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アリス

上条の前に現れた迷子の少女

『ふにゃあ?
少女はアリスですか?』



Designed by Hirokazu Watanabe (2725 Inc.)



Prologue: Visitor from Picture Book Land – Girl_Name_is_“ALICE”.

You might only have 1580 yen left in your wallet and the ATMs might all be shut off for New Year's, but the sun still rises in the morning.

December 29 had arrived.

“Ugh,” groaned spiky-haired Kamijou Touma, waking up in his bathtub. The mornings were really starting to scare him of late. When the morning arrived, it meant a new day had begun. When a new day began, it meant he had living expenses to pay. And he was very seriously approaching his limit there. He had of course gone the route of cabbage core garnished with parsley, carrot, and radish skins. Fish heads? Those were such a luxury that the 15cm god and the starving nun beast played rock paper scissors over who got them. He had used every trick in the book, but he doubted it was going to get him through to January 4 when the ATMs would be back up and running. With all such bank functions stopped, he couldn't rely on the seasonal miracle known as New Year's money from his parents.

He was so starved that lying on his back with the blanket over him made him look a lot like a dead bug drying out on the floor.

(The cat can get by on the leftover pet food Fukiyose returned with him, but the problem is feeding me, Index, and Othinus. I might have to get through New Year's by asking Komoe-sensei for some teacakes during my supplementary lessons.)

At any rate, a pity party in the tub wasn't going to get him past this crisis. And he would only be placing the noose around his own neck if he failed to visit Tsukuyomi Komoe's apartment and acquire a valuable supplementary source of nutrition there. That small teacher had canceled her own private winter vacation to help her student, so she might cry for real if she learned that was his primary reason for showing up. Still, he couldn't let this chance slip through his fingers if he was going to survive the day.

Kamijou Touma decided to finally get out of the cramped tub.

However.

"What the-?"

He noticed a sweet aroma. *Uh, oh*, he thought. Was he so hungry the soap and shampoo were starting to smell appetizing to him? His lack of money was reaching truly dire territory.

"H-how is Index doing? And Othinus? They haven't died, have they?"

He was suddenly very worried, but he couldn't call out to them. It wasn't an issue of strength or willpower, though. He was afraid that raising his voice would lead to an answer he didn't want. What if he yelled and shouted from the bottom of the cold bathtub and received no response, like the building was abandoned? Those girls wouldn't be the only ones to perish. If no one could hear him, he would be stuck here. Since he had managed to keep an unauthorized girl living with him here without getting in trouble, the adults clearly weren't going to break down the door and investigate the place just because no one had been in or out in a few days. In other words... was it possible all three of them would be found mummified after winter break was over?

"Are you kidding me? This is serious! I refuse to be the hottest new rumor in town when school starts back up!"

He was supposed to be too hungry to move, but he felt new strength welling up deep inside him. At the same time, he was weirdly certain that this was the final resistance he would be able to muster. He needed to get up, unlock the bathroom door, and collapse into the living room. Otherwise his name would go down right alongside the Kuchisake-onna and Hasshaku-sama. No, if he was all dried up, wouldn't he be more like High Priest and Nephthys!?

However...

“Nyah☆”

Did...

Did he just hear a strange noise from below the blanket?

In fact, that sweet aroma wasn't coming from the bath products at all. There was clearly something else under the blanket. *Eh? What's this? This is a completely different kind of horror than I had in mind.* He began to panic.

It was in the bathtub with him and under the blanket with him. He had forgotten he had only just woken. His thoughts were whizzing by so fast her feared he would burn out his brain as he reached out a nervous hand, grabbed the edge of the blanket, stopped, hesitated, and was too scared to continue. But he was too scared not to continue either, so he took a peek below.

His eyes met those of a strange girl. She looked maybe 12.

“Who?”

She still looked sleepy. She lay face down on top of him, so her face was shockingly close. So close his eyes had trouble focusing on it. She had long blonde hair, white skin, and sapphire blue eyes. She stirred, which was enough for more of that sweet aroma to reach him.

“Who are you?” he asked, his voice scratchy.

“Nyawn? *The girl’s name is Alice.*”

Between the Lines 1

They had arrived in the middle of a bright green rainforest.

More than ten million hectares of the planet's forests were lost every year, but this was one of the few secluded areas that remained inviolable.

It existed upstream of a river that wound its way across several national borders.

"This is the place?"

A girl had her long strawberry blonde hair done up in several fried shrimps and sometimes wore a leotard and sometimes a long red dress roughly held together at her chest depending on her mood. Her name was Anna Sprengel and she looked up at something in partial exasperation.

It looked like a modern stadium.

The interior was flooded with water and a 100m cruise ship floated in the center.

"Is she not permitted to set foot on land or can she not mix her water with any other waters?"

"There's no real reason for it," said the girl in purple who was acting as Anna's guide.

A ridiculously large yellow duck walked past them like some kind of joke, but the second girl, Aradia, only shrugged. She was the daughter of Lucifer and Diana who had taken physical form and

descended to the human world as the goddess of all witches. She was a silver-haired girl who looked 17 or 18. She wore a wimple large enough to fall to her ankles, which gave her a nun-like silhouette, but she had bare feet and a bare navel thanks to a skimpy dancer's outfit resembling a variation on the bikini.

The combination was of course meant to look immoral.

"There's no real reason for her to have a single base like this. I don't know if she was influenced by an American drama or what, but until recently she had created a prison on a remote island and was having fun there. The point is, it only has this form because this is what caught her interest. Before long, she might say she wants an elf forest or a magic school. She is not allowed a phone or tablet. The results would be dire."

Countless bookcases were set up in the stadium's tiered stands, but neither girl paid them any heed. Aradia's pure gold decorations jingled like bells with every step she took to guide Anna out past the railing in the stands. They walked *across the mirror-like water's surface* and placed their bare feet on the cruise ship's deck.

The ship felt unusually lived in. Someone called this place home. Aradia casually pointed over at a young wife snacking on some ham in the kitchen.

"That there is good, old Mary. Not the Virgin Mary, mind you, but someone who took the name to hide her identity...or so the story goes. But her alchemy can produce miracles on the same level as the real one, so do be careful."

She then pointed toward a beautiful horned and winged woman carrying a plastic bath set and humming on her way to the bath.

"That is the Bologna Succubus. One of the few demons *officially recognized by the government of the time* thanks to the court records. You see, a man in the Bologna region was found guilty of

running a brothel of succubi in 1468. I know it sounds like a joke, but he was actually executed for it.”

“What a bunch of baloney.”

“You’re not much different yourself, are you? Me too, of course.”

Aradia sighed softly while moving to show off her sexy figure.

“Anyway, most of what you’ll find here is from books, but official documents and reports, personal letter and notes, and even eccentric scribblings aren’t exactly rare. You can use any of the bookcases and drawers you want, so just find some territory for yourself. I mean, that musty old book from around 2000 years ago features a few letters itself.”

Anna Sprengel smiled thinly.

“Letters and notes, hm? Hee hee.”

“Texts from correspondence lessons work too. You people liked that kind of thing, didn’t you?”

“Simple collections of knowledge don’t interest me as much as something like a Christian glassworker’s notebook detailing their stained glass designs. An excellent code can be a thing of beauty.”

“It doesn’t matter to me. Personally, I’m not interested in that *newfangled* cross.”

The Rosicrucian leader only shrugged.

These were those who passed down and provided guidance in magic. They were a collection of myths and stories that presented knowledge at its simplest. Which was exactly why their power would be strangely missing from the records kept by the Anglican grimoire library. For example, pursuing the Lemegeton and the Book of the Law would teach you all about the Modern Western Magic that Westcott and Mathers systemized and Crowley took for himself, but it wouldn’t teach you the lives and troubles of each and every

member of the Golden cabal or the full truth of the worst conflict in magical history: the Battle of Blythe Road.

For example, there was a story known as Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.

But everyone who read that story would interpret it in their own way. It was the destructive genius Aleister Crowley himself who said it was a must-read for any student of magic who had sufficient knowledge of Kabbalah.

Aradia and the Bologna Succubus were the same. They were monsters who did not fall into the human categories of science side and magic side. Everyone here had a legend on the same level as Miss Sprengel and one among them reigned above the rest.

"Urban legends, huh?"

Anna sounded somewhat exasperated as she held her red dress up at her flat chest.

Then she smiled coldly, like she was looking at an elderly professor desperately trying to decipher some kind of code seen on the white walls of a padded room locked from the outside.

"It's said the Bible is complexly coded and there are some very unusual ways to read it. But Alice is written in modern English, so is it a lot easier to analyze and rearrange?"

"Again, I'm not interested in that nonsense. St. Vitus? St. Sebastian? You expect me to find anything of worth in people who reject the witches of a bygone era but readily appropriate those legends as a part of their own religion?"

Anna interpreted that as no more than lip service. She doubted Aradia was as fixated on the cross as she claimed. That was just the role she had to play. People *expected her to be* an advocate for all witches. Just like a ghost skeptic would deny any supposed

existence of ghosts before even trying to look at it scientifically, Aradia's position required her to always be skeptical of the cross's power. This felt twisted and dangerous to Anna because it was like stubbornly refusing to recognize the existence of your greatest opponent. Like a firefighter with no fear of fire.

The goddess of all witches sounded perfectly carefree as she continued.

"You're generally free to do what you want here. I won't get in your way."

"Is that so?"

"However." Aradia paused suddenly, like she had sliced through the air with a blade. "*Do not upset Alice.* Follow that one simple rule and you can do whatever."

"..."

Miss Sprengel was still smiling thinly. That legendary magician was as arrogant as they came, but she could be courteous as long as you did not thoughtlessly interrupt her explanations with a clear lack of desire to learn.

She recalled the giant duck. If Alice wanted one, the brilliant magicians here would gather at a single table and draw up the plans like it was critically important.

"The general public is apparently abuzz with talk about water and traces of life being discovered on a planet dozens of lightyears away, but how do you think that got there? That girl got upset and started *throwing* her ceramic pot, teacakes, and whatnot. Reality is a fickle thing," said Aradia like all of this was perfectly reasonable. "I know telling a magician not to do something is a great way to ensure they do it, but I recommend resisting that contrarian urge just this once. I'm not trying to restrict you and I'm not testing your courage – this advice comes from legitimate concern for you. Also, there's no point

in listing out and comparing your specs. You cannot defeat Alice on a much more fundamental level than that. No matter what."

Aradia wasn't bragging.

She was simply explaining what she saw as a basic law of the universe.

"You really should greet Alice now. H. T. Trismegistus can wait. Once Alice gives her permission, none of the others will take issue with your presence. Oh, and don't think you can avoid detection if you don't go see her yourself. Alice is pure and innocent, but also capricious. But more than that, she's cruel and violent. My point is..."

"No one can predict what she'll do next?"

"I'm glad you understand. Trying to soothe your silly pride will give you the same fate as a bug in the clutches of a small child, so now is the time to obediently bow your head."

They descended to the very bottom of the ship.

Modern cruise ships had pools and theatres, but it was unlikely any of them had one of these.

They arrived at a circular colosseum.

However, the scent ruling this place was the polar opposite of excited blood and sweat.

It smelled of old paper. The strong oily scent likely came from parchment made from animal hide.

Anna could sense a great many presences here, but the place felt strangely void of life. Almost like a pyramid with the sole exit sealed by a heavy stone door. There was a large open space overhead, yet the great stillness of the place created the illusion that the air was entirely stagnant.

The center of the colosseum was what mattered.

A giant throne sat there. If a small girl were to sit there, her feet wouldn't even reach the floor. The back was likely more than three times the sitting height of its master.

It was colored gold and red.

This colorful trial was simple and childish and would obliterate all who scoffed at it.

But time stopped for Aradia when she viewed the throne at the center of the world.

"She's..."

She was the daughter of Lucifer and Diana. She was the goddess of all witches who had taken physical form to save the ancient priestesses of the night who were persecuted by the wealthy cross.

But here, she tore at her hair with both hands and raised her voice to a scream.

"She's not here? Where has Alice gone now!"

Chapter 1: A Year Ending, a Wallet Emptying, a Struggle Ensuing – Winter_Vacation.

Part 1

The girl wore a white apron over a blue dress.

She wore short sleeves even in late December. She wore white tights over her skinny legs and she wore black patent leather shoes even though this was Japan and she was indoors. Her long blonde hair was decorated with a pair of pointy curls that resembled animal ears. The round white fluffball on the back of her apron may have been meant as a rabbit tail.

“.....What I’m getting from this is it’s time for some Toumacide.”

“Index-san, you already chomped me on the back of the head a few times, so could you not invent an ugly new word right now?”

Kamijou Touma was so far past his limit he only smiled gently while making his suggestion.

“This is yummy!!”

The Western girl understood Japanese yet refused to remove her shoes no matter how many times she was asked. Presently, she was kicking her little feet below the glass table. She was already in a good mood and she smiled innocently when her eyes met Kamijou's. She looked like a perfect little doll, but when she spoke, she demonstrated a warmth that swept aside that cold image.

Index glared over at her.

"How did this small child get in our room?"

"Pff. Says a girl who looks like she would land on the balcony after collapsing from hunger."

"Shut up!! L-I-I-I-like I would ever do that!!"

"Now, now. You both seem about the same to me," said Kamijou, hoping to mediate the situation. He ended up rolling on the floor from an Index bite.

The mug the blonde girl held in her little hands contained the Kamijou Touma Special Blend – a dark sludge brewed from black tea leaves reused well past their limit with a drop of caramel and the little bit of potato starch leftover at the bottom of the bag. If classy Misaka Mikoto had seen this, she might just have fainted (both from the horrific contents and the fact that he just dumped the tea in a mug), but this was a trick he had learned during his New Year's Tokyo survival life. From a cabbage core to a fish head, even the toughest and bitterest ingredient could be made edible if you softened it up in a pressure cooker and added something sweet or spicy! Humanity, now is the time to praise honey-flavored ultra-sweet syrup (flavored with god knows what) and discount curry powder (containing a mystery blend of spices)!! Kamijou Touma would be dead right now if not for them!!!!

It was eight in the morning.

He would need to leave soon for Komoe-sensei's rundown apartment for a winter break supplementary lesson. But he needed to deal with this girl first. After all, this was a matter of life or death for him.

In fact, he was a little afraid to make a hasty decision here.

Eh? Where did this girl even come from?

And wait. Does this mean we have to look after her now? He was starting to act so unusual that Anti-Skill would have taken him in for questioning if he were outside. See, it was December 29 and he only had 1580 yen left. That was all he had to keep himself, Index, Othinus, and the cat alive until the ATMs started back up on January 4, so why did he have to have a mystery guest now!? Wasn't this as much of a threat as looking down and finding a colorful snake sinking its fangs into his foot!?

"So who even is this extreme lost girl?"

"The girl's name is Alice."

"Index, explain."

"With only that to go on? That's probably the 1st or 2nd most popular girl's name in the UK. I think it's even used as a sample name on government forms."

So it was like Tarou or Hanako. Which meant it wasn't much of a hint.

Alice referred to herself as "the girl".

Almost like she was talking about someone else. She had an otherworldly quality to her and she showed no caution around strangers like Kamijou and Index. It was like she alone was weirdly detached from reality. Yes, she felt like Snow White, Red Riding

Hood, or another character from a fairy tale where no real danger existed.

Kamijou Touma held a hand to his chin and groaned with a serious look on his face.

“None of this makes sense. This is Academy City in Japan. My room smells like soy sauce. Why would I wake up and randomly find a British girl here?”

“Touma, I’m feeling kind of attacked over here.”

Come to think of it, he had no actual proof that Alice was British. Kamijou Touma, you gave her that sorry excuse for black tea yourself, so don’t let it influence your impression of her.

(What do I even do? We don’t have a gentle and beautiful dorm manger here, so should I call Anti-Skill? But I want to avoid trouble if I can. Oh, but if they take me in for questioning, they might serve me katsudon?)

Whatever he was going to do, he had a supplementary lesson to get to.

But before that, he had to prepare some breakfast or Index would starve while he was out.

“I don’t have much of a choice. I’ll figure out what to do with Alice later, so for now I’ll break out the bread I was keeping in reserve. So the time has come to open our final loaf. These six slices are the last real food we have left. Our path forward gets a lot worse at lunch today, so prepare yourself, Inde-”

He trailed off.

It was gone.

The bag had been right there next to the rice cooker that was dead weight now that they were out of rice. Well, the plastic bag was

technically still there. The problem was how it was balled up and shoved into a small gap with the crucial six slices of bread nowhere to be found!

When he turned to look at Index, she refused to look him in the eye.

Come to think of it, Index had spent the night tending to an empty stomach just like he had, so where had she found the excess energy for all that anger?

15cm Othinus was lying face down on a shelf nearby and she used the strawberry jam on her index finger to write out a message on the shelf: **Index**.

“H-how...how could you do this? You got up in the middle of the night and ate all six slices of bread while I was in the bathroom and wouldn’t notiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiice!!!???”

“There are no rules in the life-or-death struggle of our New Year’s Tokyo survival life, Touma. And if you’re that keen on being honorable, then what ever happened to lady’s first?”

Part 2

Real name unknown. Commonly known as Accelerator.

He has been found guilty of 36,025 charges including killing more than 10 thousand people, organized crime such as aiding and abetting the creation of clone humans for experimental purposes, assault, bodily harm, property damage, and violation of the Swords and Firearms Control Law. Altogether, he has been sentenced to 12 thousand years. The Juvenile Act provides some hope for a minor defendant's future, but there is no chance of overturning a sentence that large.

The time limit for filing an appeal has passed, so the sentence will stand.

A hard, cold sound echoed out.

It was followed by more of the same, but too irregularly to call a rhythm.

This was District 10's Special Criminal Adult Correctional Facility.

80% of Academy City's residents were students, but it still needed a prison to hold adults. It was also a giant cage for secretly holding the monsters the ordinary juvenile hall couldn't manage. Although that second part was a system secretly created specifically for Accelerator.

The sound traveled down an underground passageway not found on the official plans.

“...”

“...”

An androgynous monster walked down the passageway flanked by strict uniformed prison guards. But the two guards did not exchange any words – only the occasional sidelong glance. Their orderly footsteps were disturbed by the third set between them. It threw them off their tempo and took control of the space.

The clacking of a cane was joined by the jangling of thick chains.

The monster had white hair and red eyes.

The passageway was long and straight. The place was known as a correctional facility, but letting a criminal see this floor, which wasn't even supposed to exist, was as good as saying they would never see the light of day again. And if the people who went in here never left, the thick metal doors lining the walls might as well have been a sterile graveyard.

(They're ready to put some others in here as planned. But the official juvenile hall would have sufficed if not for me.)

At the very end of the passageway was a thick circular door, much like a bank vault. And it had two layers just like at a semiconductor plant.

“D-door open.”

“Bringing in Prisoner #1890. E-enter. R-right nyow!”

He almost felt bad hearing the guard's voice cracking like that.

Quiet metallic sounds continued for a while afterwards. It took 20 full seconds for the guard to get the key in the keyhole on the handcuffs. Unlike a cell with ordinary metal bars, the prisoner couldn't be put in and then stick out just their hands to have the cuffs removed.

Instead, they used that massive door which felt like it would cause security problems of its own.

The space inside was about the size of a school classroom. It had no windows, so it could be immediately rendered pitch black if the power was shut off, robbing its occupant of all forms of freedom.

Accelerator took a look around and sighed in exasperation.

“The hell is this?”

He saw some things that shouldn’t be here.

In fact, the place was flooded with stuff.

A home theater’s big screen TV and vacuum tube audio system, a microwave, a fridge, a leather chair, a large ebony desk with a computer and tablet sitting on it, bookshelves covered in specialty books, and strange artwork. The phone on the wall suggested he could order room service 24/7. He even had an ornate tea set and a selection of tea leaves from around the world. He didn’t even want to consider how much clothing there was in the closet.

It looked like the jailors had outdone themselves in *welcoming* their new Board Chairman.

(God, it feels like I wanted to go meditate in the mountains and they leveled an entire forest to build an Olympic Village for me.)

Disgusted, Accelerator threw himself onto the king size bed without even removing his shoes. He stared up at the ceiling and snapped his fingers.

Several loud and distorted sounds mixed together like space itself was straining under some kind of pressure. That was his vector control. Academy City’s #1 Level 5 had redirected the sound waves in a single direction and the result finally earned a satisfied nod from him.

His disgust would have grown if that had blown open the wall or door, but it had all held.

"I suppose it meets my minimum specifications."

Board Chairman Aleister had worked from deep inside the Windowless Building. Accelerator had once used the earth's rotational energy to attack that building, but he had failed to bring down the skyscraper.

That meant Academy City had the technology needed to forcibly suppress and counteract the #1's power.

This was all meaningless if he was granted exceptions and could come and go if the situation demanded it. At the very least, he needed this to function as a cage.

Massive inward-facing armor surrounded him in all directions.

This was his life now. He had accepted his sentence and cast out his own freedom, but he had not turned in his authority as the city's ruler.

It was time to get started on his work as the new Board Chairman.

Still lying in the king size bed, he grabbed the TV remote and twirled it in his hand. He didn't even need to press the button. His vector control power could redirect just the IR wavelength of the overhead fluorescent lights to send a simple signal to switch on the TV hanging on the wall.

"There is admittedly no material evidence like bloodstains, but Accelerator himself admitted to killing the clones and he was found guilty in a court of law. This will inevitably dampen the sensitive students' desire to learn."

"It is late December, the final stretch for students preparing for entrance exams. This distrust in not just one of Academy City's Level

5s but the #1 is worrying.”

“Due to the time of year, these demonstrations are being spread under the hashtag ‘Winter Cleaning’ and dedicated communities are popping up all over the internet. In fact, if you look at Academy City’s shopping district right now...”

(Another peaceful day.)

He snorted in laughter, but he realized he wasn’t much better since he was using his power for trivialities without worrying about his electrode battery. Noting that being surrounded by thick walls has its pros and its cons, the white monster growled a name. The door had opened, so he knew she would have entered with him.

“Show yourself, *Qlipah Puzzle 545*.”

Part 3

Whatever else was going on, he still had his supplementary lesson to get to.

Not only was he teetering on the precipice of being held back, he was cautiously hopeful that he might get some snacks to eat at Komoe-sensei's rundown apartment.

He was accompanied by a girl who looked ready to skip if he took his eyes off her for a moment. In fact, the round white fluffball on the back of her apron was already wiggling side to side. He wasn't sure if that doll-like dress would be too warm or too cold, but she seemed happy enough. Still, her short sleeves made him wonder if she had no fear of the north wind. Her skirt was fairly long, but that hardly mattered with how fluttery it was. If it caught on a fence or tree branch, he would be able to see everything. Even now, it was providing glimpses of her thighs in the white tights.

"Hm, hm, hm, hm."

"It doesn't really matter, but why did you come with me, Alice?"

"Um, why didn't you bring the nun girl with you?"

Because she would make it really hard to focus on his lesson.

Alice didn't understand that and just looked confused. She still had that gentle, otherworldly atmosphere to her. Then again, staying in the dreary dorm would have meant staying with Index who had eaten the last real calorie source outside of the mixed fish crunchy cat food, so joining Kamijou may have been the right choice.

(What do I do with her anyway?)

Kamijou Touma was at a loss.

He had lost sight of what was normal after taking in Index, a cat, and a god, but there had to be a serious story behind this mystery girl. When he asked her about it, she only gave him a smile of 100% optimism, which didn't tell him much. Was she lost? Had she run away from home? He wasn't sure how to describe the situation on the paperwork, but wasn't this worth a visit to an Anti-Skill station?

"Wait, this is actually perfect timing. Komoe-sensei is an adult even if she doesn't look it and informing a teacher at school would be my best bet here."

"?"

Whether she understood the situation or not, Alice cutely tilted her head while walking by his side.

"A biochemistry group comprised mostly of college students was just arrested in Nuremberg, Germany. They allegedly purchased and operated lab equipment in order to manipulate human DNA and create a human with less than 50% water content."

"I told you. I told all of you. This is a grave situation. Recognizing the human rights of clones sounds nice, but that also lowers the psychological barriers for those who would create them."

"There are rumors that the speedy arrest was thanks to benevolent and unofficial cooperation from Academy City, but the press officer strongly denies it and says we must pay careful attention to the changes in science ethics in academia."

The news was playing on the large screen installed on the belly of a blimp floating by in the chilly sky overhead.

Alice ignored it all and focused on a nearby convenience store instead. More specifically, on the banner set up in front of the store.

“Look, they have a new marmalade shark fin-”

“No.”

“They have a new marmalade shark fin foie gras bun!!”

“Don’t plow on through it with a smile after I stop you! The answer is no! I only have 1580 yen left to get through this New Year’s Tokyo survival life! And why the hell are they putting shark fin in meat buns and soup cups!? That price is way too low for comfort! And the marmalade up front would definitely ruin the rest of it!!”

“Ehh?”

“Don’t tilt your head with that ‘what are you good for then’ look, Alice. Nothing’s as scary as a girl lowering her voice when she questions you. It’s a one-hit kill for any teenage boy’s heart.”

“But the girl wants a dangerous *adventure*.”

“Yeah, I’m sure an adventure paid for out of someone else’s pocket is a whole lot of fun!! I get that you’re hungry after Index hoovered up all the bread, but convenience stores are not the answer. As long as you know how to cook, the supermarket or the discount store’s family-sized items are the most cost effective options. Um, Alice? Wait, stop! Don’t order it! As soon as the clerk picks up one of the hot snacks, you can’t return it! Noooooooooooooo!?”

And.

After knocking since the doorbell was broken, the door opened and the 135cm teacher, Tsukuyomi Komoe, emerged looking puzzled.

“Sniff, sniff. What’s that wonderful smell? Kamijou-chan, you stopped for some food on the way, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, and now I’m not going to live to see the new year.”

“?”

She looked even more puzzled as she welcomed them into the small room.

Alice tilted her head while clinging to Kamijou’s side.

“She’s the same height as the girl, but she seems different somehow.”

“Trust your intuition there, Alice. Do you see the empty beer cans in the corner of the room? Those aren’t a non-alcoholic trick. Also take note of the very full ashtray on the tea table. You’re looking at the sorrow of a grown teacher – not something either of us would be familiar with.”

Komoe-sensei screamed and scrambled to clean up her room.

And eventually...

“Ahem. Now, Kamijou-chan, please open your textbook to page 58. We’re still talking about esper development, but this section is about the changes in biological and chemical applied technology, so try not to get confused.”

“Ugh, what a pain. Which is which again?”

“Screw this up and you will be doomed to a second freshman year before the third term even begins.”

“I’m prepared to pour every effort into this, so please don’t give up on me already!!”

Alice was still smiling. She was also still wearing her shoes.

With no chairs, Kamijou was seated on the tatami mat floor with his textbook and notes spread out on the tea table, but then Alice

attacked his spiky head from behind. He suddenly felt something smooth against his cheeks. By the time he realized that was her legs in the white tights, he felt a weight and a higher body temperature on his shoulders and the back of his neck.

She had decided to hop up on his shoulders for a piggyback ride.

She didn't seem to care she was wearing a frilly dress. In fact, he didn't feel that thick skirt, only her thighs squeezing against his cheeks. Did that mean he had been directly invited into that longish skirt given extra volume with panniers!? The instant he focused on that idea, he could have sworn the air rose in temperature like he was in a greenhouse. He felt very trapped.

On top of him, Alice was licking the thin paper for her meat bun like it was the underside of an ice cream cup lid.

"Munch, munch. Yeah, that was pretty bad, teacher☆ The shark fin and foie gras just tasted like marmalade."

"Do you understand my predicament here, girl!? I'm down to 1160 yen because of you!"

She complained about the flavor, but her little tongue kept teasing the thin paper.

"Surprises like this are fun. That's what makes it an *adventure*."

"Also, why am I your teacher?"

"Kamijou Touma is the girl's teacher."

???

Did she mean in Japanese culture, or in having fun in Academy City? He couldn't always figure out what girls that age were thinking. But was age really the issue here? She seemed a lot more like the kind of incautious 12-year-old you would find in a fairy tale, not like

the kind of 12-year-old you would find in the real world. For one thing, what was even the point of this piggyback ride when he was sitting down and it didn't lift her any higher than standing up would?

"Anyway, you need to get off of me, Alice! I'm on the verge of getting held back, so don't get in the way!!"

"Yay, it's the Tick Tock Bunny☆"

"Don't shake me side to side!! Yikes, yikes, yikes!! If you fall over with my head between your thighs, you'll snap my neck!!"

"Oh?"

She must not have been that attached to her own idea because the soft weight left him as soon as he made his request.

But not because she was interested in behaving.

"Sneak, sneak, sneak."

"Alice, what are you-ahh? Don't crawl under the tea table!"

"Heh heh. Teacher's lap pillow☆"

She grinned and kept the mischief coming as thick as a barrage of machinegun fire. Silky gold hair fell onto his thighs. The pointy curls resembling animal ears poked gently at his stomach. She had no conception of caution and carried an overall gentle atmosphere. He would be here all day if he tried to get after her for every little thing.

What was happening here, anyway? He was taking his required supplementary lesson and an innocent blonde girl was crawling under his table while his teacher watched. Yet the girl was so oblivious to the problem there that she smiled and squirmed around in a rather disturbing way!

Worse, the tea table was far too small to hide what was going on.

It was more like a tortoise shell than anything, so Alice's hands and legs stuck out from below. Komoe-sensei could see it all from her position.

For once, that teacher had the eyes of a dead fish.

"Um, Kamijou-chan? Do you care so little about staying at school that you're willing to play sea turtle during your supplementary lesson?"

"Wait, are you suggesting I could end up expelled and not just held back!? Okay, I'll study, I'll study! Please don't give up on me!!"

Part 4

A heavy metal thud echoed out.

The words spoken by the non-Anti-Skill guards in charge of locking up the metal bars were powerful but cold. They were like an icy shout that squeezed the hearts of all who heard it. Watching over cells was an ancient job dating back to BCE times. In children's books, they sometimes took the form of monsters whose screams or songs could take lives – an idea that may have come from hearing voices like this.

"Lock ABC check!"

"Repeat. Lock ABC check!"

"Repeat confirmed. Next!! #0003, check lock and restraints!!"

However, this was not the giant prison in District 10.

It was a prison transport train named Overhunting.

Its composite armor was 200mm thick on the sides, 120mm thick on the roof where it was thinnest, and more than 800mm thick on the front. It was built more like a shelter than a train. Increase it any further and it would be so heavy it would damage the metal wheels and rails.

It had a special 7-car design, but not all of those were packed full of prisoners. The front and back cars were both engine cars containing a massive motor and an emergency battery. The 2nd and 6th cars were weapon cars loaded with containers of ground-attack rockets and a domed anti-air optical weapon built to glass laser standards.

The 3rd car was a waiting area for the armed guards. So despite the large size of the armored train, only the 4th and 5th cars were used to carry prisoners.

The city's administrative functions were gathered in District 1, so it was no stranger to amusing rumors regarding the railway and subway system. But did any of those government workers with suits and perfectly parted hair know there were subway platforms below the prisons and courthouses that were missing from all of the official diagrams?

“Sigh.”

“What’s wrong, Matsuriba? Did your pick-me-up coffee upset your stomach?”

The young newcomer waved a dismissive hand at the female driver’s cold question. They were walking across the special platform to the driver’s compartment in the front, but seeing that black and blue train covered in thick armor made him feel blue himself. Opening the door during the final check had been a bad idea.

He had seen something he very much wished he hadn’t.

It had looked an awful lot like the small food cart wheeled down the aisle on a normal train, but this was very different. It was the kind of thick cage used to transport animals. You weren’t supposed to use something like that to hold a human being. Worse, the person crammed inside the much-too-small space had looked like a girl of only 10 or 12.

“Hanatsuyu Youen. They called her a ghost of Operation Handcuffs, didn’t they?”

The young driver absentmindedly placed his hand on the side of his pants.

It was an easy mistake to make since they worked in a public facility and wore uniforms, but Japan's railroad workers worked for private companies, not the government. They had none of the authority of law enforcement groups like Anti-Skill and Judgment.

Nevertheless, he wore two black synthetic leather holsters on the side of his pants. They held nonmetal handcuffs and a cheap 5-shot revolver.

He knew things were a mess aboveground. District 1 was normally peaceful, but it was also a prime target for protests.

This special subway station never saw any ordinary customers, but the LCD advertisements wrapped around the pillars were as lively as ever.

"The Winter Cleaning begins now!!"

"Just look at R&C Occultics and Academy City's #1! We can't let the tyranny of those elites continue! The harmless average citizen like us need to keep those monsters in check!!"

"Don't let them hoard power! Tax the rich! It's all that excess wealth that lets them cover up their misdeeds. Return that money to the people!!"

That was the public opinion these days. It hadn't helped that the breakup of R&C Occultics and the arrest of the #1 had happened at the same time. The young driver knew the special prisoners who survived Handcuffs would be torn to pieces by the angry students if they weren't defended, but he hated how he became a target of their anger too just because he was carrying special extralegal equipment like handcuffs and a handgun. The deluge of angry voices coming from the monitor distracted him to no end.

Once he set foot on this train, the protections of Academy City's Swords and Firearms Control Law no longer applied. It was governed by entirely different rules, like an embassy or consulate.

The train qualified as part of a special prison where taking one step out of line would get you shot.

The female driver, who also carried a revolver fixed to herself with a cord, seemed much more accustomed to it.

“Don’t let it get to you. The difficulty of the driving is the same whether we’re transporting powdered milk or fuel rods.”

There were a few more inhumane pushcart cages, but they all carried villains who couldn’t be transported in ordinary prisoner transport vehicles.

These were the survivors of the sweep of the cruel and violent dark side.

They had been safely captured by Anti-Skill, but according to rumor, they had gone through hell on earth and it was a miracle they were still alive at all. Their survival itself was all the proof anyone needed they were indeed monsters. The damage would be devastating if they were allowed to escape.

“Matsuriba.”

“Yes, yes. I know!”

The young driver adjusted his flat hat and hurried after the more experienced woman. She didn’t look back as she gave him an instruction in a low voice.

“Repeat our schedule for me one last time.”

“I’m not a trainee who freezes up in the simulator. Ahem, the Overhunting is scheduled to depart at precisely 1700 hours. We will travel south from District 1, pass through District 7, and arrive in District 10. Our final stop is the unofficial station below the Special Criminal Adult Correctional Facility. It should be a pleasant 30-minute trip.”

“Very good.”

The city’s subways only covered a third of Tokyo. They weren’t going to have a Siberian-style train journey.

Of course, *maintaining* a railroad at usable levels was very expensive. Look into the struggles of the rural routes that were always in the red and that becomes readily apparent. Normally, no one would even consider a prisoner transport train that might only be used a few times a year. Without regular traffic from travelers and freight, rail travel just wasn’t realistic.

That meant someone considered this to be worth the cost.

Someone wanted to safely and reliably transport violent criminals by train even if it was like shoveling stacks of cash into the fire instead of coal.

“It’s impressive when you think about it.” The young driver was not talking about the abnormal amount of weaponry installed on the armored train. “Trains are the easiest type of vehicle to ambush. If you know where they’re going, you can derail it by removing a piece of the rail somewhere along the way. So to make this trip ‘safe and reliable’, they’re really telling us to keep going full speed ahead even if the light changes or the crossing is malfunctioning. That way, if someone does attack to try and rescue the prisoners, they’ll only cause a devastating accident that kills everyone onboard. It’s a suicidal message to any would-be attackers: you won’t get what you want, so don’t even try it. In other words...”

He couldn’t bring himself to say the rest.

Academy City’s higher ups were telling the drivers to ensure they would be torn to mincemeat along with the criminals if anything happened. Their lives were considered a small price to pay to ensure those criminals did not escape. Not a pleasant message for someone who had lived a good and honest life.

The somewhat older female driver adjusted the angle of her flat hat and responded in an exasperated tone.

“That’s why operating the Overhunting comes with a juicy bonus on top of the ordinary pay. This one 30-minute trip earns us enough to buy a cruiser. Not even operating a luxury European sleeper train pays that well.”

“What, are you strapped for cash? Personally, getting paid this much for train operation scares me. This isn’t like being passed a basket and tongs and told to go catch some tuna.”

“I’ve gotten tangled up in my fair share of trouble during my decade working on the railroad, but I’ve never seen a job like this before. And if I needed money, I’d start trading stocks instead of risking my life. Did you know Australia’s railroad construction industry is hot right now?”

“Then why?”

“The same reason people still tinker with old steam locomotives in this age of CO₂ hate and even make their own reproductions of parts that aren’t manufactured any longer. It’s an armored train! These inefficient and unprofitable toys are as rare as a Yamato-class battleship nowadays. This might be the only place still running one.”

“Wait, don’t tell me...”

“I have a feeling getting into this business for nonweird reasons puts you in the minority, Matsuriba. We all have the same sign carved into our souls, but tread carefully when you choose whether to call us railfans, train buffs, train otaku, train girls, train brains, or whatever else. Now, let’s get to work!”

Part 5

The supplementary lesson did not end until evening.

Komoe-sensei was being especially strict today, so there was no snack break. Kamijou Touma had failed to acquire a crucial source of nutrition. Alice had enjoyed herself with a smile on her face throughout, so she may have confused the apartment with an amusement park.

(Ugh, what do I do now? I just hope Index and Othinus haven't cast out their dignity and started eating the cat food.)

"By the way, Komoe-sensei, what are you doing for dinner?"

"Well, since looking after you took up my entire day, I don't have time to fix anything, so I'm having something delivered. Oh, here it is. Thank goodness for smartphones."

The doorbell did not ring, so she must have noticed the quiet click of the broken button. The 135cm teacher walked to the thin front door. The bicycle delivery person was another high schooler who must have decided their New Year's money wouldn't be enough.

(Huh, so you can work jobs like that as long as you have a phone? Wow, modern technology opens up so many opportunities.)

Kamijou was legitimately impressed, but then he realized he didn't have a bicycle. He checked the mall website with his old folks phone, found they cost 5000 yen even on sale, and fell further into depression.

He stared intently at what his teacher received.

"Wh-what!? Those boxy cardboard packages... Wait just a second! Am I dreaming? Those are the legendary Chinese takeout boxes I thought only existed in movies!!"

"Tsk, tsk, tsk. Kamijou-chan, do not assume your narrow view of the world has shown you everything the planet has to offer. Red Town is in fact a monstrous global chain that made the word yakisoba a household term across the globe. Really, Japan is behind the times here."

Komoe-sensei opened the top of the tall package like a blossoming flower.

It was red.

"Eh? Huh?"

Kamijou Touma wasn't sure he really wanted to see this. He felt faint as the toxic red of ketchup stabbed into his eyeballs. This was supposed to be yakisoba, but for whatever reason it had a ton of sliced olives in it, that stuff melted on the top had to be pizza cheese, and his nose detected the sweet aroma of cinnamon. Sprinkled on top where you might expect red pickled ginger were red cranberries. If they had to go with something Western, couldn't they have at least used some kind of pickle?

"Um, Sensei? You're, uh, sure this is supposed to be yakisoba?"

"Mmm, there's nothing quite like Los Angeles style☆ I wonder if it goes well with beer?"

Amazingly, this didn't appear to be a bad joke.

Really, he should have expected something that barely resembled real Chinese food when they started using a Japanese word like yakisoba instead of an actual Chinese dish name written with complicated hanzi. Like a game of telephone, something had gone horribly wrong as things moved from one country to another. He was

no longer willing to try and get a bite of her food. This was a culinary bucking bronco that would throw off any beginner who tried it. His chance at some zero-cost nutrition had gone out the window.

After nervously leaving the apartment with Alice (who was still grinning like she hadn't noticed the threat), he tilted his head.

"Wait, was that something like udon carbonara? It might have been perfectly fine if I threw out my rigid Japanese preconceptions."

"Udon carbonara!!"

"I'm not buying you any, Alice. No, stop! Don't throw your hands in the air and run over to that convenience store!"

After the financial blow that had cost him earlier, he quickly grabbed the collar of her dress to stop her. That was enough for her fine blonde hair to spread out and give him a glimpse of her slender nape. Was charging in headfirst the only card in this girl's deck? But unlike the comfy neighborhood supermarket, convenience stores didn't have free samples for kids to munch on.

She seemed to mistake this for some kind of game because she laughed and flailed her arms and legs around, the fluffball on the back of her apron shaking every which way. She still had the gentle atmosphere of a storybook character.

"Then what will you get to eat on the way home?"

"Do you see what's inside my wallet here, you stupid girl? I only have one 1000 yen bill and enough to cover the sales tax! And why are you still with me!? I thought I left you in Komoe-sensei's care!"

"Tsukuyomi Komoe is not the teacher."

"What? Um, Alice, I know she's only 135cm, but she is a schoolteacher."

"But she is not the girl's teacher."

???

Did she just have a weird way of talking, or was this supposed to be some kind of riddle? She seemed to operate on some unique fairy tale logic. She always smiled innocently and had no hesitation in her eyes. She didn't seem to just be making it up as she went along and there did seem to be some internally consistent rules that worked as her own $1+1=2$, but Kamijou couldn't imagine what they were.

(Well, classes are out for the break, so unless they have club activities to supervise, the adults of Anti-Skill will be out patrolling. They are teachers on the inside.)

“Teacher, what is wrong?”

“Nothing...”

He wasn't sure why he was so hesitant to say it out loud. He had already left Alice in Komoe-sensei's care only for the girl to escape. He didn't know where she came from, but could she have carefreely slipped away from *somewhere* before ending up at his dorm room? Saying he was going to leave her with someone else might just give her time to prepare to escape again.

“To the station! Everyone to the station! They're broadcasting live!”

“You mean there are TV cameras there? Now's our chance to get our voices heard!”

Some young people ran by carrying homemade signs talking about the Winter Cleaning. They were hiding their identities with scarves and construction masks over their mouths and sunglasses and ski goggles over their eyes, but it looked more like they were putting on a show for the cameras than participating in any kind of serious underground activities. The college students hanging out on the roadside drinking cans of a fruity alcoholic drink didn't seem connected to that in any way. The city looked peaceful at first, but there were signs it was on edge. There was a risk of trouble

unrelated to the Winter Cleaning cropping up somewhere. Night was falling, so he was honestly afraid to leave young Alice alone out here even if she wasn't strictly his problem.

(If it wouldn't cause any trouble, I'd be fine looking after her for a few days, but wouldn't her parents or dorm manager be worried once it gets dark? Especially with how things are right now.)

"Alice, do you have a phone with you?"

"Phone?"

She tilted her head at his question.

It was unusual to find someone without any kind of mobile device these days, but her clothing was unusual too. Was she someone's sheltered daughter? He understood being concerned about what your child might see online, but...no, that wasn't the point. He decided to focus on something else here.

"Hm? Heh heh. Do you like the dress?"

She spread her arms and innocently showed herself off, but he was more interested in the fact that he couldn't see any kind of GPS security buzzer on her doll dress. That suggested her unseen parents hadn't just cautiously cut her off from the internet. It felt careless.

Anyway, it wasn't looking like he could get her to show him her address book so he could call whoever looked after her.

(This is looking worse all the time. But I can't just leave her out in the city for the night.)

"The ATMs start back up on January 4. That's about a week from now. And if she keeps buying food, the 0-yen lifestyle of my nightmares will be here by the end of the day!!"

“Hmm?” Alice walked alongside Kamijou, a small index finger on her lips and her head tilting. “But you don’t seem to be returning to your dorm room.”

Of course he wasn’t.

He was living the New Year’s Tokyo survival life with no food back at the dorm since Index had devoured all six slices of bread in a single night. The 1160 yen in his wallet was all he had. If he didn’t secure some highly cost effective food immediately, he would be starving to death not in the sweltering desert or on an icy mountain but in his own dorm room. He would have to resort to licking the ketchup out of the leftover packets that came with convenience store frankfurters.

“If I don’t want Index to eat it all, it can’t be bread, cookies, or anything else edible as is. I need uncooked ingredients like rice, meat, and vegetables. And the longer they keep, the more I can buy at a bulk discount price!! Now we’re talking!!”

“Wow, they have a multi-tiered osechi set!”

“Did a convenience store send you as a financial saboteur!? And that thing only has fish paste and small fish in it, but they’re still charging more than 5000 yen for it!! Which is more than I can afford, by the way!!”

This time, convenience stores were truly off limits.

Discount stores had more premade stuff, so even if he bought a large discount package, it would probably all be in Index’s stomach by tomorrow morning. That meant his best bet was stopping by a supermarket and buying rice, meat, or other ingredients that couldn’t be cooked before eating, but he had to be careful there as well. Yes, if he let the 10% off sticker distract him, he might overlook the expiration date and end up with nothing but food that needed to be eaten by the end of the day.

Kamijou Touma could not just survive the day.

His only path to survival was a long-term plan that brought him through to January 4, so rushing toward a really good sale could be dangerous.

(If I want ingredients at rock bottom prices, an industrial supermarket is apparently best, but...ugh, I don't like the looks of this video. There's an army of murderous middle-aged women grabbing all the products from the shelves.)

All the good stuff would be gone by now and joining that nightmare difficulty battle without the proper resolve could get him crushed to death by the crowd. Grabbing at clothing and hair looked like the norm, so it was much too dangerous to attempt with a baby bird like young Alice in tow. Which meant...

"I guess *that* would be the only realistic option."

"Hm?"

Alice cutely tilted her head as Kamijou led the way to a large train station in District 7. However, he was not interested in the proud and judgmental brand-name shops in the station building.

An 18-car train was stopped at the general-use platform that divided up the overcrowded trains.

But this was not a passenger train or a freight train.

It was a large commercial train that functioned like a shopping center.

Alice's eyes sparkled like a child at the entrance to an amusement park.

"Wh-what is this place?"

"The Delivery Go Round. It's apparently classified as a larger version of a mobile sales truck. I heard it copied an older izakaya train that traveled between stations doing business."

“Look, teacher! That’s Japan’s 5-star hamburger steak restaurant!!”

“Are you trying to bankrupt me, girl!? In real life, they don’t send you to the kitchen to wash dishes – they just call Anti-Skill to have you arrested!!”

“That might not be a bad *adventure*!!”

“If it’s a one-way trip, it isn’t an adventure – it’s called game over.”

At any rate, he had to buy two tickets just to get them through the ticket gate and onto the platform. That left him with 980 yen. If he couldn’t find anything here, he was well and truly screwed.

“Hey, stop right there, Alice. She looks so innocent, but I swear everything she does costs money.”

“What goes best with tea? Hm, this rich cheesecake looks good. But a simple shortcake would be fine just this once.”

Alice was turning into Little Miss Antoinette as he guided her through the cramped platform door and into the stopped train. She hummed a song while twirling in front of a boutique and accessory shop and pressing her tiny hands against the glass cases.

He was afraid of what might happen if he didn’t caution her.

“I don’t have the money to buy anything nonedible.”

“Heh heh. The girl only wants to look. It’s called window shopping! A good way to spend a lazy day off☆”

“Then stop trying to pull me into that pet shop. I said stop, Alice! No, the puppy dog eyes will not work! Beg all you want, I’m not buying you a bunny!!”

Alice looked like she had stepped out of a picture book, so she did make a beautiful image playing with the animals in front of the shop.

The manager must have agreed and thought she would help bring in customers because the friendly young man gave her a fluffy white rabbit to hold.

“It’s so cute!!”

“I’m not buying it.”

“The girl wants a rabbit foot. They’re good luck.”

“Eh? Um, Alice-san?”

She was smiling so sweetly, so he wasn’t sure if he had misheard or this was the kind of dark joke only a child could make.

She played with the rabbit for a while, but Kamijou wasn’t buying what he wasn’t buying. She reluctantly waved goodbye and they finally arrived at the 6th and 7th cars. That was the fresh foods section.

To secure more space, the train cars had two levels. The aisle was at the side of the car and the rest of the area was divided into booths. The design may have been based on a foreign sleeper train, but with a plastic shopping basket in hand, it wasn’t that much different from walking through a somewhat cramped shopping district.

“Beef and pork are both out. To maximize cost performance, it’s gotta be chicken. Fools, you think you can trick Kamijou-san by throwing the sinewy, hard-to-cook chicken breasts in the discount section? Heh heh heh.”

“Heh heh.”

“Alice, where did you even find that chocolate? Put it back.”

“Heh heh☆”

“No!! Do not approach me with that big smile, Alice!!”

The trick to cooking on an extreme budget was to make sure you felt full. That was why people tended to focus on udon and pasta. Or they would move from there to konjac and tofu. But that was the standard and the standard wasn’t enough to survive this New Year’s Tokyo survival life.

“Ho ho? What is this oatmeal? It looks like some kind of oat dish.”

After taking a careful look around, he found something cheap enough for his purposes. But he doubted that was the actual price. It was probably being sold below cost to get more people in the habit of buying it.

For vegetables, he had to go for the flawed ones. That would normally lead you to search out the oversized cabbages and lettuces, but leafy vegetables were all water and did little to fill the stomach. He also skipped right past the out-of-season summer vegetables like tomatoes and bell peppers since they were all expensive this time of year. Even though they could be grown year-round in the agro-buildings.

He instead chose a radish that also had edible leaves and a red cabbage that was kept cheap to help expand the market.

Once he was done, the contents of his basket would cost 978 yen after tax. If they ate just two meals a day, it was looking possible to survive until the fourth of the next year when the ATMs started back up.

The young wife cashier (in a bullet train attendant uniform) smiled and gave him his total.

“That will be 1200 yen.”

“Huh? Eh!?”

He had overrun the 980 yen in his wallet.

Had he miscalculated? No, he had carefully checked each price tag, so it should have come out to 978 yen. So what had happened? Confused Kamijou Touma finally noticed a candy box among the products he had removed from his basket and lined up on the checkout counter.

“Alice!! You snuck this into my basket, didn’t you!? Put it back!”

“Why? It’s already open. Munch, munch.”

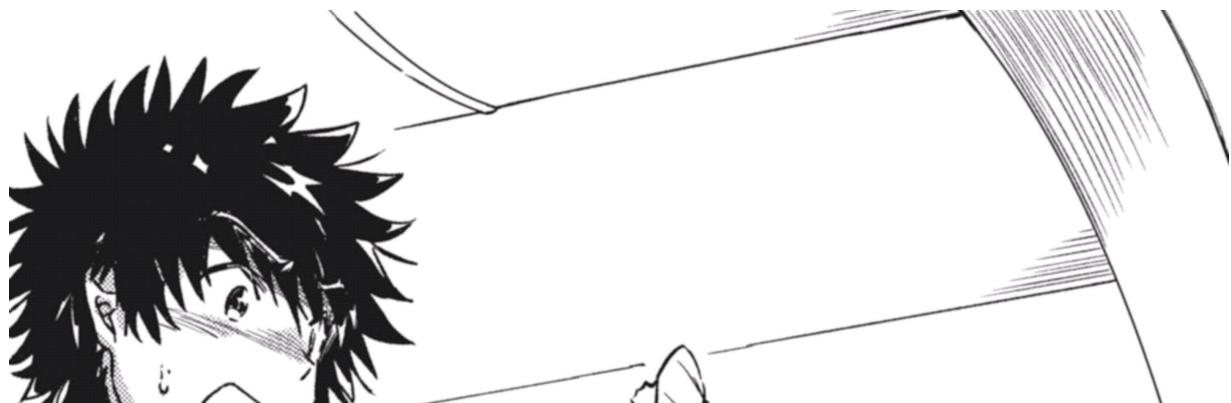
“I can’t even return it!? Who taught you that trick!?”

“Heh heh☆ Say ‘ah’, teacher.”

Alice smiled and held out one of the candies between her little fingers, but the supermarket was Kamijou Touma’s holy ground and he refused to do anything as rude as eat the food in the store.

But this extra expense required cancelling either the meat or some of the veggies. He knew he couldn’t abandon the chicken. Nor could he send back the carrots and their high beta-carotene content. That left him with no choice but to tearfully release the green onions. He could use as many of them as he could get, but he wouldn’t die without them. It especially hurt that they were only sold in sets of two. He might have been able to afford just the one!

Once he was done shopping, the regret hit him hard.





"C-crap. I shouldn't have returned the green onions. Goodbye, miso soup. Farewell, hotpot. I should have held onto that all-purpose ingredient!!"

"This says it has healthy GABA in it. Here, teacher. The girl wants you to say 'ah'."

"Heh heh heh. What do you need a stress reducer for when you've never had a care in the world, Alice?"

"Mhh. Here."

"Why did you just shut your eyes? Wait, don't feed it to me mouth-to-mouth!"

The assassin spread her little arms and approached him, but he managed to dodge out of the way. She had caught him completely off guard, so it had been a close call. If she hadn't shut her eyes, the added homing skill might have given her a direct hit.

"Kisses on the lips are special. They're not like on the forehead or cheek!"

"Sorry. Mouth-to-mouth feeding brings back some bad memories for me."

And a chocolate that melts in the mouth seemed like an especially bad idea. He was pretty sure it would remind him of harsh reality more than sweet romance.

Plus, he couldn't afford to joke around. No amount of mourning would bring back his money.

He had a grand total of 29 yen left. That simply wasn't enough to buy green onions.

However.

"I-I just remembered. We still have my Tatuya point card!"

"What?"

A shiny card was inserted into one of his wallet's card slots.

He had 1705 points on it. Each point was worth a yen, but it could only be used at affiliated stores. Buying books and CDs wasn't going

to fill his stomach. A drugstore might sell snacks and cup noodles, but only at a markup.

Fortunately, he had a plan.

Kamijou Touma gave a snort.

"First, I buy a random DVD with my Tatuya points!!"

"?"

"Then I return it to another store for some cold, hard cash!! Mwa ha ha!! That paper money is as good as mine now!! This New Year's Tokyo survival life is finally turning around!! What was I so worried about!? Wait for me, supermarket! I'll be back and I'll buy as many green onions as I want!!"

" 'Kay, your total comes out to 120 yen."

Reduced to raw garbage in front of the register, Kamijou Touma fell to his knees. Alice crouched down and amused herself by poking him.

The reseller had been struck down by divine punishment.

Part 6

“Cloning tech isn’t some special magic – it’s just a human approach at reproducing the natural self-replication of genes. So there’s no reason to fear it!”

“This is all going way over my head, miss!”

“I wonder if people fear cloning because they see it as creating an entire human being. I mean, we already mass-produce amino acids and alcohol with bioreactors made from artificially modified microbes. They’re even testing missile therapy using monoclonal antibodies. … Oh, but stuffed animals like you don’t have genes, do you, Subscrip-kun?”

Evening had arrived.

Shirai Kuroko was working on some paperwork in a shared office, a booth the size of a shower stall found inside the subway station. She only had her phone’s 1seg TV on for some background noise, so she didn’t notice what they were talking about at first.

She wasn’t really interested in the TV – she simply couldn’t focus without something to drown out the noise of the station outside. The walls of the booth were far from soundproof for safety reasons and every district’s stations were especially noisy at the moment thanks to the Winter Cleaning demonstrations.

“Next up is the news and the weather. Here is our top headline: the United States House of Representatives has just proposed a new bill to investigate all corporations with capital above a certain threshold and another new bill to amend the laws protecting gifted children.”

"I'm sure this is only a bluff meant to get in the headlines. If those actually pass, the original proposer has the most to lose. And I doubt President Roberto Katze will be too happy then either. Restricting the exceptional and artificially creating a level playing field contradicts the very foundation of capitalism."

"Ironically, it's people's frustrations over the inconvenience of R&C Occultics shutting down that has led them towards this Winter Cleaning movement that wants to further restrict corporate activities. Also, there is no connection between R&C Occultics and the Academy City #1's clone killings, yet we keep seeing people conflate the two since they both entered the public conscience at the same time. We're seeing a social phenomenon I would call an 'elite allergy' on social media, where Winter Cleaning and related terms fill the trending lists."

She couldn't seem to organize her feelings.

That was why she had used her phone (which doubled as a transportation smart card) to rent out this booth instead of doing her paperwork in the familiar Branch 177.

She sighed. Discussions like this had grown much more frequent of late. All the commentators were either sweetly pro-clone or harshly anti-elites.

It felt like they were trying to alter public opinion for someone's convenience.

At least it felt like there were *multiple* opinions in conflict there.

(Onee-sama.)

"Argh, why am I so horny? Maybe I should take advantage of this modern blind spot to deal with that real quick."

But she was interrupted by a phone call.

She gasped when she saw the number. It wasn't someone who called often. This was from Anti-Skill, that adult law enforcement agency she normally didn't get along with.

