

西尾
維新

アキラカミ

新本格ホラー小説
死神

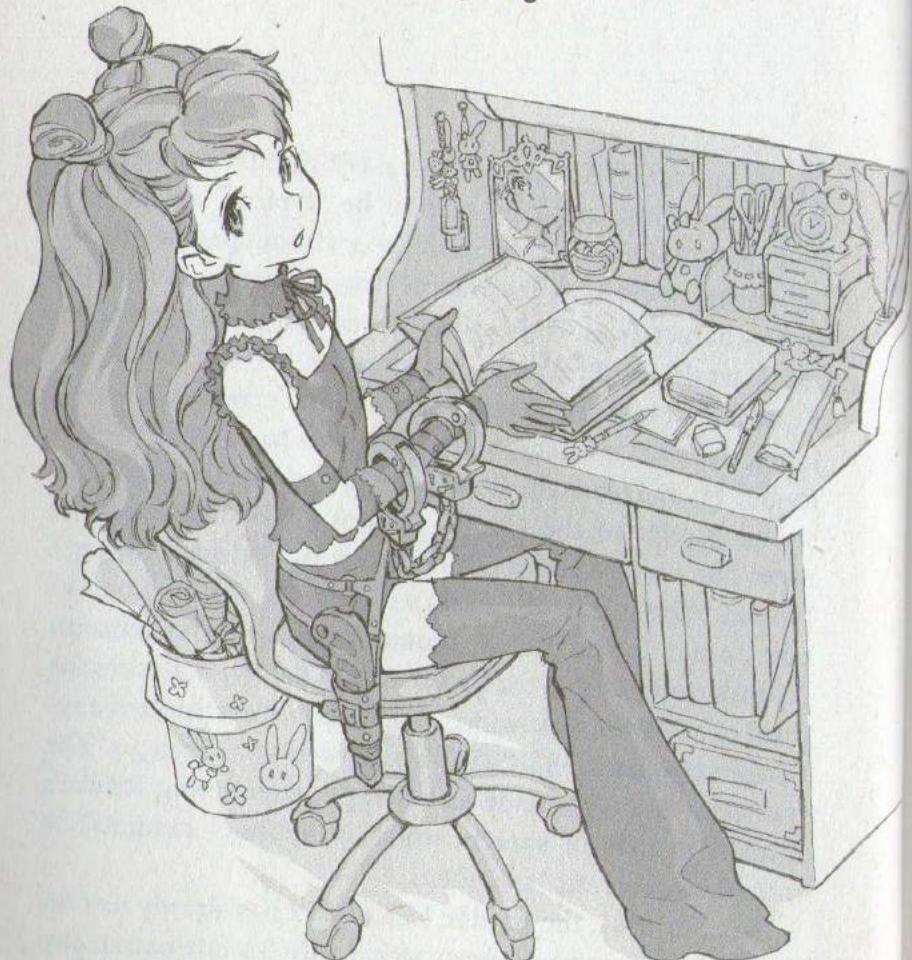
講談社
NOVELS

...Why is there magic?

...Why transform?

...Why become an adult?

...Why a girl?



2002, beginning his seminal *Zaregoto* series, and *Bakemonogatari* was published under Kodansha's popular Kodansha BOX imprint. In 2007 came the magnificent conclusion to his twelve-month consecutive serial novel, *Katanagatari*—for which NISIOISIN wrote one novel a month for an entire year—also for Kodansha BOX. In addition to *xxxHOLiC*, NISIOISIN tackled another major manga franchise with *Death Note Another Note: The Los Angeles BB Murder Cases*, based on Tsugumi Ohba and Takeshi Obata's blockbuster series. *Zaregoto, Book One: The Kubikiri Cycle* was published in the United States by Del Rey Manga in 2008.

Kinu Nishimura is an illustrator who has also worked as a graphic designer for Capcom on such projects as the *Street Fighter* game series.



I happened to witness what might have been an incident, or might have been an accident, but either way was clearly a truth, exactly one week ago, Sunday last week. Events had brought me far from my place of residence in the city of Kawano, in Saga Prefecture, taking me across prefectural lines into Fukuoka Prefecture, the city of Hakata, the town of Kizuna. There are a number of ways in which I could describe the business that brought me there, but they all boil down to “meeting someone,” and looked at from a different perspective, you could even claim I had come with no clear purpose at all. Either way it was not inevitable that I should arrive at the spot where I witnessed this truth; I believe my being there was pure coincidence. Because of things like this, I cannot bring myself to hate coincidence. Events occurred while I was standing on subway platform number 1 in the New Kizuna Station, waiting for the train that would take me

back into Hakata proper. The time was definitely 6:32 P.M. I can say so with confidence because that was the moment at which the train I had intended to board was pulling into the station. All Japanese trains, private or government-operated, are invariably punctual. Which means it was 6:32. The customary announcement, "Train approaching platform 1. Please remain behind the yellow lines," echoed through the station, and it happened a few seconds later. Four people lined up in front of me, preparing to board the train. I did not know any of them, but I know their names now: Kagawa Sakiro, Yana Harusame, Manabe Saki, and Tainaka Umi. With perfect timing, just as the front of the train was about to pass us, they all flung themselves out in front of it. I remember that moment happening in slow motion—whether the result of chemicals in my brain or simply a trick of the mind. I saw them seemingly sucked toward it, struggling against one another to be the first to fall. I saw the train's driver gaping as if he were witnessing the destruction of earth and heaven—but only for an instant, a mere instant.

A moment later, the speed of my vision returned to normal—and what happened afterward need not be explained to anyone, assuming blood still flows to their brain. They were pulped, their bits flung together till it was impossible to tell which belonged to which. Trains have been designed for the simple function of moving quickly along tracks, and what might occur if they happened to strike a human being has never really been on their designers' minds. The four victims and I were lined up near the front end of the platform, but it made little difference. We were facing a massive chunk of iron, a veritable symbol of destructive force. Even if we had been at the far end of the platform, near the front doors of the train, the best they could have hoped for was that their bodies might have remained recognizably human. At pres-

ent, this is the extent of the truth as I know it; and if that is all there is to it, then I do not see a problem. Certainly, because of this truth the train was delayed a wasteful thirty minutes, but I am not so petty as to be infuriated by such trivialities. Anger is a waste of energy, and I make use of it only if there is something to be gained in the process. But there were a number of factors to this truth that suggest it would not remain a simple truth, and I viewed this as problematic. The first problem is an obvious one—the fact that four people chose to jump simultaneously. If one person had chosen to dive in front of a train, I would understand. If a single person had tripped and fallen onto the tracks, that would have been even easier. Suicide or accident, such incidents have become a ceaseless ritual, occurring constantly in all parts of the country, on every day of the year. But for four people to engage in that ritual together—that was different. It was unthinkable that they had chosen to do so together by chance, coincidentally—and the idea of it being a planned suicide was also dubious. If they had been family members or close friends, group suicide might have been an option, but from what I had observed standing behind them, there was no connection among the four: Each of them was a complete stranger to the other three.

I am rather confident of my ability to observe human behavior. (Bring anyone you like to me, and no matter who they are, I will provide you with an itemized list of a hundred facts about them—obviously, not including any details of their appearance, just facts about their inner nature.) And the newspapers after the incident verified that there was no connection among them, so that can now be put down as an objective fact. In other words, if the first problem was the simultaneous nature of it, the second was the lack of connection among them. I doubt there are many so foolish as to

have not worked out the third problem—namely, that it was absolutely impossible. For four strangers to fall onto the tracks simultaneously—to make that situation occur, the only reasonable method would be for the person standing immediately behind them to push them off the platform. Indeed, the police and the news media are actively looking for the “culprit” behind this “case”—sadly, a futile effort. For the simple reason that the person standing behind the four victims was me; and I had not pushed them. I would never do anything like push four complete strangers onto the train tracks, never do anything that failed to provide some future benefit. But no matter what I say, without your even needing to bring up the Cretan paradox, mere words on my part are hardly convincing. More convincing than any exhortation on my part is the simple fact that it was physically impossible for me to have pushed the four of them off the platform. I might have been able to push one, assuming that one was a frail woman . . . but I, Kugi Kizutaka, was, at the time, four feet five inches tall, weighed seventy-three pounds, and was ten years old. I had no means at my disposal capable of forcibly moving four adults at once. Regardless of that, if I had stuck around, I would undoubtedly have been suspected, but I took advantage of my size to slip away during the commotion. So. Yes. The fact that it was impossible for me to have been the culprit in their deaths led to one conclusion: It was impossible. Absolutely impossible. The sum total of these three problems—simultaneousness, lack of connection, and impossibility—made it clear that this problem was a problem for me.

As I said before, I went to Fukuoka for no better reason than to meet someone, so my encounter with this truth could be viewed as an unexpected accident, but as far as I was concerned, an accident like this was something to be met

with open arms. I will happily state once more that I cannot bring myself to dislike coincidence. My first thought was to go to see Risuka directly, that very evening, but since the deaths of four people would lead to a rather thorough police investigation, I decided to allow a week for things to settle down and spent the time dealing with other matters. If the situation resolved itself in some insipid fashion in that time, then I hardly need dirty my hands with it. But these thoughts were nothing more than a pretense; inwardly I was convinced. Conviction is a very modest way of describing it for someone with my personality, but in truth, a conviction is what it was. I was convinced that the four I had seen sucked toward the tracks had not been victims . . . but sacrifices.

“Hey, Risuka. I came to love you.”

She did not respond.

“I mean, came to see you.”

I had not expected Risuka to demonstrate any high-level interactive abilities such as a proper comeback, but the fact that she failed to show any reaction at all was in itself a rather dejecting moment, and one that left me awkwardly explaining my own bad joke. I picked up a cushion (bat-shaped) lying in the corner and sat down on it without bothering to get permission. Risuka was sitting at her desk, her right hand moving steadily. Writing something. I stood up again and stood behind her, peering over her shoulder at the desk. A thick hardcover book lay open on her left and a college-ruled notebook on her right. They call it “college-ruled,” but actual college students almost never use them. She appeared to be copying everything from her left to her right.

Which meant the book on her left must be one she had recently acquired or had borrowed from some secret library—a book of magic. Risuka believed that copying grimoires was both fun and productive. The shelf to one side was packed

with books on all kinds of magic, the only notable feature of her otherwise rather drab room. *De vermis mysteriis*, *Liber-damnatus*, *Cultes des goules*, *De masticatione mortuorum in tumulis*, *Celaeno Fragments*, *Turba philosophorum*, *Kryptographik*, *The Book of Thoth*, *Malleus maleficarum*, *Dhol Chants*, *Image du monde*, *Necronomicon*—she had all the major works (although most of them were handwritten copies). The only way she could get her hands on rare books was to copy them out herself. In that sense, what Risuka was doing was actually collecting the contents of grimoires, and copying them out was simply a means to that end. Collecting the originals would be quite expensive and take up a lot of space, so this was more practical, and the fact that she was writing them out all translated into Japanese was, apparently, perfectly normal for anyone from the Kingdom of Magic.

"So . . . Yikes! You scared me."

Risuka had suddenly turned toward me and screamed.
"I was much more scared! Eh? Why suddenly is Kizutaka here?"

"Well, unlike you, I can't actually use any magic, you see. So I went through the door of the coffee shop downstairs, ignoring the Closed sign on the door; said hello to Chamberlain, who was cleaning; had him open the door behind the counter; climbed up the stairs; walked down the hall; knocked politely on your door; knocked again when you didn't answer; and when you still didn't answer, I opened the door and came inside."

"Heh . . . How exhaustingly orderly of you," she said, nodding, as if impressed. "Welcome. Anywhere is fine to sit. Would you like something to drink?"

"Nah, I'm not that thirsty. It isn't that hot yet. And that can be a dangerous question, coming from a girl who lives in a coffee shop."

"I would not try to take money from a child."

"What are you copying?"

"Mm? Oh, the title . . . I do not know. I am investigating presently. Rarity is its one merit; it is not a book of much importance."

"Hunh . . . Always looks like such a lot of work. If you could figure out a way to make your magic work with a copier instead of doing it by hand, you'd save a lot of effort."

"I would not do so, even if I could," Risuka said crisply.
"The fun of this is in the copying itself."

"The process itself provides enjoyment? That is a handy system. Ideal."

"Is not the same for Kizutaka?"

"Mm?"

"Enjoyment comes with process?" she asked, assured.

