The headline news showed a familiar face. The bearded President was saying something into the mics surrounding him. With so much English all around him, Kamijou pulled out his Transla-Pen and let its mic pick up the English conversation.

“I am one. I think love is free and...”

Kamijou gave the pen a confused look.

“Huh? Do I have the settings on this thing right? Hey, Index, what is he actually saying?”

“Let’s see, ahem... ‘I am single. I think nothing should impede our freedom to love whoever we like and express that love however we like. So I will hold my head high while I say: goo goo gaga, mommy!!’”

A flame roared as it consumed oxygen. If Kamijou had not immediately held up his right hand, Stiyl's flame sword would have reduced him to ashes.

"Why would you make that girl say things like that! You're just asking to be killed now, aren't you!?"

"Gah!? Bwah!! What is wrong with this country!? Is the entire place nothing but landmines!?"

Anyway, that President clearly hadn't changed. Was he afraid of anything? Kamijou was reluctant to ask because he was fairly certain the man would say he was scared of manju.

But that footage looked like it came from another world. Kamijou could not believe he was in the same country as that smile. He felt like the screen was being used to communicate between Earth and Mars.

The presence of electricity actually made it feel colder.

He might have been able to accept it easier in a complete blackout.

"At least there aren't any fires," said Kanzaki.

"Probably due to all the AI appliances and smart houses controlled through the internet," replied Stiyl.

Those comments led Kamijou to belatedly wonder about the kitchens in all the homes where the people had vanished. With the fire fighters gone too, the smallest fire could engulf the metropolis in a great conflagration, but that had not happened. That was thanks to the machines automatically putting out the fires.

Kamijou was honestly impressed.

"Way to go, LA. Those aren't even common in Academy City yet."

"Hmph. Have you forgotten, human? Your Academy City is twenty or thirty years ahead of the outside world."

"?"

"Those who stop to think things through before adopting a new technology can progress further, faster. A power system hooked up to the internet? An online home? The companies supplying those services aren't going to tell you all the risks involved. Just look at computers and phones—electronics are riddled with vulnerabilities the manufacturers aren't aware of. R&C Occultics's IT team would be able to abuse those systems to set fire to any home they want or spy on you from the other side of the globe."

"Aww..."

“What, trying to win me over with your moe sleeves? Well, if you’re okay with giving the unseen online masses access to your gas line and front door lock, be my guest. If your luck holds out, you might just live comfortably like that. Me, though? I’m sick of relying on luck.”

Kamijou wasn’t sure if the magic girl’s paranoia was impressive or concerning.

At any rate, it was hard to believe the city really was abandoned. It reminded him of a ghost ship. If he peeked inside a nearby office, he was pretty sure he would find the coffee pot was still boiling and there might still be delivery drones flying around with packages.

“There it is again.”

Kamijou held his body for warmth and looked to the first-floor tenant of a nearby building. It was a burger chain that had restaurants in Japan too. He ignored all the slang-filled English, but the big picture in the window was enough to know they were advertising a triple burger with beef, pork, and chicken patties. Since he had not seen it in Academy City before, it may have been a regional thing, or it might end up in Japan eventually.

But his focus was primarily on the entrance. The glass door had makeshift weatherstripping applied with thick duct tape. That gave it a very unwelcoming feel, but the door itself was ordinary, non-bulletproof glass. He was sure he could break it just by grabbing a stone off the ground and throwing it. It reminded him of the similar mismatch he had noticed at the airport.

“What’s the point of this? Why bother with the weatherstripping when they could lower the metal shutter?”

“It may not be to keep people out, human. Academy City will have been distracted from monitoring their people here due to Handcuffs, so maybe *someone desperate for victory ended up using a poison gas weapon in a foreign city.*”

He was not sure what she meant by “Handcuffs”, but he could not focus on that right now.

The mention of poison gas made him look down at his shoulder where the god sat with legs crossed. She looked exasperated.

“It’s only a possibility. I have no particular reason to think it’s that. But it would explain why R&C Occultics hasn’t said anything and all the infected bodies have been removed. Remember, we don’t know for sure that massive IT company is behind the disappearances.”

Othinus was not serious about this...he hoped. If she actually suspected it, she would have warned him not to touch things.

Still, thirty million people were missing.

It was enough to inspire some absurd theories and a fair amount of fear.

“I-it’s too cold,” complained Index while shivering.

Come to think of it, did nuns wear different habits during the winter? Not to mention that hers was held together with safety pins, so it had to be drafty. And just like a cough at a student assembly could be contagious, her mention of the cold kept Kamijou from focusing on anything else. He shivered and asked a question of the entire team.

“So what should we check first? You mentioned wanting to check the police and hospital records, right?”

“Our first stop is right over there.”

Styl pointed with his lit cigarette even though they were in a no-smoking area. Was that because the city was empty, or did he simply not care?

There was a decent-sized space in between two skyscrapers. It must have been a basketball court to begin with.

But it was now filled with thick, moss green tents. And instead of small triangular camping tents, these were garage-like tunnel tents.

“Overlord Revenge was meant to land on the West Coast and attack the R&C Occultics HQ building in downtown LA. It was meant to be a rapid strike.” Styl blew out some cigarette smoke. “But LA had become unfamiliar territory for the Anglicans and Academy City. The largest city on the West Coast had been transformed into a Rosicrucian hideout without the US government even noticing. So they must have set up some field bases on their way to attack the HQ building. They needed to claim some territory for themselves or else they could be trapped between the building’s defenders and another unit attacking from behind.”

Kamijou breathed a sigh of relief. He had already set off the alarm in the airport, but trespassing on ordinary private property felt like an even worse violation.

They would be treasure hunting without permission regardless, but he was more comfortable with some tents set up outside than breaking into those weather-stripped LA buildings. He had to preserve that feeling. These houses and buildings were abandoned, but they were not ancient ruins abandoned centuries ago. He could not just waltz on in and help himself to whatever was inside.

“I hope this is safe. I wouldn’t want that unmanned machine gun to start swiveling toward us.”

Othinus’s whispered remark made Kamijou cower down. That squat three-legged thing could move on its own?

But Index walked right on in before he could stop her.

“Now, then,” said Styl on his way to one of the thick tents.

Kanzaki was a little more considerate because she looked back just once to give him a warning.

“You can search around if you like, but do not touch any of the firearms or explosives. I know you can’t read the English labels, but be on the lookout for the words ‘danger’, ‘caution’, and ‘warning’.”

“It’s a military base,” said Othinus. “You might as well tell him not to touch anything.”

Kanzaki set off to quickly search the base, her long ponytail swishing behind her, and Othinus breathed an exasperated sigh. Kamijou and Index exchanged a glance.

“What should we do?”

“The key to survival is securing food, Touma.”

Index was her normal self, at least. Left to her own devices, she would probably consume every last one of the base’s rations—or whatever they called their portable food—so he decided to accompany her and restrain her when necessary. After all, he was officially Grimoire Library Index Librorum Prohibitorum’s “chaperone”.

“This place is incredible... What are those things?”

“Grr! They look like mechs. Does that mean they only keep gasoline as food?”

Kamijou groaned when he took a peek inside one of the tents that reminded him of a garage or a tunnel.

He was finally seeing Japanese again, but that only made him feel even more lost.

This was supposed to be an Academy City field base, but it looked more like one of the high-tech car factories he had seen videos of. There was a large work table that moved up and down with a jack and countless robot arms surrounded it. Looking up, he even saw metal rails and cranes for carrying machinery around. It looked more like a dentist’s office for large machines than a place for living soldiers.

Yet the ground crunched an awful lot below his feet. Anywhere that worked with semiconductors needed to be even more sterile and dust-free than an operating room for humans, but maybe that wasn’t possible with a *field* base. Maybe they had to be prepared to deal with this level of filth.

Even inside the tent, a few metal containers were stacked up. They were far from organized, so it looked a lot like someone who had yet to finish unpacking after moving to a new home.

“Danger, caution, warning...”

“Those ones have all three,” pointed out Othinus.

Kamijou scrambled back, but that was when he noticed the stickers labeling the metal doors.

*Five Over – Modelcase: Railgun.*

*Five Over – Modelcase: Meltdowner.*

“Wait, wait. Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait...”

He pulled out his Transla-Pen, but only let it wander aimlessly through the air.

He did not want to trace those letters and confirm they said what he thought they said. The labels were enough of a shock, but the careless way the containers were piled up was even more frightening.

And there was more.

One of the metal boxes was given a special spot in the very back. It had a much more sinister label attached diagonally across its door.

It almost looked like a cursed charm.

*Five Over OS – Modelcase: Accelerator.*

“U-um, Othinus-san? My, uh, English must be worse than I thought. Eh heh heh. Because this can’t possibly say what I think it does...can it?”

“Use your Transla-Pen.”

“No, no, no! If I do that, it’ll appear to me in undeniable Japanese and I could never accept it! I’m too scared!!”

He had no desire to check inside the container. He could only pray nothing like this had been set loose in the abandoned city.

“Anyway.” Othinus sighed from his shoulder. “Academy City’s technology is twenty or thirty years ahead of the outside world, remember?”

“?”

“That means the militaries out here are going to trend toward mechanized and unmanned warfare in the future. These have been upgraded since we last saw them, so they can switch between manned and unmanned. Hybrid weapons like that may become the mainstream, but it’s so boring and uninspired. These only lead to unfeeling wars ruled by efficiency and calculations. ...And it raises a concerning possibility.”

“What’s that?”

“R&C Occultics is a massive IT company known the world over. And they’re an ultra-corrupt company that tears down the world’s barriers to use magic alongside science. I have my doubts Academy City could really take the initiative while using *only* science. Hey, you there.”

“Yes?” asked Index, turning toward them.

Othinus haughtily crossed her arms and pointed at a random device with her chin.

“What would you do if I asked you to break through that computer’s firewall?”

“Um...what’s a firewall?”

“Basically, it’s a form of numerical code.”

“Then I would check the stars and pray to God!”

“...”

Kamijou was speechless.

But not because it was absurd.

“Do you remember now?” asked Othinus, smiling.

Kamijou gulped and hesitantly turned toward Index.

“On the 24th... Didn’t you break through a phone’s password lock faster than Misaka or the Sisters could with their electricity powers?”

“That was just rearranging the numbers with a random number table, right? Those codes are used in the magic world too. It’s rare for a grimoire to be directly readable, for example.”

“She can do that *without any magic power of her own*,” said Othinus. “Then what could someone do with actual magic? They can break passwords by looking to the stars and mess with the contents of quantum encryption by praying to their god. Now, how is a science-only group supposed to defend against an attack like that?”

Kamijou was speechless again. In modern battles, people were not immediately sent to the truly dangerous places. Satellites and drones would be used to get footage that would be carefully examined. This situation was far from ordinary, but why hadn't they done that here? Yes, the magic side was leading the recovery, but they also couldn't trust those electronics. Not when it required an electronic warfare battle with an international IT company that had more than just science at its disposal.

"But this is only one possibility with no real proof yet. It's just an idea I had, so you don't need to take it too seriously. But if it does turn out to be true, it is possible that *Academy City's own weapons were hijacked and used against them*. Combine that with my previous poison gas theory and you have a decent explanation for these mysterious disappearances."

They were surrounded by computers, but Kamijou had no idea how to check for hacking or viruses. He briefly thought of the #3 electric girl back in that Japanese hospital, but that wasn't much help when she wasn't here.

"Look, I found some hamburger steak!!" rejoiced Index. "But it's frozen solid. I can't eat it like this."

"Wait, that's not meant to be frozen. Is it so cold the boil-in-a-bag stuff has frozen solid?"

Kamijou had no obligation to help with Styl's work, but he was worried about the people who had lived in this cold, empty city.

He wasn't looking for a program or a script. He wandered around looking for something that an ordinary person could recognize as a clue. Eventually, he discovered a box smaller than a dryer in one corner of the garage-like tent. It was a safe. Carelessly, there was some thick paper caught in the door, preventing it from locking. That actually creeped him out because it suggested how chaotic things had been here.

"What is that?" asked a voice from atop his head.

The half-open door did not reveal stacks of cash or gold bars within the thick safe. It only contained a watch. But not even a Swiss one with gems covering the face. It was made of glass and plastic and the band was colorful rubber. It was weirdly digital and honestly looked pretty cheap. He pulled it out and tilted his head at what he found.

"A smartwatch?"

He was fairly certain this accessory was meant to sync with a phone to monitor the wearer's health and simplify operation of the phone. As a poor student who was more worried about getting enough to eat than going on a diet, he had little need for that sort of luxury gadget, but he had a different reason for questioning its presence here.

"This model...*doesn't work without a phone, right?* It's useless without syncing, so why would it be in the safe without the phone?"

“Trust your instincts, human. This is the same as the missing thirty million. If something strange has happened, there must be a strange reason behind it. ...There is more to this watch. Storing it in the safe on its own must be a message from whoever put it there. They were saying the watch is important on its own.”

He pressed the button on the side that was made to look like a watch’s crown, but it displayed a connection error instead of a lock screen. Was that what it did without the phone nearby? It couldn’t do anything without a phone, just like wireless headphones couldn’t play music on their own. However, a name, presumably of the user, was displayed across the entire face of the watch.

Index moved her cheek right up next to his to get a look and read off the name.

“Melzabeth...Grocery?”

“Hey, over here!!”

Kamijou’s thoughts were cut off by a shout from outside.

They left the tent to find Stiyl holding a thick stack of papers.

The priest blew out some smoke in annoyance.

“We can’t trust the reports they left. It looks like they were too confused to make proper records, so we won’t find any further answers in their data.”

“There are unmanned weapons all over the place, so what about their camera footage?”

“Do you know how to get past the authorization screen to view the data? It uses analog involuntary muscle fiber movement identification. That means it reads the unconscious trembling of your fingertips, which comes straight from the cerebellum.”

Kamijou winced. He briefly thought of what Index had said a bit ago, but knowing how to decode grimoires did not give you free rein over computers. If it did, they would have had her manipulating computers on the level of Misaka Mikoto by now. In a way, Stiyl and Kanzaki knew Index’s specs better than Kamijou, so they would rely on her abilities when they were useful. That was the entire reason she had been taken from Academy City, after all.

The pointy-haired boy tilted his head.

“Then what next? The police? The hospital?”

“There is more we can do. Although it might seem primitive to an Academy City student like you.”

With that, Kanzaki sprinkled some kind of liquid at her feet.

Kamijou waited a bit, but...

“?”

Nothing happened. The liquid froze, but that was hardly a surprise when it was twenty below freezing. However, this was apparently how it was supposed to work.

“That was tannin,” explained Kanzaki.

“Tan-what?”

“You can find it in tea. And did you know it reacts strongly to iron and can cause black discolorations? That is one reason teacups are usually porcelain.”

What was her point?

Kamijou had gotten in the habit of asking questions instead of thinking for himself, but then it hit him.

“Iron as in...blood?”

“The joint Anglican and Academy City force was attacked by R&C Occultics and then thirty million people disappeared from LA.”

This was probably a spell that used tea, not just tannin itself.

“But as you can see, there is no trace of bloodshed inside one of the bases that had to be their primary targets,” smoothly explained Kanzaki. “This could be a major hint toward figuring out what happened.”

This meant R&C Occultics did not slaughter the Academy City personnel with blades and guns and then drag away their corpses. But then what *did* happen?

Had they been attacked in a bloodless fashion?

Had the Academy City people been taken elsewhere before they were dealt with?

Or had Academy City caused the disappearances, so none of their own people were harmed?

“All this digital nonsense isn’t how we magicians do things.” Styl’s cigarette wiggled up and down in the corner of his mouth. “We can get better information using a spell to draw out residual thoughts. So back away. I’ll be getting the grimoire library’s help for this magic, so I don’t want your right hand getting in the way.”

“Yeah, yeah. I want you to get this done with as soon as possible too. Index, you be a good girl, okay? ...Um, Kanzaki?”

Kanzaki Kaori did not respond.

Her eyes were fixated on a point in the distance.

“?”

Puzzled and sensing tension in the air, Kamijou followed her gaze to see one of the skyscrapers jutting into the night sky. It was located past the buildings surrounded the basketball court, so Kanzaki was staring through the gap between some of the buildings.

But now was not the time to be impressed with her observational skills.

There was something there.

The clean, straight lines of the artificial structure were somewhat disturbed by a small black dot. Was that a human figure!?

“Here it comes,” whispered Kanzaki Kaori.

Just then, Kamijou saw something flash.

A bluish-white blade of light stretched out endlessly to slice through the Los Angeles night.

But that was only an illusion.

“I-it’s sand!! They sent out a bunch of pressurized sand, like an industrial cutter!!”

It was over by the time he had identified it as sand. It rushed in so fast he could have mistaken it for an attack made of light. It was too late to act by the time he had noticed it and shouted about it.

*However.*

“Hm.” Kanzaki Kaori did not even draw her nearly-two-meter sword. “This magic is not known to the Anglican Church, so this must be an R&C Occultics defender. But a cutting attack would splatter blood everywhere, so it doesn’t fit with thirty million people vanishing without a trace.”

The sand magic approached with enough force to slice through a tanker, but it scattered when it hit the scabbard she removed from her belt and held up horizontally.

Several lines of bluish-white light raced through the space around her a short moment later. They were the glint of seven wires. Kamijou did not know how to use magic and he could no longer borrow St. Germain’s power, but the light filling the space around him reminded him of a string figure. Whatever it was, he figured it was necessary for her spell.

She was a Saint.

Those extraordinary magicians could draw on a fraction of the Son of God's power because their physical characteristics so closely matched his.

But a direct hit was not the only threat, so Kamijou spoke up in a panic.

"I-it isn't over yet."

Kanzaki had blocked the sand magic—the cutter?—launched straight at them from the skyscraper rooftop, but the large shopping mall and parking garage in between had been fully sliced through.

"It's coming here! Kanzaki, now isn't the time to stand around and think!!"

Had the direction of the collapse been part of the enemy's plan?

Worse, the mall appeared to have included a large gym. The indoor pool kept warm with a heater or a boiler caused a large white explosion like a massive water balloon had burst, scattering the water across the minus-twenty-degree world.

It slammed into the ground and froze over while approaching with who-knows-how-many tons of weight behind it.

"Run to a nearby building," spat Stiyl with a click of his tongue.

"Eh? Huh?"

Kamijou was confused, but the priest did not bother with him.

Instead, he grabbed Index by the collar and left.

"A tent isn't enough to stop this. You'll be engulfed and frozen like a mammoth!"

Kanzaki could not bring herself to abandon anyone, so she explained while falling back. That just left Kamijou. He had to get running if he was going to catch up. Stiyl had already sliced through the basketball court fence with a flame sword and left with Index struggling in his other arm.

"Kanzaki, use the surface area!!"

"I can try, but I can't guarantee it will freeze!"

The magicians shouted to each other and then the thin wires sliced and diced the wall of water, making it bubble. But it only lasted a moment. The small blocks of water crashed back together to create a single torrent once more.

They were in no position to worry about this being private property.

Kamijou and the others ran into the first floor of a building—a shop full of fancy-looking Grapple phones.

(There aren't any stairs!? But we don't have time for an elevator!!)

"Ahhhhhhh!!!????"

The massive gray sherbet created from all the concrete dust, glass shards, and sand was drawing close. Styl started to attach some rune cards to the windows, but he gave up and ducked behind cover. Kamijou didn't know how the magic worked, but Styl must have decided he didn't have enough time.

Kamijou grabbed Index who was standing nearby and dove behind a showcase lined with MilliPhones.

He heard an explosive rumble.

The walls shook.

All of the windows were audibly broken by something like sharp ice spears and the sofas and magazine racks by the windows were knocked over.

Kamijou was actually thankful of the minus-twenty-degree weather for saving them.

There were one hundred meters between her and the broken indoor pool. If the water had not fully cooled and frozen in that space, they would have been forced to go for a hellish ice water swim that might have stopped their hearts.

He held Index close and trembled in fear while desperately searching for some silver lining here. Without one, he feared his spirit would break.

(C'mon, R&C Occultics! Grapple's a fellow IT company! Can't you get along with them!?)

"It seems slicing the water to increase the surface area sped up the freezing process enough to help. The more surface area, the more of it is in direct contact with the cold air."

"You mean that wasn't a coincidence? Yeah, I guess it would be weird for me to get lucky, huh?"

They had survived for now, but the tension remained. That had only been a secondary effect. The unseen magician could do the same thing as many times as they liked and that initial long-distance sniper attack would be deadly for anyone who couldn't break the sound barrier and knock a bullet from the air like Kanzaki could. Kamijou's Imagine Breaker could negate any and all magic, but that meant nothing if he could not react in time.

The shopping mall and parking garage had been fully sliced through, so building walls would not shield them. Not even all the water in a pool had fully absorbed the damage. Walls were only good for hiding them from view and that might not work if they didn't know where the sniper was located. The fear of exactly that led Kamijou to shout.

"Oh, right! Where is that bastard!? Did you see where they went!?"

"They appear to have left," calmly stated Kanzaki Kaori.

They could be sniped at any moment if they were seen, but she had still been monitoring that person's movements. She really was extraordinary in a multitude of ways.

But the other professional magician was focused on something else.

Stiyl Magnus asked about something other than the mysterious attacker.

"How did you know?"

"Know what?"

*"That magic attack broke the sound barrier, so how did you recognize it as sand at first glance? You shouldn't have noticed until its speed dropped after Kanzaki repelled it."*

Oh, that.

He had admittedly cheated on that one.

"I found this."

Kamijou showed off the smartwatch. It was a support device meant to sync with a phone, so he could only check the time and his blood pressure with it right now.

However.

He flipped it over and ran his Transla-Pen over the underside. When the mic at the top picked up a foreign language or the pen tip traced out a foreign text, it would translate it into Japanese.

And when he traced it along the scratches on the underside of the watch, it produced an artificial voice.

"Caution: sand."

"This smartwatch was separated from the main phone and stored in a safe on that base."

Kamijou pushed the button on the side to show the connection error that appeared instead of a lock screen and to show the name he assumed belonged to the owner: Melzabeth Grocery.

“With the face, the frame, the band, the fastener, the colors, the small scratches, and the various smudges, I just know there has to be more to this watch.”

## Part 4

To reiterate, building walls would not shield them. Once the magician knew where they were, the sand magic would break through the wall, so they could not stay in the phone shop forever. When located, the standard solution was to move. Kanzaki said the magician had already left, but it paid to be careful. Kamijou’s group left through the back entrance, crossed the narrow back alley, and entered the adjacent building.

Even moving one meter would help as long as they were not seen.

That was why a smokescreen could protect you despite not physically blocking anything. Even flimsy walls had their uses.

“Index, what was that sand magic? Knowing its weaknesses would be great.”

“Hmm.”

Kamijou did a double take.

She didn’t have a clear answer.

“I think it was mostly that, but on the other hand...I can’t explain it all with the Rose.”

“You’re kidding, right? Are you saying they’re using something you can’t figure out even with the knowledge of 103,001 grimoires, or however many it is now?”

The process they needed to survive this was crumbling around them.

They had escaped into a watch shop. The watches all looked really fancy, but this close to the airport, it may have been a duty-free shop.

“Watches, huh?”

Kamijou glanced down at the smartwatch he had found.

Once he started thinking that way, everything felt like it held special meaning.

Why was the face square? Why was the customizable band colored red and black? What about the fingerprint smudge on the upper left of the glass? Then there were the many small scratches on the underside and the band. He flipped it every which way hoping something would come into focus like a piece of trick art.

But...

"I guess it won't come to me that easily," he semi-casually muttered.

Since the watch's owner had not used a paper report or digital data, they must not have wanted just anyone to read the watch's message. This Melzabeth person had clearly left a secret message in a form that could not be discovered through ordinary means. Since they had wanted to hide it, would they have made sure it wasn't that easy to solve? Was there any point in trying to figure it out?

But Index saw things differently.

"The message might actually be really simple—you just can't see it."

"What makes you say that?"

"That's always how it is when you hide the recipe for the Philosopher's Stone in a painting or hide a secret in a portrait of Shakespeare. It doesn't look complicated because of some difficult code being used. It's hard to solve because it uses symbols only the person who made it understands, like the sun representing gold or a pelican representing the red stone. Once you know what to look for, it's obvious. That's how messages usually work."

He heard a sigh from his shoulder before Othinus joined the conversation.

"Human, you're looking at a dying message someone made and hid in a hurry. Do you really think they had enough time and were in any mental state to prepare a complicated random number table or equation and then compile a coded message based on it?"

"..."

Now that she mentioned it...

And the god of magic, deception, and war was not done with her explanation.

"On top of that, a dying message is a failure if it even looks like a complex message. All the murderer has to do is *eliminate everything that looks like writing or a code, whether they can actually decode it or not*. Any mysterious code or text that gathers attention at a crime scene is entirely meaningless from the moment it gathers that attention. So if someone is in real trouble, they won't leave such a conspicuous and complex message."

So they would be limited to simple messages that blended into the background.

Making a complexly coded message was not the point. The point was for anyone who didn't realize it was a message to walk right past, thinking it was no more than some meaningless scratches and smudges. That way the villain would not erase them to cover their tracks.

What did the colors and shapes mean?

What about the number of scratches and the location of the smudges?

Trying to work out some clever answer would only confuse him for no good reason. While looking at it more simply, his honest instincts brought his attention to one point in particular.

“Here.”

He pointed at the watch band.

Index took a look from the side.

“Hm, you mean the scratches? Those might be a D and a T.”

“There is that, but I meant this.”

He wanted to draw their attention to one of the evenly-spaced holes used to adjust the size of the thick rubber band.

“Just this one is stretched a little. Were they wearing it too tight? That might make sense with a belt after gaining some weight, but you would never force a watch on too tight, would you? I’m guessing they stuck the fastener through the hole and intentionally stretched the band side to side to stretch the hole.”

“There are eight holes in all and, starting from the outside, the third hole is stretched,” noted Index.

“Remember, the message will be simple,” reminded Othinus, to keep the magicians from using Gematria or Notarikon to find meaning in the mysterious numbers. “Take it all at face value. They might just be numbers. For example, 2-1-5. Or the reverse.”

“But what do those numbers refer to?”

Othinus shrugged. She didn’t have all the answers.

Kamijou initially thought they might be the passcode to unlock the smartwatch’s lock screen, but then he remembered it was only an accessory meant to connect wirelessly to a phone.

“2-1-5...” repeated Stiyl.

“512 sounds like some kind of machine,” said Kanzaki.

Those two puzzled over it, but never seemed to find an answer. It was a tricky problem because there was no specified goal, such as reducing it to zero or converting it into a word.

“Think simpler.”

They had no other options with the city so empty, so Kamijou held a hand to his chin at one corner of the countless road intersections.

“It has to be something anyone could think up if they knew the answer and something you could come up with on the fly. It has to be a clear and simple message.”

Index clapped her hands together.

“If they didn’t have time to think about it, then maybe we’ll see something if we’re forced to think fast. Okay, Touma. Three, two, one, go!!”

“Um, umm!?”

His head shot up. He had no actual proof, but this was all he could come up with when pushed to give an answer on the count of three. And after seeing thirty million people disappearing in real time and being helplessly caught in the middle of it, Melzabeth Grocery would have had even less time. Hurrying worked to simplify the answer you gave.

“Wh-what do the scratches on the band mean!? Are they really a D and a T?”

“Downtown?” innocently suggested Index.

Then Kamijou Touma blurted out the first idea that came to his mind.

The band had 8 holes in all and the 3rd from the outside was unnaturally stretched, hinting at the numbers 2, 1, and 5.

Only one thing popped into his mind on such short notice.

“Could this be *an address* located downtown?”

## Part 5

They were hesitant at first.

They had discovered something, so now they needed to leave the watch shop and travel outside.

Kamijou silently took a look out through the door, finding it was still dark. The city's power was still on, so he could see all the lights looking so much like stars in the night sky. Which was more frightening—complete darkness or partial darkness? The distant lights would cover up any suspicious figures creeping up on them, but Kamijou's group could not carelessly step out into the streetlights.

"A-are you sure this is a good idea?"

"You discovered it, remember?"

Kanzaki had said the sand magic sniper was gone, so she was more relaxed than the others. Othinus haughtily crossed her arms on Kamijou's shoulder.

"Make sure to walk along the wall. You're harder to find there than in the middle of the road."

"D-doesn't that depend on their angle?"

"There is no perfect protection against a surprise attack, so the idea is to always have a few doors or windows in mind you can escape into at a moment's notice. And hold onto anything you have that can act as a smokescreen. That will prevent an attack from a distance. A camera flash or a car's headlights can work there."

"A car...?"

"Remember we're on the lookout for a sniper," said Stiyl. "Electric cars aren't as silent as people think and a gasoline or diesel vehicle would be so loud you might as well be announcing your presence."

When Stiyl took the first step outside, Kamijou remembered that flame magician could create smoke and mirages. There were still a lot of unknowns, like if he was faster than the sand magic or if the sand magician even relied on sight, but at least they would not be suicidally defenseless.

Assuming Kamijou did not accidentally destroy the protective magic with Imagine Breaker, of course.

"Please spare me that misfortune. Are you absolutely sure this is a good idea?"

Having to rely on Stiyl for survival was worrying in and of itself, but he had no other ideas.

They hesitantly walked through LA in search of the discovery he had made.

Once he took a look around the deserted city once more, he noticed a lot of disturbing things.

A military helicopter was crashed into the center of a skyscraper. Tanks and armored trucks had plunged into a frozen river running through a concrete waterway situated lower than the road level. None of it looked like ordinary accidents, so some kind of unrecorded battle must have been fought with R&C Occultics.

“Maybe it was for the sand,” said Kamijou while walking through the frigid city.

“What do you mean, Touma?” asked Index.

“The weatherstripping. What if it was *to keep the sand out*, not for poison gas or whatever?”

“But why?”

He had no answer for Index’s innocent question.

But the sand was the only real threat he had seen so far. And it was some kind of magic not even Index could fully explain. It was unclear if every single LA citizen would have reached the right answer and acted accordingly after seeing that strange phenomenon. They may have simply decided the sand was dangerous and fled indoors to avoid it.

Stiyl butted in there.

His head was raised and his eyes focused on the distant buildings in order to locate the sand magic sniper, but even Kamijou could tell it was more to distract him from his nerves than because he actually expected to find the magician.

“Assumptions are dangerous. *The enemy may have more than just sand magic.* R&C Occultics is an enormous organization and they might have assigned more than one magician to guarding their HQ building.”

That was true. There had to be more to this they had not yet seen.

The duct tape weatherstripping had failed. At the very least, the people of LA must have read something wrong since they had all disappeared.

“More than that, it’s twenty below out here and it’s a few kilometers from the airport to downtown. Move around too much and we’ll wear ourselves out to dangerous levels. Are you sure this is worth checking out?”

“Stiyl, we would freeze to death just the same sitting around without any clues,” said Kanzaki. “Finding somewhere new to check is a good sign.”

“Fine, this way,” gestured Stiyl.

Kamijou frowned.

“The subway stairs?”

“I can’t think of a better defense against a sniper on the rooftops,” bluntly stated Styl. “And besides the temperature, we know something in this city caused thirty million people to disappear. Nothing about this makes sense. The things we can see aren’t what we need to fear most. Moving in secret would be best. If we have to walk for a while, isn’t it safer to do so underground?”

They descended the stairs and found no one in the station.

“It’s...surprisingly warm in here.”

Kamijou looked around curiously. He had always thought things were colder underground, but the biting cold vanished once they were inside the station. Kanzaki laughed.

“It’s the same as well water. Air and water will retain some heat without anything external affecting it. Whether you find it to be warm or cool depends on the environment you have been in.”

“Really?”

“Also, make sure to focus on your ears. I think even a magic novice like you can detect this one. It is faint, but can’t you hear it?”

“?”

“The station’s central heating is running.”

“Goddamn it! That’s not mystical at all!!”

Kamijou greatly regretted feeling moved by what she said. Othinus breathed an exasperated sigh from his shoulder and Styl clicked his tongue in irritation.

Just then, a loud electronic buzzer sounded.

“Hyah!? Wh-what!?”

Index jumped like a surprised cat. The ticket gate still had power, so it tried to block their way forward. They had already done this at the airport, but it was no less shocking this time. Index looked extremely nervous, so Kamijou soothingly rubbed her back before they all jumped the ticket gate together. It saddened him how much easier it came this second time.

They did not wait for a train at the platform.

When they pried open the platform door and climbed down onto the tracks, Kamijou felt a squeezing at stomach.

The tunnel had power, so the fluorescent lights on the wall were on. But that was not enough to sweep away the darkness. The further they moved from the platform, the less they felt of the station's central heating. A deadly chill once more crept out from the thick concrete.

Graceful Kanzaki moved up alongside Kamijou and provided a warning.

"The subway might be deserted, but it still has power. Be careful."

"You can't trick me again. I know the trains can't run with no one here."

"Watch out, human!!!!"

A blast of wind filled the tunnel.

He reflexively tried to push Index out of the way, but his body refused to move.

"Kenaz," said a singsong voice.

Laminated rune cards spread out like confetti.

"Algiz and Teiwaz. Blameless assassin, remove yourself from our path."

Thousands—no, tens of thousands—of cards covered the entire surface of the walls.

Then a swish of the tall priest's arm eradicated every shadow in the tunnel. The yellow inspection car racing toward them hopped straight up, scraped against the ceiling, and soared over their heads.

Stiyl did not even bother listening to all the crashing of bending metal behind them. He extinguished his flame sword and then lit a new cigarette using one of the embers remaining at his fingertip.

Kamijou could not keep up with it all.

"Th-thanks?"

He was answered with utter contempt.

"I was not saving you."

It pained him so much that he could not say anything when Stiyl clicked his tongue and kept moving down the tunnel.

Othinus provided a somewhat exasperated explanation from his shoulder.

“When control from the engineer’s seat and central control are both interrupted, the trains switch to an automated emergency mode. The ordinary trains leave the main tracks to wait at the switchyard or wherever else and a battery-powered inspection car is sent out for emergency maintenance and inspection of the tracks, the power lines, and the communication lines. And they will keep doing so until the source of the problem is discovered. If the machine can’t find the answer, it will keep looping forever.”

“...”

“What’s this, human? Did you freeze up because you aren’t sure whether or not to cry? You’re surprisingly weak-hearted.”

The enclosed space, the tension, and the low temperature messed with his sense of how far they had walked, but it had to have been more than for a picnic in the park.

Stiyl sighed.

“End of the line.”

“Already?” asked Kamijou.

The tall priest held his cigarette between his fingers and pointed straight ahead with it. The movement sent some air into it, so the orange light grew brighter, faintly illuminating their surroundings.

Dead ahead, the entire tunnel was blocked up by a plug of cracked sand. It almost looked like a thick wall of salt. Had it poured in from the station’s stairs or the platform?

“There should be an emergency exit. Search the walls.”

Kanzaki was right. A metal door led to some stairs that spiraled up to the surface. Once outside, the piercing chill felt like it had leveled up twice.

They were on the surface again.

Fear of that sand magic clutched at Kamijou’s heart once more.

Now was not the time to view the frigid city night that resembled the stars in the winter sky. He mentally went over the checklist from before: have several possible escape routes in mind and have a smokescreen ready, even if it was just a nearby fire extinguisher. Then he pulled on Index’s hand to walk alongside a nearby building wall.

“Where are we?”

“It’s a major road in between a college and a museum, so this must be Exposition Boulevard,” said Othinus. “That means we didn’t make it to Union Station... Still, we’re almost to downtown, so we just have to continue north.”

Kamijou looked in the opposite direction.

“A college and a museum, you say?”

“Those are large public institutions, yes, but given how empty the airport was, there is no chance we would find survivors gathered in either one of them. Seeing the space shuttle in the museum will have to wait until later. Focus on that smartwatch for now. You were the one that suspected it hinted at a downtown address.”

Different parts of Los Angeles apparently looked very different from each other. Compared to the area around the airport, this area had a lot of smaller buildings crammed in closer together. Unfortunately, they were all shops with a strangely fancy aura, so a grounded high school boy like Kamijou was reluctant to approach them. He got the feeling they would sell things like a slim and fashionable space suit designed for an idol to wear on stage. Covered with embroidered patches, of course.

“I did not expect to get this close before determining the risk,” said Stiyl.

“?”

“That’s R&C Occultics HQ.”

Kamijou gasped when Stiyl used his cigarette to point at a group of buildings towering up in the distance. One was taller than the rest. Its lights were still on, just like the others, but were there actually still people in that one? Or had all its ordinary employees been vanished along with everyone else?

“Do you think Anna is in there?”

“Beats me. We can see the building, but we can’t approach it yet. Until we know exactly what caused and triggered the disappearances, we need to assume its surrounded by an invisible minefield.”

2-1-5.

Did that address really exist here? Kamijou thought he might faint if it turned out to be the HQ building’s address.

He was nervous and skeptical of his own conclusion. He wanted to avoid doing anything conspicuous while this close to the HQ building. When they finally found the address indicated by the watch, they doubted the building held any grand secrets or was strictly guarded. Of all things, it was a restaurant that looked like it served junk food. But it appeared to be a privately run establishment, not a chain.

It was something of a letdown after arriving so close to the HQ, so Kamijou tilted his head.

“Is this a family restaurant?”

“They generally call them diners here,” smoothly replied Kanzaki with a small smile. “All the primary colors might make it look silly to our Japanese eyes, but the fading of the paint suggests it has been in business for a very long time. Downtown is prime real estate in LA. To survive so long in the harsh competition here, it must be well-established and beloved.”

It must have stayed open late into the night because the door was unlocked. Inside the restaurant called Cheap Party, they found the bright lights, gentle music, and heater were all still on. That actually made the place more disturbing.

But once they stepped inside, the warmth felt like a gift from god.

After experiencing that blessed warmth, Kamijou started to wonder if the *duct tape weather stripping had been to keep out the cold.*

But Othinus made a more concerning comment from the shoulder of his cheap jacket.

“Solid tape weatherstripping with a boiler for heat? Almost makes you think the entire population of LA was trying to *kill themselves with carbon monoxide poisoning.*”

The heat made the place feel heavenly, but that comment made him imagine he was feeling dizzy. But if he opened a window to vent the place out, he would only be letting the hellish minus-twenty-degree weather back in.

The pointy-haired boy groaned when he saw the large example pictures of the food options lined up above the counter. All of this was privately run? That suggested Americans would buy thick burgers and greasy carbonara as casually as you might buy okowa or dango at a shopping district. That explained why the floor was weirdly sticky with sand and grease.

But more than any of that, Kamijou turned his attention to the kitchen at the back of the empty restaurant.

“All the switches are still on. Thank goodness there wasn’t a fire.”

They did not see any suspicious figures in masks and sunglasses or any ultimate beam weapons shining a bright silver, so they split up and started to search the back of the place.

Kamijou nervously switched off the kitchen's gas burners and hot plates. What he guessed had once been chicken breasts were lined up on the grill like gyoza, but they had been burned worse than the aftermath of even the most inexperienced newlywed wife's first attempt at cooking. They were nothing but charcoal—no, they were more like a black and crumbling stain stuck to the grill. Perhaps it had been premature to say there hadn't been a fire. Had there actually been pillars of fire rising nearly to the ceiling that had since burned themselves out? And the sprinkler system's water pipes must have frozen solid because nothing looked wet.

"AI appliances and smart houses, my ass. That's the last time I trust a magician about tech. This wasn't safe at all."

"With a city this big, some buildings might have caught fire and we just haven't noticed," said Othinus.

That actually made Kamijou glad the people had entirely disappeared. At least they wouldn't be caught in the flames and smoke. Assuming, of course, that the disappearance itself didn't kill them.

Kamijou realized that the lack of bodies and blood stains was making it hard to believe they were dead.

But since the grill had been left on, someone must have been here originally. Then where had they gone? Who had done it? Why? And how?

Walking along the sandy floor and breathing in the warm air told him nothing. He was truly confused now, but while he searched around, he heard an unexpected noise.

It came from one of the metal lockers in the locker room at the back of the restaurant.

"..."

He stopped in front of the door.

The thin door did not look locked, so he reached out and hesitantly opened it.

"There really is something."

Until this very moment, he had not been too confident that the holes on the watch band actually meant anything, so he sounded somewhat dazed by the discovery.

"There really was a secret."

He found a girl of about ten curled up with tears in her eyes.

She had silver hair and brown skin. The secret indicated by the watch turned out to be the sole survivor of the disappearances.



## **Between the Lines 1**

### **R&C Occultics Magic Attack Theory**

Proposer: Index

A theory suggesting the disappearance of thirty million in Los Angeles was a large-scale magic attack by R&C Occultics.

A magician was discovered using sand for long-distance attacks. The magic had the power to slice through reinforced concrete.

But not even Grimoire Library Index was able to fully analyze the magic being used.

### **Academy City Poison Gas Attack Theory**

Proposer: Othinus

A theory suggesting the LA disappearances were to hide all traces of Academy City attacking the city with an unknown chemical weapon in their haste to show results. The theory assumes all corpses have already been collected, R&C Occultics was already destroyed, and Academy City has safely left the infected area.