She shut off her phone's 1seg TV and answered the call.

"A prisoner transport train?" she parroted with confusion on her face.

To be honest, this wasn't the kind of job Judgment was meant to do. Anti-Skill and Judgment were only in charge of capturing suspects. The transport of tried and convicted prisoners was a job for the prison guards. She had never even heard of an armored train for transporting special prisoners. That sounded like it introduced a lot more risk of attack and escape than driving an ordinary prisoner transport truck along the ordinary roads.

The shared office cost 300 yen for every fifteen minutes, so stopping her work for a phone call felt like having her time stolen by the unseen person on the other end. That irritated her more than the actual cost.

"The prisoners are from Operation Handcuffs? Thank you for informing me, but there isn't anything I can do."

She gave a polite response while thinking back on the events of December 25.

That mission to clean up the dark side had ended in the worst way possible.

She had gone up against the twins known as Kaai the Decomposer and Youen the Carrier and the murderous paparazzo named Benizome Jellyfish.

Not to mention Rakuoka Houfu, the Anti-Skill officer she thought was helping her pursue the case.

She of course had her thoughts on the matter. For one thing, she wasn't confident she had actually seen the incident through to its ultimate conclusion. That may have been why the adults of Anti-Skill had gone against protocol to contact her this time.

Or so she thought.

But she was wrong.

The officer on the phone gave a hurried report.

“Eh?”

Part 7

Goodbye, green onions.

It isn't that I can't eat without you, but any soup or hotpot I make now isn't going to taste right.

Kamijou Touma squeezed his eyes shut and clenched his teeth.

The sweaty pointy-haired boy cried out in frustration with the face of a gambling story protagonist upon realizing he had chosen the wrong tactic way back at the very start of the game.

“Dammit! Why would I buy the chicken but still let go of the green onions!? Am I stupid!? Stupid, stupid, stupid! How careless can you be!? That rules out grilled chicken as an out if I get sick of soups!!”

He had eliminated his own last hope.

Or so he thought until he glanced down at the receipt he still clutched reluctantly in his hand.

The very bottom of the supermarket receipt contained a ticket with a number and barcode on it. It apparently gave him one go at the supermarket lottery. They had one of those boxes with a round hole in the top like you saw at parties sometimes.

His face went dark.

They did have luxury rice and beef on the prize list. However...

“You're kidding me, right? You want me, Mr. Misfortune, to rely on a luck-based lottery as my final hope? This will never work out. I can

already see myself stuck with nothing but an empty stomach and a pack of tissues.”

“Then let the girl do it☆”

Alice stuck her little hand in the hole of the box and yanked out a scrap of paper. Unlike Mr. Misfortune, the smiling blonde girl showed no hesitation whatsoever.

She and Kamijou opened the folded paper to see what it said.

“Let’s see. Multiple Climax♂(x3)?”

“???”

“Bffff!! Wait, what!? What is that doing in there!? E-excuse me, sir, but that is the ‘for couples’ prize box!!”

Kamijou ended up learning something he would rather not about the short middle-aged clerk (who was apparently dating a very carnivorous young woman).

Later, Alice was smiling in a chain café on the 2nd floor of the shopping train.

“This tea is really good.”

“Glad to hear it. It cost me my last 100yen coin.”

Thanks to the mystery man’s eager insistence, Kamijou had been given some luxury caviar as a “special prize”. In the adult world, that might have been called buying his silence.

(But what do I even do with caviar? I feel like anything I do with it would only harm it. I’ve only mastered budget cooking, so this is more than I can handle!! If I’m going to get through this New Year’s Tokyo survival life, I’d prefer something filling, like udon or mochi!)

"By the away, Alice, I notice you're fine with instant tea and don't insist on brand-name leaves or anything. I'm sure that stuff was steeped in ordinary Japanese soft water."

"Huh? Why are you only drinking water, teacher?"

Because he was completely broke.

Even the tea Alice held carefully between her little hands wasn't in one of the big, decorative cups meant to make a good photo. It was the cheapest and smallest option on the menu. It was cheap enough he had his doubts it was actually Darjeeling like they claimed.

He viewed the platform from the unmoving train's second floor window.

(The city is normally crawling with Anti-Skill, but I haven't seen one all day. Are the railroads and stations under different jurisdiction or something?)

He didn't know where Alice lived, but her guardian had to be worried. He wanted to leave her in adult care as soon as possible. But...

"Hmm. Hm?"

He saw something in the reflection. Alice's pouting lips were reflected in the glass. He knew by this point that was a bad sign, but she was already on the move before he could react.

"This side of the table is too boring. Hiya!"

"Wait, Alice! Don't climb under the table!!"

"Hello. Hee hee. Now the girl can be with you forever, teacher☆"

"You're too heavy."

"Not true."

Everything he said got an immediate reaction. She apparently enjoyed anything as long as he was paying attention to her.

After climbing below the table, she resurfaced between his legs, made a 180-degree turn, and sat down in his lap.

She was just like a pet cat when its owner was reading an article in the newspaper or on a tablet. The cat would mistake that for being ignored and get on top of the article or screen to block their view.

Satisfied, Alice leaned back against him. He could feel her higher body temperature and she acted like she was seated in the throne of a fairy tale castle.

“Hee hee hee☆”

“Hey, wait, Alice. Don’t grab your teacup again. You definitely touched the floor with your hands, so you need to wipe them off first.”

“Really? What a pain. You do it, teacher.”

The teacup in question was not a delicate piece of porcelain. It was only a paper cup with a drinking lid on top. He had a feeling she would start poking at the lid’s opening if he didn’t do it, so he obeyed. He reached past her to grab a paper towel soaked with ethanol and wiped off Alice’s small hands. Her skin felt nothing like his own. Her palms reminded him of a sweet dessert like custard or bavarois. They were so soft he feared a paper’s edge would easily slice into them.

Young Alice let him do it.

She laughed and kicked her legs ticklishly below the table while her fine blonde hair brushed across his chest. The attention from him must have been enough for her because she didn’t pick up the teacup afterwards.

"You can have the girl's tea. As thanks for helping her."

"Alice, why do you keep trying to set up indirect kisses?"

"Because she loves you."

That blunt statement made his breath catch in his throat. He had thought she was the kind of person who would jump on anyone's back and ask for a piggyback ride if she was feeling tired, so he was surprised to hear her say she loved anyone in particular.

But after a moment, he realized what this was.

"Oh, I get it now. This is that 'I want to marry you when I grow up' thing that all the dads and big brothers out there have to deal with. This doesn't mean anything, so I won't let it affect me!"

"Mh. The girl is being honest, but you don't believe her."

She kicked her little legs and pouted her lips in displeasure.

He did still have a question.

Why was this girl so attached to him? He still didn't know why she had been in his dorm when he woke up. This wasn't like happening across her on the roadside. Theirs hadn't been a chance encounter – she had come to him.

(Could I have met her before?)

That seemed unlikely when Index and her perfect memory hadn't appeared to recognize Alice, but that said nothing about the possibility of meeting her before he had met Index.

In other words...

(Did I know her before I lost my memories?)

"Hey, Alice."

He was just about to ask, when he heard the buzzing of a small motor.

It was his phone. He pulled the old folks phone from his pocket, checked the screen, and saw an unfamiliar popup on the lock screen.

“A break alert has been issued (tap for details)”

“?”

“This is an emergency alert from your location service. You have received this alert because your GPS location matches the affected region. Please leave your present location and find safe shelter immediately.”

What was this?

Old Man Kamijou was new to this whole smartphone business, so he wasn't sure what he was looking at.

“Hey, Alice-ew, I just got your pointy curl in my mouth. Anyway, do you know what this means?”

“Wow! Is this one of those fabled smartphones! The girl wants to play games! And watch videos!!”

Come to think of it, Alice didn't have a phone.

She did seem familiar with smartphones, though. The mismatch may have come from gathering information on something she didn't have herself. Maybe from ads on TV and in subway stations.

Kamijou looked puzzled, but something seemed off beyond the incomprehensible message. All around him, the other café customers' phones began to buzz or play their notification melody.

Then they all stood up and rushed off the train. There was even a college girl who left behind her ice coffee decorated with lots of

whipped cream and chocolate sauce before she could snap a photo of it. In fact, the part-timer at the register was fleeing with the rest.

“Huh?”

The next thing he knew, he and Alice were the only two left in the café. Everything around him felt ice cold except for Alice on his lap.

What had that alert meant?

Based on this, it couldn’t be anything good.

He was unsure what to do, but then he saw someone running along the platform directly outside. The girl wore her chestnut hair in twintails and wore a distinctive armband.

“Oh, is she from Judgment? She’s not an adult, but she’s the next best thing.”

“Hmph! The girl wants you to look at her, teacher!!”

Alice sulked in his lap, so a head pat was his only recourse. The twintails girl on the platform seemed to notice them. Her eyes widened and she shouted up at them with panic in her voice.

“Geh, it’s the ape who won’t leave Onee-sama alone,” groaned Shirai Kuroko. “Hey, you there!! I am Shirai Kuroko of Judgment. Didn’t you receive the break alert!? You need to get off the train and evacuate!!”

“*Evacuate?*”

That was too dangerous a word to overlook.

But he still wasn’t sure what the danger actually was. Evacuate from what? What kind of disaster could hit this sturdy train platform along an elevated track? He couldn’t imagine powerful winds or flooding affecting it.

Shirai Kuroko formed a megaphone with her hands and shouted the crucial words up at him.

“A train is about to crash into that one!! We’re looking at a head-on collision with a prisoner transport train!!”

The Overhunting prisoner transport train crashed full speed into the shopping train stopped at the station platform.

The Delivery Go Round’s first car was crushed like an empty can and the impact rapidly propagated down to the very last car. A few of the cars in between were pushed unnaturally up, making the train look like a caterpillar or inchworm.

The *jailbreak* had begun.

Between the Lines 2

The Overhunting prisoner transport train has issued a break alert and the actual jailbreak has been confirmed.

The jailbreak occurred within South District 7 Station.

A tip hotline for civilians is being set up to allow a swift resolution. Anti-Skill and Judgment are to understand their roles, cooperate with the civilian freelancers, and fulfill their duty.

The next section describes the new bounty system and provides tentative values for the escapees.

Directly capturing an escapee earns the full listed bounty and providing information crucial to their capture provides 1/10 of the listed bounty. Bounties will be paid from public funds and will be tax exempt. The bounties will be listed on the public website, but additional rewards may be considered depending on the situation.

The escapees are all from the few survivors of the harsh and unpredictable Operation Handcuffs. Their very survival is proof enough they are extremely dangerous and violent criminals. Be very careful when dealing with them.

Benizome Jellyfish

Bounty: 150 million yen

A freelance paparazzo and a top-level sniper. This journalist will cause moral hazards by firing on her photography target from long distance to inspire confusion and acquire a special scoop. She will

not commit crimes herself, but she will manipulate crimes in progress to the point of doubling the damage.

She has developed a unique fighting style that combines photography tools like camera flashes and infrared lights with a sniper rifle. Attempt to engage her in a firefight based on your training and she will mess with your senses and use special targeting devices to counterattack.

Hanatsuyu Youen

Bounty: 300 million yen

Also known as the Carrier. She is an expert at spreading harmful substances and microbes using insects and small animals. When active, she did more than engage in direct combat or attacks. There are signs of other criminals hiring her to dispose of corpses and other evidence. (All of which was destroyed too thoroughly to prove anything in court).

Her twin sister Kaai the Decomposer went missing during Operation Handcuffs and has yet to be found. There is unconfirmed information suggesting she decomposed her own body and escaped into the sewers where she now lives within the sludge, but it is unknown if that is even technologically and biologically possible. The search is still underway.

Her primary weapon is her test tubes full of liquid.

They contain pheromones, nectar, and other substances used to control various lifeforms. Your location might look clean, but she can secure a seemingly endless fighting force from all the pests and vermin living in Academy City.

Rakuoka Houfu

Bounty: 80 million yen

Guilty of aggravated breach of trust and malfeasance for committing crimes while serving as an Anti-Skill officer. His involvement is also suspected in a murder and subsequent hiding of the body from before he joined Anti-Skill. (The body was fully destroyed, so this cannot be proven.)

Belonged to Anti-Skill Aggressor, a group within Anti-Skill whose combat training was increased to bring them closer to the mentality and skill level of the criminals. A digestive enzyme is used to artificially increase the size of his muscles, so his body itself functions as a powerful weapon. His muscular strength is estimated to be over 70 tons in weightlifting terms. He can tear off the side of an armored truck like it was made of clay.

That sums up the personal data on the escapees who have gone missing from the Overhunting after its collision with the Delivery Go Round.

Also, several inexplicable and unanalyzed phenomena have been detected near the crash site, including the cause of the crash. Reports and witness information on Operation Handcuffs suggest the involvement of the Kihara family, an artificial ghost, and an android. A lot about that incident remains unknown, information from those on the scene is extremely confusing, and many questions remain, including whether several of those involved are still alive. Thus, we cannot deny the possibility of this incident being the work of an outside accomplice or someone else entirely.

Carelessness will mean losing your life on the job. Throw out all preconceptions and respond to any threat that presents itself.

Operation Handcuffs has already ended. We cannot allow any further losses now.

This time, we will bring an end to Academy City's nightmare.

Good luck out there.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland



Kamijou Touma: The girl's teacher. He teaches her all sorts of things.

Shirai Kuroko: Judgment girl. She can teleport.

Accelerator: Academy City's biggest VIP.

Hanatsuyu Youen: Fugitive. Uses chemicals.

Benizome Jellyfish: Fugitive. A camera lady.

Rakuoka Houfu: Fugitive. Muscular combover guy.

Frillsand #G: An Academy City ghost.

Chapter 2: The Rescue Puzzle Sits Before You – Travel.

Part 1

Kamijou Touma forgot to breathe.

It happened instantly.

After blinking his eyes once, the middle school girl, Shirai Kuroko, was standing in front of him. He was lucky to even remember the word “teleportation” in that time. But if he relied on that, he would only make things worse for everyone.

The Imagine Breaker power in his right hand would interfere with the teleportation.

So instead, he pushed Alice forward from his lap and raised his voice.

“Go!! Take Alice!”

He didn’t have time to wait for Shirai’s response.

His action must have caught her by surprise because she flinched before she and Alice vanished into thin air. A terrifying roar and impact followed. Kamijou was in the café on the 2nd floor of the Delivery Go Round’s 9th car, but the force of the impact traveled

from the flattened first car all the way to the last car in an instant, lifting his feet from the floor. He really was thrown all the way to the neighboring 8th car before he hit the floor again.

“Gahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

He rolled through what looked like a deserted childcare center, breaking through and scattering a plastic jungle gym and slide before coming to a stop.

He had trouble breathing.

He couldn't believe the horror before his eyes.

But his shock *did not* come from the pain piercing his body.

“Th-the chicken...” he groaned, forgetting to get up from the floor.

His reusable shopping bag had been thrown from him and the sales items he had bought with his last remaining money were scattered across the floor. The plastic wrap had burst, the soft tray had broken, and the contents were cruelly splattered around. The oatmeal spread across the floor was already soaking up the moisture and getting soggy.

“Eh? Eh? The radish broke? And there's shards of glass in it all. Wait, why were there mice on this train!? And what is that smushed against the wall there...red cabbage? Nooooo!! The big hard clams were cheaper than the normal ones, but now they're all broken! And so is the miracle 90yen pack of eggs!? Ah, ahh.

Gwaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh h!!!???”

Holding his head and wailing wasn't going to change reality.

Clear tears fell from the corners of his eyes.

That was it. He was going to die. He had failed his attempt at the New Year's Tokyo survival life. He didn't have it in him to accept this

cruel reality. He only had 49 yen left in his wallet, so how was he supposed to replace all of this? How many times had he mentioned that the ATMs didn't start back up until January 4!? How would he survive the New Year's season now? Was he going to have to starve starting today!?

He heard a racket from outside.

"Argh!! These people after the high bounties are just getting in the way. Go move them over into a corner or something! We will pursue the fugitives. Uiharu, you check through the camera records and try to track them down that way as best you can!!"

"..."

Kamijou Touma sat up in the deserted space.

Just before the crash, that twintails girl had mentioned a prisoner transport train. And based on her panicked voice, some of the prisoners onboard must have escaped.

That had been the purpose behind the entire incident.

He took a look out the window and nodded.

He didn't know who they were, but he would make sure they died for this.

And there was a high bounty on their heads? Then he would use that to build himself a house out of chicken and green onion!!

He grabbed just the can of caviar that had survived with only a few dings and stood up like a man possessed.

He was on the second floor of the train, but the metal stairs down appeared to have been destroyed. But he didn't care. He just needed to reach the platform. He rushed toward a fully broken window.

"I-I am giving them such a punching," he muttered to himself.
"Someone needs to teach them life doesn't reward food
wasterrrrrrrrrs!!!!!"

His rage and sorrow exploded out as a great roar and he didn't even hesitate to jump out the 2nd floor window to the station platform below.

Except the platform was gone.

"Eh?"

This he hadn't expected.

His mind went blank, but he couldn't change his course in midair regardless.

"Um, excuse me!?"

The floor below had crumbled away, leaving a hole large enough to swallow up a small truck. He had lost sight of his landing point, but before he could do anything more, gravity took hold and dragged him down toward the pit of hell.

He screamed as he felt his stomach rising.

"Gyahhhhhhhh!!"

He probably fell two stories' worth.

The length of the fall had suddenly grown on him like he had casually hopped over a hurdle to find it was actually a balcony railing.

He might break a bone or two from this.

The fear took hold, but then he hit something with a sticky splat.

"???"

He had...survived?

But what was this? With the floor broken through, he had assumed he would find jagged rubble below, but he instead found a pile of black sludge. He appreciated it since it had cushioned his fall, but he would have preferred something he could identify.

(Does this mean *the platform melted*? You have got to be kidding me. That thing is made of concrete and a steel frame. This isn't harmful to touch, is it!?) After some struggling, he managed to extract himself from the sludge pile and rolled away from it.

The regret rushed in after the fact.

When stranded on a mountain or in other emergencies, people's stress and exhaustion would give them extreme tunnel vision and they would make overly optimistic predictions. For example, they wouldn't want to be stuck out in the dark after sunset, so they might think they could make their way down the slope if they felt along the nearby trees and watched their step. But if they actually attempted it, they would end up slipping and falling off a cliff.

In hindsight, jumping from the Delivery Go Round's 2nd floor window just because the stairs were blocked had been a dumb decision. There had to have been plenty of better options, like moving to the next car and searching for some surviving stairs.

The station platform was on an upper level to match the height of the elevated railway, so the lower level was a clean station concourse containing accessways and shops.

However, the number of customers and employees in evidence was unnaturally low.

Was that due to the break alert? The strange sort of convenience store only found in train stations, the standing soba shop, and the mall-like sales area that combined a gift shop with a bento shop were all abandoned. The excessive number of lights felt unusually

bright. The way the automatic glass doors opened on their own and the way an announcement repeatedly asked an empty café to download their official app only made the place feel lonelier.

It wasn't just the train.

Was something *still underway* on a large enough scale to affect the entire station building?

"..."

Kamijou gulped.

He waved at the security camera on the ceiling, but there was no sign of any adults coming running.

A special train had crashed and the criminals contained inside had escaped. That was enough to sound like a minor fantasy to a high schooler like him, but what if that hadn't been a coincidence? The station platform was melted. He didn't know if an esper power or some kind of technology was to blame, but if someone wanted to make sure they escaped, would they really rely on that alone?

(This sounds bad. Maybe I should have stayed put and waited for Alice and that Judgment girl.) If the culprit had managed to set up this accident, couldn't they have hidden some tools inside the building? Or maybe they had emergency kits hidden across all 23 districts of the city?

Those could contain money, a change of clothes, false IDs...and maybe even deadly weapons.

He heard a sound.

He could tell the burden on his heart right now was bad for his health.

He was scared. But trying to ignore this would only cause the anxiety in his chest to grow. He slowly turned around and tiptoed toward the

sound, being careful not to make any noise. He passed through a gift shop laid out like a luxury supermarket and reached a corner of the corridor. He was pretty sure the sound had come from around that corner. He bit his lip and hesitantly peeked around it.

He saw some coin-operated lockers lined up on the wall.

A girl of about 10 with long black hair stood facing them. But the sound had not been her opening and closing one of the thin metal doors. He could see her pulling a flat business bag from the gap between the bookcase-like sets of lockers.

What was she doing? Why hadn't she run away with everyone else?

She set the bag on the floor, checked its contents, and then reached for her clothes. It looked like a thick work jumpsuit, but it wasn't. By the time Kamijou realized that was a prison uniform, she had stripped it off in the middle of the station corridor.

He instinctually looked away from her carelessly exposed skin, but then realized now wasn't the time to be a gentleman.

He had seen something more concerning.

(What is that? *A gasmask and a white coat stained with paint?*)
When she put on the coat and fastened the collar so it covered a chest unusually large for her height, it weirdly looked sort of like a yukata. She wore the gasmask on the side of her head like a mask at a shrine festival.

Then she pulled out several test tubes filled with colorful liquids.

He didn't know what those were, but he could easily imagine they were dangerous chemicals.

It may have been one of them that had melted the steel and concrete station platform into black sludge. This girl had been wearing a prison uniform. He didn't know what crime had gotten her a ride on

that prisoner transport train, but he doubted it was safe to directly sniff at those chemicals. And if they really were only chemicals, then Imagine Breaker wouldn't be any help.

He couldn't afford to underestimate her just because she only looked to be 10. A gun held by a baby in a stroller was still a gun and a grenade thrown by an old man with a cane was still a grenade. A tool's power was a constant, so the correct choice here was to remember her location and get away from here. Then he could pull out his phone and tell Anti-Skill or Judgment what he had seen.

He was nervous, but he was afraid to even gulp.

He held his breath and tried to calmly take a step back.

His butt bumped into something in this deserted world.

“Teacher☆”

“Kyahhhhhhhh!!!???”

He screamed and immediately regretted it.

Smiling Alice stuck out her small arms and grabbed at him from behind while the mystery chemical girl spun around at the lockers.

The situation was on the move.

And it was headed in a deadly direction.

Part 2

Shirai Kuroko had only taken her eyes off her for a second.

(Argh, where did that blonde girl go!?)

Panic filled her on the station platform.

As much as she disliked that wretched ape, he had left that girl in her care.

She finally heard some sirens approaching in the distance. She had been doing paperwork in the station by pure chance, so it was going to take a while before Anti-Skill could get to work preserving the scene. There was probably an Anti-Skill station in a train station this large, but they were probably overwhelmed helping people evacuate.

The crash between the Overhunting prisoner transport train and the Delivery Go Round shopping train was horrific to behold. The shopping train in particular had a few of its cars bent upwards like an inchworm and its platform doors had broken so they jutted outwards.

She had to try to find the ape who had been left onboard, but at the same time...

“Uiharu, start up a new priority task and share this information with Anti-Skill and Judgment! Put in a search request for a girl named Alice!! She looked to be around 12, she has long blonde hair and blue eyes, and she is wearing what appears to be a costume dress. A short-sleeved dress despite the season. I can’t let her be forgotten in the confusion!!”

“Eh?” replied the girl on the phone. “Can’t you give me a photo, Shirai-san?”

“If you need one, find it in the station or train’s surviving camera footage! It’s too dangerous to leave her unsupervised here!!”

The Overhunting was going to gather most of the attention since it carried dangerous prisoners, but the Delivery Go Round included a café, a restaurant, and even a spa with hoses to supply its hot water, so it was packed full of flammable materials. She couldn’t ignore the crashed train either.

(She didn’t return to the train to search for her friend, did she?) It seemed unlikely, but it was still a possibility. Shirai couldn’t delay the search and then have the girl get caught in a gas explosion. She carefully walked along the platform and checked through the broken windows to see if anyone was onboard.

Her efforts were wasted and she found no one.

Not Alice and not the ape.

She didn’t notice any sounds or heat sources either.

After walking far enough along the platform, she moved past the Delivery Go Round and reached the Overhunting that had crashed into it. She tilted her head, but if those two weren’t in the shopping train, they may have gone elsewhere.

“Uiharu, what data do you have on the Overhunting?”

“Pretty much just the name. Wow, it’s like the entire train just popped into existence today.”

The front car had been crushed like an empty can, but she heard someone groaning from the driver’s compartment. The damage to the platform door actually helped her here. She couldn’t tell how crushed things were inside, so she couldn’t teleport in. Instead, she

searched around the door until she found the emergency release lever.

It didn't do anything when she turned it, but the heavy metal clunk told her where the hinges were located. She pulled two metal darts from the belts on her thighs and teleported them to destroy the metal hinges. The bent door collapsed out onto the platform.

She pulled the two drivers out and noticed two black synthetic leather holsters at their hips. Those held handcuffs and revolvers.

(They don't look like Anti-Skill who would be authorized to carry those.) "Uiharu."

"I already said I don't have any data for you."

The young man groaned and provided a report.

"Ugh...this is a special prisoner transport train."

"I am aware. You were carrying Rakuoka Houfu, Hanatsuyu Youen, and Benizome Jellyfish. They were all survivors of Operation Handcuffs, weren't they? I am from Judgement. I was called here to provide support."

"I can stand on my own. Please help me organize what information we have. Ow."

"What happened?"

"We don't know. We suddenly lost control of the train. It is true the Overhunting is special and prioritizes manual control over the ordinary ATS system, but that's why it has multiple safety devices like the air brakes and the EM brakes."

(EM brakes?)

The older woman was still unconscious. After checking her pulse and breathing, Shirai lay her down on a platform bench and wrapped

something like a thick plastic zip tie around the woman's wrist like a watch. It was a rescue tag that shared its GSP data with the firefighters. The presence of the gun was worrying, but it appeared to be fixed to her with a special strap. Just to be safe, Shirai removed the ammunition, borrowed a tool from the young man, removed the firing hammer from the gun itself, and left it all with the younger driver. She didn't like leaving it with him, but her training and education weren't enough to let her carry around a gun and live ammunition.

"Y-you seem awfully comfortable with this," said the young man.

"I use more dangerous projectiles."

The Overhunting's special design could be seen in how everything but the first car remained relatively intact. She even saw some prison guards slowly emerging onto the platform. She was afraid the strange weapon cars would explode, but that fear never came to pass.

(Her name was Alice, wasn't it? It seems unlikely she would have snuck aboard the prisoner transport train, but you can never say anything for certain when it comes to a curious child.) "The prisoners were only on the 4th and 5th cars," groaned the younger driver with a hand on his head.

"Not what I wanted to hear. Those doors appear to be open."

She checked inside and found a few wheeled cages that reminded her of the ones used to transport animals. Their locked doors sat open and the floor was littered with handcuffs, fetters, and other restraints.

They must have all escaped.

The destruction of the first car had cushioned the rest of the train enough that the prisoners had the strength needed to escape.

Shirai Kuroko checked each name on the tags pasted to the cages.

Rakuoka Houfu, Hanatsuyu Youen, Benizome Jellyfish.

She narrowed her eyes while picturing the criminals who had been aboard the Overhunting. Each of them had played an important role in Operation Handcuffs.

(Rakuoka.)

She bit her lip.

That former Anti-Skill officer had ultimately been arrested as part of the harmful dark side. During Operation Handcuffs, the bitterness had built in her chest the longer she pursued the criminals with him.

He too had escaped the prisoner transport train.

Had he seen it as an opportunity?

But Shirai made the rational decision.

“No, he isn’t the biggest threat. That would be Hanatsuyu Youen the Carrier, who uses other lifeforms to transport harmful substances.”

“Th-three hundred million? Her bounty is well above the rest.” The younger driver stared at the tablet he had kept in an industrial shock-resistant case. The disbelief in his voice told Shirai he had not witnessed Handcuffs. She wouldn’t have wanted to get involved for a hundred times that much.

He looked up with confusion written on his face.

“But she’s only a 10-year-old girl and doesn’t have any special esper power?”

“Did you miss what I said about her using other lifeforms?”

Shirai Kuroko pointed at the large hole in the platform a short distance away. She recognized the dark melted structure. The Carrier had not waited around for law enforcement to make the first move.

“Mosquitos, fleas, ticks, flies, hornets, snakes, rats, crows, stray dogs, black bass, snapping turtles – the list goes on. That monster can control most any urban pest or vermin. That means her weapons are found in every part of the city and her supply is near limitless. With her, you can never assume she has been neutralized just because you have confiscated all of her tools. In a way, she uses the city itself as a weapon.”

“...”

“And there is no controlling her once she has the attractants needed to control animals and the highly toxic chemicals and microbes those animals can carry. The real problem is that *she might be able to create those things from the exhaust gasses and waste waters found across the city*. If you don’t want that biochemical warfare specialist committing war crimes throughout the city, you need to set up a blockade to keep her from-”

Shirai never finished her sentence.

The platform and the entire station building around it shook violently.

She immediately leaned against the side of the bent platform door. She heard the sparking of severed wires from all around and then she was enveloped in darkness. The lights had gone out across the entire platform.

It was currently 5:20 PM.

This late in the year, it would be dark out by then.

(Hm? I can’t reach Uiharu. But I doubt the base station on the surface is down.) Shirai Kuroko was isolated down here. She felt her

tension rapidly rising.

An explosion didn't sound like the work of Youen the Carrier who specialized in toxins and bacteria, but during Handcuffs, Shirai had seen her use microbes to produce a methane explosion.

When his tablet lost its signal too, the younger driver complained with the backlight illuminating his face from below.

“Wh-what the hell!? What's happened now!?”

“Something we would much rather not witness. Unfortunately, we will be forced to do so regardless.”

Part 3

The lights flickered worryingly but ultimately stayed on. Thanks to that, Kamijou Touma was finally forced to see the horrors crawling in the depths of Academy City.

It began with a light.

He heard a popping of air far more violent than a bug zapper and saw a white light far more brutal than welding.

“Eh?”

But this *did not* come from the white coat girl further down the corridor.

The flickering malice came from the side.

He reflexively held his right hand out toward the unidentified threat.

“Teacher, you mustn’t use *that*.”

Someone grabbed his hand and shoved him to the side.

It was Alice.

A moment later, something brutal indeed shot past in a horizontal line at his chest height. It bent and broke four or five of the thick decorative pillars lined up along the concourse. This wasn’t a strange laser weapon or beam cannon. It only moved in straight lines, but it bent in a zigzag pattern. And it had been launched by a shaky silhouette?

“Ligh-”

After Alice tackled Kamijou out of the way, they both tumbled behind an elevator protected by reinforced glass. Alice was in short sleeves, so the softness of her upper arms reached him directly. The elevator itself was transparent, so it wouldn't have hidden them if not for a magazine rack covered in free travel brochures. Kamijou sat on the floor staring in disbelief at the scorched empty space where his eyes still saw an afterimage.

He felt a stinging pain in his little finger.

It hadn't hit him directly, but some kind of secondary effect had discolored the finger a bright red. It was probably burned.

That might not seem like much, but it told him what would have happened if Alice hadn't protected him.

The pain was minimal, but it meant a lot.

(Imagine Breaker doesn't work on this!?)

"Lightning?"

For just an instant, he saw a bloody young man sitting on a concrete floor with a smile on his face.

"Do you...reason to...one? Of...you..."

Something scorched the back of his mind like a camera flash.

But he wasn't sure what it meant. Unlike a dream, it remained so vivid in his mind.

"?"

What was that?

His right hand defense hadn't worked on the attack or on the afterimage lingering in the back of his mind. Did that mean it could

all be explained with ordinary science, like some kind of electrical signal linked to his brain?

He shook his head, pulled his old folk's phone from his pocket, and held it sideways.

He couldn't trust his eyes anymore, so he would view his surroundings through the camera app.

The distant silhouette was twisted into something like an S-shape. And for some reason, seven different facial recognition boxes popped up on different parts of it.

In this age where people were forgetting how to even write kanji, it was unusual to lose faith in the answer presented by your phone.

"Wh-what the hell am I even looking at?"

The phone picked up the crackling of electricity. When the phone started converting that into something like a flat Buddhist chant, he immediately switched off the screen. He shoved the phone into his pocket and felt an odd heat on his thigh. It creeped him out as much as having someone's severed hand in his pocket.

He held Alice protectively against his side and she shrieked in delight.

Something was very wrong here, but the destructive power of that electricity was real. The lightning itself and the concrete and rebar it blasted into the air could both tear large chunks from his body.

"What now, teacher?"

Alice never seemed to notice the danger despite having the uncanny sixth sense of a small child, so she was still smiling innocently. Maybe she could see some deeper meaning behind all this, or maybe she was just enjoying being held by him.

"Shush, Alice. That thing already knows where we are, but I don't want to give away our timing from our breathing or something."

"Is this a secret? Wow...a secret for just the two of us."

He wasn't sure how, but the way she held her hands to her cheeks suggested he had tugged very forcefully at her heartstrings.

He heard something, so he held Alice close, held his breath, and pressed against the magazine rack by the elevator wall. He slowly poked his head out around the corner to look further down the corridor.

There was definitely a silhouette there.

It was wavering side to side.

"...is F...san...chan. I am...hind you."

It was nearly impossible to make out at first.

The mass of noise was too messy to recognize as a voice.

But his instincts screamed that he couldn't ignore it. Even though anyone in Academy City should scoff at the very thought of something like this.

"Hel...thi...rill...d #G...curr...be...you"

He couldn't do it.

No one could claim this was an illusion, they were imagining it, or they had misinterpreted what they had seen and heard.

A doll-like woman wore a special dress that clung to her figure but spread out around her ankles.

Her curvy body and blonde twintails were at odds, giving her an unbalanced appearance.

Her head swayed irregularly side to side with long bangs covering her eyes.

The hem of her blue dress was absorbed by the base of a destroyed pillar. No, that wasn't it. Her unsteady feet were buried in it. *She was passing right through the solid object.*

Anyone who saw this would reach the same conclusion.

Yes.

No one could say how this could exist in a world ruled by solid physical laws and inundated with artificial tools, but this was undoubtedly something not of this world.

Or more bluntly, a ghost.

"Hello, this is Frillsand #G-chan. I am currently behind you."

Kamijou knew this had to be bad.

That phrase acted as some sort of trigger. A much worse trigger than the words "kill" and "die" that back alley delinquents used so habitually. He sensed killer intent passing right by him after being released along a path straighter than a bullet.

It wasn't aimed at him or Alice.

Which meant...

(The white coat girl in front of the lockers!?)

Grinning Alice had asked him "what now" earlier.

This ghost had launched an electric current powerful enough to break through several concrete pillars, even if they were only decorative, and she had also passed through a wall. Worse, his Imagine Breaker hadn't worked against her attack. That proved she *was not an occult being', but that was no reason to relax.*

"Hee hee. That's a ghost. Since she's making an appearance at this busy time of year, could she be a Kallikantzaros?"

"You're kidding, right? Are you saying she looks like a ghost to you too?"

He didn't know what that Kalli-whatever was, but she had definitely said "ghost". This could not be described with a different word like hallucination, hologram, or retinal projector. It was one of those things where "you know it when you see it" and he now had confirmation that it wasn't just him who thought so.

But a ghost? Most likely, no one had an exact definition there. But since she was walking through Academy City, could she have been artificially created with the power of science!?

"You have got to be kidding me. Finding a scientific explanation for a ghost doesn't make this one any less dangerous. In fact, that only makes her more of a threat for me!"

"Mhh, that dress-up doll has really big boobs. Finding a dress that fits her can't be easy."

Alice was worried about something else entirely.

This ghost existed here as a scientific, physical phenomenon. That objectivity only made her more dangerous. This wasn't just the placebo effect and it wasn't just an illusion or hallucination meant to kill him from shock. She caused very real harm.

There was no point in trying to fight and eliminate her.

Losing would mean his death, but winning wouldn't accomplish anything. And if that victory meant destroying something or killing someone, then he would be seen as a common criminal. It felt silly to bring it up when discussing a ghost, but that was how real incidents worked. It was all a waste of time. The best plan was to find cover and escape outside the station as quickly as he could.

And since his right hand didn't work, Kamijou had only one option in mind.

"Alice."

"Yes?"

"Let's get out of the station to escape this ghost. You can see the sign pointing to the north exit, right? We'll run straight down the concourse following those signs and get out of here as fast as possible. But I'm taking that girl with me!!"

He grabbed a bundle of free travel brochures from the nearby magazine rack and tossed it to the other side.

With a dreadful zapping noise, a high-voltage current was released in the wrong direction, shattering a bakery's window. *I'm damaging people's property already!?* lamented Kamijou as he tensed in preparation. A rotting stench reached him from a smoking flatscreen LCD monitor and the speaker on the ceiling swayed side to side like it was cackling. Something was very wrong here, but he couldn't let it slow him down.

Don't falter. Shake it off. If they didn't use this noise as their cue, they would never manage to leave this spot.

"Alice!! Go!!"

Alice's unnatural affection for him worked in his favor here. He gestured for her to go and she looked delighted to start running with the white fluffball on the back of her apron shaking. He pulled away from the elevator wall too and ran across the concourse. Everything around him scared him at this point because he never knew what would carry the high-voltage current to him. Several of the pillars had broken, so it was even possible the ceiling would collapse without warning. He couldn't even trust the reinforced concrete. It felt like he had been swallowed up into *another world* entirely.

Their goal was the ticket gate for the north exit, which was located about 50m away, but Kamijou did not take the most direct route. He instead approached the wall, bringing him toward the coin-operated lockers. He wanted to reach the 10-year-old girl in a white coat stained with colorful paint. That was why he had put Alice down.

He charged in headfirst.

The girl's surprised face grew to fill his vision.

He spread his arms and rushed at the girl by the lockers in what amounted to a headfirst slide more than a tackle.

And a moment later, he passed right through her.

The girl's silhouette crumbled away.

The shoulders that looked so slender they would break if he held them too tight, the chest much too large for her age, and the young face that wore a cruel smile surprisingly comfortably all faded away.

He lost his balance like he had crashed into a pile of snow or sand and he collapsed to the floor before he could figure out what happened.

“Eh?”

His mind went entirely blank.

The 10-year-old girl simply wasn't there. Nor was there a large LCD panel or anything like that. The image came apart into countless small specks that crawled all over his hair and skin and even got in his mouth.

“Ew!? Peh, peh. *The hell? Why bugs!?*”

Part 4

Hanatsuyu Youen had been cautious.

Of course she had. The 10-year-old girl with a prison uniform resembling a thick work jumpsuit was pressed against the exit of a station convenience store located right next to the lockers.

She hadn't been careless enough to march on over and collect her emergency supplies right away. She had instead created a 3D image of herself using the bugs and pests she controlled with synthetic nectar and chemical compounds and then kept an eye out for any possible pursuers.

(Dragonflies and clearwing moths are just two examples of insects with clear wings. The human eye is easily fooled if you can bend light. So by using the transparency of their wings, it isn't hard to display an image of myself a short distance away. Combine that with animal fur and feathers and, similar to an AR fitting room, I can even display clothing that isn't really there.)

Simply put, she had in fact removed her prison uniform, but not in front of the lockers. The white coat and gasmask had been additional data she created by adding extra colors on top of the 3D image created from reflected light. Jewel beetles and morpho butterflies were just two examples of creatures that used structural coloration to manipulate light like the grooves of a CD. If she wanted to, she could display an adult version of herself or even a giant version who towered over the skyscrapers.

However.

This situation went well beyond anything she had expected.

First of all, what was that ghost?

She knew the Overhunting's crash was no accident and someone had caused it on purpose. So whether she stayed on the train or tried to escape, she couldn't escape that person's plans if she didn't make a real effort to do so.

But what was this?

She had been expecting to be the target of Academy City's higher ups, Anti-Skill, or some other goody-goody spouting nonsense about justice and hoping to score some points, but this came as a complete surprise.

If anything, this supernatural being reeked of *the shadows* just like she did.

(This isn't just an image. Could they have been a part of Handcuffs too?)

Hanatsuyu Youen had not seen the madness on December 25 through to the end. She and her twin Kaai had tapped out early in District 18, so she didn't know the full picture. This thing may have reached a *deeper darkness* on that day.

But more than that, what was wrong with that incomprehensible pointy-haired boy!?

He was the exact opposite.

He was like a bright and shining sun, so she feared she would get burned if she approached too carelessly. He had just tackled the false image she had placed in front of the lockers, but surely he hadn't been trying to protect a complete stranger from that artificial ghost's attack, right?

The atmosphere changed.

The sticky darkness was cleared away.

“Eww!? I won’t deny I was a little excited to see a naked girl outside all of a sudden, but did she have to be an illusion filled with bugs!? Is this some kind of divine punishment? Peh peh. Not in the mouth!! They’re so scaly!! Ugh, bleh, bleh!!”

“Hee hee. The girl wants to hug you too☆”

Youen could not believe what she was seeing.

The mystery high school boy was writhing on the floor and a picture book blonde girl named Alice was leaping at him with a beaming smile and arms spread. She didn’t seem to care he was crawling with bugs.

Then Youen’s eyes met the boy’s.

This had all been a shock, but she had still been careless.

And. Still swarmed with clearwinged creatures and a picture book girl, he yelled to her from the floor.

He directed no anger or fear her way.

“Cough, cough!! Y-you there. I don’t know what’s up with that ghost or these bugs, but this place is dangerous!! The north exit is right there, so get out of here if you can still run!!”

For a moment, she wasn’t sure how to react.

He was serious.

This dyed-in-the-wool idiot was telling a prisoner he had never met before to escape. He didn’t even seem to realize she was the one who had chemically gathered the bugs to create that false image.

Her twin Kaai wouldn’t have hesitated to give an additional order that decomposed his entire body. Kaai shuddered with joy when she defiled herself by accepting the city’s corruption, so she hated

nothing as much as an embodiment of the sort of hotblooded masculinity that forced his fastidious idea of justice onto everyone else.

But Youen was not Kaai.

She had always wanted them to melt away together, but Kaai had already left her. And not because some third party had torn them apart. Kaai had left of her own free will.

(...)

Youen bit her small lip.

She thought a moment about why her twin had left her.

“Okay, fine!!”

She sprinkled around a chemical compound made from the wastewater found around here and sent another command to those decomposers. With a sound like adzuki beans rolling inside a tilted box, she sent the swarm of bugs away from the mystery boy and toward the electrified artificial ghost. She put her prisoner uniform back on while shouting to the boy.

“This way, normal person. If you don’t want to die, then grab that business bag and coat and follow me!!”

Something so small could still alter someone’s destiny.

Part 5

The situation was on the move.

The clear-winged bugs swarming Kamijou peeled away from him like iron sand being drawn to a magnet. The creepy, spine-tingling feeling immediately vanished.

“Don’t go, buggies!”

For some reason, Alice reached her small hands out after them. On closer inspection, the insects fluttering in front of her were a type of moth. It was hard to believe, but were fairy tale girls not afraid of bugs? Kamijou grabbed her wrists to keep her from accidentally crushing the bugs in her grasp.

He had heard someone ask him to follow her.

He grabbed the requested items and obeyed.

“Let’s go, Alice!!”

“Okay!”

It was faster to hold smiling Alice under his arm than to pull her along by the hand. She flailed her arms and legs the entire time, but she was clearly enjoying herself. On his way to the station convenience store’s entrance, he crashed into the black-haired little girl in a colorful prison uniform. They collapsed inside and landed in a pile.

A high-voltage current shot by like an optical weapon, blowing away a vending machine and capsule toy machine in front of the store and shattering all of the windows. Kamijou’s mind dulled as the fear of

death took over, but that actually helped keep him moving. Maybe a paranormal phenomenon had caused the air conditioning to malfunction, but he didn't have time to worry about the warm air that felt like the inside of someone's mouth. They crouched low as they cut across the inside of the store, pushed open a staff only door with a shoulder, and escaped into the staff only space in the back. He was scared, so he wanted the unfamiliar girl's opinion on the matter.

"Do you have any idea what that ghost woman is!? When I aimed my phone at her, the facial recognition went haywire!!"

"Sigh. This is Academy City and she seems electrical, so I would suspect some kind of virus or cyber attack."

Could that really explain all of this?

The attacks that looked like ultra-high-voltage electricity seemed more like strange masses of data to him. His malfunctioning phone and the images that appeared in his head when it shocked him seemed like a small part of what was happening here.

"Do you...reason to...one? Of...you..."

What was that partial phrase burned into the back of his mind? Who was that bloody young man he had seen?

It was like the ghost pursuing them didn't realize she was leaking some kind of message.

As far as he could tell, being hit by Frillsand #G's lightning attacks burned a scene into the back of your mind. If that artificial ghost couldn't converse in the normal fashion, that might be one of the few ways she had of conveying information. But all of this was speculation. None of it seemed worth stepping in front of that high-voltage current that could easily cause his entire body to burst.

They still weren't safe. The back of a convenience store was a curious place for Kamijou who had no part-time work experience, but

the rows of drinks kept behind the glass doors apparently continued on back to here. The cans and bottles would slide down a gentle slope to restock the shelves.

The high-voltage current pierced right through those glass doors and plastic bottles. It was on a collision course.

“Ugh!?”

He groaned and felt a pain in his heart, but he belatedly realized nothing had happened to him.

Something was dancing through the cramped space. It was floating in the air as if to protect Alice who he held under his arm, but what was it? A weapon? An oar? It was a long flat panel painted pink.

“A cricket bat,” muttered Youen in a puzzled voice. “Were you *hiding that under your apron?*”

A second and third blast of electricity flew their way, but the bat(?) soared this way and that to block them with sparks flying. Every time, pink feathers scattered from the bat and it squawked like a bird. At times, the oar-shaped bat’s outlines started to distort.

Kamijou had not seen it emerge, but if Youen was to be believed...

“Um, hey.”

“What do you need, teacher?”

“Alice, are you doing this?”

“?”

She smiled and tilted her head in his arm.

Bending at all would be nearly impossible with that large board under her apron and he hadn’t noticed her having any trouble moving before. Had she actually pulled it out at some other time like with a

stage magician's handkerchief, or could she manipulate space like Shirai Kuroko? He couldn't say when he didn't know anything about Alice.

Regardless, they couldn't stay here. Deflecting the attacks wasn't the same thing as shutting them off at the source. With another earsplitting boom, a beam of light shot right past them and scorched the wall.

"Yikes!!"

"It's electricity. That means we need to avoid anywhere that's flooded. This way."

In that case, Kamijou didn't like the idea of any water on the floor at all or any twisted wires. He also wanted to avoid stepping on the broken glass. He never really thought about how sturdy the soles of his shoes were.

But he also had a more fundamental question.

"Who are you? I'm super afraid of the answer, but isn't that a prison uniform?"

"I am Hanatsuyu Youen. I am glad you don't recognize me because it means you're one of those ignorant normal people. One piece of advice: do not search my name online. You will regret it if you do. Checking the news articles won't be too bad, but if you dig deeper than that, your search history might get you put on a watchlist of dangerous individuals."

With a cruel smile that looked weirdly at home on her face, Youen crouched low and approached another metal door. It apparently led to a corridor for workers to transport supplies. The narrow windowless concrete corridor felt so much like an underground tunnel that it was easy to forget how far above the ground they were.

Kamijou set down Alice so she could walk alongside him and she spoke to him with a smile.

"You seem accustomed to electric attacks, teacher."

She wasn't wrong since he happened to know an electric girl with a short temper, but he had never imagined that girl's dysfunctional communication style would one day save his life from something as crazy as a ghost.

"Ideally, we could escape outside the station with this corridor not found on the public diagrams, but I doubt it will be that easy. Whether or not we can defeat her, we need to be ready to break past that ghost called...Frillsand #G was it?" suggested Hanatsuyu Youen, sounding only mildly concerned.

Then Kamijou heard a rustling sound.

He looked over to see the black-haired girl of around 10 had unzipped her thick prison uniform and stripped it off in the middle of the corridor.

She did it so naturally he nearly overlooked it, but then he jumped.

"Whoa!? Wh-what the hell are you doing!?"

"Just return that coat and mask. Oh, and the bag."

"So there really was a girl naked outside? It wasn't just a weird hologram made with bug wings?"

"I guess that was a horrific way for it to end for you. You can overwrite the memory with this."





He couldn't tell how serious she was as she pulled something like a thick belt from her business bag. It looked like the ammunition for a

machinegun in an action movie, but it instead contained countless test tubes carrying colorful liquids.

Alice jumped up from behind Kamijou and (imperfectly) covered his eyes and spoke with a tremor in her voice.

“S-she is shorter than the girl but still has big boobs!?”

“Heh heh. Sexy, aren’t I?”

Youen wrapped the belt around her body (which was unnaturally curvy for a girl of her age), pulled the white coat’s collar together like a yukata, and used a medical corset to fasten it in place like a thick sash.

“There, now I’m ready to fight. And the color of the reagents suggests the chemicals are unaltered.”

“Really?”

“I don’t have to worry about money either. Cash is easily acquired by selling rare insects in violation of the Washington Convention. Or I could soak some random weeds in hallucinogenic insect venom and sell it in the back alleys for at least 100 thousand yen a gram. Heh heh. I have everything I need to earn some running away money.”

“Why do you have to add these lengthy and very concerning explanations?”

It might have been cute if she wore a black lace eyepatch and gothic lolita fashion, carried a “demon sword” decorated with black roses, and was at the age where kids loved Legendary Ultimate Eternal Almighty Magic more than food, but this girl didn’t seem so harmless. Youen wasn’t trying to steal the initiative away from an older boy like Kamijou. She was speaking to herself and checking over each of her abilities to ensure she would be safe.

“Sigh. I thought I was over this, but now that I’m out in the city, there’s so much I want to eat. Like Red Town’s kiwi gyoza.”

“Is Los Angeles just taking over my life now? I don’t have many good memories of that city.”

Anyway, they needed to get outside.

This hidden corridor had no windows and it took a few right-angle turns along the way. It was probably laid out to weave between the rectangular stores bordering the concourse. The twists and turns made it hard to see very far ahead, so they were forced to nervously peak around the corners. Fortunately, they never found any kind of ambush.

After a few turns, they came across something different: a metal shutter and a human-sized metal door alongside it.

Kamijou’s face lit up and he approached it.

“There, that’s it! We can get outside from here!!”

“?”

But one of Youen’s eyebrows shot up like she had felt her phone vibrating in her cleavage. She chose one of the colorful test tubes and pulled it from within her coat. She viewed the surface of the neon yellow liquid inside.

“Wow, it’s rippling,” said Alice in delight.

“Microwaves? No, the reagent’s coloration colloid particles are reacting, so it must be terahertz waves. That’s not good. Hey, you! Get away from that shutter immediately!!”

“?”

For some reason, Youen glared harshly at the concrete next to the shutter instead of the shutter itself. Kamijou had taken a step ahead

of her, so he looked back her way in confusion.

Just then, two loud noises tore into the thick security shutter.

The cause appeared to be a pair of metal darts.

The destruction was focused on the top of the shutter. The upper left and right. That destroyed either the device to roll up the shutter or the latches holding it in place because the shutter dropped to the floor like a dramatic unveiling ceremony.

The view outside opened up.

A girl with twintails stood in front of them wearing strange goggles over her eyes.

“Who is this girl?” shouted Alice on reflex. “She has strong pervert energy!!”

“At the very least, I’m not as weird as you and your short sleeves this time of year!!”

She twirled the short metal darts rapidly between her fingers, keeping them in constant motion.

“I was right to leave that driver back at the platform.” That middle school girl – *Shirai Kuroko of Judgment* – readied several metal darts that could destroy even the toughest and strongest material when she teleported them through space. “Hanatsuyu Youen!! You are under arrest for escaping custody and on suspicion of property damage to the station building!!”

Terahertz waves were special electromagnetic waves that could be used to scan through objects, so they were used in airports in place of magnetic metal detectors and X-ray scanners that could cause health problems. The special waves had an extremely high frequency and a nature midway between light and radio waves, so

they could easily search out the number and locations of people on the other side of a wall.

No toy could be so dangerous in the hands of a teleporter who could ignore all three-dimensional restrictions to directly attack any point in space. Currently, there was no hiding from Shirai Kuroko.

The situation could hardly have been worse, but Youen actually smiled savagely and shoved Kamijou to the side. Her other hand held several test tubes full of colorful liquids.

Before she even popped the rubber caps off with her thumb, the city's shadows were already *crawling* through the ceiling duct and the drain at the edge of the floor.

"My, my. You survived December 25 but still didn't learn a single thing from the darkness?"

"Do not attempt to resist. My darts can break through any and all defenses."

"Can they? That inability to 'strike with the back of the blade' as it were sounds like trouble for a justice exhibitionist like you. I doubt you use those goggles all the time, so how long does the battery last? A few minutes perhaps? But I'm one of the bad guys, so I won't hesitate. You really should have considered what it means to oppose the Carrier who controls every last urban pest and vermin. Oh, right. You had to tap out back on the 25th, didn't you? Abandoning your partner in the process."

"Hanatsuyu Youen!!"

"You stole Kaai from me. Did you think I would just let you get away with that? No matter how powerful your attack is, destroying individual *points* isn't enough to hold back a torrent of death. I will sweep you away with a solid *wall*☆"

They both held deadly weapons at the ready and they both stepped forward as if to provoke the other.

Kamijou didn't like the look of this. This wasn't a clash between a sword and a shield. It was sword against sword. When two people who protected themselves with a deadly force clashed and neither side got scared and put their weapon away, there was no stopping a battle where one side or the other ended up in a pool of their own blood.

Even if they were only trying to defend themselves and had no intention of killing the other.

Even if they would look down at their bloodstained hands and let out a bloodcurdling wail of sorrow once it was all over.

He couldn't let this happen. He had to find some way of stopping it.

(Oh.)

He wasn't sure why he made the decision he did.

But the moment after he shoved Youen aside, the metal dart appeared out of thin air and stabbed into his body.

Part 6

The point of scorching heat rapidly spread until his entire body was on fire.

Kamijou collapsed to the ground. He clenched his teeth, but he couldn't hold in the scream. His body felt like a vortex of agony, so he wasn't even sure where the injury was on him.

“Gah, ahhh.

He couldn't even get up and the hand holding his shoulder was mostly a reflexive thing. It was only then that he realized the metal dart had pierced his shoulder.

The disgusting feeling of the metal sticking in where it didn't belong was more powerful than the simple pain.

Hanatsuyu Youen's jaw dropped as she stared at him screaming and shedding meaningless tears. Shirai Kuroko pushed her terahertz goggles up to her forehead and rushed over.

Alice may not have understood the gravity of the situation because she laughed and mimicked his screams in genuine delight.

“Wh-what do you think you’re doing, you ape!?”

"Don't ask me. But if you feel even a twinge of regret after seeing this blood, then stop teleporting those things at people. You're both using way too much deadly force! Why does Academy City insist on bringing everyone closer to death the higher you go!? I'm starting to

think it's the ordinary Level 0s who are the safest and most at peace!!”

Meanwhile, Youen finally regained her composure and whistled with her hands clasped behind her head.

“Wow, this wasn’t my fault. Maybe I should go tattle to the teachers.”

“You villain!!”

“Here’s the thing, justice exhibitionist. If you don’t want him to die because of you, then you’d better step aside right now. I’ll fix this silly blunder of yours.” Youen held a hand to the center of her unnaturally large chest and winked. “If you need sterilization or disinfection, I can produce some ethanol or *Bifidobacterium*. If you need a pain relief chemical, I can extract it from a mosquito or tick. The quickest way to stop bleeding is to control the coagulation and sewing up a blood vessel requires some sturdy animal thread, right? There are so many options there, from silkworm silk to spider silk. The silkworm is praised as the most plentiful beneficial bug in the world, but it’s really just a grotesque moth larva. This is sounding a lot like my area of expertise, isn’t it?”

“You...?”

Shirai Kuroko couldn’t find the words.

She seemed to know Youen form somewhere and it appeared to come as a complete shock that Youen would *choose to save an injured person’s life*.

However...

“N-no!! Unlicensed medical procedures are against the law! Especially if we are talking about unhygienic surgery using urban pests and vermin!!”

“Sigh. Yet again, justice proves it kills more people than us villains ever could. I can’t imagine why this softhearted idiot would protect me, but this means *I owe him twice*. And I don’t care what you say – I’m not going to let him die until I’ve repaid him with interest.”

“...”

“Paying back your debts sounds like a system unrelated to good and evil to me.”

The two girls’ gazes clashed while they crouched on either side of collapsed Kamijou.

But they didn’t have all day.