I shook my head. "Not for me. The process is never more than a means to an end," I said. The process was never more than a means to an end. I had rarely spoken truer words.



I discovered the existence of Mizukura Risuka last April, immediately after entering the fourth grade. To be strictly accurate, I had heard a year before about a transfer student in the class next door who refused to come to school, and I knew that this student was named Mizukura Risuka. I had naturally paid sufficient attention to events in other classes. But I did not discover the true nature of the existence known as Mizukura Risuka, did not discover that she was a witch from the Kingdom of Magic beyond the Gate, until our classes were changed and Risuka's name ended up on the same attendance sheet as mine.

Of course, whether she was in my class or not, she refused to come to school at all, and I did not know what she looked

like. I could probably have found out if I had poked around, but when she was in the other class, I had not seen the point. But once she was in my class, and I was elected class representative for the fourth straight year and the seventh straight term, I did have a reason to make contact with her. In my capacity as class representative, I went to see a problem child. It made no difference to me if this Mizukura came to school or not, but if I were able to persuade her to attend school again all on my own, general opinion of me among the teachers and around the school would surely improve dramatically. As with all things, those without the capacity to evaluate accurately must be shown the light. I had no use for the adulation of those around me, but it did serve my purpose to demonstrate as clearly as possible to the simpleminded that Kugi was the sort who got things done. For the moment, if they believed me to be useful and proceeded to use me, that was sufficient. In the course of being used, I would inevitably encounter all kinds of incidents, accidents, truths, and people. Obviously, most of this would be of no use to me whatsoever, incidents and accidents and truths and people of no value worth mentioning. But occasionally, very occasionally, I would encounter incidents and accidents and truths and, yes, people that would be useful to me in times to come. Therefore, I played the role of good student. I did not need to work very hard at appealing to my classmates; it was the teachers, the adults, who mattered. Both groups were leading purposeless, meandering, wasted lives, but adults could act on a far larger scale than children, and I was grudgingly appreciative of the amount of information they had available to them. Judging from the lessons they taught, they were not terribly intelligent, but the sheer amount of time they had been alive had not gone entirely to waste. Of course, the information provided by my classmates could not be entirely

dismissed, but this was simply a matter of percentages. All were wasting the bulk of their time, but my classmates had simply lived less and must therefore rank lower when it came time to prioritize.

However, given the nature of group education, it would hardly do to be isolated from my class, so no matter how useless and forgettable a human they appeared to be, I allowed them to engage my attention. So much energy expended on sucking up to morons. Ideally, it should be possible to extract some benefit from even the most average, pathetic excuse for a human (everyone you meet is your teacher, yada yada), but it seemed I had not yet reached that level of skill, and a great deal of my time at school was spent sowing seeds that would never be harvested. Being forced to lower myself to the level of those cretins bordered on insulting. No, it was insulting. In that sense, I was not playing the role of a good student; I literally was better than all of them. This year I had become class representative for the fifth straight year and the ninth straight term . . . for a reason. But my inner self and their perception of me did not overlap. At any rate, I first went to Risuka's house for no other reason than to earn myself some extra points. It was a two-story building, a coffee shop with a design rather like a windmill. An elderly gentleman stood behind the counter (I would later learn that he was Chamberlain, Risuka's manservant), and he led me to her room. I opened the door and laid eyes on Risuka for the first time. She was sitting at her desk, copying a grimoire.

(. . . Ah.)

Red hair—and red eyes. Red kneesocks, red dress. There was a thin belt around her waist, with a holster attached; the holster was long and thin, built to hold a utility knife. She was indoors but wore red gloves, and there was a pair of cold metallic handcuffs on her right wrist, the one thing on her

that was not red. Both cuffs were on the same wrist, and it functioned as a very strange bracelet. When Risuka turned toward me, the cuffs clanked together.

(Ah, ah, ah—)

The moment I laid eyes on her, I instantly abandoned all the plans I had to get the problem child to attend school again. All reasons I had to gain some insignificant amount of adulation had vanished in the blink of an eye. I had known the moment I laid eyes on her: Mizukura Risuka was no average human, she was a full-fledged, powerful witch. I had been developing my eyes my entire life, observing everyone from newborn babies to octogenarians, honing my observational skills to the point where they could instantly tell that Mizukura Risuka was not just anyone. The moment Chamberlain left the room, I looked Risuka right in the eye. True sincerity means looking directly at your opponent, no matter the situation. Risuka admitted the truth with a speed that took even me by surprise. Not only admitted it but explained that she had been born in Nagasaki Prefecture, the Kingdom of Magic, and not only that, but she was from Moriyashiki, a city of magic with a reputation every bit as impressive as the kingdom's capital.

"You just met me. . . . Should you really be telling me all that?"

"Is fine. I was never trying to hide. And if Kizutaka needs eliminating, I have magic. It will do."

"Eliminating?"

"Exterminating," she said calmly, and pulled the utility knife out of her holster, running the thin blade in and out, in and out.

Schk schk schk.

I was even more sure of it now. This . . . this girl, out of the vast numbers of people I had met, out of all creation,

from the lowest riffraff to the strangest spirits, she outranked them all—the most useful pawn there was.



My relationship with Risuka has continued to the present day. When we advanced to the fifth grade, we once again found ourselves in different classes, but since Risuka never came to school in the first place, that made no difference. Our time together was always outside the school and involved my heading to the coffee shop in my free time to talk to Risuka—usually. Risuka was often not at home. Not coming to school hardly left her a shut-in; she had moved to Saga with a clear purpose in mind, and when she was not copying grimoires, she was busy with that. She had enrolled in an elementary school for no other reason than that she was legally required to do so but did not attend classes on the grounds that she did not need them. Direct and clear. I have nothing against the direct and clear. On the pretext of helping with Risuka's goals—obviously, as far as the school was concerned, I was still doing my level best to open the heart of a problematic truant—I began regularly visiting her. Risuka accepted me, without any signs of reluctance. I would imagine she figured a guide to the unfamiliar outside world, a human ally, might come in handy. In other words, she viewed me as an effective pawn. My effectiveness is not simply my conceit; in actual fact, her effectiveness in pursuit of her goal was far greater the year after she met me than it had been the year before she met me. To Risuka, I was a useful human—a useful cooperator. I, however, was not deranged enough to help out a witch on a volunteer basis. I wanted that witch, Mizukura Risuka, as a pawn of my own. We were both each other's pawns, a system found in all walks of life, all across the world, and which I had no objections to. A perfect con-

fluence of interest. The only problem was which of us was actually right. This was not as simple a problem as it might appear. When I first met Risuka, I instantly knew she would be a useful pawn, but I was half wrong.

Risuka was a witch, as I thought, and one with a very impressive résumé: As young as she was, she already had a Second Grade Magic Technician's license. However, her particular field of magic was not one that held much meaning for me. Not only was it meaningless, but it was a little bit beyond me. So much beyond me that I could not figure out what to do about it. Mizukura Risuka was a pawn that I was not yet able to handle properly. But I was not about to give her up for such a defeatist reason. She was the first witch I had ever met. Between Saga and Nagasaki was the Gate, which pierced the heavens . . . and you could legally pass through it whenever you liked, with the proper papers, but witches and wizards were generally very standoffish and rarely came to our side of the Gate. Even if they did, they would normally hide their identity—just as Risuka had disguised the fact that she was from Nagasaki when she enrolled in school. As a result of this, it was virtually impossible for an ordinary, powerless human to meet a witch. It seemed unlikely I would ever be as fortunate as I had been when I guessed that Risuka was a witch. (I might be a skilled observer, but objectively speaking, our meeting had been pure luck.) Risuka was far too valuable a pawn to abandon simply because I could not handle her. Her value was itself a problem—or perhaps I should say her value was the only problem. But even if I could not handle her now, it was possible I would be able to use her freely in the future, and even a pawn I could not handle had its uses.

"Then, Kizutaka, today's theme is what business?"
"I think I might be able to help you out."

"Oh?" Risuka said, pulling the utility knife out of the holster in her belt. *Schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk schk* she slid it in and out, in and out. This was a habit of hers, and that utility knife was, in a manner of speaking, Risuka's magic wand. "Curious. Tell me more."

"A week ago, quite by coincidence, I was witness to a very strange incident. Common sense failed to explain it, so I thought I should bring it to you. There is a chance it will coincide with your goals."

"Oh! Most grateful to Kizutaka."

As anyone who heard her talk would notice instantly, Risuka's manner of speaking was a little unnatural. The way she pronounced things was slightly odd: The accent she put on my name made it impossible to guess what the kanji might be, as if the vowels were coming from Latin instead of Japanese. Risuka was not yet very fluent in what we called Japanese. Language was not my best subject, but even so, her vocabulary was far worse than mine, and it seemed she had not quite managed to wrap her head around the concept of particles. She was much worse when I first met her. Obviously, in Nagasaki, they also speak Japanese . . . the language of Yamato, but they had spent so long in seclusion behind the Gate that the respective grammars had diverged to the point where the language they spoke seemed more like an exotic foreign language than one spoken within our own country. (As much a part of our country as the Kingdom of Magic could really be said to be.) So, when Risuka attempted to speak Japanese with me, her meaning was rarely lost, but it did tend to come across like a bad translation from the German (possibly because of her tendency to emphasize proper nouns). Just now, where she should have said, "I'm grateful to you," she said, "Most grateful to Kizutaka," as if making a point of all the people not me that she was not grateful to.

Other examples would be trying to say "Lying leads to stealing" and having it come out "Stealing comes from lying," or "Someone is looking at us, but I don't know who or where" becoming "What I do not know is who is looking at us from where."

With short sentences like these, it was easy enough to reconstruct her meaning, but when she tried to express a longer, more complicated idea, I had to listen very, very carefully if I wanted to understand her correctly. She was getting better. A year spent talking to me had helped. Obviously, as far as Risuka was concerned, our language was probably the one that was strange and hard to follow, but when in Rome, do as the Romans do, so Risuka was trying hard to talk like us. Chamberlain, on the other hand, spoke Japanese perfectly, even though he looked like a Westerner.

"Well? The story you have brought me is what kind of tale to you?"

"Last Sunday, at 6:32, in Hakata's New Kizuna Station, four people all jumped onto the tracks together. They were hit by the train and their bodies shredded. You heard about it?"

"Mm . . .," Risuka said, pulling out the big bottom drawer of her desk and taking out a massive file. The file said "June 1st–June 15th" on it. It was a collection of newspaper articles. Risuka flipped through the pages, the handcuffs on her wrist clanking. "Oh, that would be this, yes? I remember, I remember. Um, Kagawa Sakiro, Yana Harusame, Manabe Saki, and Tainaka Umi, yes. A high school student, a businessman, a housewife, and a housekeeper—sadly, pictures of them I have none."

"I remember what they look like. I was standing right behind them."

"Oh? That is coincidence."

"I don't need to tell you what this means, do I, Risuka? I think you know that I am not the kind of person who would shove four strangers off a subway platform without good reason. Which makes this truth . . . extremely mysterious."

". . . Mysterious, mm?" Risuka said, nodding gravely. There was not likely to be anything important in the paper, but she read the article carefully. "So Kizutaka believes magic in this case is involved."

"Right," I agreed. "We've seen mind-control magic before. . . . I also thought telekinetic powers were a possibility."

When Risuka sat in silence, not responding, I awkwardly added, "Not that I can do more than guess with magic. . . ." I wasn't completely clueless, but it was important to say things like this to her. I did not trust Risuka enough to show her all my cards, nor was I completely reliant on her.

". . . Hmm," she said after thinking things over. She put the file down and turned to me. "I have problem with all mysterious or inexplicable things blaming on magic. . . . But, Kizutaka, what we should be most frightened of is that mistake. Magic, in most cases, in normal life, it is not so useful. It makes no real difference if it is there or not. Witch hunts and inquisitions modern magic is not strong enough to fight."

"I know that without your telling me. That is why I waited a week. If they figured out some logical explanation in a week, then I would have assumed magic was not involved." However hapless they might be, the police could be relied upon to do that much, through sheer numbers. But for a full week, all those hapless numbers had done was look for witnesses. "But now? I thought I should bring it to you. I can't be certain, but you can find out if it was magic or not, right?"

"Mm . . .," Risuka said, tidying up her desk. She put the notebook away in her desk, thinking. The handcuffs clanked. "Mind control and telekinesis are both high-level magic. And

high-level magicians do not kill people at random, inside the Gate or out. Unless there is some kind of... missing link among those four?"