### **R&C Occultics Drone Weapon Hijacking Theory**

Proposer: Othinus

A theory suggesting Academy City's unmanned weapons and military datalink were hijacked by R&C Occultics and the joint unit was wiped out by Academy City's drone weapons. This theory would imply R&C Occultics has survived.

This theory can coexist with the aforementioned poison gas attack theory.

### **Anti-Sand Weatherstripping Theory**

Proposer: Kamijou Touma

A theory suggesting the duct tape weatherstripping on the doors and windows was used to oppose the sand magic.

A non-Anglican (and thus presumably R&C Occultics) magician attacked Kamijou's group with a large-scale sand spell. The attack was powerful enough to slice through buildings and a pool, but Kanzaki proved there were no bloodstains in the Academy City base using a tannin-based spell.

### **Multiple R&C Occultics Magicians Theory**

Proposer: Stiyl Magnus

A theory suggesting R&C Occultics has more than just the sand magician working to protect their HQ building and something other than the sand magic was used to disappear the thirty million. But Stiyl has found no way of concluding how many there are or what kind of spells they use.

### **Anti-Cold Weatherstripping Theory**

Proposer: Kamijou Touma

A theory suggesting the door and window weatherstripping is to keep the minus-twenty-degree weather out of the heated buildings.

This theory says nothing about the missing LA residents.

### **Los Angeles Mass Suicide Theory**

Proposer: Othinus

Derived from the aforementioned Anti-Cold Weatherstripping Theory. A theory suggesting the LA residents sealed up the buildings to keep out the cold and keep in the warmth, inadvertently killing themselves with carbon monoxide poisoning.

This theory explains the deaths of the LA citizens, but not the disappearance of their bodies.

# CHAPTER 2

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**Suspected and Alone.**

*Los Angeles.*

## Part 1

By seven in the morning, the yellow sun was rising, but it did nothing to change the minus-twenty-degree chill.

Did everything look so white due to the sand blown into the air by the wind? It also could have been diamond dust created by the moisture in the air freezing. The frost and ice kept everything frozen despite the sunshine.

“Uhh,” groaned a young and somehow fretful voice.

The girl of around ten was clinging to Kamijou Touma’s hip from the side. Her eyes were shut in sleep.

She had long silver hair and brown skin.

She wore a thin white camisole that almost seemed to let her skin color show through, denim shorts that left her thighs fully bare, and knee socks. Over all that, she wore a thick leather flight jacket with an English logo on the back. Kamijou guessed it was the brand name: Space Engage.

Curious, he traced his Transla-Pen over the words and the machine gave him a translation.

“Blank character, enter into battle.”

“There’s no way that’s what it means. I swear this piece of junk is busted.”

The hair decorations on either side of her head were modeled after blue chrysanthemums. In Japan, chrysanthemums were associated with everything from tempura to funerals, but what did they mean in America?

Meanwhile, Index had her hands somewhat exasperatedly on her hips while she glared at the overly touchy little girl (and at Kamijou).

“...Touma.”

“Wait! I don’t even know why she’s doing this, okay? What are you saying I even did wrong here? Keep in mind that I can’t speak English.”

With the mystery girl sleeping like that, Kamijou could not leave the salty and greasy family restaurant that Americans called a diner. The most he could do was let her sleep in one of the booth seats with her arms around him from the side.

It terrified him to stay in one place like this.

But until they were certain the sand magician had located them, this would work for temporary safety.

It was like finding yourself stuck in some hidden corner while playing hide-and-seek or cops-and-robbers. Once you were there, you couldn’t bring yourself to leave. Kamijou’s weak heart was reluctant to leave the walls of this building. Since everyone had disappeared without the power going out, they could use the lights and heat without giving away their position. He started to wonder if they would actually be easier to find if they started wandering around outside and he started to fear even approaching the windows.

Meanwhile, Stiyl and Kanzaki had gone on a few scouting missions until dawn, using the Cheap Party diner as no more than a temporary base. They made it sound like no big deal, but they would have been at risk of being sniped by the sand magic every step of the way. Kamijou could never have done it. And searching the area around the diner had not turned up anything useful.

They had found no clues to the fate of the joint force or the current status of R&C Occultics.

Nor had they found any clues to the whereabouts of the thirty million residents of Los Angeles who had been in the wrong city at the wrong time.

Kamijou gently reached for the brown girl’s neck to check the inside of the thick jacket’s collar. He found a name stitched there: Helcalia Grocery.

“Grocery, huh?”

“The name sounds Indian-British to me,” said Index from the same booth.

“But if she moved here from England, her nationality would be American...yawwwn,” replied the fifteen-centimeter Othinus, yawning from jetlag on the table.

Stiyl and Kanzaki were out of the diner for another search.

Kamijou was interested in something other than the girl's country of origin.

When he pressed the button on the side of the smartwatch he had found in the Academy City base's safe, the name Melzabeth Grocery appeared. Was that this girl's older sister or mother? At the very least, it seemed unlikely a sister even younger than her could have been responsible for coming up with and hiding that message on the watch. It was unknown how many more secrets were hidden in the watch's small scratches and smudges, but it had at least directed them to this girl.

What had that felt like?

While the fearsome "disappearance" was fast approaching, Melzabeth must have known she could not escape, but even as her teeth chattered and her hands trembled, she had worked to leave a message to some unknown person who might never even receive it.

(She was counting on someone like me to follow the message, so I have to make sure it counts.)

"Zzz...hm?"

The girl's regular breathing came to a stop.

She stirred and then rubbed her eyes with her small hands.

"Oh, she's awake, Touma!"

Index's bright-faced comment caused a change. A dramatic one. Helcalia Grocery scrambled behind Kamijou's back to use him as a shield. The front of her flight jacket was open, so he could feel her warm body heat through her thin camisole.

On the table, Othinus put her hands on her hips.

"She does not like you."

"That isn't Index's fault," added Kamijou, sounding exasperated.

The blame lay squarely with that rotten priest from Necessarius. She was only ten, but he had still pulled out a rune card and wielded his flame sword the instant he saw her. All while saying any information related to her identity and the LA disappearances could be extracted from her corpse's head.

There was no way she would know the whole picture here and anyone would be scared after being threatened with something that violated the laws of physics.

Kamijou Touma had intervened despite not understanding a word of the English argument that ensued, so now she saw him as her only ally. Hence why the girl of (presumably) ten(-ish) would not leave his side.

However, Stiyl Magnus had not simply been carelessly aggressive. The now-hated priest had calmly explained his actions afterwards.

“By having her reject me and open up to you, we can get a more accurate testimony out of her. And since you will share that with the team, it works out for me in the end. Rejoice—we finally found a way to make your womanizing tendencies useful.”

“No matter how you slice it, he’s still a scumbag for doing that.”

“I’m hungry. I want to eat vegetarian meat for breakfast.”

All of a sudden, she was talking to him.

The nightmarish flood of English rushed right at him. His score of 43 on his last English exam left him unequipped to tell if she was just speaking in an authentic accent or if she was still too sleepy to talk clearly. Surprised, he glanced over at Othinus to find her nodding off. The jetlagged god was still haughtily crossing her arms and legs even as she napped on the table.

This was a job for a modern convenience: the Transla-Pen. That device could translate back and forth without needing to sync with a phone, so even a boy who failed his English exam could communicate with a modern LA girl...right?

The mic was in the head of the pen, so he held it like was doing karaoke and awkwardly spoke into the still-unfamiliar item.

“Um, uh...can I ask you some questions? If you’re still not up to remembering it all, that’s fine too.”

But he had no way of knowing if it was translating his words correctly.

Especially when Helcalia responded by drowsily gnawing on his upper arm. Was she the type to start chewing on the elastic band of her sports cap when she was hungry?

## Part 2

“Eh? You’re really going to eat this? First thing in the morning!?”

“Soy is healthy food. Eating it is good.”

“Yeah, um, I get that you can make vegetarian meat out of soy, but you’re making that into a burger. Won’t that turn into a hellish mass of grain with essentially tofu between two buns?”

“I desire healthy.”

Her Japanese was weirdly awkward because he was only receiving the Transla-Pen’s translation. When she spoke with her long silver hair swaying behind her, it was all in fluent English. The clearance rack gadget from Academy City could only do so much. It even left some words entirely untranslated in its so-called translation.

(Well, I can understand her and that’s what counts.)

Index and Othinus had not accompanied him to the kitchen. One of them could do housework but didn’t and the other didn’t do housework because she couldn’t, but he was beginning to think he had spoiled both of his freeloaders too much. They would never learn if all they ever did was eat and sleep.

He was currently alone with Helcalia.

Everyone needed to eat to survive. And as long as they were hiding in the diner, Kamijou figured he might as well whip up a light breakfast from the ingredients that were going to go bad anyway. But his Japanese knowledge did not apply to an American kitchen. And not just because the tools were shaped differently and the temperature displays were all in Fahrenheit instead of Celsius. First of all, the tomatoes and broccoli were so big they scared him a little. They looked like some kind of freak mutation, so he half expected them to bite his head and hijack his brain the instant he looked the other way.

He checked inside a silver fridge larger than any he had ever seen in Japan.

“It’s packed full. Are these leftovers from Christmas? Hey, Helcalia, give your thanks to the holiday season. I can make just about anything with all this.”

“Don’t like holiday season.”

“Eh? Why not?”

“My birthday is 28th. But no one comes to the party during winter break. Friends always mix it with Christmas.”

Was that what happened?

Even if the ingredients were for unsold party dishes, Kamijou appreciated the excess stock. He scraped some of the former chicken breasts from the grill with a metal spatula to secure some space for himself.

(I need to leave some money by the register for all the ingredients I use.)

He decided he didn't need to share that overly strict thought with Helcalia. He had something else to say to her, who was clinging to his hip in her white camisole.

"Listen, Helcalia, healthy eating means a balanced diet. Escaping your dependence on meat and grease in the land of the Stars and Stripes is an impressive feat, but that doesn't mean you can eat nothing but grains. Whether it's trans fats or carbs, you Americans always take everything way too far."

"Fuck. Not making sense."

"My point is you need to find a way you can eat all the vegetables you don't like. ...And please tell me that 'fuck' was a mistranslation."

The ten-year-old only gave him a blank stare.

Kamijou frowned down at the Transla-Pen. The truth remained a mystery. He could only understand one end of the conversion, so he had no idea how the machine was interpreting the English into Japanese and vice versa.

He ended up using the restaurant kitchen to cook a round pancake.

He was a poor student, so there was only so much he knew how to cook. He wanted credit for measuring out the flour and baking powder to make it from scratch instead of using a pre-made mix.

For vegetables, he knew a ten-year-old was not going to eat a salad even if he stir-fried it. He did not know Helcalia, so he had no way of knowing her dislikes. Small children could be cruel about these things. If he ended up serving her something she disliked, he just knew she would painstakingly separate it out and push it aside with her fork. So to make that impossible, he threw the veggies in the juicer and added mayo and cream to make them into a dip. That way she wouldn't even think of it as vegetables. Kamijou had done it with sodas and shaved ice syrup, so he knew it was common for kids to choose something for its bright colors than for its actual flavor.

It wasn't uncommon for people who rarely ate whole fruits to love jam. And people who chose cheeseburgers over plain hamburgers sometimes didn't like solid chunks of cheese. It was all in how you perceived it. And when you made something yourself, you could adjust the salt and sugar content however you liked.

"Here, all done."

"DIY?"

He had no idea what she was talking about now, but her eyes were glued to the food on the plate and she gulped. Seeing the finished product had successfully stimulated her hunger.

“Index will eat it all if she shows up, so I’d eat that in a hurry if I were you.”

“What do you mean by index page? Maybe I should eat you tonight, kitty baby?”

Kamijou tilted his head, checked the Transla-Pen’s settings, and tried a soft reset. Meanwhile, the girl stood on an empty zucchini box as a stool, grabbed a plastic knife and fork, stood up on her tiptoes to reach the plate on the stainless-steel countertop, and chowed down on the pancake. The reset meant he missed whatever she said before eating.

But it finished rebooting just in time to catch one word in particular.

“Delicious!!”

“This thing isn’t bugging out anymore, is it? Well, she does look happy.”

“This green stuff is good. What is it?”

Helcalia was happily dipping a slice of pancake in a small bowl of dip, but he didn’t dare tell her it was made from bell peppers. He didn’t want to see the sour look on her face, so he opted to simply smile instead of answering.

She had orange juice to drink. She had pulled that out of the giant fridge on her own. Kamijou normally had miso soup and rice, so the sweet juice seemed like an odd choice, but he realized miso wouldn’t go well with a pancake anyway.

He thought to himself while watching her hold the cup in both hands and gulp down the juice.

(That juice is nice and cold, but the inside of the fridge is actually *warmer* than outside right now. Los Angeles really has become another world.)

“But stretching up and eating is new. Mama made all tables and shelves my height.”

“Did she?”

“When using bottom shelf, mama crouches down and has difficulty. But always smiling.”

“I see.”

He had not been directly introduced or checked the paperwork, but he realized he had just more or less confirmed the identity of the other Grocery in LA.

That woman had disappeared.

And in those last moments, she had pushed aside the fear and resentment to mark out the location of her daughter and hope some unknown person would take care of her.

(So it was her mother.)

“I want to eat lots more.”

“Ha ha. Give me a moment to wash the kitchenware, okay?”

“I want to eat infinity more!!”

“...”

Some caution entered Kamijou’s smile. He was in high school, so could not let himself fall into grandpa mode just because a little girl was flattering him. Pancakes were pure carbs, so the only person with a hellish enough stomach to thoughtlessly eat a giant stack of them was Index. This girl had been indirectly left in his care, so he couldn’t let her fall into that pancake trap.

“Eh heh heh. I’ll add this blue next. Not blueberry?”

“Hey, Helcalia?”

“Yes?”

The girl on the empty zucchini box turned toward him, the fork in her mouth.

“If you’re feeling brave enough to tell me, I’d love to hear what happened here. As much as you know anyway. You weren’t in this diner by random chance, were you?”

The smartwatch had pointed to the diner’s address and he had found Helcalia in a locker here. That meant she had not fled here on a spur of the moment decision. She must have been told to wait here. Otherwise, Melzabeth wouldn’t have been able to leave behind that information before she disappeared.

What had Melzabeth hoped to do after regrouping with Helcalia?

For that matter, why had an LA resident like Melzabeth been in an Academy City base and how had she found an opportunity to leave her own watch in a safe that would have been strictly locked down?

The smartwatch was a crucial hint, but there were also so many questions surrounding how it got where it was. Since Melzabeth had disappeared, her daughter was the only hint remaining.

She might not have told her ten-year-old daughter everything. It was common to keep the hard truths from your own child during an emergency because you didn't want to scare them.

But even a small piece of new information could mean a lot right now.

“What if I tell?”

“I’ll go save your mother who disappeared along with everyone else.”

He didn’t even need to think about that one.

He was worried the crappy Transla-Pen might not be translating what he wanted to say.

But Helcalia Grocery nodded.

Maybe it was the conviction she saw in his eyes more than his words.

“Um.”

She opened her small mouth.

She did not want to think about the missing thirty million and Kamijou’s group could never understand what it felt like. These were the words of someone who had seen it for herself.

“Mama was sneaking, but it’s not what it looks like. Mama’s phone...somewhere at the station...but...”

“?”

“She was with R&C, but not really. Mama worked with Academy City people.”

Kamijou Touma felt like he was a step away from making some major breakthrough, but then the diner’s back door burst open and the priest with long, dyed hair barged in.

“Styl? What are you doing?”

“She’s gone.”

Kamijou realized Styl Magnus was out of breath.

Had he been in a fierce battle or had he been running for his life?

*“Kanzaki Kaori has disappeared. R&C Occultics got her!!”*

## Part 3

A bit earlier, Stiyl Magnus and Kanzaki Kaori were outside the diner and slowly advancing along a building wall. Stiyl toyed with the corner of a rune card and made sure he could set up a smokescreen or mirage at a moment's notice.

They had searched outside a few times already. Not even expert magicians could take the minus-twenty-degree environment lightly. The natural plan was to designate a temporary base for themselves and gradually venture further from it, finding more safe zones.

“What a pain. And the heating is far from perfect,” grumbled Stiyl while lighting a new cigarette. His breath was visible, but not due to smoke. “It wasn’t the industrial-level heater that kept that diner safe. It was only that plus the heat from the kitchen that just barely kept it livable. An ordinary air conditioner or heater wouldn’t cut it, so we’re going to have a hard time finding more safe zones.”

“I imagine the walls and floor matter as much as the quality of the heating,” pointed out Kanzaki.

She looked calm, but she was actually focusing on the distant buildings, trying to locate any snipers.

The air sparkled with a somewhat yellowish light thanks to the early morning sun reflecting off something in the air. Was that diamond dust? You were only supposed to see that in the Arctic.

“LA is far enough south it wasn’t designed to handle a cold wave like this. I imagine the walls were built to efficiently release heat, so you can crank up the heat all you like, it all bleeds away through the walls and floor. It may be like trying to fill a water tank with a hole in the bottom.”

They needed safe zones where they could rest and be warm.

But that was only their secondary objective. Their primary objective was figuring out what had happened between the joint force and R&C Occultics and what had happened to the thirty million LA residents. They were investigating the cause to decide whether or not they could call in a second wave to attack the enemy HQ.

“We can already see it...”

“That is a mirage oasis. Seeing something does not mean you can actually reach it. We must determine the reason behind the disappearances first.”

It was not a yes or no question. If they couldn’t do it, they had to figure out why, overcome that reason, and make sure they could send back a ‘yes’ in their report. That was how professional magicians did things.

“Now, then,” sighed Stiyl. He was focused on an ordinary smartphone, not a strange spiritual item. Modern delivery drones did not require a specialized controller.

“Are you sure this will work?”

“Yes. It’s the best tool for the job.”

Stiyl Magnus specialized in rune magic. He would place laminated cards around the battlefield to construct a magical field that gave him the power to fight.

So from his perspective...

“We don’t know where the traps are on the way to the HQ building.” The cigarette waggled in the corner of his mouth. “So we only have to provoke them to draw out a reaction. And using an unmanned device is safest. Let’s hope Anna Sprengel is standing by the window on the top floor.”

The delivery drone they had captured never reached the HQ building.

It suddenly came apart in midair.

But that scattered the rune cards it carried inside.

Orange flames erupted out and gathered together.

But even that was torn apart.

Yes.

“*Something is interfering?*”

“Stiyl, they’re coming. We need to get out of here.”

Kanzaki pushed on his back and Stiyl Magnus ran in a different direction from the Asian Saint. In a way, this was all according to plan. It was like letting an empty can drift in the ocean to blow up a sea mine. This attempt was the perfect hook for fishing out traps.

(Is plain sand enough to explain this magic? No, if that's all, then what is this minus-twenty-degree cold wave covering all of LA?)

The sand magician had made their presence known, so they would be here before long. There was also a risk of this being some other magician left here to defend the HQ, but it didn't hurt to be on the lookout for that sniping attack. Stiyl rushed along a building wall to move below a translucent arcade. The cover would not function as a shield, but he couldn't be sniped if his opponent couldn't see him. The arcade normally only blocked UV light, but it functioned like a normal roof with all the white frost covering it.

Needless to say, Los Angeles was a big place. They needed as much information as they could get if they were to search the city as efficiently as possible. That meant their best bet was hearing what that ten-year-old girl, the only survivor they had found so far, had to say. But Kanzaki and Stiyl had not done that. Why not?

"We need to distract the enemy from our biggest clue."

At the very least, R&C Occultics had the sand magician.

He had already set things up so the girl would feel reliant on Kamijou, so there was little reason for the Necessarius fighters to remain in the diner. Kamijou Touma had a way of getting himself involved in other people's business and Index's perfect memory would remember even the smallest thing the girl said. With the devious Othinus there as well, it was bound to work out.

The priest's only job was keeping Helcalia safe. He didn't have to make her like him.

This was the path he had chosen for himself.

Thus, Stiyl and Kanzaki had gone out to draw the attention of the enemy or enemies. That was primarily to protect Helcalia Grocery, their top source of information, but ideally they would also defeat and capture any magician that attacked them.

They were the bait meant to capture a major prize.

They could only make this choice because they were highly-skilled Necessarius magicians. Using an attack to determine the enemy's location was especially effective against the trickier types who used curses or sniper attacks.



"(Now, then.)"

Kanzaki Kaori breathed a visible sigh while walking alongside a building wall on a different road from Stiyl.

The enemy was here. She had not forgotten what happened when they first clashed. The sand magic had attacked so fast it nearly looked like a beam of light and it had sliced right through entire buildings. And who was it they had directly attacked?

“(Me.)”

It was unknown how much R&C Occultics knew about them, but if their identities were known, then she would expect the enemy to initially target either her because she was a Saint or Index because she was a grimoire library. Stiyl's rune magic was powerful, but it took some time to distribute enough cards to set it up and Kamijou Touma's Imagine Breaker could be forcibly neutralized by moving faster than an ordinary person's kinetic vision could follow. So the enemy would first want to take out Kanzaki who could move that fast and faster and Index who could directly divulge the structure of their magic. The other two could be safely dealt with from a distance afterwards.

And as hard as it was to believe, the Index Librorum Prohibitorum was having trouble analyzing the sand magic. If R&C Occultics was confident she couldn't crack it, they would conclude Index was not a threat and leave her be for now.

That meant their top target was the Saint, Kanzaki Kaori.

The unseen enemy would target Kanzaki if she was walking around outside in the deserted city.

She never would have agreed to this otherwise.

Kanzaki Kaori refused to allow any lives to be lost among her enemies or her allies. No matter how tough she acted, she would never let Stiyl be the bait.

So she took a step away from the building wall.

She walked out into the center of a silent intersection.

She placed a hand on the hilt of Shichiten Shichitou at her hip and whispered.

“Come on out. Otherwise I will go to you. And I will break the sound barrier on the way.”

She was not speaking to herself. There was definitely someone out there listening.

## Part 4

“What...happened?”

Kamijou Touma gulped and could not find anything else to say.

It was hard enough getting those two words out. Stiyl Magnus was still trying to catch his breath and an ominous aura seemed to push out from his body.

“What happened to Kanzaki!?”

“You want to know what happened?” Stiyl pressed his back against the kitchen’s tiled wall. He forgot to even put a cigarette in his mouth as he forced a scratchy voice out through his heavy breathing. “It wasn’t just a fistfight. It had nothing to do with physical strength or the laws of physics. I was watching from a distance—I saw it for myself—but I didn’t have time to go save her!! Kanzaki Kaori and the enemy magician rapidly produced a few explosions, vanished behind the clouds of dust...and that was the end of it. The next thing I knew, they were both gone. Kanzaki Kaori disappeared! Like a mirage or something!!”

Someone had disappeared after a battle. That meant they had either been defeated or they had left, but Kanzaki would have no reason not to return to the diner if she had won. It was not looking good.

And Stiyl had said she was “gone”. He had not seen her collapsed and bloody.

So...

“Was she *taken away*? ”

“...”

“If so, we can’t just ignore this! Let’s go call Index and Othinus too. LA is so big they might not have taken her straight to their HQ. We need to ask Helcalia what she knows, decode the smartwatch’s message, and figure out where the R&C Occultics magicians might gather!!”

“I doubt that would matter much.” The priest held a hand to his forehead. “If that was the same attack that caused thirty million people to vanish across LA, then Kanzaki might not have been taken hostage. It is possible they would keep her around to interrogate her for information, but they might have just killed her and hidden the corpse.”

“Stiyl!!”

“But there is one thing we know now!!!!!!”

When Kamijou tried to emotionally reject the idea, Stiyl roared back to shut him up.

Stiyl glared at the boy to keep him from making any rash decisions.

“We now know the R&C Occultics magician is not fighting alone.”

“It was...a group battle?”

“The weather is on their side.”

Kamijou’s guess was wrong, so Styl explained.

“And if you have some way of *artificially* adjusting the atmospheric pressure, you have free control over the weather and the wind direction. And that includes meteorological disasters! That sand magician was getting help from the company. It explains why that girl couldn’t fully explain what they were doing... They incorporated in some science to boost their spell’s power!!”

## Part 5

The sand laser tore through the air as it repeatedly flew straight toward Kanzaki. The sand magic compressed the sand and shot it out like an industrial cutter, but it failed to slice apart her flesh and blood.

She repeatedly zigged and zagged out of the way before it could.

A Saint could break the sound barrier in an instant.

“Are you trying to pin me here by forcing me to block your attacks?”

She even had time for a puzzled frown.

The R&C Occultics HQ was within view, so weren’t they afraid of a stray shot hitting them? Or were they getting desperate now that she had gotten so close?

It was safe to assume they knew Kanzaki was a Saint after their initial clash. Still, it made no sense for them to attack from head on like this. If they relied on long-distance sniping because they weren’t confident in their own skill, she would have expected them to stay out of reach and prepare an attack from a blind spot to catch her by surprise.

There was only one conclusion.

“(Cutting me with the sand laser *isn’t their goal!?*)”

Also, what was this sand magic? As the R&C Occultics name so clearly indicated, they were a Rosicrucian magic cabal. That meant their members’ spells came from the legend represented by the ruby rose and the golden cross.

Kanzaki could only think of a few Rose legends related to sand.

“Black, white, yellow, and red. It is a cycle of the four stages: death, bonding, fermentation, and rebirth.”

Thirty million people had *disappeared* in Los Angeles?

Why go to the effort of making them disappear instead of just leaving them alive or killing them?

“This is Citrinitas.”

It all clicked into place once she figured that out.

For example, *the yellowish sunlight*.

The sunrise came relatively late in LA, but that was not enough to explain this. It was unnaturally yellow. And Kanzaki was familiar with a certain natural phenomenon. More severe desert sandstorms could blot out the sun. When that happened, the brightness and color of the sky could change, making it look like evening.

For example, *the sparkling she saw in the air when the sun shined on it*.

Could that be fine sand, not the frozen moisture of diamond dust?

“This is the third stage in creating the miracle stone. There must be a spell that fills the compound with yellow sand and ‘ferments’ it just the right amount. R&C Occultics has not killed the people or hidden them. They were decomposed to change their shape. Instead of leaving them alive or killing them, you *preserved them* by converting them into formless nutrients that soaked into all this sand!! That is the truth behind the disappearances!!”

Anyone the sand fell on would be dissolved and made a part of the sand. The victims were neither alive nor dead. They were buried on the assumption that they would eventually be retrieved in some different form. Their flesh and blood were converted into simple nutrients and then absorbed into the soil to trap them. It was almost like a form of cold sleep.

That was why R&C Occultics needed no cages for survivors or dumping grounds for corpses.

That was why R&C Occultics had only been able to make the people disappear, whether it was necessary or not.

“Your long-distance pressurized sand attack and the water and ice you sent at us were not meant to cause direct bloodshed. It’s also why carrying the rune cards in the drone didn’t work. *You win from the moment you can dump sand on your target’s head!! Isn’t that right!??*”

She finally knew what would make her lose.

She just had to think of the sand like a powerful acid or magma. She doubted the LA residents had figured out the details of the spell, but the weatherstripping on the doors and windows had been a response to their fear of the sand, not to keep out the cold or violent attackers.

Once she knew how it worked, it could no longer control her. Kanzaki took a few steps back to accurately escape the curtain of fine sand that dropped toward her.

She could hear what may have been footsteps beyond the thin curtain. Visibility was poor, but someone was definitely there. She could sense a faint shadow and a barrier of pressure.

Her first impression was something entirely out of place. She initially saw it as someone going for a walk. The *feminine* silhouette she saw was holding a large dog on a leash and walking through the LA streets.

Next, she wondered if the dog was a well-trained military dog.

But that guess was not cautious enough.

It delayed the realization by two whole seconds.

*“That’s a person?”*

She was not focused on the figure standing straight and holding the leash.

She was focused on the large figure down on the frigid asphalt on all fours.

In fact...

*“Could that be the real magician!?”*

That was when the figures moved.

It looked like a poorly-trained dog dragging along the poor woman who owned it. The figure in the collar forcibly dragged the figure holding the leash to continue the fight. With their wrist pulled hard by the leash, the “owner” recited an incantation that sounded more like a scream and something gathered deep in the throat of the “pet” as they opened their mouth wide.

*“!!!???”*

Kanzaki only managed to dodge the head-on attack because she was a Saint. The sand laser tore through the air and then swung to one side and the other, slicing through the buildings lining the major thoroughfare.



Most notably, a one-hundred-meter-tall broadcast tower collapsed. It was not large enough to be a tourist attraction, so it may have only been a sub or support tower used to preserve the quality of the TV or radio signal within the high EM density of the big city.

When it crashed down, a great cloud of sand would billow up from the ground.

If she was caught in that, she was done for.

Conversely, if she avoided being caught in it, the spell could not affect her. There was no need to make this complicated. If she simply assumed that cloud could dissolve the human body, she could think of any number of countermeasures.

“Okay!!”

The answer was simple.

While the tower fell and came apart in midair, Kanzaki used her legs to leap straight up. She kicked off pieces of the collapsing tower and used that falling footing to climb ever higher.

That much mass would create a great cloud of dust when it collided with the ground. It would look like a massive cumulonimbus cloud at sea level. Normally, the sand would have covered the entire sky above the target and they could not have avoided being reduced to nutrients.

But.

*“I just have to climb higher than the cloud.”*

A Saint could break the sound barrier in no time. The way she kicked off of midair steel beams and surviving building walls to jump to ever higher footing looked a lot like a rocket blasting off into space.

“If I climb higher than your cloud of dust, your spell loses all meaning!!”

She made it three hundred meters above the ground.

That was higher than the falling tower. With a Saint’s leg strength, she could even make stepping stones out of the leaves and shopping bags blowing in the wind.

No matter how much sand flooded the surface, none of it could capture Kanzaki Kaori as she soared through the sky.

Or so she thought.

But she could not shake a sense of foreboding even after finding the answer.

If the spell *really was that simple*, why hadn't *the Grimoire Library Index* been able to analyze it?

Then a massive shadow blotted out the sun.

Something new was slowly flying by even higher in the sky than her.

"Wha—?"

## Part 6

"R&C Occultics is involved in every form of online business," said Styl. He was reviewing some basic facts while narrowing in on the crux of the matter. "The most prominent of those is online shopping. But they could not let the distribution centers and shipping routes reveal the location of their HQ, so they focused on unmanned distribution using drones."

"What of it?"

"They have delivery drones all over the world. They could not build any obvious stationary bases on the ground, but they still needed some way of receiving and sending out products, recharging the drones, and performing maintenance on them. So that massive IT company built mobile bases that need not belong to any country in particular."

Kamijou and the others in the diner had not known about this, but they could not ask any questions. Maybe they could sense the intensity of this priest who had seen one for himself.

"They use aerial spacecraft launch pads known as Logistic Hornets. Those mobile space development bases look like flying wings measuring five thousand meters across. They were originally developed as mother ships for the spacecraft meant to replace the old-fashioned rockets and space shuttles, but R&C Occultics has no interest in space travel. They have twelve of the things on standby in the skies around the world and they launch their spacecraft to carry cargo between them. Then the drones carry the actual deliveries to the individual addresses. The mother ships wait at an altitude of thirty thousand meters and they use their built-in mass drivers to launch the spacecraft into a ballistic orbit that lets them ignore air resistance. It takes them about twenty minutes to carry cargo containers to the opposite side of the planet."

"Wait, wait."

"When cargo on the ground is sent to the Logistic Hornets, they launch unmanned gliders from mobile launch vehicles. You know, like the ones that launch ballistic missiles. It keeps the cost of the launches down and sticking to mobile facilities allows them to avoid the concept of nationality for all twelve of the Logistic Hornets."

“I said wait!! Logistic what!? How do you know what they’re called and how they work!? I’m not the only one feeling lost here, am I!? This is news to the rest of you too, right!?”

A pair of small shoulders jumped.

Helcalia could not understand Japanese, but that may have made the incomprehensible yelling all the more frightening. She would assume the situation was deteriorating.

“I picked these up after I was separated from Kanzaki.” Looking irritated, Stiyl tossed a thick stack of documents onto the countertop. “I found them in one of the abandoned Academy City bases. And rune magic lets you activate a carved rune’s effects by dyeing it and complete the ceremony by destroying it. When used correctly, it can dig up residual thoughts like a needle reading the groove in a record.”

So instead of reading the text on the documents, had he spied on the thoughts of the person who had written it?

The method could not be used in court, but in contexts where magic was accepted, it could provide a decent level of “proof”.

Kamijou gulped.

“Then those things are how R&C Occultics makes all its money? They’re part of the collection that Anna Sprengel will start a ridiculous war to keep whole?”

“If they can transport that much cargo, they must be able to manipulate the weather conditions too. Their spell included a scientific piece that the grimoire library wouldn’t cover,” said Stiyl. “Maybe they use liquid nitrogen and maybe they use the naphtha found in napalm, but if they can rapidly heat and cool the air at high altitude, they can change the density of the air. That lets them change the atmospheric pressure. And if you can do that, *you can bend the wind to your will*. Fighter crafts and missiles need to travel through the air, so they could never even get close to those Logistic Hornets. Combine that with the R&C Occultics magician using sand as a weapon and we have a serious threat on our hands!!”

## Part 7

It flew.

It twisted and coiled.

“Wha—?”

It looked like a single massive pillar. It sucked up the white sand covering the surface and swept it up to the stratosphere.

It was a tornado.

Even Kanzaki Kaori was slow to respond when faced with a true natural disaster. The Saint had jumped *only* three hundred meters up, so she could not escape that pillar that rose tens of thousands of meters into the sky!!

It engulfed her.

She felt her mind fading and her body breaking apart, but she still clenched her teeth.

Several white smokescreens scattered in the frozen sky.

They looked like the midday fireworks seen at athletic festivals, but there were too many of them. Hundreds or even thousands of the white smokescreen fireworks filled the air above Kanzaki like a thick roof.

Had countless delivery drones been released into the sky, flown toward specific aerial coordinates on the guidance of a group control system that kept them from colliding with each other, and then swiftly self-destructed?

(Liquid nitrogen!! They're cooling the air to control the atmosphere pressure. Does that mean the scientific machines are an amplifier used to endlessly boost the sand magic!?)

"This is...not good!"

She used her fingertips, which just barely still existed, to accurately control seven invisibly-thin wires.

She used Nanasen.

She could easily slice through the air to blow the sandstorm away in an instant, but that would not get rid of the fine grains already caught in her hair and inside her clothing.

It was too late for her.

So she left this in someone else's hands.

"Styl!!"

The sun had already risen and swept away the shadows of the night, but Kanzaki's eyes accurately located a single point of orange light.

That was a lit cigarette hidden in the city far below.

She could not waste this. She could move their game piece at least one more space along the board.

She needed to find something useful, no matter how small, so she tore apart the curtain blocking her partner's vision, opening the way to the next hint. If she could see him on the surface, he could see her from there. The two of them had split up so if anything happened to one of them, the other could at least get the information back to the rest of the team.

Kanzaki clenched her teeth for placing this burden on Stiy's shoulders.

She was forcing him to do something she had failed at. Even though she knew receiving a hint by watching your partner's sacrifice was more painful than any injury to yourself.

And.

Kanzaki Kaori saw it even as she disappeared.

All while praying at least one other person would see this too.

She saw the HQ building's defender. She could tell it was some kind of technology, but she was not sure of what kind.

Overall, it looked like a giant aircraft with V-shaped wings. It was several kilometers across, rivaling an entire town in size. The craft extended back from the V-shaped wings and ended in another triangular tail wing at the back, so even with a gap between the two sets of wings, the overall silhouette still looked like a single isosceles triangle.

But more than that...

"What?"

It was hollow.

Kanzaki's mind was drawn toward the gaping hole. The very center of the V-shape was entirely empty, even though this was an aircraft. Did the hole itself matter, or did the donut shape around the hole matter?

One of the massive flying object's main wings had the words "Logistic Hornet 06" written on it.

But that was not all.

The Saint read one more thing aloud even as her throat disappeared.

"Space...Engage?"

## Part 8

Kamijou saw the girl's eyes widen.

He and Styl had been speaking in Japanese, but she must have recognized one of the terms they were using. The instant she heard the English term, a clear change came over her.

The phrase was Space Engage.

Kamijou recognized it too. He only had to look at the young girl's back and see what words were printed on the flight jacket she wore over her camisole.

He had assumed that was a brand name, but it must have been the name of a company instead.

Kamijou immediately gave Styl a stiff smile.

"Y-you're joking, right? You must have misread it."

"I am serious and I know what I saw."

He heard a crunch as Styl Magnus bit the filter of his cigarette.

The priest gave into his anger and raised his voice.

"Kanzaki did everything she could to ensure I received this information even as her body came apart around her!! She left this mission with me and I will do whatever it takes to complete it. There is an undeniable connection between the R&C Occultics magician and Space Engage's new weapon. I will not budge on that. We must start from there if we are to find a solution."

"..."

This was the only possible conclusion based on the "starting point" he had gained from his partner's sacrifice, so he glared straight at Kamijou's face.

"Why was Helcalia the sole survivor out of thirty million people? You expect me to believe R&C Occultics overlooked her just because she was hiding in a locker? Preposterous. We've searched all over and not found a single other exception in a washing machine, a car trunk, a basement, or anywhere else. Every last dog house and bird cage was cleaned out as much as everything else. It only makes sense if you assume she was spared because she's family of one of the villains!!"

"H-hey, Helcalia?"

“Not true. Can’t be.”

When interpreted by the Transla-Pen, the girl’s response didn’t sound like much, but even Kamijou could tell she was distraught. He could not understand her untranslated English, but he could still hear the fear and anger in her trembling voice.

“Mama isn’t!! She promised to make it true before I become grownup. She was excited about making a wedding in space. So nothing to do with R&C Occultics!!”

“How about this?” Stiyl Magnus slowly exhaled and finally moved his trembling hand to pull out a new cigarette. “Do you know why this girl’s mother was at that Academy City base? Melzabeth Grocery was the president of a space start-up. She used to do experimental launches outside of LA and on the ocean, but not anymore.”

He lit the cigarette and filled his lungs with smoke, but that did not seem to make him feel any better.

“But Academy City didn’t ask for her cooperation because she knew so much about space.”

*No, they wouldn’t*, thought Kamijou. Academy City technology was twenty or thirty years ahead of the outside world, so they would never ask for someone outside the city for help when it came to technology.

But then why had they contacted Melzabeth Grocery?

“Her start up got off the ground with support from R&C Occultics and she was one of the company presidents in their crucial independent affiliates division. Academy City wanted her as an insider who knew the inner workings of that enigmatic IT company. ...But seeing as the Logistic Hornet is assisting the Citrinitas magician, that was probably a bad idea. She was working with Anna and she was sent to Academy City as a double agent. *She worked on the inside to sabotage Overlord Revenge!!*”

## Part 9

Othinus had reached absolute zero on the diner table.

The fifteen-centimeter god had woken up in a bad mood.

“So when the ten-year-old ran off in tears, she managed to slip past you? How slow are you?”

Kamijou wilted beneath the pressure of her straight back and crossed arms, so he could not even look her in the eye. Her anger was a calm thing, so it scared him in a different way from Index’s chomping jaws.

But it wasn't his fault. It hadn't been an issue of simple strength.

The girl who only came up to his hips had moved as unpredictably as a rubber ball bouncing around the room. He had lost track of her after she ducked below the counter. He did not even remember when she had managed to slam her shoulder against the back door and escape outside.

"Human, do you know what this means?"

"That you've finally run out of patience with me?"

"I will never give up on my understander no matter what happens, so stop cowering." With that said, she switched over to an exasperated sigh. "Helcalia did not run away because of that immature smoker priest's hateful words. If you already dislike someone, nothing they say will affect you all that much. Besides, you said you were speaking in Japanese."

"Then..."

"Human. It was you gasping and not defending her mother that shocked her enough to run away. She saw you as the only person she could rely on and then you pushed her away. That's a lot of pain to force onto a ten-year-old. You didn't mean to? No, probably not. She's a stranger you only just met, so you're not obligated to do anything for her. You were well within your rights to abandon her...right?"

"..."

Kamijou Touma silently bit his lip.

Othinus softly uncrossed her arms.

"But if you still feel like cursing your own gutless behavior, then you're not lost yet. You earned zero points here, but there's still time to make up for it. So before punching yourself in the face, figure out what you can do that will actually help Helcalia."

Styl was examining the paper documents he had picked up and he made no attempt to approach the divine lecture. He was only interested in discovering what happened between the joint force and R&C Occultics, why the thirty million people disappeared, and if the threat still remained so they could pave a path to the HQ building.

Now that he knew Melzabeth Grocery was guilty, he had no need for her daughter Helcalia. No matter how unpredictable she was, it was odd for a professional magician to let a small child escape like Kamijou had.

"Well, if he isn't interested in listening in, then this is your chance."

"Othinus?"

“Hey, library. You sit at that table over there.”

“Mh! Why only me?”

“(Because with you as a shield, the smoker priest will be hesitant to interfere.)”

“?”

Index tilted her head, but she happily moved to the other table when the tiny god pointed out it was closer to the fountain drinks.

And...

“Human, what are your plans now?” asked Othinus.

Kamijou blinked in confusion but then hesitantly spoke up.

“Well, if possible, I want to find Helcalia and tell her that her mother isn’t a bad person.”