Kamijou was still groaning in agony from the deep wound and the unsettling feeling of the metal in his shoulder, but he still managed to reach out an empty hand to draw Youen’s attention by tapping her on the side of the hip.

He couldn’t get his voice out even though the wound was in his shoulder.

His position lying on the floor had allowed him to notice something before the others.

The artificial ghost’s face had just appeared out from a nearby concrete wall.

Whether it was natural or artificial, that was a real ghost. That meant the laws of physics might not apply. But could she really just pass through solid walls? That was cheating in a different way from teleportation. A foe that could do that without warning could sneak up on even by the most experienced combat veteran!!

Did Shirai and Youen even notice the bug zapper sound?

Unlike with the train crash, there wasn’t time to leave Alice and Youen with the teleporter.

Frillsand #G released a massive high-voltage current in all directions.

The white light was brighter than welding at close range and the rumble of the concrete walls and ceiling coming down shook the boy's eardrums.

"Shi...rai!!"

All he could do was shout her name and give her a shove.

A moment later, something blurred and he saw another scene on top of reality. He wasn't sure why, but the phone in his pocket heated up so much he feared it would burn him.

He had misinterpreted what happened last time. It wasn't being hit by the high-voltage current that sent the strange hallucination into his mind. Yes, his phone and the station's devices hadn't malfunctioned because they received a direct hit from that thick beam of electricity.

The entire area around the artificial ghost was faintly electrified.

(My...hair? So that's it. Static electricity or something is surrounding the entire surface of my head.)

The scene played out in hellish slow motion, but he still had no way of avoiding the ghost's attack. Imagine Breaker couldn't negate it. It was possible he could reduce the risk of death from the agonizing shock if he let the hallucination take over. Even if it only increased the odds he could get back up and fight back next time.

A moment later, the mass of high-voltage electricity pierced straight through the center of Kamijou Touma's body.

Part 7

An old man's voice rang through a dizzyingly vast but suffocatingly claustrophobic concrete space.

"The Vanishing Tunnel does not actually exist."

He was answered by a young man who seemed threatened and driven to the edge.

"Do you want my research notes on Frillsand #G?"

Whose memory was this?

It wasn't the old man's or the young man's. Neither one seemed to consider the presence of whoever's eyes were watching them. Like they thought that person had already left the scene.

Maybe they weren't entirely wrong.

The scene felt like a dream. Like the viewer didn't have the ability to interfere in what they were watching.

"I'm no barbarian."

Maybe that was why that person could only watch. Even though they knew the scene was headed toward disaster.

"A few of them."

The old man pointed toward several small children in gym clothes. In the realm known as the dark side, those lives would be consumed in the name of combat or research.

“Just select a few at random.”

The young man had challenged the city’s darkness in order to protect them.

He had even pretended to be a Kihara to bolster his insufficient strength.

Even giving physical form to a pipedream like an artificial ghost and finetuning it as a weapon may have been a part of that goal.

So.

Even if he was backed up to the precipice of death, he had only one possible answer here.

“*Go to hell, you son of a bitch.*”

The observer had known from the beginning how this would end.

Finally, a dry gunshot rang out before their eyes.

They couldn’t do anything to stop it.

Not one thing.

Part 8

The ringing noise filling Kamijou Touma's mind rapidly faded and reality rushed back in.

The high-voltage current might have actually stopped his heart for the few seconds his sense of time had been out of order.

“Gah!!”

The white light was replaced by color.

Sound crept back into the great pressure.

His limbs trembled. If he didn't clench his teeth, he was afraid his convulsions would make him bite off his own tongue.

Something was messing with his mind. This was very bad. He had underestimated the risk. If this kept happening, he was afraid he would lose track of what was his own memory, what was a meaningless hallucination, and what was external data placed in his head.

In the instant of the blast, his senses had been so confused he forgot whether he was standing up or lying down. Everything felt fake, like he was swimming through a strange liquid. But even in that state, what little of his mind was still functioning worked to rejoin reality.

The destruction of the concrete wall was very real.

However, that was not the result of the electric storm released from Frillsand #G's body.

A deep roar shook the ground below them.

The concrete wall across from the one the ghost had emerged through was smashed apart by some great force. It must have been a punching fist or a tackling shoulder. The giant mass of muscle that emerged grabbed Frillsand #G and smashed through the opposite wall to disappear again. The attack made it easy to forget this was a straight corridor. It felt more like a crash at an intersection.

But aside from that, Kamijou forgot all about the pain in his shoulder while lying on the floor.

He was truly shocked.

That had been nothing but muscle.

Pure muscle had overpowered a scientific ghost?

What even was that monster? It looked like someone had taken the body of a storybook ogre and pasted on the head of a skinny middle-aged man with a combover and glasses. There probably were girls who read shoujo manga as a child and honestly wanted a sparkly guy who was disproportionately tall for the size of his handsome face, but there was no way anyone wanted that macho body with a tiny middle-aged head on top.

Yet someone seemed to recognize that otherworldly image.

Shirai Kuroko rubbed her eyes and grimaced before shouting into the hole in the wall.

“Rakuoka Houfu!! What do you think you’re doing!?”

She was only answered by repeated flashes of light and deep zapping sounds coming from the hole. The battle must have been fairly one-sided. A vending machine equipped with AI and a camera

malfunctioed such that a female voice kept repeating “Facial recognition failed. Please take a step back.” while drink bottles spewed from the bottom.

Alice approached dazed Kamijou with a smile. She bent over and rubbed the top of her little blonde head against his stomach. The two pointy curls that resembled animal ears actually hurt a fair bit.

“Teacher.”

“Yes, that girl’s intuition is correct. The ghost is the greatest threat, so escaping the station is our top priority if we want to survive.” Youen spoke on Alice’s behalf. “I say we let the justice exhibitionist play her stupid role while we do the smart thing and get the hell out of here. Can you stand? If not, I can surround you with bees or ants and force you onto your feet with them. Go, creepy-crawly powered suit☆”

“No need!!” he insisted, springing to his feet. Having tens of thousands of ants and bees covering him too thoroughly for cutaneious respiration and tugging his arms and legs around like a puppet was the stuff of nightmares. But it turned out intense fear worked great to eliminate less-important pain and suffering. He doubted his sanity was going to last long like this, though.

“Hey, where do you think you’re going!?”

“Tch. The goody-goody freak noticed. But an emergency evacuation comes first right now!!”

They hurried him along, but Youen and Alice were too small to lend Kamijou a shoulder. He was forced to clench his teeth and walk forward under his own power.

They had to get through the broken shutter and outside the station.

Then they could escape this deadly nightmare.

Or so he thought.

After hearing a sharp “zing!!”, they ducked back toward building.

“What?”

Kamijou noticed orange sparks and a shallow scrape in the asphalt near his feet.

Someone was firing on them from a distance.

Part 9

Kamijou's group weren't the only ones shocked.

(What is that? A flamingo bat? That animal ears girl must be some kind of weirdo to choose a non-baseball bat in this country.) The sniper wore a cowboy hat and a red China dress. You couldn't find that kind of clothing at an ordinary store, so she must have stolen it back from the confiscated items being transported along with her in the Overhunting. She gulped at what she assumed that picture book dress girl must have done. A pink oar-like object had floated into the air and blocked the ricocheted bullet.

(Is she an esper, or is that a next-generation weapon? No, I can worry about the exact definition later! I just hope it isn't something *truly incomprehensible* like that Coin of Nicholas.) She lay on her stomach atop a store building on the other side of a major road from South District 7 Station. A semiauto sniper rifle's stock was pressed against her shoulder and a plastic case bearing the Anti-Skill logo sat nearby.

(Sigh. Anti-Skill must not get paid very much. Wait, do they even get a special bonus beyond their ordinary teacher's pay?) A whirring motor hovered overhead.

"Yeah, these drones are more convenient than I expected. I honestly thought anything was fine as long it had a camera and could store images."

She used a mirrorless multifunction scope that displayed both the moisture and EM waves in the air to check around the destroyed metal shutter again, but she displayed a different window at the same time. With those small drones, she wouldn't miss the crucial

moment even if it happened inside the giant closed room that was the station building.

“You can’t tempt a scoop junkie like me with such a juicy incident. Now I’ve just got to get a really shocking pic☆”

Yes. Benizome Jellyfish was a paparazzo who was willing to kill if it would get her what she wanted and nothing would ever change that. She even licked her lips as she kept whispering to herself.

“Don’t give me that. I can’t have you escaping to safety, you little chicks. I went to the trouble of hiding out with my camera at the ready, after all. I’ll give you some chaos to start with, but I need to you to grow this into an incident with a shockingly high body count☆”

Part 10

More orange sparks scattered from the asphalt. This time, it was less than 30cm from Kamijou's shoe. Shirai shouted "Benizome", which he assumed to be a name.

The mysterious sniper fire kept them from leaving the station.

"Th-this is bad." Kamijou had gone entirely pale. "And the worst part is I'm barely even questioning the presence of a real sniper rifle here in Japan."

"Wow, it's already night outside. The girl wants to spend the night with her teacher. She wants to talk about things she can't tell anyone else!!"

Alice rejoiced for entirely unrelated reasons, so he grabbed the back of her collar to restrain her while walking back into the station building. He was afraid she would run out into the sniper fire with a big smile.

There were two large holes in the corridor walls. Sparking light came from one, suggesting the battle between the ghost and the muscles was still ongoing. That meant it would safer to try the other hole, the one Rakuoka Houfu had come from.

But Youen was still calm enough to think rationally. Which he found unbelievable.

"The accuracy of those shots suggests the sniper can see the moisture and electricity in the air. Bullets weren't exactly rare in Operation Handcuffs, so I would rate them a lower-middle threat maybe? The biggest threats were all bizarre nonsense."

“You are imagining things,” insisted Shirai. “It is the 29th. That nightmare ended on the 25th!!”

“For example, this justice exhibitionist’s teleportation. But I never saw that ghost back then.”

Could they confuse the sniper with Youen’s 3D images? No. No matter how many false images they created, it was still up to luck who the sniper actually targeted. That wouldn’t eliminate all risk of the girls being shot.

The hole in the wall led to a shower room. That seemed like an odd thing for a train station, but it may have been for the station workers. They couldn’t return home in their uniforms, so maybe they needed a place to change and freshen up. With the wall broken through, it was impossible to tell where the general public was and wasn’t supposed to go.

They walked across the tile floor and found a locker room. There was a bench with a back, so Kamijou finally got to sit down.

Low tremors continued to shake the floor.

Hanatsuyu Youen was focused on his shoulder.

“I should probably treat your shoulder wound now.”

“Eh? What?”

“First, I will remove the dart.”

The agonizing pain made stars dance before his eyes.

It honestly felt like the wound had swollen to several times its size.

He let out an incomprehensible shout, but he wasn’t sure the sounds leaving his mouth and the ones entering his ears were actually the same.

He was glad the dart didn't have a barb. Removing what was plugging up the wound definitely caused the bleeding to increase, but the wicked 10-year-old wasn't concerned.

"I need to disinfect the wound before I stop the bleeding. Come on out, you adorable maggots!"

"What? What did you just say, you horrible girl!?"

"Have you never heard of maggot therapy? Ignorant, hotblooded, and short-tempered is so not a good combination."

She intertwined spider silk around a hornet stinger and used that to sew up a thick blood vessel and then used a coagulating mixture of snake venoms to seal up the wound itself. The difference between poison and medicine was mostly in how the substance was used, so there may not have been a strict boundary between the two. Of course, an amateur attempting it would only get the patient killed.

In other words, this small Carrier didn't lack the skills to help instead of harm and it wasn't that the option had never occurred to her.

She could do it, but didn't.

The option was right there in front of her, but she didn't choose it. Was that due to her personal interests and preferences? Or had she lived a life where her situation never allowed for that option?

It didn't seem to bother her any and she patted her small hand on the closed wound.

"There, all done. When I decide to heal someone, I make sure not to leave a scar. You'd better cry your eyes out in thanks."

She blew him a kiss and then pointed her small thumb toward a tall machine tucked into the gap between two sections of lockers.

"The bleeding has stopped, but you'll still want some vitamin C or folic acid. I'll buy you some vegetable juice from that vending

machine, so hand over some change.”

“Vitamins?”

“As ingredients for a hematinic drug. Closing up the wound doesn’t bring back the blood you lost.”

That made perfect sense.

Needing blood made him think of iron-rich foods like liver or spinach, but if an expert in the field (what field?) said this was best, he wasn’t going to argue. Blood had several different components, so maybe there were ways beyond directly ingesting iron.

However...

“I-I only have 49 yen.”

“Garbage. Human garbage,” spat the white coat girl, giving him the look of a girl when her worthless date left her with the entire bill.

Kamijou’s shoulders drooped at his utter failure in the New Year’s Tokyo survival life, but then he felt something crinkle at his feet.

It was a rolled up 10000yen bill.

“Good fortune does exist!!”

“It’s lying near a change machine, so take it and I’m handcuffing you for theft,” warned Shirai.

“Fine, whatever. You can let the fugitive criminal take care of it.”

Youen swiped the money from terrified Kamijou’s hand and inserted it into the vending machine. She ignored Shirai’s protests and bought all of the vegetable and fruit drinks shown on the display.

“Go, creepy-crawly fusion☆”

"You aren't just going to give me the drink as-is!?"

"I said they were only ingredients, didn't I? Now say 'ah'♪"

"Wait, no! I'll drink it, I'll drink it! I won't waste your home cooking, so at least let me decide when I do it!"

"Shut up, you."

"Hm? Why did you just put it in your mouth!? I really don't have any good memories when it comes to receiving sketchy drugs mouth-to-mouth!!!???"

The mystery liquid allowed Kamijou Touma to realize the male dream of a cute girl giving him his medicine mouth-to-mouth. And unlike with Anna, this wasn't even poison. For some reason, Alice stared jealously with her mouth forming a small triangle.

This was supposed to help with his blood, but his mouth tasted like a grassy soup.

After pulling away and letting out a breath, Youen held a finger to her lips in realization. The gloomy but hard-to-read girl whispered to herself.

"Oops. That was my first kiss, wasn't it?"

His male dream received an added bonus. This was reaching legendary levels on par with warming each other's naked bodies with a cute girl while snowed into a mountain cabin. (Q1. By what miracle would a guy end up snowed in alone with the kind of girl he would normally be too nervous to even talk to?) At this point, he was terrified a horrifying catch was about to reveal itself.

"(And here's half the change.)"

"(Why do I get a 5000yen bill while you get four 1000yen bills and 520yen in coins? The way you can combine substances into just

about anything, I don't like the idea of you carrying around several different metals like that.)"

She placed the money in his hand and he whispered back with a shadow on his face. If he didn't get that money back from her, he feared she would use it to create a chemical that could melt through anything. But if he did take it from her, he feared she would claim he owed her a debt.

"So is all that stuff with bugs and snakes really safe? The area around the wound feels hot. I'd swear it's swollen to twice its size."

"You're just imagining things. But if the pain bothers you that much, I could inject the affected area with a medicinal leech's anesthetic. The stuff makes sure you don't feel a thing while the leech tears through your skin with saw-like teeth and gorges on your blood, so it's more effective than the morphine issued by the military. Although if I did use hirudin, your blood wouldn't clot and the wound would open back up."

"No, thanks!! I don't want to rely too much on drugs!!"

Shouting made his shoulder throb with heat.

He grimaced and groaned, which created a heavier mood.

He told himself to be more careful about that. They were already in a bind, so the most badly injured person's mood could affect the overall mood.

"Let's review what we know."

He had refused the easy help of anesthesia himself, so he would have to accept the pain in his shoulder. He tried not to let it show on his face as she got talking.

"The station is deserted, a weird ghost is wandering around, and she got in a fight with some mass of muscles. We were right to conclude

this place is dangerous, but when we tried to leave, a sniper fired warning shots to push us back in. If we tried to force our way out, I bet they really would have shot us.”

Shirai Kuroko sighed.

“At 17:20 today, the Overhunting prisoner transport train issued a break alert within South District 7 Station. That means criminals from Operation Handcuffs are loose in and around this station. The muscles, the sniper, and this pest here are the fugitives who triggered the break alert. But the ghost I have no information on. The Overhunting’s EM brakes and a few other safety devices malfunctioned, so I would imagine the ghost played a role in the crash, though.”

“Ee em brakes?” asked Alice, tilting her head and smiling. She was harmless as long as her attention was on that, but Kamijou feared she would start poking at his treated wound if he let his guard down.

“It’s an emergency brake system that uses electromagnets to clamp down on the trains wheels,” explained Shirai. “But contrary to what you might think, it doesn’t send electricity to the device to produce the magnetism needed to stop the train. The magnetism is always on to keep the brake pads open and the electricity is cut off in an emergency, freeing the brake pads’ springs.”

“Wait, but how could that malfunction?”

If the electromagnets were used to stop the heavy wheels, a lack of power would cause a malfunction. But when the electromagnets were preventing the springs from returning to their original position, electrical trouble would cause the brakes to activate.

That wouldn’t lead to the train crashing at full speed.

“That is why I think that ghost is behind it. Really, it’s scary to think that anyone other than Onee-sama can control such a deadly

amount of electricity. But this doesn't tell us who they are or why they attacked the Overhunting."

"It has to be someone involved in Operation Handcuffs," said Youen. "And the whatever tech that ghost is using doesn't seem to be standard issue Anti-Skill or Judgment gear."

"Are you suggesting it's a criminal neither of us are familiar with?"

"My guess is she was the final boss of that crazy bloodbath. *If we had seen Handcuffs through to the end, we might have encountered her then.*"

"There it is again," muttered Kamijou.

Good Shirai Kuroko and bad Hanatsuyu Youen both turned his way and innocent Alice followed suit without appearing to understand what this was about.

He continued now that their attention was on him.

"You keep mentioning that term. What is that Operation Handcuffs thing?"

His question earned a sigh from both the good and the bad. They narrowed their eyes as if to criticize him for being so behind the times, but also with some envy of his ignorance.

Then they both explained it for him.

Operation Handcuffs.

It had started as the *new* Board Chairman's sweep of Academy City's dark side.

The initial focus had been on shining sunlight on all that darkness, so it was a long-term plan that included rehabilitating the arrested criminals so they could be released as productive members of society.

But that had fallen apart somewhere along the way.

The information had gotten confused and the cause was still under investigation. Some claimed that the damage had grown beyond anyone's expectations when some criminals slipped past Anti-Skill *with an uncanny level of luck* and furious Anti-Skill had drawn their lethal weapons and relied on deadly force. There had been heavy losses on both sides.

The two girls made a point of mentioning the Coins of Nicholas as a key item.

They took about an hour to charge, but if you held one in your hand and prayed, a locked door would open, you would win the lottery you were playing, or *something else bordering on miraculous would occur*. That was apparently how the criminals had escaped the smart encirclement and gotten in an unexpected "lucky punch".

"Hold on," interrupted Kamijou, pale in the face. "Coins of Nicholas? Those have got to be spiritual items. There's no way they're a product of the science side's research. Why was a magic side toy being passed around in Academy City's darkness!? In a way, that's one of the biggest taboos out there!!"

"?"

"?"

Shirai and Youen both tilted their heads. They weren't playing dumb to hide something from him – they simply weren't familiar with the terms "spiritual item" or "magic side".

But that was a major problem in and of itself. What if those coins were given to people with no understanding of how they worked and they kept using them with no knowledge of the risks and downsides?

(Was there something magical going on this city and I didn't even know about it?)

His anxiety spiked.

The Coins of Nicholas were extremely effective and creepy, but no one would give them away for free like that. He didn't know who, but someone had benefited from it.

(So that operation was the *new* Board Chairman's plan? I sure hope he wasn't letting R&C Occultics or someone trick him. Setting aside what their exact domains are, *the magic side and science side do not get along*. Hopefully he understands that.)

"Yawwn."

His thoughts were interrupted by a weirdly lengthy yawn.

It came from Alice who leaned against him on the bench and helped herself to his lap pillow. He couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"How are you sleeping when we're still at risk here?"

"No! The girl was not asleep! Because she is staying up all night with you!!"

She tried to sound very awake, but she was still slumped down in his lap pillow. The most she could manage was waving her little hands up from the bench. She always seemed overly careless for the situation. She rubbed her eyes while muttering something.

"Guh. The only actual occult element of Operation Handcuffs was the Coins of Nicholas. But ghosts are occult too, so does that mean the ghost is connected to the coins?"

"I...don't think so?" Kamijou looked down at his right hand. "Alice, I know you know this."

It wasn't just the electricity that pierced him to the core. His little finger still hurt from its burn. That meant Imagine Breaker did not work on the ghost. How was still a mystery, but that ghost had to be

something scientific. She had to be separate from the purely magical Coins of Nicholas.

It was Alice's immediate realization of that fact that let her shove him out of the way and save his life.

"Hm, then it's a lot more straightforward. She would count as an ordinary robber, so wouldn't there be a record somewhere?"

"But that justice exhibitionist and I didn't see Handcuffs through to the end. We don't know what went down later on."

"..."

Could they be making a crucial misunderstanding here?

That concern suddenly crossed Kamijou's mind. It wasn't that they had made the wrong decision back at the beginning. It was more like *there was someone else they should have been more worried about*. Like they had mistaken the fundamental cast of characters and now they would never find some of the basic information they needed to reach the correct answer. That worthless fantasy rapidly grew in his mind.

Shirai had remained silent for a bit now, but she finally pulled out her phone.

"Uiharu. Can you hear me, Uiharu!? Yes, yes. I'm sure it's because Frillsand #G is producing so much electricity, but you're supposed to be one of the best in the IT field, so use some trick of yours to get me a connection. Right this instant!!"

"Geez. Ksh. Why do so many people think hackers are basically witches?"

The girl on the other end complained but still got Shirai a connection right away.

Kamijou and the others couldn't believe it, but Shirai just gave her next instructions.

"Gather all the records you can find on December 25."

"What are you looking for? There were so many deaths that wouldn't narrow it down much. I mean, around half of Anti-Skill is either dead or resigned due to mental issues. They're trying to keep up appearances, but I doubt they're really functioning as an organization anymore. They haven't touched this Winter Cleaning stuff."

Youen leaned forward with a "tell me more" look on her face, so Kamijou held her back. Shirai Kuroko glanced over at them before continuing.

"Then give me data on any criminals who managed to destroy an Anti-Skill branch or caused equivalent damage."

"Coming right up," said the girl on the phone. "Two girls thought to be the twins who call themselves the Decomposer and the Carrier attacked the South District 7 General Anti-Skill Station. More than 99.9% of the personnel inside were killed or injured. The majority of the dead were decomposed to the point that their genetic information was destroyed, which has made identifying the bodies a challenge. Shirai-san, you were there when it happened, weren't you?"

"Oh, that's about me. I'm the Carrier one."

"Bff!?" spat Kamijou.

Youen didn't sound particularly proud. She made it sound as casual as reporting on the results of a grocery run.

"Kaai and I also destroyed the Anti-Skill Chemical Analysis Center in District 18's twin towers, but that turned out to be bait so I guess you can call it a draw."

This explained the harsh looks Shirai Kuroko had been giving the girl.

And the report from the phone wasn't done yet. They were only getting started.

"The District 1 General Anti-Skill Station was attacked by Kihara Hasuu and a girl known as Ladybird using a prisoner transport vehicle. They wiped out the ordinary Anti-Skill officers and some special forces known as Anti-Skill Aggressor and appear to have sabotaged the station's server to shut down the network. I find it hard to believe, but the girl is reported to have deflected full-auto gunfire with only a heavy metal machete and thrown herself on top of a grenade to protect her surroundings. Not to mention the Anti-Skill Aggressor radio records include the phrase "She's a machine, so how the hell can she use telekinesis?" There isn't enough information to say whether that claim is legitimate or not.

"This is unconfirmed, but a few Anti-Skill officers in a District 8 street were apparently found dead due to friendly fire. No detailed records remain, but reports from people in the area suggest a girl named Vivana Oniguma was involved.

"20 Anti-Skill officers were killed or left in a state of confusion after attempting to raid a dark side mobile trailer base in the unmanned industrial section of District 17. The direct cause appears to be a supposed artificial ghost named Frillsand #G, but she was apparently acting as a hyper-aggressive decoy so a researcher named Drencher Kihara Repatri and some unidentified children referred to as 'specimens' could escape."

That was a lot of information.

It included some names not present here in this station. It also didn't explain the sniper or the mass of muscles they knew were inside or near the station.

Kamijou guessed some of the mentioned people were already dead.

This much was already complicated and it didn't even touch on the magic side plot that spread the Coins of Nicholas, so he doubted they were even looking at the whole picture of what had happened on the night of the 25th.

However, one part stuck out to him.

"Frillsand #G. That's the ghost who's been causing trouble here, isn't it? But..."

He trailed off.

Shirai Kuroko continued for him.

"Uiharu. Give us details on everyone connected to Frillsand #G. For example, who is this Drencher Kihara Repatri? It sounds like he was involved in Handcuffs, but he wasn't aboard the Overhunting and he isn't in this station."

"Yes, well, doesn't that suggest a *certain possibility*?"

A short silence followed.

No one wanted to say it out loud.

"No body was found for Drencher Kihara Repatri. It seems like the criminals were attempting to escape outside of the city toward the end of Handcuffs, but I doubt any of them succeeded. If he wasn't on the Overhunting and isn't in a hospital's ICU, we should assume he didn't survive. He just hasn't been found yet."

"..."

A young man whose corpse hadn't been found. And he had a connection to Frillsand #G.

Could he be the man from the scene that burst into the back of Kamijou's mind whenever those electric attacks were flying?

“Umm, Shirai-san? Hello, you’re breaking up. Ksshhh, Shira-ksshhh!!”

The connection suddenly died.

A source of signal interference was slowly approaching. Just like the TV or radio signal growing staticy as a large typhoon or thick thunderclouds blew in.

The artificial ghost had been willing to act as a decoy against a squad of Anti-Skill officers to help Drencher and the children escape safely. But Drencher was nowhere to be found, Frillsand #G was running wild, and she was wandering around attacking any Handcuffs survivors. Kamijou was starting to get what the ghost was fighting for.

Vengeance.

Perhaps all ghosts were bound to the world of the living for some tragic reason.

Something exploded.

The nearby concrete wall burst apart and several metal lockers were knocked over as a huge mass of muscle rolled into the room.

“Rakuoka!” shouted Shirai, eyes wide. Strangely, she had the tone of someone worried about a friend’s wellbeing.

But the others had bigger concerns.

“Hello. This is Frillsand #G-chan.”

A face emerged from the hole in the wall, swaying irregularly side to side.

“Next stop: fried to a crisp. Repeat: fried to a crisp.”

Something was slowly but surely approaching.

“Po. Popopopopopo, popo...po.....po.....popopo.....
po.....po.”

Slowly but surely approaching them.

“Am I pretty?”

They heard the sound of gathering electricity and all the shower nozzles burst open at once.

Frillsand #G.

They had no way of avoiding her. But the water soaking the floor and walls must have come as a surprise for the ghost as well. A fearsome lightning bolt was redirected so it flew right past Kamijou.

Corrupted text appeared on the shower temperature displays until “42 degrees” glowed from all of them in a red light. Wasn’t that the dividing line between life and death with a fever?

Kamijou lowered his static-covered head to look at his right hand, but Imagine Breaker couldn’t negate this. An invisible force enveloped his head and data gradually seeped into his brain from outside his skull.

A scene from the past began to play.

“They’re just kids. And it’s not like I’m asking for all of them. Just two or three will do.”

“I wanted to protect them from the dark side scum who think like that.”

A young man had lost his life in a place no one in the world recognized.

For some reason, *she* had been helpless to do anything but watch.

It wasn't an issue of courage or motivation. Her nature as an artificial ghost had gotten in the way. So she had been helpless to do anything. But that didn't mean she had accepted what happened.

That young man had spent his life to protect those small children and successfully found someone in the dark side worth handing the children over to. He had breathed his last with a smile on his lips.

She had watched it all.

"How could you throw away your own life over this!? When you get down to it, those kids are just strangers! How could a goddamn harmful go this far just because you 'wanted to save them'!? How!?
Tell me!?"

"Do you need a reason to protect someone? Of course you don't."

So he had lost his life.

And *her* inability to do anything about it had broken something deep inside her.

Kamijou Touma's mind resurfaced as a blinding light flashed before his eyes.

"Agh!!"

He lost his equilibrium and nearly fell to the side, but he managed to stay on his feet.

He could tell there was some connection between the electricity and his brain, but he couldn't explain what exactly was going on in his head. He felt the same fear as being cursed and then suffering from a mysterious fever or finding a wound shaped like a human face. It was the same horror as seeing the doctor try everything they could think of and then throw in the towel.

But the passion swirling inside him was enough to sweep aside that fundamental fear.

What had he just seen?

Frillsand #G was not doing this because she hated Kamijou's group or was after the bounty on the fugitives. But that was why she wasn't really viewing the reality around her. Her rampage was on a deeper level, so she could not be reasoned with.

A good person had been killed and she had been unable to stop it, so she had lost sight of who she was and now continued to cause further damage. Wasn't that the whole story here!?

He wanted to speak with her. To exchange words with her.

But he doubted that was possible anymore. That point had passed before he even met her. The keyhole was right there in front of him, but the key had already been broken and thrown away.

With her blonde twintails, white skin, and doll-like blue dress, she looked European, but Frillsand #G was a *very Japanese kind of ghost*. She couldn't be destroyed by holding up a holy cross and sprinkling holy water on her. Writing a Buddhist sutra all over your body would do nothing to stop her from ripping your ears off. She was a different sort of paranormal being.

There was only one person in the world who could possibly stop her now: Drencher Kihara Repatri.

Anyone could come up with that answer, but no one could make it happen.

She was like the vengeful ghosts in many stories who were doomed to eternally wander the earth because they had lost the one solution to their problem. Like someone forever searching for their body after it was mistakenly cremated while they were astral projecting, like a stalker ghost who was forever attempting to pursue a woman who

had already died by suicide, or like the spirit of a serial killer's victim who pursued their killer without realizing they had already been executed. Frillsand #G was searching for something she could never find, yet no one among the living could ever inform her of that.

(Wait.)

But.

Kamijou Touma had a fundamental question about all this.

Operation Handcuffs had rocked the shadows of Academy City. It would leave its name in scientific history due to the countless tragedies that he was sure the simple reports did nothing to adequately describe.

Anyone would want to cover their eyes at what they were seeing. But what if?

Handcuffs was something you wouldn't hear about if you lived an ordinary life in Academy City. And a lot of strange technology had been at play there.

Frillsand #G was the perfect example, since she was an artificial ghost.

Then there were Youen and her twin Kaai with their roles as the Carrier and Decomposer.

There was that mass of muscles Rakuoka Houfu and the unidentified sniper. Even the Vivana Oniguma who had only been listed as a name had likely used some kind of technology all her own.

There was some other puzzle here.

He had to throw out his preconceptions that this was nothing but unmitigated tragedy. He had to focus on all the technology laid out on both sides of the field. The night of December 25 had already passed. He could not return to that time. But those events had led

directly to this on the 29th, so the same technology, or remnants of it, had to still be in the city.

Was it really true that the mysterious dark side could only cause death and destruction?

He couldn't let those assumptions lead him astray.

Technology didn't take sides.

Military martial arts were designed to kill, but that same knowledge could be used to provide first aid. A chef license and nutritional science were used to support a healthy diet, but that same knowledge could be abused to include enough salt and sugar to shorten someone's lifespan or to create a torturous dish that was unbearably foul to taste.

This was the same.

The question was how all these different technologies would be used.

He had to rethink this horrific puzzle and take another look at Operation Handcuffs. Was there really no salvation left in that incident? Was there really nothing there they could still use now?

Really???

(No.)

This grudge came from an artificially-created ghost.

So could that same artificial method be used again?

Was it possible?

"It might just work."

Part 11

“Hello, this is Frillsand #G-chan. I am currently behind you.”

A deep, unsteady female voice echoed across a flooded shower room with a broken wall and pipes.

The source had long, blonde twintails and a doll-like dress.

She took step after step through the puddles without making a sound and she passed through the walls and pillars with ease.

High Voltage Cutting.

With both ion sheaths and shock diamonds, releasing powerful enough energy for long enough would create unusual interference and overlapping. Intentionally creating and manipulating this to make someone nonexistent appear in the physical world was the foundation of artificial ghost technology, but Frillsand #G in particular used a giant civilization battery constructed from a combination of the copper, zinc, and other metals found wherever people lived and the acid rain produced by the carbon dioxide and nitrogen oxide constantly produced by human society.

Ultimately, that energy source could come from an entire city, an entire country, or the entire world. She was an artificial ghost who would never disappear unless humanity abandoned every last one of its civilizations.

Attempting to exorcise her was a fool’s errand.

You could build a solemn shrine and desperately worship her as a god, but whether or not she stopped was entirely up to her mood.

She was like a natural disaster supported by chemistry and physics.

“...Drencher.”

Someone had said Operation Handcuffs was already over.

They had said the dark said was no more.

But if so...

“Besides, I have a secret weapon prepared for this special day.”

“Tah dah!! It’s foie gras. I’m going to sauté it in the frying pan.”

They hadn’t had anywhere near enough money. They may have gathered more than average, but anyone would have trouble making ends meet when looking after so many children.

But he had never let his weak smile fade.

She knew that fool had scraped together whatever he could to give the children a feast so they could have something special for Christmas.

“Oh, Drencher...”

Drencher Kihara Repatri.

That infamous Kihara name had been a complete lie.

The usual justice and charity weren’t enough to save the children swallowed up by the dark side, so that endlessly caring man had mastered the worst of worst, built up a position for himself, and then saved those young lives from the darkness.

The artificial ghost bit her lip that did not biologically exist.

He was no more.

If his ultimate sacrifice had caused the dark side to disintegrate, then the small place he had left behind would vanish along with it.

Could she really let that happen?

She knew, of course, that Drencher Kihara Repatri had loathed the city's darkness more than anyone and had wanted to save as many lives from it as possible, so the destruction of the dark side had been the thing he longed for and dreamed of.

But.

Even so.

Frillsand #G could not accept it. That man was such a fool and so kind and he had worked so hard and even sacrificed his life to protect those children. How could she let all record of his life be swallowed up by the waves of time until he might as well have not existed at all?

No one wants to remember what happened? So what?

People are better off not knowing? Why should she care?

Maybe the people in charge had cleverly covered it up and maybe the masses had obediently looked away, but if she wasn't satisfied, she would pry open the seal they had placed on that hell. She would show them that her rage came from their attempt to bury all evidence of that man's life.

Some of the criminals remained.

Operation Handcuffs was not over.

If she fought with them and resumed the fight to the death, surely she would be back in the same world as that man.

Surely.

Please someone tell me it's true.

I don't care if I'm wrong about it all. Just don't tell me to deny how I feel.

“Ah, ahhh.”

God, please save that kind fool.

And if you do not, please allow me to rip this pain from my heart.

Part 12

Fearsome electricity surged in every direction.

It radiated out from a central figure.

Finding some kind of shield wasn't enough this time. Thick reinforced concrete broke like styrofoam and the row of metal lockers exploded. The vortex of destruction was so great it was a miracle the entire station and adjoining buildings didn't collapse.

Imagine Breaker would not negate this

If not for the long pink cricket bat that popped out from below Alice's apron and flew around her, Kamijou would have been hit and killed by the lightning. In fact, the bat wasn't alone this time. Several balls dropped down from below her apron and then sharp needles shot out in every direction.

The effect was unclear. Or rather, he didn't have time to watch what they did.

He was too busy escaping the locker room even if he had to roll along the ground.

“Ahhhh!?”

He couldn't afford to worry about the wound Youen had treated and sewn up. He grabbed smiling Alice under his other arm (because she didn't seem to grasp the situation and didn't try to escape) and pushed open the metal door on the opposite end of the room. There he found a few office desks lined up with one wall covered in LCD monitors. Those would be for displaying the security camera footage

from the station building and platforms. Some unfamiliar machines were lined up along another wall. He tilted his head until he realized what they were. They were ticket machines. He could remember a few times when his change or smart card had gotten stuck and a worker had opened a metal slit to speak to him from the other side of the wall.

Youen listened to the explosions through the wall while she took a look at her test tubes and pulled out a few that contained a muddy brown liquid. She threw them away.

“Tch. A few of my artificial pheromones are ruined. The test tubes have an airtight seal, so is that ghost using electrolysis? No, this may be photolysis, which only needs a bright enough light. If we keep running away, I’m going to lose more and more of my stock.”

Shirai Kuroko wasn’t sure how to react. She liked the idea of a criminal losing her weapons, but she didn’t like the idea of losing the weapons they needed to survive.

Then the twintailed Judgment girl turned toward Kamijou.

“Anyway, *what ‘just might work?’*”

“Teacher, you did say that.”

Alice nodded repeatedly. She seemed eager to join any conversation related to him.

“No one can defeat that ghost called...Frillsand #G was it?” He glanced over at some grainy security camera footage. “But I do know why she’s doing this: Drencher Kihara Repatri. If he was here, he could convince her to stop.”

“That doesn’t do us much good.”

“Right. He wasn’t in the Overhunting’s records and there’s no record of him being hospitalized either, so the odds are good he died during

Handcuffs. I know that.”

Kamijou did not deny how bad their situation was.

However.

“But we know this is an *artificial ghost* since my right hand doesn’t work. And if it’s possible to create a ghost purely with technology, then couldn’t you drag a dead man back to the realm of the living?”

“...”

“...”

No one responded for a while. That wasn’t a surprise from good Shirai Kuroko, but it also applied to Hanatsuyu Youen who would throw out certain possibilities because she saw herself as a bad person.

He understood this wasn’t an easy thing to agree with.

This would be an unthinkable kind of violation. He felt a solid taboo in his hands. He knew all that, but he still couldn’t abandon this possibility he had discovered.

“I mean, what happened is so sad.” He found himself speaking without meaning to. “All of Handcuffs was. So many people died and it didn’t accomplish anything. But I’m thinking about Frillsand #G who we’re all treating like a villain just because she’s grieving someone’s death.”

Kamijou Touma had not been involved on the night of the 25th. He had fought a different deadly battle on the 24th and 25th and been left groaning in a hospital bed.

But what did that matter?

“Don’t you want to change this tragic ending?”

Just say it.

It's not about whether or not you're qualified.

Anyone would do. Raise an objection against that tragedy!! Don't turn away and say you can't bear to look at it. Face it head-on and figure out if there's anything you can do to help now!!!!!!

"I don't care what kind of trick we have to use. Don't you want to use everything found through Handcuffs to actually save her and give the finger to the god in heaven who let all this happen?"

All technology could be reproduced.

When a new tank, mine, rocket, or other weapon appeared on the battlefield, the enemy would be using the exact same thing before long.

Finally, one of the girl's sighed.

"The ethical and moral aspects don't matter to me. I just don't want to explode from all that electricity. If you have a plan to avoid that, I'm all ears." The exasperated comment came from Youen the Carrier. "We can set up a ghostly date if we want, but do you have any guarantee a second ghost based on this one will last very long? It won't be much of an emotional reunion if he only exists for a few nanoseconds. I also hope they don't blow up the whole city as soon as their powerful electrical energy bodies tearfully embrace."

"Yeah, a hug might not be all that satisfying between two intangible ghosts," agreed Kamijou.

This was a puzzle, so he hadn't expected a single piece to solve it.

"But the artificial ghost wasn't the only piece of bizarre tech seen at Handcuffs. There was that Ladybird android who could use an esper power despite being a machine. If she really exists, couldn't we give the intangible ghost a tangible body?"

“...”

“I don’t know how we would attach the ghost to the machine body, but there might be some tech we could use. Youen, maybe your chemicals or microbes. Or, Shirai, maybe that quantum 11th dimensional awareness you can handle like it’s nothing!”

Operation Handcuffs had been more than just death and destruction.

If they combined the technologies used by both sides of the conflict, they could even obtain the ability to overturn a decisive tragedy.

They had to cast out their biases.

They couldn’t let their assumptions and preconceptions lead them astray.

They had to remember that Handcuffs was originally envisioned as a way to tear down the dark side and help the people found there. For every piece of death and destruction, there had to be a corresponding piece of life and salvation.

What did the dark side label matter?

Was that any reason to just shrug and give up?

I’m sick of your shit, misfortune. Sure, I didn’t make it in time on the 25th, but it’s not too late.

I’ll show you how Kamijou Touma does things.

“We can’t know how Frillsand #G works just from observing her. And we have nothing beyond Ladybird’s name. So is there anything we can do!? You were both involved in Handcuffs, so do you have any ideas? Like where any of them had their hideouts or labs!? Anywhere the plans or equipment for their tech could be hidden!!”

“Yes, yes, yes.” Youen casually raised her hand. “I had some small connection with Ladybird – or really, Kihara Hasuu who created her.

That old man was connected to the corpse disposers you can find crawling all throughout the District 10 landfill. Those disposers would periodically receive corpses from the Kiharas and remove anything of value they could find. Those disposers would sometimes pay Kaai and me a lot of money to help melt down the parts they didn't need. Following the path of bodies back should lead us to Kihara Hasuu... and his android lab."

Kamijou and Shirai were horrified by the flood of disturbing words in that explanation, but Youen only shrugged with a "don't let that shock you" look.

But why would someone building a mechanical android need human corpses?

"Frillsand #G is a complete unknown for me, though. Judgment, what about you? The official announcements claim Operation Handcuffs is over. That wasn't a lie, was it?"

"How would I know? I haven't seen any records related to Drencher or Frillsand #G, so we should assume an entire group participating in Handcuffs went overlooked." Shirai Kuroko sighed in disgust. "But if we want information on the dark side, wouldn't it be best to ask someone else from the dark side?"

Kamijou's eyes wandered through the air.

No, he had turned toward something on the other side of the building walls.

He could only think of one other person they could ask.

"That sniper. They're a Handcuffs survivor too, right?"

"Her name is Benizome Jellyfish, a paparazzi willing to kill to get a scoop. But she is basically a professional peeping tom, so she probably would know a lot about *other people's secrets*."

Part 13

A woman in a China dress and cowboy hat frowned while holding a sniper rifle on a building rooftop located near the train station in south District 7.

She was Benizome Jellyfish.

The directional mic installed on a surveillance drone had picked up the sound of a staff-only door opening.

“...?”

(They haven't given up? Don't give me that. Why would you try to escape after I already fired on you?)

She had drones monitoring all the exits, but she could only shoot at one exit at a time. The last thing she wanted them to do was split up and escape from different exits, but they must not have been that smart. Even if they had been brought together by chance, once the camaraderie grew, they would find it difficult to choose to sacrifice someone.

Benizome was not here to kill.

Nor did she have a grudge against the normal(?) people with the bad luck to end up working with the Handcuffs people.

She wanted to get the perfect photo of the moment someone died. And the more gruesome and shocking a death it was, the better. To get that, she was willing to shoot out the leg of someone being chased by a lion.

“Hm.” The woman wearing a fusion of Japanese, Western, and Chinese exhaled quietly. “If the warning shots weren’t enough, who should I actually shoot? Well, I’m watching the entire group, so I can still get my scoop with one of them missing.”

The metal door was already open.

Whoever was there, she would shoot the first one to terrify the rest. She would go through with it. The cricket girl could apparently stop the bullets, but it would still scare them and stop them.

A dark shape emerged.

She let the drones handle taking photos while she held her breath and placed her finger on the trigger.

Immediately, a blinding flash stabbed into her retina.

She could only see the color white.

Sharp pain ran through her temples and she jerked her head away from the mirrorless malfunction scope that even display EM waves and electrical noise.

“Tch!? Was that a subway bug zapper!?”

Snipers were terrifying.

But if you knew you were being watched, you could strike back.

She grimaced and waved a hand to send an instruction to the drones. It took five seconds before the afterimage burned into her retina faded. She had to ensure her target didn’t use that time to run outside and escape behind cover. Her 7.62mm bullets could easily break the sound barrier, so even if she was a little delayed, she could still push them back with gunfire as long as she knew where they were.

Or so she thought.

Benizome still believed she was the hunter here.

She heard something like a burst of wind.

“!?”

With a series of dull thuds, her long sniper rifle broke apart. The pieces fell to the rooftop along with several metal darts. She recognized those weapons. During Handcuffs, it had been the law enforcement agencies of Judgment and Anti-Skill that had dealt with Benizome in the end.

Her caution was meaningless.

A moment later, a 50kg weight surpassed the restrictions of 3D space to land on top of her. This was teleportation. A middle school girl appeared 3m above the roof and then landed butt-first on the sniper as she attempted to twist around to look up.

“Gah!?”

“Could you not react like I’m really heavy? I am at least two sizes slimmer than you.”

“Agh, y-you!?”

“Hello, dark side. I know this is sudden, but you will be handing over all your information!!”

Part 14

The rooftop sniper had been dealt with.

That meant Kamijou's group was no longer restricted to the District 7 station building.

"What!? Then why are we descending into the subway!?" protested Shirai Kuroko.

"Because of Frillsand #G," said Kamijou "We can't run through the crowded streets with her chasing us!! Who knows how many people we'd get hurt or worse!?"

The train accident had been at an elevated platform, but the large station served more than just one line. Kamijou held incautious Alice under his arm and Shirai carried tied-up Benizome over her shoulder while they ran down the stairs to reach the subway platform.

Shirai Kuroko made sure to hold her phone out for the ticket gate, but then her eyes widened and she shouted at the others.

"Hey! Don't jump over the ticket gate like it's a hurdle! If you don't have a subway card, then go buy a ticket!!"

"Does she really think we're going to do that!?" asked Kamijou.

"That justice exhibitionist can't help it. She's the sad kind of person who would obediently stop at the red light and let the pursuing wave of lava engulf her car. She is best ignored if you prefer staying alive."

"Kya ha ha☆ The girl is playing tag with her teacher!"

Alice slipped out from Kamijou's arm and jumped down an entire flight of stairs despite wearing a skirt. Unbelievably, she stuck her legs out in front of her so she would land on her butt. Kamijou's eyes widened in fright, but then several balls made from curled-up hedgehogs spilled from below her apron. They gathered together into a cushion and she bounced softly off of them. Their flattened spines seemed to act like bed springs, but surely that still had to hurt, right!?

The disconcerting zap of busting air came from somewhere. The speaker used to inform of arriving trains exploded from within and a bundle of cables stuck out like a long tongue.

That was the artificial ghost.

The deadly being had no weaknesses. That powerful grudge could maybe even destroy all of humanity singlehandedly. If she caught up and placed a hand on their shoulder, they would be killed instantly by the powerful energy. Her chaotic electric storm could break through walls and pillars, so they wouldn't fare well if that hit them either.

But now that Kamijou knew the reason behind it, it all held a different meaning for him.

This wasn't just a deadly weapon. It was a vortex of uncontrollable emotion.

(I will save you.)

He clenched his teeth, but kept his eyes forward and his feet running.

He couldn't let himself die here. If he did, he couldn't save this woman who had been dragged into a great tragedy, lost the man she loved, and continued to weep and wail.

(This isn't just about us anymore, so I swear I'll save you too, ghost!!) Youen still wasn't out of breath, so she may have used an

enzyme or chemical to boost her abilities. The bad girl looked entirely unaffected by the running as she asked a question.

“Are we running through the tunnels all the way to District 10?”

“Please, isn’t there a legit railfan in here who can drive one for us!?”

“Don’t ask for the impossible.”

The soles of Kamijou’s shoes lifted from the floor.

Surprised, he held onto young Alice who was running nearby.

After floating up in defiance of gravity, they shot down the subway tunnel with the speed of a bullet.

Based on his shadow cast on the wall, it looked like he had sprouted giant fairy wings. No, that wasn’t it. He was extremely hesitant to look at his back, but he was pretty sure a winged bug over a meter long had grabbed onto his back like a crane game!

“What? Eh? How is it so big!?”

“It’s called parasitic enlargement. That’s one of my toys.”

Youen’s calm voice came from unexpectedly close by. She was moving just as fast as him.

Young Alice rejoiced at being princess carried by the pointy-haired boy and tried to reach out her small hands. Toward what? Toward the thing on his back.

“Wow, it’s all black and hard and shiny! I’ve never seen such a big roa-”

“Stop, Alice! Do not confirm anything for me here!! There are all sorts of flying bugs, right!? I-I am never looking back. I will never confirm which of the giant bugs from the Hanatsuyu Youen Collection is holding onto my back!!”

“Fun fact: In the bug world, particularly among beetles, a male getting up another one’s back is a symbol of a live-giving ceremony. Hee hee. By which I mean mating!”

“Stooooooooop!!!!!!”

He saw a blue shine. Youen was wearing a giant morpho butterfly like a backpack as she amused herself by whispering insect trivia to him. Of course that gloomy mini-villain had given herself the most beautiful option.

Alice was so delighted she kicked her legs around in her thick white tights.

“Hm, hm♪ The girl really does love you, teacher.”

“Where did that come from!?”

“Your arms are the best seat. If anyone is going to hold the girl, it has to be you. Heh heh☆”

Apparently she thought he was a memory foam pillow or something. Maybe it was like how a boy’s shaved head or broad chest was briefly popular with the girls but then abandoned at Mach speed.

Shirai Kuroko had refused to be equipped with a bug at all. Maybe Tokiwadai girls couldn’t understand the romance of bugs. She carried bound Benizome Jellyfish over her shoulder like a sack of rice and repeatedly teleported to move down the subway tunnel faster than a sports car.

A flashing white beam shot past them from behind.

That meant the artificial ghost had descended into the subway tunnel too.

They had avoided a direct hit, but that was no reason to relax.

Frillsand #G's lightning could destroy steel and concrete with ease. If the metal rails or concrete pillars up ahead were blown up, the airborne fragments would become obstacles for the fast-moving group. Given their relative speeds, a direct hit would be enough to tear an arm off at the shoulder.

Resentment, sorrow, rage, regret, and what else?

Maybe human emotions weren't meant to be named and organized like that.

Even a single screw or bolt was a threat here.

"Ahhh!?" Kamijou shouted in reflex.

He couldn't even cover his face with Alice in his arms.

The tunnel was a lot less straight than he had expected and went through several curves, but the wings on his back made the turns for him and he didn't feel like he was in control at all. Perhaps this was what it felt to ride a rollercoaster in a country with extremely lax safety standards.

With his life solidly in someone else's grasp, he raised his eyes with real tears in them.

"Shirai!! Did you get any information out of that China dress woman!? I want a destination. We know about that Kihara guy's lab where he built Ladybird, but I also want to know where the artificial ghost was made!!"

"You heard him. Got any ideas?"

"..."

Benizome Jellyfish was not unconscious.

She had intentionally chosen to remain silent. The sparking and flashing lights behind them suggested Frillsand #G had noticed their

escape and started moving down the tunnel. It was obvious what would happen if Shirai got sick of the woman and abandoned her here, so that silence took guts.

Pain probably wasn't going to get her to talk either.

But...

"Those are some pretty sexy modifications to your dress there. That tells me you're the type to use your femininity as a weapon. It means you think you're hotter than average," said Hanatsuyu Youen while flying alongside them using the shiny blue wings of a morpho butterfly. She pulled out a test tube and shook it, creating motion in the surface of the neon green liquid within. "Did you know spiders break down their prey's tissue – in other words, the protein – and uses their stomach like a pump to suck it all up? Doing some real-life character creation work to the face and figure is pretty simple. But don't worry. After melting your boobs away, I'll make sure to give you five or even ten of them in a grape-like cluster. Got a specific number you want?"

"O-okay, I'll talk!! Don't give me that!!"

Benizome panicked with her arms and legs bound by rope.

That paparazzo was all about spreading people's information around, so maybe she didn't have it in her to hide anything for long.

"Go to the abandoned leisure spa in District 10!! The people occupying it now have built a ton of illegal cardboard, plywood, and prefab houses in the empty pools, creating something like a Little Kowloon Walled City!! It's a criminal area where anything goes and even I have a hideout there!"

"The District 10 slums?" asked Shirai.

"Your comparison is pretty out of date, isn't it?" added Youen. "That high-rise residential area has already been demolished. Why not

compare it to Johannesburg? Well, whether you're talking about Russia or Mexico, you have to watch out in any major city of a country where the people don't trust the police and unregistered guns are plentiful. So you're saying the hideout we want is there?"

"A few large trucks were abandoned in the old employee parking lot out back where they would be relatively inconspicuous. I don't know who they belong to, but a few groups of garbage collectors were killed in horrific ways when they got close. It must have been this ghost who did it!!"

"Are you saying those trucks are the lab where she was made?"

The group exchanged a glance while flying down the tunnel.

What a *stroke of good fortune*. Kamijou would have loved to gather some more bizarre tech involved in Handcuffs, but they didn't have time to travel the full length of Academy City multiple times. Frillsand #G wouldn't give them the chance. But fortunately, the artificial ghost tech and android tech were both located in District 10.

"How does she pull off the China dress so perfectly?"

Alice sounded somewhat depressed while focused on something else entirely.

If they could pull this off, they could save Frillsand #G from her eternal rampage!!

Part 15

In District 10, Kamijou's group ran up the stairs from the subway station. A thick bolt of lightning shot past them and caused a section of the asphalt road to collapse like an antlion pit.

"Damn, that's scary!!"

"Is that the abandoned leisure spa Benizome mentioned?"

Youen pointed at a large shape looming above them.

It must have been a landmark at first. It was right next to the subway entrance and the giant waterslide proved it wasn't just a bath. Was it more like an outdoor heated pool than a spa? It was located next to a trash incinerator, so it may have reused the incinerator's heat. The building hadn't collapsed, but the rust and stains showed it hadn't been cleaned or otherwise maintained in a while. It looked just plain gross and the air there felt heavy.

It was a wonder it wasn't covered in spraypainted graffiti.

The local delinquents may have had an agreement to never carelessly approach the place.

The inside was apparently known as a Little Kowloon Walled City or Johannesburg, but they didn't have any business in the illegal houses built in and around the pools.

Driven on by the storm of lightning behind them, they circled around to the rear entrance where trucks could make deliveries while remaining inconspicuous.

There they were.

A few large trucks were lined up in the parking area there. That wasn't too strange on its own, but they looked unusually clean compared to the collections of abandoned materials forming everything else here.

"Found it! That's the artificial ghost lab!!"

"Is this safe? Didn't the garbage collectors who tried to take the trucks away get killed?"

Youen popped off the rubber cap of a test tube.

A black carpet rippled around them. It was formed from tens of thousands of ants. The ground itself seemed to be moving, so Kamijou felt like he was moving backwards despite standing still. On the Carrier's instructions, the ants marched toward the trucks, but nothing happened. They were not blown away by a high-voltage current.

"No traps."

"Then let's end this before Frillsand #G catches up!!"

Kamijou, Alice, and Youen circled to the back of the closest truck. The door to the metal container had a keyhole, but Youen summoned a thumb-sized ant that melted the metal inside.

"The inner workings of a lock tend to be an aluminum or brass alloy, so my ants can destroy them easy."

"What would those toxins do to a human?"

Kamijou shuddered at the thought while he undid the latch and threw open the double door.

They didn't get the correct one right away. This one was lined with bunkbeds and toys littered the floor. They tried a few more, but they

had been converted into a kitchen and a bath. It all reminded Kamijou of the specimen children mentioned in relation to Drencher and Frillsand #G.

None of it looked like an experimental lab.

It was mostly an ordinary living space. It likely qualified as abandoned, but it didn't feel remotely creepy. In fact, it was the first thing to put Kamijou at ease in a while.

Did something of the people who lived here still linger?

Was the sorrow all the greater the more comfortable the life that led up to it?

"..."

Eventually, Kamijou found the right one. One of the containers wasn't like the others. As soon as he opened it, the scent of sterilizing ethanol rushed into his nose.

"This must be it," he muttered.

The container floor was situated very high up. Alice tried to pull herself up with her young hands, but she had trouble and a pink bat and some spiny balls fell from below her apron. Those things were still a mystery, but they would make the occasional weird noise, which made it painful to watch them being used as a stepping stool for those patent leather shoes. The fluffball on the back of the apron wiggled side to side but the picture book girl couldn't manage to get her legs up high enough, so Kamijou finally pushed her little butt up from behind.

The lab had apparently been used to create that embodiment of electricity, but he didn't see any of the metal equipment found at transformer substations. A transparent oblong box sat in the center of the container. Round holes covered in thick rubber were placed at

even intervals, so it was apparently designed to let you could manipulate what was inside without directly touching it.

Since she specialized in microbes and chemicals, Youen took a look around, assessing what kind of lab it was.