"Probably not. From what I observed, there was nothing connecting them at all. Other than the fact that they all happened to be standing *there*."

"Mm. Well, if we imagine it was mind control, that magic is very complicated; I think it is not a pattern we find likely. Um, but... it does bother me. If Kizutaka thinks so..."

"Talking about it won't get us anywhere," I said, deciding to push things. "Proof is better than theories; if you have time, we could go to the scene and investigate. All we can do here is speculate."

"Time? The concept of time is problem that is immensely trivial where I am concerned," Risuka said, with a slightly twisted smile that did not seem to belong to her face. "... But, yes, if I see the scene, certainly, the problem becomes clear. New Kizuna Station... How long from here does it take?"

"Including train changes... two or three hours? Here's a map. And the train schedules." I had prepared these in advance (a simple matter of xeroxing the relevant documents) and handed them to Risuka. "You'll have to take care of any extra details."

"Okay. My hat?"

"Mm," I said, picking up the big red, pointy hat lying on the floor in front of the closet. While I did, Risuka took the utility knife and made a deep cut through the glove into her index finger. A small amount of red blood seeped out. She put the utility knife back in the holster, took the hat from me, and put it on. The hat was too big for her and came down over her eyes. She was always pushing it back. "Thank you."

"Have a good trip, Risuka."

"I hope to," she said, grinning. And Mizukura Risuka suddenly, with no warning, vanished into thin air. Literally vanished—she didn't move at all. No, her existence took a shortcut through time and space, leaving the chair where she had been sitting empty. I stood up from my cushion and sat down on her chair. I leaned against the backrest. I could still feel her warmth on it. I smiled faintly to myself—a very deliberate smile.

"I left the door open on purpose, to suggest she should try leaving through it. ... Oh well," I murmured. "Let us hope that this time, for once, we get a magician worth using."



Mizukura Risuka's magic was Destiny Interference; her pattern was Water, and her category was Time. Destiny Interference was a type of magic so rare that just having it qualified as a third-rank technique; so that alone should tell you how exceptional Risuka was. But despite this (because of this), I had decided Risuka was a bit beyond me—her magic could affect destiny only within her own body. If I break that down so anyone can understand it, she had the ability to control the time inside of her. For example, in this instance, she had omitted the time spent riding trains to New Kizuna Station in Hakata, Fukuoka. One might easily assume she had not jumped forward in time but had jumped sideways in space, but time and space being fundamentally the same is such a famous fact that even the most normal, unremarkable of my classmates were aware of it, and, of course, Risuka could omit time alone, without space having to be involved. For example, a moment ago, she had injured her finger with her beloved utility knife.

An injury that would take three days to heal, but Risuka could omit those three days. Destiny Interference—not a

phrase to be taken lightly. By omitting that time, Risuka was changing the future. From tiny things like not having to pay train fare to much more significant things. You could even say that Risuka's magic was the power to change the future. Those words alone suggested this was a magic I definitely wanted to have under my thumb, and when Risuka had first told me about it a year ago, and I had first seen it happen (now that I have seen how meaningless it is, a rather embarrassing memory), I was very excited indeed. But, sadly, it was a bit beyond me. Her magic affected the destiny only within her body. When she skipped time, her memories did not follow suit. (She might jump five hours into the future, but she would not have memories of those hours. Her memories and thoughts were the same as they had been five hours before.) If she started copying a magic book, as she often did, assumed it would take three hours, and fast-forwarded that much time . . . the magic book would remain uncopied (as Risuka put it, changing clothes might be a pain, but you still have to do it), which meant this magic was, in almost every case, completely useless to anyone but her. It was a little different from a simple teleportation ability. There was a method that made it possible to move through time and space with her, but omission or fast-forwarding, either one involved the passage of time, which meant that jumping two hours forward meant you had two hours less to live. If I were a simpleminded fool, that might not matter, but two hours taken away from me mean two hours less things for me to think, and that was a monumental waste of time I did not find remotely amusing. Also, at the moment, ten-year-old Mizukura Risuka was able to move only forward in time—on the basis that time was irreversible—so she could not gain back the time she had lost. And the time she could erase was (technically) limited to ten days. Ten

days at a time, but piled up on top of each other, you could easily chip your life away. . . .

"But Risuka will not die young," I whispered. "She is, after all, a bona fide witch."

The Red Witch of Time. She earned that nickname at the age of seven, in her homeland, the magical city of Moriyashiki. Even within the Kingdom of Magic, even by their standards, Risuka was a brilliant witch. Apparently. But Risuka's brilliance had little to do with her—it was all her father's doing. Yes, her father. Her father was himself Risuka's goal. Mizukura Risuka's purpose in life. You could put it as simply as "looking for her father."

At this point, my thoughts were interrupted. The phone on Risuka's desk rang. I knew who it was, so I answered.

"Hello? Kizutaka?"

"Yeah."

"Sorry. I must apologize. The mistake, it was mine. This *is* with magic involved. Sorry, I should not have lectured."

"Oh," I said, nodding. This was not exactly a surprise. "So, what now?"

"Mm . . . It is magic, but I do not think it is the work of a magician. Um . . . if that makes sense. Kizutaka, you should come here. It is easier to explain if you are here. This phone is in the station, but I will come and get you now."

"No need. I'll take the train. I don't want to waste any more of my life. And since we don't know what's going to happen after this, you shouldn't waste any of your magic. You must conserve your magic as I conserve my time. I had planned to go to that station today even if you did not agree to come, so I have the money ready. Mind waiting for me?"

"I am forever praising how Kizutaka is always prepared. Fine. Please tell Chamberlain I am here."

I hung up and went downstairs. The shop was open by

now but remained empty. Only Chamberlain, standing behind the counter. Honestly, if there were that many people deranged enough to pay two thousand yen for a cup of coffee, the city would be doomed. I had a child's tastes and did not like coffee. I was fine with canned coffee, but Chamberlain would not allow anyone to add milk and sugar. He had standards. I genuinely hoped that one day I would be able to enjoy his coffee—but had no idea if my relationship with Risuka would continue that long. If it did, then I would have had to grow to the point where I could fit everything about her in the palm of my hand . . . or else I would have lost my future completely. The latter option made me shudder. That would mean I had fallen to the same level as my thoughtless, hedonistic classmates and talentless teachers, like all the pathetic, failed, nonmagical humans out there. And there seemed little point in enjoying coffee once your life has failed. I would rather be drinking cyanide. I told Chamberlain, "Risuka went to Fukuoka. I'm headed there, too," putting things as simplistically as I could. He bowed low. "Look after her, Master Kugi." Risuka might be a bit too much for me, but this old man trusted me completely. It was not that hard to get adults to trust you. Especially old people. Chamberlain was also from Moriyashiki, the magical city, but could not use magic at all. He was a wizard with no magic—the meaning of which I was reserving judgment on. According to Risuka, making good coffee was his magic, but I had no intention of accepting that semantic obfuscation.

Either way, it seemed that Chamberlain genuinely could not use magic; not a smart hawk hiding his claws, so getting to the bottom of the issue was a relatively low priority as far as I was concerned. It hardly hurt to have a coffee shop owner among one's pawns. "Of course. I'll make sure she gets home today; don't worry. You can concentrate on work," I said, and

tried to leave the shop. But the automatic doors did not budge. The doors were triggered not by a sensor but by weight, and they would occasionally have trouble detecting me. The continued use of such an outmoded and flawed automatic door system was my least favorite thing about this coffee shop. I jumped as high as I could and slammed my full weight down on the mat. The doors opened, and at last I could leave. I began walking toward the nearest subway station, where I would board a train and begin my journey to Fukuoka.

"So it was magic . . . but not the work of a magician? Now that is hardly bad news for either of us." While Risuka would have skipped the entire journey, I spent it thinking things through carefully. "Those who were born magicians tend to be too problematic to make good pawns . . . but if someone becomes a magician later? They might have potential."

People from beyond the Gate, people born in Nagasaki Prefecture, wizards and witches . . . they were right next door to Saga Prefecture, where I lived, but as I said, it was like a foreign country, with a different culture and very little in common. Even with Risuka, there was something fundamentally off about our interaction that was yet another reason I found her hard to handle. I was exceptionally gifted at understanding other people's personalities, but where Risuka was concerned, I had to admit I would occasionally make mistakes. For example, in this case, four people had died—a truth that did not bother me in the slightest—but once, in a similar case, Risuka had said, "The dead people each had families, friends, lovers, enemies, teachers, students . . . and when they died, all those connections, they vanished. The killer broke all that, which I cannot forgive." Which might sound like cheap humanism, but when Risuka said it, it felt different, which bothered me. I agreed that even the most worthless of fools had a

right to live, but I did not think that opinion matched Risuka's. If all magicians had these odd disconnects, then that put me at a disadvantage. One of the reasons I continued working with Risuka even though I was not sure I could handle her was because being with her greatly increased my chances of meeting other magicians. Indeed, I had met several other magicians over the last year, but with no satisfactory results. Some of them had had more constructive magic than Risuka's, but unless the magician involved would make a good pawn, that meant little. Tools and humans were both evaluated on whether or not I could use them. In that sense, magicians were all more or less problematic. But . . . if there were someone who was not a congenital magician? Someone who had acquired the ability later in life? They had started as an ordinary human, and that might give me an angle. Of course, only comparatively . . . And the preference for a human with magic over a magician went for Risuka as well. If someone had learned magic late in life, that meant *someone* had taught them—and only the devil could do that.

"Thanks for waiting," I said, dismounting at New Kizuna Station, in Hakata, Fukuoka, for the first time in a week and moving to the first platform, where I found Risuka sitting on a bench, *schk schk schk schk schking* her utility knife and looking very bored. She pushed the hat back on her head and said, "I always have to wait," sounding a little annoyed. If her abilities had worked on her environment instead of herself, she would not have had to be so bored. She stood up, adjusting the hat again.

"So, Risuka, results?"

"The place where you were standing—which is also the place where the four 'sacrifices' jumped and died—is there, yes?" she said, pointing at a white line on the platform. "On the tracks there is a Magic Formula."

"A formula? Not a sigil?"

"Formula," Risuka said shortly.

I walked in the direction she had pointed and looked down at the tracks; naturally, I could see nothing. I would not be able to see either a Magic Sigil or a Formula without undergoing a certain procedure, a procedure for which I was not qualified.

"A Magic Formula . . . That means the killer was here when it happened. So there's a chance I might have seen them."

"Mm . . . yeah," Risuka said, coming over to me. The handcuffs on her right wrist clanked with each step she took, like a bell around a cat's neck. "I will let you see. Kizutaka, be moving aside."

As she spoke, she cut her finger with the utility knife and let a drop of blood fall onto the tracks. A moment later, the cut on her finger healed, leaving only the one in her glove. She had omitted the healing time. On the tracks, a complicated red pattern appeared, faint but clear. It was indeed a Magic Formula. It was not the first time I had seen one, but every time I did, I felt my head imploding from the sheer horrific complexity of the thing.

According to Risuka, humans who could not use magic, who had no resistance or immunity, had indeed gone crazy after spending too long staring at a Magic Formula or Sigil. The formula was visible only for a couple of seconds. I looked around the platform. It was the middle of the day, and a Sunday, but this was not a large city, and the station was relatively empty. Nobody seemed to be giving us suspicious looks. We must look just like a couple of kids and probably did not attract much attention. At least, not to fools unable to correctly evaluate their surroundings. It was exhausting to have to control such feeble minds. And I had a lot of that ahead of me.

"This Magic Formula is very low-level," Risuka said. "The very fact that they are using a Magic Formula for a spell this simple means the culprit is clearly not from Nagasaki. . . . Still . . ."

Shortly after we met, Risuka had explained that magic was a lot like math—in that it was a part of ordinary life, something anyone could do if they worked at it. As long as they had time, anyone could eventually master the techniques. As the name implies, a Magic Formula was just like a mathematical one, while a Magic Sigil is something much more complicated. A Magic Sigil is essentially a trap; the caster does not need to be in the vicinity—it will activate on its own when a certain set of conditions are met. A Magic Formula, on the other hand, was a shortcut, like a cheat. To explain it very roughly, you would draw the formula on the object you intended to enchant to lessen the amount of time you would spend chanting the spell. Preparations made in advance of the spell's actual use, to simplify things when the time came. Strangely, this was also the basis of Risuka's magic, her time skipping—although she needed neither to draw a complicated pattern nor to spend any time at all chanting. . . . Magic is incredibly complex.