“Not what I meant.” Othinus cut him off with an exasperated snort. “Searching out the truth is easy enough, but keep in mind that the thirty million people disappeared before you got involved. You can’t guarantee that there’s nothing to worry about when you didn’t witness those events yourself. Once you investigate, you might discover that Melzabeth Grocery really was one of the villains working with Anna Sprengel. That is a real possibility. In fact, it’s the boringly straightforward answer you’re more than likely to find.”

“...”

“So.” She paused for emphasis. “I’m asking what your plans are for every scenario, from best case to worst case. You can find an answer, but that doesn’t mean much. The truth could be exactly what you wanted to find, or it could be the exact opposite. But you can’t let fear of the past slow you down. What matters is the future you create from there. So what will you do? That is what I am asking, human.”

Kamijou Touma thought for a bit before answering.

“I want to catch up to Helcalia and tell her there’s nothing to worry about.”

“The odds of that being true are very nearly zero.”

“I’ll say it anyway.”

“The more you defend Melzabeth, the more foolish you will look down the line. This thoughtless empathy could mean never returning to Academy City again. You will lose everything that just flashed through your mind when I said that. Do you really understand that? It’s even possible the ‘good guys’ will destroy you along with R&C Occultics. They’ll

see you as a villain defending one of the criminals, so they won't even give you a chance to argue your case."

"*I don't care if Melzabeth planned the whole damn thing herself!* If she did, then I just have to punch her as hard as I can to bring her back to her senses and then drag her back to apologize to her daughter. It's twenty below out there, thirty million people have disappeared, and the magician who defeated a Saint like Kanzaki is out there. I have to go save her! I'm not giving up on her life because someone else is a villain. And Helcalia doesn't have to give up on her own life over it either!!"

"I see." Othinus breathed an utterly exasperated sigh. "Nothing I say can shake you from the path of salvation, can it?"

In the end, his answer must have satisfied her.

Because this time, she gave him a cruel grin.

"Then I'll just have to guide you to victory."

"Othinus?"

"I'm pissed too, you know? Listen, not even you can deny my feelings here. But if you're going to do this, you can't just lead Helcalia on with irresponsible, half-baked assurances. Your promise only means something if you thoroughly investigate Melzabeth until you're certain whether or not she's a villain. Saving someone is supposed to be a meaningful act, isn't it?"

"Investigate her? But how?"

"How else?" Othinus snorted and pointed over at something. "With that watch you found."

## Part 10

"Touma? Where are you?"

A carefree voice rang through the downtown diner.

It belonged to Index and her arms were crossed.

"Hmm...there's no one here. Did they all leave?"

"..."

Styl Magnus sighed softly.

Kanzaki Kaori had been defeated, Helcalia Grocery had run away, and now Kamijou Touma and Othinus had left the diner.

More and more people were disappearing. It was now just him and that girl.

“Are there even any hints out there for them to find? They might be eating something tasty!”

The nun parted the decorative plant to peek behind the fountain drink machine. In isolation, it would have been a heartwarming scene.

But Index froze after peeking underneath one of the booth tables.

That was the one Helcalia had been sitting and napping at earlier.

A single memo had fallen there and Index read the text on it.

“UST? Secret???”

“I have a document on that.”

Index’s shoulders jumped.

The priest smiled bitterly because that was an understandable response without her old memories.

He waved the stack of documents he had found at the Academy City base.

“Project Code: Secret. It appears to be a prototype optical neurocomputer modeled after cranial nerve connections. With this, the machine can handle accepting orders in every language on the planet, analyzing and managing individualized advertisements, planning and executing sales, sales analysis, mapping the customer base, locating likely illegal accounts, and preventing mass buying and scalping. Basically, whoever controls it will constantly receive obscene amounts of money while just sitting around. Although it looks like the design is not quite as complicated as an actual human brain.”

“But what is it?”

“The drone management server that controls the twelve Logistic Hornets is currently in their HQ building. It’s an old-fashioned supercomputer that requires people to actually look after it. If we can destroy that stationary device, we can shut down their entire global distribution infrastructure.”

Intentionally building a weak point like that could be seen as an advantage since it gave them a way to manually shut it all down.

However...

“But once they hook up Secret’s complex wiring, the computers within the twelve Logistic Hornets will take over while monitoring each other. That will allow those flying machines to manage themselves. Once that happens, taking out the HQ building will not stop it. The world will be surrounded by those meteorological disaster weapons. They would be able to target any part of the planet.”

“???”

Index only tilted her head.

The optical neurocomputers were already onboard the Logistic Hornets, but they were not yet running because the complex parallel wiring to connect the 256 processors was not yet hooked up. The optical neurocomputers used proprietary standards, so outside contractors could not perform the work. Even the employees from the start-up period had their doubts. They had never reached an answer, so they had apparently loaded all the equipment onboard and then left the wiring incomplete.

Even if they knew it was dangerous, an invention was still an invention. They had designed it, registered it, and actually built it to prove it was theirs. That sort of overeagerness was common with start-ups.

“They decided not to complete the wiring until four-fifths of the start-up employees agreed to it.”

Styl sighed.

“But none of that matters now. Melzabeth Grocery is the start-up’s president and she has the powerful support of R&C Occultics. Only those who agree with her remain. Those with more of a backbone have all left the company. No matter how complex the wiring, she just has to submit a detailed diagram. Then the Logistic Hornets will be unleashed on the world. That giant IT company will be able to manipulate everything from the economy to the weather of any country or region.”

## Part 11

The shape of the face, the type and colors of the band, and the various small scratches and smudges.

Kamijou had no idea how much information was still hidden there, but he had a bigger concern at the moment.

“How am I supposed to keep that sniper from getting me, damn it?”

“Stay close to the walls, but do not actually touch them. In this cold, your skin would get stuck and you would have to tear it away.”

They had something to do while Index kept Styl at the diner.

Kamijou had stepped out into the minus-twenty-degree weather. They were close to the R&C Occultics HQ and they knew there was a magician and giant weapons out there. He could not let his guard down for a second.

“That smartwatch cannot function on its own,” said Othinus on the shoulder of his cheap jacket. “Just like your Transla-Pen, or whatever it’s called, it must sync with a phone first.”

“And?”

“There are a number of syncing methods, but that one uses short-range wireless that does not go through the phone towers. So with access to the phone lost, it sends out a signal to automatically search for it. That tends to drain the battery pretty fast.”

“Oh, so if I walk around with it, I might be able to locate the phone!? Like I’m searching for a transmitter!?”

“Currently, the only information we have on Melzabeth Grocery are those paper documents Styl Magnus brought back with him. If you want to argue with his conclusion, you need to find more information than him. If she did leave her phone out, it would be in a private space. You should find a more authentic view of her life than from those papers found in a military base.”

“...”

But that might not work out in Kamijou’s favor.

Like Othinus had said, this had all happened before Kamijou got involved. What if he found a strange lab, a bloody crime scene, stacks of dirty money, or a weapon far too powerful to be for self-defense? And Kamijou’s efforts would not influence that outcome. He was digging up what had already happened, so he might just find something that broke his heart.

He needed the courage to intrude on someone else’s life.

He could not let the worst-case scenario slow him down. He needed the true bravery to keep going even if that was what he found.

He glanced down at the watch’s small screen.

“Oh, it’s weak, but it has a bar now. Looks like you can also switch it to a numerical indicator...”

“Then we must be close. And I had guessed it wouldn’t be far from the base where she disappeared.”

“Why?”

“That tent base’s bathrooms, baths, and beds were not divided by sex. It’s a common social problem found in the military, like on submarines, but I doubt a civilian woman visiting the sweaty and tactless base would have felt comfortable spending the night there. And she had no commanding officer who could order her to do so. I don’t know if she was a benevolent cooperator or a double agent, but either way, it’s safe to assume she had a room for herself somewhere nearby.”

“Is that how it works?” wondered Kamijou while reaching out with the smartwatch in his hand and slowly spinning around. He found the direction where the reception improved slightly and walked in that direction. Little by little, the number of bars increased.

“Hm, about five hundred meters to go.” Othinus sounded bored on his shoulder. “But the rest won’t be so easy.”

“Why not?”

When they arrived at a building, he looked up to see a large tourist hotel.

“You’re kidding, right? It’s huge. H-how many windows is that? It’s gotta have hundreds of rooms.”

“You can ignore everything above the seventh floor.”

“???”

“The distance from the phone includes vertical distance. If it was too high up, it couldn’t pick up the phone’s signal from the ground.”

Kamijou still didn’t understand, so Othinus gave an exasperated snort.

“The signal got stronger as you approached the hotel, remember? That doesn’t just apply to the horizontal distance. Think of it as a diagonal line rising from the ground. That also explains why the bars recovered faster the closer you got.”

Once inside, they found the place deserted.

But a cheerful voice still spoke to them.

“Welcome. Estimating language based on clothing brand...is Japanese acceptable? Will you be checking in?”

“Popper-kun!? I hadn’t seen you in Japan for a while, so were you having a major debut across the Pacific!?”

“I could not understand your question. Please speak more clearly.”

The communication robot that moved around on boring tires was surprisingly brutal.

The first floor was the front desk and the second floor on up included a shopping mall, a casino, and restaurants. There was no sign of any guest rooms until the seventh floor. Kamijou sighed when he saw all the doors lining the long hallway there. At this point, he just had to try them each in turn. He held the smartwatch toward each of the shut doors that seemed to reject the current state of LA.

“Here we go—Room 0709. The signal is strongest here and I’ve even got a lock screen!!”

“No point in holding back now. Kick the door down.”

That was not happening. Kamijou walked to the end of the hallway and searched near the employee elevator. He found an emergency master key alongside the AED in the employee space.

“Heh heh. This is how civilized people do things, Othinus-kun.”

“Breaking into someone’s room is illegal no matter how you do it.”

He really wished she had said that before he used the key to unlock the electronic and analog locks and opened the door. He could not undo it now, so he withered like dehydrated seaweed while walking into the room.

“Huh, what a dreary room. And the building looked so nice from the outside.”

“Because this is the bottommost floor of the hotel rooms and this is a single room at that. You can’t tell with the place deserted, but this floor would be the noisiest. The bars and restaurants below would be making a racket late into the night. And that part of the wall that sticks out must be hiding a drain pipe.” Othinus sighed on his shoulder. “But this is enough to get a decent image of the woman.”

“?”

Kamijou was confused as he walked further into the room.

He found a neatly-made bed and a suitcase in the corner of the room. The phone the smartwatch was syncing to was on the bedside table and plugged into the wall with its charger. He picked it up, but he doubted he could get past the lock screen.

Othinus laughed.

“A Grapple MilliPhone. And a reduced-specs budget model at that. Open it up.”

“How?”

The boy complained, but when he lifted up the phone, the tilt sensor reacted and the screen lit up. It was still password locked, but what he saw made him pause.

“A few notifications popped up.”

“There’s an upcoming item on her schedule: 28th — UST 5 AA Secret.”

“UST?”

“It could simply be United States something, or it could stand for something else entirely. We also don’t know how to divide it up. Is UST 5 AA all one term, or does AA Secret go together?”

The 28th. What had she had planned during this busy holiday season? Kamijou didn’t know all the Western holiday customs with Easter and whatever else, so he had a hard time even making a guess.

But if the phone was here, Melzabeth must have been out and about without her phone when the disappearance happened. Since it was plugged in, she may have forgotten to charge it up. Was she just a careless person? It was a silly fantasy, but it did make her feel more like a real person.

He found a few casual shirts and blouses in the closet.

“Nothing here either,” said Othinus about a drawer at the bottom of the closet. No, it had a number pad like a phone, so it was a safe for valuables. But it must have been unlocked because Kamijou could pull the thick drawer open with ease. There was of course nothing inside.

“Were you hoping to find something in there?”

“Something related to the Logistic Hornets, but I guess she wasn’t foolish enough to leave that in her room while she was out.”

Kamijou had not expected that answer. He had assumed Othinus would be after some occult secrets related to the sand magic or something.

She sighed and explained further for him.

“Those things are five-thousand-meter-large aerial fortresses. They’re more mysterious than most magic. Do you have any idea how many hurdles they had to clear to make that work? You can’t just scale up a paper airplane and expect it to fly just the same.”

“Is it really that amazing?”

“When I commanded Gremlin, we sent out Radiosonde Castle, but that was really just a giant balloon. Those things are much too big to work as actual airplanes that obtain lift from their wings, yet somehow they fly. ...Melzabeth Grocery is undoubtedly a genius who has surpassed the known limits of aeronautics. Even off the top of my head, I can come up with more than three reasons that shouldn’t work. I can see why R&C Occultics wanted them so bad.”

Othinus then turned her attention to the room’s desk.

Kamijou opened the drawer to find the usual letter set and terms of service booklet, plus a few card-sized papers. He could understand the big “20% off” and he ran the Transla-Pen over the rest to find they were grocery store coupons. She must have collected them.

“I hope we can find some writing.”

“What do you mean, Othinus? Do you want me to run a pencil over the notebook or memo pad to see what was written on the previous page?”

“That would require her to be as careless as letting her bag’s strap pull up her skirt, revealing her underwear. She’s an adult, so I would like to believe she’s better than that.” Othinus snorted. “But, human, did you know some traces can be found on the top of the desk? For example, if you cover the front of a loose leaf paper with writing and then flip it over to write on the back, the writing on the front will be faintly transferred onto the desk. Just like with the carbon paper used for delivery receipts.”

“...”

“I’m saying we might just see her underwear after all.”

Kamijou switched on the desk lamp and lowered it until it was just above the desk’s surface...and there it was. It wasn’t much, but he could just barely make out some traces of English writing. But instead of the excitement of finding a new hint, he mostly felt bad, like he was going through someone’s trash.

The stalker god crawled along the desk, pressing her cheek against the surface to get a closer look (and sticking her butt up in the air).

“SiO<sub>2</sub>.”

“What’s that?”

“Silicon dioxide. But you don’t often see a distillation method with this level of purity. It’s far purer than the average fiber optic cable. 99.9998% or higher is really only useful for an ultra-fast neurocomputer that uses optical signals.”

“Um, Miss God? Should I just go take a nap while you finish this up yourself?”

“Stupidity is no excuse to slack off. Figure it out yourself.”

Kamijou picked up the landline to check for further details, but based on the Transla-Pen’s translation of the list the automated voice rattled off, Melzabeth had not ordered any room service. When it started listing off how many pairs of underwear she had sent to be laundered, he frantically hung up.

Unsurprisingly, the bathroom was small. The complimentary soap and shampoo had been used just a bit. The dryer did not look like something she had brought with her. It must have come with the room and its plastic body had faded with age.

The god, who was once more using his shoulder as a chair, crossed her arms and leaned against the side of his face.

“*Have you noticed?*” she asked.

“*Yeah.*”

The suitcase was locked, but they didn’t need to break it open.

“Hey, Othinus. She didn’t expect anyone to see this room, did she?”

“I can’t imagine why she would set up such a meaningless trap, so we should assume this is an honest look at her.”

Kamijou took a deep breath and worked to calm his heart. He may have grown biased at some point. He wanted to return to Helcalia with some good news and he may have let that influence how he interpreted what he saw.

But Othinus was not so easily influenced and she agreed with him.

“That is almost certainly the case,” she said.

“...I see.”

“Remember, she’s supposed to be the immoral success story who handed her distribution network over to a major corporation without even considering how they would use it, grew filthy rich in the process, and has found success thanks to thorough support from R&C Occultics. View this room through that lens and none of it makes sense, does it?”

“I see,” repeated Kamijou Touma under his breath.

Almost like he was savoring the words.

“Let’s go find Helcalia,” he finally said. “I can’t leave this undone. I said I would tell her there was nothing to worry about no matter what truth we found and now we’ve found that truth. I won’t reject the answer I found. It’s twenty below outside and the cause of the disappearances is still out there. We can’t leave her out there forever.”

The attack on Los Angeles had been a truly awful thing.

Even ignoring the thirty million disappearances, Helcalia could not have been having a good day. The large-scale battle started by Academy City and the Anglicans might have been enough of a disaster, but like salt in the wound, things had gotten worse.

Her mother had disappeared.

And she had been told her mother was not worth saving.

She had trembled all alone in a cramped locker and, when help finally came, they pushed her away as well.

It was all garbage. Ever last bit of it.

“It’s about time we fought back, don’t you think, Helcalia?”

## Part 12

Helcalia had of course not told him where she was going. Nor did he know how to contact her.

So Kamijou Touma could only run around the frozen city hoping to find her. This close to the HQ building, he had to assume every step he took was putting his life at risk.

(Damn it, since they have those big Logistic Whatevers, should I assume the enemy is a large group? Please don’t give me the misfortune to run into one of them now.)

Fortunately, he was looking for a ten-year-old. She could not drive a car or a motorcycle. The buses and trains were not running and a bicycle would be too dangerous with all the sand and the slippery frozen roads.

A small child could only make it so far from the diner on foot.

And...

“Hey, human. What makes you think she’s here?”

“28th – UST 5 AA Secret.”

“?”

“It was on the phone we found in the hotel, remember? We already know Melzabeth abbreviated ‘downtown’ as DT, so it must be a habit of hers. That isn’t the acronym of some new weapon. It’s a place: Union Station!!”

According to Othinus, Union Station was a downtown landmark located near Little Tokyo. He still didn’t know what the 28th and 5 AA parts meant, but he guessed it may have been a secondary rendezvous point if the diner didn’t work out.

(But wait. Wasn’t the 28th...?)

“There she is!!”

The pointy-haired boy spotted the small girl on the empty station platform. Helcalia had to know no trains would be coming, so why was she here?

But at the very least, she was not on the top of a skyscraper or in a frigid frozen river.

And she had not been found and captured by R&C Occultics either.

So his immediate reaction was a relieved “thank goodness”.

He was out of breath, but the chilly air brought a dull pain to his chest.

In a world too cold for blood and tears, he pulled out his Transla-Pen and spoke gently to the girl.

“There is someone other than us out here. That sand is dangerous. Let’s go back, Helcalia. It’s safest if we stick together.”

But she did not respond to that.

She said something else entirely, as if cutting him off.

“It’s true.”

Her voice was a low, unsteady groan.

But when she looked up, it exploded into a tearful yell.

The Transla-Pen went wild.

“Mama really was a bad guy!! Tricked everyone, kept secrets from me, did bad things in secret. Mama made Los Angeles like this! It was all, all, all, all her fault!!!!!”

She was only ten.

Her adorable face was wrinkled like a balled-up tissue. Her demonic expression was so distorted it was a miracle she didn't have blood seeping from between her clenched teeth.

"Secret, Logistic Hornets, R&C Occultics!! I knew. I saw her sneaking around in secret! But the flying demons aren't complete yet. If mama hands over something and the wiring is wired, then everything is all over!!"

Her words were like a curse against her own mother.

Her face had the horrifying look of someone who was ready to give up on the entire world.

"Hey, Helcalia."

But.

Kamijou Touma sent his gentle words through the Transla-Pen. He didn't care how silly the translation ended up as long as the feelings behind them got through.

"Do you really think your mom was a bad person? Do you think she was the kind of person who would eagerly join with R&C Occultics, do all this to the city, and defeat Kanzaki just a bit ago?"

"But it's all shown right here! So much evidence I don't want to see!!!!!"

Maybe Helcalia didn't know what an Oni was, but that was the word that came to Kamijou's mind when the ten-year-old glared back at him.

"Mama lied, tricked, kept secrets, hid things, and did bad!! What can I think!? It's all true, isn't it!? And I trusted. Thought I could trust family. But....!"

"No."

But that was exactly why Kamijou could not let her menacing appearance get to him. Hating her, rejecting her, and denying her would not bring them any closer to a solution here!!

He had to consider why she was giving him that look and saying these things.

She had to be worried.

She had to be afraid.

Betrayal was a scary thing. And she was afraid of having the critical information forced on her by someone else, so she at least wanted to deliver the finishing blow herself. She was trying to protect her own gentle heart that way. But she was not actually protecting anything. She was only looking away from what she really wanted and running headlong toward misfortune.

*"—Mama made all tables and shelves my height."*

He had to trust her feelings. He had to look to what had made her smile so proudly.

Even if she was so shaken she was close to destroying those feelings herself, he had to stick with it.

“Listen, Helcalia.”

So he had to say this.

“Your mom didn’t choose to do this with a smile.”

The girl’s eyes widened more than he would have thought possible.

But she still bit her lip to hold back her excitement, like she was afraid of reaching for this new hope too readily.

“Your mom wasn’t a double agent for R&C Occultics.”

Now.

Give some real hope to this lonely and battered girl!!

“So, Helcalia, let’s start with what matters: Melzabeth Grocery is not one of the bad guys!!!!”

He faced her.

Their gazes collided.

Kamijou Touma and Helcalia Grocery.

Imagine Breaker was useless here. No clenched fists were needed.

He would retrieve her smile, pat her head, and tell her not to worry.

He would make sure of it.

He swore to himself that was what his right hand was really for.

“Lying.”

The girl sniffled, but still threw that word back at him.

The verbal battle had begun.

“That big Space Engage plane is really flying! Mama gave them amazing thing, knowing it would cause troubles. She gave R&C Occultics a killing weapon!!”

“The Logistic Hornets weren’t originally designed as weapons. You said it yourself, Helcalia. You said she was excited about holding a wedding in space. She was never making a tool for killing!!”

“But she still gave it!!”

“Who ever said she was happy about it?” He could only answer with such confidence because of the information he had found himself. “Her hotel was as plain as could be!! She chose the cheapest and least comfortable room, she didn’t order room service, and the clothes in the closet were all cheap. She even just used the complimentary soap and shampoo! If she had chosen to work with that giant IT company and clung to the title of president for her own success, she would be throwing money around. But it looked more like she was actively rejecting luxury. Like the money forced onto her by R&C Occultics was filthy in her eyes!!”

“...”

“Her phone was a Grapple MilliPhone. And an inconvenient budget model at that. You can see how strange that is, can’t you? Why wasn’t she using an R&C Occultics product? Why did she go out of her way to use a rival’s phone? Doesn’t it sound like *she didn’t trust R&C Occultics!?*”

He couldn’t be sure all of this would get through to a ten-year-old. He was only in high school himself, so it was possible even he didn’t fully understand the influence and benefits of the Logistic Hornets.

But that wasn’t what mattered.

He needed to save Helcalia and that required him to be earnest. He needed to show her everything he had, without holding any of it back.

He had to keep moving, even if it was cruel and confusing.

It was Helcalia who would break it all down and accept it at her own speed. It was not his place to set an upper limit for her.

So he spoke from her eye level.

“What did she gain by placing the entire start-up under their control and what would she have lost if she refused? She wanted the Logistic Hornets to remain in some form. That’s why she agreed to R&C Occultics’s deal! It wasn’t for money. Don’t you think it was to keep her promise with you, her daughter!?”

She had promised to hold her daughter’s wedding in space.

How serious had she been when she first said it? It may have been little more than a joke. But once she got to work, the technology started to come together, and she was so close to actually pulling it off, she had grown attached to the idea. She hadn't wanted to throw it all away.

She must have regretted her decision.

She must have agonized over it afterwards, wondering if she had really done the right thing.

They knew she had in fact been frequenting that Academy City base. She had been working to reject the fortune R&C Occultics was offering her and instead assist in bringing them down.

Kamijou had no idea what happened in between.

But she had come to her senses in the end.

At that point, there was almost no chance of her being a double agent.

"But mama didn't. Thirty million are gone, but I still see glimpses of mama around the city!! Mama was spared because she works with R&C Occultics. She made all this terribleness!!"

"In the world of magic, there are plenty of ways to make people do things against their will," said Othinus from Kamijou's shoulder. "For example, *the St. Germain pill*. Have someone swallow that spiritual item and it will directly infect their body and create a fictional personality inside them. It isn't unusual when the Rosy Cross is involved and R&C Occultics CEO Anna Sprengel even infected my understander here that way."

"Never heard of that unheard-of disease. It might not have been used on mama!!"

"Then let's talk about something with more evidence to back it up, Helcalia," said Kamijou with a gentle sigh.

There was a much more reliable way of controlling people than with something like St. Germain. It wasn't something too high-level for Helcalia to understand and it wasn't speculative since Kamijou had already seen it in effect here in Los Angeles.

"Melzabeth has regretted what she did ever since doing it, so what *vulnerability* do you think they used to get her to obey?"

"I don't know. Vulnerability is dirty word. Only applies to dirty grownups with skeletons in their closet."

"How do you think R&C Occultics found out about it? The answer was right in front of them the whole time. If they knew they could use the Logistic Hornets, they must have

thoroughly investigated all of their specs. And that must have shown them the ‘vulnerability’ that led Melzabeth to make her reluctant decision.”

“What are you—!?”

Helcalia shouted back on reflex, but then she gasped.

It must have come to her.

She trembled and stared blankly into the air while weakly shaking her head.

“No. Can’t be. Not true.”

“She promised to hold her daughter’s wedding in space.”

Even the Space Engage name itself pointed to that.

Perhaps Melzabeth Grocery had been unfamiliar with human cruelty. Leaving your innermost desire out in the open like that was far too careless. It introduced the risk of having that desire used as a vulnerability. Because when someone was gasping for breath in the middle of the vast desert and they asked for a cup of water, the other person would only sneer and jack up the price.

In other words...

“Who was that promise meant for? Nothing could be more obvious: you. And when the villains who control the world threatened her ten-year-old daughter, what could she do but obey!? Maybe you didn’t know you had been taken hostage, but R&C Occultics would have always had someone close by so they could attack you at any moment. And Melzabeth wanted to escape that situation so badly she went to Academy City, even if it felt like grasping at straws! Why do you think you were the only survivor when thirty million people disappeared in LA? Were you just lucky? Did she use that opportunity to pull a fast one on R&C Occultics? No, whatever agreement she had with them *required them to spare her daughter’s life!!*”

But in the end, Melzabeth had betrayed R&C Occultics.

She had tried to do the right thing even if it meant betrayal.

She had broken her promise. Once she had disappeared, there was no real reason for R&C Occultics to keep the hostage alive. They could have slaughtered her along with everyone else.

But CEO Anna Sprengel had not done that. Why?

Knowing Anna Sprengel, it was because she thought that way would be more cruel and more entertaining. She had derived great pleasure from trampling on the dignity and pride of a mother who had tried to do the right thing.

With Kamijou Touma and St. Germain, she had enjoyed the worst of aristocratic games where she had forced that magician to infect the boy's body against either of their wills. And she had enjoyed watching that nightmarish Christmas like she was observing bugs in a cage.

So what would she do here?

Would she let Melzabeth go after she betrayed her? Would she be satisfied simply dissolving her nutrients into the sand like with the other thirty million?

Would she crush the woman between her back teeth when she still had the tiny treasure that was Helcalia that she could use for further entertainment?

*Not a chance.* That woman in particular would never do that.

"She would force Melzabeth Grocery to do bad things."

Or if not that, she would try to defile the one thing Melzabeth lived for.

"Melzabeth wanted to protect her daughter more than anything, so Anna would set things up so that daughter hated her. And in the end, she would force her to kill her own daughter. That's the kind of cruelty I would expect if Anna Sprengel was out for revenge. So if you and your mother end up attacking each other and hurting each other, you're playing right into her hands!! ...Listen carefully, Helcalia, to make sure you don't regret this!! It might look like Melzabeth is trying to do something terrible, but you lose from the moment you doubt her, hate her, give up on her, and stop seeing her as your mother!! The rest of us can't truly save Melzabeth Grocery here! The only person in the world who can do that is you, her daughter!!!!!"

He threw the answer at her.

Othinus had warned him over and over that if he faced the darkness to save Melzabeth and Helcalia, he might find an even worse answer hidden there.

And what had he said?

No matter what answer he found, he still wanted to tell Helcalia there was nothing to worry about.

So he would see this through to the end to save this lonely girl.

"I won't be tricked. Not again."

Helcalia sniffled and shouted with all her strength, like she was trying to reject all of it.

She rejected it over and over again.

“Mama lied. Mama didn’t tell me! Nothing anyone says can change it! She had to have some guilty secret. Otherwise she wouldn’t keep secret! It’s proof that she did bad thing!!”

But she was wrong.

Kamijou Touma knew it.

“There was Secret, the key to making the flying demons complete. The wires diagram for connecting the optical neuro machine thing! She was going to give to R&C!! So I have to stop her, reveal the bad things, and save everyone in LA. I have to fight mama!!!!!!”

Helcalia was so adamant on asserting malice on her mother’s part because she was afraid. She was terrified of letting herself trust again and then feeling the pain of betrayal by her own mother all over again. She had decided that abandoning all hope now would be less painful. So she distanced herself from the answer she actually wanted to shout louder than anyone else.

So he had to destroy that.

Until nothing remained.

He would bring back a world where this girl could insist that her mother was not a villain. That was enough of a reason for Kamijou Touma to direct his fist toward something that had grown larger than any one country.

“Of course she had a secret. But that doesn’t mean she’s a villain.”

“So you admit mama had secrets.”

“So what if she did?”

Melzabeth Grocery had been hiding something from her daughter.

What was it? And why? The answer was obvious. He already had everything he needed to answer those questions. He had found this answer on his own, so now he only had to present it with confidence.

So he revealed the answer to this final secret.

“Two days from now...”

“What?”

“December 28th!!”

She may have realized something when he said that.

Her tearful eyes widened in surprise as he threw the decisive truth at her.

“Isn’t that your birthday, Helcalia?”

He would tear down that wall of suspicion.

It wasn’t meant to come between a mother and her daughter.

## Part 13

Union Station’s interior looked like a fashionable shopping mall. It had a vast ceiling, long escalators, and spiral staircases. If it was full of people, Kamijou might have felt like he had wandered into the world of a movie.

It turned out coin-operated lockers were not very common in America.

Instead, they had something like a hotel cloakroom to store luggage. There would ordinarily be an employee at the counter, but not right now.

Kamijou climbed over and checked inside.

He already knew what to check for: 28th – UST 5 AA Secret. He checked the labels on the steel racks and saw the luggage was organized by three alphanumeric characters.

“This is it.”

He pulled out 5AA and brought it to the counter. The girl’s face crumpled as soon as she saw it. Melzabeth had left it here because she could not have her family running across it at home.

So what was it?

Who said it had to be something she felt guilty about?

“Uh...”

It was a small box in pretty wrapping paper.

She had made sure to have a separate present for the girl who hated having her birthday combined with Christmas.

“Ahh...”

A card was held below the crisscrossing ribbon and Kamijou could read the handwritten message without needing the Transla-Pen: Happy birthday, Helcalia.

This was not vague circumstantial evidence.

It was unique material evidence of happiness.

Helcalia curled up, clutched the box to her chest, and bawled her eyes out.

It had nothing to do with a new weapon or super technology.

It was the same gentle secret found in any family.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry! For doubting, for not trusting! Mama!! Ahh, why couldn’t I!? Why!? It was so obvious!! I should have known!!!!”

The Transla-Pen's output was a mess, but it may have been the girl's actual words that were a mess.

“Listen, Helcalia.” Kamijou kneeled down to her eye level. “People lie and they keep things to themselves. I doubt there’s a single person out there that doesn’t. And you don’t become a perfect person once you grow up and reach a certain age. But,” he added to begin a verbal counterattack. *“Your mom isn’t the kind of person who keeps secrets that would hurt people or trap them.*

“Ahh...”

*“That much I know to be true. I tracked down this answer, so I won’t let anyone say it isn’t true.”*

“Ahhh!! Ahhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!”

She could not get any more words out.

He had found an awful answer. A notorious IT company had cruelly used the misunderstandings between a mother and daughter until a third party was forced to reveal the secret Melzabeth Grocery had wanted to keep hidden. Her daughter Helcalia had seen the present before her birthday.

But.

By revealing this without giving up, he had the opportunity to take this to the next step. He had just barely avoided the worst possible option where they denied someone's good

nature and sent them to the depths of hell just because they seemed suspicious and untrustworthy. Shining a light in the darkness had revealed something unpleasant, but because he had leaned forward and stretched out his hand despite the damage it caused, he had acquired this final opportunity.

He could still save Melzabeth Grocery.

That mother had been caught between good and evil, but in the very end, she had chosen to protect her daughter. She had worried for so long that she had done the wrong thing. Kamijou had made it this far, so as long as he kept going, he knew he would be able to grab that drowning hand.

That was a power found in anyone's right hand.

"There you are."

Then he heard an unexpected voice.

That was all it took for young Helcalia to faint, like something had forced her consciousness away.

Kamijou supported her small body and laid her down on the floor before turning around to find Stiyl Magnus in the station. Had he performed a magic search, or had he simply heard Helcalia crying in the empty city?

Stiyl would still think Melzabeth was a villain.

He only believed the things he had seen for himself.

"This is an emergency and even a Saint like Kanzaki has disappeared, so I think we need to be very cautious with Helcalia Grocery as a daughter of one of the villains. Hand her over. This is too much for you to handle."

"Not happening."

The pointy-haired boy bluntly refused, gently placed the wrapped present on the unconscious girl's stomach, and moved himself between her and Stiyl.

Stiyl Magnus wielded magic.

It was powerful, but Imagine Breaker was effective against the occult.

With his right fist, he could save this girl who had nowhere else to turn. And he was willing to fight a wielder of the supernatural to do that.

"Helcalia, I promise you I will save your mom no matter what. I will eliminate all suspicion surrounding her and bring back the life you two once had."

She could not hear him since she was unconscious, but Kamijou strongly believed the words were still meaningful.

“So let me be clear: you have nothing to worry about.”

The runic magician’s only response was an exasperated and smoky sigh.

That was all it took to switch him on.

“Do you understand...”

Laminated cards flew like confetti. The rune cards pasted themselves along the walls and floor, fully covering up the original colors.

“...the situation here?”

“Oh? Are you sure *you do?*” scoffed Othinus from Kamijou’s shoulder. “With that Amakusa Saint gone, the magic side seems pretty short on good will in this city. Now, you might have no reason not to kill Kamijou Touma, but are you prepared for the grimoire library to know what you did? She has a perfect memory, if you recall. Make one little mistake and she will never forget it.”

The priest laughed bitterly at himself.

“True, she’d probably hold a grudge if I killed you with my runes.”

It took less than a second.

It happened so smoothly Kamijou actually missed the moment it happened.

*Bang!! Bang bang bang!!*

“So I had an idea.”

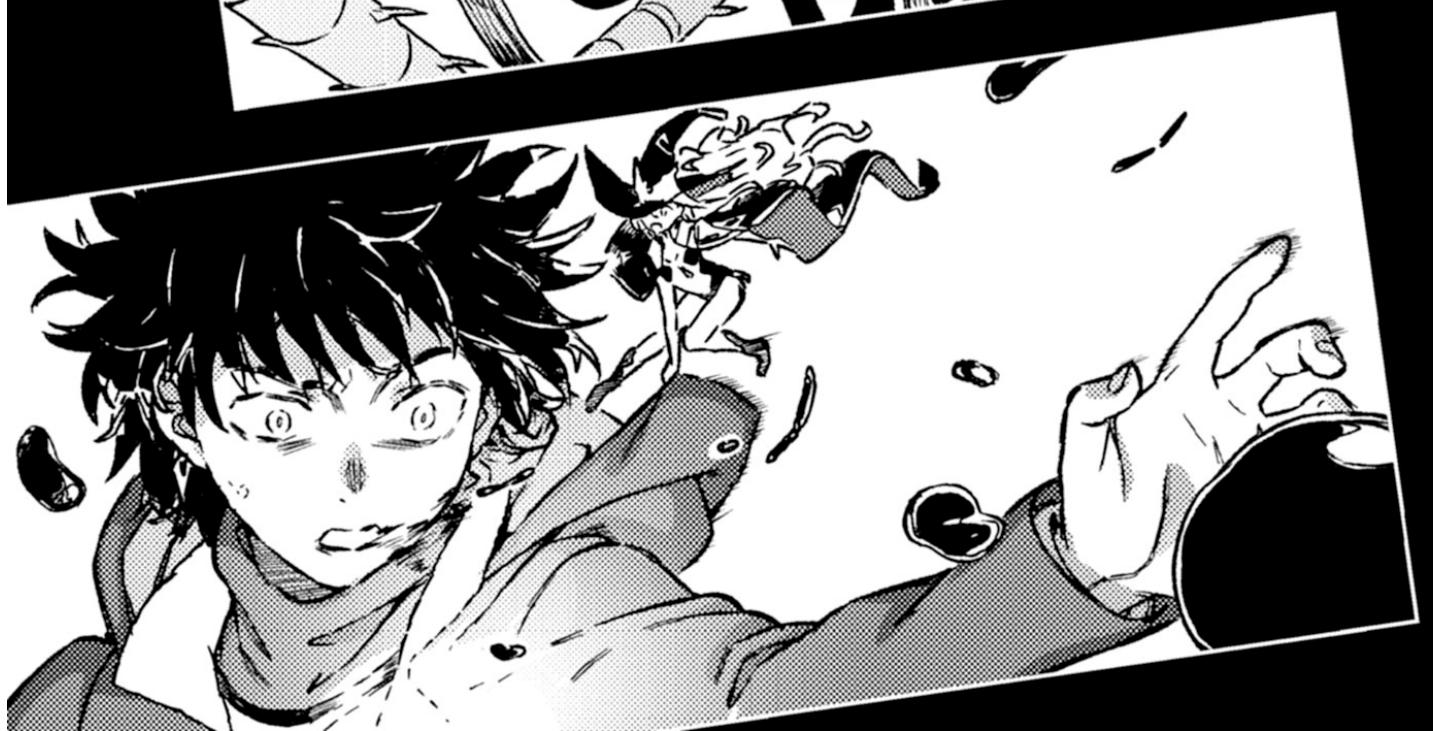
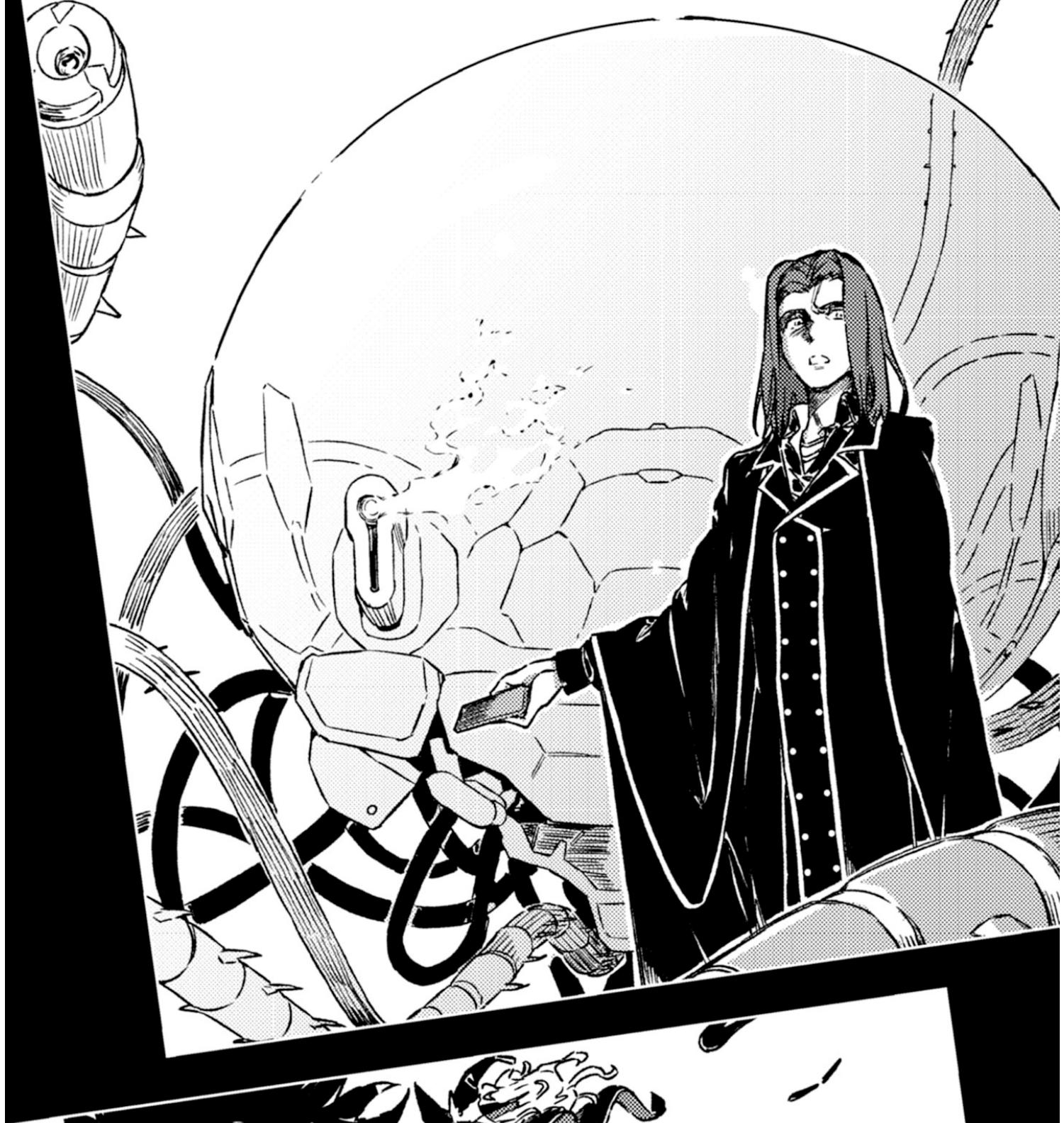
The sweet cigarette smoke was joined by a different smokey scent.