“A clean box, huh? The duct by the wall is used to prevent the passage of impurities and the sink is pretty secure too. Was the ghost research more biological than I thought?”

The box sort of looked like a clear coffin to Kamijou.

“Isn’t that more the kind of thing you’d see on a TV show about science-themed ghost stories? Y’know, like the model skeleton running around at night or a pool of formaldehyde used to wash dead bodies.”

“Not those old cliches.”

She rejected his ideas. He bit his lip and hung his head, but she must have thought he was crying because she actually looked unsure what to do.

Alice was more interested in the equipment around the clear box. Several video cameras were set up on tripods. She smiled and made a peace sign in front of one.

“Yay☆”

“Also, what are with those cameras?” asked Kamijou. “You wouldn’t need this many to record the experiments. I mean, this is just a truck container. With this many, I feel like they would get in the way of the research.”

“To record what happens, you would only need to install a few on the ceiling where they wouldn’t be in the way,” agreed Youen. “You wouldn’t need 12 of them arranged in a circle like this.”

“Meaning?”

“The cameras were part of the experiment. If observation was a crucial component, quantum physics may have been involved.”

Kamijou pressed a switch on the wall and the room’s lights changed. Just like a dark room in an old movie, the container filled with an orange light similar to sunset. A change came over the clear coffin. Glowing lines appeared inside, similar to the human outline at a crime scene. He also saw several stud-like electrodes there. Were those the acupuncture points that were also used in moxibustion? That was just his impression, but he couldn’t say for sure. The points may have been something unique Drencher had come up with. Regardless, the hundreds of electrodes were divided into small blocks that could be rearranged to alter their number and position.

It was like a wire diagram for a human body.

That may have determined the individual traits of the artificial ghost.

Youen leaned forward curiously, so she may not have had many opportunities to view someone else’s lab.

“For that ghost – Frillsand #G was it? – you only have to create an initial ‘spark’ in the lab. No matter how small it is, releasing it into the outside world will let it grow endlessly from there. Reminds me a biological weapon. No, that isn’t quite right. The biology, quantum physics, and weaponization research are like different colored pencils in a single set – they’re just elements used to create her. A ghost shouldn’t have any clear outlines, but she was forcibly divided into existing categories to create something humans could easily perceive.”

“What matters is we can create a ghost by turning this machine on.”

“We need some personality data on Drencher Kihara Repatri first. Maybe an oil-eating black mold would work. The distribution of

fingerprints and footprints would tell us if he was meticulous, neurotic, or whatever else.”

“Y-you can learn how people think like that?”

“You think that’s strange? There’s an esper out there who reads people’s ‘residual thoughts’ from the electricity and moisture left on objects.”

With a few dull thuds, Shirai Kuroko teleported out of thin air and dropped some duralumin cases larger than she was.

“I found a ‘base model’ in the lab buried in garbage! I honestly find it hard to believe this faceless mannequin can be transformed into something indistinguishable from a human.”

“We need to get those cases open! And we need to figure out how it works! Are there any texts or manuals!?”

They opened the latches thicker than the ones on the truck containers and lined up the contents of the cases on the floor. Shirai Kuroko was right. It looked vaguely feminine since it was wearing something like a one-piece racing swimsuit, but there were no actual gendered features. It was a smooth ball joint doll with no hair and no face.

“Wait, what happened to Benizome?” asked Kamijou.

“I left her tied up in that lab buried under more than three million tons of garbage. She loves scoops so much she should enjoy being buried alive with a *burnt corpse*.”

Alice started trembling all on her own.

“Th-three million tons?”

“That might sound like a lot, but a single domed stadium weighs 370 thousand tons,” said Shirai. “Are younger children just more sensitive to the term ‘million’?”

But the “doll” was heavy.

Unlike the artificial ghost that barely seemed to be scientific at all, the android was fully physical. It was a machine seemingly made by wrapping a heavy metal skeleton frame with artificial muscles and silicon. Kamijou tried moving the shoulder or knee and felt a dull grinding sensation. The skeleton frame may have been somewhat adjustable to fit the desired body type. The power of science could now create the kind of magical girl who transformed from a child to an adult and back again.

Youen pulled out a few test tubes.

“If the exterior is silicon, I can form the details with an organic solvent. I’ll need a photo of this Drencher person for that. Also some of his clothing to learn his body size. Check the drawers over there. He lived here, so surely there’s a photo somewhere.”

“I’ll check, but this is only a machine, right!?” said Kamijou. “It’s basically a self-driving car shaped like a human, so will the artificial ghost really attach to it even if we do create one successfully?”

“If the ghost is electrical in nature, the powerful currents we’ve seen from the one chasing us would just fry all the circuit boards.”

“Then we just need to find a tech that will reduce its power. For example...”

They heard the low zap of bursting air, so everyone but Alice stopped blinking.

“(Here she is,)” whispered Kamijou.

“(I can’t believe it took her this long,)” said Shirai. “(Given her previous speed, she should have attacked well before this. Could she have hesitated after seeing the lab she used to call home?)”

If so, he felt kind of guilty for doing this.

But now that the attack had started, it wasn't going to stop.

Youen pulled out a photo and some clothes while the sound of breaking glass rang loud. The windows and streetlights had to be bursting. The sounds of destruction continued as the container lab itself tilted. The truck's tires must have ruptured from exposure to the high-voltage electricity.

What did that decision mean to Frillsand #G?

What was she thinking while destroying a place filled with so many memories to get at the people trampling on a treasure from her past?

Kamijou got down on the floor and protected carefree Alice while biting his lip. It pained him to see Frillsand #G run wild like this. That was the thought on his mind when he reached out to support one of the camera tripods that was about to fall. He didn't have the specialized knowledge to know which equipment was important. It was possible the artificial ghost technology was something only Drencher could understand.

The cacophony of destruction would not stop.

Their plan would fail if the interior of the lab was destroyed too. Their own survival wasn't the only thing on the line here. Frillsand #G would eliminate her only chance to ever see Drencher Kihara Repatri again.

She fit in so well with the city's darkness, but he didn't want to give her that kind of ending.

Kamijou Touma stared into a video camera that's lens was focusing despite not being switched on and he shouted into it without considering the risk to himself.

"Give it a rest, Frillsand #G!! What is it you really want? Just this one last time, picture the face of the person want to see more than anyone else in the world!!"

Did his voice reach her or not?

A blinding white light raged violently outside. A mass of lightning finally flew inside the container. The ghost's sorrow hit them directly and orange sparks flew everywhere. A shelf drawer broke, sending documents and photos fluttering through the air. Hanatsuyu Youen rushed to the device and flipped the sparking switches there. With a low hum, the clear coffin started to glow.

"The electrical energy is too great," shouted Shirai Kuroko, eyes wide. "Even if we do create the artificial ghost, the android will only explode if we try to place the ghost in it!!"

But if they did not present Drencher Kihara Repatri to the vengeful spirit, she would never stop attacking. Then the truck would explode with all of them inside.

Frillsand #G would be doomed to forever weep and wail in the wreckage of her one chance at salvation.

"That's where..."

A scratchy voice spoke over the loud electric noises.

A small girl could be seen popping the rubber cap off of a test tube in the gaps between flashes of light.

Hanatsuyu Youen was not a good person.

But Kamijou knew better than anyone that she had chosen to save people's lives on several occasions today.

"...this comes in!!!!"

The electricity exploded.

The stench of burning plastic assaulted Kamijou's nose.

Part 16

Of course, Frillsand #G knew exactly what that place was.

This was the collection of trucks where Drencher Kihara Repatri had spent so much time with those children. It was his mobile lab. And it was a large daycare center where he collected the specimen children who had vanished into the dark side.

She had mercilessly destroyed some garbage collectors who tried to collect the abandoned trucks. Very literally so. Their body tissue had exploded from within.

She had wanted to protect that place even if it meant spreading grudges and curses.

“...”

But now some Handcuffs criminals had made it inside, so she no longer hesitated. An all-out attack would not leave much of the lab intact.

She might blow away the very core of her memories.

She would probably be hit by intense regret afterwards, but this might let her break free of her current situation.

With that in mind, she held a skinny arm toward the trucks. This was not an indiscriminate, omnidirectional attack. She took precise aim to blow up the survivors of Operation Handcuffs.

Prioritizing destruction over her memories may have shown she had now become *a true vengeful spirit*.

But a moment beforehand...

"Good grief. I wake up and this is what I find? Fate can be cruel, can't it?"

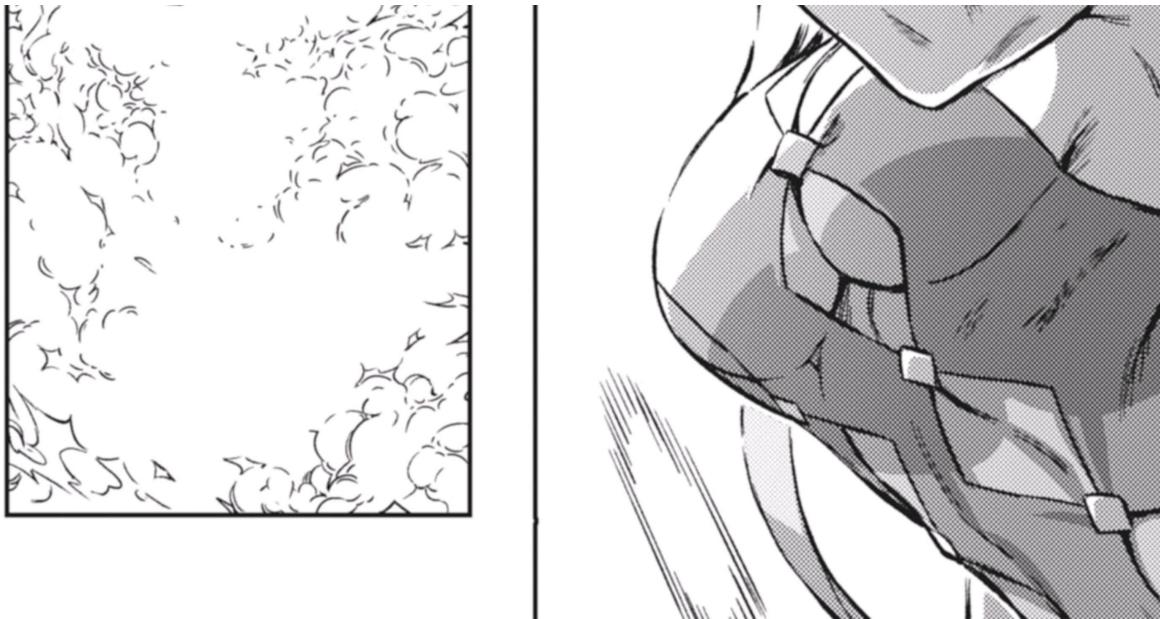
"What?"

It was deflected.

It was bent.

Her torrent of electricity could bring down a skyscraper, yet it was easily repelled with a single hand.





With the exception of the time some unidentified *interference* had caused her to malfunction, no one had managed to escape her grudge and curse during Operation Handcuffs.

But without breaking a sweat, he once more protected some children who had fallen into the darkness.

“Why? What are you doing here!?”

Surprise appeared on her face for the first time. Her eyes may have finally focused on reality again. Something about the opponent before her eyes would not let her wander through a nightmare any longer.

This person shouldn't have been here.

But she also wanted him to be here more than anything.

“You know exactly what I’m doing here and why, Frillsand #G-kun. How can I sit idly by while the dark side continues to devour lives? Even if it means losing my own life.”

“That’s not what I meant. This is so much more than that! How are you here? This world stole everything from me, so why is it going

back on that tragedy now!?"

Her own beam vanished.

Her ghostly face silently crumpled.

An indistinct figure appeared before her.

It took the form of someone so foolish and so kind.

"Do you need a reason to protect someone? Of course you don't."

It only took those words.

It only took that simple whisper.

"Ah."

She stopped.

Frillsand #G came to a stop.

Her thoughts ground to a halt and refused to function.

Attempting to exorcise her was a fool's errand. You could build a solemn shrine and desperately worship her as a god, but whether or not she stopped was entirely up to her mood. She was like a natural disaster supported by chemistry and physics.

"Drench...er?" she muttered, eyes wide.

She just about clung to him, but then she bit her lip.

She shook and held her head.

"You can't trick me!! I won't be fooled!!"

Perhaps she refused to accept the possibility because it felt too good to be true. Perhaps she feared there was some malicious trick

hidden somewhere. The events of Handcuffs had been so cruel they had emotionally scarred even a ghost.

So when she spoke again, there was a tremor in her voice.

The invincible artificial ghost was terrified that simply touching this man would cause him to pop like a bubble.

“You died.”

“That I did.”

“I was never supposed to see you again!!”

“Says who?”

Drencher took a step forward. Frillsand #G shook her head, but she did not step back.

What she wanted above all was vengeance. It was supposed to be an eternal battle.

But was that really true?

Weeping like a child, she leaped into the chest of the dead man once more.

He accepted her into his arms.

Even if his body was fake, he would still have a pulse.

“Everything will be alright.” He gave her a trouble smile. “Everything will be alright now. I’m not going anywhere, Frillsand #G-kun.”

No matter who got in the way and no matter how much they said this kind of patchwork happy ending couldn’t happen, there was no stopping the pursuit of happiness.

Part 17

“Ha.”

A breath that was half sigh and half laugh left Kamijou Touma’s mouth.

They had cut this one extremely close.

But the electrical damage stopped right in front of the collapsed boy’s feet. It had been like diving headfirst into a thick thundercloud and all the lab’s equipment had burst from within, but he had somehow avoided losing his life.

“I provided a ground.” Hanatsuyu Youen was collapsed in the same lab. “Since the electricity was too powerful for the circuit boards, I just had to divert the unnecessary power into the ground. That prevented the artificial ghost from frying the android’s innards.”

She shook an empty test tube and raised her thumb even though the rubber cap was already gone.

“Now, this might alter the soil’s acidity a little, but no one around here has to worry about being electrocuted. Electricity flows along the path of least resistance and this wasn’t powerful enough to ignore the ground and race up to someone’s brain or heart.”

“Electrical stuff doesn’t sound like your area of expertise, so I’m betting you found a way to make this biological. What did you use this time? A bug? Or maybe some kind of mold?”

“Gallionella iron bacteria.”

“...”

“Don’t stare at me like that. It’s a microbe that oxidizes iron and manganese ions. They take metal inside themselves all on their own, so they’re perfect for constructing an invisible wire between the android and the ground.”

“Don’t tell those two. It would ruin the romantic mood.”

The boy realized he had recovered enough to complain about that.

He gave the embracing couple a silent look while still collapsed on his rear.

Then he sighed and spoke up.

“Alice, what is this?”

Between the Lines 3

“Oh, you noticed?”

Time froze.

Only Kamijou Touma and short-sleeved Alice remained facing each other in the slanted and scorched truck. The girl’s presence seemed to rule this space – both the shine of her golden hair and her warmth that drove out all loneliness.

As usual, the blonde girl of about 12 cutely tilted her head like a storybook girl.

“What part made you suspect?” she asked with a smile.

“All of it. From the beginning,” spat Kamijou.

Then he listed off what he meant by “all of it”.

“How did I escape nearly unscathed from a head-on collision between two trains?

“I jumped from the train’s 2nd floor, fell through the hole melted in the platform, and didn’t know where I was going to land, so it makes no sense I didn’t break a single bone.”

“Frillsand #G built up an overwhelming pile of victims during Handcuffs. Did she really attack using something as immediately obvious as electricity?”

“Even if that is what she used, I should have basically exploded if that high-voltage current even grazed me. It also doesn’t make

sense she could share her memories with me using electricity. Our brains aren't constructed the same like with the cloned Sisters.

"Is Shirai Kuroko of Judgment really the kind of person to do what a fugitive criminal says even if it's necessary to solve the problem at hand?

"I don't know how skilled that Uiharu girl is, but does she really know enough about the underside of the city to give us a list of Handcuffs mysteries just because someone asks her to run a search real quick? For that matter, does she have the mental fortitude needed to just smile and describe those dark side tragedies even if her search did turn them up?

"What about Benizome Jellyfish? Wasn't it a bit much to just assume she had to know where Frillsand #G's lab was? We had nothing to suggest that.

"Does the technology to link an artificial ghost with an android really exist? Can you really resurrect the dead by cobbling together Academy City tech?

"Why did Frillsand #G wait to attack until after we had found everything we needed in Drencher's lab?

"Then there's Hanatsuyu Youen the Carrier. This was my first time meeting a Handcuffs criminal, but is she really the kind of girl who would grow so attached to someone she just met even if we had a common goal? I mean, she changed in front of me and fed me a drug mouth-to-mouth. Being from the dark side doesn't mean she's that unguarded.

"But the most glaring error was me finding 10 thousand yen on the ground and all the other times I was insanely *lucky*."

Alice sighed.

"The girl's magic *forces all of those things to work*."

“Magic?”

“Ah ha ha. Did you think it was an esper power? Like the #6 who you can’t see clearly?”

He was curious why Alice sounded so knowledgeable about that, but he was more interested in a different question.

Could Alice really be described using just the magic side?

“Do you modify probability so you could always win the lottery or at bingo? No, that isn’t it. That wouldn’t let you include nonexistent possibilities.”

“Correct. It is not that☆”

Alice slowly pointed her finger toward Kamijou.

But not at him. She pointed past him. He noticed something there and slowly emerged from the tilted truck.

The frozen outside world was not the world he knew.

A giant towered into the heavens above the abandoned leisure spa and enormous pumpkins shaped like human faces broke through the asphalt to grow from the ground all over the place. A five-pointed shooting star drew a trail behind it in the night sky and incomprehensible ancient characters and diagrams danced about like neon signs.

Time remained frozen.

Kamijou was honestly glad for that. If time resumed now, *something awful would happen to Shirai, Youen, and everyone else who wasn’t here.*

“Teacher.”

The voice behind him remained entirely innocent. She hopped around in front of him.

That girl there had done all this.

She could end the current world with a snap of her fingers.

“It doesn’t matter if your real-world theories have broken down. Even if there is no direct connection between two ideas, a bridge can always be built if the girl *goes on an adventure* and creates a new path.”

“A bridge?”

“Hmm, like this: ‘There are four emotions and four elements, so when roleplaying, you can draw on a special power by intentionally drawing on a specific emotion in yourself.’ ”

People would normally call that “a stretch” or “sophistry”. It might sound reasonable at first, but there was no existing mythology or law behind it. In this case, the idea of the four emotions was an Eastern thing and the idea of the four elements was a Western thing commonly seen in fantasy RPGs.

But if you could build a bridge between the two and it would give you power with 100% reliability, you would have a legitimate miracle on your hands.

It reminded him a bit of the way the Amakusas combined Shinto, Buddhism, and Christianity, but this was completely different. Alice didn’t need to find points in common between the two things to form a logical connection. She could notice that a paint set on sale had 12 colors, associate that with the 12 numbers on a clock, and *with nothing more than that* gain a complete control over time. Except it wouldn’t just apply to Alice herself. The moment she decided that was true, all the paint in the world would gain the same power.

“Burning something requires phlogiston, observing one of a pair of separated particles determines the spin of the other one no matter the distance between them, neutrinos can travel faster than light. It might sound ridiculous, but if the girl links together the surrounding theories to build up a solid basis and makes it convincing enough, she can create an actual functioning theory. Even if the idea she started with was flawed and even if the values she started with came from faulty measurements.”

“You mean...?”

“It works even if the theory is how to resurrect the dead. After all, *magic is meant to give people joyous hopes and fun dreams.*”

By forcibly connecting entirely separate theories, she had created a single path to this destination.

Even if she hadn’t created anything herself and was journeying around by peering into someone else’s mind.

If he had continued traveling through that comfortable world without questioning it, all of the pieces would have intertwined and become real.

Like a board game where surrounding your opponent’s pieces captured all of those pieces for yourself.

Kamijou noticed a straining sound.

It came from within Alice.

Specifically, from her blue storybook dress with a white apron over it. It tore in a way such solid fabric never should have. The entire center of her body tore to either side like it was a thin stocking.

The ripping noise sounded somehow suggestive.

“Now.”

Immorally bright skin emerged from within.

The transformation was like a childish mint candy becoming a sticky honey dripping onto the skin.

The thing contained in the storybook dress came into view. Metal buckles shined and red and black belts glistened with oil while digging into a slender body.

Alice spread her arms wide without showing any concern for the empty shell left behind.

“Please guide the girl, teacher. She wants to *go on an adventure* inside you. You weren’t satisfied with this ending? Then what kind of ending would you accept? Just tell the girl and she will join the theories together, fill in the gaps, establish the necessary facts, and give you the world you want.”

“Is that so?” muttered Kamijou.

However it had happened, it was difficult to think of a happier ending than someone being reunited with a loved one who had died. And when it was done with a technology so closely connected to herself, that had to have saved Frillsand #G.

Not everything about Operation Handcuffs had been bad.

If you avoided taking a one-sided view of that night and rearranged things like a puzzle, it could even be used to save a life.

That answer was sure to save all the people who had been dragged into that mess.

Alice wasn’t doing anything wrong here.

He understood that.

So Kamijou Touma answered her just like she asked him to.

“Then return everything to the way it was, Alice. If I use your power like this, I can never truly reach the end.”

She looked confused.

She looked dreadfully psychedelic covered in belts that moved all on their own and loosely bound her legs together. She looked like she had stepped out of another world altogether as she tilted her head with so much of her soft skin showing.

“Umm, are you sure you want that?” she asked.

“I am.”

“The girl connects the unconnected, stabilizes impossible theories and ideas, and creates a *better than* optimal reality. To be blunt, you will not survive without the girl’s help, teacher.”

“It’s still what I want. You filling in the gaps keeps me from seeing what I really need to do.”

“The girl didn’t give Frillsand #G a power she doesn’t really have. That was simply the result of emphasizing just one aspect of her. Once she has access to all of her power, you don’t stand a chance against her.”

“Probably not. But I’m not trying to overpower her.”

“Hanatsuyu Youen, Rakuoka Houfu, and Benizome Jellyfish escaped from the train. You aren’t naïve enough to think they aren’t a threat just because they aren’t as powerful as the ghost, are you? Each one of them is a difficult enough enemy to take you out the instant you encounter them.”

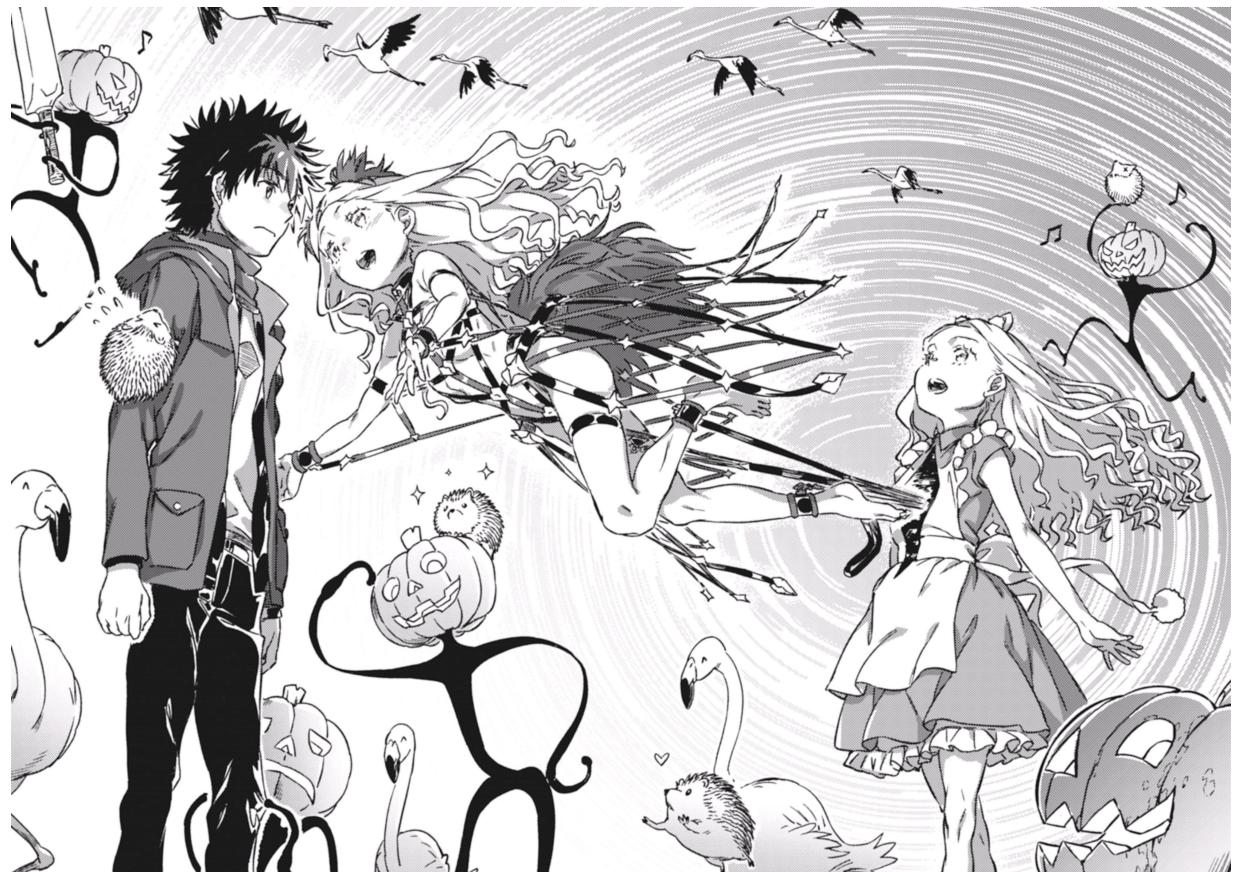
“I know that.”

“*You will die.*”

“*That doesn’t change my answer.*”

"Hm." Alice placed her index finger on her chin and stared into empty space. "One of them wanted to become a god, one of them wanted to be immortal, and one of them wanted to get back at academia for making fun of him. The girl has gone on a lot of strange *adventures*, but this is a first."

"?"



"Ah ha ha. Curiouser and curioser. You reject the girl, but not because you have no desires inside you. The girl has never encountered this kind of desire. ...This sounds *delicious*."

Alice smiled.

But this smile looked subtly different from before.

Perhaps it had a touch of loneliness.

“New command from Alice Anotherbible. Immediately cease all modified kabbalah bridge linking within Live Adventures in Wonderland.”

The deep thunk that followed sounded just like a thick metal lock opening.

Kamijou Touma was enveloped in white light.

His senses gradually faded until nothing felt real anymore, but he definitely heard the girl’s sad but hopeful voice.

“Teacher. Please don’t let yourself die too easily, okay?”

Chapter 3: Welcome to a World Without the Goddess' Protection – Difficulty_the_ABYSS.

Part 1

Kamijou Touma forgot to breathe.

“Gah...”

Nothing felt real for a while.

The world came into view tilted on its side and that world was not the truck container lab. Alice, Shirai Kuroko, and Hanatsuyu Youen were nowhere to be found. The floor was littered with shards of glass and the jagged remnants of a colorful plastic jungle gym. He was apparently inside the Delivery Go Round shopping train.

(Good. Shirai teleporting Alice off the train wasn't a favor granted by Wonderland.) But what had happened?

When he tried to get up off his side, a storm of agony assaulted his body.

“Gahh!? Cough, dammit, what is this? Ow, *is something stabbing into me!?*”

Trying to move brought on a weird stiff feeling. He initially thought a broken bone was obstructing the movement of his muscles or joints, but that wasn’t it.

It was the plastic jungle gym from the play area.

When the trains had crashed, he had been flung from the café to the next car, where he crashed into the jungle gym, breaking off a few jagged plastic rods that had pierced his flesh.

But in all likelihood, *it could have been far worse.*

Without breaking through that “cushioning” to slow himself down, the impact with the wall probably would have killed him instantly.

(Ugh...a-a real train crash really is a disaster, isn’t it?) His head spun within the crashed Delivery Go Round’s play area. He was at least thankful there hadn’t still been any children in here.

The plastic jungle gym had been smashed to pieces.

The bright colors had become a pile of deadly weapons.

He searched the unusual sensations in his body, grabbed one of the jagged edges that was duller than a bamboo spear, and clenched his teeth. He pulled as hard as he could. The pain when it came out was much less than he had feared, but he didn’t have time to think about that. With the plastic plug removed, he was now bleeding much more rapidly.

He was glad he had been returned to the starting point, but he had to stop this bleeding or he would die.

“Pant, pant.”

After removing the jungle gym shards from his arm, gut, and thigh, he didn't even have the energy to writhe in agony. He crawled along the gritty floor. He hated how the metal box on the wall was all the way up at hip height. His fingers kept slipping on his own blood, but he finally managed to get a grip. He forced the box's door open, pulled out a thick synthetic bag, and collapsed onto the floor with a wet splat.

He now had the AED and first aid kit.

He pulled out some disinfectant, removed the cap with trembling hands, and rubbed it on his arm wound. Burning pain immediately exploded in him. It was so bad he initially thought some static had ignited the ethanol. But he couldn't hesitate. He moved on to the wounds on his gut and thigh.

"Gahhh!! Ahhh!?"

He was dripping with sweat.

But completing the hellish disinfection process wasn't the end of it.

His real task was stopping the bleeding. But these wounds were too bad for bandages to suffice. His vision was flashing in and out, so he mostly relied on his sense of touch to pull out a device wrapped in plastic. The gadget was shaped something like a small submachinegun, but it was in fact a handheld sewing machine. He couldn't think straight from the blood loss, so he didn't have it in him to read through the small text. He relied entirely on the illustrations printed on the side as he pressed it against the wound in his side and pulled the trigger.

The series of "thunks" sounded more like construction work than a medical procedure, but in just a few seconds, a sturdy silk thread had closed up the dark red wound. He couldn't fully control the full-auto compressed gas device, so he ended up overshooting the end of the wound and sewing up intact skin.

He was scared.

The whole concept terrified him, but he would die if he couldn't close up all his wounds.

Only after the first one did it occur to him to hold a handkerchief in his mouth so he wouldn't bite his tongue in shock. Then he sewed up the wounds on his arm and leg too.

"Damn, I really want to tap out already. Ugh. I'll go through with this, but I'm at least allowed to cry about it, right, Alice?"

He threw the gun-like sewing machine to the floor.

He had forcibly stopped the bleeding, but his head still felt just as heavy. Closing the wounds did not return the blood he had already lost. Finding the only correct answer and taking the optimal course of action did not mean everything would go his way. When your life was at risk, there was no guarantee a cute girl with highly-specialized knowledge was going to show up and fix everything for you. He smiled at the reminder he was back in the real world.

A first-aid kit would not contain a blood transfusion kit that included a pack of blood or a hematinic drug.

He would have to attempt the rest of this as he was.

(Damn, and I'm back down to 49 yen. I'm right back in the New Year's Tokyo survival life. *You really don't just find money in the real world, huh?*) Where was Alice anyway? He doubted she was going to help him anymore.

It took him a full minute to get up on his feet with quite a bit of groaning.

The sweat on his brow was unusually chilly. He had lost so much blood he was having trouble keeping his body temperature up. He appreciated how it also dulled the pain, but the intermittent nature of

his vision was disturbing. He was afraid he would pass out altogether if he let his guard down.

The situation was already on the move.

He was no longer playing on easy mode with Alice to help him along.

He doubted getting Hanatsuyu Youen or Shirai Kuroko's help would be so easy this time. Rakuoka Houfu's violence had been on another level and Benizome Jellyfish wouldn't fall for a trap so easily. Even Frillsand #G would probably be *even more deadly* than she had seemed before.

And above all, the dead could no longer be resurrected.

Human lives did not get a continue.

“...”

He bit his lip. Everyone had just the one life, so instead of carelessly jumping out of the window, he carefully and unsteadily walked through the crashed train. He found a surviving spiral staircase, descended to the 1st floor while making sure his feet didn't slip, checked through the bent and dislodged automatic door that the platform was safe, and only then took a step outside. He had escaped the train.

He would not push himself too hard. He could not afford to neglect the standard safety measures.

Part 2

A boy lay on his back within the ICU of a large District 7 hospital.

Four days had passed, but he was still hooked up to several tubes and electrodes. He wore a clear mask over his mouth and his blood and nutrients were circulated with the help of a machine. If just one of the many machines around him were removed or just one of the switches were flipped, it would likely begin a chain reaction of organ failure resulting in his death.

“Hamazura.”

A girl sat in a round stool next to his machine-covered bed. She was known for her shoulder length black hair and her pink track suit. But not even Takitsubo Rikou’s voice got any response out of the boy.

The air purification system and UV lights left the air sterile to the point of feeling toxic and the only sounds were the steady beeps and the rhythm of a pump.

No one would tell her anything. The doctors and nurses all gave her harmless smiles and insisted he would be all right. But she knew that too steady a reading was in fact a bad sign in cases like this.

“?”

She suddenly looked up after noticing something. But not any kind of sound or a flashing light. Still, she had detected a presence of some sort on the other side of the thick glass door.

Her esper power was AIM Stalker, which let her accurately perceive AIM diffusion fields emitted by espers.

But that did not mean this was an esper.

The pink track suit girl stood from her stool and approached the glass door. She stepped on the floor pad and the door slid aside while a flat buzzer sounded.

A bouquet of flowers sat on the bench just outside the door.

The ICU was tucked away so ordinary patients and visitors would not see it, so no one would have just been passing by on their way to somewhere else. The presence of the flowers meant someone had been here to visit the ICU.

They had come all this way and then left without opening the glass door.

Had the sight of Hamazura Shiage hooked up to the bed and Takitsubo Rikou by his side brought on too much emotion for them to continue?

Takitsubo tilted her head.

The flowers had a card with them. Had they carelessly left that behind after getting cold feet about visiting? Or had it come from a subconscious desire to leave some sign that they had been here?

The name on the card was Yomikawa Aiho.

“...?”

Part 3

After leaving through the bent platform door and setting foot on the elevated station platform, Kamijou took a deep breath and focused his mind. When his life was on the line, there was no need to take a risky gamble by rushing in shouting threats. He glanced to the side and saw a large hole the color of rotten vegetables in the platform made of concrete and steel. A few people were gathered nearby. Were they prison guards?

(Now, then.)

He grimaced as the simple act of breathing triggered dull aches all across his body.

(I fell down that hole in Alice's world, but *what happens if I don't do that?*)

A dull creaking sound passed by overhead. He looked up and could make out a few footsteps passing by on the roof covering the entire platform.

"What do you mean this wasn't a problem with the train!?"

"I mean exactly that. This wasn't a simple brake malfunction. It could never crash at full speed unless there was some conflict between the train's own controls and the track's automatic brakes!"

"Hee hee. Yay! The girl is in the lead! Follow her, everyone!☆"

"Alice!! Do not run off in random directions, you short-sleeve animal ears girl!!"

While looking up toward the voices, Kamijou saw some underwear pass by above the clear panel used to let sunlight in.

“Bff!?”

He saw a leather belt around thighs, some fancy lace, and thick white tights. He got more than a glimpse too, since it was a lot like looking up from below an open umbrella.

(O-oh, I get it. With one hole in the floor, it might break through elsewhere too. Until they know what caused the first hole, they can't know which way is safe and sending them to the roof is easy for that Judgment teleporter.)

“Hey, Ai-!”

He started to call out to her but froze.

If he stopped Alice here, she might start helping him again. And he was the one who had decided he wasn't accepting her help.

Meanwhile, a few more shadows passed by overhead.

He was still unsure if he had made the right decision.

This was the elevated platform on the 2nd floor of the train station. On the concourse below, he would probably find Hanatsuyu Youen the Carrier, Frillsand #G the Artificial Ghost, and Rakuoka the Mass of Muscles. He wouldn't make any new discoveries there and the difficulty level would be set much higher without Alice's mysterious adjustments. If he thoughtlessly rushed down there, he was pretty sure he would fail to get anyone's assistance and just get himself killed.

You only live once, so when you knew somewhere was dangerous, it was best to stay as far away as possible. He needed to instead focus on going places, seeing things, and trying things he hadn't back in Alice's world.

He ignored the wandering footsteps and ran straight across the platform.

Even so, something felt off to him about all this.

(Huh? Something isn't right.)

Fortunately, the platform didn't collapse like wet cardboard the way Shirai's group had feared it might. He ran across it just fine. He moved from the Delivery Go Round side of things to the Overhunting side. He reached the crushed first car and worked his way back from there. He didn't consider the possibility that the criminals remained locked up inside the train. That kind of optimism had no place in reality.

Whoever was talking to Shirai had said this "wasn't a problem with the train", so the cause had to be located further back.

He was fairly certain all the trains would have been stopped after the accident, but climbing over the platform door barrier and descending onto the tracks was still nerve-racking.

This was a straight-line path with nowhere to run.

He stared off into the distance from the elevated railway while he started walking down it.

(But will this problem really be something an amateur high schooler would notice?)

He was still figuring out how his old folks smartphone worked, but he managed to use its LED backlight to shine alternately between the power lines overhead and the metal rail below his feet. The railway had powered rails and overhead powerlines, probably a sign of how many different trains were researched and experimented on in this city.

Just as the track grew a lot more complex, he found he had crossed a railroad switch.

He didn't think he had traveled more than 300m. For a high-speed train that didn't stop at the intermediary stations, applying the brakes there wouldn't stop it in time for the station.

"Is this it?"

Kamijou crouched and viewed something at his feet.

He did not know all that much about trains and railroads, but something here was unusual even to his eye. Some white plastic boxes were installed at a set interval in the space between the rails, but one of them had been smashed by a hammer or something.

He recalled the voices he had heard passing by on the roof.

"What do you mean this wasn't a problem with the train!?"

"I mean exactly that. This wasn't a simple brake malfunction. It could never crash at full speed unless there was some conflict between the train's own controls and the track's automatic brakes!"

(Could this be the track's automatic brakes?)

An ATS was a large system of sensors that measured a train's speed and automatically sent a stop signal if necessary.

This wasn't just destroyed.

The color inside wasn't right. He could tell a few of the cords below the smashed cover had been rewired.

"But wait..."

This was odd.

(Huh? Huh??? This isn't right at all. An electric being like Frillsand #G could probably destroy the train's brakes, but was she really behind this mechanical sabotage? She could just blast the train from a distance and fry its systems, so why would she even need to mess with the track at all?)

An alarm was blaring inside his mind. Was this the only piece of sabotage? He had a feeling it wasn't.

A moment later, he felt a heavy blow like someone had swung a metal bat into the side of his head. He didn't just lose his balance. He was launched to the side from his crouched position. By the time he realized how bad this really was, he had already broken free of gravity. He could feel himself leaving the elevated railway and soaring toward the empty air beyond. He was about to cross the pivotal line. He would soon be past the edge.

But intense confusion hit him before the pain did.

"Gh, bh?"

(Why? Why wasn't it electricity? That artificial ghost's attacks didn't feel like being hit by heavy metal. Then what is going on here?)

He had been attacked.

Attacked by someone deadly enough to put his life at risk with just the one blow.

However...

(Was Frillsand #G *not* the one who caused the crash!?)

He was not viewing the same incident as before, just from a different vantage point.

The actual answer was different than in Alice's world.

As soon as he realized that, he flew over the edge of the elevated railway and plunged toward the city 7m below.

Part 4

Kamijou Touma fell.

His body landed on a light truck. He thought the parked truck was loaded with scraps, but apparently it itself was considered scrap. Some inconsiderate people had dumped their garbage in the back of someone else's truck. The scraps weren't enough to absorb the impact, so he rolled off to the side.

His body slammed into the asphalt.

"Gahh..."

Every part of him felt weirdly hot. Just as he realized his forcibly-closed wounds had reopened, his vision blurred.

Reality was not so kind.

Humans would die if they lost just two liters of blood. They were so fragile it was hard to believe they could live for a hundred years without spilling all of that. And if the conditions allowing their survival ever collapsed, death would reach them soon enough. The grim reaper wouldn't sit and wait long enough for the human to find the solution to a mystery or to settle things in a final showdown with their true enemy.

When it was time to die, it was time to die.

They would lose their life without finding any answers and without leaving anything behind.

The special rules of Handcuffs applied today, so *the rules were different* from the back alley brawls Kamijou was accustomed to.

He heard a solid footstep.

“!?”

The extreme tension allowed him to quickly regather his hazy and scattered mind.

Who was this and what were they up to?

Had the attacker descended from the elevated railway to finish him off? Or had some other dangerous person discovered someone close to death they could prey on? Anything was possible today. This was a world where death was meaningless and lives were taken as no more than a handy consumable item. Handcuffs was thought to have ended, but it had returned today to corrupt Academy City once more.

His cries for help hadn't reached anyone, but he was sure the same had been true of so many people during Handcuffs.

“Hello, hello.”

Kamijou Touma couldn't get up, so he simply stared into the shadows.

The person who casually stepped out below a streetlight was accompanied by a large dog.

“You have a way of getting yourself beaten up, don't you? That was a piece of tungsten steel this time, wasn't it? There was something strange about the makeup of *that housewife's* body, though. Isn't it funny how you seem so at home in this world of bloodshed even though you claim to want peace and love more than anyone?”

The city decided to hit Kamijou with another surprise.

This person looked nothing like the one he knew. She was a woman with blonde hair cut to shoulder length, blue eyes that carried both a rational look and the look of a mischievous cat, and feminine curves that pushed out her plain beige habit so much it looked sinful. Wasn't she the one known as a great demon? But Kamijou Touma spoke another name after she came into view.

"Ale...ster?"

"Ha ha."

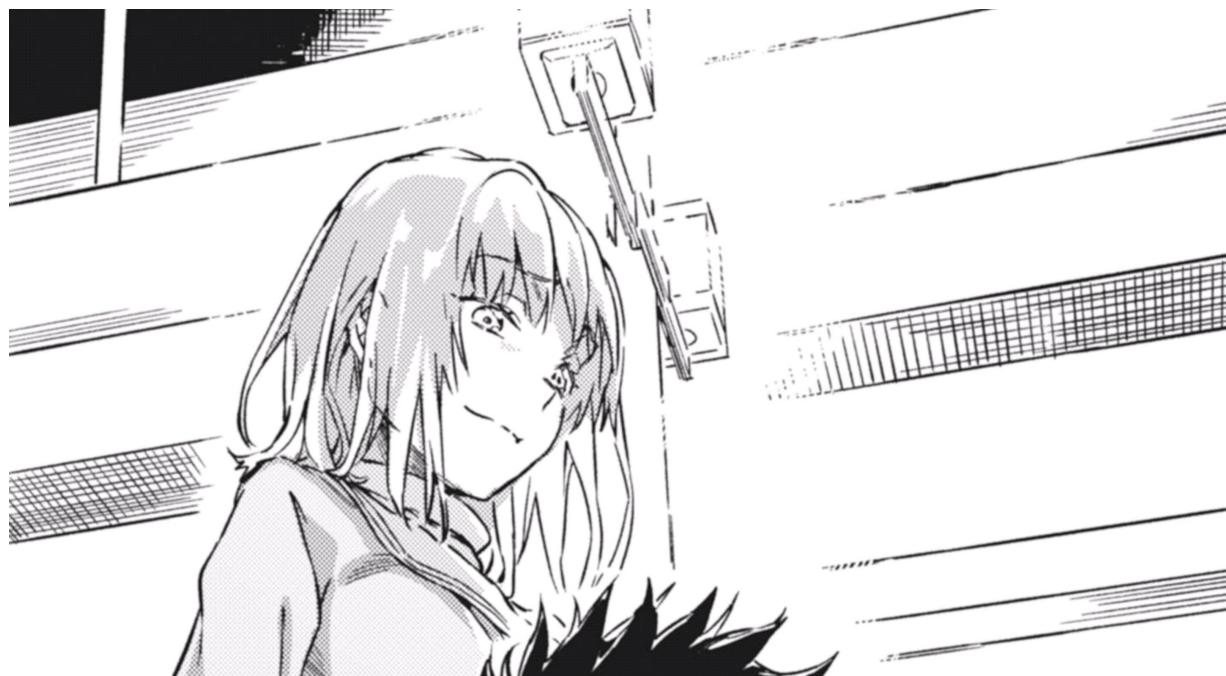
He was answered by sarcastic but intensely dry laughter. The face and body were different. Even the sex was different from what you would find in the history books. But Kamijou was certain of it.

Even though the dead weren't supposed to come back to life.

"Ah, ahh..."

The boy's emotions swelled before he could wonder why or how. He got up from the filthy asphalt and staggered forward.

The magician smiled thinly at being identified so easily.





“Perhaps it is my inability to stay dead that makes the world despise me so. And I suppose seeing Aleister Crowley change form again isn’t going to surprise you too much when you already saw me change sex once. ...Wait, what?”

The beige habit woman(?) reacted first with surprise and then with an exasperated sigh when Kamijou wrapped his arms around her.

The great villain sounded legitimately uncertain while asking a basic question.

"Is this really worth bawling your eyes out over? I can imagine the Anglicans hid the details of the message I left in LA, but even without that, I am the human who ruined your life to use a certain aspect of your nature."

"I don't care. And no, I can't explain why I feel this way!!!!!"

The boy squeezed his arms so tight he thought he might break that delicate body.

And despite what he said, the magician did not push Kamijou away. He even patted Kamijou's trembling back like he was consoling a young child. The originator of all modern magicians simply let the boy sob into his chest.

Kamijou wept at this human's survival.

As a small child, the human had butted heads with his schoolteachers and his parents had accepted the teachers' malicious view and refused to believe their son. He had grown to loathe that family and the god they worshiped, but he had been denied the chance to build a warm family of his own and continued on in constant loneliness. No matter how many victories he accomplished, he was never satisfied and so judged them all to be failures. His had been a life of needless cruelty, so how many people had shed tears for him not out of anger or humiliation but out of joy? That thought may have crossed his mind for just a moment there.

"Are you ready to hand this off to me?"

"..."

"You should know all too well now that your methods are useless against the dark side. Letting Aleister Crowley take over seems like a valid choice to me."

“Not happening.”

“You will die. Or someone you know very well will.”

Kamijou clenched his hands tight with his arms still around that human.

Alice Anotherbible had distanced him from the harsh reality. And Aleister Crowley, who knew Academy City’s darkness better than anyone, had also concluded Kamijou could not do it. That meant it was probably true. If he strayed beyond the expectations of those monsters, he would lose his life.

“But it’s still not happening.”

“Why not?”

“The victory you would bring...” Kamijou Touma spat the words out weakly. It took him a full minute before he could pull away from Aleister’s warmth. “Is not the path the *next* Board Chairman wants to follow. Handcuffs ended on the 25th. Maybe it was a failure, but that doesn’t mean we can trample on its corpses now. If anything can be salvaged, I have to salvage it now. All you would do is pour cement into the path toward salvation and seal it up tight. Along with all the still-breathing people collapsed down there too weak to move.”

“Your point?”

“I’m not letting that happen. I’ll clean up my own blood. I really am happy to find you’re alive, but you chose to leave this city, so you don’t get a say in what happens here anymore.”

“...”

“You created Academy City. It’s true. But *it isn’t your city anymore*. Maybe you only did it on a whim, but that’s the decision you made. Don’t come back and start pushing for more tragedies here with a grin on your face, Aleister. There isn’t a single life in this city you can

control anymore. If you think you can ignore the rules and get away with it because you're special, then you're no different from the rest of the dark side."

This might be the only option that would let Kamijou safely back out.

It wouldn't solve everything, but it would let him escape the darkness without losing any more blood.

But he refused, even though he couldn't even support his own weight.

Kamijou Touma didn't know Hanatsuyu Youen.

Kamijou Touma didn't know Rakuoka Houfu.

Kamijou Touma didn't know Benizome Jellyfish.

Kamijou Touma didn't know Frillsand #G.

He didn't know anything about Handcuffs where so many people had risked their lives to fight.

He couldn't rely on what Alice had shown him before. He doubted the real Handcuffs had room for the love, tears, and laughter he had seen there. That meant he couldn't say he actually knew those people.

However.

Was not knowing them really enough of a reason to refuse to save them?

Someone was trying to take the lives those people had somehow managed to preserve after so much unspeakable suffering and humiliation. Wasn't that reason enough to stand up and fight for them?

(You don't need any special rights or qualifications for this.)

He had been bloodied from the starting line.

Gritting his teeth wouldn't close up his reopened wounds.

But...

(People's lives are on the line here, so I can't sit around waiting for the perfect opportunity. I need to figure out what I can do and then do it, even if it means sticking my nose where it doesn't belong!!)

"Move, Aleister. Whatever happened on the 25th, the 29th belongs to me. I won't let Handcuffs end in failure again. I'll give it a happy ending this time."

That was all Kamijou Touma could do while wearing down his very life.

He was so battered he couldn't even stand up without leaning against Aleister's chest. The beige habit woman(?) stared coldly down at him and snorted with laughter at his decision.

"Hmph. You can dream all you like, but what do you think you can do when you're in such bad shape *here in reality*? What can you do against me? I am Aleister Crowley, the human who conquered history's most intense magical battle, destroyed the world's largest magic cabal from within, divided the world between magic and science, created the very concept of the science side, built Academy City during the confusion of postwar rebuilding, and manipulated the entire world to my own selfish ends."

Kamijou fell silent, tasting a rusty flavor on his breath.

The culprit behind the crash was still at large.

Aleister's solution would be indiscriminate. Anyone even tangentially involved in the Handcuffs-related events of the 29th would be sealed away below the concrete if he got his way. And he could almost

certainly pull it off since he had single-handedly won the Battle of Blythe Road.

(What can I do?)

Whether he went for a direct confrontation, a surprise attack, or set them up to defeat each other, he would not just aim to be the reigning champion of the dark side. He was the one who had designed and managed the city's dark side. He was on another level entirely, so if he used his power, he would slaughter everyone in his way.

That would mean Shirai Kuroko, Hanatsuyu Youen, Rakuoka Houfu, Benizome Jellyfish, Frillsand #G, and anyone else Kamijou hadn't encountered yet.

Aleister would mercilessly bury them all before even hearing them out or battling them.

(You want to know what I can do after being shown this nightmare?)

For a brief moment, Kamijou's mind came into sharp focus on this single point.

The bloody boy slowly raised his head.

He stared straight into that fearsome monster's eyes at close range.

He was still woozy, but the kind of normal high school boy you can find anywhere gave his answer in a low voice.

"I'll get mad."

Aleister Crowley smiled.

Still smiling, the human took a step back, leaving Kamijou to fend for himself.

"I would readily get into a physical battle with William Wynn Westcott who was rumored to be immortal. I would have no problem with killing that clown Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers who had the nerve to name himself the originator of modern magic."

Aleister slowly raised both hands.

He didn't turn his head, but he didn't seem able to look Kamijou directly in the eye either.

Almost like a small child whose mischief had come to light.

"But the one thing I never want to do is get into a verbal argument with you."

"I know reality isn't going to play nice," spat Kamijou Touma, surrounded by terrifyingly dark shadows.

Aleister had taken a step back, so he couldn't use the human for support anymore.

But he managed to stay on his feet with the bestial gleam found in the eyes of any challenger.

"But *that's why* I need to overexert myself and stretch out my hand as far as it can go if I hope to grab anyone's hand. Are you kidding me, Aleister? Yeah, they're hopeless villains. Sure, they're criminals who harm everyone they come into contact with. But so what? Don't just give up on people's lives. That should be *all the more reason* to make a real effort to save them. What if I can prove everyone wrong and save them? What if I can pull off a happy ending after the rest of the world threw in the towel and pretended they couldn't see what was happening anymore? It'll feel pretty damn good, don't you think? You're supposed to see this as a chance to point and laugh at the god in heaven who claims to be all-powerful and all-knowing but still lets these tragedies happen. Am I wrong?"

"..."

"I don't know how many Handcuffs survivors there are in all. There might be someone everyone's forgot who's still out there struggling in the depths of the darkness. They might be shouting – screaming – for help, but we just can't hear them. And as long as that chance exists, I've got to plunge into this godforsaken darkness and search for them. I won't settle for a partial solution with Alice's help. I'm not burying it all under cement and going home when there might still be someone down there. *That's why* I refused her help and came back here, knowing it would hurt like hell. So don't waltz in here and try to do the same damn thing like you'd be any better."

His head wobbled on his neck.

He had lost too much blood.

But he clenched his teeth, held his ground, and got out the words.

"Don't cement over it all and call it fixed. The all-knowing god in heaven might be able to accept an answer like that since he can see all the right answers, but you're only human. So don't you want to see a future that tears down that coldhearted conclusion, Aleister?"

"I can't believe it." Aleister sighed with an indescribable look on his face. "To think I would find a glimpse – however small – of the Thelema leading to *the 21st Aeon* in the very home I have already abandoned. This part really is frustrating. This always seems to happen to me. The things I pursue flee me and the things I discard turn out to be treasures."

"...?"

"Just speaking to myself," whispered the beige habit woman(?). "Now, I have a simple question for you: how do you intend to turn this around?"

"First, promise me an overpowered joker like you won't get involved in this. If you can't promise me that, then I'll punch you right in the face until you cry and change your mind."

"Why does justice always side with you when what you're saying isn't much different from a tyrant's criminal code?" Aleister sounded somehow exasperated, but he had turned his back on goodness and justice for so long he wasn't about to change his mind on the matter at this point. "I get that you intend to turn down my generous offer and settle this on your own, but how exactly are you planning to do that? You don't understand what is really going on today, not to mention how the original Operation Handcuffs ended."

"Personally, I find it strange that you would know so much more about it when you were supposed to have left the city."

Kamijou poked at his temple. This was not like when he had Alice's strange adjustments to protect him. He had a bruise there where some kind of blunt weapon had hit him.

(Really, Alice's intervention has only complicated things. The real culprit *wasn't Frillsand #G*. I'm betting Alice switched the real one out for a powerful enemy she thought I could actually defeat, but that false information got in my way here.)

He could use his knowledge from Alice's world as a reference, but he couldn't rely on it too much. The number of people involved didn't match up and everyone's plans and situations were different. After all, *he didn't even know if Youen, Rakuoka, and Benizome had really wanted to escape the crashed train of their own free will*.

He exhaled, focused on his aching temple, and gave his answer.

The wounds on his body were the one thing he knew to be real.

"I start by figuring out who did this. I might not like the answer, but I can never find the path to a solution if I don't know who my real enemy is."

"*Then the girl will help you, teacher☆*"

"Gweh!?"

His senses were taken over by something soft, warm, and sweet.

An incautious blonde girl had apparently jumped right toward his head from the side. She had taken a running start and then buried his head in her flat chest. When she wrapped her arms and her legs around him, he couldn't help but focus on her body heat. Her arms were latched onto his shoulders and her legs onto his hips. There was only one person this could be:

"A-Alice!?"

"Yes, the girl's name is Alice."

He tore her from him and then held her under the arms like a cat. She tilted her head, demonstrating the same otherworldly and gentle fairy tale aura she had shown in her world.

The beige habit and golden retriever were nowhere to be found anymore.

He briefly wondered if he had wandered back into Alice's world, but that wasn't it. Aleister could pull off a miracle of that level on his own.

"Where did you come from?"

"From there☆"

Her little finger did not point north, east, south, or west.

It pointed up.

That came as a surprise. Firstly, because it meant she had recklessly jumped down from the elevated railway like he had. It did sound like her to ignore the defined path like that. And secondly, because if she had jumped down with no concern for her skirt, she may have had a good reason to leave the railway in a hurry.

(That's right. What happened to whoever hit me in the temple!? The culprit who destroyed the ATS sensor is up there. If someone else tries to investigate the track, they'll run right into the culprit too!!)

He heard an impact of heavy metal.

Then someone flew over the elevated railway's wall and fell toward him.

“Shirai!!”

Part 5

Earlier, Shirai Kuroko teleported from the platform roof to the elevated railway. She could use a series of teleports to travel at a speed equivalent to a sports car, but she instead chose to travel on foot this time. Not even she was sure why she avoided high-speed travel and instead chose to walk slowly along the track.

The train tracks were a dangerous area you weren't meant to walk through in the first place. Plus, the gathered darkness keeping her from seeing very far ahead may have triggered an instinctual fear within her.

At any rate, Shirai Kuroko walked along the elevated railway with Matsuriba, the young driver of the Overhunting, and Alice, the girl left in her care. She didn't like getting the driver involved, but she knew nothing about railroads and needed assistance from someone with the appropriate knowledge. Alice came too. No one knew why.

(Wait, I only teleported myself and the driver from the platform to the roof. When and how did she follow me onto the roof and then onto the railway?)