Anyway, as I said, a Magic Sigil is a trap and is itself magic, so it can activate automatically no matter where the spell-caster is, allowing for remote casting. On the other hand, a Magic Formula is nothing but a formula, cannot be operated remotely, and the caster must be standing close to it. So the killer in this case must have been right next to me. Right. Next. To. Me.

". . . But, Risuka, why is the Magic Formula drawn on the tracks? Mind control or telekinesis, in both cases the spell would be cast on the four sacrifices, wouldn't it?"

"Yes. Mind control or telekinesis is not being the magic

used here," Risuka said, grinning. "This is Summoning—pattern of Wind. Summoned was, probably . . . a vacuum."

"Someone summoned a vacuum?"

"Yes. A fact that just proves how low-level they are. Vacuums compose most of the universe, a very available thing," Risuka said, looking down at the tracks again, right at the spot where the formula had briefly shown itself. "That aside, this killer summoned a large vacuum over the tracks. And what does Kizutaka think happened then?"

". . . Oh."

The four victims had been sucked toward the tracks—just as I had said. Brute force such as that eliminated the need for high-level magic such as mind control or telekinesis. It was almost a trick. Summoning (basically teleporting a space that did not include yourself?) was low-level magic (five ranks below Risuka's movements through time), and it made sense that it would be even easier if you were summoning something as close to nothing as a vacuum was. And the use of a Magic Formula for such a simplistic spell was definitive proof that the killer was not a magician, was not from Nagasaki.

"Hopes dashed, Kizutaka?" Risuka said impishly. "Magic that weak will not be useful to Kizutaka's army."

". . . Mm." I did not like that smile. Had she taken it into her head that she understood me? Fine, I would forgive her. "High or low difficulty, high- or low-level, no ability can be measured by strength or weakness. What matters is how well that ability can be used. True strength, Risuka, means knowing the stage where your talents can shine. That goes for normal humans or magicians. I don't think we can really say you're making full use of your control of time, your Destiny Interference Magic. It is a very powerful magic, but it has almost no meaning. Having a talent you cannot use is the same as having no talent at all."

"... Well, that may be so," Risuka agreed. "Oh, and, Kizutaka... not taking back what I said entirely, but it is possible this killer is not a complete pansy. Controlling a vacuum—if you have a formula ready, it is like using a kamaitachi."

"Kamaitachi? A vacuum blade?"

"Not as powerful as hitting with a train... but dangerous enough. There is also the issue of vacuum permittivity—but perhaps worst of all is summoning a vacuum over our coordinates. The principle is the same as being flung into space without a space suit. But this defines the enemy's magic. Pattern is Wind, category is Summoning. Then... his purpose... We know the means, which removes simultaneous and impossible, but the problem of no connection remains. This, I have no idea how to solve."

"If the killer can use magic, then the matter is a simple one. As I keep telling you, when humans acquire a means of violence beyond their normal abilities, past or present, east or west, they have done only two things. Used that means of violence to undermine their superiors or used it to stomp on their inferiors."

"... Oh yes, like Kizutaka's classmates pouring hot water into the anthill."

"Precisely. An idiot convinced he has become strong always feels the need to test that power. Unaware that this merely proves how shallow his thinking is."

Jesus, Risuka had made me remember things about my classmates I would prefer to have forgotten. I would at least like to forget those abortions on a Sunday, when I was with Risuka. The same age as me, but they never made any effort to think; they were worse than animals. Certainly, they were more of a nuisance. They could not even begin to imagine what literal battlefields they would find themselves standing on in the future if they did not start preparing themselves

now. Lack of knowledge might be a problem caused by their environment, but the least they could do was think for themselves about the time that lay ahead of them. Why did nobody see the danger in spoiling children until they turn into small adults, like canned coffee? There ought to have been at least one person in the school who was able to tell that I was different. If that had happened, I would have welcomed that enemy with open arms. Fine, I will tolerate your imbecility for the time being. Go on, read mystery novels, convince yourselves that you are smart.

"... Even if there was no Magic Formula, what is certain is that the killer was close by. If he was testing his violence, then he would want to watch. To see his strength with his own eyes."

"Right... hmm... right next to me...?"

The victims had been right in front of me, so where else could he have been? In retrospect, I had been in pretty serious danger. If I had taken so much as a step forward—or if there had been one person fewer in front of me—I would have been sucked into the vacuum on the tracks. And I would have died. I had been lucky. How horrible it would have been to die there, without having done anything concrete... mm? No, wait....

"Risuka. This Magic Formula... how good is it? How much of the chant can the caster omit with it? How long would it ultimately take someone to cast the spell?"

"How long... Four people, at this distance, summoning a vacuum that could suck them in... It depends on the caster's class, but with this class of Magic Formula... A rough estimate is... about one second."

"Hmph."

"So what about it? It is a terrible Magic Formula... A little algebra, and he could have simplified it greatly. Last time,

it was the same. . . . Is this the limit of what ordinary humans can comprehend?" Risuka slid the blade out of her utility knife and cut her fingertip through the glove again. "Twice he will not do the same thing in the same place. But I shall destroy this Magic Formula anyway."

"Yeah, go ahead."

"Okay . . ." Risuka spun the utility knife. It looked as if nothing happened, but she gave a satisfied nod. "Disposal complete. Too simple."

What Risuka had just done was called a Cancel. A simple spell that rendered a Magic Formula, Magic Sigil, or magic itself ineffective. It was not that hard to perform, but neither was it a very simple one. Risuka, and Risuka alone, could pull it off without even chanting a spell. In the vast majority of cases, Risuka did not need to chant spells. Because inside her body (just a little taller than my own) was something that functioned as a Magic Formula—her blood. Every conceivable Magic Formula was already programmed into her body.

That was why she was a Second Grade Magic Technician despite her youth—despite her childishness. That was why she was a genius. When Risuka needed to use magic, all she had to do was let blood flow—cut her fingertip with a knife, and she was done. Hence the *Red Witch of Time*. And it was her father who had put such an advanced Magic Formula in her blood—Mizukura Shingo, current whereabouts unknown. Risuka was looking for him. She had come through the Gate to look for him. Her eyes were peeled wide open, desperately searching for a clue to his whereabouts, any clue, no matter how small. Even a case like this—knowing how he enjoyed teaching humans how to use magic.

"What do you think the odds are this is your father's work?"

"Mm . . . My father can use all patterns, all categories.

Omni. It feels a little too sloppy to be my father's teachings . . . but that may just be the human factor."

"I can't imagine there are many magicians crazy enough to teach humans magic."

"True. Then we should decide to track him down," Risuka suggested, finally getting down to business. For all our efforts, we had found no clues at all recently, and she must be getting rather desperate. Magicians cannot cross water, so Mizukura Shingo could not have gone anywhere; if he was alive, he could not have left Kyushu. But she had been looking for him for two years without catching his scent. (Of course, we could also blame some of that on the way she had been searching that first year.) "Kizutaka is the witness, so Kizutaka will be needing to remember anyone suspicious."

"Easier said than done. . . . We could have solved the whole thing if only magic could have told us the killer."

"Precognition and Postcognition are advanced Destiny Interference. I have yet to meet anyone with those abilities."

"Yeah. Um . . . So you said he would have had to chant about a second? No one near me said anything that sounded like a spell. I'm sure I would have noticed."

"Yes. Kizutaka has experience, can tell if a spell is a spell if Kizutaka hears it."

"With a Magic Formula such as that, how close would the caster need to be? With a Magic Sigil, they can be as far away as they like, but with a few exceptions, Magic Formulas don't work like that, right?"

"Fifteen feet . . . maybe thirty is the limit, I think. Too close and it would work on him, and he would be hit by the train. I would have thought the sweet spot was where Kizutaka was, right behind them, where he could easily see them die."

"But I can't use even the simplest magic."

"Sweet spot number two, then . . . right behind Kizutaka. Kizutaka is short; grown-ups could see over your head with no problem."

"I thought of that," I said, and gave her my prepared answer. "But as I said, if someone standing right behind me had chanted for a full second, I would have noticed. Most people would have."

"Regardless of whether non-Kizutaka witnesses would have noticed . . . Kizutaka certainly would have, yes. Kizutaka is never not paying attention."

"Which means we'll have to find sweet spot number three. . . . Where else could you see the four of them die? Somewhere close . . . The next door over? No." I shook my head. "On the right, the train would be in the way, and to the left, bits of them would get on you. Which would be bad. The left is probably more likely, but . . . can't say it's the best angle, no."

"Mm . . ." Risuka moved over to where the next door to the left was marked on the platform. She looked in the direction the train would come from. "Here is dangerous . . . a little . . . fast, would splatter very hard."

With a three- or four-door car, it might be possible, but the subway used two-door cars, and the door to the left would have been in the same car, which ruled it out. Five meters away . . . somewhere the bits would not splatter . . . well behind the line for that train door. Logically, given those three conditions, he would be standing almost out of range.

"But by the process of elimination, there's nowhere else he could have been. I wonder who . . . It wasn't that crowded, so I doubt I forgot them, but . . . I guess I wasn't paying attention. I should have been prepared for the people in front of me to jump. Or if not that, then once I had witnessed that, watched the commotion around me carefully."

"Then Kizutaka would be a suspect. Kizutaka was right to run. The ones still looking for Kizutaka are the police."

"They can look all they like. I wouldn't say I ran, but . . . I guess I kinda did. . . . Ah!" I clapped my hands together. "Risuka, we have another option! Turn the tables on the way we were thinking. What if one of the four was able to use magic? What do you think? The two right next to me couldn't have, but the guy in front could have chanted a spell for a second without my noticing."

"Mm . . . So, suicide? All four of them together, it seems so roundabout. . . ."

"No need for it to be all four. Just one of them, and the other three were just unlucky. Of course, it could have been a group suicide, but given the lack of connection among them, it seems more likely they were just dragged along."

Which meant I had to change the way I was thinking about the killer. That would mean he had obtained power but not used either choice usually taken. It also meant he was already dead—which would make him useless to both of us, but neither of us was so closed-minded as to be unable to find any value in even a useless thing. After all, wasn't there something rather impressive about using magic to pull yourself onto the tracks instead of just jumping? The people dragged with you were not the most aesthetically pleasing aspect of it, but that was a trivial concern.

But Risuka dismissed the idea quickly. "Did I not say? Suicide by magic is not possible."

". . . You can't . . . commit suicide?" I had been involved with magic for a year now, but this was a new one for me. "Whyever not? I mean, you told me yourself about a wizard who died by his own Magic Sigil."

"That was an accident, negligence—not suicide. Mm . . . You understand . . . magic is not physical. It is mental, yes?"

To do anything, your mind must be focused. In that sense, it is a more animalistic action. You could say instinctive? More generally, any ability is a means of turning something from weak to strong, no? Magic is the same. All living things have defense mechanism. To cut your wrist," Risuka said, pointing at hers with the utility knife, "is easy when you are out of control, but to perform magic, you must be in control. You must always be thinking when you are doing calculus, yes? The same. Even if you are using Magic Formula or Magic Sigil, it is the same."

"Hmm . . . I did not know that, but it does make perfect sense. How careless of me. Sorry to make you waste your time explaining that."

"Even in the Kingdom of Magic, only one magician was ever able to commit suicide."

"There was one? Who?"

"My father," Risuka said awkwardly, as if confessing something shameful. "Because he can use Regeneration and Resurrection."

" . . . As always, some father you've got there."

Mizukura Shingo. The more stories . . . legends . . . I heard about him, the more I wanted him as a pawn, but again, he might well be a little beyond me. After all, he was Risuka's father, the man who made her. A pawn that was too powerful would be even harder to use than Risuka. But it did not sound as if he was someone it could hurt to meet, and I expected my relationship with Risuka would, at the least, continue until we had found him. During that time, I might manage to find other useful magicians. If I'm being honest, until I met Risuka, I had assumed that magicians were simply exceptional humans. In much the same way as stupid adults assume that everything Westerners do is right. Which is exactly why I was so excited when I met Risuka. If I had

known then how unimpressive most magicians really are, I'm sure I would have remained much more collected. Including Risuka, not one of the magicians—and humans who had been taught magic—whom I had met had even come close to mastering their magic, their own powers. I could not for the life of me understand why they did not seem to view this as a waste. The world is genuinely full of hopeless incompetents. So many born second-rate, not usable even as pawns . . . She might be a bit much for me, but in that sense, Risuka wasn't that bad.