It smelled a lot like fireworks.

The obvious cards had been a bluff to distract from what Stiyl Magnus held in his right hand.

(A...phone?)

“If I used *this thing* I found in the Academy City base, no one would ever suspect it was me even if they did find your corpse. They would assume someone on the science side did it, don’t you think?”



(Oh...right. That sand magician is still out there. So it doesn't make sense for Stiyl of all people to leave Index all alone. The only reason he would do that is to avoid having her perfect memory remember something unpleasant. So he was planning to kill me from the moment he left the diner.)

"A dro—bwah!? Agh...you...cough! Used a drone!?"

"Such a tragic accident. One of these hybrid weapons—did they call them Five Overs—*went berserk* in unmanned mode."

Kamijou could not get any more words out.

Instead, he tumbled down the escalator.

## Part 14

Kamijou fell down three floors' worth of Union Station's escalators.

He coughed violently.

Something was caught in his chest, which kept him from coughing up a clump of blood.

His legs were involuntarily trembling where they were stretched out on the floor.

But that did not last long.

His mind was dragged toward the pit of death.

But he clenched his teeth and dragged himself back to the real world.

"Gah, agh!!"

He forced himself to cough.

Red liquid spewed from his mouth, but he was still alive.

His face was turning blue from asphyxiation, but he still worked to crawl along the ground. He focused on leaving the bottom of the escalator to hide himself.

What would screaming accomplish?

How would writhing in pain help anyone's future?

His time was better spent moving as much as he could. He had to leave Union Station and find the next opportunity.

Melzabeth Grocery was not a villain and he had decided he would save her.

Othinus sighed half in concern and half in exasperation while holding onto his collar.

“Really, human? What did you set up this time?”

“With all those papers...in the diner—cough—I figured it couldn’t hurt to swipe some and stuff them under my clothes like they were old magazines.”

He had taken multiple shots to the chest.

But had that really been a Five Over—that is, a powered suit? The #4 had a much more bizarre silhouette than the mantis-like #3. It had looked something like a giant, transparent jellyfish. Did it accelerate electrons within its dome-shaped body and launch them from the tentacles spread out all around it? That made sense in unmanned mode, but Kamijou could not imagine how someone could wear it.

“It honestly scares me how accustomed you are to misfortune,” said Othinus. “Was that a spare one they hadn’t locked down yet? And when did you suspect this might happen? I didn’t see any hints myself.”

“When Kanzaki disappeared... Styl isn’t exactly the friendly type, so I couldn’t imagine us continuing to work together with her gone. *That’s how it’s always worked between us.* Plus...we’re in the world’s biggest gun country. Bh, I knew there would be bullets flying once I got into a fight in America. Ugh, cough! I-I never imagined I’d be shot by Japanese bullets after traveling all the way here, though.”

Still, *it could have been worse.*

The Five Over was a hybrid weapon that could be manned or remote-controlled. This one was apparently modeled after the #4, so he would have been vaporized if Styl had used its electron beam instead of the optional machine gun. Of course, that had not been a kindness on Styl’s part. He had probably only wanted the corpse’s wounds to be more obviously “scientific” in nature from Index’s perspective.

And the #4 had an especially ill-defined position among the Level 5s.

“It doesn’t use the wave or the particle—it uses the midpoint between them. I bet that tech came from quantum computers, not particle accelerators. I never thought they’d be buildings machines that operate by intentionally *not observing.*”

“?”

“I’m saying we were lucky that idiot brought the #4. If it was the #3 instead, I would have been obliterated by the Gatling guns in its arms.”

“Yes, what luck.”

Did Othinus click her tongue because of Stiyl’s cold calculation, or because Kamijou breathed a sigh of relief and honestly considered himself *lucky* after a supposed ally shot him several times in the chest?

“Hmph. Is that bastard not following up on the attack because he isn’t used to operating a drone?” asked Othinus. “Academy City has those drum-shaped things crawling through all of its alleys, so why even bother with manual control? Switch it to auto and the AI can control hundreds of units at once.”

“He’ll figure out the controls soon enough. He’s familiar enough with machines—cough—to make his rune cards with a printer.”

The copies of the #3 and the #4 were not their only enemy here. Kamijou Touma remembered another label he had seen on the metal containers in that tent base near the airport: *Five Over OS—Modelcase: Accelerator*.

He had no idea what that new weapon could do, but it could attack at any moment. If he did not cover his tracks and find somewhere safe to hide, he would lose the chance to even fight back.

And then he couldn’t save the mother, the daughter, or anyone else.

“...”

Helcalia Grocery had fallen into Stiyl’s hands.

In that case, maybe it was lucky Index was still with the priest. Like Othinus said, Stiyl could not do anything too cruel in front of Index. That went beyond logic or personal interest. It was more like his own personal faith.

So Index would have to protect the daughter.

But that wasn’t enough. Protecting just one of them would not truly save the mother and the child.

The mother was Kamijou’s job.

“Heh. This is perfect. *Now that he’s killed me*, we might as well go into hiding, Othinus. If this lets us hide from Anna and Stiyl while we search out Melzabeth Grocery, it actually works in our favor.”

“Save the smug grins until you’re strong enough to stand up again. It’s twenty below, so if your cheek freezes to the chilled floor, you won’t be able to pull it away again. Do you have something in mind that’s worth the effort?”

He had only been brought along as Index’s “chaperone”.

And since he was no longer following Stiyl’s plan, Stiyl had decided he was only in the way. Kamijou himself had no real reason to work for the Anglicans here.

But.

“My job here isn’t to give up on someone’s life and throw them into the pit of misfortune *just because*. ”

He spoke clearly.

He slowly but surely got his trembling legs moving and stood back up.

And in one more sliver of luck, he still had Melzabeth’s smartwatch and phone. He wished he also had Helcalia as an information source, but he still had some hints to go on.

He could still do this.

The trail had not gone cold, so he only had to keep moving.

“I made a promise to Helcalia who keeps crying even though she didn’t do anything wrong. I promised I would save Melzabeth, so my complaints and frustrations don’t matter. Stiyl can wait until later. There’s just one thing I have to do right now. Whether Melzabeth is a perpetrator, a victim, or buried in the sand, I need to grab her by the collar, drag her back to her daughter, and have her apologize for worrying the girl so much. That’s the one thing I have to do no matter what. ...Am I wrong about any of that, Othinus?”

“No?”

Othinus smiled in amusement on his shoulder.

Whether they were a good or bad person, he would not hesitate to pick a fight with the entire world if he thought someone was worth saving.

That god understood exactly who Kamijou Touma was, so she toyed with her witch’s hat and spoke.

“I am the god of magic, deception, and war, so use my power to its fullest. Swindlers are experts at detecting other swindlers. So leave all the boring magical details to me while you view the world through the familiar lens of science. If you’re going to teach R&C Occultics a lesson for distorting the world for fun while pretending to be all benevolent, then you have my full support.”

“Hold on. Our only goal here is that mother and daughter.”

“Fine, fine. You decide how to use my war powers, human.”

They both took a deep breath and then spoke in unison while stepping into the merciless cold outside of Union Station.

“The counterattack begins now. Let’s destroy every last one of those illusions!!”

He had to trust that there was still some small goodness left in this world.

He had to refuse to let anyone be thrown into the depths of the darkness and stand up back up once more.

## Between the Lines 2

### **Melzabeth Grocery is the Culprit Theory**

Proposer: Stiyl Magnus

A theory based on the paper documents left in the Academy City base and the residual thoughts extracted from them using rune magic. Melzabeth was president of a space start-up, but she brought the results of her research to R&C Occultics and used the Logistic Hornet aerial spacecraft launch pads and their artificial weather manipulation to amplify the sand magician’s power. Melzabeth held onto her position as Space Engage’s president in R&C Occultics’s independent affiliates division and was sent to the Academy City base as a double agent.

According to this theory, she led Operation Overlord Revenge to failure by providing incorrect guidance and she played an active role in Kanzaki’s defeat.

△ Kamijou Touma and Othinus have mostly disproved this theory, but they still lack any truly conclusive evidence. Their investigation is still underway.

### **Melzabeth Grocery is a Villain Theory**

Proposer: Helcalia Grocery

A theory suggesting Melzabeth was so blinded with greed she gave her distribution network to R&C Occultics despite knowing the trouble it would cause. As more and more of the start-up’s workers left, Melzabeth and the others unprincipled ones snatched up as much dirty money as they could to live the good life. The disappearance of LA’s people

was Melzabeth's doing and she happily did it to protect R&C Occultics and thus her own interests.

Helcalia insists she must be a bad person because she had hidden some technology known as "Secret" from her own daughter.

X Kamijou Touma and Othinus have fully disproven this theory. Melzabeth did not enjoy her reward from R&C Occultics. And the secret she was keeping was something else.

### **Melzabeth Grocery is a Good Person Theory**

Proposer: Kamijou Touma and Othinus

A theory suggesting Melzabeth was forced against her will to bring her start-up to the giant IT company because they had taken her daughter hostage, but she was wracked with guilt and distanced herself from all that dirty money. Based on her hotel room and smartphone, she did not trust that immoral company, did not enjoy the rewards they gave her, and chose to live more simply.

This would suggest she ultimately disobeyed R&C Occultics's threatening demands and assisted the joint force instead, but there are concerns she was remotely controlled by some other means and was made to perpetrate a series of misdeeds against her will.

The true enemy is R&C Occultics and CEO Anna Sprengel and it is possible they were trying to pit the mother and daughter against each other in order to get back at the traitor by making her destroy what she cared about most. There is reason to think that cruel plan is meant to end with the mother being made to directly kill her daughter who was spared from the disappearance of the 30 million.

Kamijou Touma has said that both Helcalia and Melzabeth must be rescued.

While Melzabeth had been hiding something from her daughter, she was only preparing a birthday present. Clear material evidence proved that her suspicious behavior had no connection to the incident.

Kamijou Touma proved to the girl that everyone lies and hides things, but Melzabeth Grocery was not the kind of person to keep secrets that hurt or trapped people.

No matter what.

# CHAPTER 3

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## The Counterattack Begins.

*Boy\_not\_“Dark”.*

### Part 1

“I’m sorry to say this year’s nightly tournament project is a Cinderella story for unpopular guys and women who aren’t anywhere near as good looking as they think! The time has come for the o-1 Grand Prix to determine the top comedian. We’re Double Magnet and we’ll be your hosts this year!”

“Unfortunately, accepting this job means we can’t be contestants.”

“I consider it an honor. They’re competing to be the top of the punished, but we get to do the punishing. It means we’ve reached the next rank as entertainers.”

“Then why even have the tournament? Just give us the ten million in prize money.”

“We have a tournament to run here, hosts! Quit getting greedy and wasting the whole two hours on your prattle!!”

When the secondary comedian interrupted and some obviously staged laughter followed, Shokuhou Misaki tilted her head, letting her honey-blonde hair sway along the back of her babydoll. She frowned and spoke to her roommate, Misaka Mikoto.

“What about this is even remotely funny?”

“Enjoying comedy requires empathy and cooperation, two things you are sorely lacking in.”

They got into a scuffle on the bed, but in a purely physical battle, she had no chance against the chestnut-haired grizzly that was Academy City’s #3. Shokuhou Misaki had made a mistake from the moment she challenged the girl who could slice apart a naval cruiser.

“I paid extra to get this cable broadcast of the comedy channel, so you don’t get to complain!!”

“The *polite* thing to do would be to wear headphones! Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!?”

“Speaking of polite, can’t you wear something other than that see-through babydoll!? I’m embarrassed just looking at you! I mean, wow. I can see everything through it *and* it keep slipping out of place!!”

“I am a very delicate girl who can only sleep in her usual nightwear!!”

Pushed back onto the bed with her wrists pinned down, Shokuhou Misaki turned her head to the side and childishly pouted her lips. They probably would have been getting complaints from the other four girls in the room if the others hadn’t already been unable to sleep after ruining their sleep schedule staying up for their Christmas parties.

And Shokuhou’s next line was not “You might have control of my body, but my spirit will never give in.” Instead...

“(Also, well, I have trouble with hospital gowns. They remind me of *that old project.*)”

“Huh?”

“I’m just surprised with you, that’s all☆”

When her psychological powers did not work on someone, Academy City’s #5 kept the upper hand with plain words. But this was only a secondary skill for her, so it was not at the level of that girl who could control every aspect of someone with nothing more than words.

“I mean, I’m surprised you’re watching a comedy show as if you had nothing better to do. I thought for sure you would be using all of your monstrous strength to barge your way in to *that trial.*”

“Sitting in the same room glaring at him won’t change the outcome.” It was Mikoto’s turn to look away. “I won’t help anyone by fretting over it. And it’s getting so much attention that any channel I might be watching is bound to cut away to some emergency news the instant a verdict is reached.”

“You’re relying on the TV news when you’ll have a flood of trending online news and recommended videos coming your way, saving you the trouble of even searching for it? Besides, don’t modern trials use computers to partially automate the process?”

“Why do you know that? You aren’t manipulating the lay judges, are you?”

“Oh, c’mon. I wouldn’t go that far.”

“And how far *would* you go?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know☆”

That was when Shirai Kuroko arrived. The rehabilitation rooms were not open this late, but she may have been secretly receiving some counseling related to the previous incident.

But as far as appearances went, the twintailed underclassman was smiling brightly and spreading her arms.

“Oneeee-samaaaa, what are you—brfahflshf!!!??? Th-they’re making a super-sweet macaron sandwich in the same bed!? And Onee-sama is the top!? *She’s* the dominant one!? How powerful are your pheromones, Shokuhou Misaki!?”

“Shokuhou, did you mess with Kuroko’s brain?”

“Logical brainwashing can’t make someone act like that. It would seem the human body is still a treasure trove of mysteries.”

Just then, Misaka Mikoto’s phone played a monotone melody from the side table.

The three girls turned toward it.

## Part 2

Kamijou Touma walked through the minus-twenty-degree weather of Los Angeles.

He had a single goal: find Melzabeth Grocery, who had been set up as the culprit behind the disappearances as part of R&C Occultics’s conspiracy, take her back to her daughter Helcalia, and have her apologize for worrying the girl.

He would fight anything to accomplish it.

Powerful resolve filled his mind as he asked a question with a white puff of breath.

“*Umm, where am I supposed to find Melzabeth?*”

He was almost in tears. It was twenty below outside. It was closer to midday than morning now, but the temperature showed no sign of rising. He had barely escaped Union Station with his life, but if he walked around aimlessly, he would turn into a popsicle before long.

Othinus sighed in exasperation from his shoulder and recrossed her legs. She also crossed her arms to give him a haughty look.

“In the broadest sense, Los Angeles is a collection of several large cities. Trying to find a single person there on foot is as reckless as plans come. If you still don’t understand the sheer size of LA, keep in mind that there are 375 kilometers of pipe drawing water across the desert to the city center here. This is the US’s second biggest city and its economic value makes all that development more than worth it.”

“Y-you mean it’s too large to walk from one side to the other?”

“A splendid answer well worth seeking out a god’s aid for, don’t you think?”

Now he was even more certain he would freeze to death before finding that Indian mother. Just walking brought him closer to death out here, so searching without a single hint was much too difficult.

So...

“Do you think there could be anything more hidden on here?”

He let out another white puff of breath as he pulled out that smartwatch. The square face, the red and black band, and the small scratches and smudges sure seemed to hide some important meaning, but none of it did him any good when he didn’t have a code sheet telling him how to interpret it.

It was like having a list of all the correct answers for a multiple-choice test but not knowing what test it went to.

Othinus sighed.

“If you want to pursue Melzabeth Grocery, you do have a few keywords to go off of. 1. Her daughter Helcalia. 2. R&C Occultics. 3. Space Engage. Searching based on those things would probably be the most realistic option.”

Kamijou Touma looked down at the smartwatch again.

“I must be big dumb-dumb cause that didn’t help me at allllll.”

“You aren’t trying to get out of thinking for yourself because you think people find you cute when you’re dumb, are you?”

But if he couldn’t find anything with the smartwatch, maybe it was best to try something else. He also had the phone that synced with the watch.

Needless to say, that Grapple MilliPhone had to be chock full of personal information, but an ordinary high school boy had no way of getting past the lock screen to see inside.

“In that case...hmm, I guess I’ll have to ask her for help.”

“You aren’t even trying to do this on your own, are you? Being stupid will not work out in your favor, you know?”

Othinus sounded utterly exasperated while Kamijou operated a mobile device. But this was not the mother’s phone he had collected.

He used his own Academy City phone to call one of the numbers in the address book.

It was only a phone call, but he spoke with the world’s ugliest attempt at sounding ingratiating.

“M-Misaka-shaaaan? I’d like some help from your zappy powers.”

It was so pathetic that Helcalia Grocery might have reflexively kicked him in the balls if she heard it so soon after trusting him to the point of tears.

However, he was not a private eye or a veteran police detective and there was only so much a high school boy could do.

But he had decided to do what he could.

He would not let that mother and daughter be lost in the darkness, no matter what it took. So if he lacked the skills and knowledge, he would find a way to make up for it. He would not hold anything in reserve. He would use every single thing he could think of. And just because he was a failure of a Level 0 did not mean everyone around him was too.

On the other side of the phone, Academy City’s #3 spoke with ice in her voice.

“So you vanish from the hospital without telling me, but the instant you need some help, you decide to get me involved in your own mess like I’m suddenly a party member again? I see, I see, I see.”

“Kyahh! Is that Kamijou-san!? Why is he calling!? Where is he right now!? Kyah, kyah!!” shouted *a mysterious voice*, but he couldn’t focus on that right now.

“Please, Biri Biri! This is an international call, not a free calls app!! Your anger is understandable, but I need you to act quickly right now!!”

“Oh, if you have a problem with this, I can always connect you to a mysterious call center in South Africa. Then you can think long and hard about what you’ve done while watching the call time rise on that abnormally pricey connection that refuses to hang up no matter how many times you hit the ‘end call’ button.”



“What in the world!? Did that defunct Dial Q service come back to haunt us as a phone fee black hole!?”

“And please stop shrieking, Shokuhou! Since when are you the giddy schoolgirl type!?”

“I was born this way.”

“And since when did you have hearts in your eyes?”

“I was born this way! Yes, born this way!”

“Well, it stops right now or I’m killing you.”

He heard a physical altercation over the phone, but he could not have this conversation delayed indefinitely. Those girls back in their peaceful country did not know the hell that was international phone rates.

Othinus, meanwhile, sighed with her arms still crossed.

“(She complains a lot for someone who picked up on the third ring. Was she waiting in front of her phone?)”

“Hey, put on that girl I just heard whispering,” said Mikoto. “I need to have a talk with her. And depending on her answer, I might just blow up the lithium battery by your ear.”

“?”

Kamijou looked puzzled and Othinus only gave a carefree whistle from his shoulder.

At any rate...

“I need to get past a phone’s lock screen, so can you open it with your powers?”

“A phone, huh? What kind? An Alkaloid?”

“It’s a Grapple MilliPhone. Why don’t you sound too confident?”

“It’d be a cinch if I had it in front of me, but over the internet is trickier. Those small, multifunction devices are so easy to accidentally break. Plus, the MilliPhones are rumored to have a planned obsolescence system called Telomere... Is the data backed up? If I fry the chip, you’ll never be able to see what’s on it.”

“But I really need to track down Melzabeth. The places she normally visits, her hideouts...anything really.”

“Dwehahhhhhhhh!!!!!”

A bizarre yell suddenly burst from the phone.

He thought maybe Miss Misaka Mikoto had overworked her brain and gone crazy, but apparently not.

“Onee-sama!! I wasn’t done speaking with you! And now you’re having a phone conversation in bed? You know you shouldn’t use phones in the hospital, don’t you? There, justification acquired! Now I can drag her to a mysterious basement of loving and courageous punishment! Calexa, order me a scavenger’s daughter and a pear of anguish!!”

“You don’t have to be so careful about it without any specialized equipment in this room, so settle down, Kuroko!!”

“Pant, pant!! And you, whoever that is helplessly on the other end of the phone!! What do you think is happening to Onee-sama right now? Just what deliciously naughty things are being done to her!? Heh heh heh. Use your imagination to its fullest and strain your ears to pick up every little sound. Weh heh heh. This! Yes, *this* is the true joy of cuckoldryyyyyyyyyy!!!!!”

Mikoto seemed busy, so maybe it was about time he hung up, had a snack, and tried again later. The international fees were really starting to scare him now.

But even as he stared off into the distance, the previous intruder said something more.

“Also, *what was that about Melzabeth Grocery?*”

“?”

For a moment, he really thought he couldn’t breathe.

How had she known his question before he asked? Had she heard what he said to Mikoto? But he didn’t remember giving the Grocery last name. Why did someone know about Melzabeth Grocery all the way in Academy City!?

“Wait, um, why do you know about Melzabeth? Because, uh...”

“Sigh. You mean the president of Space Engage, don’t you? Then again, it’s one of that giant IT company’s slave companies now.”

Kamijou and Othinus exchanged a glance.

Why did someone on the other side of the globe—and a first year in middle school at that—know about this?

Shirai Kuroko replied before he could even ask and she made it sound like a silly question.

He was quickly reminded that the students of the prestigious Tokiwadai Middle School really did live in another world.

“Um, why do you sound so surprised? My bank and investment firm contact me all the time about these things. And when they tell me about a promising new start-up with private equity, of course I’m going to check it out.”

“Investment firm? Private equity?”

Kamijou glanced down at his Transla-Pen.

But no. He couldn’t give up yet. This conversation was supposedly in Japanese, after all.

“To be clear, I am not an actual trader or marketer. It’s not about making money; it’s about getting a feel for how money moves around. Think of it like a form of social studies. The experts have already gone over all of this before introducing it to me and their reputation is riding on their recommendations. Maybe it’s like a fishing pond for special customers. This is *entry level* stuff that would get me a derisive snort from the actual mathematicians and financial engineers who are braving the tall mountain to go fishing in the most dangerous streams.”

Shirai Kuroko sounded utterly exasperated. When kids in the Tokiwadai world were taught the value of money, it apparently was not done by pedaling their bike around as a paperboy over winter break.

But even so...

“If you are interested in her keynote speech on private spaceflight, it should still be up on the video sites. You know, that thing so many American start-ups do, where they proudly announce their new project up on stage wearing a casual shirt and jeans. Of course, her corporate policies and principles were wiped out once she sold that new tech to that IT company, so I sold all my stock then. In fact, it doesn’t look like R&C Occultics even intends to let the company survive. They were only interested in the distribution infrastructure and rights to the technology, so they aren’t expected to actually produce those new products. They probably see her company like an empty candy wrapper now.”

A shareholder.

It was a completely different tug-of-war compared to the connections he was more accustomed to, like enemy, ally, family, or stranger.

“W-wait!! Are you saying you know a lot about Space Engage? I know they’re completely subservient now, but do you know where their office or lab was during the initial start-up days!?”

“Of course I do. Investigating a company’s assets and equipment is the least you should do before investing. Any prospective shareholder will ask for that data first and foremost. Without that, you wouldn’t know if their proud presentation is within their means or a complete bluff.”

## Part 3

Tokyo was the capital of Japan. London was the capital of England. In most countries, the most developed city was also the capital, but there were exceptions. For example, what was the capital of Brazil? Some might say Rio de Janeiro, but they would be wrong. The correct answer was Brasilia.

Similarly, the world’s most famous man lived in a city much more minor than LA or New York.

The city was Washington DC and his home was known as the White House.

That building was packed full of so much history and tradition, but right now it rang with an intellectual woman’s shouting voice. Her name was Roseline Krackhart and she was a presidential aide with a specialty in national security. Although at the moment, she felt more like the babysitter for an abnormally large baby.

“Why was there a call girl waiting outside!? How many times are you going to do this!? You can’t just pick up your phone and call one here whenever you’re feeling bored!!”

“Now, hold on. Are you saying you sent her away? This is my home and I’m allowed to order whatever I want. Speaking of, what happened to my four cheese and soft-boiled egg carbonara pizza? Really, you sent that back too!? I need my fuelllllll!”

The large Hispanic man added “you could have at least given them a tip” while Roseline silently formed two fists and began pummeling the balance ball in a corner of the room. The White House actually had more stress relief products for the staff than it did its actual resident’s personal possessions.

The bearded man named Roberto Katze would likely have been terrorizing the seven seas as a pirate if he hadn’t become president. In fact, Roseline sometimes wondered if that was the real timeline and his presence in the oval office with his leather shoes up on the desk was proof that this was an unnatural parallel timeline.

“It’s a free country and I’m single, so it’s not even cheating if I decide to cut loose and have some fun.”

“And what if she is a honey trap sent by the opposition party? Besides, the profiles on those sites are all self-reported, so you can’t trust any of it. Oh, god. What if people start to suspect you’re carelessly leaking information to foreign spies? Your political career will be ruined...”

“Quit your bellyaching. Miss Jane I met the other day was a real adult who understands how society works, not some kid like you who never stops complaining. So it’s fine.”

“When and where did you sneak out to meet with this woman!!!???”

The White House was protected inside and out by the secret service and the marines, but this man had developed escape skills straight out of a ninja action film. Whenever justice or his libido were on the line, he had the uncanny ability to transform into a shirtless, Gatling-gun-toting monster who could fight space aliens head on.

Currently, he switched gears to the non-libido side of things.

“How are things in LA?”

“Did you really expect any progress? We still can’t reach the state governor or legislature.” Roseline answered his question with a question of her own and placed her shapely butt atop the balance ball. “Fortunately, Overlord Revenge was run by England and Academy City, so America was not directly involved.”

That was the only way it could have worked. The US military could not fire on their own citizens in their own country, with one exception: if that citizen broke into one of their bases. So they could not make a preemptive strike inside the country. That restriction felt downright silly now that thirty million people had disappeared, though.

Could the actions of a single company really be called a civil war or a revolution?

To answer that, they had to determine *what exactly R&C Occultics had done*. If it involved nuclear or chemical weapons, they might have the excuse they needed to deploy the military, but so far, they just had an inexplicable mass disappearance. As silly as it seemed, the law could do nothing until they figured out how it had happened. With disappearances alone, they had to seriously consider the possibility of people running away from home en masse. Legally speaking, anyway.

So they could not authorize military action, leaving them stuck and unable to act.

It was true police special forces had militarized a lot in recent years, but they were not trained to endure a real war.

The aide breathed a heavy sigh.

“On the other hand, you will be publicly criticized for authorizing an attack by foreign troops, even if they are allies. I will put together a flowchart of expected questions and their answers, giving you a political defense that will withstand at least 256 different branching possibilities. The vice president says he will play the role of your criticizer to help you practice.”

“Bleh, that’s not fortunate or unfortunate. It’s trivial.” The president made a verbal attack with his feet up on the desk. “What matters is figuring out what happened to those thirty million. I want to know for sure if they’re alive or dead and, if possible, drag them all out of the darkness alive and well. Only then can we talk about what’s fortunate and unfortunate. Don’t give up on the most important part before you know how it’s gonna turn out.”

The intellectual aide sighed too quietly for anyone to hear.

She was especially careful to make sure the president didn’t hear.

It was his ability to talk boldly here that earned him so many votes despite his unprecedented behavior. He was nothing like the other politicians who always said they would do their best and work towards everyone’s happiness but who were too afraid of going too far or saying the wrong thing to actually give a straight answer when it counted.

The words of this president left a solid footprint in the ground.

And it was that trail of footprints that was defining the future of this country and the world as a whole. So everyone in the United States, regardless of gender, generation, race, or religion, wanted to see where this man would take them.

The way he elevated the country made the election fun for once and he convinced all of the people that they were lucky to have a say in electing him.

And now Roberto Katze took another step forward.

“What about the NSA?”

“They are waiting outside of LA.”

“The CIA?”

“Keeping them from recklessly rushing in there has not been easy. If they did that, they would probably only disappear along with everyone else.”

“Then we just have to find someone who knows what’s going on.”

Telling Roberto there was nothing they could do was not enough to stop him.

The mysterious occult were not the only ones with secret forces they could covertly send out.

“Still no word from our Overlord Revenge contact? Then we’ll have to contact the people in charge.”

“You’ve heard what’s going on in Academy City. I doubt we would have a chance to speak with *the defendant* while he’s cut off from the outside world for the trial.”

“What about England?”

“Our hotline is up and running, but who is even in charge of that country? Their prime minister is already begging our operator to pick up the phone.”

“It would have to be whoever was in charge of Overlord Revenge and whoever would know how things stood right up to the end.”

“That would be the Church then,” readily answered Roseline. “You want the Anglicans.”

## Part 4

“Long Beach?”

Kamijou Touma tilted his head and stared down at his phone.

Othinus sighed on his shoulder.

“I get the feeling you wouldn’t recognize Anaheim or Chinatown either.”

Shirai Kuroko had sent him a certain data file. It was not password-locked or anything, but it had an extension he had never seen before and he had trouble figuring out to open it on his phone. That had required nervously downloading a free decompression tool from a sketchy-looking foreign site. Why couldn’t they use a reputable app store?

“Oh.”

“Wait, Othinus! This is safe, isn’t it!? If *you’re* lost, then I’ll be forever trapped in this online world!!”

Everything was done paperless these days, so he opened the file to find a company pamphlet. Except it included a few specialized numbers and names, providing data not released to the general public.

He was unfamiliar with this sort of document, so it took some time to read through it.

It was the afternoon before he knew it.

“Long Beach is exactly what it sounds like. It’s strong in the aerospace and steel industries and its beaches are pretty fancy.”

“Fancy? You mean like an invite-only—”

“They are not nudist beaches.”

“Do you have to glare at me like I’m a bug crawling on the floor!!!????”

Despite wearing little more than a cape herself, that god did not like people who were too eager.

She continued her explanation, sounding like she was only giving the bare minimum she felt obligated to provide.

“But being a nice area means it gets crowded fast, so getting any land there has to be a challenge. So instead of doing launches on a vast stretch of land, they may have run their experiments out at sea. Space Engage is a space company, right? A simulator would be enough for their initial experiments, but practical experiments would be necessary eventually. Even if they only used scaled-down models.”

It didn’t really matter, but it was apparently twenty or thirty kilometers from Downtown to Long Beach. If they did not find some kind of vehicle, it would be time for a marathon in the minus-twenty-degree weather.

“This might be exactly what we needed.”

“In what way?”

“You know what I mean.” Othinus crossed her arms on his shoulder. “Melzabeth Grocery screwed up. You could even say you were only following the rails of failure she had set up. The smartwatch was a convenient collection of hints, but following it to the end would only have led to the same fate as her. The best way to use that watch is to *play a game of chicken where you get as much use out of it as you can and bail at the last second*. You at least need to jump from the car before it plummets from the edge of the cliff.”

In that sense, maybe it was good they had found a new source of information.

This would give them a view from outside that single set of rails.

The world would open up around them.

Every part of the frozen city was marred by sand. Every step had the same crunch as at a busy seaside restaurant, but it was all a remnant of R&C Occultics’s attack.

The sand magic had caused everyone to vanish from Los Angeles.

Kamijou's focus turned to his right hand.

The Rosicrucian magic was called Citrinitas and the thirty million missing people had been turned into nutrients and absorbed by the sand...or so he had been told.

This was an occult effect, so he might be able to negate it with a touch from his right hand.

He might be able to save the trapped people.

"Don't even think about it," warned Othinus. "You can negate the magic, but what happens then is a mystery. You might be able to drag them all out of the sand safe and sound, but what if *you negate the special life support effect keeping them alive as no more than nutrients?* Then only the nutrient-rich sand will remain and the people can't be revived."

"That's...a good point."

He could negate it, but he could not define how the occult would be destroyed.

Was this Citrinitas magic similar to a cold sleep device? They did not know if they could safely retrieve the victims by smashing the device from the outside, so it was best to avoid touching any of it until they knew for sure. People's lives were at stake.

"So would it be better to directly defeat the villain using the Citrinitas magic? I feel like it would save everyone if I destroyed the tool they're using as a core of the magic. Like a magic wand or a crystal ball."

"I'm reluctant to agree with that, but it would be fastest to get the defeated magician to tell you what to do. And you don't need to be friends to get them to talk. You just need to do whatever it takes to win."

That would require searching out someone.

Maybe the sand magician, maybe Anna Sprengel, and maybe Melzabeth Grocery.

Who would know the answer? Where could they find any hints to their whereabouts?

"What is this? Rental scooters?"

"Use that pen of yours to read the English sign, human. They have a big motor attached, so they can reach speeds of around 50km/h."

"You can use these on the streets? What kind of license does that require?"

"Forget the restrictive Japanese rules. American standards are always scarily relaxed."

You could apparently hold your phone up and immediately pay to rent one. Othinus sighed when Kamijou held his own phone up to the reader.

“There’s no one here, so you could just use Melzabeth’s phone.”

“I’m not doing that.”

Toys that looked like someone attached T-shaped handlebars to a motorized skateboard lined the sidewalk. He removed the stopper from one and pulled it out with both hands.

“Huh? Why do you look so pleased, Othinus?”

“I have a soft spot for these American toys. Especially two-wheeled ones ridden standing up.”

He took off along the road without a helmet.

It was unthinkable in Japan, but Othinus insisted that you drove on the right in America. His Japanese instincts very nearly led him to his doom. In fact, he might have died almost immediately if LA wasn’t deserted.

The wind was agonizing in this twenty-below world. His cheap jacket was no help whatsoever.

He finally understood why Stiyl had insisted on using the dark subway tunnel before.

“My ears are gonna fall off!!!???”

“How is this too much for you? You trekked across frigid Denmark with me, remember?”

Othinus started talking like an old grandmother who insisted rubbing yourself with a dry towel was the best way to fight the cold.

“I don’t care what, just tell me something that will distract me from this biting pain!”

“Fine. You might be interested to know that even America requires a helmet and a license to drive one of these on the streets. Oh, and you broke another law too. You need to be eighteen to drive one.”

“Why did I ask!?”

Riding out on the open road felt dangerous, but it was still a relief to rapidly leave the area they had been sniped in earlier.

He saw something slowly pass by overhead in the distance.

“What is that?”

“A Logistic Hornet. One of the twelve mobile delivery bases surrounding the world.”

“Are you sure it doesn’t use magic? It really uses no more than the laws of physics to stay in the air?”

“Does that look like a flying broomstick to you?”

“I-I guess Academy City isn’t the only place with crazy tech...”

From a distance, it looked like a V-shaped boomerang, but it actually had another triangular tail wing attached behind that. But more than that, the center of the main V had a giant hole in it. The centerless aircraft produced a low rumbling.

At the same time, orange sparks flew from it.

The donut-like part surrounding the hole began to glow and then the flashing moved back to the tail wing. Then an orange beam of light was launched diagonally upwards.

Like with lightning, the loud boom shook Kamijou’s eardrums and gut after a short delay.

“Wh-what the hell!?”

“That would be the mass driver that carries cargo outside the atmosphere. A linear motor builds up circular acceleration and then it’s fired from the rear launch port. The orange light is probably the heated electromagnets being exposed to the external air to cool down. I guess you can think of it like a roller coaster where the track ends partway through. ...But that one was moving awfully slow. I can’t imagine it would do much more than glide slowly through the upper atmosphere.”

That aircraft boosted the Citrinitas magic by creating sandstorms and other weather conditions made by manipulating the temperature with liquid nitrogen and naphtha.

“I-it disappeared beyond the horizon.”

“You have to look at it on the scale of the weather map. You’ve seen the maps they show during the forecast with what look like the rings of a tree, right? This intentionally creates and distorts those, so their sketchbook has to cover fifty or even one hundred kilometers.”

Kamijou saw an unnatural sunrise in the southern sky. No, was that the naphtha fire being used to heat the air? It shined for about ten seconds before gradually vanishing once more.

Even Othinus sounded shocked by the extraordinary American size of it all.

“That thing can carry an obscene amount of supplies. If that was pure napalm that just detonated in the sky, we’re talking about enough firepower to have ended the Vietnam War in three days. I know they needed it to control the wind and carry enough sand to the city for their magic, but this is still impressive.”

“More like absurd... Why even control the weather when they can blast us with that explosion?”

“I’m sure it has its restrictions. It was originally designed for peaceful launches, so the coordinate settings and the mass driver’s movement range won’t allow it to target the nearby surface.”

“Can’t planes flip upside down?”

“You fool, don’t you know what would happen if you flew a large transport plane or strategic bomber the same way as a small fighter? And this thing is five thousand meters across, so it’s a miracle it stays airborne at all. The tech here is even better than that Radiosonde Castle we used in Gremlin.”

At that size, he wondered if it could change the wind currents by tilting just enough to catch the wind.

“Does it launch everything by noisily blasting it into the air?”

“That would be unnecessarily inconvenient. At five thousand meters across, its wings can be used as runways. They can also hang transport planes and drones from the bottom and accelerate them like a monorail.”

But Othinus was viewing this from another angle as well.

“The hornet name is a symbol.”

“?”

“The rose is the organization, the nectar hidden within the flower is knowledge, and I supposed the hornets buzzing around the flower would be the experts seeking that hidden knowledge. Hmph, quite the name for the tools flying around the world for a massive IT company.” Othinus sounded half exasperated and half impressed. “They function much like an aircraft carrier, but the upwards-pointing mass drivers can also launch flying objects into ballistic orbit. And if that asshole priest is to be believed, the launches cost less than one percent of a multistage rocket launch.”

“How incredible is that?”

“More so than an oil field that never runs dry. Even if it is limited to ballistic flight, this invention makes spaceflight more accessible than the highway. Melzabeth Grocery must be the kind of person who ends up unhappy after winning the lottery.”

A high school boy did not know much about oil fields or highways either, so Kamijou still didn’t really get it.

But more importantly...

“How does that giant thing take off and land? I doubt it can use an ordinary airport.”

“I was guessing either the ocean or the desert, but since we’re on our way to Long Beach, probably the ocean. Then again, they might rely on midair refueling to stay in flight indefinitely.”

“You mean using an air tanker?”

“They went to all that trouble to create stateless mobile bases, but those would require using ordinary airports for refueling. Maybe they send up tanks attached to giant balloons. That would let them refuel from land or sea without needing a stationary airport.”

Kamijou recalled Stiyl mentioning that in the diner. Something about them using gliders and missile launch vehicles to send cargo to the Logistic Hornets. So they might do the same thing to provide fuel and maintenance equipment.

However they worked, they were R&C Occultics’s toys now.

It would not be that easy to neutralize them by cutting off the fuel supply.

Those things were so big that nothing they could do on the surface would bring it down. It was like challenging the moon or the sun.

He was driving at the speed of a motorcycle, but it was still a long distance to travel. And time was passing the entire time. The abnormal weather was bad enough to begin with, but he felt like his body temperature was dropping as time passed.

He finally grumbled a complaint while operating the unusually fast scooter.

“So you’re saying we have to fight that thing? Stiyl said it’s so big it can control the weather and entire meteorological disasters. Isn’t this entire twenty-below mess its fault? Not only can it part the ocean or send spears raining down on our head, but it can boost that sand magician’s magic to the point that not even a Saint like Kanzaki could win.”

“So are you going to give up?”

“*I didn’t say that.*”

He didn’t even need to think about it.

He would find and rescue the missing mother named Melzabeth Grocery, he would take her back to her daughter Helcalia Grocery, and he would make sure this ended happily.

*He would do anything to pull it off.*

*There was no doubt in his mind about it.*

They passed by an English sign. Kamijou could not read all of the simple English, but he could read the two biggest words: Long Beach.

## Part 5

“Defendant, can you confirm for us that the adults did not use their weapons or authority to coerce you into these criminal acts and that you chose to kill these people of your own free will? And while they were clones, we are talking about twenty thousand innocent people here.”

“Your Honor, this question is deliberately phrased to assist the prosecution! I fear it is a leading question!”

“The existence of this alleged experiment using cloned humans has yet to be proven, so we should not be discussing the possibility of homicides based on that premise. Academy City denies any and all accusations of such an experiment.”

“We have ample testimony and data to suggest the very likely possibility that the defendant is mentally unstable, so is it not highly immature to continue asking him questions in this state?”

“We request a recess. We of the prosecution wish for victory in a fair trial. This trial is meant to reveal the truth, so we request a recess even if it might assist the defense!!”



That ‘human’ gave a snort of laughter.

Academy City’s #1 Level 5 and new board chairman, a thorn in so many people’s sides, laughed weakly from the defendant break room’s sofa.

“Hee hee. Ee hee hee. Nee hee. Ah hee hee.”

He also heard another voice laughing.

The papers sitting in a corner of the room and the dried leaves from the potted plants swirled around on their own and finally burst from within, revealing a translucent girl wearing a shabby dress made from English newspapers.

She was a true demon.

She was hard at work this morning too.

"This is certainly a strange situation. I mean, I thought human trials were about the prosecution and the defense arguing against each other, so *why does the prosecution keep protecting you by bringing up your mental state, master?*"

Mentally unstable. The prosecution was meant to gather evidence, search out witnesses, and win a guilty verdict for the defendant, so that should have been the last card they wanted played. It was a necessary part of the system, but people with something to hide had a tendency to claim it like a trump card.