Shirai wanted to get to the bottom of this case, so she was headed to the likely center of the action. The escaped prisoners were unlikely to return to the train, so leaving Alice at the platform should have been the safest option, so what was she doing here?

Alice looked perfectly harmless smiling up at Shirai, but that just made everything about her more confusing.

The fairy tale dress was also curious. Not to mention the short sleeves. Clothing that didn't match the season was a sign of

someone on the run for a long period of time, but could that really be the case here?

Eventually, they heard a voice. They hadn't even traveled 300m by that point.

"Yes, yes."

Shirai immediately grabbed Matsuriba and Alice's hands and teleported. The elevated railway traveled in a straight line, but it stuck out a bit from its meter-high concrete walls. The drop from there was about 7 meters, but she could approach whoever-this-was if she traveled along the outside of that wall.

She held a finger to her lips to tell the other two to stay quiet.

"..."

The lack of noticeable obstacles along the track gave a clear view in both directions and it was easy to overlook the walkable section past the walls, so they had managed to get in a blind spot.

The voice coming from the other side of the thick wall belonged to an adult woman.

"I've had a realization, Yomikawa-senpai. I've realized the truth. Operation Handcuffs was an obvious failure. Attempting to clear out the dark side while keeping our hands clean triggered a powerful backlash. That's what brought down Handcuffs, right? So we need to make some adjustments to keep that from happening. Anti-Skill needs to adapt more flexibly to the state of the city if it hopes to keep the peace."

(Who is she talking to? Is she on the phone?)

"Do you have any idea what you're saying?"

"Of course I do. We need to be more open minded. Call it a plea bargain or a witness protection program if you must, but we've

decided to call ourselves *Anti-Skill Negotiators* and we actively negotiate with the criminals. We can use that to make the technology seen in Operation Handcuffs our own and use that to defeat even more powerful criminals. From there, we just have to repeat the process, our power growing each time. The power scattered by Handcuffs will be absorbed by Handcuffs and used to end it once and for all. Anti-Skill doesn't need to suffer any more damages tonight."

"Anti-Skill only has the right to arrest. We have no right to determine a suspect's guilt or reduce their punishment. You lack the power to keep the promises you're making!"

"Yes, and?"

"First of all, some of the criminals you're talking about using are minor students and they will come to harm using your methods. What do you do if they end up hurt or worse!?"

"Why should I have to do anything? *They're criminals*, so why should I care what happens to them?"

"Tessou...Tessou Tsuzuri!!"

That name came as a shock.

Shirai knew her.

(Are you kidding? She's changed so much I didn't even recognize her. Is this really the same timid Tessou-san?)

Surviving Handcuffs may have acted as a baptism for her.

December 25 had been a nightmare for everyone involved. That bloody night had been so horrific it was a miracle anyone had survived. It may have been a radicalizing event for some.

"Oh, please, Yomikawa-senpai. Did you learn nothing after surviving Handcuffs and crawling out of the hell that was South District 7

General Anti-Skill Station?"

"Kh."

"The nightmares plague me every time I try to sleep. Now I know there are people who don't see the world the way we do and can't possibly be saved. Criminals can be useful, but they are too dangerous to let loose. If you insist on denying these simple truths, then you're making a mockery of all our colleagues who died helpless and in vain while trying to the end to be the good teachers serving to protect the city's children. Also..."

The speaker paused there.

(Oh, no.)

Shirai Kuroko's hand wandered through empty space until it found the driver and she teleported him to the ground. Alice had already disappeared of her own accord, but Shirai didn't have time to question that.

"*I can see you,*" said the voice beyond the wall.

"Dammit!!"

The meter-tall concrete wall was mercilessly blown away. If Shirai hadn't teleported away a moment before, the scattershot of fragments would have knocked her from the elevated railway.

She teleported to the center of the track.

The person who ended the call and stored the phone in her chest was an adult woman with glasses and curly black hair blowing in the night breeze. Shirai knew her to be the timid type, but no sign of that remained.

She wore a black jacket and tight skirt, but the outfit would never have fit in at an ordinary office. The belts around her hips and shoulder looked more military than anything. For some reason, the

Anti-Skill emblem stitched onto the shoulder belt was upside down. Instead of a gun on her hip, she wore a large whip, a stun baton, pepper spray, an LED strobe light, a spherical wireless speaker, and more gadgets. It initially seemed like a motley collection of SM gear, self-defense tools, and A/V equipment, but Shirai realized what they all had in common.

(Those are all used in nature parks and circuses to get large animals to obey.)

The hooked pole she held was used by animal tamers.

The Anti-Skill Negotiator grinned and scraped that along the ground.

Shirai had heard that loud noises and strong smells could be as effective as direct pain against an animal with sharp senses. Although in those cases, it might be referred to as a repellent instead of pepper spray.

Someone else stood alongside her.

The woman was cowering nervously and looked to be college aged – no, probably a bit older than that. Her long chestnut hair was tied back with a simple hair tie. She wore an apron over a sweater and skinny jeans, giving her the look of a homemaker. Light gleamed from her left hand's ring finger. It could always be fake, but that suggested she was married and had a family.

But something else clashed with the rest of her look.

A neon color shined atop her head. She wore a pair of triangular devices resembling cat ears. They were attached like headphones and they made constant subtle adjustments in response to the wearer's thoughts.

That was clearly a next-gen weapon.

And if what Tessou Tsuzuri had said was accurate...

(Is she a criminal who made a deal with this so-called Anti-Skill Negotiator? But wait. I don't remember anyone like her during Handcuffs.)

Shirai was suspicious, but she couldn't deny the possibility either. Too many people had died during Operation Handcuffs to keep track of everything.

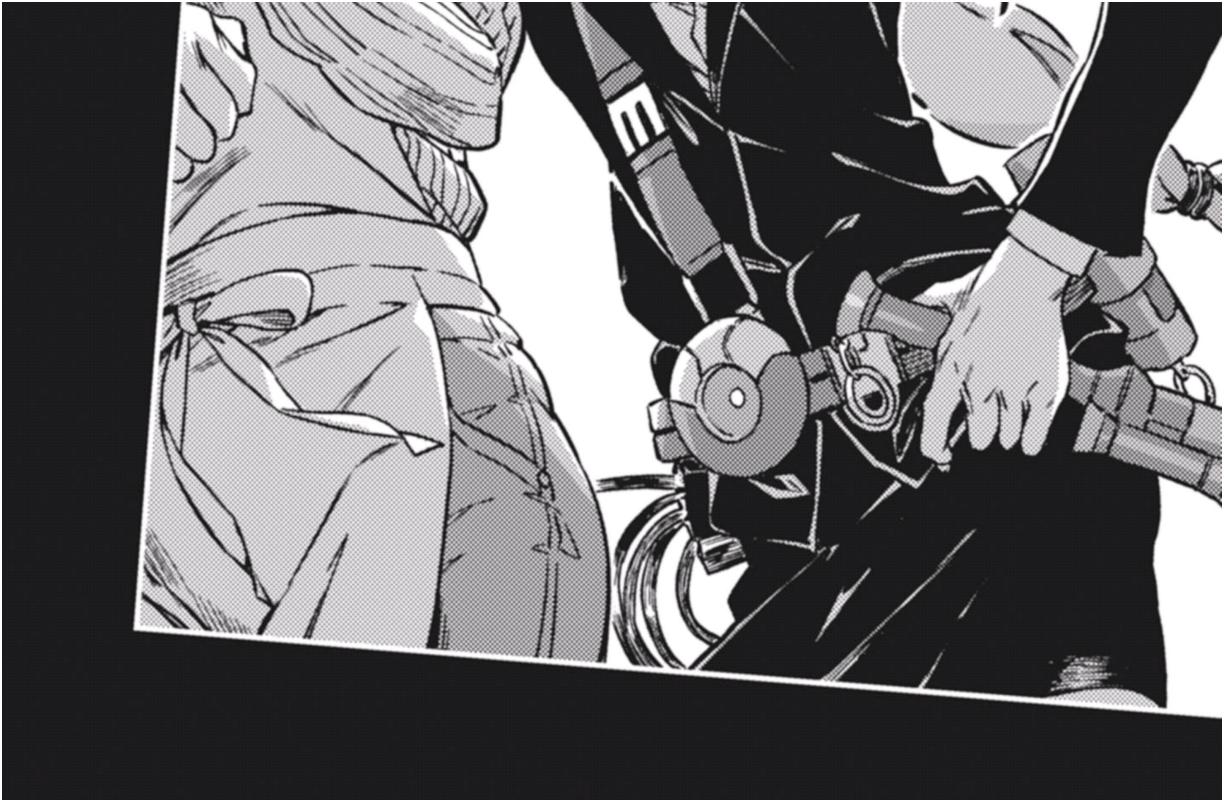
But now was not the time to frown in thought.

The apron woman may not have been the belligerent type. She was stooped over and cowering with tears in her eyes as she asked a nervous question of the woman in a black military uniform.

"E-excuse me, but is what you just said, um, true?"

"Oh? Ohh? Ohhhhh???"





The Anti-Skill Negotiator on the other hand sounded amused. She moved her legs adorned with garter belts and black stockings, clacked her sharp heels against the ground, moved her lips over to the apron woman's ear, and tore into the other woman's heart with a voice loud enough that even Shirai could hear it.

"What makes you think a criminal's family deserves an ordinary life?
Would you prefer I spread some rumors around your neighborhood so you can never go back to the life you had?"

"!?"

It was Shirai Kuroko of Judgment who gasped, not the apron woman herself.

Did that woman not realize she was violating an unforgivable taboo for anyone with the ability to search people's personal information at a deeper level than the average person!?

“Ah ha ha! I hope you’re ready to deal with graffiti on your house, stones thrown through your windows, and raw garbage left at your front door. Your name will be on all the trending search lists. You see, people don’t give a crap about the rights of bad people, especially when they’re strangers. And people with too much time on their hands will do just about anything to feel self-righteous. I wouldn’t go outside at night if I were you. A van might pull up and snatch you off the street. You and your family!!”

This was pure malice.

It was the ultimate cruelty where you stripped all other options from someone until they had no choice but to continue toward the precipice. The scum who tamed humans like animals used her whispered words more than her whip or stun baton.

She made a show of driving the verbal blade into the soul found deep in the apron woman’s chest.

“Do you get it now, *Rakuoka Nodoka-chan*?”

That name was enough for Shirai Kuroko to sense something snap in her mind.

Maybe he hadn’t been a good person. Maybe Operation Handcuffs had revealed him to be a harmful villain.

But.

“Tessouuuuu!!!!!”

Shirai’s shout was repelled by a deep metallic noise.

The apron woman stepped forward to shield the black military uniform woman.

Rakuoka Nodoka’s weapon was neon-colored metal that protectively surrounded her hands. She held them in her hands and passed her fingers through them to enhance her fists like high-tech brass

knuckles. She scraped them together before spreading them to either side.

“We’ve found your second target, Nodoka-chan. C’mon, hurry it up. I don’t want to dirty my own hands. I can’t let my involvement get out until we’ve managed to build ourselves a solid enough foundation within Anti-Skill.”

(Did she punch through the concrete wall with that? No, enhancing an ordinary fist couldn’t accomplish that. And at her age, I doubt she’s an esper.)

Shirai Kuroko pulled a few metal darts from her thigh belts, but Rakuoka Nodoka was more afraid of someone other than the enemy in front of her.

“Wh-what are you going to do? This girl looks like ordinary Judgment. Eek, eek. Can you really *trap* someone who hasn’t done anything wrong?”

“Kh.”

“Nodoka-chaaan. Don’t phrase it like that. Are you doing this on purpose?”

(Whatever the case, she isn’t an esper. If only these darts weren’t so powerful. And I can’t use them for defense either!!)

This woman wasn’t even a criminal.

The government workers in charge of rehabilitating criminals had a duty to protect not just the victim but the perpetrator’s family from any social backlash. But a public agency’s network was being used to threaten this woman and force her to commit crimes against her will. *What was she if not a victim?*

With all the pain and suffering, it was unclear if she even knew what she was doing, so it was possible she could not be held legally

responsible here. And Shirai personally hoped it would turn out that way.

She only wanted to take down this villain using justice as a disguise.

More and more brutal words were used like a whip against the puppet's ass.

"Get going!! Make yourself useful or I'm posting photos of your home on social media. Ah ha ha hee hee. Do you want your lovely and comfortable family torn apart because you're the sister of some criminal scum!?"

"Uhhh. Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

"Don't listen to her, Rakuoka Nodoka-san! Dammit!!"

Rakuoka Nodoka approached with greater strength than expected.

Her skinny arms suggested she had never worked out a day in her life, but a punch from those metal fists could easily be fatal.

"!!"

Shirai Kuroko escaped outside of her punching range.

She couldn't attack either, so she kept teleporting away, focusing on Rakuoka Nodoka's feet. Specifically, on her short-heeled pumps.

(If I can break one of her shoe's heels to knock her off balance, she won't be able to rush toward me in that moment. But that's all the opening I need. I can use that moment to end this by defeating that Anti-Skill Negotiator grinning behind her!!)

Shirai Kuroko did not see Rakuoka Nodoka as an enemy. It didn't matter where she came from. When she was so blatantly being threatened by a third party, she was a victim needing protection. More than that, it made this a battle she could not afford to lose for the sake of the Anti-Skill man she had fought alongside.

She would not harm her.

Killing her was entirely out of the question.

She was sick of the cruelty seen in Operation Handcuffs.

But *she didn't know the full truth.*

Shirai Kuroko had not seen the end of Operation Handcuffs after it was so distorted by the Coins of Nicholas, so she didn't know how this particular case had begun.

She did not know that Rakuoka Houfu and his family had gotten away with murder in the past. She did not know he had strayed from the straight and narrow to dispose of the body of a malicious stalker who wouldn't leave his sister alone.

So a question.

Rakuoka Houfu had disposed of the body, but who had that body belonged to? Kihara Heikin. That specialist in psychological research had belonged to a family infamous in a certain field and he had a bad habit of mixing his personal and professional lives. But who was it that managed to locate that monster hidden nearby, attack him, and end his life without giving him a chance to fight back?

The answer stood before Shirai now.

An impossible impact struck her in the forehead.

No amount of external boosting should have brought such a slender fist to this level and Shirai had been out of punching range regardless, yet her brain was rattled all the same.

Woozy, she heard something slicing through the air and hallucinated a great flying serpent.

Only then did she realize what was happening.

(So...that's it.)

Once you noticed it, it seemed silly.

But if you failed to notice until it hit, even the cheapest of tricks could be very effective.

Shirai was a Level 4 Teleporter. She could ignore the three-dimensional restrictions and warp to whatever coordinate she wanted, but this apron-wearing homemaker was holding her own against that high-level esper.

In other words...

(I don't know if it's to extend her reach or boost her power, but is she *swinging the brass knuckles around on some kind of rope.!?*)

The rope was cheap. It looked like she had a sturdy cardboard tube around it to protect her hands from the friction.

It was less like a Western flail or morning star and more like the flying claw developed in China during the Ming dynasty. That weapon swung some finger-like claws at the end of a long rope. It was unlikely Rakuoka Nodoka had dug that deep into history, though.

It wasn't that this was all Rakuoka Nodoka could do.

Just think back to her first move. With nothing more than the cat's paw brass knuckles on her hands, she had easily broken through a concrete wall.

That suggested she was more destructive at closer range.

The really scary part was the incredible luck involved in sensing her disadvantage, immediately coming up with a clever solution, creating it on the spot, and proving it to be effective.

This ordinary homemaker could convert a discount store into a collection of weapons more deadly than a military armory. Those deadly crafting skills were here true essence.

“Bff?”

Shirai didn’t have time to shout.

With her head so rattled, she couldn’t teleport even when she noticed the threat approaching.

The apron woman tugged on the rope to retrieve the blunt weapon and then moved in close while readying her other fist. Maybe she had thick springs at her armpits and elbows because the body blow that hit Shirai’s gut from below felt like it was rocket powered and even lifted her feet from the ground. More than that, it sent her soaring through the air.

Rakuoka Nodoka could draw on as much deadly force as she needed and she was being threatened into doing precisely that.

The Anti-Skill Negotiator would negotiate with anyone involved in this case and make use of them even if it meant their deaths.

It was an extremely dangerous combination. They had more than enough power already, but the threat level could grow endlessly if Hanatsuyu Youen, Benizome Jellyfish, or someone else was convinced to obey as well.

Tessou Tsuzuri.

That woman’s own physical abilities were an unknown, but she was definitely dangerous enough to make use of Operation Handcuffs and all the human desire and violence packed into it.

Whether it was the Carrier or the artificial ghost, she could squeeze out all the bizarre technology anyone was hiding.

Shirai Kuroko understood all this, but she couldn’t find a solution.

She could considerably reduce the chance of being hit by teleporting around, but her physical endurance was the same as any middle school 1st year. Her head was rattled and it was a struggle to breath. She could not recover right away, so she was helplessly dumped off of the elevated railway.

Her badly blurring vision caught sight of a tearful smile.

Now she understood.

If she had collapsed atop the railway, Rakuoka Nodoka feared the Anti-Skill Negotiator would laugh and crush her head under her sharp heel. *Whether it was warranted or not*, someone who felt no guilt could not be threatened into obeying. That meant the corrupt Anti-Skill officer would have no choice but to physically eliminate her. To avoid that, the kind homemaker had intentionally sent the pitiful loser over the edge.

Shirai was again saved by someone with the name Rakuoka.

She bit her lip, still unable to clear her vision.

But the 29th threatened to transform Rakuoka's kindness and compassion into something deadly.

Part 6

Kamijou Touma had no choice but to spread his arms and catch her.

“Gwah!!”

He had chosen to do it himself, but he nearly lost all awareness of where he was. The breath caught in his throat. As soon as the impact hit him, his upper body was pushed straight down. His feet nearly slipped from the ground and his hips bent more than 90 degrees. He had taken the impact on the arms, yet he felt an intense pain in his neck and back more than his shoulders.

What was the average weight of a 1st year middle school girl? 40kg? 50kg? It felt more like a small meteor had hit him. Never again would he dream of a heroine falling from the sky. If one of those actually landed on you, you'd be dead.

Nevertheless, he managed to catch her.

He just barely kept her from hitting the asphalt after falling more than 7m. Once the numbness wore off, he could finally feel her warmth. She was still alive.

“Ow... Wow, I can't believe I did it. That was pretty badass, right? If I don't praise myself and drown my brain in endorphins over this one, I'm pretty sure I'll keel over from blood loss.”

“Teacher☆”

Innocent Alice spread her arms and hugged him with her higher body temperature.

She rubbed her face side to side on his stomach, poking him with the pointy animal ear curls. She gave him an endorphin-fueled smile and pointed up.

"There's more coming down."

"Hm!? Eek!!"

Kamijou quickly adjusted his grip on limp Shirai Kuroko and fled below the railway overpass where some rundown food carts were set up. Smiling Alice clung to the side of his hip the entire time.

He heard some heavy crashing noises as metal pieces of something rained down. Had the rails been torn up, or were those the poles holding up the power lines? Not only were they heavy, but they scattered bluish-white sparks.

"What the hell!? Is there a mountain gorilla or a dinosaur going nuts up there!?"

He so hoped the unidentified monster didn't jump down here. He shifted the twintailed middle school 1st year into a princess carry and stepped out from the other side of the railway overpass. They needed to avoid this foe's attention while getting as far away as possible. Alice ran alongside him staring jealously at the girl being princess carried like something from a picture book, but he didn't have time to focus on that. Making any promises now might just lead her to leap onto his back with a smile, so just like a stray dog you can't take home with you, showing kindness would actually be crueler in the end.

He felt a dull pain throbbing in his temple. He too had been attacked by someone up there.

"Wait, wait, wait. What happened to Frillsand #G? Death is coming on so much stronger than in Alice's world. My skin is still tingling after making it this far away."

“Hmm.”

What happened next went well beyond a pink bat and some hedgehog balls emerging from below her apron.

He heard a straining sound.

He looked over to see Alice’s fairy tale dress pulling to either side so hard it was about to tear. The sturdiness of the actual materials and stitches didn’t matter. It was going to tear as easily as a thin stocking. It was all too obvious that the stagnant warmth gathered inside was trying to escape.

If that burst open, the world would be destroyed.

“It’s not too late to *use* the girl.”

“Please, Alice. Anything but that!!”

Alice genuinely puffed out her cheeks and pouted her small lips. That was the look of a girl whose thoughtful suggestion had been rebuffed as a nuisance. The apparent innocence only made him more concerned she might *explode* without warning.

“Keep that hidden and don’t let it out at the drop of a hat. Please!!”

“So it’s a secret? A secret for just the girl and her teacher!? Kyah, kyah☆”

It transformed into a smile an instant later. She even held her hands to her cheeks in an extremely bashful way. That was a relief, but he had to hope the things he said now weren’t going to come back to bite him later. Saying whatever saved his skin in the moment could end up teaching her the wrong lesson.

That was when Shirai Kuroko groaned in his arms.

“Ugh.”

No matter how weak she was, he was afraid she might suddenly move her limbs and unbalance herself enough for him to drop her. He gave up on moving and stopped below the roof of a deserted bus stop.

Even stopping to ask her what had happened up on the elevated railway was taking a risk. If he didn't keep a close eye on their surroundings, the unidentified monster could catch up and tear him in two.

But Shirai brought up some unusual points.

"Hold on. So you're saying this Anti-Skill Negotiator is trying to bring the Handcuffs criminals onto her side to boost her power enough to fight even more powerful criminals?"

"Yes, what about it?"

"But she was directly involved in the Overhunting's crash. She was the one who messed with the ATS brake sensor on the track."

Shirai Kuroko was very insistent that he put her down, so he carefully lowered her onto the simple bench.

"That doesn't make sense if she's part of some secret special forces mobilized to capture the Handcuffs criminals who escaped the prisoner transport train. Why would the Anti-Skill Negotiator cause the crash that let the criminals escape in the first place? For that matter, *when did she find the time* to contact Rakuoka Nodoka and turn her into a puppet?"

There was of course another possibility.

Maybe that Anti-Skill Negotiator named Tessou Tsuzuri had arrived after the fact to solve the case and the crash had been caused by some third party like Frillsand #G.

But Kamijou Touma shook his head even as he described the possibility.

“No, that couldn’t be.”

“Why not, teacher?”

“Then she would have no reason to attack me to hide the cause of the crash. If it was just me, fine – maybe she got confused. But she did the same thing to Shirai. And Shirai was wearing a Judgment armband. It doesn’t make sense to assume she’s a criminal just because she’s approaching the scene of a crime on the off-limits elevated railway. That wasn’t a mistake. She’s attacking anyone who comes by to investigate the crash. To hide her own guilt.”

“You mean?”

“Her plan was to let the criminals escape so she can kill them while they ‘resist arrest’ or whatever excuse she comes up with. If they end up in prison, they’ll be out again eventually. So what’s the only way to ensure they never commit another crime? She may feel the need to settle this once and for all since it was Anti-Skill that risked their lives arresting these criminals in the first place.”

Anti-Skill only had the right to arrest. They couldn’t convict a suspect or adjust the severity of their sentence. According to Shirai, Tessou’s colleague had brought that up over the phone and Tessou had said she didn’t care about the criminals’ rights.

That was the answer right there.

She wasn’t satisfied with the sentence the courts had given and decided to carry out a capital punishment herself. And she was willing to destroy a strictly-defended prisoner transport train to do it.

She had taken it upon herself to determine the weight of their sentence.

She felt Anti-Skill deserved to redefine those criminals' punishment.

(Was it that bad? Can she not bear to go on if she doesn't cling to her hatred of Handcuffs?)

Kamijou had not directly experienced the hellish night of the 25th, so it was hard for him to say.

The metal rails or poles falling from the railway suggested it was an absolute mess up there. Perhaps Tessou was physically eliminating all evidence of her sabotage. She and Rakuoka Nodoka had come from elsewhere, so they may have been going around destroying each piece of sabotage in turn. So even if a forensics team went over the place with an electron microscope, they would only find the scars left by Rakuoka Nodoka's rampage. And that was no skin off Tessou's nose when she only saw the other woman as a useful tool.

Tessou Tsuzuri, the mastermind behind it all, could walk away unchallenged and find someone else to capture and threaten. She didn't feel an ounce of camaraderie with Rakuoka Nodoka, so she would use up a human being like a bullet. She would repeat that process until all of the infamous Handcuffs criminals were wiped out. So she would proactively gather anyone related to that event and set them up to destroy each other.

She was joining forces with the criminals on the other side so she could gather together all the technology seen at Handcuffs.

Kamijou had chosen that same path in Alice's world. All while that small girl guided him around by the hand. Did that choice really look so twisted and ugly from the outside?

"It won't be that easy, Tessou Tsuzuri."

Before, Kamijou had assumed he only had to hand the captured criminals over to the adults in Anti-Skill, but this proved that idea wrong. He had to protect the prisoners from the sinister scheme set up by some of the adults.

“This greatly changes how we have to go about this,” whispered Shirai Kuroko, holding a hand to her swollen forehead that had to ache pretty bad. “This Anti-Skill Negotiator only sees the escaped prisoners as a means to expand her power. She seems to be doing fairly well with Rakuoka Nodoka so far, but if Tessou Tsuzuri was planning to deal with the Handcuffs criminals from the beginning, would she really assume she *only* needed verbal threats to get them to obey? She already knows how far those villains are willing to go.”

“Are you suggesting she has something else set up?” asked Kamijou.

“It’s too soon to say anything for certain, but her plan seems to be to actively bring criminals onto her side and use them as efficiently as possible to defeat and threaten even more powerful prey. We need to *protect* them before she can capture them and use them as a disposable tool. Who knows how far the harm will spread if we don’t.”

Kamijou smiled a little at that.

She gave him a puzzled look.

“What? This is no laughing matter.”

“Yeah, I know.”

She had said they needed to *protect* them.

Belonging to Anti-Skill or Judgment did not mean you had to blindly hate the criminals and view them as an enemy.

People were too delicate and complex to be described with simple, named emotions. They would make seemingly contradictory or incomprehensible choices all the time.

And this unexpected choice felt really nice.

Not everything was permissible simply because it was considered "just".

This was not the convenient world Alice had created for him. Good was not guaranteed to prevail and evil was not guaranteed to be punished in this version of the 29th. The prisoners didn't stay in the train station forever, someone not even on his mental cast of characters had attacked him, and the dead would not come back to life. If you declared it unfair and came to a stop, you would be the next one to be mercilessly destroyed. This world could only be described as harsh and unforgiving.

But it meant so much to hear those words here in the real world.

Kamijou Touma had finally found something that made him glad he had chosen this more difficult path.

Part 7

Low tremors intermittently shook the asphalt.

However, this wasn't necessarily the handiwork of the Tessou Tsuzuri and Rakuoka Nodoka team.

"Hee hee hee. Off, off, off with their heads♪"

Alice smiled and sang a disconcerting song with the white fluffball on the back of her apron wiggling to the beat. *Is this the unique cruelty of small children?* wondered Kamijou, staring out from the bus station.

"So how do you suggest we end this commotion?" he asked.

"I doubt we would find any of the criminals if we returned to the station now," answered Shirai. "If they hope to escape, they wouldn't remain anywhere near the Overhunting."

That meant they now had to search the entirety of Academy City for Hanatsuyu Youen, Rakuoka Houfu, and Benizome Jellyfish. Not to mention Frillsand #G who hadn't been on the Overhunting. Even with several options, it was unlikely they would encounter anyone if they ran around at random.

So...

(This might not apply since things are so different from in Alice's world, but it's worth a shot.)

"We find Youen."

"What?"

Shirai Kuroko wasn't sure what he meant, so he clarified.

(Youen helped me in Alice's world, but things are different now. So where would she have gone and what does she hope to accomplish here?)

"Hanatsuyu Youen the Carrier. We need to capture all of the criminals before that Anti-Skill Negotiator does, but we need a starting point. I might be able to just barely predict what she'll do."

That girl had the technology to manipulate any urban pest or vermin in order to send out microbes and chemicals at will. Her skills could be used to help people, but she chose not to. She would not join forces with an ordinary person, treat their wound, or make jokes with a gloomy smile.

But like a game of concentration, enough wrong answers could lead to the correct answer.

(What is Hanatsuyu Youen's goal? *Is she really the type to run away without a plan just because the adults are closing in on her?*)

He didn't think so.

He had a feeling she had some goal no ordinary person could understand.

Whether she would cause a citywide panic to distract Anti-Skill while she escaped the city or she chose not to escape and instead slaughtered Anti-Skill to ensure her own safety, he felt like the Carrier would think up and act on an idea so destructive it made him feel faint.

Academy City was a big place.

But what facility would let her use her trait as a Carrier most efficiently and spread harm farther than anyone else?

"We have to secure all of them regardless, so I don't particularly care who we start with," said Shirai. "I don't see why that couldn't be Hanatsuyu Youen like you want. And once we start collecting the prisoners, we will inevitably encounter that Anti-Skill Negotiator who wants their power. Once that happens, we need to rescue Rakuoka Nodoka from the scum who has her trapped."

With that, Shirai started to stand from the bench.

That was when it happened.

"...is...still..."

Kamijou Touma's view dropped straight down. No, all his strength had drained from him and he fell to his knees.

"Kah..."

He didn't even have time to shout.

An unpleasant sound came from within his body. He thought he maybe had a nosebleed, but *the stickiness he felt while blinking* told him there was blood below his eyelids.

He saw a doll-like blue dress and long blonde twintails blowing in a way unrelated to the night breeze. She was right there in front of him, but she looked less real than a mirage.

(Frillsand #G!? Why does she have to show up now!?)

She hadn't laid a finger on him.

She had not shot a horrific beam of light through his chest and she hadn't caused a massive explosion.

She had simply appeared before him.

That was enough for a wet and sticky sensation to flow from his eye and ears. After falling to his knees, he was helpless to do anything

but slowly collapse forward.

He was experiencing unexplained bleeding, a headache, chills, and a fever.

Death was approaching little by little – step by step.

“What? Bh...ah!!!???”

(Damn...it. I can't even raise my right hand. This attack...makes no sense. Agh, what am I even supposed to punch with Imagine Breaker!?)

“...still...inside...”

This was absurdly dangerous.

That monotone female voice was simply too dangerous.

His vision was tilted on its side and growing red starting from one side, but he managed to see Shirai Kuroko collapsing from the bench to the ground. His brain was hallucinating cracking and straining noises. The confusion of all his senses was worse than any pain and it felt like having an invisible hand squeezing him in its grasp.

This was Frillsand #G the artificial ghost.

Unlike in Alice's world, she did not just launch powerful electricity and use her scientific nature to resist Imagine Breaker.

This was not a visible, physical threat like that. He didn't understand any of it, but was she a *much more dangerous being* who would kill you if you carelessly looked in her direction when she spoke to you!?

At the same time...

“Yawwww?”

He heard an odd voice.

It was cheerful, carefree, and cutely sweet. Apparently she had trouble staying up late in the real world too. She was nodding off in the middle of the crisis playing out around her.

Alice Anotherbible looked like she had stepped out of a picture book and she alone remained standing. After holding a small hand to her mouth and yawning, she placed her index finger on her chin and tilted her head to ask a question.

Yes.

The fundamental question of *why was everyone around her collapsing?*

“Ri...still...inside...”

“That won’t work on the girl,” interrupted Alice with a sleepily clueless smile.

This time, no cricket bat or hedgehog balls emerged from below her apron. This was a formless curse, after all. But Alice was still entirely unaffected by the invisible attack.

Was she built differently from the others on the inside?

Was this like how carbon monoxide was deadly to humans but harmless to insects because their blood was different? This didn’t seem like she simply didn’t feel any pain because she was that much stronger than the average person. It was a lot more like the conditions of the attack didn’t apply to her in the first place. Kamijou even had a meaningless fantasy about someone continually giving animal carcasses to a vulture in the hopes of giving it food poisoning.

Which was more unnatural here: Frillsand #G for causing fatal wounds without laying a finger on anyone or Alice for being exposed to that and smiling like it was nothing?

“A ghost can’t match the girl’s level of mystery☆”

“...”

A few solid impacts rang out.

They came from Frillsand #G, not Alice. Her neck kept bending unnaturally to the right or the left. At times, it bent more than 90 degrees.

The shadow extending from young Alice’s little feet had grown unnaturally long.

It slid out past Frillsand #G and a strange silhouette stood up from it. The emaciated and bony silhouette was far creepier than the flamingo or hedgehogs. But instead of white bones, these were clear as crystal.

It held a one-sided axe with a sharp sword blade extending from the butt end of the staff.

This was the horrifying side of fairy tales – the polar opposite of the candy and the stuffed animals.

(What is that?)

Kamijou had no advance knowledge and no one gave him the answer, but when he saw the bony creature wrapped in a tattered black cloak, he was strangely certain of the answer. Like the answer had been inserted into his mind.

(An executioner?)

The ominous silhouette seemed puzzled by its failure to lop off its target’s head in a single attack.

Its skull-like head tilted disconcertingly far while it spun the shaft around in its hand. It switched to the sword blade and sliced sharply

at the air. Whenever it spun the shaft like a baton and aimed the point at its target, the artificial ghost's head was mysteriously knocked aside, causing it to bend directly sideways.

Kamijou honestly couldn't even see the axe, the sword, or even the blur of the blades in motion.

Most likely, the conditions it used to cut had nothing to do with that motion.

Maybe it was the arrangement of the fingers gripping the weapon, maybe it automatically sliced at the weak points the target reflexively tried to protect, and maybe the baton-like weapon was a spool for the threads of life and destiny and it would cut those threads, killing you instantly, if you failed to defeat it before it spun a certain number of times.

Frillsand #G was only still intact because she was an artificial ghost, but Kamijou was willing to bet he would have been decapitated before he could even try to react. He couldn't even guess when he would need to use his right fist.

"Oops." Alice noticed something and quickly pressed her small foot against the ground and rubbed forward with the sole. "Teacher would be mad if the girl actually killed you. Come on back, Executioner. You can't cut the Cheshire Cat who vanishes into thin air."

That was all it took for that powerful silhouette to collapse and disappear.

Kamijou only now realized something.

Both in Alice's world and the real world, the pink bat and hedgehog balls would emerge and block any attack that Alice couldn't avoid herself.

But it wasn't about protecting her.

It wasn't motivated by a fear of injury.

If she was hit by an attack that obstructed her movements, it would piss her off so much she would kill her opponent without even meaning to. So Alice *made sure to block the attacks so that wouldn't happen*.

Not even the Executioner was Alice's own power. Anything that slipped past the cricket defense and escape the Executioner's blade would probably find Alice herself waiting for them.

"..."

Even after taking several lethal slashes to the head, the artificial ghost was still functioning.

Didn't an old children's story say you couldn't behead a bodiless cat?

Frillsand #G silently pointed a finger up with her head still bent unnaturally far to the side.

A deep boom echoed from overhead.

It came from one of the photography or delivery drones that were common enough nowadays. She must have messed with its large battery, causing it to explode above Alice's head. Even a single screw could become a deadly weapon when dropped from sufficient height. This was like creating a falling ceiling from the many fragments.

The artificial ghost's formless attack had not let up.

Kamijou still suffered from the inexplicable fever and bleeding while he did his best to roll along the ground.

"Gah...ah!?"

(That ghost woman doesn't just harm anyone she meets. Can she also make machines malfunction!? I-is there anything she can't do!?)

“Hmm.”

It was Alice’s turn to act.

She removed the finger from her chin and directed her small palm toward empty air.

She had the look of a child when the stone they were kicking down the road on the way to school fell into the ditch. It was the look of someone abandoning some meaningless, self-imposed restriction and preparing to unleash whatever they were holding back.

Most likely, this wasn’t due to the electric ghost’s approach. It was something else that made Alice spread her long blonde hair to the sides.

All the assumptions were breaking down.

The cricket defense had been slipped past and the Executioner’s blade had been escaped, so it was time for Alice herself to make her move.

“The girl kind of has to now, doesn’t she?”

“Alice!!!!”

Kamijou clenched his teeth like he was about to cough up blood and gathered all his remaining strength in his legs.

(I can’t do anything for Shirai. I’ll just have to hope the bus stop’s roof is solid enough!!)

He leaped to the side, grabbed Alice around the hips, and rolled into a nearby alley with her.

He heard hundreds of solid objects striking the ground outside the alley. It sounded a lot like a sudden downpour.

He kept the small girl pinned to the ground, pressed his forehead against hers, and shouted down at her.

"I told you I didn't want any of *that*!!"

"Mh! Well, the girl doesn't want you mad at her."

The way she shook her fine blonde hair side to side was as innocent as ever.

When he saw her smile and noticed he could actually see it clearly, he realized his red and distorted vision had already returned to normal.

Was that because he had moved a few meters away from Frillsand #G?

Or...

(No, this alley isn't that far away. So is it *seeing and hearing* the ghost I need to avoid?)

That did sound like in ghost photos where it was the photographer or someone else in the photo who was cursed just because a ghost appeared in the photo.

He heard a windy sound and then woozy Shirai Kuroko appeared in the back alley. She leaned against the filthy wall from the side and cleaned up her bloody nose with a fancy-looking handkerchief.

"I'm impressed you could teleport in that state."

"And I'm impressed you could get up at all. Also, you'll feel better if you *cough that up*."

He hit his limit as soon as she mentioned it.

Leaving Alice with Shirai and turning the other way was the most he could manage. Something warm rushed up from his stomach, but

this wasn't vomit. He spewed a red liquid onto the alley wall. What had happened to his organs during that encounter with the artificial ghost? She was an unreasonably deadly being.

It was terrifying finding himself unable to analyze what had happened even *after it happened to him*, but it was also creepy not knowing why she had appeared and attacked them here and now.

Yes.

(Hold on. Damn, I didn't even consider this. If she wasn't behind the Overhunting's crash, *then why is she involved in this at all?*)

"I have no idea what makes her attack, but we won't survive again if she passes through the wall and peers into this alley. We need to leave."

"Agreed." Kamijou wiped the blood from his mouth. "Hanatsuyu Youen will be the easiest one to predict. Let's start with her."

"Sure. I just hope the other prisoners are still *safe and sound*."

Part 8

Metal clangs and orange sparks burst through the city night. A woman in a red China dress and a cowboy hat lay collapsed face down on the roof of one of the many skyscrapers.

Her dominant hand was pulled behind her back and a knee was pressed against her back to pin her center of gravity. The culprit was an apron woman wearing thick brass knuckles resembling cat paws.

This wasn't just an issue of range. The pinned woman was a skilled cameraman and sniper, but she wasn't only effective at long range.

The housewife with her long chestnut hair tied back with a hair tie seemed like a complete monster by this point.

Rakuoka Nodoka's ability to cause harm was extraordinary. The fact that she had still managed to maintain a normal life without falling to the dark side only made her seem more dangerous.

“Gah!?”

Once the paparazzo's hands were tied behind her back with a cheap zip tie, a booted foot kicked her sniper rifle aside and a woman with glasses and a black military uniform crouched in front of her. Even kneeling, she was still looking down at the other woman.

Tessou Tsuzuri held a long, thin object between her thumb and forefinger.

“Hi there, Benizome-chan. I'll need you to open your mouth indecently wide for me, okay?”

“Mghhh!?”

A metallic sensation suctioned to the underside of her tongue. It was about the size of the AAA batteries used in TV and air condition remotes. A rubbery flavor filled her mouth.

“That’s a Fishing Tongue. One remote signal from me and the motor rolls up your tongue until it tears that entire lying tongue right out of your mouth. Isn’t it cute? Now you and Nodoka-chan match☆”

Only when the timid housewife stuck out her tongue and slowly moved it around was Benizome able to see the device for herself. It was attached with a suction cup or an adhesive.

“...!?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t recommend trying to force it off. I mean, unless you like the idea of the lithium ion battery detonating and blowing off your lower jaw.”

The China dress woman froze when she heard that. There were times when the threat of a slower death would restrain people better than a quick death.

Tessou Tsuzuri had pulled all this off without a single run in her stockings. She started the discussion with a smile.

“*Let’s get negotiating, shall we?*”

“Don’t give me that. I don’t even get to choose if I side with the good guys or the bad guys?”

“You never did.”

(This gives me a short-range and a long-range fighter. A pretty standard setup. But it isn’t enough to control the entire board. If I want a complete victory, I need some more bizarre tech. I only need one more person and victory is mine.)

That was when the usual flashbacks hit the Anti-Skill Negotiator.

Not even she could figure out what triggered it.

Anti-Skill officers melting into black goo.

A slaughter carried out by the very children they were supposed to be protecting.

More experienced officers holding their handgun to their temple and sobbing as they pulled the trigger.

“...”

Tessou Tsuzuri bit her lip as the images filled her mind.

The nightmare of Handcuffs on December 25 would not leave her.

The word “acupuncture” grew ever so tempting, but she shook it from her mind. The adrenaline and noradrenaline strongly linked to tension were produced in the adrenal glands, so shutting off the signals from there could forcibly free her from this. But she could not afford to fill her mind with meaningless optimism.

Rakuoka Nodoka asked a nervous question.

“U-um, uh. Wh-what...next?”

“Good question.”

The Anti-Skill Negotiator pondered the question in amusement.

It was too soon to make her next demand. Rakuoka Nodoka was not normally the kind of person to place a deadly roller below a stranger’s tongue and drag them into the same hell she was experiencing. Perhaps people could counteract their guilt as long as they were able to view themselves as a victim.

Tessou Tsuzuri chuckled as she turned her gaze elsewhere.

“Hanatsuyu Youen the Carrier. Yes, negotiating with her would be the safest option.”

Part 9

Kamijou's group walked through the city to reach a neighboring district.

This would never end if they failed to rescue Youen before Anti-Skill Negotiator Tessou Tsuzuri reached her.

They arrived in District 10, but unlike in Alice's world, they had no business with the abandoned leisure spa.

"The garbage incinerator? Oh, that's *the place next door*, isn't it? But why there!?"

"The Carrier wouldn't get scared and skip town just because the law is after her," said Shirai Kuroko. "I agree with your assessment there. During Handcuffs, she repeatedly attacked an Anti-Skill station and a forensic investigation facility to keep anyone from investigating further."

She wasn't sure why, but her teleportation didn't work on Kamijou Touma. She had tried it herself, so now she was stuck traveling on foot with him.

"So we only need to work backwards from there. The garbage incinerator is not much of a threat itself, but many garbage trucks gather here, those trucks contact the garbage collection areas around the city, and those areas are accessed by the countless cleaning robots. So if a high-density contamination begins here, the microbe or chemical can spread to every part of the city."

"This late at night? I thought garbage collection was done in the mornings."

"It's winter break. And close to New Year's. The restaurants are packed, which means more garbage. They must have a special schedule in place for this time of year."

"Damn. Why are the villains always so clever and calculating?"

"But that aside," continued Shirai Kuroko. "The Carrier specializes in controlling urban pests and vermin. Even more than the garbage collection infrastructure, this place is like her *home turf*."

"So what do you think Youen is trying to do? Cause a large enough panic to escape safely, or eliminate all of her enemies?"

"With her twin missing, I have to wonder if she even has a real goal in mind."

"?"

They could see a boxy concrete building with several smokestacks on top.

Kamijou's feet nearly stopped moving as soon as it came into view.

"This isn't good."

"What isn't?" innocently asked Alice, wiggling the round fluffball on the back of her apron.

It wasn't clear if she really didn't understand. With that otherworldly storybook girl, it was possible she actually understood every little thing that was going on.

The large facility had more than just the one building. And it didn't seem to just be split between the kinds of garbage. It was clearly linked to the adjacent facility beyond the concrete wall.

"The closed leisure spa. Hasn't it been overrun by illegal homes? Man, those expand its silhouette more than you would think. Are there really that many people stuck living there?"

"You know an awful lot about this underground area," noted Shirai. "Did you hear about it on a test of courage video? Anyway, there is definitely a large uncounted population here."

"Does the Carrier see humans as no more than larger vermin she can convert into infection bombs?"

"I don't know if she will use the water or air to spread the infection, but it could spread to the leisure facility through the ducts and pipes, leading to victims there. The place appears to be shut down, but the pipes are still connected. And at her small size, she might be able to travel directly through them herself instead of just sending bugs or microbes."

The front gate was open and there was no sign of any guards.

No, that wasn't accurate. The concrete wall surrounding the facility was unusually swollen in places due to the thin white threads covering it. The collections of threads took the shape of humans.

"Eek!?"

"That looks like the Carrier's work all right," said Shirai. "Uiharu, arrange to have backup and an ambulance sent to District 10's garbage incinerator. Uiharu!?"

Shirai Kuroko called the name a few more times before giving her phone a puzzled look. She had apparently lost her connection. Was Youen responsible for that?

(Or was it someone else? Youen might not be the only threat here.)

The dark roadside trees rustled unnaturally nearby. They had no idea how many people were here. Kamijou had no real reason to do it, but he made sure to grab smiling Alice's small hand and pull her forward. More than just let him do it, she innocently pressed against the side of his hip.

“What now? Should we go in on our own?” he asked.

“Yes.” Shirai Kuroko shook her uncooperative phone. “I would normally suggest we wait for backup, but if we are even a second too slow to prevent Hanatsuyu Youen’s distribution plan, Academy City really is doomed. Similarly, there isn’t much we can do if the Anti-Skill Negotiator gets the Carrier on her side.”

Kamijou was afraid to touch the clumps of white threads on the wall, but they had to do something if someone was trapped inside. He wasn’t sure how much it would help, but he covered his mouth and nose with his jacket’s sleeve and peeled away the clumps of threads with a stick he found on the ground nearby. It felt less like breaking through a spiderweb and more like splitting open a cocoon the size of a sleeping bag.

He worked to at least get the faces of the silhouettes open. None of the guards he uncovered were conscious, but he could at least hear them breathing.

“Good, they’re still alive,” he said.

“Are those moth scales?” asked Shirai.

“The girl knows about poisonous moths! They already have their pokey bits as caterpillars, so everyone says not to touch them. They can’t do anything to the girl, though.”

“These aren’t scales,” said Kamijou, staring at the Judgment girl, who shrugged.

“If you can’t tell just by looking, that sounds all the more dangerous to me. I can’t tell you what that *specialist* is using, but let’s hope the hospitals have a serum or antidote available.” She placed a handkerchief over her mouth and carefully observed it from a step away. “But laying them down or treating them with our bare hands would be too much of a risk. We can’t say what they were infected with like this and the threat might not be visible like scales. Since

they're unconscious, we can be certain the Carrier used *something meant to knock them out*. They should have airtight hazmat suits in a specialized garbage incinerator, so it would be best to help them after ensuring our own safety."

"Are you serious?"

"With that Carrier, I find it odd she didn't just kill them when they were in her way. That makes me suspect they are meant as infection mines."

Kamijou couldn't rely on what he knew from Alice's world. The real villain named Hanatsuyu Youen wouldn't open up to you so easily.

He had thought he understood that, but seeing the harm she caused still came as a shock.

"Damn, that's one more reason we can't die here."

"Agreed. We need to stop Hanatsuyu Youen, acquire a hazmat suit, and get them medical care. We must not be taken out of the fight before then."

They passed through the open front gate and entered the grounds.

It was a large place, probably because so many garbage trucks had to come and go. As they approached the service entrance to the large boxy building, they found the doorknob melted. That would be Hanatsuyu Youen the Carrier's handiwork. Kamijou and Shirai exchanged a nod before pushing open the stainless steel door with their foot to avoid touching the melted portion.

There was no one inside.

But once they stepped into the building, the air felt so much more tense.

It was like they had crossed a line with that step over the threshold.

"This is pretty big for a garbage incinerator. Where would Youen have gone?" asked Kamijou.

"Probably not the actual incinerator at the very core. She wants to infect the entire city by sending it back through the garbage collection route – from here to the trucks, to the garbage collection areas, and finally to the cleaning robots. I don't know if she's using a microbe or a chemical or what specific pest or vermin will be carrying it, but she doesn't need to expose any of it to those temperatures above 1300 degrees for extended periods of time."

"Then where?"

"Where the garbage trucks gather. She only has to infect the pit where the trucks dump their garbage. Then every truck that stops by will be infected."

According to Shirai, most of the garbage was sent to be recycled, so there wasn't really very much "fuel". That meant most of the garbage gathered around the city was sent to sorting facilities.

The unnatural lack of people suggested the place was almost entirely automated. Or maybe everyone else had been neutralized like the guards out front.

"Anyway, I wonder where the hazmat suits are," said Shirai.
"Whether she is using microbes or a chemical, I want to be protected from the microscopic threat as soon as possible."

On the way, Kamijou found an open door, checked inside, and looked puzzled.

Youen wasn't there.

"Hey, Shirai. What's this?"

"?"

The twintails girl gave him a curious look, so he tossed her what he had found in the small room. It was a cardboard box about half the size of a chocolate bar.

She caught it and checked the front and back.

“It is an ethanolamine drug.”

“Which is?”

In this case, his ignorance wasn’t due to being a failing student. That term wasn’t found in any high school textbooks. He initially wondered if it was used in esper development, but apparently not.

Shirai actually seemed surprised he didn’t know.

“Oh? Do you live a happy life free of seasonal allergies? It’s just an allergy medication. It works on pollen as well as some inflammation and bug bites, so it makes sense that they stock a stronger version at a garbage processing facility. The only problem is that the histamines involved in allergies exist within the body, so suppressing them too much makes you drowsy. What about it?”

Kamijou pointed toward a corner of the small room.

There was a clear gap there.

“At least two or three of the cardboard boxes of the stuff is missing. Maybe more.”

“There’s our answer then. Damn!! The over-the-counter stuff wouldn’t be a problem, but this is much stronger!!”

Shirai clicked her tongue and walked down the corridor. At a rapid pace.

Kamijou was afraid she would teleport away if he didn’t follow and call out to her.

“Hey! If the real Carrier is as bad as you say, then why is she sticking to something that only *knocks people out*? Just like striking with the back of the blade, safely knocking someone out is a lot harder than killing them!”

“The real Carrier? If you only look at its effects, this drug is no more than an allergy medicine. Even if this one is stronger than you can buy over the counter. So unlike dioxin and PCB, this won’t trip the cleaning robots’ toxin sensors. Can you think of an option more efficient than using the very drug they already have stockpiled here?”

“By any chance, do you have a non-efficiency-related reason in mind too?”

“It’s an irregular side effect and won’t happen to everyone, but even a small percentage collapsing is a problem. You should never take a drug you don’t need. And remember that the Carrier is an expert at using urban pests and vermin. I’m sure you can imagine what will happen to any victims who end up collapsed helplessly in their rooms or around the city. The creatures they usually crush underfoot without even noticing will swarm them while they can’t move a finger.”

“...”

Was Hanatsuyu Youen the Carrier really *that bad a person*?

“Wait, Shirai! Look!!”

“?”

A plastic board hung on the wall. It displayed a simple map of the facility. The garbage dumping pit Shirai had mentioned was on the west end of the building. The map showed the entire outer wall as a metal shutter. With so many garbage trucks lining up to dump their trash in that pit, it made sense.

“So we take a left at the next intersection to reach the western outer wall. This means Youen wouldn’t have had difficulty reaching the goal either.”

“It isn’t that far, but just to be safe...”

Kamijou pulled out his old folk’s phone and took a photo of the map. Then a few more in case the first was blurry from his unsteady hand. He had to hold Alice back so she didn’t photobomb him with her smiling face.

At the same time, something dripped from the ceiling and the map started to grow dark. He initially thought the roof was leaking, but this was different. The board was made of plastic. Simple rainwater wouldn’t discolor it like this.

Plus, the dark stain was moving.

This wasn’t a liquid at all.

“Cr-”

He tried and failed to force his dried throat to operate.

Alice’s cheerful voice spoke for him.

“Crickets!”

They all looked up. A glistening light moved in waves along the corridor ceiling. As soon as they noticed, tens of thousands of crickets began vibrating their wings at once, creating an explosion of sound.

Part 10

Several heavy metallic sounds happened all at once. The incinerator facility had more than just the incinerator and conveyer belts. To sort between burnable and non-burnable trash, it also needed machines and chemicals to break apart large items, remove the metal pins from cardboard, and to remove the plastic paints from wood. Not to mention machines that determined if something could be recycled or not. For Hanatsuyu Youen the Carrier, this place was a treasure trove.

Even in the noisy facility, she could just barely make out the explosion of noise.

(I caught someone. It's not great that I can hear it myself, though.)

At a certain country's embassy, some workers who complained off severe dizziness and a buzzing in the ear were thought to have suffered brain damage. It was likely a special form of sound wave attack. Rumors spread in the embassy that the attack was intentional and that it would develop into an international incident...but it was later theorized that the chirping of local crickets had caused it.

Crickets chirped by rubbing their wings together, so as long as you knew the dangerous frequency, you could subtly alter their wings with chemicals to reproduce the same phenomenon. It had helped that the heat-filled garbage incinerator facility had been full of creatures that couldn't normally survive the winter.

(And it is still connected to the filthy slum with a thick pipe.)

“Now, then.”

Youen lowered the stack of cardboard boxes she held.

(Resisting too hard on the 25th was a mistake, but my Carrier trait may not be welcome outside of Academy City.)

She had never questioned any of this when Kaai was with her. She had never feared anything no matter who in the world hated her as long as they were holding hands. Even if it meant planting a tracking device in her sister's stomach.

But things had changed.

She lightly kicked the side of the box stack with a sulky look on her face.

(So would it be best to go with Option 3 – playing dead? I can make them think I escaped the city while the citywide panic brought down their investigative abilities but then actually hide among all the bodies. As long as I change my face or ID later, I can escape them. Doing that requires overloading their ability to identify corpses, so *more than 300 thousand* deaths should do the trick.)

She froze in place after reaching that conclusion.

She was certain her answer was correct. She alone could take control of the 29th that way. But what did she really want to do?

She hadn't cared what the rest of the world thought. She had been perfectly satisfied racing against her twin every day. They had worn the same clothing and eaten the same foods so their conditions were exactly the same. But Kaai had grown tired of it and left, leaving Youen all alone.

She was afraid of dying and she certainly didn't want her life cruelly taken from her. That much was true. But what did she want to do beyond surviving? What was worth tearing down others and taking so many lives?

Hanatsuyu Youen was not like Kaai. Youen did not take lives for fun or on a whim. She might pretend to do so in order to paralyze an opponent with fear or anger, but deep down, she always manipulated her pests and vermin in the most effective and efficient way possible.

But not everyone would accept an answer just because the math proved it to be correct.

She always considered the shortest route to her destination, thought up the fastest method to achieve her goal, used every shortcut that would eliminate unnecessary steps, and received plenty of disapproving frowns from the people who only ever climbed the stairway one step at a time.

They all wondered how she could be so obsessed with something so gross.

Those questions always confused her. What did gross have to do with anything? Wasn't the entire point to climb the treacherous mountain and reach the summit? None of them had the strength, equipment, or plan needed to reach the summit, so how could they criticize her for making all the necessary preparations to reach it faster than anyone else?

It was so strange and weird. It made no sense.

She only wanted to win first prize, to succeed, to receive praise, and to show everyone there was a perfectly safe and convenient route up the mountain.

All she had done was minimize the time and effort required to reach the summit.

Kaai was the only other person racing to the summit under the same conditions as her, so only she had been worth training against.

“...”

She shook her head.

She could ponder these philosophical questions after surviving and escaping to safety.

The bad kind of gifted child opened the top cardboard box and viewed the smaller boxes of drugs packed inside.

They were ethanolamine drugs. Industrial strength.

They were only allergy medication, but healthy people's bodies could malfunction if they took enough of them. There was no such thing as a perfectly safe drug and the difference between poison and medicine was more about dosage and usage than substance.

(I need this to travel backwards from the incinerator facility to the garbage trucks, to the garbage collection areas, and to the cleaning robots, so I need something better at surviving the cold than crickets. Something with a resistance to the cold, something not afraid of people, and something that won't be incapacitated when covered in the drug. Something that can also be used to carry pollen would be best. Let's see...)

A low buzzing tickled her ear.

With no fear or disgust, she raised her skinny index finger to let a silver-glowing bug land on it. Then she winked.

"Drug resistant flies, perhaps?"

Part 11

In a vortex of noise too loud to hear his own shouting voice, Kamijou saw Shirai Kuroko stagger to the side. She couldn't use her teleportation. And this was the girl who had just barely managed a jump when under attack by Frillsand #G.

Looking purely at simple damage, the chorus of tens of thousands of crickets was apparently worse than the ghost.