" . . . Ah," Risuka said suddenly. "There was one more sweet spot, Kizutaka."

"Mm? Where?"

"Over there," she said, pointing at the opposite platform. Platform number 2, where I had stepped off the train from Hakata Station. She had pointed with her right hand, and the handcuffs on her wrist clanked together.

" . . . Oh." Right across from this was a boarding point for trains on that platform. He could stand there, waiting . . . the perfect place. Close enough, and yet far enough that he would not be dragged into the summoned vacuum. (Even less risk than our first sweet spot, the place where I'd been standing.) "Nice. That would be the best place."

"Let's go."

"Mm."

There were only two platforms in New Kizuna Station. There was a passage between them a floor above. We went up the stairs and down the other side, onto the second platform. They were both equally deserted. This suited us perfectly. Even if Risuka had no intention of hiding it, if someone saw her skipping time and suddenly appearing and disappearing, an unfortunate pandemonium would undoubtedly follow. This was what Chamberlain had meant when he told me to

look after her. Some of the stupid, pathetic humans called the magicians "half demons"—simply because they were different—and detested them. The same ideas that led to witch hunts. Few things in life were more idiotic. Even if the government denied the existence of magic, even if the Gate separated them from us, what was there was there. Part of the problem could certainly be blamed on the Kingdom of Magic's standoffishness, and their tendency to look down on humans this side of the Gate as "powerless," but grown-ups should not be having childish fights like that.

They had these abilities; make use of them! Cowards, not even attempting to grasp reality. Convinced they would look smart if they sneered enough while debating the matter. Even though it was no debate, merely an exchange of dismissals. They are not fit even to play bad chess; if they worked really hard at it, they might manage checkers.

"Here," Risuka said, standing in the sweet spot. "Mm . . . He could see well from here. This is perfect, Kizutaka. The one standing at the front of the line for this door was the killer. The police checked only the first platform, which is why he chose this side. Kizutaka . . . do you remember him? Did you see anyone suspicious standing here?"

" . . . I don't know. Until they jumped, their bodies were blocking my view, and after they jumped, the train was in the way. If I did see anyone over here, it would have been only a glimpse; even I'm not that good."

"Mm. Then we are stuck."

"No, we have options. Humans are creatures of habit—they all have patterns. It is possible the killer is someone who often used the second platform here at New Kizuna Station. Humans tend to test things within their territory. Perhaps he always stands here. It may have felt comfortable to him. It is not a very big town, so if we search thoroughly,

we should be able to track him down, as unguarded as he seems to be."

"Ah . . . So much work," Risuka said, moving back and collapsing on a bench. She looked down at the map and train schedule I had given her in her room. Wondering if she should have brought her newspaper collection, no doubt. "We will have to lay a sigil down and wait patiently again, yes?"

"Yep."

"I do not like drawing sigils. I have to use my own blood, and if I make the sigil too big, I get anemic. And drawing it that small—such a pain."

This did not sound like someone who seemed to enjoy copying nightmarishly complicated grimoires out by hand, but since I could not use magic, I suppose I do not fully understand the subtleties. But since this was our only means of progressing, whether the process failed to provide enjoyment or enjoyment failed to provide a process, she had to go through with it. There might not be many people here, but it would still attract attention, so we might have to select a different time . . . but at any rate, coming here had not been a waste of time. That, at least, was some consolation. Risuka might be freely distributed at a whim, but even if children rode half price, it still cost a lot to cross prefectural lines. I looked down at the watch on my left wrist—a device that meant little to Risuka. It was just past noon. Mm, it was about the right time; perhaps we should eat something. Risuka never carried a wallet, so I would have to pay, but I could put that down as expenses. She would pay it back by helping to advance my plans.

"Say, Risuka . . . let's get out of here."

No answer. Risuka was sitting on the bench; she had already put the map and schedule away and was staring up at

the ceiling. Schk schk schk schk schk... schk schk schk schk... unconsciously sliding the blade of her utility knife in and out. Schk schk schk... schk schk schk... schk schk schk... schk schk schk... schk schk schk...

"Um, Risuka?" I said, without much hope. When Risuka was concentrating hard, as when she was copying a grimoire, she never noticed voices. Risuka's magic was not the only thing that was locked up inside her. "Risuka!"

"Kizutaka," she said, looking at me at last. Her hat had fallen down over her eyes again, so she pushed it back. "It may be that I know the killer."

"Eh?"

"Mm... Yes, this is... probably no mistake. I think. Well, no... If one second, then possible. But only that makes sense. In which case... this is not the case we thought it was, Kizutaka."

"What do you mean?"

"Is it possible to speak with the driver of the train that hit those four people? If we can... I think we will solve this case."

"The driver...? I'm pretty sure they're investigating him for professional negligence resulting in death. But I doubt he's been arrested or anything. I can't say for sure unless I ask my father, and even if I do, this is Fukuoka Prefecture and not his jurisdiction." My father was a high-ranking officer in the Saga Police Department. I almost never saw him, but he came in handy in situations like this. He mostly made life difficult for me, but he was also no idiot. "But do you really think the driver knows something?"

"You could say that."

"Well... can't hurt to ask. Can I borrow your telephone card?"

She handed it over, and I headed down the platform to the

pay phone. I reached up and took the receiver and placed the card in the slot. I tried to dial my father's cell, but the buttons were too high, and I accidentally pressed 5 instead of 2. I put the receiver down and tried again. What the hell were pay phone designers thinking? Why were they so high up? I had used a card this time, but when I wanted to use coins, I had to find something to stand on or I couldn't reach the slot. Adults all have cell phones, so they should at least make the pay phones with kids in mind. Situations like this come about when those in charge are fools. If you have no talent, then all you should do is resign yourself to being used by your betters. Your whole life. My second attempt at dialing was successful, and I was connected to my father's cell. After the polite greetings society required of us, I asked about the driver in question. He had indeed been booked, as I had known, but the accident had left him in a state of shock, so he had been placed in the Hakata City Police Hospital. Not a surprising outcome for a small-scale human who had killed four people. The driver's name was Takamine Koutarou, forty-seven years old, single, with no family. He had already resigned from the company. Resigned. With trains, unlike cars, the driver could bear no responsibility for something like this, so the charges of professional negligence in the line of duty were a mere formality, and he would not have been fired. But with all that had happened, it was not surprising. After getting as much information as I could, I asked my father if it was possible for me to meet the driver. The Fukuoka Police had asked all the questions they were going to ask by now, and it seemed as if it would be possible—not for two children alone, but if he accompanied us. My father knew about Risuka, so that would not require explanation. (Of course, he did not know that she was a witch.) My father rather doted on her. I had never cared for adults who spoiled

children. . . Not that I mean to cast judgment on the values of others. He was a busy man, and there was (apparently) paperwork involved, since it was outside his jurisdiction, so it would have to wait till next Sunday. I accepted this, we agreed on a time and place, and I hung up and went back to Risuka.

"Sorry that took so long. That man can talk. Only seven points left."

"Not a problem. Any results?"

"All good. Next Sunday, 11:00 A.M., meeting him outside the Hakata City Police Hospital."

"Hospital?"

"He's been hospitalized with shock. Some paperwork and processing, so we'd probably be in the room by 11:30 or 12:00."

"Very well," Risuka said, smiling. "If it is true that I can go where that man is, then I can skip to there whether it is this week or next."

"The hospital . . . you know the coordinates? Need a map?"

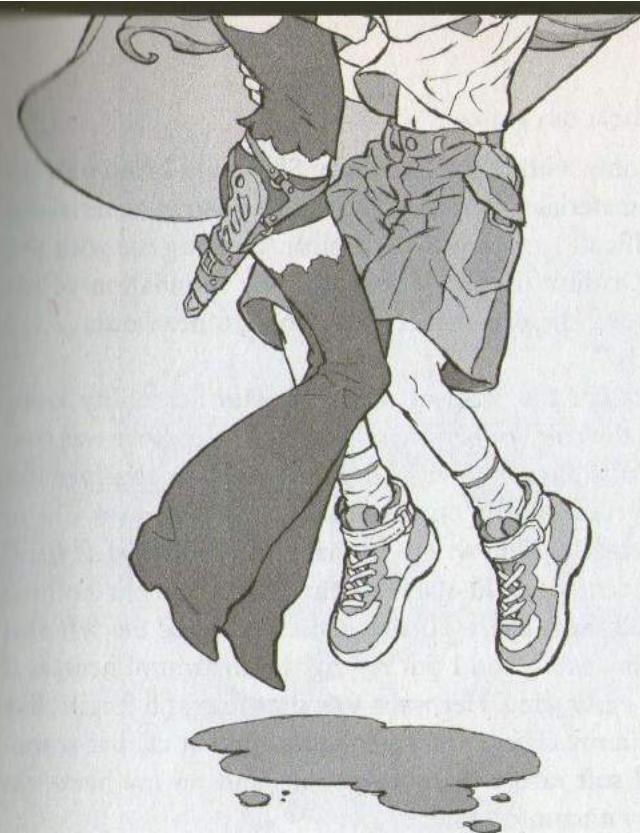
"I have been to the Hakata Police Hospital once before, is not a problem. The room number?"

"Room 603. Private room, given the circumstances."

"Perfect . . . Should be easy to cover. Kizutaka, this time, you will join me? I will not wait a week."

"Fine . . . Can't say I like losing a week of my life, but I am curious to see what you'll ask him."

I held out my left hand. As a sort of ritualistic precaution, I looked around; nobody was paying any attention to us. I need not even have bothered; worms crawling in the dirt, the lot of them. Ignorance on such a scale was a crime. Mozart was always a nice guy; Salieri was always the villain? Yes, and twenty years from now, I shall give you all lives of luxury. If you manage to survive that long. Anyway, Risuka's magic



worked only within her own body. She could bring only inorganic material with her through time; organic material was quite difficult . . . but not impossible. To bring me with her, she had to link my blood to hers—the foundation of her magic—and stabilize that connection. In other words . . .

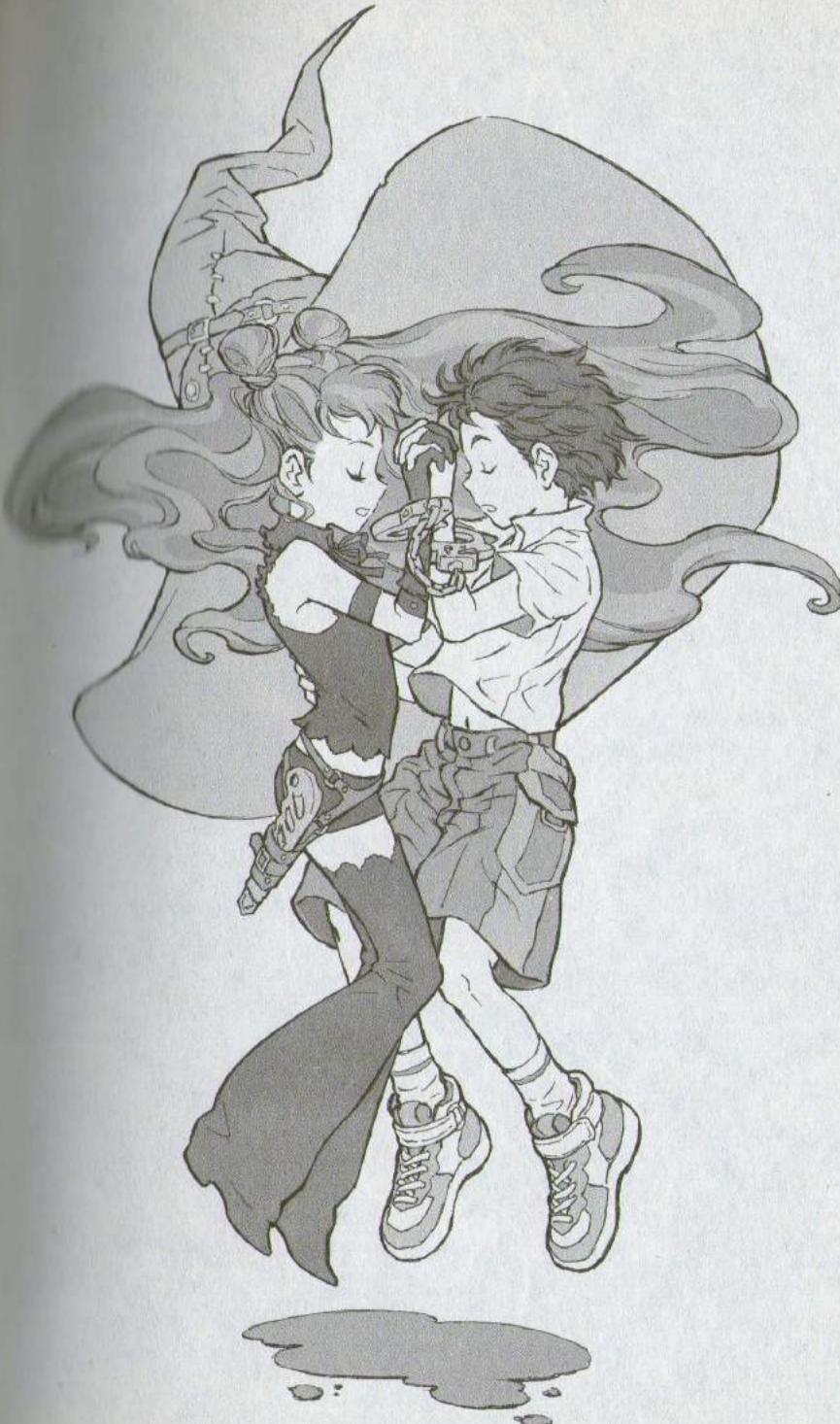
“. . . Ow.”