"Hmph. Getting them to admit to the clone experiment is the real challenge here. Because there's no evidence. They're trying to throw out all of my testimony and reports by claiming *I hallucinated it all and none of it was real*. Far too many people in the city feel they would be better off with that result."

The defense wanted a not guilty verdict (whether the defendant himself wanted it or not) since that was their job, but even the prosecution wanted to avoid a guilty verdict this time.

It was truly a bizarre trial. Accelerator, the defendant up on the chopping block, was the only one hoping for a guilty verdict that would mean more than ten thousand years of prison time.

He could not let this be dragged out with a mental evaluation or a reexamination of the evidence. Because the #1 had a good reason for wanting a guilty verdict.

"Can't say I envy your position there. I mean, you're exposing your own misdeeds to keep the world from noticing the clone girls you didn't kill, right?"

Hearing a sneering voice, Accelerator clicked his tongue.

The voice came from Qlipah Puzzle 545, but her shoulders had gone slack, her arms hung limply down, her head lolled, and her eyes were devoid of light.

Like some kind of mistake, someone else's words came from the crescent moon slit of her mouth.

"What did you do?"

"Did you forget already? Qlipah Puzzle 545 calls herself a demon, but she was originally *something like a grimoire* created in England. That makes her a lot like me, the Great Dion Fortune, since I'm made from seventy-eight cards. Revealing the Qliphoth and hijacking control wasn't all that hard."

Dion Fortune.

The original magician had belonged to the legendary Golden magic cabal and this version now reigned as the archbishop at the top of the Anglican Church.

“The US President was not happy. Darris Hewlane, was it? Japan will collapse pretty quick without America sticking around as its training wheels, so how about being a little nicer? Academy City—no, that tiiiny Asian archipelago will be in trouble otherwise.”

“Darris is the vice president.”

“Oh, excuse me. He’s the more sensible one who actually contacts us, so he came to mind first. ...I’m surprised a monster like you actually bothers remembering people’s names. Have you finally learned how to moderate yourself as a leader?”

“Hmph.”

“Anyway, it didn’t look like I could contact you by phone, so I improvised.”

Dion Fortune made it sound like little more than a minor magic trick.

And for the head of the Anglicans, maybe that’s all it was.

Someone else spoke through the mouth of the demon whose arms hung limply and whose marine tail squirmed on the floor.

“True, it probably isn’t ideal for you to be contacting an outsider in the middle of your trial, even during a recess. You could receive some hint that might overturn the testimony presented at trial, or you could have an outside team cover up some evidence.”

She appeared to be laughing.

She had laid out those rules so she could overturn them.

“Those are your science side rules, so we can ignore them here on the magic side. Overlord Revenge is still ongoing, so we can’t have you ignoring the Japan-UK-US hotline for your own *personal* affairs.”

England did not care what happened with the #1’s trial.

Wiping out R&C Occultics was much more important.

Was that why she was so concerned about the outcome of the Academy City and Anglican Operation Overlord Revenge? What was that about moderating yourself as a leader? He felt like it was she who had gone soft.

“Listen, Accelerator. This isn’t our first contact, since we already met at Windsor Castle. I get the feeling you don’t think too highly of my abilities and think I’m beneath you. I won’t deny it either. I might be a stranger from a different land, but I will use my endless love and patronizing affection to guarantee you freedom of speech and thought, no matter how tiny those thoughts might be. ...Besides, it has long been known that people are much easier to trip up if they underestimate you.”

“So how are things going?”

“The Saint was defeated and the infiltration team fell apart afterwards. So not great. Plus, the HQ building in LA doesn’t really matter. That collection of glass and concrete is far less important than the R Rose drone control server. If they can break that apart and escape the city with it, they can easily rebuild. R&C Occultics can’t be weakened without taking out the twelve Logistic Hornets that act as the cornerstone of their online shopping network and as a global meteorological weapon, so what are they even doing down there?”

“Sounds like I wasn’t underestimating you at all. I was dead on in my estimation.”

“Do go on believing that. That way I win even if I come back empty-handed this time.”

Dion Fortune did not seem to care.

The slumping demon girl’s lips continued to crawl.

“And do remember that I’m not my predecessor. I’m no good at conspiracies and I don’t much care for them either. So what you see is what you get with me. And let me be clear, that should scare you. That means I won’t compromise, cover things up, make secret arrangements, or guess at what other people are plotting. So let me take this opportunity to make one rule of this new world crystal clear for you.”

She made this sound even more serious than the ongoing end of the world.

*“I’m not interested in any sob stories about what went down over there. I know you have Hamazura Shiage hooked up to tubes and cords in the ICU. If he dies, then you’re facing all-out war with England.”*

She ignored everything else they had been talking about.

Even the battle against R&C Occultics was of secondary importance.

If Academy City and England started obstructing each other’s efforts, there really would be no one left to stop Anna Sprengel and R&C Occultics. But she was not ignorant of that. That Golden magician *was well aware of it, yet she did not hesitate.*

That may have been the proof she was of the Golden.

It pointed to the nature of the world's largest magic cabal once led by Mathers and later joined by Crowley. Individuals were not to compromise themselves for the dreary needs of the world at large. They believed in the will of the individual and they never let the world come between them and what they chose to do.

She did not care that a single mistaken command could lead humanity to extinction over an unnecessary detour. She let her personal issues taint everything, which in turn allowed no room for compromise.

"Humanity itself is only a temporary ruler. Sooner or later, they will die out."

"..."

"So my role is not to provide eternal happiness to the entire population. The planet's resources are finite and the sun will eventually expand all on its own, so the human race has a limited lifespan and the concept of eternity is meaningless. My job is to delay that destruction by just a bit and to avoid leaving a bad taste in everyone's mouth. So let me be clear: I do not fear the destruction of humanity. Because technically speaking, I don't even qualify as human."

She was arrogant and selfish.

She did not even consider how much explaining her pet theory would distort the world around her. This was exactly how the Golden magicians acted.

A transparent thread dripped from the girl's crescent moon mouth.

"So I will make full use of the privileges granted me for fulfilling my duties as archbishop. Hamazura Shiage is my friend, my savior, and a crucial part of not leaving a bad taste in people's mouths. So if he dies, *I will give up on avoiding that bad taste*. This is simple arithmetic. I am saying that I will not do what I cannot do. If you hope to trigger a pointless apocalypse, then I hope you have the keys to heaven on hand. To be honest, this is one of the more boring scenarios leading to humanity's destruction."

For anyone other than the #1, the tense atmosphere would have suffocated them.

And it ended there.

The air seemed to relax around him.

Dion Fortune was once more turning the gears of conversation.

"So let me ask you once more: *Take care of Hamazura Shiage for me*. As long as you do that, I will cooperate with you in anything you might want. I will lend you the full power of the Anglican Church, the part of this planet's magic half that excels in combating magicians."

Accelerator breathed a disinterested sigh.

And he spoke without hesitation.

“What are you saying you can do?”

“I already told you: my job is to delay the destruction of humanity just a bit and to avoid leaving a bad taste in people’s mouths. And that includes the points of contention in that trial of yours.”

“...”

Dion Fortune also spoke without hesitation.

Even though she knew how risky it was to do that in front of the #1.

“Yes, so how about this as a way to support your adorable little legal trickery and our much more important Overlord Revenge? There are still nearly ten thousand clone girls left around the world. With #ooooo, #20001, Dolly, and Worst, I really don’t know what the exact number is, but don’t you want to give them a place to live and give them true acceptance by the world? In other words, don’t you want to *actually* save them?”

## Part 6

Los Angeles was a large place, but it was entirely deserted at present. Any noise, light, or other sensory stimulus was extremely conspicuous. And if that noise or light was a gunshot or gunpowder smoke, it would put any observer on guard. Plus, the R&C Occultics HQ building was within visual range.

Thus, Stiyl Magnus immediately relocated.

Even a meter of distance could prevent being sniped if it went unnoticed.

The tall priest carried the unconscious “villain’s daughter” back to where the grimoire library waited and then they moved to a small store. The glass showcases must not have been enough space because a fence had been attached to the wall and display products were attached to that with hanger-like devices.

The products in question were assault rifles and submachine guns with their full-auto capability removed, commercial handguns, extended barrels, stocks, and even modification kits to provide rapid-fire capability. The selection of bullets included softer ones that would be crushed within the body and armor-piercing ones with artificial diamond powder worked into the surface.

Gun shops like these could be found anywhere in America. This was a health-conscious country where bullets were more plentiful than cigarettes.

(What a pain.)

When Stiyl pushed his shortened cigarette into the ashtray, he realized this was his third one in a row. That showed just how much time had passed. If he was having this much trouble making a decision, he must have had more doubts than he had thought.

He would show no mercy even against young children when necessary.

He had thought he could do this without guilt, but maybe he was having difficulties this time.

Because this small girl reminded him of *that girl's* past.

“Phew.”

He pushed the cigarette into the ashtray and made up his mind.

Helcalia Grocery, the sole survivor, was hiding something. And she showed no intention of letting Stiyl or Index know what it was. She might open up if he took the time to earn her trust, but he did not have that kind of time.

That job was supposed to have been Kamijou Touma's, but he had refused to share his information with Stiyl. The intimidating priest could try to do it himself, but there was very little chance the frightened girl would open up to him in such a short time.

Which meant...

(Maybe the beer rune would work.)

His rune magic worked by engraving a rune into the target object and then dyeing the rune to activate its power. The rune could then be scraped away or otherwise eliminated to cancel the magic effect.

Rune magic had long been used to give special powers to physical objects. For example, you could carve a victory rune into a sword or a ward rune into a gold coin.

Along the same lines, *what if you used a blade to carve a rune into someone's body and dyed that?*

*What effect would a talking rune have?*

“No.”

It was like she had read his mind.

No, the silver-haired nun standing protectively between him and the ten-year-old subject had an even greater understanding of rune magic than Stiyl, who trusted it with his life.

He would show no mercy against even young children.

If he *intentionally left the suspect unsupervised* with so many weapons around, she might just grab a handgun. And if Helcalia was up to anything, she would assume the worst about her situation and act accordingly. But the priest's assumptions did not play out.

(She's weirdly hopeful about her situation. Is that because I didn't let her actually see him get shot?)

Had it been a mistake not to isolate her? Young Helcalia was fighting back tears and hiding behind Index. When had those two built this bond of trust? It felt like he had let bacteria into the wine barrel, ruining the entire batch.

Stiyl sighed and switched gears.

"I didn't even say anything."

"Naudiz, #10 of the Germanic Futhark. It phonetically stands for 'n' and it means distress. It is also one of the runes needed for the beer rune spell. The spell is said to ensure a wicked woman cannot deceive you. The actual effect of the spell is to split in two if the container contains poison, saving the user's life. Right?"

*As expected*, she saw through it right away.

But Stiyl had stopped moving for a different reason.

He could never betray this girl. He had promised as much long ago. Even if the girl glaring back at him now had no memory of it.

"By placing it on the center of a human body, it might split their body in two if they so much as lie. But even without that, I will not let you pick up a blade and leave indelible scars on someone's body. The Anglican Church is meant to protect people from the threat of magic, so it's wrong for us to use magic to harm the suffering people we are meant to protect."

"And who says Helcalia is an innocent victim?" Stiyl quietly clicked his tongue. "We've only known her for a few hours. We have no idea what she did before that."

"*But Touma saved her.*"

It took all of Stiyl's willpower not to grimace.

But the girl with the perfect memory may have noticed the beginnings of one anyway.

*“I know this is what Touma would do, so I’ll do the same thing.”*

Again, Index had a perfect memory. She would never forget something she had seen. So even a minor error in front of her could have a lasting effect. Because she would possess the memory until the day she died.

But Stiyl’s lips still gave a tremble.

He could not help but mutter under his breath.

“I wish that boy’s corpse was here so I could shoot him again.”

## Part 7

Long Beach apparently referred to quite a large area of land. The houses or villas alongside the beach looked like toxic bite-sized chocolates with their red, blue, and pink colors. A retired warship in the ocean had been turned into a museum. If they had not known what address to look for, they would have gotten lost and frozen to death in this minus-twenty-degree open world adventure.

Kamijou did not even notice the sunset.

He just knew it had gotten a lot darker and a second night was beginning.

“Wait, it’s this late already?”

“In LA, the sun sets early during the winter. Wait for the five o’clock news and it’ll be dark out.”

Kamijou and Othinus rode long the beach to reach a concrete yacht harbor.

He did not hear any waves along the way, so he looked over curiously to find no movement there. The beach was covered with frost like the inside of a freezer and the seawater had fully frozen.

“For real? This doesn’t even feel like the yearly drift ice showing up. It’s a solid sheet like at a skating rink.”

“The entire population of Los Angeles is missing, but there must have been a large margin of error. The ocean is white out to the horizon. I wonder if that Skybus 550 is all right.”

It felt like seeing the grilled corn from a New Year's festival frozen solid.

It was physically possible, but why bother?

It felt wrong to see such incredible waste.

The pointy-haired boy kept his electric scooter running as he spoke his thoughts aloud.

“So this is Long Beach...wait, is that it!?”

He pressed one of his shoes against the ground while his voice cracked in surprise.

Space Engage was an American high-tech start-up in the private spaceflight business, so he had expected a smart building covered in glass or a bizarre underground lab.

But he instead found the frozen ocean.

Something unusual sat at one corner of the concrete harbor lined with fancy yachts and cruisers.

It was not even made to float in the ocean.

It looked like a skinny, wheeled shed about the size of an RV. It was more like a rounded capsule than a rectangular container. He was pretty sure it was called a mobile home.

There was no vehicle to tow it around. The rear living space had been separated and left here. If he had not already been given the company's address, he might have mistaken it for some abandoned scraps no one wanted.

It felt terribly out of place with nothing else like it here. Almost like inexplicably finding skis in the department store swimsuit section.

“Information any shareholder would know, huh?”

“What now, human? Worried you might find R&C Occultics here?”

“Yeah,” he admitted.

He had no idea how stocks worked, but the massive IT company that made the start-up an affiliate and then worked to kill it would have to have been involved. They would know anything he knew, so even if there was a crucial hint here, they might have detected it and disposed of it already. That meant anything he found here could be modified lies.

But Othinus shook her head on his shoulder.

“I doubt it.”

“Why?”

“Let me ask you this: why the mobile home? The official documentation would only have the building’s location—it points to the *land*. So whenever R&C Occultics was coming for an inspection or examination, she would only have to remove her lab and place an identical mobile home in its place. It’s a simple way of preserving her secrets, so I can’t imagine why she wouldn’t do it.”

“...”

“If she didn’t need it, she could get rid of it. The harbor fees aren’t cheap, you know? Yet she still has her original mobile home here. That means it contains something she was reluctant to part with. So be careful. The enemy you’re imagining hasn’t been here.”

Kamijou viewed the frozen mobile home, but he could not see inside thanks to the curtains covering the windows. The metal sliding door did not have a keyhole. Instead, there was something like a calculator’s number pad next to the door. However, most of the buttons were missing.

“The panel colors are...red and black?”

“The same colors as the watch band. The decoy home may have used a different color combination.”

He approached and a bright light dazzled his eyes.

And he heard a gentle woman’s voice.

“Welcome to, ahem, Emptiness Marriage.”

“Yikes!? Eh? What just welcomed me?”

Kamijou gave a start and then glanced down at his Transla-Pen. The god sighed in exasperation.

“It’s a standard security sensor. It makes a lot of light and noise when someone approaches the entrance. But what was that weird sigh in the middle? Did Melzabeth record this herself?”

“Y-you mean no one’s here?”

“It’s too soon to say that, but try holding up that mother’s phone.”

He did as Othinus suggested and was surprised to find the metal door opened on its own. The place may have been hooked up to an external power supply to accommodate a long-term stay.

The inside was still cold, but not freezing.

He found himself in another dimension once he stepped inside.

“This is incredible.”

Kamijou spoke aloud, forgetting all about the possible danger. The mobile home must have been based on an RV. About the same space as a tour bus was divided into a kitchen, bathroom, and bath and the furniture like a table, sofa, and bed could be folded up and stored in the walls. To save space, the TV, phone, and computer were all set to display on the same monitor.

But.

“The walls and ceiling are covered in these colorful things? Is it all spacecraft related?”

He was right. There was so much it obscured the color of the original wallpaper. Clippings from specialist papers were covered with sticky notes scribbled with equations. Colorful masking tape connected them to visualize the connections and possible compatibility between technologies.

The table was mostly covered by a two-and-a-half-meter model instead of food. It looked about as big as a decent-sized surfboard.

The model was of a Logistic Hornet.

Othinus sighed when she looked to the walls and ceiling.

“The Melzabeth Method. I see. Now I get it.”

“?”

“Remember how I mentioned the difficulties of making a five-thousand-meter object fly using wings?” Othinus stood on the table and pointed her thumb at the detailed model covering most of the surface. “Five kilometers is enough to reach another train station and a new district. That means a difference in temperature, humidity, wind direction, and even the weather—sunny, rainy, and so on. The different wind strength and air resistance on different parts of the craft would ‘twist’ it and ultimately break it apart in midair. But Melzabeth came up with an intriguing solution: human skin.”

“Skin? You mean it uses biomaterials instead of mechanical ones!?”

“It doesn’t have to go that far. It may be an offshoot of neurocomputers that come up with ideas using the same structure as a brain. A *spinal cord* is artificially created and the Logistic Hornet itself is given delicate cutaneous receptors so it can make adjustments based on reflexes that do not require conscious thought. Just like a fingertip running down your spine makes your hair stand on end. That same reaction is applied to every last part of the five-thousand-meter craft to make aerodynamic adjustments by moving the armor scales. That is impressive. There are more than a million of them in all. If you tried to think about each of them before giving a command, you would never finish in time, so Melzabeth set it up to *give commands without thinking*. The very idea is different from all that junk AI out there.”

“...”

“Melzabeth’s own data is apparently used for the aerial attitude control. Those giant launch pads are controlled based on data taken from her subconscious muscle tension and center of gravity control while hang gliding. That means those flying machines include Melzabeth Grocery’s subconscious, from the core of her body to the very last bit of peach fuzz. Ha ha. Who creates an aerial fortress like that? We’re not just talking about an electronically-controlled stealth fighter here. That giant thing’s smooth flight is controlled by nothing more than a mother’s sensitive body. I doubt even Academy City’s Kiharas could have come up with something like this!”

Kamijou was speechless.

Was the word “genius” really enough to cover all of this?

Kamijou doubted he understood even half of what made this so impressive. He felt like the word genius was just a lazy label used to stop thinking about something he did not understand.

All the detailed math made his head spin, but he could not let himself be overwhelmed.

He wanted something to help track down missing Melzabeth Grocery. He pulled out the Transla-Pen synced with his phone. He had no idea if it would work on the text hastily jotted-down on the sticky notes, but he had to try.

No longer would he fear an unknown truth.

Melzabeth Grocery had chosen to hand over her new tech to a massive IT company because they had taken her daughter hostage. She had been ordered to do all sorts of things after receiving their assistance as an affiliated independent company, but she had eventually refused to obey and rebelled.

The current state of LA was the result.

Othinus had said they may have controlled her using some magic like the St. Germain pill. Or they could have threatened her with something other than Helcalia.

Regardless, Anna Sprengel had decided to purge the traitor by making Melzabeth destroy what she most cared about. Anna had sent things up so the mother and daughter would be in conflict. So even if Melzabeth's actions made her look like a villain involved in the disappearance of LA's people, *Kamijou would save that mother*. He had made that decision before he even started working on this. Finding some inconvenient truth now was not going to stop him.

"What is this?"

Kamijou Touma was not all that great with digital things, so his focus naturally turned toward the analog media.

In addition to the many sticky notes, he found a small picture frame in the kitchen space.

An even younger Helcalia stood in the center of the photo. Her gender was hard to tell at a glance at that age. Smiling next to her was a silver-haired brown-skinned woman with a strong family resemblance in the face. That had to be Melzabeth Grocery.

Then who was the man standing on the other side of the girl?

(The most obvious guess would be her father.)

Something was handwritten at the top of the photo.

The writing was large and distinct. It was very different from the birthday present's card, so it may have been the father's handwriting.

Kamijou ran the Transla-Pen over it through the protective glass and the artificial voice translated it into Japanese.

"A moon rock tiara for my daughter's wedding."

He looked to the photo again and smiled. Helcalia was still too young to easily judge her gender, so her father must have been quite the doting parent.

(But where would you even get a moon rock? The moon has its own gravity, so they wouldn't fall to earth all that easily.)

He flipped over the picture frame and found nothing more than a cork panel. But when he removed the cork and extracted the photo, he could see something handwritten on the white back of the photo. This was the same flowing cursive he had seen on the message card.

He was unsure if the cheap device could handle cursive, but he ran the Transla-Pen over it anyway.

The awkward translation came out as follows:

*Age of death: 29. Multistage rocket Uranus III failed atmosphere exit.*

“...”

Kamijou quietly clenched his teeth.

He felt like he had stumbled upon a secret origin point.

Had the mother's obsession with her daughter's wedding not been hers alone?

“Hey, Othinus.”

“Yes?”

The small Othinus looked back toward the kitchen space while walking back and forth along the folding table a short distance away.

“Um...about Space Engage. Did they ever launch ordinary rockets in addition to those gigantic Logistic Whatevers?”

“Of course not. The existing methods are the safe and affordable home turf of the experienced. If a new start-up wants to get into the space development business, they need some new method in order to outdo NASA.”

(Then was Melzabeth not involved in this launch experiment?)

She had lost someone in a state-run rocket launch.

The man had never gotten that moon rock. He had never been able to attend that future wedding. But Melzabeth had truly understood her husband's reasons for venturing into space as an astronaut, so she had been unable to despise space enough to give up on it.

So she had begun to wonder if there was another way.

A safe way that anyone could use.

That was her dream for space travel.

“Othinus, space is so far away. It's an absurd dream located even higher than the clouds in the sky. So why do start-ups try to reach it without the help of their country?”

“For money.” Othinus coldly sliced through the thoughts in his mind. “There is no fair competition when the state is running the space industry. Only the companies trusted by government officials get any business, so technological development is actually pretty slow. Once a ‘belief’ sets in, all the research goes in that direction. For example, the idea that space shuttles are safe and can keep launch costs down, or the idea that lunar probes should be made out of aluminum even though there are so many nonmetals lighter and sturdier than steel these days.”

“...”

“Their neighbors in Russia are even worse. They insist that nuclear energy makes for a clean power system and actually threw a running nuclear reactor out into zero-g space. They ultimately lost control and the entire satellite fell back down to earth. Yet they continue their research into developing a clean nuclear reactor for use in space. But if you let multiple companies compete fairly and compare data, those ‘beliefs’ wouldn’t last long.”

Othinus explained that this was not limited to space. Those “beliefs” were rampant in fields with a small market share. For example, the idea that golf clubs should be made of carbon or the idea that handguns should have a caliber of .45.

In other words, that had been the starting point.

Melzabeth had wanted to change how things were done in the national space program that insisted on continuing down a mistaken path. She had believed she could reduce the number of “unfortunate accidents” if she started a new age where anyone was free to join in the industry and only the company providing the easiest and most comfortable space flight would survive.

Giving her daughter a wedding in space sounded like a joke, but she had drawn out serious plans to achieve that dream, all to help give her some peace of mind.

Yet Anna Sprengel had twisted it into something ugly.

“Hey.”

Othinus was holding something atop the table she had been walking around. At her size, it looked like a body pillow, but it was actually a USB memory stick even more compact than a tube of lipstick.

“What’s that?”

“It was inside the model. And I found it in the most important part: the storage room for the digital spinal cord.”

Othinus was fifteen centimeters tall, so searching that two-and-a-half-meter model had to have been an adventure for her.

The only label was a symbolic one.

A large red X had been drawn on the side of the USB memory with a permanent marker.

“This has to mean something.”

Kamijou first assumed it was telling him not to look inside, but then why store it on the USB memory? Any unneeded data could be deleted and no one could ever read the contents if the memory itself was broken in two.

Yet it had been left in an accessible form.

It reminded him of how she had hidden the smartwatch in the safe to show how valuable it was.

Thinking back, telling Helcalia to hide in the locker may have been something similar. She had left the possibility of someone else picking the girl up if she could not.

When Melzabeth Grocery wanted someone to find something important, she had a habit of hiding it in a conspicuous location.

“Is there any way to view the data on this? Would her phone work?”

“You can’t directly plug it into the MilliPhone; you would need a dongle. It would be simpler to check it on a computer. Do you see one around here?”

“What about my phone?”

“The hospital recommended it to you for use with their health management app, remember? That cheap senior model is entirely out of the question.”

“Eh!? This is an old person phone?”

He checked around and found a big laptop hidden behind the fridge. It was the size of a drawing board, so he wasn’t sure why you would bother making it a laptop. Thanks to the extra cooling device attached to the bottom, it was thicker than the average encyclopedia. The laptop had been criticized for the size of the computer and its bulky power adapter. Kamijou used both hands to place it on the table and Othinus stared at the enormous laptop that had to be forty inches.

“Looks like it’s based on an e-sports gaming computer, but it’s only a terminal. This isn’t enough for a space simulator, so I bet it connects to the real computer over the internet. It might not even be in LA.”

“But it’s still a computer, right? We can use it after switching it on, I hope? What if it needs a password or fingerprint?”

“This will be easy if it just wants a fingerprint, but we might not be that lucky.”

“?”

Well, it wasn’t a self-destruct device in an old spy movie. When he tried turning on the gaming computer, it connected to the large TV. Suddenly, Kamijou’s face was displayed in a small window. A rectangular cursor appeared over his mouth and a wavy line was displayed at the bottom of the window. The camera at the top of the laptop screen had apparently activated. Othinus doubled over in laughter.

“Ha ha! Voice recognition of all things? Talk about insecure! Or is that digital exhibitionist doing it on purpose!?”

“Um?”

If it used her voice, didn’t that mean they needed the brown mama herself to get in? The legends said she could switch between god and human, but did that antique blonde gal think she could change her appearance and voice at will?

“Were you just thinking something rude, human?”

“Well, um, uh...sorry.”

“Hmph. Since you were honest, I will forgive you this once.”

She picked up a plastic pin a lot like the ones used to skewer bento meatballs and threw it at him. The famous god, whose forgiveness apparently included throwing spears at people, explained her point.

“The worst form of biometric ID is the fingerprint. The second worst is the voice. You stamp your fingerprints all over the place over the course of your daily life and the distinctive ‘traits’ of your voice can be easily recorded these days. That just means we need a recording of Melzabeth Grocery’s voice.”

“A recording?”

“And do you remember what made you jump at the entrance earlier? The sensor-triggered message most likely used her own voice, so use it.”

Walking to the front door and back was all it took to get past the login screen. Kamijou actually felt hesitant now.

“A-are you sure this is okay? I mean, the recording meant to keep people from breaking in unlocked her laptop.”

“With tech, the attackers are always a step ahead of the defenders. If you want your device secure, you at least need to use the veins or bones in your palm. Your ear hole or your teeth work as well. Really, any kind of biometric that never leaves your body works.”

Now they could see inside the USB memory.

But something else caught his attention first. The desktop displayed on the synced TV only had one icon on it. It was clear that everything else had been deleted to leave only this there. It was located at the top left and it belonged to a video file.

The filename was “Message”.

She tended to hide the things she wanted found.

“Well, this isn’t a spam email, so I doubt it’s malware.”

Othinus crossed her arms and tapped her heel twice on the laptop’s touchpad to double click. Maybe it was something Melzabeth insisted on herself or maybe this was standard in America, but Kamijou did not recognize the video player that started up and played back an image from the past in a rectangular window.

It appeared to be filmed in this very mobile home.

He guessed it had been done with the laptop’s camera because it showed a woman’s face from a flat, head-on angle reminiscent of a student ID photo.

She had silver hair cut to shoulder length and brown skin.

She looked to be in her thirties or maybe even younger. She wore a baggy white T-shirt and a tight skirt with her legs covered by pantyhose or something. The blue scarf around her neck had a chrysanthemum decoration. It was a casual but refined outfit, but it was unlikely you would find the combination in an ordinary office. It made her look like a company president announcing a new phone.

Kamijou Touma muttered her name.

While picturing a family photo taken with her daughter, not the woman herself.

“Melzabeth...”

Unsurprisingly, she did not answer him.

The woman faced the camera dead on and her eyes would occasionally flit side to side. It looked like she was worried about something and overreacting to every little noise she heard outside.

“I could not stop the powerful support...no, the invasion.”

Her face showed agony and humiliation.

And most of all, regret.

He could only get so much information through his clearance rack Transla-Pen, but the raw emotions came through in her untranslated voice and her expression on the screen.

“At first, I thought they sympathized with the dream. I thought business profit didn’t matter. But it changed when they took control of company, including right to speak, and chose to bring tragedy.”

“Either the private equity or allowing a single patron was a mistake,” muttered Othinus.

Kamijou was not quite sure what it all meant, but he could tell she had been deceived in some way.

“The company could only be bound as affiliate. But this original beginning was not told to the parent company. Maybe you are a stranger who happened across it and maybe a colleague who shared my dream. One of the engineers who left is fine too. But if you are an R&C Occultics investigation team, then I have really and truly lost. I pray that is not the case.”

The woman on the screen waved something she held between her slender fingers.

It was the USB memory with the red X on it.

“This is a type of program.”

“...”

“The program sneaks into center of Logistic Hornet system disguised as drone network mutual authorization signal and destroys chain of command. To put simply, this one thing can permanently destroy the Logistic Hornet system. ...Maybe it is technically called malware or a worm. It should be treated as such unless used for correct purpose.”

Why was she leaving this with someone she didn’t even know?

If she had a trump card like that, why not use it herself?

But that was the wrong way to look at this.

With such a crucial trump card, she would never have just the one copy. And generally speaking, *any kind of digital data could be copied*.

Kamijou Touma clenched his teeth.

“Did she stay with R&C Occultics so she could sneak into their HQ as a cooperator and inject this into their system?”

“That would be suicide.”

“Kh.”

A corrupt corporation had tried to use the private space flight system she had been building to prevent another tragedy like her husband’s and to bring happiness to her daughter. She could not stop it any other way, so she had decided to end the entire project herself.

It was an admirable motivation.

What would bad people do if you gave them great riches? And the Logistic Hornets could cause cataclysms across the planet. She would have wanted to stop that no matter what.

She had been prepared to give up her life if need be. That put a new perspective on her plans for leading someone to Helcalia. Trying to retrieve the girl herself could have put her at greater risk, so she had chosen not to. She had bit her lip and shed tears of blood in order to focus on her final attempt instead.

But the result had been obvious from the beginning. It was plain as day. R&C Occultics was *not just an ordinary company*. Reading someone’s mind and nipping their attempt in the bud was a piece of cake for a professional magician. If a normal gun was enough to defend against them, then the Academy City element of Overlord Revenge would not have lost so fully.

She had made her attempt and failed.

The smartwatch had been found in a safe within an outdoors base. She must have been attacked by the sand before even reaching the HQ building, so she hid the watch in the safe and then ran toward enemy lines even if it cost her her life. She knew nothing of magic and she attempted to reach the HQ building that not even Stiyl and Kanzaki had been able to reach.

This here was only her “insurance” in case *exactly that happened*.

“Your own judgment is fine. The decision is left with you. If the Logistic Hornets continue to fly around the world and you find the smallest danger that they guide the world in a bad direction.”

How had she felt when she left this hope?

**She had wanted to hold her daughter's wedding in space.**

One by one, the colleagues and subordinates who had sympathized with that simple dream and trusted her had started leaving. And now she was baring her fangs toward their own creation. None of them had understood the painful decision she had been forced to make.

It had meant abandoning her dream of taking space development out of the country's hands and decreasing the risk to astronauts like her husband through the free competition between companies. She had held onto the company even as so many of its engineers left and she had even earned the suspicion of her daughter.

But in order to protect her colleagues, her remaining family, and the world as a whole, she had chosen a lonely path without the chance to ask anyone else for advice.

Yet even those feelings had been trampled underfoot and her attempt had ended in failure.

How much strength had she poured into this will left behind in case that worst-case scenario played out?

The woman faced forward and spoke the words that seemed to reject everything she had lived for.

“Please destroy this foolish dream we started. Leave nothing left.”

The next thing Kamijou Touma knew, he had slammed his clenched fist down on the table.

Was this the truth?

Was there really nothing beyond this? It ended like this? Were there no words of salvation for this mother? Not even one!?

“Anna...Spreeeeeeeeeeeeeengel!!!!!!”

The boy roared loud enough to tear his throat, but it did nothing to change the past.

The video ended there, the footage flickering out just like her courage and determination had.

Her will was over.

The Rosicrucian magic cabal had hidden in the shadows of history. No one knew what exactly R&C Occultics was, even as it chose to unilaterally influence the entire world. And it was all controlled by Anna Sprengel, who stepped on Secret Chief Aiwass and selfishly wielded power greater than a god.

So what?

What did any of it matter?

Did that give her the right to trample on people's dreams? Some geniuses had gathered their ideas together and finally made their dream a reality, but some asshole had stolen it all away just because it could be used to earn a profit. And she had remade it into a weapon of war, a trigger for meteorological disasters, and an ingredient that would bring misfortune to all!!

And it had all led to someone earnestly begging anyone who would listen to destroy the very dream she had worked so hard to realize.

Kamijou Touma would say it again

He would ask this question as many times as it took.

Who in the world had the right to mock and spit on the dream someone had dedicated their life to and then force that person to throw their own dream in the garbage!?

Kamijou was not naïve enough to think any dream would come true as long as you worked at it.

High schoolers had their own cynical view of such things.

But even so.

Someone had sneered as they selfishly stole away a dream that was already set to come true. She had decided the world's throne belonged to her and she would force everyone on the planet to do the same. Using big data and AI, she would separate out the achievable dreams from the unachievable ones, harvest the achievable ones for herself, demand people give up on the unachievable ones, and ultimately trample on both.

Maybe it was the most efficient thing to do, but it was unquestionably wrong.

Whether it was to be an athlete, an astronaut, a chef, or a doctor, the people who had made their dreams come true deserved to be happy. Something was wrong if they were not granted as much happiness and success as the effort they put in. And no one had the right to steal away those dreams and their rewards without putting in any effort themselves. Kamijou Touma still trusted in dreams enough to reach that conclusion on pure reflex.

And yet.

This *was worse* than just an unfulfilled dream.

As long as Anna Sprengel placed a ceiling on the world, no one could find happiness even if they did achieve their dreams. Instead, her filthy hands would pluck the half-blossomed buds from the stems, suck out all the nectar before the flower had a chance to bloom, and cruelly throw away what remained. And this was not a hypothetical or a possible future. *The world had already been remade in that way without anyone noticing.*

“A world where you can pour all your efforts into a dream, but the result is stolen away from you. I see. That explains the extremely unnatural ending to Handcuffs. That white monster should have been able to achieve his dream of eliminating the dark side, but some asshole twisted and stole away that outcome.”

“Othinus?”

“Oh, nothing. *Just some magic side stuff.*”

The small god cut off that line of thinking.

And she intentionally changed the subject.

“This may have been what Anna Sprengel was after.”

“?”

“Didn’t you find it odd?” asked Othinus. “Anna Sprengel holds a position similar to a priestess, but she actually has complete control of a superior being like Aiwass and has become a legendary magician greater even than a Magic God. Yet she always travels on foot and directly appears before her enemies. Why? Sure, you can say she does it for fun or on a whim since she’s the strongest, but I see a simpler theory.”

“*You mean she doesn’t have anyone else to rely on?*” stated Kamijou in a daze.

He had already clashed with her a few times either directly or indirectly, yet the idea had never occurred to him. Whenever Anna made an appearance, the world revolved around her. She held all the cards. She would mock and deny everything. She had never seemed lacking in anything.

Othinus nodded.

"That may be why she wanted Melzabeth. It had never bothered her before, but once she became aware of it, it bugged her to no end. ...Doesn't that sound like the simple logic that selfish girl operates on?"

And she had sent shockwaves throughout the entire world as a result.

She had destroyed Los Angeles and made thirty million people disappear.

This monster was much harder to deal with than an evil demon king who meticulously built up a master plan.

"Citrinitas is a term found in one of the three sacred Rosicrucian texts. Through conversions to black, white, yellow, and red, an expert void of worldly desire can acquire the supreme stone. Citrinitas is the yellowing stage and it refers to the act of burying it in sand so it can 'ferment'." Othinus sighed. "Once something has died and decomposed, it undergoes a beneficial transformation underground, giving it new value. Hmph, Anna is more obsessed than I thought. Even after Melzabeth turned her back on her and betrayed her, Anna was using Citrinitas on her to redo things. To get her to turn back her way."

"But why? She runs a giant IT company, so she must have hundreds of thousands of employees. So why the obsession with Melzabeth?"

"Because of what Melzabeth did," answered Othinus with a snort. "Out of those hundreds of thousands around the globe, who was the only one to disobey and display noble justice in the end? Who was the fearsome individual who resisted all of the sweet promises and threats and refused to throw out her good heart even though she knew she couldn't win? To Anna, that must have shined as bright as a crimson jewel. She must have been smiling even as her pet dog bit her hand and got burned playing with fire. She wants to break her and make her hers. The genius named Melzabeth Grocery has impressed her that much."

"But..."

"It seems wrong to start a war to apply pressure to a single individual? Einstein's brain was removed and preserved. When Saint Thomas Becket was assassinated by four swords, the people nearby gathered up his splattered blood and brains and took it home, believing it to be a panacea. ...So in this one instance, we can't just chalk it up to Anna being insane. Humans are willing to go to such lengths for people in which they sense mystery. We should assume Melzabeth has reached that level for Anna."

Othinus let out a quiet but heavy sigh.

"If only it was that easy to obtain a true understander. No comfort is found in validation found through brainwashing. A lesson I am sure *a certain #5* is very well acquainted with."

Melzabeth Grocery.

Even Kamijou wished he could have spoken with her sooner. He wished he had gotten to know her so he could have helped her, at least a little bit.

But that would be entirely meaningless if he was forcing it on her for his own purposes.

Melzabeth had her own dream.

She had her pride, her dignity, and so much that she had wanted to protect more than her own life.

If all of that was stripped away and control of her very being was taken from her, then you could no longer call the result Melzabeth Grocery.

Did the lonely and isolated Anna Sprengel not realize that?

“And, human. The situation could hardly be worse, but we have not hit a dead end yet. I don’t know if that USB memory is the original or a copy, but the malware does exist. It is not too late to plug that it into the control server deep in the HQ building and destroy the global distribution network and dangerous meteorological weapons created by the network of twelve Logistic Hornets.”

“Right...”

He clenched his teeth.

He clenched them tight because he could only live in the world that existed after that cruel defeat.

“Right!! She left this task with me. She begged me to destroy her dream because she couldn’t, even though she had no idea who would receive the message!! So I’ll do it. I won’t let Anna abuse those geniuses’ original dream any longer!!!!!”

Then he heard a small sound.

But it came from outside the mobile home’s thin wall. So why hadn’t the security sensor reacted?

Kamijou Touma and Othinus both understood that thirty million people had vanished from Los Angeles, leaving no one to make a sound like that.

And they understood that Anna Sprengel would not hesitate to steal away someone’s dream and she had a childish, short-tempered personality that left her with no patience for anything that stood in her way.

“Human!!”

“I know!!!!!!”

He shouted his response and held his right palm toward the wall just in time.

That very moment, the aluminum and stainless-steel mobile home was shredded like tissue paper and blown away.

But Kamijou Touma was not focused on that.

The real threat was the sand. *He could not let it envelop him.* His right hand obliterated a torrent of pressurized sand flying his way like a laser and, unsatisfied with that, he rolled on out through the newly-formed gash in the mobile home's wall. He focused upwind and made extra certain he was not swallowed up by the billowing cloud of sand.

Needless to say, the magician did not have to worry about being caught in the scattered sand.

Citrinitas was it?

The search of the mobile home must have taken longer than he thought because it was already dark out. He heard solid clacking sounds out there. Almost like a large dog was pressing its full weight on its thick claws while walking along the asphalt.

Two figures appeared through the murky curtain, as if parting the row of luxury yachts and cruisers brought up onto land.

But...what was that?

One stood tall and held a dog leash.

The other wore a collar and crawled on the ground.

He would have called the second one a dog if their silhouette was not so weirdly alluring. And they were not standing on a pair of front legs and a pair of back legs.

They were down on hands and knees. They were a crawling human.

There was a chance Melzabeth Grocery was being manipulated using some kind of magic.

After doing so much to thirty million people, R&C Occultics was never going to worry about respecting someone's rights. So there was a concern they would control a captive *like that.*

Or so Kamijou Touma thought.

*But he was wrong.*

“Ugh!?”

A chilly breeze swept away the sandy curtain.

The enemy made no real attempt to hide.

Kamijou groaned when he saw the identity of the magician standing in the yacht harbor.

The one figure was wearing a large collar at the end of a thick leash. The dog was large enough to weigh fifty kilograms, or maybe more. If it leaped at him, he would be knocked to the ground and helplessly pinned while it ripped his windpipe out.