"Gah."

Kamijou collapsed to the floor. There was nothing he could do. He saw a few crickets drop from the ceiling and then they all came down like a black waterfall. They didn't bite or scratch, but he did feel the weight of the bugs – not something he was normally even aware of.

And within it all...

"Oh, dear."

A small girl's voice reached his eardrums with unexpected clarity.

It belonged to the storybook girl named Alice.

The noise was enough to rattle the mind and the bugs were cascading from above, but she had the same smile as ever and held both soft hands out toward him. She pulled his upper body out like she was rescuing the victim of an avalanche and then she dragged him away.

Neither the cricket defense nor the executioner made an appearance.

Tens of thousands of bugs apparently wasn't enough for her to feel repulsed or disgusted. She had used the bat and balls before. Poison gas, curses, and other forms of internal damage never seemed to affect her. (It almost felt like trying to drown a fish in water.) But her soft skin could not deflect the macroscopic external damage of the crickets. Plus, she was wearing a skirt and short sleeves.

"Heave ho, heave ho. Hmm, you are heavy, teacher. Ah ha ha. Boys backs really are big☆"

"...lice, wai...second. Shirai...still...!?"

"The girl can't carry you both at once."

Did she drag him 10m or 20m?

Alice acted like the shiny bugs weren't even there as she walked backwards down the corridor and stepped into another workroom. The swarm of crickets vanished entirely once they crossed the threshold. There was no way that was natural for them. An invisible maze must have been drawn out with a predator's bodily fluid or some other chemical.

The high frequency wave continued to rattle his head, but it sounded more muffled, like hearing live music through a wall.

"Agh! Ahh!!"

"Kya ha ha. There's still a cricket in your mouth, teacher. Don't move, okay? There, got it!"

Kamijou still couldn't get up from the floor as Alice shoved her small fingers in his mouth and pulled out a surprisingly large and squirmly bug, but he grabbed her wrist.

"Please, go save Shirai too. Hurry!"

“What will you do?”

The endlessly superhuman girl smiled and he glanced deeper inside the facility.

“I doubt I’d be any help just waiting here, so I’ll keep going and prevent that stuff from being spread across the city.”

‘The difficulty level is way higher that way.’

“Doesn’t matter. Really, that’s all the more reason I can’t make you or Shirai do it.”

Alice nodded and turned back so readily it actually worried him. In fact, she spread her little arms and toppled forward to do a bellyflop into the torrent of black bugs. Her definition of gross appeared to be different from his. He heard her laughter from beyond the thick black wall, like a child enjoying getting dirty in the mud. She really didn’t seem to have any hostility or malice inside her.

Meanwhile, Kamijou crawled deeper into the facility.

He got his trembling legs moving enough to stand up and slowly walked forward.

He chose to trust in the things he couldn’t see. When he had a bad feeling or sensed a mysterious pressure, he kept away from that room even if it meant going the long way around. He didn’t know if it had helped at all, but he wasn’t attacked by anymore bugs. It was possible he had noticed a faint dizziness or headache from the chemical smell or the change in room temperature or air pressure.

Regardless, he referenced the map photo on his old folk’s phone to take an S-shaped detour around the most direct route and finally reached the destination of that labyrinth.

He had found the dumping pit on the westernmost end of the facility.

The large hole there was used to hold all the garbage gathered by the trucks that lined up outside. It was longer and wider than a school pool and there was a drop of more than 10m just to reach the top of the trash piled up there now.

He saw someone small standing on the edge of that steel cliff.

The black-haired girl wore a white coat tightened around the hips with a medical corset and she wore a gasmask on the side of her head.

She was surrounded by opened cardboard boxes and she was crouched down shaking a test tube with a frown on her face.

She was already preparing to infect the pit.

“Youen!! Please wait!!”

“!? ...Who are you?”

She looked back in surprise without standing up and her question filled Kamijou with an irrational feeling. It made sense. Nothing in Alice’s world had really happened, so this was her first time meeting him. Having a stranger use her given name out of nowhere may have come as a surprise.

Maybe it was cheating and maybe it made no sense, but he did already have some information on her.

(Hanatsuyu Youen is the Carrier. She can attack individuals or entire areas by distributing dangerous microbes or chemicals using urban pests and vermin.)

Once she got started, he would have no way of stopping her.

Her Carrier abilities were not an esper power, so Imagine Breaker wouldn’t work. If she used artificial pheromones and synthetic nectar to draw in tens of thousands of gross creatures, he would be swept away by the swarm.

However...

(So no matter how dangerous she is, she doesn't use her poisons directly! She uses the nectar in her test tube to gather creatures, places the toxins on them, designates the target, and sends them in to attack. That's a lot she needs to do. She's a threat, but not an immediate threat like a gun! I can win this as long as I rush her before she can act!!)

"!!"

Kamijou Touma took his first step forward.

To repeat, the Carrier abilities were not an esper power. She only had some bizarre technology and she herself was only a girl of around 10. He could see her eyes widening and her legs locking up in the face of such primal violence. Kamijou didn't actually need to punch her. She needed her test tubes to attack, so he could neutralize her by tackling her to the floor and pinning her arms against her body. Without her pests and harmful substances, she was only a 10-year-old girl.

On the other hand, he lost all chance of winning if she broke free of her surprise.

If that happened, Academy City was doomed. If she managed to spread that efficient industrial-strength drug, he couldn't even imagine how many people would collapse and be gnawed on by rats and roaches.

(That makes this my one and only chance.)

Maybe Hanatsuyu Youen really was a horrific villain in the real world, but he was certain she could end up like the version in Alice's world if she made the right choices. She wasn't the worst of the worst and she wasn't pure evil. Her preferences trended in a dangerous direction, but if she happened to switch paths just a bit, she might be able to find a future where she smiled like that.

So he wasn't going to give up.

Kamijou Touma refused to give up on someone else's life. Even if she wasn't even aware that path existed!!

(I know your abilities can be used to save lives. And that's enough of a reason to risk my life for you!!)

He stepped into arm's reach of her. A height difference this great actually limited his possible arm movements, but it didn't matter if she could predict his actions. He only had to tackle her and pin her arms to her hips to neutralize her. Then he could place his weight atop her.

But before he could do any of that, a dark red hole was blasted in the center of his gut.

Part 12

“Oh, dear. Oh, dear. Oh, deary me☆”

(I was waiting for the Carrier to fall from that stack of boxes before I ordered her capture, but the ricochet hit someone else instead.)

The black uniformed woman viewing the scene through a pair of binoculars didn't bother slapping her forehead as she made an objective assessment of her choices.

“Hm.”

Her top priority was Hanatsuyu Youen the Carrier. Once that girl was in her grasp, she could take complete control of the 29th. But if she screwed that up, Youen would finish her plan and make a mess of things.

That was why Tessou Tsuzuri whispered smoothly into her radio.

While toying with the hooked animal-taming rod in her other hand.

“Go, Nodoka-chan☆”

Part 13

Kamijou felt something hard and heavy inside his body.

Just beforehand, the color orange had burst from the plain metal pillar in front of him, so had it been a ricocheting bullet? And Hanatsuyu Youen didn't have a gun.

(So is someone else here!?)

He had heard a ricochet would reduce the force of a bullet, but he had also heard the jagged edges of a crushed bullet made it more dangerous if it hit you.

Both ideas came from action movies he had seen, so neither one was worth gambling his life on.

He nearly collapsed to the floor, but...

(If it only hit me by accident after ricocheting, then it probably wasn't aimed at me. If Youen hasn't moved, she'll be shot!)

"Nh, bh, gahhh!!"

"Kyah!?"

He had no choice but to use his bloody body. He forced himself forward and tackled Youen to the floor. He was surprised by how cute her shriek was.

Something outside broke through the metal shutter for the trucks and a jagged sheet of metal duller than a saw whizzed by just above his head.

He looked that way, but there was no one there. And he heard a creaking sound from overhead.

(That wasn't a gun. Did they jump up to the ceiling and cross the pool-sized pit in the blink of an eye!?)

He didn't have time to check.

He was in no state to even get up. The most he could manage was holding young Youen tight and rolling to the side before the black shape on the ceiling dropped down like a meteor.

A metallic roar followed.

Someone had landed in a curled-up pose where he and Youen had been a moment earlier. A fist protected by thick brass knuckles shaped like a cat paw needed to be slowly pulled out of the steel floor.

The woman wore an apron and her long chestnut hair was tied back with a simple hair tie. She looked to be college aged or maybe a bit older.

But her gentle homemaker look made it hard to believe the extreme violence playing about before his eyes. She probably wasn't an esper since she was an adult, so was this some kind of bizarre Academy City tech!?

This was completely different from the muscular Rakuoka Houfu he had seen in Alice's world. She wasn't surrounded by thick muscle armor and she kept her slender and soft bodylines.

Something exploded right next to her without warning.

It was a work light that was probably a later addition. A piece of the shutter may have stabbed into the fuel tank for the generator below it.

She only shook her head to the side.

Unbelievably, she dodged the shrapnel soaring horizontally toward her.

With the whirr of small motors, the pair of neon triangles on her head turned toward Kamijou.

They moved just like cat ears.

Had they detected the explosion in advance or accurately located the flying shrapnel?

(A cat?)

That was when it hit him.

This all came down to nimbleness. A chemical or something had changed her tendons and cartilage to alter the movable range of her joints.

Cats could jump four or five times their height without a running start, which was how they managed to jump onto roadside walls or reach the knob to open a door. That required powerful muscles, but it had more to do with their nimble joints and cartilage. Expand that to human size and this was perfectly possible. She could jump to the ceiling, cling to it, cross a pit longer than a school pool, and drop back down on the other side.

(Hold on. Wouldn't a 160cm cat be a jaguar? Or a cheetah? No, this is even worse. Isn't this on the level of a small lion!?)

What would happen if she used that speed to swing her brass knuckle enhanced fists? He wasn't liking what his imagination was suggesting. And what if she had boosted herself in other ways as well?

But Youen's confusion was directed elsewhere.

She forgot to even pull a test tube from her white coat. The little villain girl kicked her young legs to struggle below bloody Kamijou's

weight.

“Hey! What the hell do you think you’re doing!?”

“Shut...up!! Agh! *I’m trying to save you!!!!!*”

“???”

That must not have been what Youen had expected to hear from the stranger who had attacked her out of nowhere. The confusion drew out her 10-year-old girl side more than her extreme villain side.

“Oh, dear. Oh, my☆”

Another voice reached them from elsewhere.

There was a third person here.

“*Benizome-chan*. I don’t need the boy. Just shoot him and tear him off of her.”

“!!”

(Oh, no!! They’re after her!!)

As soon as he realized where the previous ricochet had come from, Kamijou freed Youen below him and shoved her as far away from him as he could.

But she instead pulled him toward her with her small arms. Then the Carrier’s thumb popped the rubber cap off of a test tube.

A thick black wall rose from the ground. A disturbing number of bugs created a barrier more than a meter thick. Some hot and sharp scraping sounds came from the other side, but the countless obstacles appeared to be altering the ballistic paths. It may have been like sniper shots through an aquarium’s water tanks.

Bleeding and groaning, Kamijou couldn't even get up from the floor. He only managed a weak question.

"What are you doing?"

"I have no idea!! You idiot! You freak!!!!"

Hanatsuyu Youen looked perplexed as she snapped back at him.

To a violent villain, incomprehensible good apparently qualified you as a freak. That was a subtle difference from in Alice's world. He had not been rewarded in the slightest for screwing up his courage, shaking off the fear, and risking his life to tackle the little villain to the ground. Reality was not so kind.

But that was what made it so much fun.

A heavy tearing sound flew by right in front of him.

How many tens of thousands of lives were taken in that single strike? The apron woman had used her brass knuckles to tear through the wall of bugs like it was tissue paper.

All that technology and they hadn't even earned enough time to run away while hidden from view. The primitive violence rushed toward them.

However.

Kamijou had no idea what happened next.

He could only describe it as a tower. A tower of flesh.

The thick steel floor burst apart and something grew up from the hole. It was a mass of muscles. The muscles formed a tightly clenched fist at the end of an arm longer than Kamijou was tall.

The steel floor was torn up like aluminum foil and something like a picture book ogre emerged. Except he had the head of a middle-

aged man with a combover and glasses.

“What the hell!?” shouted Youen. “Why is everyone showing off their brute strength here!? I’m not letting you turn this into a contest of muscles and body size!!”

She must have been afraid of anything that could force its way through all those bugs because she grabbed the collar of Kamijou’s jacket and struggled to get away.

“Ra-” muttered the pointy-haired boy in a daze. “Rakuoka Houfu?”

Yes.

This was him.

But Kamijou Touma had another question when he saw that great muscular back before him. This was a mystery he hadn’t solved even in Alice’s world. Since that former Anti-Skill Aggressor had escaped from the Overhunting prisoner transport train, he had to be one of the dark side’s villains.

But on a more fundamental level...

(He did this in Alice’s world too. He’s clearly on a rampage, but *what is he fighting for?*)

In that world, he had grappled with Frillsand #G. Even though a wielder of purely physical attacks could never really damage that ghost.

Fleeing the city as quickly as possible didn’t seem to be his goal. If so, he would have ignored Kamijou’s group when they were under attack and run off on his own.

On the other hand, he didn’t seem to have a grudge against Anti-Skill or Judgment for arresting him. If he did, he would have gone after Shirai Kuroko before Frillsand #G.

It didn't fit. That couldn't be it.

(What if?)

Kamijou gulped. He slowly backed away while tightly holding onto Youen who would try to escape and drop into the deep pit if he let her.

(What if he's still trying to capture the criminals as an Anti-Skill officer!!!???)

Part 14

What he had done was wrong.

It had been an undeniable mistake.

Rakuoka Houfu clenched his teeth.

But there had been someone he wanted to be happy even if it meant leaving the straight and narrow. So when he had found his sister standing dazed in a pool of blood, he had hugged her, discussed it with the entire family, and decided to crush, smash, and chemically break down the malicious stalker's dead body to leave no trace of him in the world.

The real tragedy had come from his talent.

He could have screwed it up at any step along the way, but he had found success at every turn.

But what if that unexpected success had in fact widened the cracks? What if those cracks had grown into a great maw that was now threatening to devour his family again? And what if his family troubles were putting so many other Academy City lives at risk?

He had to put an end to this himself.

Even if it meant becoming a big, bad ogre.

This was not his first time directly facing the malice that ruled the city's darkness, so this pitiful loser was not going to get cold feet now.

He had already developed an immunity to these sticky shadows.

“Rakuoka Houfu is low priority. You only need to approach the one.”

He heard an amused voice.

Just like back then, these were the mocking words of a demon enjoying the act of bending people to her will.

“Your top priority is Hanatsuyu Youen. Benizome-chan, kill him if he gets in the way. Nodoka-chan, you stay where you are☆ That’s all you need to do to make him freeze up.”

A scorching heat stabbed into Rakuoka’s upper body at supersonic speed and exploded inside him. The lead had been crushed into a flower when it failed to punch through his powerful muscles, which actually worked against him.

His large body tilted to the side.

So what? His precious family was watching.

She wielded deadly violence supported by her crafting skills. But no matter how much anyone else feared her, her brother would always see her as his little sister, so he gently knocked her aside. That sniper was not the type to worry about where her ricochets ended up. If he sent Nodoka into the dumping pit, she would be outside the angular range of the sniper bullets.

He cared about his family more than his own life safe, so now that she was safe, he no longer needed to hold back.

He slowly changed direction.

His bloody muscles swelled out further, growing another size. The crushed bullet was forced back out from the wound.

He had a single target here.

The glasses woman in a black uniform. The Anti-Skill Negotiator. She was supposed to be one of those who prevented crimes by acting as a friendly confidante before things reached this point, not the one who punished the criminals after the fact.

The two foolish adults who had failed to fulfill that role stared directly into each other's eyes.

Tessou Tsuzuri gave a light wave of her right hand. She was probably sending a signal to the distant sniper, but he ignored that. His muscular strength let him lift more than 70 tons. He could end this fountain of tragedy at the source by getting in a single punch before a bullet could break through his thick muscles and shut down a vital organ.

“Oh.”

He took a step.

From there, he exploded into a run.

He had lived a shameful life.

He had entered his 40s without accomplishing anything, he was now an unemployed criminal, and his little sister had gotten married and started a family before him. He was still a virgin, for that matter.

But surely he was still allowed to do one thing his family could be proud of, right?

Part 15

“Heh.”

A deep, artificial voice spoke from a transmission tower that gave a view of the entire facility.

The lit end of a cigar wobbled up and down.

This romance-loving golden retriever had once rejected this man in the depths of the earth.

“That’s a lot more like it, big brother.”

Part 16

When Kamijou heard fierce blows rattling the metal shutter, he grabbed struggling Hanatsuyu Youen with his bloody hands and rolled behind a nearby indoor wheel loader. A simple high schooler didn't know how to locate a professional sniper and the random ricochets were still a threat, but it had to be better than staying put.

Rakuoka Houfu vs. Tessou Tsuzuri.

Ordinarily, it was hard to imagine the skinny woman defeating the 3m mass of muscles, but surprisingly, neither side had emerged victorious yet.

She blocked his attacks. The battle remained even while heavy straining sounds filled the room.

(Damn, that Anti-Skill Negotiator woman is using *something* too. I guess celebrating this convenient interruption won't be enough to survive!!)

There was no saving Rakuoka Houfu if he was sniped from the side while dealing with Tessou. He was an Anti-Skill officer turned criminal, but he had put himself in harm's way to let them escape. Shirai and Alice were not here and Kamijou's right hand could not negate bullets. That left him with only one person to rely on. He spoke to the girl in his arms.

He spoke to the little villain who he had not abandoned even while encountering new surprises at every turn.

"Youen."

“Wh-what?”

“I want your help. How much of your strength as the Carrier do you have left? Can you call all those crickets in here!? C’mon, please! I’m begging you!!”

“S-stop grabbing me and using my given name like we’re friends! Unless I screwed up mixing a drug and erased my memories with some kind of gas, I’ve never met you before in my life!”

“Just! Do! It! Now!” He was shaking her back and forth by the collar. “You’re the only one I can rely on!! I don’t want that guy to die after he chose to fight for us and you can prevent it with your Carrier stuff. So please!! I’ll do anything, *so please save us with some trick only you can pull off!!!!!*”

“...”

For a while, she forgot to even blink as she tried to process what he had said.

She almost looked pleasantly surprised, like no ordinary person had ever come to her for help before.

“Ha.”

Finally, she broke out of her daze with a laugh. She pulled a bunch of industrial-strength drugs from her pocket, crushed them in her fist, and tossed the powdery result toward the garbage dumping pit. Was that the allergy medicine that caused drowsiness as a side effect? That likely reached Rakuoka Nodoka, knocking her out.

With a loud clink of glass on glass, she pulled several test tubes of colorful liquids from her white coat.

“You’re going to regret this.”

Was she summoning a swarm of crickets to act as an acoustic weapon, a swarm of hornets or spiders filled with deadly venom, or

something so horrific a high schooler couldn't even conceive of it?

With several dull sounds, she tore open the nearby pipe until white steam erupted from it. She may have wanted a secret ingredient for her test tubes, but the real surprise was how she tore the pipe open with her teeth.

"What? My teeth melted away during Handcuffs, so I replaced them with nonmetallic implants I made myself. It's the same stuff they make airplane fuselages out of."

Apparently she used more than just chemicals. And how had she managed to implant herself with that new equipment while restrained? He had been shot before it could happen, but if he had managed to tackle her and incapacitate her, would she have bitten into his chest or shoulder?

Also, what had his analysis of her abilities been again?

She was powerful. She used chemicals to control the urban pests and vermin to carry microbes or chemical weapons to her target. Once that process had begun, there was nothing you could do, but she lacked the immediacy of a handgun.

"Benizome-chan."

That voice was the slightest bit faster.

Tessou Tsuzuri managed to speak while grappling with the mass of muscles.

"Your top priority is Hanatsuyu Youen, but if I can't have her, no one can. If she is falling into another player's hands, eliminate her."

"Ah!? Youen!!"

Kamijou had to wonder what he hoped to do about the bullet that would soon be flying their way. He could barely even get up and Imagine Breaker wouldn't work on it.

Nevertheless, he rushed out in front of her.

However, the flow of time felt distorted. His body moved so slowly and Youen felt terribly far away when she was right there next to him.

At the same time, a question occurred to him.

He knew why Anti-Skill Aggressor Rakuoka Houfu had come here, but why had he burst from underground to do so?

What possible reason was there for that?

The answer revealed itself.

A liquid erupted from underground.

The skin-colored syrup surrounded Hanatsuyu Youen and blocked the bullet as a thick liquid barrier.

Yes, skin.

That whitish cream color could have applied to so many other things, so why was that disturbing word the first thing that came to Kamijou Touma's mind?

The answer was obvious.

It was so similar to the color of Hanatsuyu Youen's skin while she stood there in a daze.

"Ka...?"

"Nee hee hee hee hee."

After spiraling around the girl, the liquid swelled up in violation of gravity and finally formed a silhouette seemingly made of melted wax. Once the details formed, it looked exactly like Hanatsuyu Youen.

No, not quite.

Another girl was toying with the crushed rifle bullet held between her little fingers.

"I dissolved myself into the sewers to bathe in all the city's filth forevermore, but I just couldn't do it. Humans are great at adapting to their environment, but the Japanese spirit isn't made to eat curry rice three days straight. Hmm, maybe I should've gone to train in India, the mystical curry capital of the world, before melting my body."

"Kaai!? Is that you, Kaai?"

"Youen, I was honestly sick of your creepy dependence on me. Doing our hair and clothes exactly the same just cause we're twins is so boring, so I wanted the freedom to be on my own and do whatever I wanted. But then I realized the filthiest part of this city was always right there by my side! Hello, my bluebird!! Hello, my defilement!!!!!! I want to see something really nasty from you, *the only scum so filthy that even I have to doff my cap to you*. Do that and I'll play with this enemy of yours☆"

Youen the Carrier hung her head.

And she smiled a little.

"Heh."

The strained atmosphere here was packed hopelessly full of malice, so it was the polar opposite of a comfortable household. But the little villain knew it had always been that way with them.

She could never be a good person, but now that something crucial had been restored to her, she pulled out a new test tube and poured its contents onto the floor.

"Hm, hm, hm, hm."

“Hm, hm, hm, hm.”

Both girls hummed while the one let her shape collapse and spiraled around the other. Kaai might have been called a water spirit if there was anything remotely pure about her. Together, the two wicked twins took the first step back into the city’s darkness.

“What do you think would make a good punishment? An indiscriminate slaughter?”

“What do you think would make a good punishment? An indiscriminate slaughter?”

The darkness really did suit them best.

So they used their forbidden techniques to clear their own way toward freedom.

Part 17

This isn't good, calmly assessed Tessou Tsuzuri.

She could no longer simply *beat down* Rakuoka Houfu. A new player had entered the field and her options were growing more limited. The worst part was the great unknown of the Kaai-Youen twins pair. If they were working to fix everything like that boy wanted, she could ignore them and wait for the criminals to destroy each other, but if they had regained their original violence, waiting like that could be a critical mistake.

An Anti-Skill Negotiator's tactics always came down to taking and using pawns.

It was a lot like chess except for the fact that she was on the board herself.

And no matter how unusual an example she was, she was still Anti-Skill deep down. She focused on the combined power of groups, not the overwhelming force of an individual. Her own specs were irrelevant.

"Un."

"Un."

She heard something like giant gas bubbles floating to the surface of a swamp and popping.

No, the popping bubbles were growing from the cream-colored slime surrounding Youen.

“Deux♪”

“Deux♪”

And Tessou’s original association had been accurate. These were giant gas bubbles.

“Trois☆”

“Trois☆”

“!? Tch!!”

A single spark of static electricity would trigger a massive explosion. Had they used their crazy microbes to rapidly turn the raw garbage into petroleum? Worse, this wasn’t just an indiscriminate gas explosion. It was directed in a single direction to accurately launch shards of metal like a sniper shot. And when the Decomposer and the Carrier were behind it, those “arrowheads” were likely coated with a horrific poison.

When you didn’t have the pawns necessary to accomplish anything, the only option was to retreat.

“Sh!!”

Tessou Tsuzuri *kicked Rakuoka Houfu’s knee with her sharp heel to use him as a shield* and then ran toward the exit. A second and third projectile tore through the air to reach her...and she doubted it would end there.

“Tch. We need a more creative way to boost our power.”

“Hey, hey, hey. I like the looks of that can of caviar you’ve got there. I’ll be borrowing that☆”

“Eek! Stop! That prize belongs to Alice!” shouted an out-of-place voice.

“?”

Confused, Tessou twisted around to look.

At that exact moment, a much more powerful shock hit her from behind. She immediately lowered her head, but that didn't stop the sharp scratches from raking across her cheek.

Rotten gas had expanded inside the can until it exploded.

The attack had come from the can's lid. She had just barely dodged that, but the scattershot of caviar had still broken her skin. It was like a needless tranquilizer dart.

(Oh, no! The fish eggs burst inside the wound!)

The only pawn still available to her was Benizome Jellyfish. Rakuoka Nodoka had been mostly taken out of the fight with the drowsiness of an extra-strength allergy medicine and this place was crawling with the more bizarre side of the dark side: Rakuoka Houfu, Kaai, and Youen.

Tessou needed to get a fresh start.

She could imagine some kind of microbe or chemical was circulating through her body. There was no such thing as a panacea, so she couldn't eliminate the risk without knowing what exactly was inside her. She used pure willpower to steady her shaky vision and pulled out the radio used to control her pawns.

(These dark side scumbags are all messed up in the head. It might look like they're all working together now, but they'll turn on each other in an instant if I sow some confusion!!)

“Goddammit! Nodoka-chan! Benizome too! If you don't support me, I'm pulling your tongues out with the Fishing-!!”

Just as she clenched her teeth and rushed out of the building, something dropped toward her like a guillotine blade.

If she hadn't rolled to the side, it might have functioned much like one too. Without her reflexes, she might have lost her head despite noticing it in advance.

It was a shield.

One of the clear shields Anti-Skill used for riot control.

She belatedly realized it had not in fact missed. Broken pieces of the radio she used to send commands to the Fishing Tongues were flying through the air.

Whoever this was had prioritized freeing the hostages over dealing a deadly blow to their enemy.

They had abandoned the option of a surprise attack and even introduced the possibility of being attacked in return.

"What?"

She knew who this had to be.

She knew an Anti-Skill officer who was especially fond of using a riot control shield. The woman excelled at using a shield instead of a weapon because she disliked aiming a gun at children, even if those children were rogue espers.

"Yomikawa...-senpai? What are you doing here?"

The bottom corner of the shield scraped against the ground as a low voice answered her – the voice of an Anti-Skill officer whose stance hadn't changed one iota after being drenched in the sticky darkness during Operation Handcuffs.

"What, you need to hear from me why I'm here before you'll accept it?"

No, not that.

This was nothing so cliché. She wanted to know how exactly this woman had appeared here now.

Yomikawa Aiho worked in District 7, so she wouldn't show up at the District 10 garbage incinerator for no reason. That meant someone had told her what was happening. But who?

“Be-”

When the answer hit her, Tessou Tsuzuri entirely ignored the situation and gnashed her teeth.

“*Benizome Jellyfish!!* You damn scoop junkie!”

Part 18

Earlier she had said, “Don’t give me that. I don’t even get to choose if I side with the good guys or the bad guys?”

That was very true. The thing was, she didn’t care.

The woman in a red China dress and cowboy hat wasn’t interested in siding with either of those.

She was presently lying on the floor and munching on the Red Town fried rice sandwich and banana spring rolls she had acquired nearby.

“Ha ha☆”

She grabbed her weapon with a melting smile on her lips. Her sniper rifle was only used to set the stage.

Her true weapon was a single-lens reflex camera.

She was willing to throw out all chance of escape if she could snap this one photo.

Her lower jaw? Feel free to blow that away if she could capture the crucial moment.

“Did you know you can still get published from jail?”

Part 19

Something swished through the air.

Black-uniformed Tessou Tsuzuri had pulled out the whip coiled at her hip.

She carried a stun baton, pepper spray, an LED strobe light, a spherical wireless speaker, and other tools used to tame large animals in nature parks and circuses.

She used it all to “tame”, control, and efficiently defang dangerous criminals.

Because she believed it would reduce the number of victims as the chaos spread.

But Yomikawa Aiho sighed when she saw it.

She saw through the trick right away.

“Magnetic osmotic pressure cell membrane control. If you’re controlling the ion channels and sodium pumps too, I’m guessing you’re altering the signals sent to your muscles to overload their output. In a way, I suppose that makes you a new form of cyborg. Not all cyborgs replace their muscles and bones with metal.”

“...”

She was exactly right.

Even the most powerful weapon could never hit if its wielder lacked the necessary strength. And even if it did hit, it wouldn’t do any real

damage. So Tessou had needed to reject her own weakness if she hoped to stand up to the city's malice.

She could not make that decision unless she was prepared to abandon her own humanity.

"Tessou. Do you hate the dark side?"

"I do." The whip woman nodded stiffly at the shield woman. There was no hesitation in her voice. "*I want to save the people who have fallen into the darkness no matter what it takes. The city's children were left in our care, so why would I ever hesitate, Senpai?*"

Yomikawa Aiho and Tessou Tsuzuri.

The two Anti-Skill officers' gazes clashed between them.

They both had enough of a reason to keep their gazes firm.

The emblem on Tessou's shoulder belt was upside down, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. There was even a saint who had asked to have his cross upside down because it would have been too disrespectful to hang from the same sort of cross as his savior.

"People can be permanently broken. Once someone has gone bad, even if they're a small child, they will continue fighting and taking lives unless they are stopped. Anyone who saw Operation Handcuffs on the 25th would reach the same conclusion."

That was why the city already had a self-cleaning system.

The villains would kill other villains.

That created a strange balance, like filthy water filling a cup. The contents of the cup would never overflow unless the good tried to dive in and "fix" things.

That was why so many would notice the people trapped and suffering there but would keep walking without interfering.

Handcuffs had forcibly tried to wash the cup clean, but that water purifier or chlorine tablet had only made things worse.

“Yes, yes. Those who call themselves villains, prefer violence, and risk their lives for momentary profits and pleasures might laugh and accept that destructive lifestyle, but I can’t just let this keep going. *I want to be the kind of teacher who protects the children.* Just like all the others who never managed to live up to that dream.”

“Tessou.”

“So.”

The Anti-Skill Negotiator had decided she would start *speaking with* evil, so there was one thing she would never say to those villains no matter what else she might do.

She would never play the all-powerful but despicable card of writing them off as incomprehensible.

She had remade herself so she would view them as human beings. And instead of timidly hiding behind her powerful colleague’s back as an inexperienced Anti-Skill rookie, she had chosen to stand out front to protect someone.

“Someone has to control them. Someone has to set an upper limit on their evil, direct their violence, and make sure they actually help the city. That way they can see they have a place here and that we aren’t just rejecting their power outright. At the same time, we show them the consequences of stepping out of line, allowing them to find the best position for themselves and limit themselves.”

Some children did not go straight home after school. Some students did not stay in line at the cafeteria. From a teacher’s viewpoint, the so-called dark side was just a more extreme version of that familiar phenomenon. And outside of school, they could get away with more savage solutions that had been eliminated from modern education.

"So you want to be the scary teacher?" asked Yomikawa Aiho.

"Yes. Maybe it won't be pleasant right now. They can resent me as much as they want. But one day, they will look back on this and laugh. This has to be far better than letting them die here and never having another chance at all. Even if they've been driven to the verge of death and their heart stopped beating more than a minute ago."

"But none of that has anything to do with Rakuoka Nodoka."

"Oh? You didn't know what she did *a loooong time ago*? Well, maybe that's not a fair question. They did set things up so nothing could be proven in court."

This wasn't enough to shake Tessou Tsuzuri. Learning about the criminals' horrific crimes wasn't enough for her to seal them away. She wouldn't hide them below the darkness.

She couldn't forgive the people who would cover themselves in wounds and throw out their own future.

That was the thought on her mind when she thoroughly remade herself physically and mentally.

"Rescuing the criminals and their families is part of our job too. We construct and provide the objective evidence needed to make them productive members of society once more and to counteract any unfair criticism. At the very least, my negotiations will shift them from the position of hated criminals to poor victims. And if they capture an even worse criminal, that shuts up all the bored people online and in their living rooms. Isn't that the same idea as a plea bargain?"

"I see." Yomikawa Aiho had only one thing to say. "*But what about Kamijou Touma?*"

"..."

"He's just a normal kid. He has nothing to do with any of these criminals."

Tessou Tsuzuri had no answer for that one.

Yomikawa shook her head softly.

But she didn't hold back.

"You can't answer that because you're wrong and you know it."

Yomikawa wasn't going to be shaken by words any more than Tessou was.

She wouldn't have accepted the burden of people's lives if her feelings were half-baked.

"You chose this path because you envied the dark side. You only learned one thing from seeing hell on earth in the District 7 station, but it wasn't a new method of reducing the number of victims and it wasn't new values that let you reduce the number of criminals. You saw a predator who readily took the lives of people they didn't like and you wished you could do the same."

Tessou Tsuzuri didn't nod. This didn't matter. She had chosen to do whatever it took to protect the people of this city, but that very decision may have been when the darkness trapped her.

"So what are you saying?"

"..."

"If that's what it takes to protect Academy City, then I'll do it. They're young, they're powerful, and they have no remorse. So the instant they leave their cells, they'll do it all again. And as long as they get what they want, they don't care if they destroy themselves in the process. Their love of doing evil is a part of who they are, so you can't just change them into good people. That's as difficult as using the education system to turn a STEM person into a liberal arts

person. For the vast majority of them, you will fail and fail until their sentence is over and they're dumped out onto the streets unchanged. I will do anything to keep them from causing more deaths and destruction. I will do whatever it takes to teach them how to establish a healthy relationship with the darkness. Even if that means temporarily expanding their power through fabricated crimes."

"So you're going to stalk anyone who looks suspicious to you and use that hunch of yours as justification for sneaking up behind them, knocking them out with a stick, and placing a collar around their neck? Locking someone in a room isn't the only way to commit kidnapping and imprisonment. You've already started down that path if you've created any kind of environment they can't leave of their own free will. Lawless justice is just violence. I'm more worried about you causing more death and destruction than any of them."

They didn't have to see eye to eye. If Tessou had naively assumed everyone would agree with her, she would have invited her respected colleague to join her from the beginning. And she would have been stopped before she started.

She would have failed to even become a criminal to save anyone's lives.

Now it was one-on-one.

This wasn't how the Anti-Skill Negotiator was meant to fight, but this was only the beginning.

Maybe it would all fall apart, *but the situation would dramatically improve if she could take out Yomikawa Aiho here*. Maybe it wasn't logical, but she was certain she could save more people this way.

"Yomikawa-senpai, your methods can't change anything."

"Maybe not, but I seriously doubt yours are any better in that regard."

There was no signal.

They both took a step forward at the same time.

Then something swished through the air.

It was a lot like an iaido strike.

Tessou unleashed a full-power attack with a brutal whip capable of killing an elephant, but Yomikawa swung down her shield to catch the whip against the ground, severing it.

“Yomikawa-senpai!!”

“After everything you’ve done, I doubt destroying your weapon is going to stop you!!”

Tessou didn’t hesitate to throw away the whip grip and draw the hooked pole from her hip.

But that was only a distraction while her other hand pulled out the LED strobe light. She held it out and let it flash while she rushed in.

She ran right into Yomikawa’s shield.

She was knocked back and her hooked pole broke. The shield was like a shovel, so it could be used as a deadly weapon with an attack that focused the force on the edge or point.

But that was why Tessou sneered.

(She could have killed someone like me with that one!!)

The strobe light was working.

It flashed at a maximum of a million candelas, so it rivalled a stun grenade.

Yomikawa’s shield was made of clear plastic. That was meant to ensure she could see while protected by the shield, but that meant it failed to protect her eyes from bright lights. The only way to avoid

being blinded was to turn her face away. And that would keep her from doing much else.

(Goodbye, Senpai.)

Still holding out the strobe light, Tessou tossed the hooked pole aside. Blinded by the light, Yomikawa would be reliant on sound.

Tessou had thrown out her hesitance toward hurting people when she decided to try and understand the villains.

(I can use that big shield as a weapon too! Even if you're holding it with both hands, that's still just two points on a single axis. I've boosted my muscles, so if I use my weight to kick it with the sole of my boot, I can slam it into your forehead like I'm knocking on a door!!)

Then something unexpected happened.

Yomikawa subtly altered the angle of the shield.

There was one thing you were never meant to do when searching an abandoned building wrapped in darkness. A powerful blinding light would also give your position away to the enemy, so you must never move around with it on. You were meant to flash it for just an instant and move based on the image burned into your mind. You also were supposed to avoid shining it directly at a window or any metallic parts. Why was that?

Because the light would blind you if it was reflected like a mirror.

“Gahhh!?”

“About what I expected. Do you have any idea how much time I’ve worked with you? When you realized you couldn’t defeat me from a distance with that whip, I knew you’d move in close and try to blind me. It wasn’t hard to trap you when you were eager to put your mind at ease by moving past your failure.”

Yomikawa Aiho's voice was as cold as ice.

She was different. She could not bring herself to accept and cater to wicked hearts.

Nevertheless, *she had gained the strange ability to place a limit on violence from a position of pure good*. She must have learned that from dealing with a monster far more twisted than any of the Handcuffs villains.

She didn't need any excuses about protecting lives, protecting students, or protecting the city.

“!!”

Don't let this chill down your spine affect you, Tessou told herself.

Don't let this temporarily blindness scare you. You can attack the shield by kicking at the source of the reflected light. Then you can hit her with the very shield meant to protect her.

She doubted that would be enough to win.

So she drew her stun baton with the hand not holding the strobe light.

She would be extra certain.

“Ohhhhhhhhhh!!”

“By the way.”

Tessou's heavy boot kept going after hitting the shield. It wasn't just that Yomikawa had pulled the shield back as she hit it. Tension and panic grew inside Tessou and Yomikawa's voice stabbed into her ears.

“You can stick the bottom of the shield into the ground so it stands on its own. Which means I don't have to be holding it.”

“!?”

Yomikawa had escaped, but she had to be defenseless without her shield. The afterimage of the bright light still flashed in Tessou’s vision as she thumbed on the stun baton.

And after a loud “zap!!” it was Tessou who crumbled to the ground.

Her boosted muscles twitched uncontrollably and she could feel her black stockings tearing on their own, presumably because of the high-voltage current.

“Also, stun weapons – especially batons – don’t mix well with liquids,” said an exasperated voice. “That includes sprinklers, mist, and *sweaty palms*. I thought you would draw it at some point when you were feeling cornered, so all I had to do was push you around until you started to panic. Tessou, you can play the bad girl role all you want, but you haven’t changed your timid nature.”

Yes.

Yomikawa was right.

Tessou had to admit it to herself while clenching her teeth at her soaked palms and her ugly heart.

She was still an inexperienced member of Anti-Skill, so no matter how much she tried to remake herself and no matter how many pawns with strange talents she gathered, she could not win on a more fundamental level. In a direct confrontation between two Anti-Skill officers, she could not defeat the tougher and more experienced woman.

Or so it had been in the past.

But she had chosen to become the scary teacher.

She would give everyone a future even if it earned her their resentment and ensured she would never be invited to any kind of

reunion held by the children. She would rescue people from the unfair criticism people got just for being a criminal or their family. Because in her glimpse of the hell that was the dark side, she had seen not just the slaughter of innocent people but children who were forced to rely on those techniques to survive. It wasn't an issue of morality. So she needed to teach those people that things would get better as long as they survived. After seeing the hopelessness that was Handcuffs, she had sworn to herself she would become that kind of teacher!!

She would not let any villains treat their own lives as worthless.

She would give them a final chance to reject a ridiculous life where they cynically decided they were satisfied with dying. So she could not give up and be defeated here!!!!!!

“Gah.”

The teacher clenched her teeth, forced strength back into her falling body, and heard straining and cracking sounds from all over her body. Her boosted muscles were putting pressure on the bones within and even causing comminuted fractures. Just like a corpse stuffed into a metal drum and then solidified in concrete would have its bones shattered by the change in volume. But she could keep fighting as long as her abnormal muscles could support her.

Tessou Tsuzuri could remain the scary teacher for a little while longer.

It was all thanks to her magnetic osmotic pressure cell membrane control.

As long as she didn't collapse and pass out, she could reach out a helping hand to the people who maligned themselves as villains and rushed toward their own doom. She had decided for herself to be the scary teacher, so she couldn't let anyone see her falling to her knees in weakness.

She didn't care how much she was feared or how many people tried not to remember her.

As long as she didn't give up here, even the weakest person who couldn't protect anyone could become the kind of teacher that could save people's lives.

"Gahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
hhhh!!!!!"

She coughed up blood while swinging her fist around to the side.

She still couldn't see and didn't know where Yomikawa was. But that didn't matter. She could judge the correct direction and distance based on the other woman's voice. The air was as solid as clay and the frictional heat burned through her right sleeve. Tearing through the air with that much speed and mass would scatter the floating dust and dirt across a fan-like shape like wide-range birdshot.

(The effective range is 40m and the maximum angle is 150 degrees dead ahead. Yomikawa-senpai, this will knock you out no matter how you try to dodge it!!)

Tessou's resolve popped like a bubble when her deadly fist was stopped prematurely. Without a full swing, she couldn't produce the scattershot wall.

"?"

For a brief moment, she wondered if Yomikawa was using the same tech. Or did she have some new equipment Tessou wasn't even aware of?

(It can't be.)

"Are you not using anything at all? Did you sacrifice your own arm to stop my fist!?"

“Did you think I could carry the burden of so many people’s lives if I wasn’t willing to do that, Tessou?”

That had to be like stopping a large bus by sticking your arm into the rapidly-rotating wheel or axle.

But if that bus was loaded with children and headed toward a cliff, Yomikawa Aiho would not hesitate to sacrifice her arm.

She would do it. She would leap into a storm of bullets if it would save anyone, no matter who.

And she only needed one arm to finish this anyway.

Tessou felt a hand roughly grab her collar and a leg sweep her feet out from under her. A moment later, she lost track of up and down. Just as she realized she had been thrown, her back slammed into the ground and all the oxygen was squeezed from her lungs.

It knocked the breath out of her more than it hurt.

“Do you know what your first and biggest mistake was, Tessou?”

So she wasn’t entirely sure if she was really hearing this voice.

But she thought she heard it just before she passed out.

“You gave up on the children by thinking villains couldn’t become good people. I happen to know one monster who struggled and struggled through so much pain but ultimately escaped that life.”

Part 20

Finally.

It was finally over.

The Anti-Skill Negotiator had her hands cuffed behind her back and was loaded into a car by the adult Anti-Skill officers who had come running. The Anti-Skill woman who had cuffed her was not at all okay. After she confirmed the Anti-Skill Negotiator was restrained, Kamijou saw her collapse.

He couldn't even get up while Hanatsuyu Youen expressed blatant displeasure with the flesh-colored liquid floating around her.

"That wasn't enough. I only got to do it once and it only really hit that muscle guy."

"What's wrong with that? The less fighting the better."

"You're the one that got me all fired up! Don't tell me you would say that kind of thing to just anyone!"

"O-ow!! Wait, I'm sorry! Don't send that liquid toward me! I'm not sure if it's alive or dead, but it's made from a person, isn't it!? It's terrifying!!"

"Okay, that's it. I'm pulling that bullet out of your gut!!"

"Gwah! Please treat me with more care than that!"

Kamijou desperately apologized while his limbs convulsed. It scared him that he felt so little pain yet his body wouldn't do as he told it.

“Teacher☆”

The blonde girl ran over with a smile. She held her little hands out and mercilessly leapt at him, burying his face in the warmth of her flat chest, violently smothering him in relief. It was like drinking hot milk after a very long day. He was afraid he would fall asleep right then and there.

“Pwah. Wh-what happened to Shirai Kuroko?”

“The girl saved her. Because you told her to.”

He heard a windy sound and saw the twintails girl appear out of thin air with a modified China dress woman over her shoulder.

“That’s the last of the fugitives. Now I won’t have to work through the night on this.”

He wasn’t sure what to make of how casual she was about it. He was pretty sure Benizome Jellyfish had played an important role behind the scenes in the events of the 29th and that meant she might have played a direct role in whether they lived or died, but it was all so uncertain he didn’t have a real argument.

He was also pretty sure the crickets had moved elsewhere when Hanatsuyu Youen had gathered all of her forces to herself, which was before Alice had rescued Shirai.

“You aren’t going to run away, are you?” he asked.

“Why would I need to?” The Carrier rubbed her cheek against the flesh syrup floating in the air. “Hee hee hee. I’m happy as long as I have Kaai, so I don’t care where we end up living. In fact, an airtight cell sounds perfect. I wouldn’t even need to implant a tracker in her. Now I know she can never escape me. Hee hee hee hee hee.”

“Ew, gross. Why are you so clingy, Youen? Kya ha ha. You’re the creepiest person in the world☆”

By this point, even Kamijou Touma had learned that there was no point in trying to understand the dark side. You needed enough mental fortitude to classify these twins as “friendly”.

“Okay...that’s finally everything squared away. Yes!! I so want to get home and take a shower. I’ve only got 49 yen, but I can worry about that after getting some sleep!!”

“Hmm? Are you sure this is everything?”

Alice sounded displeased and hadn’t let go of him.

He looked to her in confusion while she pulled some hedgehog balls from below her apron, stuffed them in a sack, and sat on that.

“Did you ever figure out why Frillsand #G attacked?”

.....
.....

He had no answer for her.

“...Huh?”

Come to think of it, what had that artificial ghost been doing? She hadn’t been onboard the Overhunting and she hadn’t had anything to do with Anti-Skill Negotiator Tessou Tsuzuri, but she had still played a role in the day’s events. So where was she now?

Did some of the 29th’s storm clouds still hang in the sky?

He had no clear answer. Leaving this unfinished would mean wasting the efforts of the teacher who had fought until she broke her arm and passed out.

He was left speechless by this question, but then he heard something else.

A flat, repeating electronic tone.

He turned his head to see a fluorescent light at one corner of the garbage incinerator grounds. It shined on an old-fashioned device: a payphone in a booth of reinforced glass. It was ringing like a home phone.

He hesitantly approached, opened the creaking door, and looked to the phone. It never stopped ringing no matter how long he waited, so he finally picked up the receiver.

He pressed it to his ear and heard a voice.

“Hi.”

“A-Accelerator?”

He didn’t understand.

He blinked in confusion before finally managing to squeeze out a question.

“Weren’t you arrested?”

“I was. Which is why I’m calling you from prison.” Accelerator sounded bored. “You never should’ve been involved in this mess, but if you’re gonna stick your neck where it doesn’t belong, have the decency to actually end it properly, third-rate.”

“...”

Even over the phone, Kamijou felt the usual tension.

“I’ve been monitoring the events with *my demon*, but that only tells me so much. Can you fill me in on the details?”

Kamijou nodded, not really understanding what was happening here. Then he realized Accelerator couldn’t see him nodding over the phone and gave a verbal affirmation instead.

"Did you capture all the prisoners who escaped the Overhunting?" asked the boy on the phone.

"Um, yes. We caught Hanatsuyu Youen, Rakuoka Houfu, and Benizome Jellyfish. And for some reason, Youen is with her twin."

"What about the Anti-Skill Negotiator behind the train crash?"

"The Anti-Skill officer who survived Handcuffs, right? Was her name Tessou Tsuzuri? We somehow managed to capture her, so that should settle every-"

"One last question. How much do you know about the conflict between Kihara Hasuu and Frillsand #G?"

"...Eh?"

He had no answer.

What was that about? He knew Frillsand #G, but Kihara Hasuu? His name had been mentioned as an android researcher back in Alice's world, but what was this about a conflict? He hadn't shown up yet, so didn't that mean he had died on the 25th like Drencher and Vivana?

He heard a disappointed sigh from the phone.

But he still had a question.

Tessou Tsuzuri had been threatening dark side villains to get them on her side so she could battle even greater criminals. But if she just captured all of the prisoners who escaped the train crash she caused, she was right back where she started. He had never learned who she was hoping to attack after getting them all on her side.

Could it be?

Could another Handcuffs criminal still be out there? Was that Frillsand #G, or was it *someone else*? Was that why the Anti-Skill

Negotiator had been fighting to gather all the criminals riding that train?

But that still didn't answer what Frillsand #G had been doing and he hadn't even met this Kihara Hasuu. And didn't this gap in information suggest there was some greater depth to the 29th's dangers?

"That's right. And speaking of that ghost..."

Things had worked differently from Alice's world. If she hadn't been involved in the Overhunting's crash, then why had she attacked his group?

If he couldn't come up with an answer, maybe he was looking at this all wrong.

For example, what if she hadn't been trying to harm them at all and they simply hadn't been strong enough to withstand her presence? What if she hadn't meant any harm and had only been appearing to them to ask for help?

"Someone out there still needs help." New Board Chairman Accelerator gave the answer. "Her name's *Risako*. I can't give you a passing grade if you haven't found her yet. So get out there and rescue her from Kihara Hasuu."

Part 21

At the District 7 hospital, the ICU's visiting rules differed from the ordinary hospital rooms, but not for a good reason. An ICU patient's condition could worsen and lead to death at any time, so they visitors were never restricted.

Takitsubo Rikou had only left her seat for a short while.

Only five minutes at the most. But when she returned, she found the ICU bed empty.

“Hamazura?”

Between the Lines 4

A voice whispered deep in the darkness below Academy City.

No one knew these depths even existed.

But was this really a voice? It was a lot like starting to find meaning after listening to any long, drawn-out noise, like a deep groan.

“You are weak, which places a greater burden on those around you.”

The words felt like a physical blow as several faces appeared and disappeared in the back of the young girl’s mind.

...The doggy she had met in the sewers and never seen again.

...Vivana Oniguma who had protected her from that big muscle man and later been reported dead.

...Drencher Kihara Repatri who had fallen to a bullet before her eyes.

...The older delinquent boy who had brought her and Sodate-chan to the surface and then been shot by a grownup.

“This will keep happening.”

The girl curled up and held her head in her hands so she couldn’t hear anything.

So she failed to hear *the female voice* that was weaker than the first voice but still tried to reach her. A grinding sound dragged her away from salvation. The sound of gears locking together and turning a chain.

"If you want to avoid any further sacrifices, you have no choice but to change yourself. Risako-kun, your only option is to make yourself strong."

At first, that might sound reassuring.

But that was all the more reason to be cautious. The more reassuring the suggestion, the harder it was to emotionally reject it even if it made no sense.

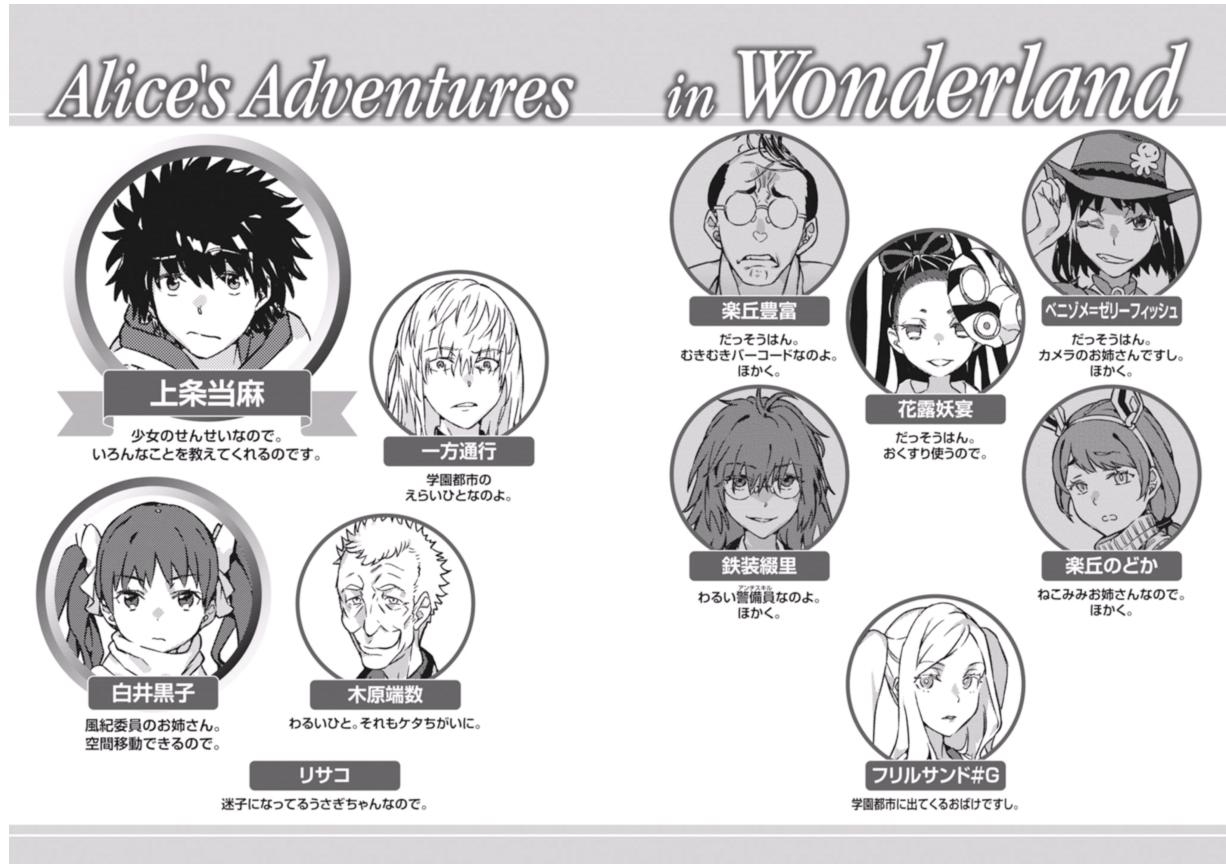
"So *use me*. As a Kihara, I can make you the strongest person in the entire dark side."

Whether they were natural or artificial, ghosts did exist.

Ironically, that had been proven by Frillsand #G, who most wanted to protect this young girl.

In other words, *death wasn't necessarily enough to put an end to a true villain's villainy*.

Alice's Adventures in Wonderland



Kamijou Touma: The girl's teacher. He teaches her all sorts of things.

Accelerator: Academy City's biggest VIP.

Shirai Kuroko: Judgment girl. She can teleport.

Kihara Hasuu: A bad guy. Like, really bad.

Risako: A lost bunny.

Rakuoka Houfu: Fugitive. Muscular combover guy. Captured.

Hanatsuyu Youen: Fugitive. Uses chemicals.

Benizome Jellyfish: Fugitive. A camera lady. Captured.

Tessou Tsuzuri: A bad Anti-Skill lady. Captured.

Rakuoka Nodoka: A cat ears lady. Captured.

Frillsand #G: An Academy City ghost.

Chapter 4: If Someone Remains to be Saved – Final_Exams_“Handcuffs”.

Part 1

It doesn't matter which side anyone is on. Let's combine all the strange tech seen in Operation Handcuffs and resurrect the dead.

That was the plan from Alice's world, which sounded ridiculous in hindsight.

But what if Kamijou hadn't attempted it alone? What if someone far more talented and wicked than a simple high schooler had attempted it in the real world?

“...”

Kamijou Touma stared at the phone receiver for a while after the call ended.

Payphones mostly had the same features as an ordinary phone, but they unfortunately lacked a redial button. And during his New Year's Tokyo survival life, he couldn't hope to guess the right number with only 49 yen to work with. It was already looking like they would have to survive until the ATMs were back on nothing but a small

convenience store chocolate bar and a packet of sold-separately dressing.

But who were Kihara Hasuu and Risako? Where in Academy City were they? Needless to say, Academy City was a large place covering a third of Tokyo where 2.3 million people lived.

(Think back.)

Accelerator had hung up without giving him any answers.

Accelerator wasn't the type to bother with riddles. He had the best brain in the city, so he had likely skipped several steps to reach the answer on his own. That meant the necessary clues were already here and Accelerator hadn't seen a need to state the obvious.

(The answer isn't hidden somewhere like District 15 or 20 that hasn't shown up at all during this mess. The answer is right there in everything I've already seen. And Accelerator would know what the others were doing too. That means Benizome, the Rakuoka siblings, Youen and Kaai, and Frillsand #G. Could there be a hint in something the others saw?)