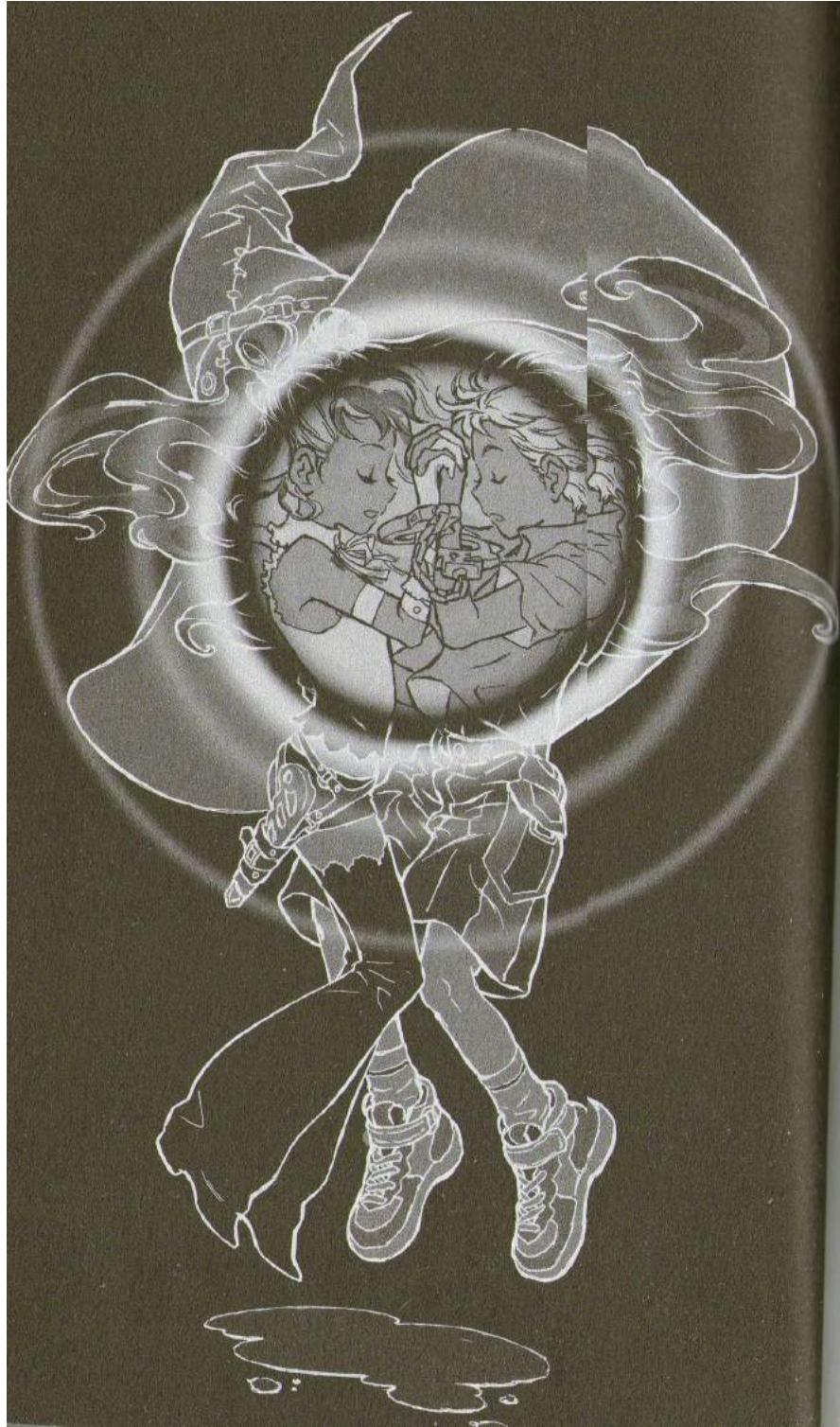
Risuka cut the palm of my hand with her utility knife, then cut the palm of her own right hand. Her glove was covered in cuts already. Then we linked our cuts together like puzzle pieces, locking our fingers. Next, Risuka took one of the cuffs off her right wrist and snapped it onto my left wrist. The handcuffs would stabilize our hands, so that nothing could pull them apart. Finally, Risuka wrapped her left arm around my waist, and I put my right arm around hers, as if we were embracing. Her waist was very thin and fragile, like any girl in my class. Barely any flesh to her at all, but somehow still soft rather than bony. Her hand on my back was somehow uncomfortable.

“Ègünämü Ègünämü Käätörükü kā Ikäisä Mürä Törümärühî . . .” Risuka began to chant. Jumping a full week was impossible without a chant, even for Risuka. It occurred to me that I should have pretended to beg and tried to get my father to take us sooner, even if only by a day. It shamed me to waste my pawn’s energy. “Ègünämü Ègünämü Käätörükü kā Ikäisä Mürä Törümärükü . . .”

And . . .

Since we were moving through time, it was impossible for our movement to take any time at all, either relatively or absolutely. The time omitted was not experienced at all. But relatively speaking, Risuka and I experienced a week in a single instant, and the trick was to convince your mind and body to keep up with that speed. What that actually came down to was compatibility with Risuka’s blood. Even linked and





stabilized, it was possible to fail. What happened then . . . we shall not dwell upon. Fortunately, my name was Kugi Kizutaka, and my date of birth not that different from Risuka's . . . which meant I was able to travel through time with her. Physically, that is; mentally, it felt as if the entire world were distorting around me and it was extremely uncomfortable. I always shut my eyes, even though I knew it was meaningless. To my shame. And then . . .

A hoarse shriek.

I opened my eyes and found myself in a square white room—a hospital room. It seemed we had successfully moved through time . . . and through space. Of course, only our relative time had progressed; by absolute time, a moment ago we had been standing on the second platform of New Kizuna Station—literally, only a moment before. A seedy-looking man was sitting up on the bed, staring at us in shock. Of course, from his point of view, we had just appeared out of thin air. Fortunately, there were no nurses or doctors in the room. It would have been much more difficult to cover things up if they had been here. Clearly, this seedy, graying, middle-aged man was the driver—Takamine Koutarou. He did look familiar: I had caught a slow-motion glimpse of him as the accident occurred.

"Wh-what? How'd you get in here? H-how did . . . Why? Children . . ." He did not even try to hide his confusion. "N-no, doesn't matter, what . . ."

"Calm down. You're a grown-up, act like one," I said soothingly. I was getting used to this part of things, after a year of it. The best thing to do when adults were doubting their own senses was to give them an easily understood answer—nothing in the world easier to trick. "You should pay more attention! We just . . ."

"I have but one thing I wish to ask you," Risuka said, inter-

rupting me. She never tried to speak until I had finished pulling the wool over their eyes, so this was very irregular. She carried right on, without waiting for Takamine to respond.

"Who taught you magic?"

All confusion and fear drained from Takamine's face. He chuckled softly and looked right through us.

"I see. . . So you're the Red Witch of Time."

Risuka just stared back at him. Her lack of denial was itself agreement.

"So you've come to pass judgment on me?"

". . . I guess so," Risuka said coolly.

While this was going on, my mind was quickly catching up. Of course, of course. Since it was a Magic Formula, we had assumed the caster was nearby—had assumed he must have been there the whole time. But if it was the train's driver—then he was not on the scene until the moment the truth occurred. That was why his timing had been so perfect. One second—a borderline number, but the train had been slowing down, and if he chanted fast enough, he could summon a vacuum before the train had passed by.

"You understand now, Kizutaka?" Risuka said. "Yes, the best position was not where you were or on the second platform. The real sweet spot was on the train, in the driver's seat. The one place where he was guaranteed a good view of everything."

"B-but . . .," I said, watching him closely. "Why did he do it? Here he is, able to use magic . . . and all he accomplishes is being charged with professional negligence resulting in death, losing his job, finding himself blamed by society . . . until he ends up in the hospital."

"Blamed by society?" Takamine scoffed. "So what? Who cares? Boy—all I wanted was to run someone down with my train. Just once."

When humans acquire a means of violence beyond their normal abilities, past or present, east or west, they do only two things. Use that means of violence to undermine their superiors or use it to stomp on their inferiors. He had chosen to stomp—within the realm of expectation—but the violence Takamine Koutarou had acquired was not magic, it was his train. A lump of iron not designed with an eye to what would happen when it ran into someone. Violence that could tear people apart like paper—a veritable symbol of destructive force. And the magic had been simply a means to enact that violence—nothing more than a means to his end. I could wrap my head around that concept but not shake off my disbelief. I could understand wanting to see people hit by a train. That was simply an extension of wanting to drive your sports car at 125 miles per hour, a feeling I was capable of comprehending.

It was a higher-level, less-infantile desire than wanting to kill people with magic, or wanting to drop people on the tracks with magic, and easier to understand. Easy to understand and comprehensible. Oh . . . Trains ran only where the rails took them. No matter how much he wanted to hit someone, without magic, there was no way to guarantee he would ever be that "lucky." Of course there had been no link among the four sacrifices. It all made sense. I had no intention of dismissing that part of things. His stunned look had been bliss as his wish was granted—a bliss that had left him so out of it he had been sent to this hospital. In that sense, it certainly was easy to understand. But . . . but. Takamine had lost everything as a result. His job, his life, everything else—it was like suicide. There was no future in store for him. If you stomped that hard . . . what was the point? And he had quit his job . . . because he had achieved his goal? He had worked there for decades purely because he wanted to run

into someone? But Takamine did not seem to notice my doubts.

"I've heard about you, Red Witch of Time," he said, his attention fixed on Risuka. "Risuka the Witch-hunter, passing judgment on all who use magic outside, right?"

"Magicians cannot be judged by the law—they can be judged only by magic. Stands to reason," Risuka said, stepping forward. "But what to hear I am interested in is . . . who told you that?"

"Gosh . . . Ha!"

Takamine suddenly roared, raising his hands toward the ceiling. Instantly, the room transformed. The white walls, floor, and ceiling, even the windows—in all directions, Magic Formulas appeared. Since Risuka had not made them visible, they were not red but colorless, transparent, like air, like wind given shape. I looked at Takamine—he had a crazy sort of smile on his face. A crazy smile I had seen before. I was, belatedly, certain that he was the killer, the man who had cast that spell. Those who used magic in their villainy always, without exception, smiled just like this.

"Magic . . . Formulas!" Risuka wailed, angry at herself for overlooking them. Shaken badly, her attempt at sounding grown-up crumbled. "He was waiting for us! That's why you put yourself in hospital, bastard! Try to trick me by pretending you were broken! How dare you!"

"Yeah, I'm broken all right . . . but you give me a week, and I can do the job just fine. Take this, Red Witch of Time!" Takamine lowered his hands, focusing his palms on Risuka. "Mägînägü Mägînäkü Èkûrâtøn Kømütän Kømütän!"

"Ha, you're too slow!"