Or so he feared.

“The unanalyzed sand magic and large-scale weather control using the Logistic Hornet...”

*But he was wrong.*

Those were not a pair of front legs; they were five-fingered hands.

Othinus clicked her tongue on his shoulder while holding the USB memory like a body pillow.

“I thought it was strange when Kanzaki Kaori lost. She is a Saint, so she can draw on a portion of the Son of God’s power. She should have won, so I had wondered what made her stop attacking. Well, now we know!!”

The thing crawling around like a dog was not covered in clothing or skin. It was a feminine doll with exposed ball joints. The face was covered by something like a cage made by bending panels of black metal about the size of sticks of gum. A section the size of a coffee can stuck out in front almost like a dog’s snout. And it clacked open and closed like a bamboo tube or cup split vertically.

Then who was the figure being weakly tugged along by the leash?

“You’re...kidding.”

She had shoulder-length silver hair and brown skin.

She wore a baggy T-shirt, a tight skirt, and pantyhose. She wore a blue scarf around her neck. It was definitely Melzabeth Grocery, the woman he had seen in that video. Or was it? There was something wrong with her. Her shoulders were slanted, her head was tilted limply to the side, and there was no light of intelligence in her eyes. A string of drool dripped from the corner of her mouth.

The leash and collar were not playing their intended roles. Like a poorly-trained animal, the crawling doll was dragging the woman around behind it.



It was unclear who was in charge.

Should he simply break apart the ball-jointed doll and save the woman holding the leash since she looked just like the woman in the video? Really??? Yet the doll looked so masochistic crawling around like a dog. Its butt was lifted higher than its head and it kicked at the sand with its back legs. Come to think of it, the doll was a size larger than Melzabeth, so was it possible *an entire person had been forcibly stuffed inside?*

Was it the obvious answer, or was it a trick?

Or was it a reverse trick?

Where did R&C Occultics and Anna Sprengel's malice lie? It could be a reverse trick, where the appearance of trickery was used to distance him from the obvious answer. Or was this some larger trap set by the giant IT company? The more he thought about it, the more dark uncertainty roiled within him.

Was it the unsteady woman holding the leash, or was it the collared doll pulling her around? They both demonstrated ways of stripping someone of their dignity.

Who was in control? Which one was being controlled?

What was the crux of the issue?

Who did he need to defeat?

“Which one?” he muttered.

That was when an even nastier problem came to mind.

Kanzaki Kaori refused to kill and she was aware of her great destructive power as a Saint, so she had hesitated to attack.

She had failed to reach an answer out of fear of choosing wrong.

And that moment of hesitation had been her undoing.

Kamijou Touma clenched his right fist in the icy night and spoke his question aloud.

The sand magician had seen him too. Could his right hand react in time to a direct attack? Holding it in the wrong direction could be fatal.

He felt like a grotesquely blossomed rose was swallowing up the world around him.

A precarious tightrope walk had begun.

“Is it the owner or the pet? *Which one is the real Melzabeth Grocery!?*”

## Part 8

“God, is everyone still talking about R&C Occultics? This is *my house*, you know?”

“We can’t stop their aboveboard lobbying. An IT company that big can throw a lot of money around, so we have people questioning your decisions from the opposition party *and* from our own party. Today’s online debate is going to be rough from the very beginning.”

“(You’re not naïve enough to think that aboveboard money is the only thing at play here, are you? Damn them for ruining my chance to hold the entire country’s attention during primetime.)”

Aide Roseline Krackhart quietly caught up to President Roberto Katze and Vice President Darris Hewlane in a White House corridor.

“Excuse me, Mr. Vice President, but no phones allowed past this point. I will hold onto that for you.”

“Oh? But this doesn’t use Panda OS.”

“The Patriot Act just had another minor amendment, so all phones are banned regardless of developer. Not even Grapple or Bagel are allowed anymore. They can be used to spy even when powered down.”

“How do you even leak information from a debate being aired live to the entire world?”

This corridor doubled as the stage for any last futile resistance.

The White House was the president’s home, but he could not just wander around the entire place in a bathrobe. And that was especially true of the press room overflowing with so many reporters.

The beautiful aide stuck the vice president’s phone in her pocket and then whispered in the president’s ear.

“This is an online charity debate, but the opposition intends to go full throttle right out of the gate.”

“And this is supposed to be a relaxed affair used to gather ad money for the disadvantaged.” Roberto scratched roughly at his head with a glove-like hand. “And if I’m gonna have someone mad at me, I’ll take your graceful, polite voice over those smelly old folks on the opposition. Makes me jealous just hearing you’re mad at them instead.”

“Don’t worry. I will never smile for a sexual harasser with no sense of decorum or manners.”

He decided it was best not to ask how she had gotten the scripts and flowcharts the opposition party was using.

“But right now I’m worried about you because you can be so sloppy. Are you wearing a tie? What about socks? Please tell me you’re sober this time.”

“Don’t worry. I’ve thought this through.”

“Which hand do you use when swearing on the Bible?”

“I’m insulted you have to ask. You do it like this, mommy.”

“FYI: using a digital bible on a tablet is still controversial. And I have to confiscate it anyway.”

While a phone would fit in her pocket, Roseline was unsure what to do with the tablet.

“Again, they are taking this very seriously. Show any opening and they will lay the blame on you until your political career is dead. So do not give them that opening. Even a bit of bedhead could be catastrophic.”

The aide’s sharp words made Roberto sigh.

“What, more fighting over money?”

“Not just that. The opposition leader’s son and daughter-in-law live in Los Angeles. Her first grandchild was part of the disappearances. You can infuriate a politician just like you can a gang member. Go after a family member too young to be aware what their job is and they *go ballistic*. She will be attacking you more than her job requires. But if she lets her emotions run wild, you might have a chance to strike back.”

“Forget it. I’m no good at all those brainy tricks.”

“Don’t worry. No one is better than you at infuriating sensible people.”

Roseline turned out to be right.

Among all the reporters filling the press room, the greatest threat was the opposition party leader. The room was not large enough for hundreds of congress members to fit, but they could join the debate through their online social media accounts. Rumor had it that unseen hackers were working to see if they could hijack any of those accounts. Same for administrative access to the teleprompters displaying the politicians' scripts. *Never a dull moment in this country*, thought Roberto.

After the president placed his hand on the Bible and swore to tell the truth, he saw the genius who had failed to become empress stop herself from biting her thumbnail three times before the moderator from a neutral TV station took over.

"Mr. President, is it true you neglected your duties as commander-in-chief of the US military and left a foreign unit in charge of our country's public order?" she asked, once it was her turn to speak.

"Are you asking if I am guilty of dereliction of duty as well as instigation of foreign aggression?" Roberto snorted with laughter. "We can't use any branch of our military to resolve domestic issues. Especially for a preemptive strike against an attack that *might* happen. This is basic stuff."

"And who is it protecting you in your very own home? The president's life is guarded by the secret service, SWAT, and—yes—some of the marines, yet you abandon the very people who trust in you and pay you with their taxes? Shall I assume you intend to do absolutely nothing until the entire population of LA is dead?"

(I'm sure she's trying to bait the president into saying the wrong thing, but this is quite the tightrope walk for her too.)

Roseline nearly clenched her teeth while listening from a short distance away.

During the morning, the US government had given each news company a calm reporting of the facts concerning the disappearance of Los Angeles's people, but the internet had been unsure how to respond. Thirty million people had inexplicably disappeared. It felt so unreal that most of the social media posts assumed even the government's announcement was part of a promotion for a new movie or drama.

That silly optimism would die here.

The opposition party leader was using it as a trump card to attack the president. And the entire world was watching it live over the internet. How much shock and chaos would this confirmation spread across the country?

And this was only the beginning.

More and more of the opposition party raised their voiceless voices in the form of text. Some truly wonderful messages filled the live broadcast's comments. They were displayed on the wall filling the space between the president and the opposition leader.

"Do we even know for sure R&C Occultics's HQ is in LA?"

"If that IT company has broken the law, isn't this an economic crime?"

"This never would have happened if you had waited until the LA residents and their assets could be safely evacuated before authorizing a military operation."

There was no actual meaning behind the questions.

They were only bluffs meant to overwhelm the president with the sheer number of questions. It was like a bird's nest created from tangling countless threads.

Then it was the opposition leader's turn to speak again.

The look on her face was very different from the smile she gave for the cameras when donating money to the church or welfare organizations.

"Mr. President, why are you so hellbent on interacting with our and other countries through the military? When you suspect a crime within the country and you wish to investigate, that is a job for the police, is it not? Then you could have avoided this interference from Academy City and England."

"Now, hold on. Try to remember what you yourself said earlier. I'm both this country's leader and our military's commander-in-chief. Seems a bit unfair to ask me not to think about the military. And if I agreed, I can already imagine you finding a way to complain about *that* too."

"You chose to work with Academy City, who I hear has manufactured human clones, a clear violation of international law. Not just that, but a group of them with enough organization to carry out military action. And this is not just a malicious rumor; it comes from their new board chairman's official testimony at his trial. You invited those savages into our country and gave them permission to use military weaponry! ...Can you raise your right hand and swear to the American people that you made the correct decision as commander-in-chief? Can you swear that no fault can be found in your choices!?"

"..."

"Oh? You paused. I do not know what you are weighing in your mind, but a second's hesitation can be the doom of a politician. You just implicitly told us all that you cannot wholeheartedly defend your actions. Is there something you are reluctant to tell us in front of the cameras broadcasting across the globe?"

An aide was no more than an aide. With Vice President Darris standing by Roberto's side, Roseline did not have the authority to push past Darris and give Roberto some advice.

She instead sighed quietly by the wall where she would not be in the reporters' way.

The opposition leader was so hard to deal with because she wielded truths and falsehoods simultaneously.

First of all, it was only natural for the military to protect the White House. The president was their commander-in-chief and the White House included a shelter and contained plenty of military secrets. Interpret it as protecting their own base and it was not at all unusual for the marines to be stationed here. It was entirely different from deploying them to LA.

But breathe a sigh of relief there and you would come to regret it.

Had allowing in England and Academy City really been the right thing to do? Thirty million people had disappeared and they had no solid report on what had happened, so that was not a question anyone could answer immediately. Accurate information was needed first.

(But sending in *ordinary* forces would only lead to more loss of life.)

Unfortunately, only those who had actual experience with magic would understand that. Roseline had once been caught in the middle of an incident crawling with Gremlin magicians in Hawaii, but things that only a select few understood could not be used to explain official decisions.

If you did not explain your actions with a clear and simple logic that everyone could understand, then they would see you as a dictator.

Whether that was true or not, you would be rejected just the same.

The people were looking for an incomparable genius when they cast their votes, but they hoped for standard and relatable answers once their candidate was in office.

(Besides, tell congress we want to send in the military and one of them might leak it all to R&C Occultics. I don't know how many of those greedy congress members have been lured in with a stack of cash slapping them on the cheek, but we could end up losing even more people if our attack loses the element of surprise.)

Carelessly making that argument out loud would probably result in the entire opposition party demanding to know what could be worse than thirty million people missing.

Those politicians saw themselves as heroes, but did they realize that whatever had caused the disappearances could directly attack Washington DC next? Since no one knew what caused it or what its range was, there was no way to defend against it. Being on the east coast was no guarantee of safety. Roseline could not believe how secure they sounded making their complaints even though it was all happening in the same country.

Having to helplessly watch it all play out was frustrating, but it was not without merit.

She could easily speculate that R&C Occultics was throwing money at the politicians just like any other aggressive corporation. And that would come in many forms—from honeytraps to taking data from their phones. She was on the lookout for any congress members forcibly altering the course of the debate. The online format was convenient since it left simple records of everything said. If she searched through all of that and drew lines between the friendships and other relationships, she might be able to detect the influence of the IT company.

Once she understood that, the president would not need to make the decision on his own.

“But...”

(We have to wait for now. It’s too soon to go on the offensive. I just hope that dumbass president doesn’t get baited into dropping any bombshells here.)

The beautiful aide glanced next to the president.

Vice President Darris Hewlane looked oddly nervous.

He appeared overly concerned about every little move the president made. The man preferred a Japanese diet of vegetables and fish for health reasons and his stomach was probably squeezing tight right about now.

(I know exactly how he feels. Or rather, if I have to associate myself with one of the two, I refuse to fall into the same category as that president. But the vice president worries me specifically because he’s a reasonable person. I hope his nerves don’t make him do something stupid.)

## Part 9

Torturing the information out of her would be easy.

But the problem was Index. She had a perfect memory and would never forget anything she saw, so he wanted to avoid going too far with her around.

It was already dark out and they had moved from the gun shop to a British-style pub. Stiyl Magnus sighed.

(What am I doing here? I thought I had already made my decision here.)

“Ahh!” screamed Helcalia.

But only because she had spilled a cup of water while playing with Index. She snatched up a small box and held it up high while the water spread out across the table and then spilled down onto her thighs and lower stomach.

“Wh-what do I do? Won’t my wet clothes freeze?”

“Come here.”

“I don’t have any other clothes, though.”

“I know a way to dry the ones you have. It just takes some guts!”

Index took Helcalia’s small hand and led her to the back of the pub. Maybe it was because Index had complimented the birthday present’s wrapping paper and maybe it was because she seemed like less of a threat than Stiyl, but Helcalia had grown attached to Index despite fearing her so much before.

Stiyl watched them go and only realized a second later that he had let Index leave his sight alone with the daughter of their biggest suspect.

(I’m surprised with myself. Am I not as worried about her as I thought?)

After a bit, he heard the whirring of a motor running.

“Gyah!? I-I think it’s going to blow up!!” shouted Index.

“Driers don’t blow up,” insisted Helcalia. “But I bet it would be bad for my skin to do this while I’m wearing the clothes. I should take them off first.”

“Wow!? Th-that is some mature underwear...”

“Mama’s is see-through.”

“...What are they doing?” grumbled Stiyl.

But he could not let himself go back and forth on this issue. If he did not fully commit himself, he could not build up enough speed and would plummet into the canyon without reaching the other side.

He had chosen to shoot Kamijou Touma and not tell that girl about it.

Had he really thought they could be friends after that?

He did not mind if his own dependence on her led to his failure, but he could not let it bring harm to her.

(I need to focus on just the one task. I need to choose one thing and pour all of my energy into that.)

First of all, the sand magic being used on LA was Citrinitas. It was the third stage of the four said to create the red stone in the Rose tradition.

R&C Occultics had used the dark web to reveal to everyone around the world how they could use magic. But he had checked those sites and none of them mentioned Citrinitas. That meant this was someone the IT company had sent in, not an LA resident who had seen those sites.

So...

(They should be an originalist. Well, they are modifying it with the Logistic Hornet, but when making a cocktail, you want your ingredients to be as close to the original as possible.)

And in this case, the original grimoire would be written in German.

“No, wait...”

Things were different than before.

Once the two girls returned, they would probably be making a lot of noise again, so he needed to search Helcalia’s things while he could.

Kamijou Touma had managed to dig up a birthday present for her.

Stiyl did not care what was inside. He only needed the card.

*Happy birthday, Helcalia.*

It should have been nothing more than some flowing cursive writing.

But Stiyl gulped.

(The handwriting has no German elements to it?)

Could you really tell someone's language history from the idiosyncrasies of their handwriting? Couldn't handwriting analysis only *maybe* determine if it was really by a specific person or not? Most any Asian would ask those same questions. But European culture generally used signatures instead of seals and signatures were used to authorize everything from marriage to war, so they put a lot more focus on handwriting.

In fact, handwriting played a role in a well-known story on the magic side. Yes, the story of the letters regarding the establishment of the Golden cabal. Westcott insisted they showed his correspondence with Miss Sprengel who lived in Nuremburg, Germany, but Ellic Howe and other skeptics had some handwriting analysis done, which revealed the spelling used in the letters were those of a Brit pretending to be a German, not an actual German.

It was the same as native pronunciation. A Brit who learned German later in life and one who learned German from birth would have subtle differences in their pronunciations.

“...”

Stiyl Magnus pulled out an invisible dye.

He had managed to read some residual thoughts from the Academy City printouts, so with handwritten text, he would be able to hear an actual voice like he was playing back a record.

He breathed in and out to refine the lifeforce circulating through his body into magic power.

He reached something unseen hidden within the message card's handwriting. An unfamiliar woman's voice played in his head like he had set the needle down on a record.

“Let's see, I want this s-sach...? Oh, forget its name. I want this chocolate cake here. No, I don't want a Christmas message on the chocolate plate. This is a birthday cake! How big would be best for two? Eh? It's pronounced sachertorte? Spelled like that?”

Stiyl just stared, entirely forgetting to end the ceremony.

“Ha ha.”

That conversation had been nothing more than a mother preparing to celebrate her daughter's birthday.

But it was devastating to Stiyl Magnus.

The Citrinitas spell had to have been learned by decoding a German original grimoire. That was a requisite step to use the magic directly or to indirectly support it with the Logistic Hornet. Magic and science working together might sound simple enough, but it

was actually a risky bit of acrobatics. It required both sides to know exactly what the other would be doing.

And yet.

Sachertorte was as standard a German word as Kaiser. For that matter, if you pronounced A-B-C as ay-bee-see, you had the foundations of German entirely wrong. She probably pronounced Hamburg the American way too.

Residual thoughts could not lie.

No one could escape an answer they had found themselves.

“Melzabeth Grocery...”

Admitting to your own mistakes was a form of strength. If you stubbornly bent the truth instead, you were truly lost.

Kanzaki had sacrificed herself to entrust him with this.

But he refused to lose his cool.

In that sense, he was still the same priest he always was. He wrinkled his brow, bit down on the cigarette filter, and spoke under his breath.

“Damn, this means she can’t possibly be involved in the Citrinitas. I was 100% wrong there. And I can’t let *an innocent person* die because of it!!”

## Part 10

Kamijou Touma knew what kind of person Anna Sprengel was.

He had to choose between the ball-jointed doll wearing a dog-snout restraint and crawling like a dog and the alluring woman being weakly pulled along by the leash. The owner of the beautiful face might actually be her, but the real one could also be hidden within the doll. It was a challenge similar to someone pushing up one of their cards while playing old maid. It was too obvious, which scared him. But reading too much into it could also lead to disaster.

Could he really trust the appearance of the beautiful woman? Could he really deny the possibility of the real one being hidden inside the creepy doll?

Choose wrong and he could not save LA or Melzabeth. It would also leave him open to a deadly attack from the other one.

So he had to analyze R&C Occultics's cruelty.

But the more he thought about it, the more either option seemed likely. He even came up with new possibilities, like the city being flooded with decoy women and decoy dolls, or a large group of magicians gathering to control Melzabeth.

If he let himself be led astray, it could send his fist in the wrong direction and lead to unnecessary bloodshed. If that happened, Anna was bound to activate whatever trap she had set up, trample on his justice and goodness, and relentlessly mock him.

In other words...

“It isn’t the owner or the pet...”

If you could bury as many mines as you liked, how could you guarantee the enemy soldiers would step on one? Placing just one on the vast battlefield and guiding them toward it with the terrain and psychology was hard, so why limit yourself like that?

There was a reason the term “minefield” existed.

And that was his answer.

“You’re both fakes! Melzabeth Grocery was never a part of this! She’s still trapped in the sand along with the other thirty million!!”

It didn’t matter if he chose the doll in the doglike restraints or the human being pulled along by the dog.

Anna had immaturely laid a trap on every path ahead.

If they pretended to be in pain and agony after he attacked, he would assume he had mistakenly attacked the real one and hesitate. Then they could use that opening to win.

What other possibility was there? There could be more decoy women and dolls hidden throughout the city, or R&C Occultics could be using its status as a large company to control Melzabeth with a large group, each one holding one of the puppet’s strings.

But it wasn’t either of those. If they had magic to control Melzabeth like that, they could just put her in danger to use her as a hostage. If they were placing several options in view to confuse him, then he could at least punch out these two here.

“Gee hee.”

And.

After that...

“Ee hee ha!! Ah ha ah ha ha ha ha ha gee hee hee ah ha hee hee ha (■Error analyzing voice. Please repeat that more slowly)!!!!!”

Maniacal laughter echoed through the biting cold of the night.

It was not that either the owner or the pet was laughing.

The unsteady silver-haired woman and the crawling doll laughed crudely together. Almost like they were trying to strip away the dignity of the real woman who was not even here.

He doubted the Transla-Pen’s poor specs were to blame this time.

The doll raised its head like a howling dog and released a terribly distorted voice.

“Yes, yes. Indeed correct. Only ugly artificials here!!”

He heard a deafening buzzing sound.

But it was not a supernatural phenomenon produced by magic. It came from countless drones that looked like giant crane flies. They had cameras attached to their bellies and could record footage in the same high definition used for TV broadcasts.

He looked up to see them nearly covering the sky overhead.

“Are those reinforcements from the Logistic Hornet?” asked Othinus from his shoulder.

That would mean R&C Occultics was planning to broadcast their own crimes.

But that would not end up being a self-destructive confession.

The ball-jointed doll formed a large vertical curve like a dolphin jumping from the waves. At the same time, the silver-haired silhouette dropped to the ground.

The collar and leash came away and the positions of owner and pet switched.

The doll now held the leash and the silver-haired woman now crawled like a dog with the collar around her throat. Either could play either role. Perhaps there was no real hierarchy between them.

Both mouths shouted at once.

“But so what? The person here is no different in the face than Melzabeth Grocery. The crimes committed by me will all be Melzabeth’s crimes. The truth is easy to twist because the rules are made that way!!”

They drew a circle in midair as woman and doll swapped leash and collar again.

Citrinitas.

The true defender and trump card of the R&C Occultics HQ.

“Frustrated? Regret-filled? The good person dissolved in sand has no say. Even if the whole world hears this talk, the whole world will decide *Melzabeth Grocery has gone crazy and talks nonsense!*”

The woman was back to crawling on the ground. She lifted the butt of her tight skirt higher than her head and her baggy T-shirt slid up far enough to see her navel. If this was meant to destroy her socially, they didn’t need to worry how the pose made her look.

“Is that all you wanted to say?” The boy silently but powerfully clenched his fist. “The jig is up. My fist can destroy the likes of you in a single blow and I have no reason to hesitate anymore. ...I happen to know a nonhuman magician—a count was designed specifically to hijack people’s minds. But he proved that being made that way doesn’t mean you have to be a bad person.”

Yes.

That magician had entered Kamijou Touma’s body as a black pill and nearly hijacked his body, but he had instead lent Kamijou his power to resist Anna Sprengel’s atrocities and he had ultimately chosen his own destruction to save Kamijou.

Kamijou did not know what the other St. Germains had been like.

But at the very least, *that one* had not been an evil being.

He had been a person worthy of the utmost respect.

“So I won’t let you use that excuse.”

A mere high school boy spoke clearly.

He wouldn’t let people take it for granted that a nonhuman being or a user of terrible magic had to be a bad person.

He would challenge that assumption with the life St. Germain had saved.

"You aren't a bad person because that's just what you are or because that's the only magic you can use. No matter what you are, you can always fight it and make a new path for yourself. That makes you actual scum who never even tried to fight it. So I won't go easy on you. Now that I know you're both enemies, I've got nothing to fear. Nothing can protect you now."

"Were you even listening?" The crawling woman lifted the butt of her tight skirt high and her smile split apart, looking like drool could drip from her mouth at any time. "My crimes will be Melzabeth's crimes. I said that, I believe? So! I am saying I will now commit a clear crime that even general society will see that way!!!!"

He heard a solid metallic sound.

No, not just one. They came from the road, the park, behind the frozen trees, and the building rooftops. He was surrounded by them. They came from giant mantises and jellyfish. More than a hundred—no, more than two hundred—of the bizarre powered suits designed to mechanically reproduce the #3 and #4's powers were now targeting the one boy.

Those weapons could operate unmanned.

They were hybrid models that could switch between manned and remote-controlled modes, so they could operate in a deserted city.

Hadn't Othinus suggested the possibility of the Academy City force being destroyed by its own hijacked weapons? And being able to use sand magic did not mean you could not use machines as well.

"The jig is up."

The enemy mockingly threw his line back at him. The woman now held the leash and the doll crawled with the collar on its neck. They flipped roles like the two sides of a coin and the smooth-faced doll shouted at him. While the woman laughed maniacally.

"And these bullets can destroy the likes of you in a single blow!! Gee gee ee hee hee! Die in this crime-ridden city. *And the point is for Melzabeth Grocery to never be able to recover from it!!*"

It was disgusting.

It was unbelievably ugly.

Kamijou had been pushed close enough to the brink of death that time seemed to slow, yet his thoughts were on the information mechanically translated for him by the Transla-Pen.

They were going to frame an innocent woman for their crimes to leave her social standing in tatters.

They were going to tear apart her family bonds and friendships, steal her job, and trample her purpose in life.

She would lose any place to live beyond R&C Occultics—no, beyond the Rosicrucians who had connections across the hidden side of the world. They would leave the woman entirely stranded, with nowhere else to turn. Was that any way to act when you were attracted to someone's goodness and justice and wanted them to join you!?

"Human!! Those are only network-connected machines. Destroy their communications or computer chips and you have a chance. An EMP or powerful microwaves should do the trick! Just destroy some kind of high-power electronic device to create a lot of noise!!!!"

Kamijou took off running as if physically struck by Othinus's shout.

The mobile home had already been shredded and destroyed, but there was more to this harbor. A streetlight wouldn't be enough, nor would a vending machine or ATM. But what about a giant disaster warning speaker attached atop a stainless-steel pole taller than the streetlights? The industrial power supply would be boosted further with a large amp to produce a volume loud enough to reach past the horizon, so it was sure to scatter lots of invisible electromagnetic waves if you destroyed it!

"No use, no use."

The two figures swapped places again. The standing doll wagged its index finger while the crawling woman shook her head.

*"How do you expect to break down stainless-steel pole with puny hands!? I could understand if your right hand shot fire. I would feel cautious if you could shoot out vacuum. But your right hand only destroys illusions!!"*

"!!!???"

"Please try it if you think your right hand can actually break it! You think good intentions can defeat laws of physics? Then show me a miracle or a synonym! If you are capable!!"

It was not a question of reaching the speaker or not.

Even if he did reach it, he could not do anything with it.

So the enemy did not even bother using magic to stop him. Citrinitas only sent a merciless command to the mantises and jellyfish surrounding him.

The world had slowed to a crawl for Kamijou.

The machines were aiming more than just machine guns his way. These were the #3 and the #4. The attack coming for him a second from now would be true death. He could not move himself in any way that would dodge it. Stuffing paper below his clothing would not save him this time.

He had no way of avoiding death.

And the promised one second passed.

A dull crash rang out.

“What?”

But.

It was Citrinitas, not Kamijou Touma, who raised their voice in surprise.

The silver stainless-steel pole thicker than a human arm had been cleanly broken away at the base.

The power cable running through it had broken and the powerful sparks scattered electromagnetic waves as a secondary effect, knocking out all of the Five Overs.

The pole heavier than a barbell fell atop a nearby yacht, crushing it.

This was undeniably real.

The destruction sounded unusually light because the boat was made of fiber-reinforced plastic, not metal.

Staring at the result in disbelief, the Citrinitas doll and crawling woman spoke in unison.

“Was the metal fatigued due to minus-twenty-degree weather? Did the sandstorm weather away the surface? No, no!! I question what happened!! That is not enough to explain!! Hee hee. H-how did you cheat? A normal human fist cannot break pillar of stainless steeeeeeel!!!!!!”

He knew that.

Kamijou Touma agreed that this was cheating.

He could not explain it either. Because he was not the one who had caused it!

*“It is high time...”*

A single footstep rang loud in the frozen world.

*“...that you shut the fuck up, coldly warns Misaka while trying to suppress her irritation.”*

Kamijou was as taken aback as anyone.

What was she doing here?

She had short chestnut hair. She was short. She was a human clone girl wearing a thick coat over a prestigious middle school uniform, with special goggles on her forehead and a powerful anti-materiel rifle in her hands.

She was one of the mass-produced #3 clones known as the Sisters.

It was obvious how she had broken the stainless-steel pole. If you could not do it with your bare hands, you only had to use a weapon.

“But...why?” asked Kamijou in a daze.

“The Misakas were sent all around the world, explains Misaka. Most of us were sent outside of Academy City to different cooperative institutions. And that of course included some American labs.”

Her eyes remained entirely void of emotion, but there was definitely something there.

“And it is also possible for us to gather in a single location by coordinating over the Misaka Network. We used the information from *the British government* to rapidly respond to your crisis. From there, we observed you from a safe distance and worked out a plan.”

“...”

“Misaka apologizes if the habits she picked up in America show through, but fuck them. Misaka is sick of sitting idly by while those assholes have their way, says Misaka to demonstrate her intent to join the battle. Misaka also cannot bear to watch you take any more punishment.”

“Hee hee!”

A sound like an electric razor thrummed through the air as drones flew by over the two fake magicians.

“I captured that critical moment, you big fool!! The aerial surveillance drones are sending the footage out on a global stream. No way to hide it now. If you are really a clone, then you were doomed before the battle begins!”

The doll tried to deny the value of someone’s life while cackling with distorted laughter.

But then Citrinitas froze.

They were shocked.

Even after being told the drones were filming everything and streaming it to the entire world, the girl stood her ground.

No, not just her. Too many footsteps to count approached the park, the sounds blending together into something like leaves or grass rustling in the wind.

They were identical in every way.

No one could deny now that these girls were clones whose existence violated international law.

They were working to save the life of the boy who had been so enraged by the villain’s actions that he stood up to defend someone’s trampled dignity and was even now struggling to keep fighting.

Yes. They had not hesitated to gather on the battlefield as people with undeniably human hearts!!

“You said every crime you commit here will be blamed on Melzabeth Grocery. You said the rules allow the truth to be twisted as much as necessary.”

The group of girls all aimed their guns.

The Sisters spoke without a twinge of doubt.

“Then just try and twist this truth, announces Misaka. The Misakas here are an army of identical clones. So kiss Misaka’s ass, monster. Let’s see who gets all the attention: the Misakas or your precious twisted truth.”

“Hee, gee hee!”

“Misaka will reveal an answer not even you can hide: *that Melzabeth Grocery did nothing wrong*. And Misaka is more than willing to use the truth of her existence if it will overflow R&C Occultics’s processing power that lets you manipulate the world’s information.”

They were not really even watching the enemy anymore.

They had their say and did not bother listening to the rebuttal.

The doll took a trembling step back, but was stopped by a tugging on the leash. The identical girls kept their eyes on that, but they also glanced over at the boy.

"An army is best fought with an army, and technology is best fought with technology. Let the Misakas handle these bullet-spewing wimps. And you settle this in a way only you can, says Misaka, confident her war buddy has her back."

Mechanical sounds came from all around as the incompletely destroyed Five Overs rebooted themselves.

But the clone girls were unfazed.

They readied their assault rifles, shotguns, and anti-materiel rifles like a single giant hedgehog in order to fight back.

"Go save the real Melzabeth Grocery and give us the ultimate happy ending, requests Misaka, knowing you would do it anyway. That is the obvious and simplest answer and it should be the natural way of our world. That is a cause Misaka is willing to fight for."

"Hee hah hah!! Go to hell! I will crush it all! Clone killing has been added as an option, yes! Ee hee hah, you \*\*\*\*\* (■Possible Southern US slang related to nonstandard sexual proclivities?)! I will guide that woman to hell's depths, by making it all her crimes!!!!!"

## Part 11

The aide could not hide her grave expression as she whispered into the president's ear, but Roberto smiled fearlessly.

"I thought he was just a coward with a pointy chin and a pretty face, but looks like he knows what he's doing."

A certain boy had intentionally inspired public backlash by confessing to the crime of killing clones.

He had hogged the seat of the wrongdoer by making himself the villain who had killed ten thousand people.

That distracted people from any hatred or disgust they might have had toward the human clones themselves. He made sure the identical girls were viewed as victims and could not be so easily criticized.

If he had simply built up their defenses to dodge the issue like that, Roberto would not have felt a need to defend him. Academy City's inexperienced leader could have called it quits there, but he had taken it one step further.

He had revealed them, despite the danger.

He had shown them thinking human thoughts, sympathizing with someone's trampled heart, and taking up arms for a just cause.

He had shown off how human they were and then asked the world whether or not it would accept those girls.

It was quite the gamble.

If the world was not moved, they might easily conclude that the clones were violations of international law and should be disposed of, no matter how many of them there were.

And when Roberto saw this once-in-a-lifetime gamble made with something that boy cared about more than his own life, he had just one thought in his head.

*Go for the big payout.*

*If you run from what you really want to do and try to win enough small bets that they add up in the end, you'll find yourself losing more and more as time goes on.*

"My fellow Americans!!" Roberto grabbed the mic in his powerful grip and began speaking more like a professional wrestling announcer than a president giving a speech. "Academy City? Clone tech? It sounds like the opposition leader is trying to trip me up with some meaningless detours, but I'm game if she is. After all, taking some detours is a lot more fun than just heading straight home!! Listen up, USN Broadcasting and TV AMB! I'm about to get you the best ratings you've had in years!!" He winked toward the cameras broadcasting this nationwide. "I came from outside this country. In fact, I got my start as an undocumented immigrant who crossed the Mexican border with means I'd rather not get into here. From there, I learned to read and do math, I successfully modified the election laws, and then the American people chose me to be the third Hispanic to ever serve as president!! If a high school dropout like me can be elected, then anyone has a chance. I carry the hopes of so many people in this great country. Race? Ethnicity? Religion? Gender? Language? Education? Class? They can all eat shit. Here in the best damn country in the world, we go around tearing down those meaningless barriers, so why the hell should we criticize people for *the circumstances of their birth*!? Here in the land of the stars and stripes, we need to smile and welcome in anyone who shows up at our doorstep, no matter how they got there. And that goes double for these girls who have chosen to take up weapons and risk their lives to save thirty million of our own people! To take back Los Angeles!! And to protect an innocent woman from being blamed for crimes she didn't commit!!!!!"



Roseline's face crinkled up like she had just eaten a Japanese umeboshi. With the president straying from his prepared speech and providing a deluge of adlibbing instead, even her elite brain was feeling overloaded. Which was usually how these things went.

So it was the vice president who whispered in his ear. His job was to support the president, so he could not have the man making a mess of things with his excess courage and enthusiasm.

"Mr. President, none of this had been confirmed yet. What is the clones' objective? We do not actually know they are fighting for our sake. They may simply be running wild."

"No!! I trust them wholeheartedly!! Because whether they're born from a sperm and an egg saying howdy deep inside someone's body or they're born from the DNA extracted from someone's cells, all people have the same human heart beating in their chest! Those girls in LA have kind hearts! Oh, man! Standing up and yelling has got me a little hard, but I swear it wasn't from talking about those girls!"

"That argument is nonsensical!"

"It was the talk of a sperm and an egg that did it! And it's not a full one, just the startings of one, so it's all good!"

"Stop talking about that, goddammit!! What connection do those clones even have to Melzabeth Grocery anyway? It seems highly unlikely they would do all this for a complete stranger!!"

"Really, Darris!? You're getting a lot of gray in your hair nowadays, but don't trust the legends saying Asian eel will help you get it up. We're Americans, so when we have trouble in bed, we eat red meat! Go for that pound of sirloin and don't be afraid to add some garlic!!!!!! ...Oh, and one other thing."

"Yes?" blinked the vice president.

He could not keep up with Roberto, who brought the mic up to his mouth before continuing. And he was not recommending foods to boost an old man's virility.

*"How did you know the woman being framed was named Melzabeth Grocery?"*

For a brief moment, Darris Hewlane could not get his mind to focus on what the president had said.

But then it hit him. He should not have tuned out Roberto Katze's emotional speech. Roberto had intentionally made the lengthy speech as a distraction. During his speech, he had only said the clones were protecting "an innocent woman from being blamed for crimes she didn't commit"!

“I thought I might catch someone with that one, but I didn’t expect you, Darris. And unlike those cute clones, you can’t claim you were secretly gathering information in LA while standing here. I mean that’s on the other coast and there’s only one of you.”

“Oh...”

“And thirty million people disappeared from LA, including the undocumented immigrants. Pretty unlikely that you would guess the right name out of a pool that large. You might have better odds of guessing the nuclear launch codes on the first try.”

He could seem like he didn’t care.

But the President of the United States actually had an overwhelming presence.

It was not an issue of party. When he put together a plan, it was to make the entire country a better place. When he made a decision that made his own party grimace and when he invited the opposition leader to his own home to have a shouting match, it was all because he trusted that the conflict would lead to a wonderful idea.

Ultimately, he saw anyone who worked to better the USA as his ally.

But he would never allow the opposite.

He was always watching and shaking hands with his American allies, but he would also mercilessly strike down his enemies.

“I’m sorry, Mr. President. I shouldn’t have been checking my phone while working.”

“This isn’t one of Japan’s silly closed room trials. This debate is being broadcast nationwide. We have a hundred cameras on us—maybe even two hundred. They’re watching us from every angle and we can check the footage if you really want us to. But if we discover you never once touched your phone since the debate began, then it’s over for you.”

“...”

The debate was indeed being streamed live to video sites, but the participants were not allowed to bring their own mobile devices with them. The only online information here was the comments from the congress members displayed on the wall. They could not freely search the web or check the online news.

So no matter how much the news was making waves around the world, the vice president should have had no way of knowing about it.

The president himself only knew because his aide had whispered it to him.

“For that matter, my cute aide confiscated your phone back in the corridor. Or do you carry two, just like a high school girl? Sounds like you’re pretty young at heart, Darris. Now, if you insist you saw it on your phone, pull it out and show it to me. Assuming you actually have one, of course.”

“.....”

R&C Occultics had thrown money around, set up honeytraps, taken data from phones, and used their PR advisors to plant deep roots around the country. No one knew where they would find a double-crosser.

But now they had their answer.

Roberto Katze shrugged and Darris Hewlane sighed.

Then they both pulled a semi-auto shotgun from within their fancy suit.

The stocks extended just like a folding cane or hanger.

They aimed for each other’s vitals at point-blank range and forcibly held the gun with just their dominant hand, the long barrels intersecting between them. It looked more like a fencing match than a Western shootout.

“I don’t know what has you sucking up to that immoral company.”

The US President, the most powerful man in the world, grinned inside his own home.

“But this isn’t just getting yourself involved in some kids’ fight. You’ve gotten your grimy fingers on a peaceful family only so you can tear them apart. I won’t stand for that kind of behavior in my White House, Darris. As commander-in-chief, it’s my job to protect the American people and the world’s future, so I have to admit I’m mighty pissed about this. So how ‘bout a quick duel?”

Roseline Krackhart wanted to die.

She could understand the vice president sneaking a gun into the White House since he was a traitor. In the sense that she could see an immoral criminal so flagrantly flouting the rules.

The problem was the other man.

The blonde woman forgot what was going on around her and shouted in anger.

“Why in the world did you bring a loaded gun to a charity debate, you presidential dumbass!!!???”

“Did you forget? We live in the land of car chases, sex, and gunfights.”

## Between the Lines 3

### **R&C Occultics is the True Culprit Theory**

Proposer: Kamijou Touma.

A theory suggesting the ball-jointed doll and the silver-haired brown-skinned woman, who can switch between the roles of pet and owner, are both fakes prepared by R&C Occultics and devastation awaits no matter which one Kamijou chooses. According to this theory, the real Melzabeth is hidden in the sand with the other thirty million people.

That would make the real Melzabeth entirely unrelated to the disappearances.

Also, R&C Occultics's goal was to frame the real Melzabeth for more and more crimes until she had nowhere left to turn and was forced to become a convenient puppet for CEO Anna Sprengel.

Melzabeth Grocery did not want her Logistic Hornets to be misused, so she planned to feign ignorance and sneak into the R&C Occultics HQ to destroy their massive distribution network with a piece of malware she had written. Her attempt was stopped before it even began, but the fact that she resisted to the very end is speculated to have drawn Anna's interest.

Anna wanted her specifically because she was so noble and pure of heart.

It may be a desire she cannot abandon no matter how much it contradicts her position as a villain.

This theory has Othinus, the Sisters, and President Roberto Katze's support.

Stiyl Magnus has also confirmed that Melzabeth cannot read German.

The magician Citrinitas and Vice President Darris Hewlane were both successfully revealed to be villains.

The time has come to fulfill the promise made with a sobbing girl.

The only task left is to defeat a powerful foe. Do that and a happy ending awaits.

# CHAPTER 4

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## Beyond the Two Choices.

*Duel\_Against\_R.:C.:O.:(for\_Save\_Mother).*

### Part 1

Continuous gunfire erupted in the Long Beach yacht harbor where even the seawater had frozen. The din signaled the beginning of a clash between the mass-produced military clones and the remote-controlled Five Overs. The Five Overs were designed to surpass the original Level 5s with pure technology and the Sisters had failed to match the original, so it should have been a difficult battle for the girls.

But the other two people present did not even turn in that direction.

Kamijou Touma and Citrinitas.

The latter included a ball-joint doll holding a thick leash and a young woman wearing the collar and crawling on all fours. The solid doll and the silver-haired, brown-skinned woman were both fakes. R&C Occultics had set a trap where saving either one would make him look like a fool.