Drencher, the Anti-Skill woman, and even the Anti-Skill Negotiator had shown them that Academy City's adults weren't all bad – even if that last one had had a messed-up way of showing it.

They had risked their lives to fight for someone else.

Everything would fall apart if he ignored their resolve and determination now.

With that in mind, he raised his head.

"Damn, that's right. There's still Frillsand #G."

"Um?"

Still holding onto him from the side, Alice shook her fine blonde hair, wiggled the fluffball on the back of her apron, and tilted her smiling head. She still didn't seem bothered by her short sleeves. Now, was Accelerator aware this small storybook girl was here? It wouldn't surprise Kamijou to find out that *Alice had mysteriously escaped his notice.*

"The real one was so powerful that simply seeing her was enough to nearly kill us. We didn't even have a chance to make out what she was talking about."

He had admittedly written it off as nothing more than her being a creepy ghost, but he couldn't do that here.

"But *where did she appear from?*"

He couldn't always rely on what had happened in Alice's world since she had distorted so many factors, but there she had walked around the concourse and suddenly appeared from the next room by passing through the wall. That meant she wasn't bound by the laws of physics but still followed the paths on the map to an extent. She did not suddenly teleport from point to point like Shirai Kuroko.

Then realistically speaking, how could she have caught them by surprise at that covered bus stop?

They would have noticed her approaching from a distance. Or rather, they would have collapsed sooner. She hadn't passed through the wall of a nearby building either. Which only left one option:

"*Underground,*" he muttered. That was the only way for her to get so close without them noticing. "She emerged from underground. Like someone floating up to the ocean surface. It was the same with Rakuoka Houfu. I thought he was underground because Kaai was in the sewers, but what if that wasn't the only reason?"

He heard a solid metallic sound.

It came from Rakuoka Houfu, who had shrunk down to a small middle-aged man. Anti-Skill had placed him on a stretcher. He had fought Tessou Tsuzuri who had pushed back with extraordinary strength and he had been sniped a few times by Benizome, so he was in no state to answer any questions.

For just a moment, Anti-Skill stopped working.

He couldn't get up from the stretcher, but he managed to reach out and touch the forehead of a woman knocked out by a drug. They didn't say a word. Neither sibling had lived a laudable life, but he still deserved a chance to reconfirm the weight of what he had risked his life and taken bullets to protect.

Finally, Anti-Skill loaded Rakuoka Houfu onto the ambulance.

Whatever was on her mind, Shirai Kuroko sighed while watching from a distance. Kamijou had not played a role in Handcuffs, so he couldn't know what feelings that sigh carried.

"Well, there is that place hidden deep below District 10." The answer came with surprising casualness from the cream-colored liquid violating gravity by spiraling around Youen. It transformed into the other twin like a water spirit (that looked so filthy you would take poison damage if you touched it). "Youen and I didn't see Handcuffs through to the end, but I did notice something strange while enjoying my lovely sewer vacation. Everything down there is designed to *avoid* a certain area. We didn't care about it, but that might have been the goal for most of the criminals caught up in Handcuffs."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"What else?" The liquid girl seemed confused he didn't know. "I'm talking about *Academy City's Greatest Taboo*."

Hanatsuyu Kaai went on to explain something unbelievable.

According to her, Academy City strongly promoted recycling since they could not mine their own resources, but that wasn't enough to break the city's reliance on importing resources. However, the amount of materials brought in and the amount of garbage produced didn't match up. For some reason, the amount of garbage was larger. That violated conservation of mass, so the numbers only added up if there was a secret underground passageway through which materials were transported.

However, the legend of a secret passageway was only a bluff meant to hide the truth and Academy City's Greatest Taboo was *something else*.

The real answer was Operation Handcuffs' ending point.

While so many criminals met tragic ends, only a few experts like Kihara Hasuu and Frillsand #G would have arrived at that true darkness. If some part of the supposedly resolved incident remained, it had to be there.

Youen sighed and continued for her twin.

"If it's below District 10's outer wall, your best bet is probably to descend into the subway and travel as far south as you can get. Although Kaai said the underground infrastructure is built to avoid the Taboo."

"Hmm. Is it really that complicated?" asked Kamijou. "If he really was working with Frillsand #G, then Drencher must have reached that Taboo as well. His mobile base was left in the parking lot of the abandoned leisure spa next door, so we should be able to reach our destination by heading underground from here."

"I see. And even if he did seal up the underground passageway, we can break through a random wall to make a shortcut. A biological acid or a methane explosion should do the trick."

"Youen? Since when are you helping me?"

“What? You’re going to make use of us criminals again, aren’t you? Then hurry it up. If I have to risk my life, I want to get it over with as soon as possible. Even if urban pests and vermin tend not to hibernate, it still isn’t easy chemically guiding them during a late December night.”

“No.” She made it sound like a foregone conclusion, but Kamijou shook his head. “You’ve done enough already. I mean, none of this would have even happened if the Overhunting hadn’t crashed. You have no stake in this fight, so you don’t need to risk your life.”

“Do you have a death wish? I’ve only heard of Kihara Hasuu and never actually met him, but if he reached the Taboo and is waiting there now, then he’s an even *deeper* part of the darkness than me. Did you think bringing ordinary Anti-Skill and Judgment with you would be enough?”

“No, I didn’t. But if I used you, I wouldn’t be any better than that Anti-Skill Negotiator.”

“But-”

Youen started to say more, so he grabbed her skinny shoulders and crouched down.

He put himself at her eye level before continuing.

“Please. This isn’t the first time you’ve saved my life.”

“?”

Oh, right. She didn’t remember what happened in Alice’s world.

Not that it mattered. He would *never forget* any of the things that little villain had done for him.

“If I owed you anything more, I’d never be able to repay you, so I want you to stay where it’s safe.”

She fell silent at that.

But the less sensible twin started trembling.

"F-first he asks for help to save that muscle man and now he has the audacity to say he cares about her safety? And Youen is falling for it? ...Yes. Oh, god, yes!! Youen's heart and body are falling for a bankrupt boy with only 49 yen to his name and I'm helpless to do anything at all to stop it! Is this what they call NTR? I can already tell this will defile my soul in ways I never even imagined! Gulp!!"

"Shut up, Kaai!! I-I am not falling for him in any way shape or form!!"

"I am not bankrupt!! Don't even suggest something so horrifying!!"

Kamijou beckoned Shirai Kuroko over and she explained the situation.

"Yomikawa-san was sent away after getting a splint for her arm and the other Anti-Skill officers are staying here. They need to preserve the scene of the crime, quarantine and exterminate the pests and vermin, and keep an eye on the recaptured prisoners. I will be heading underground to tie up the last loose ends."

"Got it. So is it just the two of us paying Academy City's Greatest Taboo a visit?"

"The girl is coming too☆"

"Hey, no fair!!" shouted Youen, forcing Shirai to hold out a hand to silence her.

"You have no business doing this either. And you were shot!" she shouted to him, looking like she had a headache.

"But we're the only two who can do this. I'm sick of forcing the risk onto people just because they're villains, so I'm going too. I want to create a version of the 29th I'm satisfied with."

“Okay, that’s enough!!”

Unable to just watch any longer, Youen popped off the rubber cap of a test tube and then Kamijou felt something hot at the center of his gut. Right at the bullet wound.

“It’s a nontoxic mold. It can only place a thin film over the wound, but that’s better than nothing, right?”

“Mold?”

“If you don’t want it, you can remove it by rubbing on some ethanol, but that would probably cause the wound to open up all the way, killing you.”

This exchange left Shirai Kuroko looking about as exasperated as humanly possible. Was that directed at Youen herself or at Kamijou for speaking so casually with such an unmanageable villain?

“I really think I should leave you here with the prisoners where Anti-Skill can protect you,” she said.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m willing to put *myself* through hell as many times as it takes.”

“Why do I get the feeling that right there is the entire problem with you?”

Shirai sighed in utter annoyance, but she didn’t stop him either. She was still a middle school 1st year, so whether she was consciously aware of it or not, she may have been reluctant to approach this unseen Taboo alone.

Frillsand #G and Kihara Hasuu. Youen had assured him this darkness was *deeper* than her.

Fortunately, there were plenty of stairways leading underground.

“Let’s get going.”

“Sure.”

Part 2

All hesitation was gone once they descended the subway station stairs.

Something isn't right, gulped Kamijou.

They hadn't arrived at Academy City's Greatest Taboo yet. Drencher may have passed through here on the way to the Taboo, but according to Kaai and Youen, they would have to travel south from here and maybe blow up a wall before finally reaching it.

The station was warm.

And not just because they were sheltered from the winter air. A somewhat musty and sour smell helped make him feel like he was walking down the gullet of a giant creature.

"Hey," he said.

"Yes?" asked Shirai Kuroko.

"This is *still* a normal subway station, right?"

The ticket gates extended from the walls.

They walked around those since they couldn't pass through them and a bit later the floor changed from concrete to marble. The basement of a fancy department store led to the sewer, which ultimately smoothly connected to a rough stony area reinforced with steel beams. It was a lot like a cave or a mine.

Something very different was happening here. They were going somewhere else entirely without knowing what had caused the

change.

Could they blame this on Frillsand #G or on the mysterious researcher named Kihara Hasuu?

"Wait, wait, wait. A mine? Since when does Academy City have one of those?" he asked.

"The Taboo was supposed to be a secret passageway for transferring materials, so perhaps they preserved the limited underground resources instead of using them. Or maybe they distributed algae that rapidly convert animal carcasses into petroleum," suggested Shirai.

"I get the concept and maybe somewhere like that does exist somewhere in the city, but it seems wrong for this place to directly connect to those ordinary tunnels, like something from a surreal painting."

"This could be the physical manifestation of something. It isn't biological like the AIM Burst was, but this feels similar to me."

AIM. That term reminded Kamijou of Kazakiri Hyouka, the girl who existed as a collection of the AIM diffusion fields made from the faint power that escapes an esper.

(But if that's true...)

He gulped and looked around.

(Is that what *all of this* is?)

That did seem worth calling Academy City's Greatest Taboo.

He had entered District 10 through the subway tunnels in Alice's world, so he couldn't rely on that memory. However, it did get him thinking.

The tunnels hadn't been this expansive back then, so was something causing the distortion to accelerate?

The underground wasn't covered by the map apps, so he doubted he could rely on them. That meant his old folk's smartphone was only good for its digital compass. He kept them pointed south. The underground space stretched out in a network of tunnels, but he was afraid one wrong turn down a side tunnel would mean never finding the surface again.

They heard a solid sound like shoes on the ground.

Shirai Kuroko casually turned toward the source and then collapsed. Whatever she had seen had drained the strength from her legs. Kamijou recognized that phenomenon, so he kept his head turned the other way while picking up the limp girl and hiding behind a nearby pillar. He normally wasn't aware of it, but the human body was a heavy thing. It felt like dragging a sandbag.

"Frillsand #G!!"

She didn't respond, which was for the best. Whether or not the artificial ghost meant any harm, her stimuli were too powerful for human senses. And sight wasn't necessarily the only trigger. An unexpected word from her could always knock him out.

With a visual threat, he could at least guess what to punch with Imagine Breaker to damage it, but this was too vague and spectral to have a punchable target.

"Please, *restrain yourself* a little more!! We aren't strong enough to bear it!!"

He heard more footsteps resembling a knocking sound. Incautious Alice was clearly sticking her head out from behind the pillar and smiling, the white fluffball on the back of her apron cutely wiggling. She could shrug off a curse, germ, or any other internal threat (it was like trying to kill a mole by burying it alive) and she seemed proud of

that ability, giving off some full power “compliment me” beams. The upper arms left exposed by her short sleeves shined bright without a single goose bump.

“Teacher, that ghost is leaving.”

“Is she telling us to follow her? Or is she telling us to leave because it’s too dangerous?”

“That would be good to know.”

Kamijou tried to puzzle it out while lending feverish Shirai his shoulder and leaning out from behind the pillar. Frillsand #G was already gone, but he could hear her footsteps coming from the shadows up ahead.

“I think she’s telling us to follow her.”

“What makes you so sure?”

Because she could have knocked them all out now if she only wanted to stop them. She could have done so with ease. Well, except for with Alice Anotherbible.

Kamijou asked another question while helping Shirai stay on her feet.

“She lived with Drencher and those specimen children, right? How could something so deadly live with people?”

“Hm. Maybe it wasn’t always like this.” Alice placed her index finger on her chin. “What is this place, anyway?”

“What do you mean?”

“Academy City’s Greatest Taboo was supposed to be near District 10’s outer wall, so whatever it is, it wouldn’t be this large. Doesn’t that mean the Taboo wasn’t originally like this and *something destroyed it?*”

“So what is happening here?” asked Shirai.

“Who knows. But this definitely isn’t a normal place. If teacher is right and the ghost is guiding you, then maybe she knows more about it.”

Alice tilted her head while poking at her hair’s animal ear curls. Was this underground labyrinth the result of Frillsand #G coming in contact with Academy City’s Greatest Taboo?

Or had something else caused the collapse?

What did she even want them to do? Accelerator had suggested they needed to rescue Risako from Kihara Hasuu, but was that really a powerful enough enemy that not even Frillsand #G could defeat him?

It felt like all those questions had taken physical form.

They followed the footsteps up ahead. Kamijou tried his map app, assuming it wouldn’t work, but it was completely frozen. He checked the digital compass and they were definitely headed south. Nevertheless, the tunnel they were following never seemed to end. He felt like they were going to leave Academy City if they kept this up much longer.

“Gh. This is just like that 1994 theory on faster-than-light travel,” groaned Shirai Kuroko, shaking her head and still borrowing his shoulder.

He hadn’t heard of this one.

“Near the end of the 20th century, a certain physicist seriously constructed a warp theory. The idea was to compress space, cross that distorted space in a single step, and then revert space to normal like straightening out a scrunched-up carpet to ignore the speed-of-light limit.”

Shirai probably knew so much about this because she was a Teleporter. She may have wanted to research all the other ideas out there.

"This could be the opposite. Some kind of force may have *crumpled up* this space like a flyer being thrown in the trash. So we won't reach our destination by counting our steps in the same direction. It might look we're only taking one step, but if space has been *crumpled up*, then this might actually be a third of Tokyo or an even greater distance compressed down to almost nothing."

"Wait, then is Frillsand #G not leading us somewhere?"

"Who ever said she was?"

Maybe Frillsand #G thought she was safely guiding them, but Alice had said this space was destroyed.

In other words...

"Is this place ruled by conflicting wills, one wanting to protect us and one wanting to eliminate us?"

"The question is whether there is a third party in control here, or if this is a psychological battle being waged inside her."

But protect them from what?

If Frillsand #G was this powerful, then why did she need someone else's help?

An electronic sign used to display warnings sat on the rocky mine-like ground.

Text scrolled by on the orange lights.

"Why am I always the one that survives?"

Kamijou tilted his head. Would a ghost talk about “surviving”? After leaving the mine, they found a large, clean train station concourse. All of the pillars there had curved advertisement LCD displays attached.

Each one displayed a different smiling face. The voice they played was not the ghost’s.

One displayed a golden retriever.

“I haven’t seen the doggy since the sewers.”

One displayed Vivana Oniguma.

“The girl who saved me had her picture on the news. They said she died.”

One displayed Drencher Kihara Repatri.

“I saw mister shot to death.”

One was Hamazura Shiage.

“The delinquent who took Sodate-chan and me to the surface was...”

The trembling voice belonged to a girl Alice’s age or younger and was permeated with sorrow.

Kamijou didn’t recognize everyone shown.

And even those he did, he couldn’t say how much they matched up with what he had learned in Alice’s world. Take Drencher Kihara Repatri for example. The artificial ghost’s lightning attacks had burned an image into his mind, but was that what had really happened, or was it something Alice had invented just for fun?

He felt certain he would find the answer if he pursued Risako, who had been saved by villain after villain.

Maybe none of them had been good people. They probably felt more at home in the shadows. But during the chaos of Handcuffs, those villains had felt a stirring from the last shreds of a conscience in their hearts. When they had seen a young life thrown into the center of that hellish Christmas, they had reached out a helping hand with no thought to their own lives. They had wanted to smile and give her a chance to run away and survive.

These people had risked their lives for nothing more than that.

Whatever the result had been, some of the villains on that day had possessed a strong enough will to make that choice. So Risako had no reason to feel this way.

And yet...

"So I need to be strong."

All the concourse lights went out. In the pitch darkness, an image was displayed across an entire wall, like projection mapping.

A small girl hung her head and bit her lip while an artificial ghost flew around her.

"I want the kind of power that lets me keep anyone else from getting hurt. I need to protect Sodate-chan, the ghost lady, and everyone else from my weakness. No matter what it takes."

The text displayed on the wall received a response.

Frillsand #G shouted to the girl.

She said that was wasn't true, she said drowning in the darkness would accomplish nothing, and she said the people lost during Handcuffs had gladly risked their lives to drag her out of that very darkness.

But none of it reached the girl.

Frillsand #G was so dreadfully powerful, but her voice couldn't even reach this small girl's ears.

Why was that?

Because someone else didn't want the nightmare to end and thus silenced the saving voice that would guide the girl to the safe exit.

An old man laughed crudely.

But this voice did not come from a mouth. It came from near the girl's feet. Her young hands held a horrifically brutal chainsaw.

A voice seemed to bleed through from the depths of the earsplitting roar. Just like you started fantasizing a meaning in any white noise if you listened to it for long enough.

“Quite the retro sound, don’t you think? But it contains everything needed to destroy.”

A vague shape other than Risako appeared alongside her.

It stood across the chainsaw from her and held the weapon along with her, like a bride and groom holding the knife to cut the cake. Maybe the brutal chainsaw functioned as a link between the living and the dead.

The other figure could no longer be called human.

Frillsand #G and the heavy weapon spewing malicious words glared at each other with oblivious Risako in between. Yes, the old man clashed directly with the artificial ghost and even held his own.

“You cannot reach her.”

The mocking words did not come from the spectral old man. He was moving his mouth in time with them, but the sound actually came from the violent power tool young Risako held in her hands.

Something evil resided in that rotating blade.

“Your words cannot reach her. *Only logical words can reach Risako-kun now.* No matter how cruel it might seem, anyone can understand something if it is logically sound.”

“Kh.”

“Rejecting someone’s logical argument with groundless, subjective emotion feels so terribly violent to them. And violence is what Risako-kun detests most of all after the events of Handcuffs, so won’t she just push you away?”

“Kihara...Hasuu!!”

This would be over in the blink of an eye if Risako would simply open the door to her heart, but that would not happen. Other people’s emotions were so difficult to predict and they could even lead to violence if you weren’t careful, so the young girl would reject them herself.

Even though there was nothing at all wrong with emotions.

Was logic a symbol of calm stability and emotion a symbol of violent outbursts? Of course not. Anyone who lived in Academy City long enough would realize the great value of the ordinary kindness and gentleness that helped hold wild logic in check. If the world was ruled by nothing but logic, life would be so much colder and crueler. Hadn’t Drencher Kihara Repatri tricked profit-focused Academy City and taken in those specimen children so he could fight back against exactly that?

"I attempted to *reproduce my mind* based on you, but several of the details differ. For example, I can control the malfunctions brought on by Academy City's Greatest Taboo. I can also hold objects to an extent. But unlike you, if I try to leave the Taboo, I would apparently release such a powerful and uncontrollable burst of electricity it would fry the entire city. It saddens me I would destroy any valuable experimental equipment I might try to approach, so I need a convenient body to use."

"So you're going to hijack Risako's body!?"

"Oh, this is nothing so cliché."

Why had Risako come all this way in the first place?

If Kihara Hasuu couldn't leave, he couldn't have forcibly taken her here.

Had she survived the 25th, but something hadn't sat right with her?

Had she descended to this place in the hopes of collecting the traces of the people who hadn't survived and then encountered a horrific monster?

If so, this was as horrifying a crime as a murderer killing a complete stranger while they visited a loved one's grave.

"Admittedly, finding a way to possess people and jump from body to body would be interesting, but I bet the #5 could do that if she were willing to abandon her body. As a Kihara, I want my death to give the world an even greater dream."

That guess was wrong, off base, and mistaken, but did that mean he wasn't threatening Risako's life?

No.

The old man sharing the chainsaw with her wasn't so kind.

He hadn't appeared in Alice's world, which meant even Alice had done everything she could to keep Kamijou away from him. The dead ends of so many lives were gathered on this one point.

The roaring engine tricked the mind into hearing a human voice once more.

"Which is why Risako-kun is simply buying me some time until my work is complete. The thing is, I am apparently too powerful on my own at the moment. I don't know if she will survive until the end of my work, but she was always meant to be a research specimen. I might as well use her as she was intended. Gee hee, gee hee, hee hee hee ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!"

Frillsand #G wasn't just going to stand there.

This may have been Kamijou's first time seeing the artificial ghost's right hand form a fist, take direct aim at something, and send hostility their way.

But Kihara Hasuu looked entirely unfazed.

The old man had implied he had defeated her during Handcuffs. He smiled thinly, took one hand from the chainsaw, held out his right hand so their arms crossed, and formed a finger gun.

"You cannot win."

"Gah!?"

"So leave it all to me. Both the Taboo that has swallowed you whole and this puny life you still try to protect."

There was no light or sound, but something like an invisible thread definitely snapped. Frillsand #G was rapidly pushed away from Academy City's Greatest Taboo. She reached out in desperation, but Risako failed to notice while standing down in the deepest depths of the darkness.

Frillsand #G was clenching her teeth and trying so hard to rescue her, but the young girl remained oblivious while speaking to herself.

“This time, I will protect the ghost lady.”

The concourse’s bright lights came on, blowing away the image projected on the wall.

This wasn’t over and Kamijou’s group were the only ones who could do anything about it.

The *very future of Academy City* had to be riding on this one.

“This isn’t right,” said Kamijou Touma.

No one disagreed. That silence was a wholehearted agreement.

It was an agreement with the boy who questioned the darkness and chose to stand up to the city’s remaining cruelty.

“We can’t let this happen.”

Risako was clearly acting oddly. Something had been implanted in her mind.

Why would she see anything logical as correct and reject everything else? Why didn’t she allow anything based on emotion?

What if everyone had responded with cold, mechanical logic during the Cold War when two superpowers had aimed nuclear missiles at each other, during World War Three when science and magic had clashed directly, or when Othinus had half-jokingly blown away the world with Gungnir? The world would have ended long ago.

When people saw the world approaching destruction, they felt fear. When they failed to protect their loved ones, they felt pain. When they learned powerful people were manipulating the world from the shadows, they felt anger. When they wanted to ensure they could

continue living their lives tomorrow, they decide to screw up their courage.

What was wrong with those feelings filling people's hearts?

So many things couldn't be explained with logic.

Why do people laugh? Why can't you see people's thoughts? Why are there so many stars? So many problems become a tangled mess once you try to explain them logically.

"She wanted to say that herself, but she couldn't. She kept shouting it, but it never reached Risako who was lured into the depths of the darkness and now wanders there all alone. Dammit, is this the regret keeping that ghost from passing on?"

They now knew the motive preventing the ghost from truly dying.

They had finally found the reason Frillsand #G fought. Unlike in Alice's world, she wasn't fighting for herself. She wanted to respect the feelings of the dead by protecting this young life that still lived, but she couldn't do it. So she had needed someone else's help. No matter what.

Kamijou did not know the whole story of Operation Handcuffs. Maybe he didn't really have the right to be standing here. But this small life had barely survived thanks to the work of so many people risking it all on that day and now some piece of shit was trampling on it all by repeating that stupid tragedy while sneering out from the shadows.

He had finally found the last person still struggling in the sticky darkness.

But he hadn't reached her yet.

Handcuffs still wasn't over. It would never end unless someone put an end to this tragedy.

“...”

Kamijou Touma stepped away from Shirai Kuroko who was still supporting herself on his shoulder.

“Hey, you said we’ll never reach our destination like this, didn’t you? Because this space was broken against Frillsand #G’s will?”

“I did.”

“And you said the space is essentially crumpled up, right?”

“What of it?”

He silently turned to face one of the concourse’s pillars.

It could have been anywhere. He only had to clench his right fist.

“*So what happens if I do this?*”

He slammed his fist against the illusion before his eyes.

Part 3

Crash!!!!!!

Part 4

After a moment of dizziness, Kamijou Touma found himself in an unfamiliar location.

It looked like an ancient colosseum. A large, circular space contained evenly-spaced concrete pillars. A train turntable was located in the center. Much like a clockface, tracks extended from it in 12 directions before being swallowed up by dark tunnels.

This was Academy City's Greatest Taboo.

This was the very end of Operation Handcuffs.

Shirai Kuroko and Alice Anotherbible were no longer by his side.

The crumpled-up space had been returned to normal, so even though they had appeared to be so close, they may have been sent to some distant place when the wrinkles were straightened out. Wherever they were, they were probably somewhere beneath Academy City.

So.

The small figure in front of him was not either of the girls he had been working with. Someone more dangerous was waiting for him now that he was freed from that distortion.

It was an old man in a lab coat.

He probably shouldn't have been here.

He held a chainsaw longer than 150cm. Young Risako had been holding that in the image Kamijou had seen while Frillsand #G was

guiding them.

He had a bad feeling about this.

“What happened to Risako?” asked Kamijou, his voice low.

“I ate her up. Leaving nothing but bone.”

An unpleasant noise came from Kamijou’s back teeth.

Kihara Hasuu’s shoulders shook in laughter, as if this ordinary human anger was the funniest thing he had ever seen.

“I’m only kidding. Seen too many remnants of Handcuffs while you wandered around today? Did you figure one of us *might just go that far?*”

He doubled over in laughter before straightening up and raising a finger.

No, that wasn’t it.

He was pointing up toward the tall, tall ceiling. Perhaps this would have been more clearly visible for anyone who arrived here along the proper route.

Something dangled from the ceiling like a bagworm. No, that was a tiny silhouette being suspended from the ceiling.

“There’s no real meaning behind it.”

The simplest kind of cruelty suddenly blossomed here.

What greater desecration was there?

Kihara Hasuu made it sound so obvious that Kamijou nearly missed it.

“She is 550m up. The ceiling of this underground space borders the surface, but no direct routes lead here. And at the center of the Taboo I control, not even a ghost can pass through the walls. So just like fooling GPS guidance, Frillsand #G will wander forever in search of the shortest route to save Risako-kun. You see, if it came down to a real clash between us two immortal ghosts, this place would collapse before either of us did. I would still prefer not to push this unstable Taboo to that point.”

“...”

“I am sure she is panicking. The more her efforts fail, the more it will feel like I have taken Risako-kun from her. Unfortunately for me, I could dig through this underground space forever and never reach my objective. I would much prefer to reach out and touch the sky. Heh heh.”

It was impossible to know if he was telling the truth.

But Kamijou doubted Kihara Hasuu would be joking to smooth things over at this point.

In other words...

(There is something here he doesn't want to tell me right away.)

After reaching that conclusion, Kamijou took a step forward.

What reason did he have to fear?

“This isn't what I saw on the way here. Why did you change your plan?”

“What a pain. Did Frillsand #G show you that? Or was my subconscious leaking out? This Vanishing Tunnel doesn't play well with ghosts, so I was originally planning to whisper in Risako-kun's ear to manipulate her.”

But that hadn't worked, so his plans had changed.

The rapid expansion of the Taboo may have come from that change of plans.

"I am ashamed to admit I had trouble with her. Such a stubborn girl. She won't shut up about never doing anything that would make 'Sodate-chan' or 'the ghost lady' sad, so *I shut her up myself*."

That was enough out of him.

Was the splitting sound Kamijou heard his canine tooth breaking through the corner of his lip?

His heart was shouting from within his chest.

It said he no longer needed a reason. It said he needed to fight for someone. It said that was how things *should be* in the remade Academy City – in the city he called home.

He clenched his right fist and raced forward without any hesitation.

An engine roared in response. Kihara Hasuu tugged hard on the chainsaw cord and a bicycle-like chain covered in short, thick blades began to rotate violently fast.

(So what?)

Kamijou Touma poured courage into his heart to fight the squeezing it felt.

And he took another powerful step forward.

(I heard you, Risako. Maybe you can't say a word yourself and maybe it only reached me through someone else's malicious words, but I still heard your refusal to disappoint the people you care for. So I won't back down now!!)

Yes, his opponent held a chainsaw about as long as he was tall. An attack from that would mean instant death. And Imagine Breaker probably wouldn't work on it. But its length and weight would also

limit how it could be used. That old man might be a ghost, but he still moved on his two feet.

Would he sweep it horizontally or swing it down diagonally from the shoulder?

Either way, he would have a hard time swinging it around to the left while holding it at his right hip.

Plus, he was a ghost.

If that was true, then Imagine Breaker might just come in handy!!

“Go to hell!!” shouted Kamijou as he got to work.

Once he moved in close, Kihara Hasuu was sure to swing the chainsaw. A horizontal sweep would be his best bet. But if Kamijou knew it was coming, he could prepare for it.

Specifically, he kicked up a plastic bag lying on the ground.

A chainsaw was undeniably a deadly weapon, but it always rotated in the same direction. And as thin as the plastic bag was, it wouldn’t vanish once it was torn through. With something caught in the blade, the chainsaw would stop!!

Or so he thought.

However...

“Nice try.”

(Damn, is there more to this!?)

When he heard the old man’s mocking voice, Kamijou practically doubled over and threw himself backwards to stop in a hurry. His back slammed against the concrete floor like he had failed doing the limbo, but it was well worth it since the chainsaw blade swung by just above him.

No, that wasn't just the chainsaw.

When the tattered plastic touched the old man's skin, it was blown away with some unnatural bluish-white sparks.

"By the way."

"!"

"And this really is just a warning for your benefit – I would recommend against trying to negate me with Imagine Breaker. My basic structure is identical to Frillsand #G. Granted, I did remove a few features to eliminate the compatibility problems with the Vanishing Tunnel, so I had to abandon her level of lethality."

The old man's smile spread while a faint electrical sound filled the brief silence.

"That makes me a physical phenomenon that can be electrically explained using High Voltage Cutting. Touch me and your flesh will burst and you will be scorched to the bone. But if you have the courage needed to destroy a running transformer with your bare fist, I won't stop–"

A dull impact burst out.

Kamijou Touma had ignored the man and thrown his fist. Of course, Imagine Breaker didn't work on a ghost who could be scientifically explained.

"So what?"

"..."

Kamijou held a thick roll of duct tape he had found on the ground. About half of the plastic tape was blown away and melted.

"So my right fist doesn't work. Did you really think *that was enough to stop me?* After you've done all this? When Risako is right there

suffering at the hands of a dead man after she managed to survive the 25th?"

He tossed aside the already unusable duct tape roll and cautiously viewed his surroundings. Duct tape must have been used for train maintenance because there were plenty more usable rolls on the turntable covered in various tools and cleaning supplies.

Today had been a terrifying day.

Enough to make him painfully aware that he had been shielded from the city's darkness all this time.

Alice's world had been a mess of truths and fictions, but he had still learned some things from it. Hadn't Hanatsuyu Youen the Carrier mentioned how useful a ground could be? It was hard to electrocute people if the current didn't reach their brain or heart.

The reality he had returned to had been even more frightening. But as inappropriate as it might seem, he had been impressed with Tessou Tsuzuri and Rakuoka Nodoka. They had done whatever it took to make up for what they didn't have. Even if that meant wearing a tool to protect their fist.

Kamijou Touma hadn't been standing down here the whole time.

Unlike this man, he had been fighting to ensure his enemies and allies could survive.

The journey he had taken to reach Academy City's Greatest Taboo hadn't been for nothing.

So it was time to end this.

It was time to defeat the final enemy using everything that had come before.

"If you want me to hit you, I'll turn you into a goddamn punching bag. I don't get how any of it works, but you're supported and stabilized

by electricity, aren't you? I saw you *blur* a bit when that plastic exploded and vaporized. How about I try it with steel or aluminum next? What about a liquid or powder? Whatever's supporting your body has an upper limit! So I'll keep at it as long as it takes. I don't even need to wrack my brains over it – it's like making wrong guesses in a game of concentration. I just have to keep risking my own life until I find the right answer. *That's all it takes. So I will rescue Risako from your clutches!!!!!!*"

"Tch. You masochistic martyr!!"

For the first time, Kihara Hasuu moved to dodge an attack.

Kamijou could use insulation, a ground, and even the concept behind birds on the power lines.

Electricity always took the path of least resistance. If there were multiple routes and one was more efficient than the human body, you could just barely avoid death. As long as he could come up with ideas, he could fight.

Kihara Hasuu must have known he couldn't just rely on the high-voltage current here, so this time he came for Kamijou. He raised the chainsaw to swing it down. Kamijou could do no damage to the old man by clenching his teeth and stubbornly opposing the chainsaw. He would only get his body torn apart. Then he couldn't save Risako. He clicked his tongue and fell back for the time being.

Kihara Hasuu pursued, even using the bouncing of the rotating blade. The slightest graze and it would tear into Kamijou's clothing and shred his flesh and bones.

"Tch!!"

"You negated it once with your right hand, but the Taboo is still running wild. And the civilization battery supported by High Voltage Cutting uses the acid rain produced by a metropolis as a power source. I am only hitching a ride for now, but if I use the Taboo tunnel

leading out of the city to send out Academy City machinery and materials, I can control the technological level and economic status of the entire world. I will have free control over the operational status of any factory and vehicle.”

“...?”

Kamijou moved away, got up, and gave the old man a puzzled look.

Why didn't he continue the attack?

What was he so desperate to distract Kamijou from?

“Didn’t I tell you? I accomplish nothing digging through this underground space. My objective can only be found in the sky. One magnet does not pull the other to it – they affect each other. That remains true for the magnetosphere covering the planet and the geomagnetism produced by the magma flowing underground. Precisely controlling the earth’s sky lets you indirectly influence the earth’s core. That is because the magnetism covering the planet comes from the flowing magma and rotating core acting like a giant generator. So what if a ghost like me – a collection of electrical energy – could reach that?”

Kihara Hasuu was an artificial ghost, but he had said several of his details differed from Frillsand #G. For one, Kamijou could directly view him without bleeding and collapsing.

He had also said he initially planned to use Risako.

“I will link myself to the dynamo theory.”

Kamijou had made it this far, but Kihara Hasuu would not stop.

The old man would greedily absorb everything that caught his interest, no matter how much harm it caused others.

“Then destroying me would require destroying the earth’s core. It is currently moving a little too fast for that kind of precision work, but

not to worry. With Risako-kun's assistance, I can buy myself enough time to modify and tame it. Assuming I do not end up stuck in an endless battle with Frillsand #G who also uses High Voltage Cutting."

(This bastard.)

He sounded so casual about it.

Like he was mentioning how cheap the eggs were at the local supermarket.

This was not the lifelong dream of the researcher named Kihara Hasuu. He had been mentioned in Alice's world as an expert in android research, so ghosts had to be outside his area of expertise.

So.

This was something he had realized he could piece together with the items lying around, so he might as well do it. He was that casual about trampling on people's dignity and even extending his influence to the core of the planet. He didn't feel even a twinge of guilt as he stomped all over an individual and the entire world.

He didn't need a grand objective to destroy things people cared about and he would simply laugh after seeing someone emotionally devastated.

He was that kind of evil.

(Now I get it, Drencher Kihara Repatri. I've never met you, but I still understand you! I see why you wanted to create a place for the children who had fallen to the dark side, even if it meant throwing away your one and only life in a world where the dead can never be brought back!! That's right. We can't just let this happen. This is the worst kind of evil and it easily surpasses the greatest tragedy I could imagine!!)

“Once I do that, I should be strong enough to leave the Taboo without bursting and frying the entire city. It would be a real tragedy if I became immortal yet couldn’t touch my lab equipment without destroying it. This immortality was an unexpected prize, so now I need to figure out how to use all this extra time. Once no one on the planet can punish me, I suppose I should start by continuing my research until I grow weary of it.”

That was sure to lead to more tragedy and cruelty.

This sticky darkness would remain as long as he was still around.

Operation Handcuffs would continue forever and ever.

Kamijou had only one thing to say to that.

Risako wasn’t dead yet while she swayed from the tall, tall ceiling. Hope remained for her. That girl had accepted the pain because she didn’t want to hurt anyone else. If she could do that, then Kamijou knew what he had to say.

“No, I’ll end this before that happens. The people of this city will stop you here and now!!”

“Everyone says that after seeing a Kihara in action. The thing is, I’ve never seen any of them succeed.”

The deafening engine roar grew louder.

The raised right fist was so pitiful the old man actually laughed.

But so what?

Kamijou Touma would not be shaken no matter how tough that man tried to make himself look. Young Risako had been fighting all alone here not long before. Frillsand #G’s voice couldn’t reach her and Kihara Hasuu had cut her off from all else, but she had still rejected this Kihara’s words with only her own strength. She had told him to his face that she could never hurt others or disappoint those she

cared about. The morality Drencher and Frillsand #G had tried to instill in her had reached her and it had not broken. Kamijou wouldn't let anyone deny that achievement. And no one could save the young girl dangling from the ceiling unless he defeated this evil ghost.

That win condition was all he needed to know.

He had to save Risako.

As soon as possible.

This wasn't like Alice's world. The dead could not be brought back no matter what you tried. But he had caught a glimpse of those people while following in their footsteps today. They had reached out a hand to pull the children from Academy City's darkness or to help a girl they had happened across. Maybe that was the wrong choice according to the cold rules of this world. Maybe that was why rejecting the most logical and safe option had removed them from the path of survival and ultimately taken their lives.

But.

Vivana and Drencher had made those selfless acts despite being scorned as villains and Kamijou Touma would remember them, even if he didn't know the full story of what they had done.

They would have been enemies of each other during Handcuffs, but those villains had unwittingly passed the baton between them to save Risako. Kamijou was confident they wouldn't have wanted the girl to now lose her life for the amusement of some ghost.

He couldn't let the 29th end that way.

This wasn't just about saving Risako. He was also fighting to reward the kindness of all of those who had helped the young girl and dragged her out of the darkness.

So...

(Who cares if he has a chainsaw?)

Kamijou instantly focused in on that point.

He would start with the most frightening aspect. He was through averting his gaze from the darkness.

(I know what I have to do. If he's going to get in the way of that, I just have to steal her from him. I still don't know how to defeat a ghost, but if I couldn't interact with him at all, he wouldn't be able to swing that chainsaw around. That means there has to be a way. This turntable has to have some method of defeating that electrical ghost!!)

That was simple enough to say, but he was risking his life here.

The lab coat man's chainsaw was just that deadly. Its weight and vibrations tugged his matchstick-thin body around, but that made his movements harder to predict. The slightest contact meant death, yet his footing was unsteady. This was a different kind of terror from facing a master of kendo or fencing.

This time, the old man came at him.

Kihara Hasuu awkwardly swung the chainsaw around a few times, so Kamijou fell back while kicking up and catching a mop.

(The chainsaw is powerful, but it runs on a gasoline engine. If I hit its fuel tank and shake the fuel, it should form air bubbles and stall the engine. Really, it should be unstable already from him swinging it around every which way!!)

His theory might be accurate, but that was a real chainsaw. Even a kitchen knife was dangerous, so he had no idea if he could really suppress that mass of destructive force.

His thoughts were interrupted by the lowered chainsaw blade contacting the concrete ground. It wasn't clear if the old man with the

shadowy eyes had meant to do it. It was such a careless action it could have bounced the blade into his own body.

But a moment later, something exploded.

Sparks flew while the concrete shattered like stained glass and flew out like a scattershot.

“Gah!!”

Kamijou couldn’t do anything beyond cross his arms in front of his face.

Chunks the size of small rocks stabbed into him and his feet were lifted from the ground. The next thing he knew, he was flying backwards.

He rolled along the ground while clenching his teeth tight.

(What was that? Is it not just a normal chainsaw!?)

“Hee hee.”

The boy glared at the source of the violent scraping noise.

“Gee hee hee, ee hee ee hee hee hee!! Did you think a Kihara like me would ever use a ‘normal’ anything?”

That old man was doing something else. The chainsaw’s edge wasn’t enough to explain this, so was it an Academy City esper power? It took him a moment to realize what he was considering.

Could an old man – that is, a grown adult – really use an esper power? Could ghosts ignore all the rules and break all the limits like that!?

(Don’t panic.)

Kamijou let out a short breath and forced his mind to keep moving.

He readied his right fist again and quickly confirmed what he knew.

(Don't stop thinking!! A wrong answer isn't a bad thing. Risako defeated him all on her own. She made this Kihara decide she was too much trouble and change his plan!! So I can't let him beat me. When such a young kid worked so hard to stay strong, I've got to show her that there is still hope in this city!!)

He didn't have time to give much thought to Kihara Hasuu's power. He only had to keep in mind that the short old man had something he couldn't underestimate. Even now, the man was approaching while swinging the running chainsaw side to side. Every time it carelessly contacted a concrete pillar, a coil of plastic rope, or something else, orange sparks would fly and pieces of the object were launched toward Kamijou.

It was like a small bomb.

"Dammit!!"

That made it nigh impossible to reach the chainsaw engine with his bare hand and switch it off. Even if he was fully covered by a steel suit of armor, he would end up bisected. Trying to stall the engine was a better plan, but he couldn't calculate how many times he had to hit the fuel tank with the mop to produce the air bubbles. He couldn't rely on that.

If he lost here, he couldn't save Risako.

He had to be thankful she was dangling from the ceiling and thus wouldn't be hit by the concrete scattershot or orange sparks.

Kamijou unwrapped the plastic sheet from his arm and threw it away before grabbing a bottle of detergent. If he opened the cap and squeezed the plastic bottle tight, the contents would shoot out like a water gun.

He still knew exactly what he needed to do.

(A gasoline engine has to take in air to burn the fuel. If I can block the air intake with mud, rain, detergent, or whatever else, the engine will stop! I can figure out how to deal with the electric ghost after that!!)

“Take this!!”

Just as he held his arm out to take aim, he froze in place. He found his foot buried up to the ankle in the concrete ground. It was like he had stepped through a dark, discolored floorboard.

Then realization hit him.

(No. He isn't increasing the chainsaw's power. That would work with the metal or concrete, but it wouldn't let him produce sparks from and cut through soft synthetic fibers!)

The roaring weapon was raised high. The engine kept the chainsaw's blade rotating.

But that wasn't the real threat.

(He never had any kind of esper power. This isn't a normal space – it's a strange place called Academy City's Greatest Taboo. Is this one of the malfunctions he mentioned? It doesn't just affect the ghosts – it effects this place itself. And Kihara Hasuu has stolen it from Frillsand #G, so can he alter and control the terrain and its materials!?)

He yanked his foot out of the dark and dry floor, but the time loss proved devastating.

If he died here, he could not save Risako.

He tried to roll behind a nearby concrete pillar and the chainsaw swung diagonally down to slice right through that thick pillar.

The color red flew.

Part 5

An unnatural amount of sparks scattered like a flamethrower and concrete fragments were launched out in a fan shape.

(He could actually negate the fragments with his right hand, but maybe there are too many for him to handle. Or did he get the wrong idea after touching the duct tape and mop without issue?) Kihara Hasuu didn't feel any need to check beyond the dust cloud.

He had wondered how much this boy could do since he had held a central position in the *previous* Board Chairman's plan, but this was a real disappointment.

(The Taboo is a mixture of a physical space and the Imaginary Number District, but the items brought here are unaffected. I don't know who had been in here, but Imagine Breaker won't work on the regularly resupplied items like mops and detergent bottles.) Or...

"In this case, Risako-kun's special trait won out," muttered Kihara Hasuu, all on his own now.

Operation Handcuffs had truly been hell on earth. He knew that all too well since he had lost his life at the very end. If anyone who played any role in those events manage to survive to the end, you had all the proof you needed that they were unusual.

And of all of those, Risako had the most impressive record since she had survived Handcuffs without fighting even once.

He had originally only wanted her to deter Frillsand #G, so now that she had refused to cooperate, he had no reason to include her in this.

Yet he had still done so.

Consciously or not, Risako changed something in her surroundings with her mere presence.

"Kihara Noukan was never seen emerging from the sewers."

He whispered.

"Vivana Oniguma died protecting the child."

He whispered.

"Drencher Kihara Repatri goes without saying."

He whispered.

"Hamazura Shiage was shot accidentally at the very end."

He whispered.

A smile spread across his face while he lifted the chainsaw in both hands.

Whether she wanted it or not, Risako's weakness had dragged down everyone around her and given Handcuffs its ending. That was a fact. But if she picked up the plain power that was a chainsaw to overcome that weakness, she would become a new central point spreading even more death.

She had the drive to do what she set her mind to.

But she also accepted what people told her and obeyed the warnings strangers gave her.

She stayed true to herself while actively listening to others. Not many people could manage both like that. Not even professional journalists who made a living asking people questions and gathering

information. For example, that dark side paparazzo had put too much emphasis on herself.

In terms of old stories, Risako was the honest person who benefited the most despite setting foot in another world.

Her actions must have seemed strange indeed on the dark side where everyone assumed ulterior motives in everyone else. Some of those villains and demons may have paid an unnecessary price there and then tilted their heads in confusion. Yes, a powerless and honest person could sometimes take down the strongest resident of the darkness. They would unwittingly eliminate their cruel neighbor using the rules of that other world.

Kihara Hasuu had wanted to destroy that here.

After she boiled her goodness down to the level of a complex and finally grasped the thread of hope, it would have only led her to the trap he had laid. Just like he had once told Ladybird she was an experiment for creating esper androids who could replace the children being harmed by Academy City. The look on her face when she learned she needed to consume other people's brains to survive had been priceless.

He had learned so much leading up to this moment.

He had been looking forward to that ending, but Risako had ruined it all.

If not for that, she wouldn't have needed to hang from the ceiling like a bagworm.

"Hee hee. *But it's all the same to me as long as it's entertaining.* Having a trump card like this is certainly interesting. And it's such a minor factor, like sprinkling something into the pot to make it all boil. Risako-kun, you may have been the greatest monster in Handcuffs."

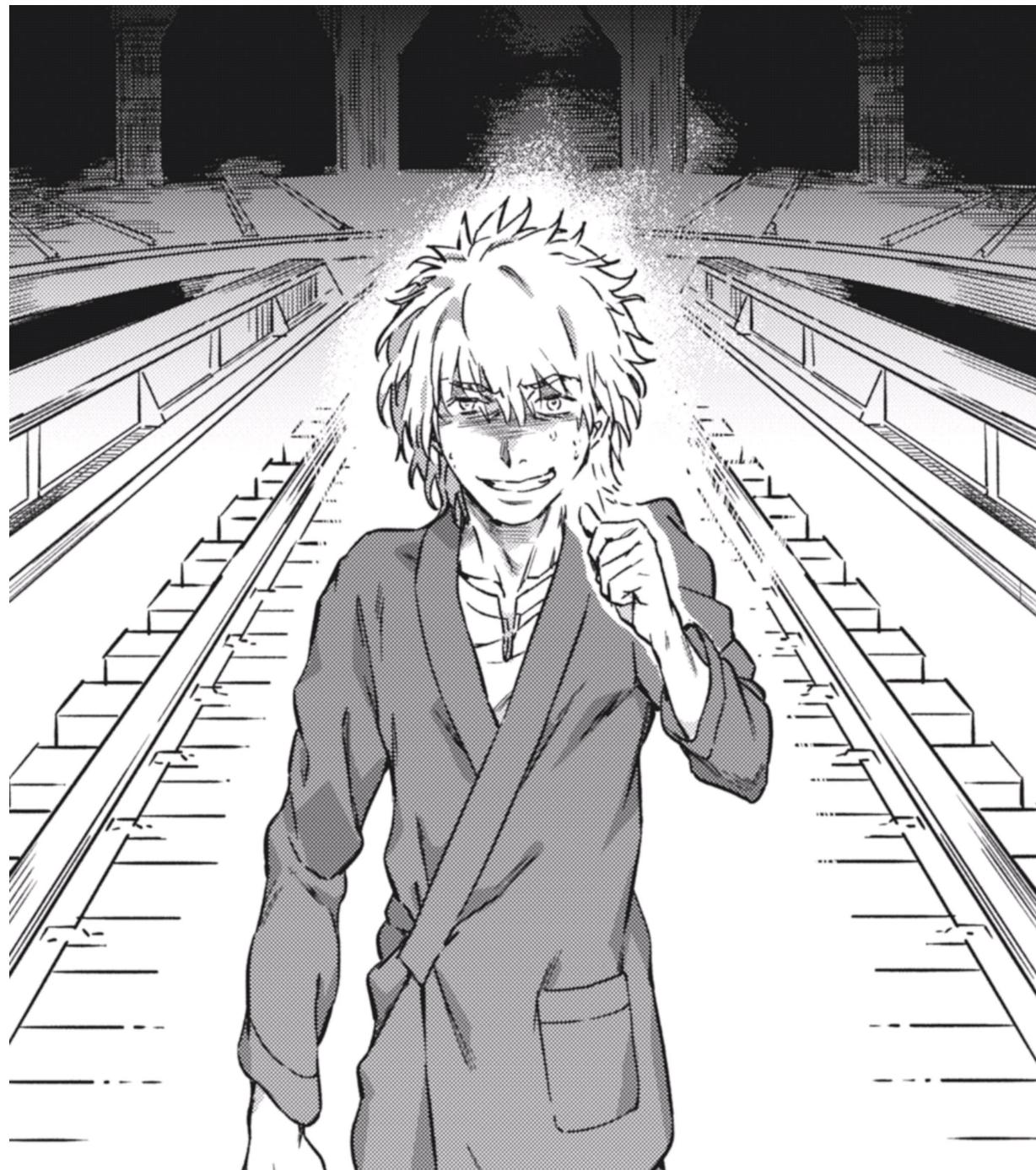
That was when he heard a solid footstep.

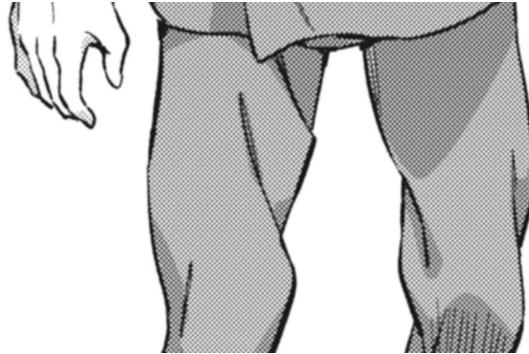
In that moment, he forgot all about the brutal chainsaw he held.

He looked up without thinking and then froze in place.

That was how much of a surprise this was.

Handcuffs was not over yet.





This was a true continuation, with no need for the dead or for distorting the world.

The boy was sickly pale and looked to be at death's door.

But he still jabbed his thumb back at his face and spat out the simplest logic necessary to break this spectral curse.

“Guess who’s not dead.”

The villainous Kihara was paid a visit by Hamazura Shiage, the very person who had killed him the first time.

One more boy had been reckless enough to put his one and only body into danger to protect the dignity of the young girl who had been struggling all alone against the worst possible dark side researcher.

He still wore a surgical gown and several tubes and cords hung from his arms and stomach. His lips were dry and cracked and his skin didn't even have enough strength left to sweat.

Nevertheless.

Kamijou Touma was not the only one who had received Risako's feelings and stood up to save her.

The failure of Handcuffs didn't matter.

It was time for Academy City to grow and to let everyone know it had changed.

Part 6

In truth, Hamazura Shiage barely knew anything about the events of the 29th.

He didn't know how difficult it had been to reach this familiar place or what kind of drama had played out to make it possible.

But he had heard a cry for help.

Maybe that cry had come from an artificial ghost whose anger had caused her to swallow up Academy City's Greatest Taboo, which stood on the dividing line between science and magic and made her voice deadly to even listen to.

Still, Hamazura Shiage had survived the 25th.

He thought he had ended Operation Handcuffs himself, so if it was still ongoing and someone was still suffering down in the darkness, then the half-dead delinquent boy had more than enough of reason to get out of bed.

Especially after seeing Drencher Kihara Repatri's lifestyle up close.

He couldn't let harm come to something that man had risked his life to protect.

No matter what.

"Hee hee."

Something was making noise.

It was that pitiful ghost that had been caught in the shadows of the living realm by some kind of mistake.

He spoke directly below the young girl hanging from the tall, tall ceiling like a bagworm.

“You of all people are here? Did getting one little move in on me go right to your head or something!? You’re a zero! A Level 0!! If you lost sight of that and decided to return the darkness, it sounds a lot like you have a death wish and decided to throw out your undeserved good fortune!”

“None of that matters,” calmly said Hamazura Shiage.

Operation Handcuffs had been the worst of the worst, but he had caught a glimpse of something while running around trying to survive the disasters of that day.

He had learned something.

He could take a step forward now that he had inherited something from Vivana Oniguma and Drencher Kihara Repatri who had died before his eyes.

Would they have just watched while young Risako’s victory was denied and her resolve mocked?

“Esper level doesn’t matter here. Everyone who comes to this city takes their first step after finding a reason to motivate themselves. Maybe they want to be a Level 5, maybe they want to be the #1 at the top, and maybe they want to be an even greater monster. So I have the right to try. And this godforsaken darkness is what invited me onto the path of the undefeated champion by stubbornly clinging to life and dragging Risako into it all.”

“Is that old-fashioned ‘where there’s a will there’s a way’ argument really all you have? The very fact that this city separates people by level should tell you that trying harder doesn’t actually make you

stronger. A zero will always be a zero, Level 0!! You will never amount to anything!!”

“*I wasn’t talking to you, you empty ghost,*” spat Hamazura. His voice carried the slight irritation of having TV static interrupt an important conversation. Yes, he was facing the ghost, but he was speaking to someone else. “I’ll say it again: esper level doesn’t matter here” He almost seemed to be singing. Or maybe declaring war. “Everyone who comes to this city takes their first step after finding a reason to motivate themselves. Maybe they want to be a Level 5, maybe they want to be the #1 at the top, and maybe they want to be an even greater monster.”

It may have been the same for Risako. It was true she had failed to defeat him. Her resistance had accomplished nothing and Kihara Hasuu had ultimately overpowered her. But she had not been fooled by his words. To the end, she had held onto what Drencher Kihara Repatri had given her. Kihara Hasuu’s open anger about it proved how strong her will was. Her reluctance to hurt Sodate or the ghost lady hid a small light that would one day grow into a great power.

Drencher was gone and the dead were not so easily brought back. But in a more figurative sense, he had to be smiling when he saw Risako now. He would have learned that his efforts had been more than just self-righteousness.

Hamazura Shiage had dealt with him enough to feel certain of that.

“So I have the right to try.”

So Hamazura did not criticize the result.

For one thing, he was not directing his question toward Risako.

“And this godforsaken darkness is what invited me onto the path of the undefeated champion by dragging Risako into it all.”

So when he asked the question, it was directed toward someone else with the same right to try.

“What about you, *Sodate*?”

He turned toward the area behind one of the concrete pillars.

Yes. There was another survivor of Operation Handcuffs. Maybe he had failed in everything he tried and never defeated anyone, but survival alone was enough of a win for that day. After experiencing everyone being manipulated by the Coins of Nicholas, Hamazura knew all too well how difficult that simple accomplishment had been.

At the very least, he wasn’t accepting any argument from the cheater who had failed to survive yet been so furious about losing he had flipped over the game board and clung to life.

With the slightest of sounds, a small boy in gym clothes stepped out from behind the pillar. He never should have been here and should have been the first one to keep away from that brutal chainsaw.

“I...”

But Hamazura didn’t stop him. Because that boy had the right to try.

The boy stepped up alongside Hamazura, tensed his trembling legs, and clenched his small fists tight.

All so he could resist the world’s cruelty and save someone he cared about.

“I also want to become an esper who can surpass any Level 5, even the unbeatable #1!!”

Part 7

“Hah.”

The new Board Chairman laughed quietly inside his unusually well-furnished cell.

The white monster sat on the king-size bed and removed his mouth from his can of coffee to speak to no one.

“You’ve already done that.”

Part 8

With a roar like a motorcycle engine, Kihara Hasuu swung his chainsaw side to side. Hamazura and Sodate both wanted to silence him as soon as possible, but they couldn't rush the chainsaw without any kind of plan. If they suffered a fatal wound, Risako would blame herself and they couldn't let that happen.

"Kee hee." The chainsaw-wielding old man laughed. "Hee hee hee, ah ha ha ha ha!! You think you can reject logic with hogwash you lack the power to back up? Emotion cannot make up for a poor argument. And it's time you learned firsthand what happens when your argument is lacking!!"

Hamazura spat back a response.