The moment he began chanting, Risuka whipped out the utility knife, pushed out the blade, and threw herself at him. Yes, this was the greatest weakness of every magician—the

weakness none of them could avoid. When they were chanting their spell, they were completely defenseless. They were not gods, not devils, and they could not avoid the requisite chant. Using the same magic, a high-level magician would be able to chant less than a low-level one and perhaps make that chant time almost zero—but never actually zero. If you genuinely wanted to use magic safely, you would work in teams or, like Risuka, fill your body with nearly flawless Magic Formula. This room was not that small, and covering it in Magic Formulas . . . was not enough to cancel out the need to chant. He was not summoning a vacuum onto unmoving tracks but onto a moving target, and to lock onto her would take several seconds—by which time Risuka's knife would be in Takamine's throat.

" . . . Mm?"

There was a clank, and Risuka fell forward, spinning.

" . . . Uh, hey! No!"

"Ah!"

I saw her eyes look at me, pleading for help. And realized that our wrists were still stabilized—locked together by the handcuffs. No matter how fast she moved, if I stood stock-still, she could move only the length of our arms. Ah! Such a stupid way to . . .

" . . . Mägînägimü Tèèémü!" He finished chanting.

"Um, sorry."

I do not know if she heard me. The moment Takamine's chant finished, kamaitachi came from all directions—from the walls, ceilings, floor, and windows—and cut Risuka to pieces. Hacked, slashed, chopped, and shredded. Her arm flew off, the severed arm split in half, and the pieces were cut in half again. Her leg flew off, the severed leg split in half, and the pieces were cut in half again. Her head flew off, the severed head split in half, and the pieces were cut in half again.

Risuka was pulped before my eyes, as if she'd been tossed into a blender, unrecognizable instantly. There was no shape left to her at all. No shape, no shadow, nothing of the sort. Only the pointy hat—too big for her, it had flown off at the first impact and escaped damage. It drifted down to the floor. The handcuffs hung limply from my wrist, no longer stabilizing anything.

"Hee . . . hee-hee . . . hya ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!" Takamine laughed like a mad thing. A crazed, deranged laugh. "Th-that all? That was so easy! That was the Red Witch of Time? Gone in an instant! No fight at all! I crushed her! Killing the other four was peaceful and pleasant, but, hey, this wasn't so bad either! The week I spent preparing was not a total loss! The work I put into learning magic was not a total loss! Hard work pays off! What a wonderful thing!"

"Ha! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! No point in throwing away my life, is there? More fun for me! First thing, get out of this hospital—then I can use this magic! I can . . . I can . . . I can . . .!"

Sheesh. I waited a bit, but it didn't seem as if he had any.

idea what else to do. How could he? His whole goal in life had been to run someone over with his train. Compared with most people's goals, it was a fairly advanced one, one that had taken me rather by surprise, one that had effectively confused me for a moment, but the more I thought about it, the less it seemed like something worth trading in your life for.

That action led to no future at all. What a pathetic man. I clapped my hands together, interrupting his manic laugh. Until that sound, he had entirely forgotten that I was there. He looked at me, and I clapped three more times, slowly. Expressing my admiration.

"... What? What does that mean?"

"Oh, you are very impressive, Takamine," I said respectfully—as respectfully as I needed to be to hook a man like this. "Of course, that worked only because Risuka stupidly forgot to undo the handcuffs first, but that matters little. You did manage to blow away the Red Witch of Time, and that's what really matters."

"What? Are you . . .," Takamine said cautiously, feeling his way. "Are you . . . a wizard, too?"

"I am a mere human. I can't use even the simplest magic. Not even the limited amount of magic you have managed to learn. Your pattern is Wind, your category is Summoning—you rely on the Magic Formula, but not bad at all. Who did teach you?"

"... I don't need to answer that."

"What do you say, Takamine. Will you be my slave?" I asked, sounding as sincere as I could. "I admit I had rather looked down on your magic until now . . . but I underestimated you. It is impressive. Only thing is, there's not enough of it to really be worth calling violent."

He was bewildered.

"What I'm looking for is real violence, on the level of a nuclear bomb. Not the violence of a train that can kill four people, not the violence of the wind you used to kill a little girl—you'd have to be able to kill *at least* a few million, or you just don't count. Magic really is so useless. Go bend a spoon or something." Feeling Risuka's blood on my skin, I gazed at the red all around. "But little and often fills the purse—even magic like yours, I can use. Takamine Koutarou, become my pawn. I shall give your life purpose—and not a pathetic purpose, such as hitting people with a train. Something worth trading your life for; a rich, fulfilling purpose."

"Wh-wh-wh . . ."

"It seems you'll do anything for your goals, even sacrifice your own life—which earns you a place among my minions. Your power is not worth losing at a moment like this—it seems like a waste. You have power but no idea how to use it—which is exactly why I offer to make you my slave. You will expend yourself for me. Obey me."

"F-f-f-fuck off!" Takamine shrieked. "Wh-who do you think you are? You should fear me! I am a magician! You will not use me!"

"Oh, but I will. Using magicians is what I do," I said, taking a step back, folding my arms, and leaning against the wall. Given what was about to happen, it was safer for me against the wall. "I decided that much when I met Risuka. They call themselves magicians, but none of them can use their powers properly. Might as well be human. Useless humans, useless magicians, all the same. Out of sheer pity, I offer to use them. If I do not, who will?"

"N-no child . . . no human thinks like that!"

"Of course they do. I am a child, and I am a human! I will ask you one more time, Takamine. This is your last chance, Takamine Koutarou. Let me make you happy."

"No. With every bone in my body, no! I'm gonna cut you into pieces, you cocky little shit! Mäginägü Mägi—"

But there, at last, Takamine could not help but notice something amiss. Risuka's red blood, dripping from the ceiling, the walls, the windows, pooling on the floor. The sheer quantity of it: There was far, far more blood on the floor than could fit inside one tiny little girl. The blood on the floor, that red, red blood, was lapping against my ankles now. Fresh blood staining my white socks and sneakers. The blood dripping from the ceiling was like rain. Drip, drip, drip, drip, drip, drip, drip . . . drip drip drip drip drip.

"Wh-wh-what the . . .?"

"Such a shame. My heart fills with regret and a touch of resignation. I was sure your magic would make a good replacement fan. An environmentally sound one, no less . . . but I guess I'll have to make do with the air conditioner," I said, and done with gloating, I handed over the spotlight. "Do what you like with him, Mizukura Risuka."

"UNDERSTOOD."

Her voice echoed. The blood on the floor was up to my knees. I was wearing shorts, so I could feel Risuka's blood lapping against my bare skin. It was warm and sticky, seemed to cling to me, to brush against me, a deep sea of Risuka's red blood. All the blood in the room slithered toward the sea of blood, moving with a will of its own. Drip, drip, drip, drip. Diving down like suicide, scrabbling together like insects, collecting together in an orderly fashion.

"Wh-what's going on!? Sh-she's dead! I killed her!"

"But she is Mizukura Risuka! She is my pawn, the one pawn I can't begin to handle," I said, not even unfolding my arms. "No matter how hard it blows, no wind can split the water. Water blown upon remains water—it comes back together, and the ripples will die down. And Mizukura Risuka

is Mizukura Shingo's daughter. The legendary wizard they called a god, a devil—Nyarlathotep, the most powerful magician who has ever lived. And she is the embodiment of his Magic Formula. Like some diabolical joke! How could she die from being cut to pieces!? A pathetic loser like you might just be able to ruffle my Risuka, but she is not the kind of witch you could ever hope to destroy!"

"EXACTLY."

Again, her voice echoed out of the sea of blood. It boiled, rippled, churned.

"NÖNKIRÎ NÖNKIRÎ MÄGÜNÄÄDØ
RÖIKISURÖIKISØRØI KISHIGÄÄRÜKISHIGÄÄZÙ
NÖNKIRÎ NÖNKIRÎ MÄGÜNÄÄDØ
RÖIKISURÖIKISURØI KISHIGÄÄRÜKISHIGÄÄZÙ
MÄRÜSÄKØRÙ MÄRÜSÄKØRÙ KÄIGIRINÄ RÙ
RØCHÙ RØCHÙ RØSONÄ RØITØ RØITØ MÄITØ
KÄNÄGÜRÙ KÄGÄKÄKÙ KÄGÄKÄ NYÄMÄMÄ
NYÄMÖNÄGÙ DØIKÄIKÙ DØIKÄIKÙ MÄIRÜZÙ
MÄIRÜSÙ NYÄMÖMÙ NYÄMÖMÈ..."

"NYÄRÜRÄ!"

The chant seemed to last forever, but the moment it finished, a woman's arm rose up out of the sea of blood. The blood came up to my knees—not deep enough to cover someone, but that did not matter. No mere common sense could apply to this. The hand began feeling around, looking for the hat floating on the surface of the blood. It found it, and . . . she rose up out of the blood. As she did, all the blood rushed toward her, like the tide going out, the level dropping quickly. Of course, her body was forming from that blood. The blood itself, the Magic Formula carved into that blood, was Mizukura Risuka.

"HA HA-HAI!"

Risuka laughed. A laugh of birth. She did not cry when born; not like mere mortals—as Risuka was born, she laughed. She was no longer the ten-year-old child she had been before. She was seventeen years older—twenty-seven years old. She was tall, slender, and supple like a wildcat—and very beautiful. Red hair, red cape, with a pointy sort of belt, gloves, and showing a lot of skin. Her eyes were red like fire; her lips glistened. The only things that remained unchanged were the utility knife in her hand and the red pointy hat. But the hat . . . fit perfectly.

"...Hello, Risuka," I murmured. Murmured with a trace of reluctance, a tinge of regret. This—this was the greatest reason why Risuka was a bit beyond me. Risuka's father, Mizukura Shingo, had placed a procedure in Risuka's blood: If she lost more than a certain amount of blood—if she were ever about to die from loss of blood—it would trigger automatically. A Magic Sigil triggered by Risuka's death. Mizukura Shingo had placed a Magic Sigil inside the blood he'd already covered in Magic Formulas. And the magic that automatically triggered when that condition was met—you could call it a kind of safety valve. Mizukura Risuka's subjective time would leap forward seventeen years—omitting 6,205 days. A Magic Sigil some 620 times as strong as the present-day Risuka's full power. A Magic Sigil formed, against all sense, of Magic Formulas. A magic completely impossible for ten-year-old Risuka—but something easy enough for Mizukura Shingo, Nyarlathotep himself. No matter how much blood Mizukura Risuka lost, she would always be reborn, never die. Whether this was protection in the name of fatherly love or egoism in the name of his ambition, I could not say . . . only . . .

"HA-HA-HA-HA-HA . . . AH HA-HA-HA! GOOOD

MORNING! . . . MM? WHAT'S WRONG WITH MY VOICE? Risuka shoved her long fingers into her mouth. **"WHERE'S THE REST OF MY TONGUE!? HUH . . . MUST HAVE USED TOO MUCH BLOOD IN KID MODE, JUMPING TWO PEOPLE THROUGH TIME . . . RIGHT, KIZUTAKA?"**

"What?"

"GIVE ME YOUR LEFT THUMB."

Even as she spoke, she swung the utility knife. She was several meters away, but that did not matter; my left thumb was neatly severed at the root.

"Mm . . ." It did not hurt, but no matter how many times bits of my body were cut off, I would never get used to it—it remained decidedly unpleasant. The handcuffs slid off my wrist. I clasped my right hand over the cut, stopping the bleeding, and kicked the thumb over to Risuka. "There."

"**THANKS . . .**" she said, picking it up and raising it to her lips. Blood dripped out of it, landing in her mouth. She sucked every last drop out of it and swallowed. When it stopped bleeding, she popped the thumb into her mouth, chewed it a few times till only the bone remained, and then stuck out her tongue proudly. "Finished! The perfect Risuka! So cool! So beautifully red! Ta-dah!"

Takamine stared at her, stunned. He really was good for nothing. Had he really thought there was nothing more to the Red Witch of Time? That's just too sad for words. A pathetic insect, capable only of perceiving the world according to your convenience. I could have dealt with your pathetic magic, incapable of even blowing out a fire, all on my own. The Wind magic was a waste . . . but there was nothing worse than a pawn that had no use.

"Let me warn you—in this form, Risuka doesn't beat around the bush. I have no idea what happened to her, but sev-

enteen years from now, Risuka has developed a very aggressive personality. No matter how much we change the future, that much is always the same. As if it's an innate trait that memories and thoughts have no bearing on—resulting from the physical construction of her mind and the chemicals in her brain. In that sense, physical and mental are much the same thing."

"A most accurate warning, Kizutaka," Risuka said, stepping forward. "And what will you do now that you've been warned, Wind Master?"