“Gee kee ee hee hee!” The Transla-Pen was not enough to explain away the distortion in their voices. “So you built more? You built up a lot more people beyond yourself? It looks almost miraculous, but does that mean victory? In fact, the more help you borrow, the same amount you lose. Like a house of cards! Because if you lose from here, you can never crawl back out again!!”

“Let them talk.” Othinus crossed her legs on Kamijou’s shoulder and coolly shrugged off the enemy’s scorching malice. “I’m sure you can tell this is a lonely magician, who doesn’t know the first thing about friendship, imagining what it must be like and critiquing the neighborhood birthday party based on that. Don’t worry. No matter how reasonable any one of their claims might sound, it doesn’t fit together. ...As your understander, I guarantee you the power you hold in your hand is great enough to reject the destruction of the world.”

“But that solid core is why I want to see your face when it breaks in twooooooooooooooo(A portion of the voice has left the human audible range)!!”

With a dull sound like a car’s shift lever moving, the crawling woman’s jaw joint opened wider than should have been possible and something glittered deep in her throat.

A great roar followed, but was that the sound of all the sand spewing from the pet’s mouth like a laser cannon, or was it the sound of the boy’s right hand obliterating the attack?

It happened so fast it was impossible to tell the two apart. If he had not already known Citrinitas used a spell capable of slicing through reinforced concrete, he would have been decapitated before he even put up his guard.

And negating the one attack did not end the battle.

“Upwind!!”

“I know!!”

Kamijou reacted to Othinus’s shouted warning by sliding to the right instead of charging straight ahead. That kept him from being caught in the cloud of sand that billowed out like cotton candy. Turning his back on the magician, the edge of the harbor, and the ocean was dangerous, but he could always stand on the frozen ocean if he had to.

Citrinitas referred to a type of fermentation.

That magician remade humans and all other life forms into nutrients and absorbed them into sand to trap them alive. That meant they fought by *claiming territory*, not by violently striking the enemy.

Kamijou would be caught by an unavoidable insta-kill attack if he was surrounded, enveloped, or swallowed up.

But on the other hand...

“I can touch the surface just fine. As long as I focus on its presence in 3D space, your magic doesn’t scare me!!”

“Is that a fact!?”

Kamijou circled upwind and then rushed in toward the enemy.

His target was the poor doll holding the leash and being pulled about by the collared woman. He clenched his right fist as tight as he could and threw a punch toward the doll’s smooth face. The owner and the pet were both highly unnatural. If they were made from magic, they could not survive his right hand.

So he could defeat Citrinitas if he got in just one direct hit.

He felt something soft.

The doll had spun around to face him.

But this did not feel like human flesh and bone. It was also strange to feel something soft on a ball-joint doll. A pillar of sand thicker than Kamjou's torso had risen from the ground a moment earlier, distributing the impact of his fist.

The next thing he knew, the doll had spun around in midair to begin crawling like a dog. And like they were on opposite sides of a revolving door, the woman now held the leash, facing Kamijou.

Had they switched modes?

“A...sandbag!?”

“Hee hee. I thought magic doesn't scare? Disproving yourself pretty fast there!!”

Whether it was Imagine Breaker taking effect or not, the sand pillar came apart and exploded in every direction.

“Kh.”

It was enough to force Kamijou to fall back. In that brief opening, the doll once more grabbed the leash and the woman put on the collar. She crawled on all fours, not caring that the collar of her baggy T-shirt created a tunnel toward her chest, and opened her mouth abnormally wide.

The attack was powerful enough to tear through the scenery, concrete and all. The faint curtain of sand was shredded by the compressed sand laser.

Kamijou quietly clicked his tongue while hiding behind a grounded cruiser.

“Damn, they're indiscriminately slicing through the boats. Is a simple yacht not enough to block that?”

“A *simple* yacht? That boat you're leaning against now costs about thirty million.”

“...”

*On second thought, go ahead destroy all of them,* silently cursed the boy with only 5,800 yen to his name (that he could not currently access with the ATMs not running at the end of the year), but that would actually mean no more cover for him.

“So Imagine Breaker can negate their attacks, but the attacks remain deadly afterwards? That doesn’t sound like much, but it’s a huge pain!”

“Yet Citrinitas does not keep themselves surrounded by a sandstorm at all times.”

Othinus hinted at a terrifying possibility.

If the enemy built a 360-degree barrier of deadly sand, a close-range fighter like Kamijou would have no way of approaching them.

However...

“There is no rule forbidding Imagine Breaker’s user from also using weapons,” said Othinus. “So are they hesitant to obstruct their own vision in the great gun country of America? Or are they afraid the fine sand will damage their lungs? Either way, this gives us a chance.”

“Okay, I get that it could be worse, but that doesn’t actually tell me how to win this.”

“Of course you aren’t going to find the answer to everything right away. This is a Rosicrucian elite.”

A cruiser was sliced through horizontally.

Kamijou crouched down and got to work. The sand in the air was indeed frightening, but nothing around here would work as a shield when the enemy could bring down a broadcast tower. Keeping his distance would only give them a chance to target him. That risk remained at close range, but at least he would be in punching range.

He heard a quiet thunk like a knife chopping through a radish or a carrot, but instead he saw a transparent blade stabbed into the harbor’s frozen concrete ground.

It was glittering somewhat.

Sharp glass shards were raining down from overhead.

The yacht harbor jutted out toward the frozen ocean, so there weren’t any skyscrapers with windows to break. That left just one explanation:

“Sand!? They can turn it into glass!?”

“Not just once!” shouted Citrinitas. “Did you think this was only a park sandbox debut!?”

He frantically twisted his body and knocked over the joint lever of a towing vehicle parked on a nearby road. Its yacht collapsed on its side and he rolled beneath the thick sail.

He now had a waterproof fabric roof sturdier than a tent.

The deluge of noise was even higher pitched than pouring rain. The mass of noise exploding from the concrete ground was so loud he thought it had to be directly damaging his eardrums.

“Gh!?”

He felt scorching pain in his thigh.

(It pierced the sheet!?)

Screaming would only let Citrinitas know the attack was working, so he grimaced, clenched his teeth, and touched the shard embedded in his leg. He felt the transparent blade become sand once more.

He did not have time to stop the bleeding.

“Come out.”

The crawling woman opened her mouth wide and fine sand spilled from the corners of her mouth. The wind gently swept the sand into the air and then pressurized it into a two-meter box.

It was like a sea lion playing with a ball.

“Is run away and hide all you can do? Then it can never end!”

The crawling woman jumped up to lift the cube resting on her head and the doll began to crawl instead. The standing woman slapped the falling cube with her hand.

She almost seemed to be rolling a giant die. Except that was a block of sand weighing more than five tons. It smashed up the fallen yacht as it rolled through.

Kamijou had no choice but to rush on out.

He covered more distance than expected because the force of the exploding yacht pushed on his back, launching him through the air.

“Gahh!?”

“Tch. Rolling would have been more fun because of you shredded by glass. Sparkle, sparkle.”

The two parts of Citrinitas kept switching the pet and owner roles while they spoke and laughed as one.

(Damn. I thought yachts were economical boats that used the wind to move!)

His back felt hot.

He tried to strip off his cheap jacket, but it caught on something. Then he realized the heat was not from burns. Some shards—glass and metal ones the size of his little finger's tip—had stabbed through the jacket and into the skin on his back. He preferred not to imagine how many there were in all.

It looked like those two did not fight by having the crawling woman chase their target like a hound and then having the doll supply the finishing blow. If anything, they may have seen each other as weapons or tools, like a witch's broom or a crystal ball.

Not that there was any point in asking which one was the master and which the servant.

“You failed, don’t you think you did?” The standing doll and crawling human cackled and moved in bizarre synchronization. “Your fight is empty. No guarantees are found in real battle! Isn’t that the truth!? Then you should have told the clones to quit. From the moment you agreed to their offer of help, you dragged them into inescapable battle!!”

“No.” He cut them off. He clenched his fist, stepped forward, and rid himself of all hesitation. “I believe the Sisters’ good will and kindness will be rewarded. They are far stronger *people* than a mere high school boy like me. I trust them enough to rest easy knowing they have my back!! So I won’t worry about them!! I refuse to believe this was wrong. They created this miracle by standing up for Los Angeles, for Melzabeth and her daughter, and for everyone’s happiness! So I’ll make sure they don’t regret it!!!!!!”

## Part 2

At the same time and same place, short bursts of gunfire rang out.

In the quiet of the deserted city, only Long Beach rumbled louder than a fireworks show. An intense firefight had broken out between machines that surpassed the #3 and #4 and clone girls who had failed to reach that point.

But so what?

Firing a powerful railgun was not enough to win anything and everything. Combining railguns into a Gatling gun did not guarantee victory over espers. The ones who had fought on the front lines and the ones who had remained on standby around the world had their brains electromagnetically linked. The nearly ten thousand Sisters formed a single massive parallel processing network known as the Misaka Network. Their overwhelming processing power could calculate out the answer.

They dodged with the smallest of margins.

They sniped joints and sensors like threading a needle with their bullets.

And during it all...

“What’s wrong? Taking a break already? asks Misaka #19559.”

A girl spoke to an identical girl seated with her back against a sliced cruiser.

The seated girl fell silent for a bit with her assault rifle still between her head and shoulder.

And then...

“Sorry,” she said. “Misaka was listening, honestly confesses Misaka #10089 while looking up into the night sky.”

The other girl understood.

That boy was not linked to them by the invisible network, but he still trusted they had his back. It was simple enough to say, but could anything be so valuable?

So the girls reflected on the words, relished them, accepted them, and whispered quietly to themselves.

“Took you long enough, baby.”

Their break was over.

The girls stood back up, readied their guns, and directly faced a headwind of death and destruction. Muzzle flashes blossomed in the cold night. The identical girls tossed each other spare magazines, bought each other time to reload, and otherwise supported each other as they destroyed their targets.

“Misaka cares deeply about someone.”

They marched across the wreckage of the obliterated yachts and cruisers.

One of them fired a finishing blow on the mantis head lying at her feet.

“And if this will help him and it will save the people of Los Angeles...”

Several clones formed a thick shield to protect another who leaned forward to aim an anti-materiel rifle.

They supplied devastating attacks and marched onward while making an announcement to the world.

“Then a threat this minor is not even worth fearing!! declares Misaka.”

That was when they heard some deep mechanical noises.

If anything, it reminded them of a precision computer operating.

A nearby cruiser shattered like glass.

If the identical girls had not immediately coordinated via the Misaka Network and gotten own on the ground as a group, they would have been shredded and bloodied by the many shards.

And they recognized this storm of blunt weapons.

It was the result of vector control.

“No, this does not appear to be vector control itself, calmly analyzes Misaka #16360.”

Several solid sounds of impact followed. After blowing away the cruiser it was using as cover, the new foe had nowhere to hide.

It looked like a crab monster larger than a van.

The mechanical weapon held out shields that nearly covered its silhouette from the front. And those shields were its true weapon. A CD-like rainbow sheen moved slimly along its surface because it was covered with something like sea anemones too small to see.

Five Over OS—Modelcase: Accelerator.

“So Misaka’s final obstacle is named after *you*? It would seem fate has a sense of humor, comments Misaka #19559. ...But *the real one* would never get in his way.”

“You cannot call it fate when people were involved in setting it up, calmly retorts out Misaka #10089 while testing her reaction speed.”

The Five Overs were weapons designed to reproduce a Level 5s power through pure technology and match or exceed the original’s destructive power. The #3’s was the most obvious example there. Equip a machine with an even more powerful railgun and you had yourself a Five Over.

But those with the OS designation, which stood for Outsider, were different.



“Those weapons use a method other than the Level 5’s to produce a similar effect.”

“Does it use over a billion group-controlled cylinders thinner than hairs, or does it use a distributing electrocontractile gel? How exactly it *gives the appearance* of vector control should be the key to defeating it.”

“Either way, this is a product of compromise. It only exists because they could not find a way to reproduce the real power. But even if it is a failure, Misaka will not go easy on it. As a fellow failure, she knows just how painful it is to have someone condescendingly hold back, decides Misaka #16360.”

The girls all aimed their weapons.

If this machine did not *actually* control vectors, they had a chance. If it could only defend itself in the direction of those shields, then it felt nowhere near as intimidating as the #1.

“You are not the real one, so Misaka does not fear you. You are no reason to abandon someone who trusts us to have his back, says Misaka #10089 while she declares war by raising a choice finger. Fuck you.”

◆

An online exchange of criticism began in a pacifist country of faraway Scandinavia. They called the girls savages for using guns and asked if they thought traveling to a foreign country and shooting up the place was their idea of a relaxing hike.

But then someone made a certain post.

It was more than enough to silence those armchair idealists.

“I bet you’re only trashing them cause you’re jealous. They’re out there looking like heroes while you’re throwing stones while hiding behind your anonymity. They look a lot more *human* if you ask me.”

◆

In a fancy French hotel, a bunch of young people carrying homemade signs flooded into a press conference where some prideful academics were preparing to officially denounce the use of human cloning technology.

The scene descended into chaos, but the young people were clearly enjoying themselves as they shouted in front of the cameras.

“How can you talk about what’s ‘humane’ when you’re demanding the execution of ten thousand girls like you’re just stamping some paperwork!? When those girls heard about the crisis in LA, they chose to fight for their fellow human beings, but you want to have them lined up against the wall and shot!?”

“Do you think you can get away with anything since none of it’s happening here!? You people are advocating mass murder just to make a name for yourselves, so I say you’re the real disgraces to humanity. We need to set an example for those clones!!”

“Yes, rules are necessary, but those rules should be punishing the people who made them, not the girls themselves. Welcome to the world, girls. Allow us to introduce you to this wonderful society of ours.”



In an American home, someone was clanking around in the garage.

“What’s going on, mom? Why are you pulling out the shotgun at this hour?”

“Oh, my fairy, haven’t you seen the online video? I don’t care if they’re clones or what—that’s a bunch of young girls out there fighting. I can’t bear to sit idly by and watch a live video of some teenagers getting gunned down when they still have such promising futures ahead of them! That’s not the American way!!”

“But LA is three hundred kilometers away?”

“Three hundred is nothing. What do you think my Harley is for? Roar down the highway on that huge-ass bike and I’ll be there in no time! I don’t know what help I’ll be, but I’ll find something to do or my name isn’t Monoetta Spring! It’s time to charge headlong into someone else’s business in the name of justice! Cause *that’s* the American way!!”

“Look, if you’re if you’re going to go out and smash up dad’s bike, why not go looking for him instead? No, forget dad—I want a MilliPhone! There are apps I can’t get for my Alkaloid.”



In Japan, someone used the internet to distribute instructions for a 3D mask anyone could make with some cardboard and a printer, so Shibuya and Roppongi were flooded with boys and girls wearing the same face.



In South America, a surprise club event was held where SF authors and movie directors drank beers and cheered for human equality.



In the Vatican, the Catholic Pope solemnly stated that no sin was committed in the clones' creation since no embryos were destroyed in the process.



In China, a social media post went viral for saying their country had 1.3 billion people already, so what's ten thousand more?



And.



Two girls held a phone on its side and pressed their cheeks together to watch the footage.

They were Misaka Mikoto and Shokuhou Misaki.

"Oh, no. Oh, no. Oh, no. How am I ever going to explain this to Kuroko!?"

"Count yourself lucky. Kouzaku-san might actually kill me over this."

Mikoto's phone would not stop ringing. She was receiving a flood of messages from her parents and friends. She had never seen a number that big on the unread messages icon. They all had to be wondering what was happening.

But that aside...

No one had ordered them to do this. Those girls had chosen for themselves to take up weapons to protect some people in need. The Ace and Queen of Tokiwadai's eyes gently narrowed as they watched it.

The two Level 5s spoke softly while watching those girls take their first steps into a larger world.

They whispered like they were dazzled by the beauty of it all.

"You're looking pretty cool out there."

## Part 3

The minus-twenty-degree air bit at his skin.

At a yacht harbor in Long Beach, Los Angeles, Kamijou Touma continued his confrontation with the strange magician known as Citrinitas. He clenched his right fist tight and readied it.

He would win.

He had to win no matter what.

And...

"If I stay here, the downpour of glass will get me, but any shield will be torn apart by that sand laser or a sand boulder. And that sandbag that blocks my punches is pretty bland, but no less of a pain in the ass!!"

"Do not call me bland. It injures a small amount."

The Transla-Pen picked up the comment made by the collared and crawling woman while she pouted her lips like a child, but then her jaw dropped, opening her mouth wide, and an ultra-compressed sand blade was released.

Trying to run away was not a long-term solution. So with extreme fear clutching at his heart, he stayed low and charged toward the two leash-connected bodies of Citrinitas. He threw his right fist, but the woman jumped up like a dolphin, the doll began to crawl, and a thick sandbag rose up to block the path of his fist.

Othinus viewed their surroundings.

"Is there a tanker truck around here? A septic tank would work too."

"?"

"Citrinitas uses sand," said Othinus. "They use it in different forms, like a compressed blast, sharp glass, or a heavy boulder, but that means they are restricted by the nature of sand. So we only have to use that against them. And what's a basic camping technique right alongside boiling your drinking water? A standard step you should always follow before drinking any water from rivers or springs?"

"A filter made with...gravel and activated charcoal?"

“Yachts and cruisers use them for recycling rainwater. And they include sand as well. A handmade filter cleans filthy river water, but they don’t break conservation of mass. That means the filth is caught in the filter and builds up there. And in there, it’s concentrated several times or several dozen times normal!!”

They had already noticed that the doll and the woman never covered themselves in the thick cloud of sand. They had even guessed it was to keep their view clear or to avoid breathing in the fine sand.

But sand itself could be dangerous when used wrong.

So what if Kamijou and Othinus made it a lot more harmful?

“The fugu does not create its own toxin. Plankton eats faintly toxic bacteria, small shellfish and crabs eat the plankton, and the fugu eats those things. All of the initial toxin is concentrated inside the fugu’s body until it reaches a lethal level. This magician is the same. An ordinary substance found in small quantities in the air all around the globe could bring an unnatural level of harm to Citrinitas due to their unnatural magic!!”

Kamijou saw something out of the corner of his eye.

He saw a boxy device smaller than a vending machine with a handgun-like nozzle and a thick hose on its side. He had no idea if these fancy boats used gasoline, diesel, plutonium, or red wine for fuel, but this looked a lot like the pumps found at gas stations.

Hadn’t Othinus given a tanker truck as an example?

“Over there!!”

“Hee hee!”

Citrinitas’s creepy laughter rang through the deserted city where thirty million people had disappeared. This may have been the cleanest Los Angeles’s air had ever been.

The pair made another vertical rotation, resulting in the silver-haired woman crawling and the ball-joint doll standing up with leash in hand. Something was about to happen.

“Naïve, naïve. If you want to use special sand...you need to use it this far!”

A large shadow fell on Kamijou.

The sky above was blotted out even more unnaturally than during a solar eclipse. The culprit was a giant structure. The five-kilometer-wide aerial spacecraft launch pad had a V-shape with a gaping hole in the center and a triangle swept back from it like a tail wing.

“The Logistic...Hornet.”

“You should have known this answer already. I vanished thirty million people all by myself!!”

With a deep rumble and flying orange sparks, something accelerated around the circle and was then launched skyward from the tail wing. At the same time, drones were launched from the V-shaped wings like a swarm of bees.

Either naphtha or liquid nitrogen was being accurately distributed.

“You know what that implies? When used correctly, this can produce one big move that swallows up all of Los Angeleeeeeees!!!!!”

The atmosphere moved.

An entire city’s meteorological conditions were entirely changed.

Technically speaking, the Logistic Hornet’s massive cargo transportation ability was being used to scatter naphtha or liquid nitrogen wherever it wanted. By manipulating the temperature differences, it could alter the density of the air and thus the atmospheric pressure, allowing the operator to set the weather at the tap of a touchscreen. It was no more than scientific technology. The unnatural cold wave keeping the more southern city of Los Angeles at minus-twenty was the Logistic Hornet’s doing.

But this was not about that surface-level effect.

A gust blew in from a direction very unnatural for the seasonal winds. Could the winds be set up to spread the sandstorm across all of LA!?

“Now.”

The standing doll spread its arms with a solid creaking sound.

An inescapable reverse flood, pushing from land to sea, was approaching from behind it.

The Academy City and Anglican Church participants in Operation Overlord Revenge may have seen something very similar.

It spread horizontally in front of Kamijou.

It reminded him a thick wall rising up toward heaven or like a massive dry wave. It fully engulfed the skyscrapers and villas and mercilessly attacked the beach and ocean, not allowing a single scrap of land to remain. The wall of sand was so massive it felt like witnessing Noah’s flood.

A woman had built this new technology to overcome her husband's accident and make her daughter's dream come true.

But now it was being abused so that none of those original intentions remained.

"Oppose my ultimate attack if you think that is possible, challenger!!!!!"

## Part 4

US President Roberto Katze and Vice President Darris Hewlane.

The two men did not speak a word while aiming their shotguns at each other's chests from less than a meter away.

Unlike the pump action variety usually seen in movies and dramas, these semi-autos did not need the forend to be slid to load each shot.

As long as the initial round had been sent to the chamber, it could produce a hail of death each time the trigger was pulled.

With a loud bang, Roberto's body twisted around. No, he had pulled the trigger and let the recoil swing him around. The ordinarily-impossible action caused Darris to miss his target at point-blank range. His specks of lead burned through empty space and obliterated the clock on the White House press room's wall.

To reiterate, a semi-auto shotgun did not require a loading action. You only had to pull the trigger to fire the next round.

Still twisted around, Roberto Katze aimed his shotgun up toward the vice president's jaw. He did not hesitate to unleash the deadly attack.

"Ohhh!!"

"Mr. Presideeeeeeeeent!!"

Barrel collided with barrel to throw off the president's aim, so he used the recoil to fall back and pretended to be preparing another shot, but instead crouched down and rushed back in toward Darris. Barrels heavily collided, gunshots threatened to burst their eardrums, muzzle flashes shined bright, and colorful shotgun shells fell at their feet.

Screams and shouts erupted as the gathered reporters scrambled toward the exit.

There were armed secret service members in the White House, but they were all too shocked to do anything. Besides, the current president and vice president were aiming guns at each other, so who were they supposed to aim at? And even if they knew that, their shots could easily hit the other one with those two so close together. These were truly unprecedented circumstances not covered by their training and they did not have the guts to figure it out on the fly.

Aide Roseline had built up some resistance to the president's unprecedeted behavior, so she managed to yell at him from a short distance away.

"Wh-what is wrong with you!? How do you intend to clean up after this mess!? And while you can go hide in the White House if you want, *I* have to go stand in front of the press. This one is bad even for you, so how am I even supposed to smooth things over at the next press conference!?"

"Hey, Rose? I'll listen to your loving lecture later, so you keep your head down and escape outside the White House!!"

"Oh, how I wish I could just throw him in a holding cell right this instant!!"

"Please. If a stray shot hits you, I might actually kill him."

Their conversation ended there. The secret service grabbed the silenced aide's arm and hurried her out of there. They must have decided this was better than just standing around doing nothing.

With that, it truly was one-on-one.

And it still could not exactly be described as a gun battle.

If anything, it was more like an old-fashioned knights' duel where the two sides took up swords to defend their honor.

The two warriors pushed the long shotgun barrels against each other like two locked blades and roared at each other from less than 10cm apart.

"Ha ha!!" laughed the president. "A 12-gauge? You were really trying to kill me, weren't you!?"

"Says the man using slugs. Those will punch a fist-sized hole through a bulletproof jacket and the chest below it!"

"Quick question: what did R&C Occultics promise you? America is a country that values freedom but is also weirdly religious. What was your reward for betraying me? I'm the president, so I'm aware there are prizes beyond money in the political world."

For example, people would swear on the Bible in government institutions like the courts and congress. Religion also played a big role in elections. In addition to policies, campaign promises, campaign funding, and celebrity endorsements, a candidate's campaign was influenced by the specific religious denomination they belonged to. That was because the voters felt an affinity with someone who believed in the same rules as they did.

Would they ban immigration, or welcome any and all immigrants?

In politics, a candidate had to secure the votes of as many people as they could by showing sympathy for their views on issues of that nature as well. Even in the Christian church, the Catholics and Protestants followed different rules. Of course, not all mythologies and religions could become a majority within America. But if the opinions of those minority groups could reach the majority and trigger a chemical reaction, it could lead to a change in the country's morals and manners and lead to a different breadth of acceptable policies a politician could advocate.

"There is one way for a vice president to get a promotion. You know what that is, don't you?"

"..."

"The president must be removed from office in one way or another. Then the vice president will take over the position as an emergency replacement."

"So you tricked me into giving England and Academy City the go-ahead prematurely? All while knowing thirty million of LA's people would be lost?"

Asking why he could go that far for political power would not reach the heart of the issue.

Roberto Katze narrowed his eyes and then asked the real question.

*"You never could get over that I was chosen instead of you, could you?"*

"The vice president is not chosen by the people."

The deep shadows in Darris's eyes were too lukewarm to call hatred.

They were only a shadowy darkness.

"You appointed me as your right-hand man. I am only allowed in the White House as a consolation prize! This was supposed to be my party. You were only supposed to be the spokesman. But the next thing I knew...!? I had won it all. I had everything you didn't. And yet no more than fleeting popularity and a simple fad took it all away!!!!!"

Roberto Katze was not particularly smart.

Or so his officially released academic records said. *How much bearing that had on his actual abilities was a separate issue.*

The first time people had heard his academic history, they had been shocked to find a high school dropout had been elected to Congress.

He had known the reaction he would get, so he had easily turned it into a joke to earn laughs.

So yes, it must have been humiliating for Darris Hewlane, a “traditional” politician who had been born to a well-established family, graduated top of his class from an Ivy League school, and used his many connections to work his way up from secretary to politician.

You could be elected president without all that work?

Was there no limit to the USA’s freedom?

Everyone’s dreams have an equal chance of coming true. It’s never too late to pursue your dreams. Those sayings sound nice and all, but from the perspective of someone who had been surpassed when someone else skipped several steps with a rocket booster, it felt more like having all of his life’s hard work thrown out with the trash.

Roberto sighed.

And...

“My fellow Americans!! Do you like sex!!!???”

Time seemed to freeze.

Darris Hewlane seemed to forget they were engaged in a life-or-death shotgun battle.

His mouth moved wordlessly at that question that had no business being asked in the White House.

“Wh-wh-what is the meaning of this?”

“Because I sure do. Hell, I love it!!!!!”

“What are you talking about!?”

Darris gave up on a direct hit and pulled the trigger to rattle the president’s eardrums with the earsplitting gunshot. That forced Roberto to pull his shotgun away, but it hardly mattered. With his eyes shining bright, he raised the gun in one hand again and slammed the barrel against Darris’s like it was a sword.

Living the life you wanted to live provided a type of strength. But academic history and family status were no guarantees of safety. Everyone was free to do what they liked, but they were the ones responsible for their own words and actions.

“You idiot. Grab a kid off the street and they’d be able to answer ‘yes’ to that one. How do you expect to earn the people’s votes if you can’t even admit to the most basic truths and if you try to whitewash your life and file off all of the negative aspects? Are you planning to pump wax into all your holes and create an eternally preserved human model!? I’m not the best at anything really. But no one’s going to trust some boring old man whose answers to social media questions are stiffer and more boilerplate than an AI assistant!!”

“Kh.”

“If you want people’s trust, it isn’t academic history, funding, popularity, or charisma that you need. What you need is honesty, Darris.”

Despite his unprecedented behavior, that president somehow always managed to meet people’s arguments head on and tear them to pieces.

An honest and open argument was a sword, not a shield. Any politician should know that and it was used against Darris here.

“The clones scare you? Fine. You don’t understand all this strange new technology? That’s a valid opinion. So why hide it? Why find all sorts of mealy-mouthed excuses to avoid giving a clear yes or no answer? The way you lay out a bunch of arbitrary but meaningful-sounding statements and then desperately try to give it all the most advantageous meaning after the fact makes me feel like I’m speaking with Nostradamus. Can you not even discuss the weather without setting everything up so you can act all-knowing no matter what happens? Don’t you get how you look more pathetic each and every time you try that trick?”

“You are nothing but a scandal generator. You are a mere mascot that has confused gathering negative attention for charisma, yet you dare presume to teach *me* about politics!?”

Now Darris went on the attack.

Several gunshots rang out, the stench of smoke scorched the air, and they once more locked barrels.

They pushed with all their might.

“It’s all those commentators playing things up for the cameras who decide the things I say are scandalous. They only become scandals once those people package them up just right to cause an uproar. I’m only selling a knife that makes cooking a lot easier, so you can’t blame me if someone else uses it to stab someone. What’s wrong with telling the plain truth? Is the president you long to be some cowardly fellow who slinks around, eyes darting furtively, and hesitantly speaks up only after figuring out what everyone around him wants him to say?”

The bearded president actually licked his lips while using his body weight to just barely keep his opponent’s shotgun aimed away from him.

His life was at risk, but he derived joy from staying true to himself even now.

“So take it from me, a president everyone in the world can look up to!! Making love? Bedroom activities? Since you’re too scared to come out and say ‘sex’, I’ll do it for you!! I love women, I love booze, I love fast cars, I love big guns, I love gambling, I love comics, I love theme parks, I love Hollywood’s cheap but moving stories, I love popcorn, and I love greasy burgers so damn much!! I love this country from sea to shining sea!!!!!! And more than any of that, I love seeing boys and girls act based on their still immature ideas of justice. Even at my age, it just makes me want to root for them, you know? And I’m not ashamed of any of it because *that’s just who I am.*”

Even as they pressed the barrels together, the vice president clearly did not know how to respond.

He wanted to reject everything the president had said to him, but there was also envy in his eyes.

The man who had wanted that life roared at the man who had failed to obtain that life.

“You can’t say it, can you? You can’t do a damn thing without thinking about how it’ll affect your approval rating, the stock market, public opinion, your likeability, the critics’ five-star ratings, or whatever the hell else. You’ve lost sight of who you even are. You’re so afraid of losing votes, you’ve changed everything about yourself until you’re as bland as a soybean patty between unbuttered buns. You can’t speak from the heart anymore. So I’ll protect this country for you. I love soda, I love preservatives, I love junk food, and I’d prefer if it was served to me by a pretty lady in a cute uniform. What’s wrong with that!? Maybe it sounds silly, but the people chose me to lead this country where we’re free to speak our minds, so I’ll take up a gun and risk my life to protect it!! Whether they’re an immigrant family or some clone girls, everyone has a right to life from the moment they’re born, so I won’t let a single one of them be lost!!!!!”

“You...”

There was no more strategy to his actions.

The vice president kicked the president away to break free of their locked barrels and wielded his semi-auto shotgun like a rapier while he clenched his teeth with hatred in his eyes.

“You refuse to make any sacrifices, you refuse to even clean up your own room, and you’re as self-centered as they come!! I cannot leave the fate of the United States and the world in your hands!!!!!”

“Now, that’s more like it. You’re starting to look like a man now, Darris. This is a one-on-one duel, so it was getting boring being so one-sided. A real fight has an opponent who fights back!!”

## Part 5

Imagine Breaker meant nothing here.

Even if he could negate the sand with a punch, this big wave could swallow up LA, so the wall of sand would only collapse on top of him. He was done for if the sand enveloped him, so he could not survive that way. In fact, he might be crushed by the pure mass before the magic even took effect.

He had to make up his mind.

“Human!!”

“Kh!?”

He turned away from the enemy. He gestured to the clone girls, but he didn’t know if the message reached them.

He just had to avoid letting the sand reach him directly. And he needed to hide somewhere Citrinitas would not expect, the sturdier the better. That meant the nearby yachts and cruisers were out of the question. There was nowhere to run in those small boxes, so the enemy only had to tear them open from the outside.

He needed something bigger.

Something complex enough to overwhelm Citrinitas enough that they got lost inside.

“Over there!!”

“I see,” said Othinus. “I will trust your judgment here!!”

Something much larger than the yachts and cruisers could be found along the concrete oceanside. But it was not a cruise ship or a tanker.

The ship was 270 meters long and built to hold a maximum of nearly three thousand people.

Running up the slanted ramp was not easy. He ignored the pain in his thigh and clenched his teeth as he approached a thick metal door on the deck. Tackling it did nothing. A loud thud echoed out and the impact raced through his body, reminding him of the scorching heat in his thigh and back. The wounds had started to clot, but now they reopened.

He somehow managed to get the watertight door open and collapsed bloodily inside.

This was the USS Iowa. After being retired, the battleship had been opened as a floating museum. The powerful ship had to be even tougher than a reinforced concrete building.

Still lying on the corridor floor, Kamijou kicked the door shut behind him.

A moment later, the outside world was filled with sand.

“Hurry and pull the lever to seal the door!!” shouted Othinus.

“Damn, what happened to the Sisters? I can’t keep up with all this.”

“Worry about yourself for once!”

“I’m the one that thought I’d be trapped like a rat in those yachts and cruisers... They gathered from around the world to save me!! They said they wanted to save Melzabeth and Helcalia after hearing about them! And now...damn it, is there really nothing I can do for them!? Goddamn it!!”

“Listen, human.” Othinus did not give him kind looks at times like this. She would not corrupt her understander that way. “If I am caught in their sand and trapped by the ‘fermentation’, I don’t want you to blame yourself and give up. I want you to find a way to defeat Citrinitas as soon as possible and pull me back out from the sand. Got that!?”

“...”

“You can’t change the past, so you have to aim for the best option remaining in the present. Fortunately, those clones are in the same state as LA’s thirty million. They aren’t dead yet and there is a way to save them. As long as you, the final survivor, don’t join them there!!”

That finally got Kamijou Touma back on his feet.

He clenched his teeth and forced himself to lift his sinking head.

The USS Iowa was now a museum.

It seemed to tower over you like a mountain from the outside, but it felt cramped on the inside thanks to the narrow passageways and complex arrangements of pipes. He guessed the passageways were half as wide as a school's hallways.

He heard a horrible scraping from outside.

That would be Citrinitas.

Kamijou's shoulders jumped and he ducked low, but then he realized the walls were holding. Apparently not even that sand magic could slice through a warship's hull so easily.

"You can't just hang around. Get some distance between you, hurry."

Othinus rushed him from his shoulder, but he could not put her valuable advice to use.

Maybe it was one of the watertight doors, or more it was a vent, but some weaker area was forced open and two large shapes tumbled into the passageway: a doll and a crawling woman.

They did not seem at all worried about the metal shards sharper than glass scattered across the floor.

Not even a real battleship could defend against that sand.

The entire ship was creaking disconcertingly. That had to be more than surface damage. The entire ship may have been bending, with some walls breaking apart like a rotting monster's stitches.

What would that kind of attack do to a person?

This went beyond simply disappearing when the sand enveloped you.

"Citrinitas..."

"Who decided I would be saving people?"

The magician borrowing a mother's face cackled while crawling on the floor and howling like a dog.

"In fact, what merit does it provide?"

“Kh.”

Their sticky malice showed through even through the mechanical Transla-Pen.

“I only need to steal away any place for Melzabeth Grocery and have her give in to R&C Occultics. Hostages not necessary. Killing the thirty million would make me go more viral(■Possible mistranslation?).”

This was something they had discussed while searching the frozen city.

The owner pulled the pet along and the pet led the owner around. Each Citrinitas fought for control with the same leash. But why had they only made people disappear? Killing them would have been easier.

“They’re bluffing,” concluded Othinus, her arms crossed. “If it was really that hopeless, they wouldn’t need to say it out loud to rattle you. If you had no way of avoiding that dead end, they could just ignore you. So why rattle you? Why try to get you to change your mind? Because we’re on the right track. It’s like pushing up one of your cards when playing old maid. This means you’re afraid, doesn’t it, Citrinitas? You’re afraid our hand will move right past the old maid. You wouldn’t bother with these tricks if you really had the upper hand.”

“...”

“You didn’t *choose* not to kill. You *could only* make people disappear. Sorry, but it’s a theory we already considered. You just aren’t suited for group battles. And I’m the god of magic, deception, and war. You’ll have a hard time slipping a lie past me if all you do is use silly arguments to distract from your own weaknesses.”

“Hee hee.”

Fine sand fell from the mouth of the woman crawling like a dog.

She was cornered, but she sounded delighted.

“I see it, I see it. I see the weak link. If I squish that little one on your shoulder, then your spirit breaks!!”

The air outside began to move again.

The wind was as unnatural as when a train passed through a subway tunnel. The Logistic Hornet could alter the atmospheric conditions as much as it liked by scattering naphtha or liquid nitrogen. A powerful wind blew in from an impossible direction and the deluge of sand moved to cover Los Angeles once more.

At this point, it didn't matter if they were indoors or outdoors.

The watertight doors were not perfect. Citrinitas had already broken through one of the weaker points to enter the ship. Even without the Logistic Hornet's assistance, they could slice through a concrete building with that sand magic, so they could create a hole wherever they wanted to call in their sand. Not even a giant battleship could survive multiple attacks like that.

And yet...

“Huh?”

That confusion came from Citrinitas.

Something was wrong in the world visible through the “torn stitch” in the metal wall where the groaning and twisting had burst open a weld.

The thick sand wall, which was hundreds of times larger than a good surfing wave, suddenly collapsed. It was like watching fog clear out. Long before it arrived at the ship, the massive wall could no longer support itself and it scattered in the far distance.

“What happened? Was the Logistic Hornet's dissemination calculation erroneous? No, the numbers would be correct. Then why did the atmosphere control fail!?”

A low roar could be heard in the distance.

It was the sound of fire consuming oxygen.

That was enough to explain it.

The Logistic Hornet's atmospheric control was based on altering the density of the air through temperature differences. This was accomplished by scattering naphtha or liquid nitrogen at precisely-calculated coordinates.

So what if something could produce flames even greater than ones made by the five-kilometer aerial spacecraft launch pad?

A blinding light broke through the cold night's shadows.

Kamijou knew someone whose magic could grow endlessly powerful as long as he had sufficient rune cards.

“Stiyl?”

## Part 6

An orange fire glowed atop a building rooftop.

It burned at the end of a cigarette in the corner of a certain priest's mouth.

"Hmph."

Kanzaki Kaori had left this mission in his hands. She had known her defeat was imminent, but she had not even asked him to save her. Up in the air with no way to escape, she had used her seven wires to slice apart the curtain of sand.

That had informed him that the Logistic Hornet was boosting the sand magic.

But that wasn't all.

"Yes, she left this with me."

The five-kilometer Logistic Hornet used liquid nitrogen and naphtha to create temperature differences that changed the air density to remake an entire region's weather conditions as it saw fit. A meteorological weapon that could set the wind direction and produce sandstorms and tornados was the perfect partner for Citrinitas who could dissolve and absorb anyone they covered with sand.

But.

A strategy that relied on pure quantity could be affected by an external force if it was powerful enough.

Kanzaki Kaori had in fact used her Saintly strength to tear through the sand wall so accurately designed by R&C Occultics.

Stiyl knew the numbers at work here.

He estimated them to be at Saint level.

He did not have that kind of inborn talent. He was one of the "talentless" magicians who used knowledge to make up for what he lacked in strength.

However, he could boost the range and power of his rune magic by scattering enough laminated cards around the area.

Thirty million people had vanished from Los Angeles, but the power was still on and all of its modern conveniences were still accessible. So he could print off as many cards as he needed. By increasing the number of cards to the point that his power was greater, he could mess with the Logistic Hornet's weather control. Ignoring him had been a mistake.

“Sorry, Helcalia,” he murmured to himself.

That girl was not here and he doubted she would forgive him, but he still felt the need to say it.

“I’ll make up for my mistake here.”

Yes, that thing could *only* change the atmospheric pressure by heating or cooling the air.

So with firepower greater than the naphtha explosions, Stiyl Magnus could single-handedly overwhelm that five-kilometer piece of technology!!!!!!

“Come forth, Innocentius.”

A fiery colossus rose higher than the skyscrapers.

## Part 7

A dull thud echoed through the deserted battleship as Kamijou Touma took a large step toward the Citrinitas ball-joint doll. The pet used the collar to pull on the leash and drag it away, but that established their positions.

Kamijou was the attacker and Citrinitas the defender.

The doll whirled backwards and began to crawl, so the woman held the leash.

That meant the sandbag was coming.

“Kee hah!!”

Kamijou ignored the laughter and knocked away that shield thicker than a human torso.

At first, you might think the confined space would fill up with sand more easily.

But the opposite was true.

With walls surrounding them, the wind could not carry over the sand in the air. And with limited space, Citrinitas could not constantly keep their distance and rely on projectiles. Indoor battles were perfect for close-quarters combat. This location worked in Kamijou’s favor.

And do not forget.

While thirty million people had disappeared, the city's facilities remained intact. With the power on, Kamijou had ways of removing the sand from the passageway.

He slapped his palm against the wall.

Specifically, against the fire alarm.

"Kh!?"

With a dull roar, the air began to move. The curtain of sand hanging in here was sucked out through an ordinary smoke vent.

Even after World War II, the Iowa had ended up participating in the Cold War and was ultimately loaded with giant cruise missiles, but none of that mattered now.