No, it wasn't just him. That man was no longer with them, but several people here had inherited his spirit. So Hamazura would not be broken by mere malice.

"We lack the power to back it up? Of course we do!! Drencher and Frillsand #G stood out from the pack during Handcuffs, but even they agonized over their inability to protect those children. It all began there and ultimately led to him fooling the entire dark side while remaining a good person!!"

"Mister died in the end, but he didn't just give up on everything from the beginning. Pain and suffering can give you the strength needed to keep moving. It doesn't just break you and distort you – it can be used to push you in the right direction! That conversion was mister's greatest strength. So I will never give up on finding a way for everyone to return alive. We might not have what it takes and we

might suffer defeats along the way, but we will still search for a way to make everyone happy!! Just like mister did!!!!!"

So they didn't need an unnatural method of bringing back the dead.

Drencher Kihara Repatri's determination, spirit, and powerful kindness lived on as the solid core supporting these other people. And they would use it to drag Risako up from the darkness. His life may have been lost, but he was still with them. No one could replace Drencher, but they could inherit his mission. Could they feel his pulse when they held a hand to their chest? Hamazura and Sodate didn't need to confirm that with each other.

Could they risk their lives to protect someone?

They wouldn't have appeared in this subterranean world unless they could give the same answer as that man.

Kihara Hasuu.

We will exorcise your ability to stubbornly cling to the world of the living.

"!"

Hamazura kicked up a tarp as a distraction while he grabbed Sodate and hid behind a nearby pillar. With the rattling of a chain, the tarp mysteriously erupted with orange sparks as it was shredded.

Sodate glared into the distance, biting his thumbnail.

They were helpless to fight back, but the small boy did not turn away from the threat.

Just like that young man had once challenged the depths of a great darkness.

He was willing to fight back if it would help them find happiness.

"What now? I swore to myself I wouldn't embarrass myself in front of Risako again! So I'll do whatever it takes. If we can't get that chainsaw from him, could we keep running away until it runs out of gas?"

Running away wasn't embarrassing. It was a solid tactic.

That implication showed that Sodate really had inherited Drencher's spirit. No one was talking about flimsy pride here. If they really wanted to win and rescue Risako from this nightmare without making her sad, they had to protect their own lives too. This time, they would reward that man who had fought against the city's darkness because he couldn't allow a world where children were set up to "bravely" die in the name of scientific advancement and expansion of the city.

But even though running away was a valid tactic, they would almost certainly be caught and shredded before the gasoline ran out. Their opponent was an old man, but the limited underground space worked against them.

(If only there was a way to immediately and safely stop that chainsaw.)

The delinquent boy worked his mind. He wasn't out of his element here. He knew a lot about engines after his days of stealing cars and robbing ATMs.

"Hamazura!!" shouted another boy from further away.

It sounded like he wanted to convey something even if it meant coughing up blood.

Like he wanted to tell Hamazura something even if it meant giving his position away to Kihara Hasuu. He too was risking his one and only life for Risako.

Hamazura couldn't see him, so he may have been behind a pillar or container.

"That's where I screwed up!! Kihara Hasuu is using something else too. Cough! Something that amplifies the chainsaw's sparks. I think it takes advantage of this Taboo place, but don't forget that the chainsaw isn't the only threat!!"

I see, thought Hamazura.

"Oh, it's just flint."

"?"

It was understandable for young Sodate to tilt his head here. It was actually unusual for a high schooler like Hamazura to be this familiar with how lighters worked.

"Everyone should know that rubbing flint makes sparks, but you can't actually make sparks with just flint. You need a metal to strike the flint with."

"Eh? Really?"

"Technically, it's the carbon mixed in with the powder of the crumbling metal that glows orange from friction."

This amplified that.

It also let the chainsaw slice right through the pillars and floor made of concrete.

In that case...

"Does it absorb the carbon in the object to produce more sparks? And with the carbon removed, the object is a lot weaker than before?"

That meant the concrete pillar wouldn't shield them. Unlike Frillsand #G, Kihara Hasuu had overcome an artificial ghost's compatibility issues with Academy City's Greatest Taboo and he even used them to his advantage. The weak old man's chainsaw only worked inside

the Taboo, but it could slice through and break any object, launching the pieces like a shotgun blast.

Hamazura picked up Sodate's small body, turned around, and fled behind a nearby pillar.

No, he pretended to.

The crackling of electricity exploded from nearby. After luring the ghost in, Hamazura had dumped a bucket of water on an emergency power transformer among the nearby train equipment.

The untouchable immortal ghost clearly *blurred*.

“Gbbbhladfghbh!?”

“The ghost lady could pass through walls and pillars, but she always avoided the microwave in the container kitchen. I don't know why, but if you work like her, that has to be a weakness!!”

“Tch!! E-e-e-electromagnetic waves!?”

An electromagnetic pulse attack made by detonating a nuclear bomb outside the atmosphere was an incredibly effective way of destroying electronic equipment and networks, but receiving the go ahead on using a nuke was no easy task. That was why a cheaper E-bomb had been developed to scatter powerful microwaves from its detonation point.

Sodate wasn't just another target needing protection. He threw down his cards and challenged their enemy himself.

“I don't need any special power. I've lived with a ghost long enough that I know more about them than a *beginner* like you!!”

They had to stop thinking of a ghost as something special.

If their enemy was supported by electricity, then he would carry all the corresponding weaknesses. It was best to think of him like an

exposed wire with no waterproofing. Saltwater, static electricity, microwaves, EMPs – he might even have more weaknesses than an ordinary human. They had just been going about it the wrong way until now.

They had found a way out.

Or had they?

A moment later, the entire underground space shook with a deep tremor.

“Hey, um, you said he’s been removing the carbon from everything, right? And that makes it all weak?”

“Y-yeah. What about it?”

“Then.” Sodate gulped and looked to something. “*Is this pillar we’re leaning against going to last?*”

Several thick cracks ran through it. The carbon may have been removed, so they couldn’t blindly trust in the safety of reinforced concrete. And what happened once the pillar couldn’t take the weight of the ceiling?

A burst of heavy air pressure passed by from top to bottom. It reminded Hamazura of the arrival of a great mass when he was waiting for a train on the subway platform.

That interpretation wasn’t inaccurate.

Several chunks of concrete larger than a big truck fell from above.

“Watch out!!”

He had no choice but to pick up Sodate and roll away.

(This is bad!! Risako is still dangling from the ceiling. She isn’t going to fall from that height without warning, is she!?)

The ceiling split and dropped pieces a few more times, so their footing was far from stable. The firm turntable now felt like a bed with bad springs.

No, that wasn't it.

The tremors weren't just from the falling concrete. The ground was also bucking up below them.

"D-don't tell me..."

"Oh, god!! How far does this space go!? He hasn't removed the carbon from the crust here to release the earthquake energy, has he!?"

The tectonic plates found deep underground were always pushing against each other, so if one were made more fragile than the other, all that force could be released like a spring snapping back.

(At least he's limited to the objects in this space. Humans are made of carbon, so if it worked on us, he could extract all the carbon from any organ he wanted!!)

But the exact conditions were still unknown. There might be something that would make them a valid target, like the mythological rule that anyone who ate the fruit of the underworld would become a resident of the underworld.

By the way, looking up at the ceiling during an earthquake was apparently a unique trait of the Japanese since hanging cords and chains for adjusting the brightness of ceiling lights and floor lamps were ubiquitous in Japan. In other countries, people would focus on other things, like the ripples in a cup of water or the shaking of a candle flame, so maybe those reactions were a reflection of someone's time period and nationality. For example, the way people recently began associating "everyone's phone going off at once" with danger.

Anyway, Hamazura and Sodate's immediate reaction to their anxiety was to look up to the ceiling.

Almost like someone had intentionally guided their eyes there.

With their eyes directed up and away from the space directly in front of them, Kihara Hasuu appeared from behind the pillar and held his chainsaw to the side. A horizontal sweep would be enough to bisect the both of them.

But a blinding flash of light from above made the attacker flinch just beforehand.

Should they be surprised that a ghost could be blinded, or impressed by how occult it was for ghosts to recoil from bright lights?

The cylindrical underground space resembled an ancient colosseum. Someone stood on the catwalk running along the perimeter. They had shined a light down.

"Use this. Hurry."

The blinding light pointed elsewhere.

It shined on a fire extinguisher – a foaming model meant for chemical fires.

Hamazura leaped toward it.

Gasoline chainsaws were simply designed, so they lacked a water radiator. They used air cooling, just like a motorcycle, so they would burn themselves out with their own heat if the engine was covered in something fluffy like cotton. A bubbly chemical fire extinguisher compound would work just as well. The chemical bubbles would readily pop and cling to the engine, so Kihara Hasuu couldn't just wipe them away as long as he was prepared to burn himself. (Could ghosts even suffer burns?)

There were other threats, like the structure's collapse and the earthquake, but it would mean a lot to safely rob the old man of that deadly weapon.

The ghost wielding the roaring engine briefly directed his attention upwards and away from his soon-to-be victims.

"You? Are you another Kihara?"

"Sorry, but I owe Risako up there after Handcuffs. Damn, I knew she had a good heart, but I never imagined faking my death would come back to bite me like this. So this time, I'm going to set aside my own interests and give it my all. Because I could never forgive myself otherwise."

A small orange flame waggled up on the catwalk by the wall.

It burned at the end of the cigar held in a golden retriever's mouth.

"Also, I was never someone who would hold back just because my opponent is another Kihara. Kihara Hasuu, I don't see a shred of romance in you. You are killing for no reason – not for science and not for Academy City. Which makes this something I must deal with."

"So you decided to rely on this ragtag group? Then you bet on the wrong horse. I don't care if my opponent is a Kihara any more than you do. If you get in the way of my fun, then I will kill you. I'm not going to complain if you operate under the same rules."

Hamazura realized he couldn't just look back and forth between the two sides of this incomprehensible discussion like he was a tennis referee.

(The entire conversation is a distraction to give us time to act. Nice one, you big dog!!)

He pulled out the extinguisher's safety pin and aimed the hose toward Kihara Hasuu. Specifically, at the chainsaw's engine. This

projectile was entirely harmless, but if its big bubbles covered up the air-cooled engine, its heat wouldn't be able to escape and the engine would stop.

Something felt wrong and his hope was shattered in an instant.

The lever had bent in his hand.

Kihara Hasuu ruled this territory and he had the power to extract all the carbon from objects.

“Shit!!”

Hamazura clicked his tongue and threw the extinguisher itself. If the old man swung the running chainsaw, the canister itself would burst and scatter its bubbles along with its nonflammable pressurized gas. He would end up coated with the stuff all the same.

But that hope was shattered too.

The extinguisher's metal canister burst in midair before it could touch the blade. With the carbon removed, it hadn't been able to withstand the internal pressure.

(That's worse than I thought!! Did I rely too much on the extinguisher!?)

An impact hit him from the side.

Sodate had tried to tackle him out of the way, but as desperate as he was, he failed to move the high schooler. Kihara Hasuu raised the chainsaw diagonally in preparation to slice them both in two.

There was no time to think.

The red extinguisher had been shredded and flew their way like metal blades. Hamazura used his body to guard Sodate from that, but he was painfully aware he couldn't stop the chainsaw. He knew

that, but he had no other option either. A direct hit from the scattershot meant to pin them down could be fatal to Sodate.

All he could do was shut his eyes and clench his teeth. He heard the violent roar of the chainsaw swinging diagonally down toward him.

And.

The dull sound of destruction continued on and on.

Yet the pain never arrived.

He slowly opened his eyes to find something standing up to the chainsaw. Long hair too brightly orange to be human spread out before his eyes. A special fiber suit resembling a racing swimsuit covered a slender body powered by electricity and filled with an electrified machine oil gel.

Since she was inorganic and existed here, Kihara Hasuu should have been able to alter the distribution of carbon inside her.

Yet her joints did not collapse and her raised arms were not sliced through like tofu.

She was clearly more than just a machine.

Which was why her slender arms were enough to match the chainsaw!!

“La-”

Hamazura Shiage knew her.

The girl had wanted to prove her worth as an esper android who could free Academy City’s children from all the dangerous experiments. Yet she was a product of tragedy because that cruel researcher had designed her so she required human brains to survive.

With a dull clang, the chainsaw blade was knocked back.

“Ladybird!?”

The android built by this Kihara had resumed functioning to stop him.

Part 9

In truth, Kamijou Touma hadn't had time to think about it that much.

He was bleeding and battered.

He had lost way too much blood over the course of the day, so he could barely think straight. He couldn't get up, so the most he had managed was to crawl while clinging to his last shreds of consciousness. The harmless mold(?) Youen had given him had burst, so the bullet wound in his gut would not stop bleeding.

But he knew there had to be more he could do.

A tarp or some detergent would work. He just needed something that would stop Kihara Hasuu's chainsaw, but he found something else behind a metal drum.

It looked like a girl.

But she was made of artificial muscles surrounding a heavy metal skeleton, she had exposed wiring, her head was missing, and some kind of door sat wide open on her back.

He was willing to use anything that might work.

He relied on his own memories.

He was pretty sure he had passed out for a few seconds after the chainsaw attacked the pillar he was hiding behind, hit him with a shotgun blast of concrete, and launched him several meters through the air.

When he had opened his eyes again, he had noticed himself leaking blood and grimaced. It wasn't just the bullet wound on his stomach. Way back at the beginning, he had been stabbed by pieces of a plastic jungle gym and forced to stitch himself back up.

(Damn, I wish I'd brought the train's first aid kit with me instead of assuming the tragedy ended there. I miss that handheld sewing machine.) "Gh."

He placed his hand against a concrete pillar and tried to get up, but his hand slipped and he fell back down. He hated how slick his hands were. His vision was somewhat faded and his legs were convulsing unnaturally, preventing him from getting up.

He had lost too much blood.

There was no way he could dodge a chainsaw like this, even if it was wielded by an elderly ghost.

(But there has to be something I can do.)

Would he really give up just because he had ample reason to say it was hopeless?

How could he ever accept there was nothing he could do for the people still suffering?

He had to end Handcuffs.

He had to end the chain of tragedy and misfortune.

There had to be a chance left.

He had passed out for a few seconds without getting chainsawed. He realized Kihara Hasuu had lost sight of his target thanks to all the debris and sparks. Maybe the weapon was *too* powerful. He could only crawl at this point and he clicked his tongue at the realization he left a trail of blood wherever he went. He pulled in a nearby tarp and

rolled himself up like a spring roll before using just his arms to crawl along the filthy floor.

His fingers were in agony. He thought his nails were going to break.

But this was his one and only chance. He would be sliced in two as soon as the old man noticed, so he might not have another opportunity to act. He decided to bet on that metal drum, so he crawled around it and collected that girl.

He would have a hard time closing up his wounds and running around at this point, but that didn't mean he was helpless. Introducing an unexpected fighter – yes, unexpected for Kihara Hasuu – could lead to rescuing Risako.

It looked to him like the racing swimsuit girl *was broken*.

He doubted sticking her severed head back on her body would get her running again, so he used his bloody fingers to pull out his old folks smartphone and called for some help.

(Oh, no. I only have 49 yen, so I hope international calls aren't too expensive when you both have smartphones. Aren't mobile phones supposed to let you travel the world with them?) He didn't have his Transla-Pen, so he had to use an unreliable translation site to get his words into English. He wanted to reach the woman from outside Academy City whose inspiration, according to Othinus, had surpassed even the Kiharas.

In other words...

“Please, *Melzabeth!!* I want to know how to wire her back up. I need your help!!”

Part 10

The girl glared past the chainsaw that continued to produce a disconcerting grinding sound.

“Back then...”

Ladybird didn’t let it bother her.

She understood the threat all too well, so she took a powerful step forward instead of fleeing. She did not dodge the attack because it scared her – she challenged it because it scared her. She had always wanted to be a protector and she had finally achieved that goal.

“I thought the same thing. Even someone as filthy as me. I decided dying in that drum explosion wouldn’t be so bad when the alternative was killing the children and extracting their brains. But I never want to do that again. Because I...even I *want to surpass the #1!!*”

She had found her reason.

Kihara Hasuu did not remember inputting this data into her.

So in that moment, she had truly broken free of her bonds.

She had been given a mission and pushed in the right direction.

It was time for her to leap into the flames to protect someone. And as an android, she could do that quite literally. So she didn’t need to belittle herself and agonize over what she was.

Maybe she had only found a goal to work toward and maybe she hadn’t made up for the crimes she had committed without even

questioning them, but she had still taken her first step into a larger world.

The manufactured girl had finally become her own person.

“Yes.”

She reached toward the back of her hip.

She did not hesitate to draw a machete so heavy a normal person could never even lift it.

But this time it was to protect people's lives, not to deceive and to kill.

Maybe she could only do it once, but that was enough.

She glared directly at the old man who had created her.

“Finally. I have finally found who I want to be, Sensei.”

“Hah! You're nothing but a filthy murder weapon!!”

When the weapons clashed, the violent chainsaw blade bent along with the guide for the chain. The chain could never rotate now.

That threat had been removed.

“Oh? The android turns on her own creator? I thought you were no more than a toy, but you are brimming with romance, Ladybird-kun. And you are motivated by good, so you are not just a rampaging monster. I give you a perfect score for this.”

The golden retriever up on the catwalk sounded somehow impressed.

These were the words of a researcher who viewed the world from an angle other than ordinary ethics.

"So many people died because they were all at the mercy of a power *too great for them to handle*. This is the sort of reward the villains who met their ends on the 25th so desperately needed."

But Kihara Hasuu didn't bother responding to the fellow Kihara's semiserious words.

He was preoccupied.

"How are you still functioning *so well*?"

His voice carried a confused anger.

He had acquired his artificial ghost existence as a new toy to play with, but now he shouted enviously at the old toy he had thrown out.

He held onto the broken chainsaw and the roar of its engine distorted into something like a human voice.

"You fully ceased to function here on the 25th!! Even if an amateur somehow managed to get you running again temporarily, it couldn't have lasted more than a few seconds at the most. Not to mention that you must consume human brains. So how are you moving so nimbly!? This exceeds the limits of my specs for you!!"

"*Does it now?*"

That plain answer came from Ladybird's mouth, but the voice was not hers. This was a grown woman speaking in English.

She had been connected to someone else.

This was the genius woman named Melzabeth Grocery.

"It's true her cellulose nanofiber brain would grow abnormally quickly, exceed the capacity of her artificial skull, and collapse in on itself. And I can see how a constant supply of human brains would trigger the rejection needed to disconnect it and keep its size down. But you

could avoid all of that if you didn't use cellulose nanofibers in the first place."

"What?"

"Ever heard of the Logistic Hornet system? I designed it, R&C Occultics made it their toy, and now its mobile bases are floating in the oceans around the world. But there was one piece of equipment inside those 5000m containers we never ended up using: fully autonomous optical neurocomputers codenamed Secret. In other words, they're massive computers *designed to mimic the structure of the human brain.*"

Ladybird had once cursed the fact that she was an incomplete machine. She had cursed her very existence as something that needed to kill espers and extract their brains.

But there were paths to salvation open only to machines.

"They're too big to fit in someone's skull and maybe they can't use those Academy City esper powers...but they also don't require any of that cruelty. Simply linking her head to a big enough computer with a wireless network is enough to free her from her malfunctions, from the fear of death, and from needing to commit any more crimes. The only problem is *the idea never occurred to you.* You were so eager to leap at the immediate profit and indulge in the ironic cruelty that you failed to notice you had wandered into a dead end with no solution."

There was scorn in her voice.

Melzabeth Grocery was a mother. Her daughter might even be with her at the moment. And that was why she could never forgive this man's actions. Ladybird had looked up to her creator, but he had answered his *daughter's* adoration with mockery and abuse.

So Melzabeth did not hesitate to speak the words she knew would tear into a skilled researcher's heart more painfully than any other.

“Kihara Hasuu. You’re not as smart as you think you are.”

Part 11

What was he feeling in that moment?

Maybe only a Kihara would know. It was possible not even another Kihara could have understood.

“No.”

The old man’s outlines blurred.

Something about his incorporeal form had visibly changed.

“No! You are not a Kihara or even from Academy City. A wannabe-scientist like you does not get to talk to me like this. Yes, I get it now. I don’t need eternal life. Forget about the earth’s core. I will reject your theory, your thesis, and your way of life!! I will take everything from you and tear it all down to reject it for all time!!!!!”

“Is that so? Kee hee hee. Then I’ll be taking cute Risako-chan from you.”

Something was taken from Kihara Hasuu with a sparking sound.

It looked so easy.

“What?”

Did that exclamation of surprise come from Kamijou Touma or Hamazura Shiage?

A new form floated up at the colosseum-like space’s tall, tall ceiling – a place everyone could see but no one could reach.

The “cocoon” surrounding the unconscious little girl was sliced through to extract her. She wore gym clothes a lot like Sodate’s.

Risako’s limp form was held in the arms of another girl.

But this one was very different. She seemed even more vaguely defined than an artificial ghost as she descended to the floor as weightlessly as a cotton ball or a leaf.

The slender silhouette of a girl had wings and a tail reminiscent of marine creatures. No mention of this hidden being could be found in the texts of any mythology or religion.

“A demon?” groaned Kihara Hasuu. “A real demon!?”

“What? You’re how old and you still don’t know your demons? I’m Qlipah Puzzle 545, a UK-made fake. Oh, and don’t you dare claim this came out of nowhere. Really, you’re the one that decided to intrude on *the peaceful city that boy wants to protect*.”

Someone else was doing everything they could to protect a complete stranger.

The new head of the city was even reaching beyond the bounds of science.

But Kihara Hasuu couldn’t even try to take back Risako after she was laid down on the cold floor.

Kamijou Touma and Hamazura Shiage passed the demon on either side, taking a step toward the distorted collection of electricity.

Their limits didn’t matter. They had both been close to death before they even arrived.

“Hah. I have no idea what’s going on.”

“Same. But I do know that buying some time by delaying him here is all we need to save Risako!!”

The two boys wiped blood from their cheeks and mouths with no idea if they could really win or even survive this.

They had no idea what was going on, but they still grabbed a coil of plastic rope to protect their fist or lifted a wooden hammer in both hands before approaching. Even Kihara Hasuu had to hesitate when he saw that. They weren't afraid of all his electricity. They would try whatever it took to break down his silhouette. There was even a belligerent light of hope in their eyes.

Frillsand #G had used the logic of a ghost photo or a curse, keeping her distance from her enemy and overwhelming them with a great army.

She was still doing that now.

The demon girl showed off her ratty dress made of English newspapers held together by tape.

The articles began to wriggle and change.

The demon spread her arms to display the text personalized for Risako.

Almost like there was no reason to hide any of it even with the girl's eyes still closed.

"Demons like me are sensitive to people's desires. And I'm the Qlipah Puzzle 545 who used the mood of war to confuse the people of an entire country, so the dark parts of people lives are like my backyard. If I want to know the history of my target, I just have to take a look at my dress's articles."

If his chainsaw was still working, Kihara Hasuu would have attacked the demon girl's back. He was especially fond of the kind of malice that overturned scenes like this.

But the chainsaw was bent and broken. The roaring of the engine did nothing to turn the chain covered in short teeth.

And the racing swimsuit girl who had broken the weapon stood in his way. Almost like she was moving between him and the reckless Level 0s.

Ladybird wanted to protect the children from the city's cruelty.

She must have seen those bloody brawlers as two of those children.

That android had been born from the infamous Kihara family, but she had found who she wanted to be and was taking her first step in that direction.

He was a collection of electrical energy using High Voltage Cutting, but Ladybird was not an ordinary human. No matter how much of her body was destroyed, she would continue to carry out her objective without batting an eye. Because she understood the strength of being an android.

"I won't let you." That manifestation of malice clenched his teeth, groaned, and roared. "Risako-kun said she doesn't want to hurt 'Sodate-chan' or 'the ghost lady'. But! She has yet to say how she does intend to stand up to this cruel world!! She has simply stopped thinking. Once she is finally forced to reach an answer, she will say she wants the power to fight and to kill so she can protect her loved ones!!"

"Are you sure about that?"

The gym clothes girl's shoulders jumped.

Her eyes were still closed, but for some reason, those words reached her.

The newspaper articles surrounding Qlipah Puzzle 545 may not have really meant anything. Everyone probably saw something

different, like with a Rorschach test. The words were changing like a living creature in front of Risako.

“I’m a demon, so I can see your desires. But I’ll ask the question anyway.” Qlipah Puzzle 545 moved her face toward Risako’s, her smile growing. “Refusing to think about it wasn’t enough to push back Kihara Hasuu. That’s why you lost to that mean old man in the end. So let’s keep going from there. Instead of hesitating and putting it off, it’s time to reject his answer with an answer of your own. Show him there’s an answer other than asking for the power to fight.”

A whisper designed to speak directly to people’s desires sank deep into Risako’s hardened heart. Even though emotionally rejecting a logically sound argument should have felt horribly violent to her and caused her to harden her heart further.

“No one wants other people to suffer because of their own weakness, so they seek out strength by any means necessary. It’s a fine thing to want, but can you really achieve it by shutting your heart up tight, clouding your vision, and swinging a blade just because someone tells you to?”

No, that was the wrong way of looking at it.

The term “desires” could make it sound like they were talking about something emotional.

But there were plenty of logical desires. This was most readily apparent in the financial world where people’s interests could be mathematically calculated. Sports medicine and biomechanics, where scientist in lab coats spoke of the human body in numerical terms, was rooted in the same word. People wanted to win first place. What was that if not a desire?

And what was it Risako had said in the illusion shown by Frillsand #G?

She wanted to conquer her weakness and become strong, no matter what it took. It was a flimsy logic, lacking quite a bit, but it mattered that Risako had been thinking of strength *as a numerical thing that could grow and existed in a hierarchy*.

It looked a first like she was rejecting Kihara Hasuu's idea, but she could not fully reject it. Because if she did have the #1's vector control, she could have changed how Handcuffs ended. She could have saved those people. That much was certain.

People were free to think Vivana Oniguma and Drencher Kihara Repatri wouldn't have wanted to see her like that.

But she was the one who had watched them die, so there was a part of her that wished she had a more obvious sort of power. She had managed to hold that part of her in check and reject Kihara Hasuu's tempting words, but she had not been able to rid herself of that part.

And.

Since she wanted to measure things with a numerical hierarchy, there was room for desire there.

One's instincts and reason did not always need to be in conflict. In fact, your mind would fall out of balance if one or the other ceased to function. That would be like using hypnotism to reduce activity in the brain's dorsal anterior cingulate cortex to get someone to obey any command without question or resistance.

"But what you really desire isn't a number."

That was Qlipah Puzzle 545's greatest weapon and only opening, but she rejected it herself.

Think about it rationally. Wanting to feel good and wanting to make others happy were both examples of shameful desires.

In that case, wasn't this odd?

What desire would be met by relying on this Kihara and picking up that heavy chainsaw?

What part of the human heart was satisfied by a power that could only maim and kill?

If the girl could not answer those questions herself, then something was seriously wrong there.

"I get that you want power. But is the power you want a lonely thing that hurts and pushes away everyone who talks back to you? Of course not. What did you think when you saw Kihara Noukan, when you saw Vivana Oniguma, when you saw Drencher Kihara Repatri, and when you saw Hamazura Shiage!? Did you want to cause even more bloodshed in a world where only you could survive? Of course not. You wouldn't find any peace in a boring argument over who's the strongest or in showing off your specs. Your true desire has to be somewhere else!!"

The demon girl pressed her forehead against the other girl's forehead and shouted at point-blank range.

"So tell us, Risako!! Remember what your original desire was!!!!!"

Without a sound, the young girl slowly opened her eyes.

"I want...to be strong."

There was a tremor in her voice, but it definitely filled the people gathered here with strength.

"But I don't want a strength that hurts people."

Maybe it didn't really mean anything. Maybe it had nothing to do with their actual abilities.

But there was a real strength in her voice.

Her clouded eyes cleared up and her hardened heart opened.

This wasn't Imagine Breaker or Accelerator, but the strength the demon had inspired in that small heart – that young desire – left no room for any malice!!

"I want the gentle kind of strength that puts a smile on the ghost lady and Sodate-chan's faces and lets everyone draw on 120% of their strength when we're in trouble."

Part 12

With a deep rumble, Kihara Hasuu was suddenly launched somewhere. Someone from a certain world might have called it a different phase. The people who had long lived in the deepest parts of Academy City might have called it the Imaginary Number District.

Either way, he had been cut away from the ordinary world while standing right alongside the others.

Had it only happened because he had left the confines of humanity, or had he been swallowed whole by the fluctuations caused by toying with the unstable Taboo?

Qlipah Puzzle 545 stood in that lonely world. The only other inhuman being was the only other person here.

“No.”

Kihara Hasuu himself had to be the most surprised.

First, a demon had suddenly shown up and rescued Risako, the only one capable of keeping Frillsand #G, the original owner of the Taboo, wandering up on the surface, and now his fortress was collapsing.

His logic was in tatters and the young girl’s emotions had rejected him.

He himself had said he had reproduced his mind based on Frillsand #G but several of the details differed. He said if he linked himself to the earth’s core, he could leave the Taboo without being destroyed and frying the city. He said he could avoid destroying all of the lab

equipment he might want to use with his newfound immortality. So he had used Risako to stop Frillsand #G from interfering.

An important fact was hidden in all that.

He did not have complete control over himself. Once Risako was taken from him, he could not stop her from summoning Frillsand #G to forever interfere with his plans. Once that happened, he could never again restrain her and incorporate her into those plans.

His territory had always been this place deep underground. In fact, he had failed to develop a method of escaping the Imaginary Number District. The demon girl slowly approached the trapped ghost.

She was a higher-level spiritual being than him.

But more than that...

“N-no...”

He shook his head, forgetting all about the fear of being annihilated.

He was brimming with rage over something that made no sense to him.

He was still a scientist, so he could not let this slide.

“I did not implant her with a false desire!! The chainsaw, the bloodshed, the deadly force – that really was the kind of strength Risako-kun wanted. That’s what gave me an opening in the first place!! So what is this about making people smile? How did she reach that false answer!?”

“Kee hee hee. Yeah, I guess I shouldn’t expect much more from a mere ghost.” The demon laughed. The being who had twisted the girl’s answer grabbed her newspaper skirt and curtsied. “FYI: humans have more than one desire. Their one heart contains several desires, both large and small. It’s kind of like a bunch of

grapes, really. They're always in conflict and whichever one wins guides their actions in the end. A part of Risako did want to protect her loved ones even if it meant cutting down the villain attacking them. But so what? Another part of her wanted to reject any and all violence. Just like a part of you might want to wear pants today, but another part might want to wear a skirt."

"You mean you tricked her, you...you demon?"

"Maybe this was too complicated for you sciency types who get all whiny when something doesn't have a single clear answer. But keep in mind that I'm the demon who controls the mood of war. Demons are experts at twisting people's desires *to trick them into thinking a specific desire will bring them happiness*, right?"

That was why god would never forgive the devil no matter how many smiles he created.

God just could not bear to watch the people smiling happily while clutching the leaves they thought were money.

"Also."

"?"

"Now that Risako has rejected you and your plan to mess with the core is stalled, you're basically already defeated. But do you really think *she* is going to leave that kind of loose end unresolved? Now that the original owner of the unstable Taboo has regained control, that scary young lady will be coming for you."

Kihara Hasuu looked to his surroundings. He knew exactly who his enemy was this time: Frillsand #G. She wanted Risako's safe return more than anything and had been doing everything she could to attack the Taboo from the outside.

With that protection gone and his fortress walls breached, he could easily imagine what would be rushing toward him.

(This isn't a problem.)

After dying once, he knew the fear of annihilation.

You were hit with a sense of loss very different from mere pain. And it wasn't even the lower-level animalistic instincts that provide a fear of losing blood, an inability to endure suffering, or a rejection of losing your life.

He couldn't continue his research.

The ideas he carried inside would vanish into the ether, never to be realized.

What greater fear was there? He refused to again feel the great loss of knowing he could never enjoy the greatest entertainment there was.

The fear at the very core of his being squeezed at his heart once more.

And in a way, fear had a way of fanning the flames of people's fighting spirit.

So he would take this as seriously as possible.

(Frillsand #G and I are both artificial ghosts, so it will not end immediately! And if the conditions are right, I can stop her without using Risako-kun. For example...yes, Sodate-kun is in a similar situation, so if I drive him to the edge and place him up on the ceiling instead...!!)

He may indeed have had the perfect plan for fighting Frillsand #G.

Qlipah Puzzle 545 had evaded him thus far, but if he intentionally summoned Frillsand #G here and got that demon caught in the middle of the artificial ghost battle, he might be able to use the resulting confusion to buy himself some time. Sure, he would break apart and fry the city or the entire world if he left the Taboo, but

Frillsand #G might not be able to take back complete control of the endlessly-expanding Taboo right away. If he bought enough time, he could use the magnetosphere to link himself to the massive dynamo in the earth's core and take control of it for himself. Then he could leave the Taboo and travel anywhere in the world.

That plan was wiped from his mind by what happened next.

Several radiant objects pierced through his back and out from his chest.

They were logs with the ends sharpened like pencils. They were bound by rope in a crisscrossing pattern to create what was originally used as a brutal fence. They pierced the ghost's body and tore apart the wreckage of the chainsaw he still held. Rainbow flames flickered from his wounds, perhaps due to interference from the soot created as the logs burned.

This was a yarai.

Instead of a weapon, it was actually used by *torture and execution experts* to surround an execution ground.

One had even made an appearance on the 25th. It had been used by a hakama girl with long curly silver hair who had sacrificed her life to save an unfamiliar child and some unexpected companions.

Kihara Hasuu muttered in utter shock.





“An...”

He ignored the pain.

The surprise won out. He had never known the simple act of turning his head to look behind him could be so supremely difficult.

Had the decision to fight for a stranger finally summoned a being like this?

Was he finally that close to death?

“*An angel?*”

The girl wore the blazer uniform of some school or another.

The girl had long hair with one thin stand worn up on the side.

The girl was known for her timid glasses and her large chest.

Her name was Kazakiri Hyouka.

This was not Vivana Oniguma, the actual owner of the yarai.

Because no matter how much anyone might want it, the dead could not be brought back.

Because the real world was not that convenient.

But someone had watched the 25th from the background, picked up on that girl’s feelings, and stood up to deliver the finishing blow in her place.

Kihara Hasuu’s ignorance of this girl proved just how low-level a Kihara he was.

The demon grinned.

“It’s true Frillsand #G might take back control of the Taboo, *but I never said she was the scary young lady.* I mean, have you forgotten that you already defeated and neutralized her back during Handcuffs? Hee hee. Whether she takes back control or not, she can’t defeat you.”

So she had instead relied on the girl who knew the Taboo better than anyone and called the Imaginary Number District her home.

In a clash against more malice, Kihara Hasuu may have survived.

That had nothing to do with logic or skill. On an instinctual or conceptual level, a Kihara's evil may have been enough to survive an attack from a demon or ghost.

But this was different.

Kazakiri Hyouka was a collection of the AIM diffusion fields produced by the city's people. She could be seen as the collective will of Academy City and she had given a clear answer to this evil: *Go away. We don't want you here.*

"An artificial angel feels like cheating to me. And she's really strong now that it's all gone public and she can directly ask the Sisters for permission to place a burden on them. Hmm, but she's apparently the type to worry over things all on her own, so if you'd never turned yourself into a ghost, maybe you wouldn't have had to encounter this kind of terror. Oh, and don't you dare claim this came out of nowhere."

The demon smiled thinly at the twisted ghost as he vanished.

That endlessly cruel expression was the perfect last sight for such an evil man. There was no promise of salvation in that smile.

"She's been here in Academy City from the very beginning. Really, you're the one who doesn't belong after deciding to intrude on the peaceful city that boy wants to protect☆"

Epilogue: Even If Your Hand Leaves Mine – Not_Enemy.

Kamijou Touma crawled back out from the depths.

He somehow managed to return to the surface world.

“Hah.”

He laughed and then slumped down to the ground as soon as he felt the outside air on his skin. He honestly hadn’t thought he would make it back out alive this time. And if he had been on his own down there, he couldn’t have managed it.

His stomach was stained a dark red.

He couldn’t go on. He couldn’t possibly fight any more. He knew he was still in danger, but he just sat there weakly and smiled into the distance.

A group of people had formed a short distance away.

Ladybird had sheathed the ultra-heavy machete on the back of her hip and she had artificial muscles and wires sticking out of the split artificial skin on one arm. Risako hesitantly approached her after being carried out on Hamazura’s back. Sodate was a lot more hesitant, but that may have had more to do with her skimpy racing swimsuit outfit than with her being the android who had tried to harm him once. It was a subtle difference but an important one.

Kamijou’s vision grew red and distorted. Was that Frillsand #G’s toxic presence that kept her from being with the children she had

once lived with? He was too weak to speak to her. They both watched the group from a distance for a bit, but she eventually vanished into thin air without speaking a word.

Academy City's Greatest Taboo was back in her control and she had chosen to disappear without giving any kind of warning, so he guessed the Taboo had stopped expanding and would not alter the planet itself using the magnetosphere. In that sense, he knew she would never betray Drencher's spirit.

Maybe Operation Handcuffs had been a hellish incident, but that didn't mean the people caught up in it had no hope.

They had finally ended it for good.

He felt certain of it.

"Teacher."

Alice trotted over with a smile. The white fluffball on the back of her apron wiggled side to side and the arms sticking out of her short sleeves were thrust forward as she leaped at him.

"Hee hee. Good job."

"Was it really?"

"You are incredible, teacher. Well, you're hard to look at in your current state, but you did prove it was worth rejecting the girl's spell and struggling on your own."

...Maybe so.

Alice had the same gentle atmosphere as ever. He was too weak to get up when she leaped at him, so he was helpless to prevent her from nuzzling against him. Her frictionlessly smooth skin and high body heat stabbed sharply into his exhausted brain. He didn't even question where she had come from or what she had done in the

past. The storybook girl was harmless, but she carried too many mysteries.

He was badly hurt, he only had 49 yen left, his New Year's Tokyo survival life had reached true crisis levels, and he may not have gained much of anything from getting involved in all this, but he had ended Operation Handcuffs. Knowing something like that would never happen again was good enough for him.

And just as he sighed at that thought...

"Alice. Did you have fun?"

His shoulders jumped, but that was all. His head would not turn.

A bored girl's voice had come from behind him. He couldn't seem to bring her into view, like he had a crick in his neck and it wouldn't turn right.

He could tell something had been gently placed on his head. His reflection in a nearby puddle showed him wearing a thorny rose crown. One thought immediately leapt to mind.

(Is it poisoned!?)

After St. Germain, he had nothing but bad memories concerning *their* medicines and poisons.

Even if it was a magical spiritual item, he couldn't touch it when his right hand wouldn't move.

He recognized the voice slipping into his ears.

A sweet rosy scent hung in the air as the voice was gently sighed behind him.

"I didn't realize you were into the cute 'needs to be protected' type. Maybe I should have worked up some crocodile tears and slipped below your blanket."

“Anna...Sprengel?”

“Alice.”

She was through with him.

The villainess named Anna ignored paralyzed Kamijou and spoke to the other mysterious girl. Her tone was as casual as could be.

“You’ve been running around all night without any sleep, haven’t you? Isn’t it about time you went home?”

“Yes. You can’t tell the girl what to do, but she does like having someone to talk to.”

Alice was equally casual as she left Kamijou, but did she really know what this meant?

“Wait...”

Kamijou called out to her without thinking.

Alice Anotherbible had been a mystery from the beginning. She hadn’t been fazed by an artificial ghost like Frillsand #G, by Hanatsuyu Youen the Carrier, or by anyone else. She had used some kind of powerful magic called Live Something-or-Other, and he still didn’t understand what that had been about even after she explained it herself.

To be honest, she was so strange he had his doubts *she was really a magician.*

But...

“You aren’t like her.”

“Um? What do you mean?”

“You aren’t like Anna Sprengel!! It’s true you use a power I don’t understand and everything about you is a mystery, but you helped me. You saw everyone suffering from Handcuffs and you used your power to help them!”

“Alice.” The higher-level being sounded amused but exasperated. “Is that the kind of desire you played with this time?”

“No. He is the girl’s teacher, but he didn’t leave an opening for the girl *to have an adventure.*”

Alice tapped the back of her small hand against Kamijou’s chest.

“The girl saw it coming from the moment he refused to use Live Adventures in Wonderland. Ah ha ha. Because the better the person, the less they need the girl.”

“My, my. And yet *none of them* were able to resist the temptation.”

“Right? Teacher is incredible☆”

Alice’s smile looked sad but somehow proud as well.

Kamijou heard a rustling of cloth from outside his range of vision. Anna Sprengel was probably slowly standing up.

In order to leave.

While holding the hand of that girl who existed beyond good and evil – or maybe was too young to even know the difference.

To take her back into a different sort of darkness from Handcuffs.

“Stop...Anna.”

“Why should I? I received that human’s message in LA, so I need to prepare for our game. And you were the one who rejected Alice. You refused to flee into her storybook world and you put a stop to her *adventure.*”

“She saved me. No, not just me – everyone involved in Handcuffs. She made it a lot more complicated, but the 29th never would have made it to this point without her!”

He couldn’t move a finger, but he heard Anna Sprengel’s tone shift slightly.

There was now a subtle hint of regret.

“Maybe I should have done the same from the beginning.”

“?”

Her tone shifted again, this time to that of a girl plotting some new mischief.

Like she was trying to shake something off.

“And just so you know, *I do think this is in your best interest.*”

He wasn’t sure what she meant.

Could his outstretched hand not reach those girls unless he figured this out?

Finally, Alice bent over.

She placed herself on the seated boy’s eye level and smiled gently. It was a strangely mature smile that did not at all match her storybook dress or her animal ear curls.

“Farewell, teacher. It would be best if you stayed here.”

The lips he felt on his cheek were probably meant as a way of saying goodbye.

A faint scent of tea lingered afterwards.

She practically hopped away and then the other girl moved into view. Miss Sprengel in her baggy dress held Alice's hand and walked into the shadows.

"This...isn't over," said Kamijou Touma, still unable to move. His voice grew to a shout. "I won't stay here!! Listen, Alice. If you're going to descend into the darkness like everyone in Handcuffs did, then I will pull you back out again. I'll do it whether you want it or not!! I don't care what anyone says or even what you think – nothing will change the fact that Alice Anotherbible saved us all!!!"

There was no strength in his voice, but the helpless boy still managed to shout the words, like he was carving them into his heart.

"I don't care if you can use some special magic or if you're some unique being! I got to know you and that's a good enough reason to pull you out from the darkness!! So listen, Alice. If you insist that's the only place for you, then I swear I'll destroy that illusion!!!!!"

A cruise ship floated in a flooded stadium located in the middle of a deep, deep rainforest cut off from time and civilization. The giant yellow duck floating in the gathered water made it all look like some kind of joke.

Aradia, goddess of all witches, smiled and greeted the storybook girl with a jangle of pure gold.

"Welcome back, Alice."

"Hi☆"

The girl wiggled the fluffball on the back of her apron as she kicked off the water's surface and landed on the polished deck. Were the short sleeves actually a good match for the jungle, or were they an even worse mismatch because it left her bare skin exposed to so many natural dangers?

“You weren’t lonely with the girl gone?”

“No, no.”

The goddess of all witches did not bother pointing out that it was Alice who had disappeared without telling them. This happened all the time. Aradia exchanged a glance with Anna and then shrugged.

Alice walked through the disconcerting cruise ship with great familiarity and made her way to the circular colosseum. She plopped down in the giant throne sitting in the center. It was far too big for her, so she couldn’t bend her legs when sitting against the back. Her legs stuck straight out as she kicked them despite wearing a skirt.

Her high body temperature and the way the light reflected off her blonde hair and pale skin seemed to change the very atmosphere of the place.

This was how things usually looked here.

Sensing Alice’s return, several people appeared in the tiered stands – good, old Mary, H. T. Trismegistus, and more. Their physical location had them looking down toward Alice, but the reality was the opposite. They had hurried to visit their returned master because they knew what happened if they displeased her even slightly. They all had active imaginations and they could not ignore her even on this ship where their individual freedoms were guaranteed.

The only others at the center of the colosseum were Aradia, who was closest to Alice, and Anna Sprengel, who was a newcomer and thus did not properly recognize the threat.

Aradia, who wore a purple bikini-like dancer’s outfit and a wimple that fell to her ankles like a cape, spoke gently to her master in the throne.

“Did you have fun?”

“Yeah!”

“If you are feeling refreshed, how about you get to work now, Alice?”

“Hmm?”

Alice placed a finger on her chin and stared into the distance.

Aradia did not let her smile crack. She knew how capricious the storybook girl was. That was why she had not mentioned anything about Alice’s sudden disappearance or her return with Anna.

If Alice said she wanted a toy, they would get it for her. If Alice sulked that she was bored, they would find some way to entertain her.

Even if that toy or entertainment was a living human being.

Alice would go on adventures where she linked together laws and definitions to find new meaning there while she innocently used her Live Adventures in Wonderland that affected the entire world, so all of their efforts here were a small price to pay if it let them work that girl into their own plans.

But.

“No, the girl isn’t doing that. Teacher wouldn’t like that messy stuff.”

She made it sound like an offhand thought, but it was devastating for Aradia and the other powerful magicians who were trying to accomplish something using the special spell that only Alice could use (which was the opposite of how magic was supposed to work).

Alice bounced her little butt up and down on the throne’s cushion.

“Hm, it just doesn’t feel right. Teacher’s lap is the best seat there is.”

“He isn’t my type, but I must warn you that acquiring him will not be easy.”

“That’s what makes it so fun.”

“Now that I understand.”

Everyone else had been shocked into silence, but one person continued smiling and speaking with Alice.

Anna Sprengel peered into Alice Anotherbible’s face and asked a question.

“So what kind of *adventure* do you want to go on next, Alice?”

“The girl hasn’t decided.”

“Then think of it this way: what would *he* want to do with the world?”

“Hee hee. You don’t know that any more than the girl, Anna Sprengel.”

For a moment, Aradia felt left behind by the flow of time.

But a few seconds later, her blood boiled and rushed to her head.

“A-”

But just as she started to say something, she heard a swishing sound.

At some point, a flamingo bat and a few hedgehog balls had emerged from below the storybook girl’s apron. Her psychological defense had activated.

This was actually protecting Aradia from Alice herself doing something *without thinking*.

But push this any further and Aradia would no longer be protected and the executioner or *what lay beyond* would emerge.

If you stopped blinking and paid careful attention, you would have noticed a tingling more ominous than static electricity filling the air around bored-looking Alice. Needless to say, the real threat was not the bat, the balls, or the executioner – it was young Alice herself.

“...”

So Aradia had no choice but to forcibly alter what she was about to say with her mouth forming an “A” sound.

She could only think of one other person to address instead. Ideally, this newcomer would turn out to be a useful pawn. But if she did try to start some kind of rebellion, Aradia and the other legendary individuals would either take her down as a group or have capricious Alice eliminate her instantaneously after she displeased the girl.

But what was this?

Did this answer the mystery of how Alice had gained an interest in Academy City!?

“Anna Sprengel!! Did you delve far deeper *before we even invited you here!*?”

The red girl tried to suppress her laughter.

But she failed. Miss Sprengel started shaking and then doubled over, holding her sides.

“Ha ha. Ah ha ha!! Didn’t I tell you *before* to ask Alice? My, my, my. It is true I told bored Alice the story of a certain boy, but I don’t see how you can resent me for that. Also, killing me won’t do a thing to change Alice’s nature now. She is already focused on a different toy. Pwa ha ha!!”

“Only because you pushed her in that direction!! Do you have any idea what you have done!?”

Aradia's rational anger only made Anna wrap her arms around herself and tremble in joy. As if to say she had only bowed to this wannabe elite earlier so that she could see the look on her face now.

Alice was not the only person who let her current mood guide her and destroyed everything around her.

This other innocent girl, who had readily thrown out R&C Occultics once she was done with it, parted her own smiling lips.

"Whining isn't going to change what has already happened. Hee hee. I am not Alice's *teacher*. Her obsession is with someone else."

Alice held a small hand to her mouth and yawned.

Like she had no interest at all in the argument being held over her head.

The way she kicked her little legs in the oversized throne made her look like cuteness incarnate. But no one here could make her obey with any kind of external force. Aradia herself had explained that to Anna: You are free to do what you want here, but do not upset Alice.

They had been bound by their own one and only absolute rule.

But after spending so much on this and making so much progress, they were not going to just let this happen either.

"Kamijou Touma."

The goddess of all witches, who ruled the moon and the night, clenched her teeth and rapidly reworked her plan.

If she lost Alice's interest here, it could bring a permanent end to that plan.

So she knew the first problem she had to deal with.

"Kamijou Touma!!"

Afterword

If you picked them up one at a time, welcome back. If you bought them all at once...um, how many volumes is the entire series by this point?

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This one was mostly an Operation Handcuffs rematch, but I also let the mysterious storybook girl Alice Anotherbible go nuts as a guest heroine. She is a lovely girl with a bright smile, but I think you should have sensed a scarier side of her as well.

Alice and Anna are both selfish girls who put themselves first, but while Anna and the Handcuffs villains are dangerous people with a short temper and a penchant for causing explosions, Alice is always smiling and seems more stable. The problem is no one can predict what will happen once she finally does explode with anger. They do say, after all, that even the Buddha will eventually run out of patience, but maybe someone like her isn't who they had in mind with that saying. ...Or is she more like a gentle mother of indeterminate age?

What is the difference between Kamijou Touma and Hamazura Shiage?

This question was referenced a bit in GT3 and 4, but the answer is found here in GT5. Hamazura rushed into battle without trying to determine what was causing it all and did not consider the possibility of converting that evil power into something good, so *he placed himself on his opponent's field* and couldn't stop the tragedy. But things would have been different if he had been dragged into it all on

his own, without the Coin of Nicholas's interference. Protecting what matters to you does not always make things better. And sadly enough, increasing your position only on the side of good does not always give you more options to work with.

I think the most prominent difference between before (GT3) and after (GT5) was Hanatsuyu Youen. Her actions were easier to predict when she was separated from Kaai, who is more violent and loves being self-destructive, but Kamijou still compromised with her quite a bit. With Kaai in GT3 and Kamijou in GT5, Youen proved to be easily influenced by anyone who makes a real attempt. I hope you saw just how cute that little villain is.

Everyone has a good and a bad side, so I decided to show a different side of Anti-Skill this time. I was wondering how they would face the villains after having their headquarters destroyed in Handcuffs. Before, I had mostly shown rogue units motivated by an extremist form of good, so this time I went the other way and introduced an Anti-Skill officer who compromises with the darkness and makes use of the villains. Being flexible and avoiding direct conflicts can increase your options. That might sound nice, but I hope you saw just how sinister an adult organization like that can be. It might be fun to consider what the real difference between Kamijou and Tessou is.

And whether they were good or bad, it was the ghosts who never strayed from their convictions. Kihara Hasuu was a scientist in GT3, so it seems ironic to me that he failed to die within the bonds of the science side, returned as a ghost, and was ultimately finished off by an angel. Unlike the other villains, a benevolent salvation would have the opposite effect on him. I feel like you wouldn't have anything left if you removed his toxic side.

On the other hand, Frillsand #G had a fairly ominous scene at the end of GT3, but I think it was obvious whether she would choose to focus on her revenge or choose to save the children that Drencher had risked his life to protect. I think it's important to remember that she was created as a childcare ghost first and the ability to fight

external enemies was only an extension of that. None of it was revealed in detail within the story, but that kind ghost had gathered all the tools needed to take revenge on those involved in Handcuffs but threw them all out so she could instead oppose the great malice threatening those small lives. I hope she made you realize that Hamazura and Sodate weren't the only ones who had inherited Drencher Kihara Repatri's spirit.

I give my thanks to my illustrators Haimura-san and Itou Tateki-san and my editors Miki-san, Anan-san, Nakajima-san, and Hamamura-san. This was a GT3 rematch, but I imagine that made it difficult to design the new enemies so they could still stand out. Thank you for going along with my ridiculous demands yet again.

And I give my thanks to the readers. Did you find the Handcuffs villains or Alice Anotherbible more frightening? I hope you also had some thoughts about the smaller changes to the world, like the collapse of R&C Occultics and Accelerator beginning his new prison life.

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.

I don't think there's anything cuter than a lonely villain girl pouting her lips.

-Kamachi Kazuma

Ending

Academy City's nights were a familiar home to that human, but just like a certain boy had said, it was no longer his kingdom.

A woman in a beige habit with blonde hair roughly cut to shoulder length waited in one corner of District 7. Technically speaking, she was a great demon whose body had been taken over by Aleister Crowley.

She(?) was crouched in an unnaturally open space within the closely-packed skyscrapers.

A golden retriever walked up to her and she spoke without even glancing his way.

“Are you quite done now?”

“How condescending. You had your own objective to carry out, didn’t you? And this trouble on the 29th helped hide what you were up to.”

“Fair enough.”

It had been very convenient that the center of the commotion had moved from District 7 to District 10. Otherwise, someone might have noticed that Aleister was up to something.

Maybe it would have been the prisoners running around the city’s night, maybe it would have been the artificial demon flying around unseen, and maybe it would have been the city’s new ruler watching it all from afar.

He had prepared a countermeasure for the Underline hidden in the air, but it turned out the new ruler had shut the system down.

“That was a close one,” said the dog.

“What was?”

“When you offered to take over for Kamijou Touma. Aleister, *that one was entirely selfless, wasn’t it?* None of it would have functioned as a diversion if you had gone to District 10 to solve it yourself. This could have all ended in failure then.”

“...”

Still crouching, Aleister fell silent.

And he finally asked a question.

“Do you think it is wrong to reach out a helping hand to someone being manipulated, even if it means your own defeat or failure?”

“Tactically speaking, it would definitely be wrong. Then again, it’s the choices like this that make me want to help you.”

Aleister Crowley’s life had been a series of failures and mistakes.

No matter how carefully he put together a plan or strategy, the smallest thing would cause it all to fall apart. It didn’t matter how much time and effort he put into it. Time and again, this had been proven to him.

So to be blunt, he had been caught completely off guard when he had lost the Windowless Building in his fight against Great Demon Coronzon and when he had been forced to battle Westcott, Mathers, and other old members of the Golden cabal in London. That was why he had barely had a countermeasure in place for those things.

But he did have a few things in mind.

He had left some trump cards behind since they hadn't fit the situation, but they looked like they would be useful in a different way now.

The beige habit woman held a tablet attached to another device with a cable. The Windowless Building was gone, but its foundation remained in Academy City's ground. The foundation's power supply and communications network had been shut down, but reacquiring access to the original network was still possible if you repaired the damaged and concealed portions.

He had needed to run a search.

This was not limited to Academy City. He searched through the vast ocean of data covering the entire world known as the science side.

Of course, it was the magic side that would understand the true value of what he sought.

So it had been easy to imagine it would be hidden on the science side where it could go unnoticed.

Aleister grinned.

"Found it."

"Good grief. My goal is the elimination all forms of magic, so don't expect me to throw my hands in the air and rejoice this."

"Now there's an amusing mental image. Even more amusing since this country calls that the 'penis' pose."

"I'll bite you?"

"Why the anger? English alone has over 100 words for that body part and who knows how high the number goes if you count every language on the planet. Don't act like you're some refined intellectual, scientist. Whether they admit it or not, everyone loves dick. The dick is the most romantic body part."

The human who had gone down in history as a world-class pervert was entirely serious, so the golden retriever really did attack the habit woman. The last line was apparently especially unforgivable.

“Ow, ow, ow!! So the queen of evil is brought down by the dog who is both her friend and an old man? How interesting. Heh, is this my new normal? Well done showing me even I have more to experience, Kihara Noukan.”

“Grr! We do not have time for this. We do not belong in Academy City anymore, so we need to leave.”

“I am aware of that. Now that I have this, I have no more business here.”

Aleister Crowley looked fairly beaten up after the large dog bit him on the arm and dragged him along the ground, but he didn’t bother getting up and stared up into the night sky. Then he brought the tablet’s thin screen up in front of his eyes.

The action gave enough of a tug for the taut cable to pop out.

A new message had appeared on the screen.

A pin had been placed on the map. The habit woman kissed that part of the screen.

It indicated a location where a corpse had been preserved for more than a century now.

“Hello, Anna Kingsford. This magician was Westcott and Mathers’s teacher and *that woman* is rumored to have been based on her. Now, I think it’s about time I treated myself to a counterattack.”