Yes, a high schooler like Kamijou had no way of knowing the specific damage control and firefighting equipment the Iowa had, but since it had been remodeled into a museum, he knew it would have *modern* safety features like emergency exits and fire extinguishers. That meant it had to have the buttons or levers that anyone could use. Thus, he did not need any specialized military knowledge. He only had to rush toward the ordinary things that did not fit the overall look of the ship.

With all interference removed, Kamijou was in complete control.

He didn't need to run away. This time—finally—he could run right up to Citrinitas!!

The woman's footwork was not enough to evade. Since he could destroy the sandbag just by touching it, he used as little strength as possible to do so and even used that to throw off her rhythm.

The doll crawling on all fours like a dog forced a vertical rotation to trade places with the woman holding the leash.

That avoided a solid hit from his right fist, but the glancing blow still sent it crashing face-first into the wall.

The doll made of a hard, reflective material held its own face near the nose. Despite the unmoving face, Kamijou still sensed piercing rage in its gaze.

Quiet cracking sounds came from its face and dark cracks ran along the entire face, like small bugs escaping from below the hand holding its face.

Even without a solid hit, Imagine Breaker was definitely working.

The doll's shoulders trembled with rage as it staggered back and shouted in that distorted voice of its.

"Enough, this is enough!! Send Logistic Hornet to hell. A useless toy is unnecessary. I command you to crash and crush that goddamn fire magician!!!!!"

"What?"

"Hee hee. It is a five-kilometer mass. This is no longer fighting fire with fire. If you have such confidence in your fire, then burn up the Logistic Hornet before it hits!!"

## Part 8

Gunshots, explosions, and the clang of metal on metal echoed through the White House in Washington DC.

President Roberto Katze and Vice President Darris Hewlane dueled in the last place gunshots should have been found.

"Yes, I was scared."

They aimed at each other with semi-auto shotguns hot with gun smoke and sparks.

But Darris bit his lip and spat out a response.

"I'll admit you all scared me!! I know the US is a country of immigrants and we should welcome anyone with open arms. I do get that, but you have grown too powerful!! Show some restraint, have some tact, and know when it isn't your turn to speak!! Manners and morals require moderation! You can't just show up and take over!!!!!"

"What, is this about the religious balance?"

"No, quite the opposite," howled Darris while their thick shotgun barrels collided. "It's about science. That's what scares me the most. People are free to immigrate and they can work with us if they want, but not when they gather up all the latest technology, build giant corporations, and transform into some kind of monster that absorbs all of our people's data!! I am willing to live side by side with immigrants, but I will not let them rule over my entire life and trample me underfoot. If the Logistic Hornets had been used for their original purpose, an immigrant-run company could have partnered with god-knows-who and developed orbital weapons!!"

Roberto sighed.

If the Logistic Hornets had triggered a revolution in launch costs as had been originally intended, it would indeed have been the death knell for the state-run space development that relied so heavily on expensive and unstable old-fashioned rockets. If private companies were the leaders in space, it meant the state would be almost permanently lagging behind in any number of current and future fields, such as GPS and satellite communication services, large-scale control of drones and self-driving cars, lunar travel, generator satellites, and more. NASA did a lot to improve the world's opinion of the US government, so maybe Darris was imagining the fate of their country if that agency shriveled up and died.

However...

"Here I was expecting some convoluted conspiracy and it's just a rehash of the old fear of Japanese cars? Were you also scared of the new Chinese and Korean phones or cheap Indian and Brazilian appliances? This is nothing new. It's a tired old fear we've seen time and time again. It's like a type of *measles* that shows up in this country every so often."

"You could never understand." The vice president's face grew red with humiliation when the president snorted and treated his fears so dismissively. "Not when you started out as an immigrant before earning your citizenship, changing the laws, and finally becoming president!! R&C Occultics will manage all that technology. When all those uncontrollable start-ups start cropping up everywhere, R&C Occultics will keep them in their place and unify them!! America needs that sort of management organization if we hope to coexist with those immigrants while keeping our country safe. The government only needs to interact with R&C Occultics. A company from outside can take care of all those immigrants flooding across our borders!!!!!"

"I see no freedom or dreams in that."

"..."

"Darris? Since apparently an immigrant like me can't understand these complex issues, how about you answer me this with whatever knowledge it is you gained from growing up in the closest thing a country of only about three hundred years has to an 'old' family: *You have a pretty low opinion of America, don't you?* Remove the freedom and the dreams and whatever you have left won't be America anymore."

"...!!!???"

"This is a country where anyone can achieve their dreams—a country where honest hard work and ingenuity are rewarded. That's the America I strive to defend as president. If you want to accomplish something, don't tear down your rivals. You should have worked harder to make sure none of us immigrants could outdo you! Don't underestimate us,

Darris. Don't underestimate America. You ran from the fight and stopped trying, so what right do you have to deny anyone in this country their dreams!?"

But a battle was a battle. The extreme tension meant no stalemate could last forever.

In that instant, Roberto pulled the trigger with his shotgun aimed straight up.

The blast sounded like an explosion.

But Darris was the one to frown. A gunshot at close range could rattle the brain. That was why it was worth pulling the trigger even if your gun was pushed to the side of your opponent's head.

But there was no point in pulling the gun close to your own head and rattling your own brain.

Or there shouldn't have been.

However...

"Ohhhh!!"

"Oh, no!"

Roberto Katze roared.

He had already rattled his own brain and numbed his senses, so for this brief moment, Darris's gunshots could not affect him. The man could ignore the deafening blast and blinding flash even if Darris did fire nearby.

In that moment, the president actually had time to choose from a few different options.

Instead of pressing the muzzle against his opponent and firing, he slammed the collapsible stock against the side of Darris Hewlane's head.

"But...why!?"

"You didn't kill my aide, take her hostage, or harm her in any way. It would've been easier for you if you had, but you chose not to. That's the one good choice you've made today, Darris!!"

Without warning, the vice president's body vanished.

A close-range shotgun blast could not do that to a human, much less a blow from the stock. It almost looked like *his body had turned to sand*.

“?”

Even Roberto Katze had to gasp. He staggered a bit from the momentum of swinging the stock.

Silence.

Stillness.

He grabbed the long shotgun like a rapier once more, spun it around, and sighed. He arrived at a conclusion that sounded absurd from a scientific and common-sense perspective.

*“That wasn’t the real him?”*

But in both science and magic, what good was the common sense of an outsider?

Thinking back, he still did not know how Darris Hewlane had gained such accurate knowledge about the goings on in LA. He had not used a phone and no one had whispered it to him. Roberto had assumed R&C Occultics had explained the plan to him in advance, but apparently not.

What if he had been remotely attending the Washington debate while he was actually in Los Angeles? What if that was how he had known something someone in DC shouldn’t have known?

Roberto Katze muttered a comment while somehow certain he would never see the man again.

“You always got way too caught up in your tricks and traps. If you could do shit like this, why not just attack and kill me directly?”

## Part 9

They waited.

They waited and waited.

And they waited some more.

“What?”

Citrinitas was the first to speak.

Ignoring the cracks spreading from the doll's face, the collared woman looked up at the metal roof as if viewing the sky beyond.

"Why is the falling work not completed?" she shouted. "Is my command being refused by the Logistic Hornet!!!???"

The tremor and roar of the comet-like destruction never arrived.

Because someone had stopped it.

Since Citrinitas was fruitlessly repeating the command over and over, this was not just a mistaken input. The villain had been booted out and the massive craft had to be leisurely circling in the sky above LA.

Maybe it could be called a miracle, but this was not some divine act. When something ordinarily unthinkable happened, it had to be the result of some very unordinary efforts.

In this case...

"Melzabeth Grocery?"

"Why speak that name here?"

Kamijou Touma's absentminded utterance caused the doll to turn its cracked face his way. If not for the metal restraint shaped like a dog's snout, its entire head may have been destroyed by now.

The Transla-Pen picked up the magician's confusion.

"She is the smallest of fries and not even a magician! And she was long since defeated! She was helpless and she still is helpless while a stain in the sand!! Why that woman's name!?"

"She left that malware with you in case she failed," whispered Othinus from his shoulder. "But that doesn't mean she was sneaking into the R&C Occultics HQ with the intention of failing. After setting up that insurance just in case, she would have bet everything on completing that challenge herself. So she could win. All to ensure she had delivered the finishing blow to the Logistic Hornet she herself had created."

"No, impossible, it can't be..."

"Maybe she didn't actually achieve that dream. Your surprise suggests it was you that stopped her." Othinus snorted with laughter. "But did you forget? The Logistic Hornet is so large it can't stay airborne in the normal ways. It includes a digital spinal cord developed from optical neurocomputer technology and the basis of its movements as a

flying machine came from the attitude control and center of gravity movement data taken from a certain person hang gliding.”

“...”

“That person was of course Melzabeth Grocery, the genius who lamented her husband’s death but never gave up on his dream for their daughter’s sake. The Logistic Hornet took in a portion of her neural network, so did you really expect it to keep helping you forever while you were trampling on people’s dreams and making families cry?”

“It learned from her?” said Kamijou in a daze.

Yes.

“The malware attack may have failed. She may never have plugged the USB memory into the HQ’s server. But the Logistic Hornet still picked up on her regret. It sympathized as another of Melzabeth’s failures! So *it* chose on its own to stop your attack!! It knows it was built to give her daughter a wedding in space and it felt anger at losing that purpose. Maybe it has no conscious mind, but the artificial nerves of its digital spinal cord still subconsciously *sympathized* and pushed it to act accordingly. Nothing else could explain this miracle!!!!!”

Kamijou had sworn he would save her.

But he had been a fool. She had ended up saving them all.

Melzabeth Grocery was not just a symbol or a key item. She was a human being with possibilities all her own. She too was in Los Angeles, so it was possible for her to be the one to bring about their ultimate victory.

This was a free country where anyone’s dreams could come true.

That was not just an ideal and Melzabeth had proven it.

Besides, *the Anna Sprengel* had wanted the woman so very badly. No one like that would go down without a fight.

Kamijou Touma took another step forward. It was a large step, full of confidence. He also clenched his right fist.

This indoor battle gave him the advantage.

His doubts and his fears were gone.

“Hee.”

The pet and the owner trembled.

The doll in the dog-like restraints and the woman crawling like a dog both trembled and shook their heads.

"Hee hee. Go to hell. Go to hell right now. This was only a scenario set up outside our knowledge. This was a tug-of-war between Miss Sprengel and Melzabeth!! It does not mean that I was defeated by a mediocre like you!!"

"True, I'm just a high school boy. And the way things are going, I might have to repeat the year."

"..."

"But that ordinary, and maybe even below-average, high school boy will be the one to defeat you. You're not worth any more than that. I won't let Melzabeth, Helcalia, or any of LA's people be your toy."

That was the end of it.

He could use his right hand to eliminate any sand attacks or sandbag defenses. The fine sand in the air was sucked out of the smoke vents activated by the fire alarm.

Nothing could get in his way.

He could rush right up to his adversary!!

The most crucial move was how he planted his foot on the ground. Just as the crawling woman tried to open her jaws and fire compressed sand, he stomped on the leash attached to her collar, snapping her head to the ground.

He wasn't going to let them flip around any longer.

He could keep her from moving by holding down that one spot.

And this did not just stop the crawling woman. It also stopped the doll who was being irregularly tugged around by the leash.

"The Rosicrucians and R&C Occultics don't matter here. If you seriously think you get to trample on people's feelings just because you have some special magic..."

And.

Once they couldn't move, he could reach them.

This time, his right fist could end it all!!

"I'll destroy that illusion!!!!!"

With a dull sound of impact, the doll was knocked backwards despite the foot on the leash.  
Its hand had come off.

The torn-away hand remained on the leash while the creaking body writhed in the narrow passageway of the cold battleship.

It released an inhuman scream, but Kamijou felt like this was his first time hearing its real voice. The hard doll desperately covered its face with its broken hands as if trying to hold its crumbling body together. But something spilled from between its fingers and the destruction began to accelerate.

When it fully broke apart and fell to the ground, it sounded a lot like sand piling up.

The face glimpsed between the fingers had wrinkly skin. It was not even a woman. It was an old man who looked as desiccated as a mummy. Had it never been just a doll? Had he been this way from the beginning, or had he become this way over many long years? With a tattered yellow cloak billowing around him, an old man who looked nothing at all like a certain mother lamented to someone who wasn't here.

“Why? I...I am a magician of the glorious rose. I am Citrinitas of the 3rd Stage(■May be a poetic metaphor)!! Mine should success be!! By Miss Sprengel I was granted the rank of expertise, so how could I fail hrrrrrrrrrrrrre!!!!???”

“Citrinitas. Fermentation. Ruler of the 3rd Stage.” Othinus snorted and crossed her legs atop Kamijou’s shoulder. “Or to put it another way, you were a magician who could never reach the 4th Stage and complete the process. The black, white, yellow, and red are the four stages needed to achieve ultimate wisdom, but did you know that the Rose’s teachings say most any magic user can complete the 3rd Stage, but they fail to fully control the bird born in the fourth and final stage? Their worldly desires distract them, so they lose sight of the item’s essence on that very last step.”

“Ghh...”

“So was that a title that Anna gave you and not one you adopted yourself, *Mr. Vice President*? If so, this is just sad. It means she never expected much from you. Explains why she sent you out to give her the much more valuable Melzabeth. She was throwing out the trash to obtain someone actually useful. Like catching a tasty fish using a gross worm as bait.”

The battered old man curled up into a ball and trembled.

He was pathetic enough to earn Othinus's pity, but she showed no mercy. She would do whatever it took to save her understander.

So she directed the boy's attention.

"Did you notice that, human?"

"!?"

His right fist flew again.

With a dull thud, the crawling woman pinned by the collar and leash was shattered. She fell apart like sand. Citrinitas's last chance for a surprise attack had ended in failure.

And when the crawling woman crumbled into a pile of sand, a round object appeared. It was about the size of a clenched fist, it was transparent, and it jiggled like jelly. Something like a partially-formed baby bird was curled up within. It was covered by black feathers and soaked with red blood.

But it did not look like a living thing.

It lacked the glow of life or the grotesqueness of death, so it was not even a dead thing preserved in formaldehyde. No matter how real it looked, it may have been like a wax food sample.

"The beheaded king and queen are dissolved, two types of bonds are used to form the egg, and the egg is buried in the sand to ferment."

Kamijou did not understand a word of what Othinus was talking about.

But what she said next he understood perfectly.

"That's the yellow core. Destroy that spiritual item with your right hand and this all ends."

## Part 10

The unnatural cold wave bringing temperatures down to twenty below ended like someone had flipped a switch. That was thanks to the Logistic Hornet rejecting R&C Occultics's commands.

The buzz of activity had returned to Los Angeles. Human presences and warmth could be found everywhere. Where the wind had blown the fine sand into piles, people emerged alive, like they were surfacing from a deep body of water.

“Pwah.”

The identical girls were among them. Those mass-produced military clones known as the Sisters rattled the guns they had borrowed from the Academy City tent base.

“It would seem we are still alive, says Misaka as she looks to the sky and considers how surprisingly easy this world makes it. This calls for a hearty fuck you to destiny, baby.”

The people hesitantly walked out onto the major streets. Some were the people of Los Angeles and some were uniformed Academy City soldiers.

And among them...

“Pant, pant.”

Kamijou Touma lent his shoulder to a certain woman. She had short silver hair and brown skin. But when he used his right hand to support her, she did not crumble into sand.

Another small figure stood across the road from them.

It was the girl who had been left in his care.

She was trembling between a priest who reeked of cigarette smoke a nun in a white habit. She looked afraid that this might vanish like a mere dream or mirage.

But the clock was still ticking.

She hesitantly walked across the large road. Her pace picked up to a run.

Kamijou decided this was a time for some tact, so he pulled his supporting shoulder away and pushed gently on the woman’s back.

She took one step and then two.

Then she slowly kneeled down.

To put herself on eye level with the daughter she had wanted to see this entire time.

At that point, the girl no longer hesitated.

Mother and daughter shared a tearful hug in the center of the street.

That signaled the end of an incident.

After making sure they were reunited, Kamijou sighed and turned around.



Someone followed him away. The silver-haired nun caught up to him. She had worked to protect Helcalia while Kamijou was busy chasing after Melzabeth.

“Touma.”

“How are things on your end? Like with Kanzaki.”

“She was pulled from the sand along with the other priests and such.”

Only then did Kamijou realize that Kanzaki was not the only magician to be defeated by Citrinitas's sand magic. R&C Occultics could cause a lot of damage.

But now it was time to take on their HQ building.

Index peered up at his face.

“You aren't going to name yourself as the person to save those thirty million people?”

“God, no. That sounds like such a pain. Not to mention that we entered LA by climbing over the gate at the empty airport. We've been here illegitimately ever since. I don't know how America's laws work and I don't even want to think about how many other legal landmines I've stepped on since arriving.” He sighed with Othinus on his shoulder. “Besides, I don't like to keep score about those things You're supposed to save people when they're in trouble, so I don't want any special credit for it. The world would be a much happier place if everyone did it that way.”

“Hee hee.”

Index laughed and leaned against his side.

He frowned.

“What is it?”

“Oh, nothing. Hee hee hee hee.”

Since they were here illegitimately, they needed England or Academy City's help to get back to Japan.

But he liked the sound of grabbing a giant burger to eat before he went crying to them.

## EPILOGUE

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### That Human Returns. *Science\_Side, Interrupt.*

“Watch as a Japanese high school boy and some identical clone girls fight over giant burgers in LA.”

“Geh!? They’re looking great here!!”

“I’m so glad we stood up for them. I’d have had nightmares if these adorable girls had been sent off to be killed.”

Academy City resumed its trial with a scattering of similar conversations outside.

One look at the internet and social media showed the clones were generally being received favorably. That meant people saw them as fellow humans. Maybe people had a hard time ostracizing others, no matter what they said. Just like people would avoid tearing the face when opening a snack container with the mascot’s face printed on it.

It was still unknown what would happen with them, but with so many empathizing with them, it seemed unlikely they would simply be killed. However, that introduced another problem.

“You say you killed people not for money and not out of anger but simply to increase your power?”

“Correct.”

“You killed more than ten thousand like this? And you would have killed twenty thousand if no one had stopped you?”

“It was fun. I could feel myself growing day by day. Those are the facts.”

“My, my, how frightening. Those weren’t just lab rats, you know? *They may have been born through a different method, but they clearly have the same human lives and hearts as us.*”

The white-haired, red-eyed monster smiled on the inside.

The world had finally caught up with him.

Which was why they would show no lenience on the #1 and new board chairman.

“Order, order. We will now begin the final tally.”

His defense attorney looked nervous, but he had not hired the man. The system required it, but it had been unlucky for him to be given this unwinnable case.

There was no way to overcome the disadvantage of the defendant himself planning to lose.

“Accelerator—real name unknown.”

The judge’s icy eyes stared down at the monster.

He was the executor of justice.

But did the old judge notice Accelerator mouthing the words “it’s far too late for that”?

The world was rejoicing in their victory, but the person who had most wished for that victory would be sent to hell.

Exactly as the new board chairman had planned it.

The judge who controlled the scales of justice spoke with ice in his voice.

“You have been found...”



“The last of the Logistic Hornets has apparently landed in the South Atlantic. That means all twelve have been neutralized.”

“I see,” replied Roberto Katze. The president barely seemed to be listening to the report with his feet up on his Oval Office desk. Roseline Krackhart would normally have berated him for it, but she let it slide this once.

Something was clearly missing here. There was an empty gap where the vice president normally stood.

“Darris...”

Roberto spoke his comrade-in-arm’s name while leaning back in his chair and staring up at the ceiling.

The regret in his voice was palpable.

"I thought for sure I would never see you again, so don't just go get arrested in LA, you idiot!! What am I supposed to say when I see you next!!!???"

Roseline slapped her forehead and groaned like she was cursing the entire world.

"Would it count as discrimination if I called all men immature children who don't know how to actually finish anything? Yes, I know an American politician is supposed to be pro-diversity. I know I shouldn't be saying this, but to hell with it: every single man is utter trash!!!!!! Do you have any idea how many fires I've had to run around putting out because of the silly battles you fight over your stupid pride!? I'm going to be taking something for indigestion and then staying up all night *again!* It's already the 26th and I'm nowhere near finishing my work for the year!!!!!"

"Hey, that's part of my collection."

"It is a piece of evidence!!"

The president moved to stop his beautiful aide after she grabbed his semi-auto shotgun. Fortunately, she was not a gun person and forgot to load the first round. Otherwise, several rounds would have gone off accidentally during their struggle.

It was a fairly risky battle, but the next thing they knew, he had the aide's back pressed against the top of his large desk. Almost like he had laid her down on a bed.

It was a highly unnatural position to find herself in, but Roseline did not cry out.

Roberto set aside the shotgun.

"Not a day goes by you don't save my ass."

"Don't do this, Mr. President."

"I could never make a gamble like that if I didn't have you watching my back."

"We don't have any interests in common, so there simply isn't a scandal to be had with me. Isn't that supposed to be our greatest weapon?"

But she did not resist it.

This was undeniably the wrong decision, but they may have both been hoping that someday they would make that mistake.

Just then, a message came over the speakerphone.

“Excuse me, we have a sex worker out here calling herself Jane and swinging around a used condom. What should we do about her? She insists we will find she is a friend of the president’s if we check the chromosomes inside, so should we send it to the CDC for testing?”

The aide smiled a little.

She smiled and kicked the president in the crotch so hard he lifted off the floor a little. Then she snatched up the semi-auto shotgun that still smelled of gunpowder and actually remembered to load the first round into the chamber this time.



“I’m here, darling!! Now where’s this enemy of the USA who wants to meet the working end of my shotgun!?”

“Nooo, you burned out my Harley’s engine!?”

Life had returned to Los Angeles. Whether it was English or not, there was so much talking going on that it only sounded like incomprehensible chatter to a Japanese ear. It was currently night. It was said stores closed surprisingly early outside of Japan, but today was an exception. Maybe everyone wanted to share their joy, or maybe they wanted to feel like their ordinary lives were back even if it meant going back to work when they didn’t have to.

In one corner of a burger restaurant, Kamijou Touma, Index, Othinus, and several identical clone girls were crammed into a single booth seat.

Kamijou felt like he was going to be crushed by the soft skin, soft skin, body weight, and more soft skin surrounding him, but his primary complaint was something else.

“We are being way, way, way too conspicuous here!! Gweh, what even is this? I thought you tried to hide your presence from the world? What happened to that!?”

He could not help but blush.

The interest was of course with the Sisters, but he felt like a panda at the zoo with all the cameras snapping photos of them. The rapid flashing made him feel a little dizzy.

But the Sisters did not mind. They had gathered together like a single dumpling-like monster and spoke in their emotionless voice.

“Misaka has stopped hiding, explains Misaka #16360 while clinging to you from the front row.”

“Whoever contributed most to the battle is to be rewarded with a hug and a head pat, says Misaka #19559 while making sure to catch your attention.”

“Being the center of attention is the most important thing in the fucking world. Misaka doesn’t care about the fucking serial numbers any more. Time to share this elation and exhilaration with the Misaka Network!”

The Sisters all had their own unique traits despite being connected via the Network, but he felt like randomly sprinkling the word “fuck” into your sentences wasn’t exactly accurate to American speech. He didn’t know what number she was, but he guessed it was an issue of her personal tastes and interests. In fact, didn’t they avoid using the word here since it was offensive?

“Okay, okay! So I just have to choose the MVP, right? But can’t I just shake hands with one of you and then you share that experience over the Misaka Network?”

“...”

“...”

“...”

Terrified by their silent pressure, Kamijou turned to the nun (who was also being crushed by clones due to sitting next to him) for help.

“Grr... Th-they are Legion. Touma, be careful. Now is the time—striped—to use your—panties—right hand—so many stripes.”

“What’s wrong, Index? You’re letting the visual information confuse you. Wait, why is your face all red!? Are you overheating? Is this that special attack bees do to kill a hornet with heat!?”

“I could see the #5 developing a deadly special attack like that and giving it some bee-related name,” muttered Othinus while showing no intention of helping Kamijou.

The clones’ hands approached like a sea anemone in their desire for a reward, so Kamijou decided to just eat everything on the table while he still could. With their intensity and their stomachs of growing girls, there wouldn’t be a single fry or even parsley garnish left if he waited much longer

But...

“Eh? Is this soy? No, it isn’t. But then what have I been eating!? The worst part is how much like meat it is!!”

“Don’t worry, human. Meat substitutes aren’t unusual. You know the little cubes of meat in the cup noodles you eat at night when you think no one is watching? Made of soy. And the drinks you can never resist buying at the convenience store generally don’t have any real fruit juice in them. They’re nothing but mystery chemicals.”

“That doesn’t tell me what this is! It has fatty parts and actually tastes good!!”

They were not the only ones there.

A silver-haired brown-skinned mother and daughter sat together across the table. The Sisters were only swarming one side of the box seat, so those two were not being crushed.

“I want to eat soybeans. Vegetables are the extreme of healthy.”

With another awkward translation, Helcalia got to work on the giant hamburger she had to hold in both hands. She was happily kicking her legs below the table while sitting in the one seat available only to her: Melzabeth’s lap. She kept hitting Kamijou’s shins, which was legitimately painful.

Also...

“I’m surprised to find you speak Japanese.”

“I can get by in Japanese, Russian, and English. The space industry is smaller than you would think. And just like so many medical terms are in German, you really need to know those languages if you hope to make it far.”

He realized the video message Melzabeth had left in her mobile home had not been meant for him to find. If she had known someone Japanese would find it, she would have made it in Japanese.

“I am so sorry you got caught up in our problems here,” she added.

“Hm? What are you talking about?”

“My, my. You’re surprisingly mature about these things. But still, I want to reward you in some way. Yes...how about this?”

“Ah!” cried Helcalia while placing her hands over her eyes.

And.

Kamijou felt a brief, soft sensation on his cheek. He was fairly certain it wasn’t her finger.

The mother pulled her face away with a gentle smile.

“?”

Helcalia was still staring, but when her mother wiped the burger sauce (made from who knows what) from around her mouth, the girl resumed innocently kicking her legs.

The daughter may have been placated, but Othinus had seen it from right on his shoulder. The dumpling of clones had seen it too.

Not to mention Index.

“Wait, wait, wait! If you’re going to be nice, try to do it right! Can you please explain to them that this is no more than a normal greeting in the West, Melzabeth!? Wait, why are you blushing now!? What do you mean it’s embarrassing when I use your first name!? This isn’t the time for that!”

He was a step away from death when his old folks phone began to ring on the edge of the table.

He snatched it up, checked the screen, and frowned.

“What now? Withheld numbers are always scary, but it’s even worse when I’m overseas!”

The idiot (who failed to realize he could receive calls from anywhere in the world no matter where his phone was physically located) hesitantly answered his phone.

“We’re...done here.”

“Huh? What is it, Stiyl? Weren’t you on your way to the R&C Occultics HQ? And you said you didn’t need the USB memory. What, the fighting’s already done? Well, Citrinitas was the foundation of their defenses and we already took him out, so was the rest a cakewalk?”

“They were...”

The scratchiness of the voice was not due to a poor signal.

Stiyl could not keep his own voice steady. Kamijou frowned as Stiyl started again.

“They were already dead. We found all the R&C Occultics executives in pools of blood.”

When he heard that, Kamijou Touma finally noticed a numb tingling feeling at the back of his head.

He could not accept it. The clear Japanese words had entered his ears, but his mind would not process them. So his face stiffened and he asked a silly question.

“Wait, what does that mean? Like, it was an illusion or something? Do you need a specialist there? Like Inde—”

“No, do not bring her here. She might seem naïve, but she’s actually quite perceptive. Because once something enters her head, her perfect memory lets her review it over and over again. So don’t let her know about this.”

Styl Magnus was a master of the witch hunt and he had overcome so much fierce fighting, but he groaned here.

This one had to be bad.

Kamijou could not see it over the phone, but that may have been a blessing. Did the tall priest even realize he was speaking more to himself than to Kamijou?

“She can never forget anything, so I can’t let her see this hell.”



Earlier in Los Angeles, the magician sent to defend the R&C Occultics HQ had been defeated. With Citrinitas out of the picture, the thirty million residents and the Academy City and Anglican members of the joint force were dragged back out of the sand.

A final showdown was imminent.

The company executives held an emergency meeting inside the HQ building.

“Hey, what are we going to do about this!?”

“Has the drone management server been dismantled for transport yet? As long as we get R Rose out of here, we can abandon this building and use the Logistic Hornets to maintain our control of the skies!!”

“You’re still hung up on those useless toys that reject our commands!? We have primary income divisions beyond online shopping. Right now, we need to go into hi—!?”

The woman’s shoulders jumped in her fancy suit.

And not just because of her mental state.

That global VIP had been hit by a multitude of attacks, so by the time she collapsed to the floor, her entire body had swollen. It was so bad her expression was unreadable. In fact, something appeared to be moving underneath her swollen skin.

“Good, good.”

With a single footstep, someone gathered the dumbfounded executives’ eyes and walked right into their sanctuary.

It was a woman in a beige habit with her blonde hair cut unevenly at the shoulders.

"I considered using tsetse flies, but tachinid flies really are the best choice for research. They're bigger, tougher, faster, and—with the right modifications—can even break through human skin and lay their eggs inside. Also..."

That woman pointed her finger at the executives as they desperately tried to flee. No, was that a small water gun? Whenever the jelly-like substance hit a target, a swarm of killer flies would take a sharp, curving path toward them with an afterimage resembling a black or silver beam.

Flies could easily distinguish between different scents, so they were actually one of the easiest insects for people to control.

"When they've been customized to fly at 50km/h, you can't hope to outrun them. I've outdone myself this time. I think these are even more convenient than bullets. Not even hiding behind cover or wearing bulletproof equipment will save you from this."

"Good grief." Everyone was shocked to see what was obviously a golden retriever answer the mysterious woman. "Did you choose to make your deadly toy out of the universally-disliked fly as a tribute to the Decomposer and the Carrier?"

"Those twins did not have exclusive rights to such things. Director Yakumi Hisako used bugs too, if you recall."

The golden retriever sighed and cut a new cigar.

You could maybe accept being killed by a venomous bug, like a wasp, spider, or scorpion, but having countless maggots devouring all of the soft tissue below your skin had to be a horrific way to go. It was an obvious case of using empathy in a more detached fashion.

*"He said he doesn't want any of it anymore,"* casually replied the woman, twirling the small gas-powered water gun. She winked and tapped her temple with her other hand. "So I'll be taking all that 'dark side' technology for myself. That means all the technology needed for Five Overs, military clones, androids, nanodevices, artificial ghosts, artificial muscle enhancement, AIM diffusion fields, and even making dogs speak. But most importantly, that includes esper development. I don't even need the Bank. I have all the official and unofficial Academy City tech stored *right in here*. The only thing not in the palm of my hand would be that right hand."

"There is very little romance in a mid-boss who shows back up for a second round, or in a special boss who has gathered up all the previous gadgets. And this isn't about their actual stats. Fighting the same enemy again lacks impact and a Demon King who can use all of the Four Generals' abilities is easily defeated."

"What if I called it using just the old, outdated tech to confront the smug new boss?"

“Oh? Putting it like that is cheating. My romance sense is tingling just a bit. Do you mean like using an old German 88mm to blast the high-tech composite armor tanks coming at you like a parade of death?”

“That isn’t possible and you know it.”

“That’s the entire point, though. The romance is found in attempting the impossible.”

“Wait, it can’t be...” groaned one of the executives who could not even get out of his chair. With intruders in this deep, they had to assume the HQ building’s guards had been wiped out.

They had to assume a single person had done that.

“It can’t be!?”

“Yes, it isn’t just your cowardly personality keeping you from getting up from your seat. But don’t feel bad. *It’s already happened to you all.*”

They could not move.

And not just their arms and legs. They even had trouble blinking and breathing.

“Gah!”

Then something moved at the back of the woman’s head.

“Gbwakhah!!”

There was something there. *A face-like shadow* was visible in the golden glow, looking uncomfortably cramped in that short hair. And it wailed in human language, its voice sounding like it was drowning in the air.

“Hey, you there! All of you! Somebody fight back!! If you don’t, he’ll get cocky. This is Aleister, the ‘human’ who lived a life of failure and setbacks! Don’t let him have this! Tear him down! He must have left any number of openings!! So...!!”

“Ha ha ha. Lola Stuart, Great Demon Coronzon, and my constant companion. You are such a tsundere. I know you only say these things because you love me.”

“The very idea sickens me!!!!!!”

“Sorry, but just this once, I have won a flawless victory. The inevitable defeat can wait until next time.”

It was a ridiculous conversation, but no one could stop it. They were already paralyzed down to the finger. The woman(?) had more than one trick up her sleeve. The killer flies were just one card in her deck.

In fact, every type of scientific technology was her toy.

“Allergens have a much more dramatic effect when absorbed through the skin than ingested orally, so things not identified as food allergies can still affect you. And this method does not give you a chance to sense the danger and take measures to avoid it until it has already taken effect. It lets me bring people down while they remain defenseless. And unlike cyanide or monkshood, nothing out of the ordinary will be found in the autopsy. Even the professional investigators will conclude it was an unfortunate accident where the victim consumed something without realizing their allergy to it.”

“Gah...”

Anaphylactic shock was a cause of death no medical or police investigator would question, so the executives were shocked a second time to learn *it could be induced externally*.

The woman took a disinterested glance around the room.

“I see CEO Anna isn’t here. Not that I expected her to be.”

“You just called it a flawless victory, yet a flaw has already presented itself.”

The dog’s exasperated comment did not bother the woman.

She was used to unfortunate coincidences.

She smiled. What did you do when the person you wanted was out? You left a message.

“You know, Miss Sprengel, if you get in the habit of staying home from work, you will find it harder and harder to ever leave the house again. And I think I should start getting to work as well.”

The Academy City and Anglican joint force would be arriving at the HQ building before long, so she had to write out an obvious message that no one could erase and then leave in a hurry. Nothing here was related to Academy City, so they were bound to transmit it around the world without hiding anything. That meant the message would reach Anna Sprengel.

Too easy.

The woman grabbed a dull letter opener from the gorgeous table and touched it to the tip of her soft index finger. Harming someone with that would require *a lot* of force. Then she slowly turned toward the poor victim who was dripping with sweat and unable to move.

She held the letter opener with a backhand grip and readied it like it was a stake.

And she smiled.

It was an oddly refreshing smile, but it was a thoroughly “dark side” smile that seemed to split her mouth apart.

“Aleister Crowley, the human whose life came to an end at Blythe Road, is on his way to kill you.”

## AFTERWORD

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If you picked them up one at a time, welcome back. If you bought them all at once, welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Christmas is over and the story has reached the 26th!! How did you like it? Since GT3 was so dark and gloomy, I made sure this one had Kamijou Touma running straight toward the center of the incident. Kamijou Touma and Hamazura Shiage both did their best, so what made the results so different? I think you can imagine what exactly it was Kamijou Touma found after he risked his life to fight for a complete stranger while saying he would do so even if she was a villain.

I also tried to use the Between the Lines sections to visualize the process of the various theories being proposed and then gradually narrowing in on the truth from chapter to chapter.

Since I had Styl show up for the first time in a while, I decided now was the time to have him make a harsh decision. He wouldn't be our sketchy smoker priest without that. And it's also just like Kamijou to not even consider cutting ties with him or plotting revenge. That aside, rune magic sure is convenient, huh? By choosing and carving the rune, dyeing it, and destroying it, you have a clear visual and physical side to the preparation, activation, and deactivation of the magic. The only real problem is that it's a little too powerful and versatile, so it creates a character who's too convenient to use all that much.

Accelerator's trial was first mentioned in GT1 and it was underway in the background of this volume. Without Anna Sprengel around messing everything up, things actually go quite well for the #1.

A mother and her daughter was another theme this time, so I focused on Helcalia in the first half and Melzabeth in the second half. That may be something you haven't seen much in the series so far. I also wanted to see how much I could build up Melzabeth's presence without actually having her appear until the very end. What did you think of that?

I give my thanks to my illustrators Haimura-san, Itou Tateki-san, and Kasai Shin-san who did the Five Overs. I also give my thanks to my editors Miki-san, Anan-san, Nakajima-san, and Hamamura-san. The sand magic isn't very visually impressive for the effect it has, so that may have been a challenge. And then there was the terrifying Logistic Hornet. Thank you for going along with my nonsense again.

And I give my thanks to the readers. How did you like this story of Kamijou Touma in America, where he doesn't understand the language? I think the real Americanness isn't found in the big cars and motorcycles, but in Othinus's comment: "I have a soft spot for these American toys. Especially two-wheeled ones ridden standing up." But what did you think? Until next time!!

It is time to close the pages for now while praying that the pages of the next book will be opened.

And I lay my pen down for now.

A fictional president needs to be able to pilot a stealth fighter, don't you think!?

-Kamachi Kazuma

A voice as lovely as a bell's ring spoke in one corner of the world.

"Oh, you're done with it already?"

Anna Sprengel, who looked like a ten-year-old girl, shrugged in response.

"That was always the plan for that company."

"Still. Even if you raised it to be a sacrificial pawn, don't you grow attached to it while keeping it nice and warm? And I feel like you would be especially prone to such *capriciousness*."

"*Aradia.*"

"Sorry. I will keep my mouth shut this time. Especially because I know how bad your *capriciousness* can be."

The woman placed her index finger on her lips, winked, and smiled.

R&C Occultics was a global company not bound by any national borders, so they had they not needed an HQ building as an obvious central point. Yet they had built one. Why? Because without a central point, it was impossible to tell if it had been defeated.

In other words, the giant IT company had been set up from the beginning to be destroyed.

This was the same as Aleister Crowley's allergy attack. They had created a *nonexistent weak point*, built it up to the point that it was impossible to ignore, and lured in an external attack to have it destroyed.

All so they could sneer and watch as the world suffered.

"Now everyone will be shouting to restrict the giant corporations and for the state to manage the successful. They will insist that the exceptionally rich are sure to use some ghastly illicit methods, so they need to be torn down, crushed, and pushed face-first into the mud. They will say the world's standards must be aligned to the lower classes to preserve peace and safety."

Anna Sprengel laughed and stated her conclusion in a singsong voice.

"After causing so much trouble on camera, we will soon be seeing a reign of terror where anyone who rises even slightly above the masses will be cut down. Hee hee. Maybe you won't want to do it, but you will have little choice with the crazed masses forcing their hand, Mr. President. Your beloved justice has been poisoned so it will kill all of the people you hope to protect. So enjoy this new age of uncontrollable riots."

Anna acted like she reigned over the entire world. She could have done exactly that if she continued using R&C Occultics and the Rosicrucians instead of sacrificing them, but she was not actually that fixated on the idea.

She acted more like someone who was sick and tired of having to stand at the top and look after everyone.

She had had more than enough of *providing that sort of help* during the mess with the Golden cabal.

She never wanted to do it again after everything returned to ashes at the Battle of Blythe Road.

Now it was her turn to have someone look after her. She wanted to enter under someone's protection, rely on them for everything, and make all the selfish demands she wanted whether they had the patience for it or not. But no one in *the open part of the world* was capable of ruling over her.

(With Melzabeth's intelligence and good nature, I thought it would be interesting to obey her. Being a sensible person and a genius both is a miraculous balancing act. That's obvious enough just looking at those Level 5s. Sigh, it really is a shame I lost someone of even greater character than Einstein.)

But what about in the hidden part of the world? Perhaps nothing there would meet her expectations either, but she would cross that bridge when she came to it.

The woman named Aradia tilted her head curiously.

"I don't really care, but does this wild new age mean anything to us?"

"Why not ask Alice? I'm sure she's as bored as ever."

"Everything she says is downright indecipherable. It makes me dizzy and I feel like my brains are spilling out my ears. Listening to her absurdities is like getting lost in the woods. She really needs to control her dopamine or endorphins better."

"Well, it is Wonderland."

"You can tell she's the real deal since she was faced with that psychedelic nonsense and still went along with a game of croquet and a trial without questioning any of it," responded the witch of the moon and light with an exasperated shrug.

Aradia was "the god of all witches" from a famous witchcraft grimoire. Said to be the daughter of Diana and Lucifer, she was the goddess who shines in the dark night and it was said she had taken a physical body and descended to the human world in order to truly save the poor from the wealthy Christian Church. According to this story, all the

witches' sabbaths around the world were used to worship her and involved rituals designed to teach people how to resist the oppression of the rich.

It goes without saying that Alice was the name of the protagonist in a world-famous children's story. ...But was it as well known that *the Crowley* had suggested that familiar story as a must-read for those wishing to deepen their understanding of magic? That eccentric had listed it right along the Goetia and the Golden Bough and he had said it took on a completely new meaning when read by someone with sufficient knowledge of Kabbalah.

Now, a question: where did the name Anna Sprengel come from?

Some said it had been entirely invented by Westcott, one of the three founders of the Golden cabal, and others said it was a reference to Anna Kingsford, a teacher to Westcott and Mathers. There were any number of theories, but had a conclusive answer ever been found?

The Rose and the Golden.

This mystical woman had passed between the old and the new world-famous magic cabals and was a necessary part of them both. But who in the world could say for sure who she really was?

“*Everyone is waiting, Maiden of Nuremburg.*”

“Says the picture book witch who was pierced by its many spikes.”