"Mägînägü Mägînäkü Èkûrâtëñ Kômûtän Kômûtän . . ." Takamine quickly began chanting. There were no more handcuffs to get in her way, and she could have ended it instantly by attacking while he chanted—but Risuka did no such thing. She walked slowly, unhurriedly toward his bed. "... Mägînämü Mägînägimü Tèèëmü!"

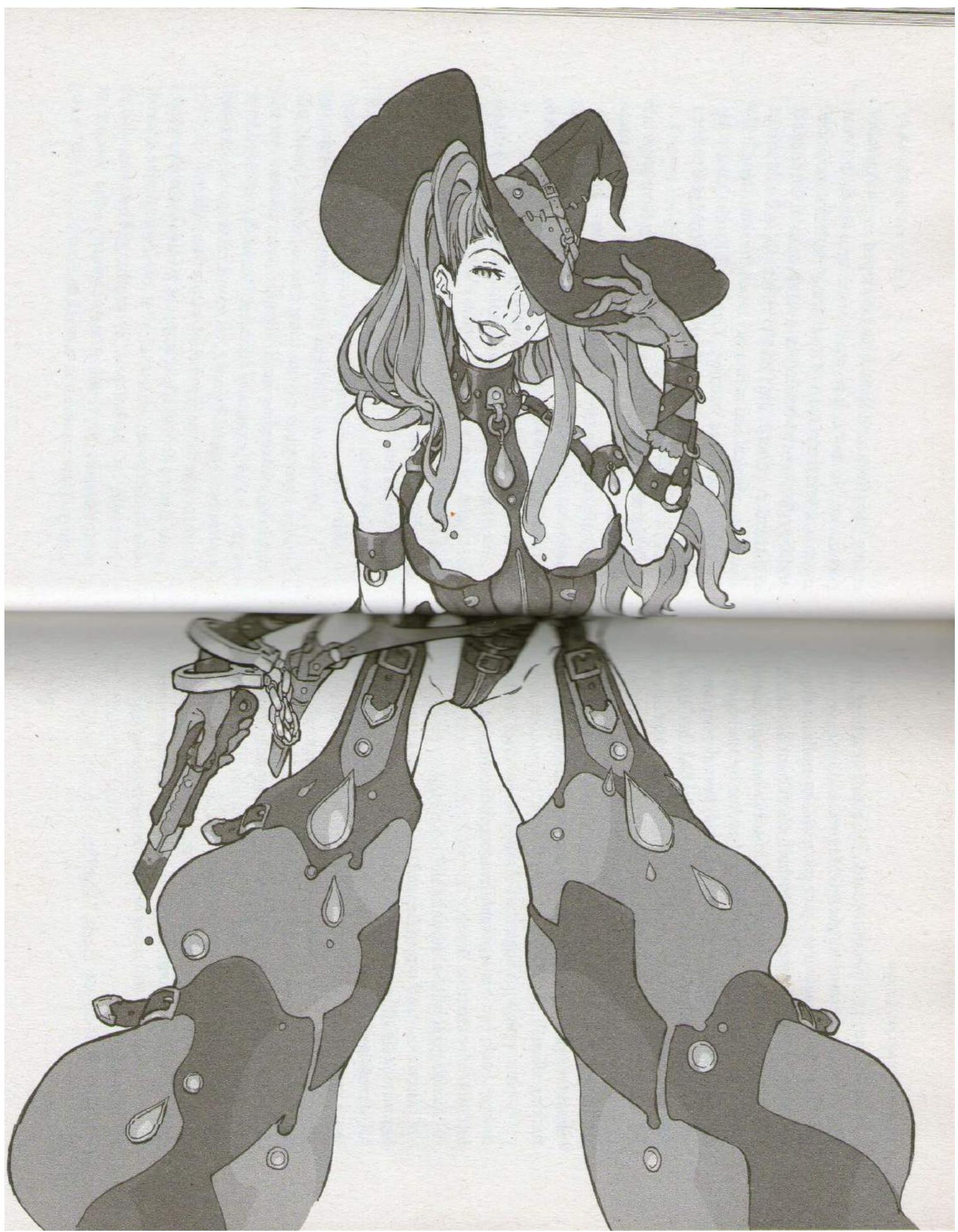
He finished chanting. Vacuum blades flew from all directions, and once again the blades sliced through Risuka's body . . . but where they cut, her body turned to liquid and immediately returned to its original form. No matter how many blades cut through her, she remained intact.

"Wh-wh-wh . . ."

"Kizutaka . . . explain?"

" . . . Ten-year-old Risuka can only advance time—jumping forward through it or omitting chunks of it," I said, still clutching my bleeding hand. "But the twenty-seven-year-old version is fundamentally different. Her flesh and blood have matured considerably in the last seventeen years: She can stop her own time as easily as taking candy from a baby."

And once her time had stopped, it was absolutely impossible for her to die, no matter what. She could not be injured, she could not be harmed. By anything. That was what it meant to stop your own time absolutely—the absence of change. Time, time, time, time, time, *time*.



"Th-that's . . .," Takamine said, his panic reaching its peak. "One more time! Mäginägü Mäginä . . ."

"Didn't I tell you you're a pathetic good-for-nothing slug-like unbelievably unbearably slow half-wit!? Chant in binary, why don't you, you useless piece of historically insignificant trash! I'll reduce you to component atoms by the thirty-second hexadecimal byte!" She vaulted toward him and slammed Takamine's aging flesh against the bed, her right fist slamming into his heart and holding him down by brute force. She might be grown-up now, but he was a man. Nevertheless, she did this easily. She held up the utility knife in her left hand. "Ha-ha-haaaaaaah! Look at all the scribbles you left on the wall, crazy man! You know what I call this? Wasted fricking effort!"

"Augh . . . augh . . . augh . . .," Takamine groaned, trying to fight back, but his legs and arms would not move, as if held down by invisible chains.

"Aaaaaaggggghhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

"Listen close, and remember well, you pathetic little man! Genius equals 100 percent talent—no effort at all! Effort is for scrabbling little worms like you, a futile endeavor you waste your whole sad lives on!"

Schk schk schk schk schk schk . . . Risuka began sliding the blade of the knife in and out, in and out.

"Time for the witch's trial! I will pass judgment on you! Two choices—live . . . or die!"

"Aaauuggghhhh!"

"Who was the raging moron who taught magic to a defective loser like you? Answer truthfully, and I will spare your life . . . though you will never be able to use magic again."

"Wh-why?"

"Mm? What do you mean, 'Why'?"

"Wh-why do you . . . do like this? Judge magicians who use magic outside? I . . . aren't we the same?"

"How dare you even suggest a worm like you has anything to do with a goddess like me! There is a limit to how rude I shall allow even a man as ignorant as you to be! Still . . . Well, I suppose . . . I am trying to find my father, but . . ." Risuka looked at me and flashed me a sardonic smile. I said nothing. "I kill you all to stop your damaging the reputations of the rest of us. Outside humans seem to have a bit of a hard time understanding this stuff, but if a scumbag like you gets taken for a typical magician, and people start thinking all magicians are like you? That would suck. You've got to throw the bad apples out. If people start to think magicians are dangerous, that means trouble for all of us. Right now they've just got us locked behind the Gate, but if it got down to it, they wouldn't hesitate to nuke Nagasaki."

"And we really, really, really don't want to be nuked again. That's why basket cases like you and the kind of half-wit magician who would teach a loser like you magic cannot be tolerated. If we want everyone to believe that wizards and witches are harmless, helpful, and adorable, then defects like you can't be allowed to exist."

"Th-that's . . . that's it?"

"See? I was nice enough to answer your question. Now you'd better level with me. What was the name of the man who taught you magic?"

The blade of her knife gleamed. Risuka said nothing more, just stared down at him. Takamine hesitated for a few more seconds, but at last he answered . . . with that same crazy smile.

"Eat shit, bitch."

"Good answer, scumbag!"

She spun the utility knife and stabbed it down through her hand, into Takamine's heart. He grunted, but this was only the beginning of his nightmare. Risuka's right hand was linked to Takamine's heart by the flowing blood and stabilized via the utility knife. And thus, the rest of Takamine's life began. It began in an instant . . . the beginning of his end.

"Gaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!"

It was like a video fast-forwarding: Takamine's body began to wither away, faster and faster. He was through old age in no time, quickly becoming a sort of mummy. His skin dried; his eyes lost moisture, turning cloudy; veins throbbed against his skin—his hair went white and then fell out. Takamine was experiencing decades in a single instant. Without a second's thought for compatibility. Meanwhile, Risuka herself remained twenty-seven. At twenty-seven, Risuka had taken advantage of her pattern, Time, and obtained the ability not only to stop—but to remain unchanged. No matter how far she advanced through time, Risuka herself did not change at all. By almost any standard, that meant immortality—immortality without growing old. Destiny Interference, carried to its logical extreme, was just that high-level a field. Risuka no longer controlled time—she *was* time. "Ha, ha-ha, ha-ha-ha-haaaah!" Screaming her laughter, she stole his time, as if her blood were sucking it in.

"You always do like to fight flashy," I sighed, watching the terrifying time storm. "But I guess that's what makes you a witch, daughter of the god devil."

Risuka had said geniuses were 100 percent talent, but I did not agree. Genius meant 1 percent talent and 99 percent wasted effort. In that sense, Risuka was absolutely a genius. And I did not need to be. All I ever needed was 1 percent inspiration.

"I . . .," Takamine said, racked with the pain only some-

one well past death's door could ever endure. Shame long since forgotten, he begged for his life, screaming, "I don't wanna die, I don't wanna die, I don't wanna die, I don't wanna die . . .!"

"Shut up," Risuka said, and took her right hand off his chest, only to punch him with it. Takamine's dry, mummified body—shattered. Into tiny fragments. The air filled with shiny bits of Takamine Koutarou. "Diamond dust," Risuka said, snapping her fingers.

Instantly, all the bits of him in the air, and the pile of hair on the bed, vanished. Removed from the space-time continuum.

"Dude had some balls for a loser."

"I'm sure you haven't forgotten," I said, interrupting her as she gloated. Risuka at ten was one thing; the twenty-seven-year-old version was a bit more difficult—a bit beyond me. She was truly a monster—not a pawn I could even begin to use. Pawns that were too powerful could occasionally hold you back. In that sense, Risuka was as big a problem for me as her father. "Risuka, I would definitely like my thumb back."

" . . . Oh, sorry, sorry."

She grinned, moved over to me, and, in a hideously nonchalant gesture, snapped her own left thumb right off. Blood spurted out of it, but that blood was instantly stopped and returned to her body. Risuka put her thumb against the wound on my left hand. The blood mingled, and for a long moment, the thumb twitched like a thing possessed, but at last it calmed down. I tried moving it. Rock, paper, scissors. Rock, paper, scissors. Fox, rabbit, dog. It was an adult woman's size, so it looked a little odd, but since it was made of a shapeless liquid originally, it would soon resize itself to fit my hand.

"Thank you."

"Not at all. I should be thanking you."

"But if you were going to kill him anyway, you might as well have stolen *his* tongue."

"Kizutaka's blood tastes better. Very, very compatible. I could have drained that loser of his blood and not grown as much as a fingernail. Let's face it, your blood is just perfect for me," Risuka said, her red lips twisting into a smile. "But it looks like we both wasted our time here. I got no clues to my father's whereabouts, and you did not acquire a new pawn."

"Not entirely wasted. We have eliminated a dead end—and in that sense alone, this was productive."

"Aha. I see. You do have a clever mind. But it has been awhile since I met you in this form."

"Yes, it has, Risuka."

"Would you like a kiss?"

"Pfft. No thanks. Wait till I'm grown up."

"You're no fun. Either way, looks like my time's up."

Risuka began to melt, her time crumbling away. One minute—that was how long Risuka could remain twenty-seven years old, the only limit on her presence in this time. A necessary limit built into the Magic Formula—Magic Sigil, that impossibly high-level magic.

"See you again."

"Probably."

Risuka winked at me . . . and time moved backward, something that was normally impossible. Her flesh melted, her form turning liquid, everything crumpling faster, faster, until all that remained . . .



"Still . . . I mean, it makes sense that the train driver was the killer . . . but how did you know, Risuka? I can see how the

front of the train would be the best place to be, but how does that prove he wasn't actually on the second platform?"

"Mm?" Risuka said. "Mm . . . Good point."

She had exhausted her magic and been unable to jump home from the police hospital. She had sneaked out of the hospital with me and headed for the nearest station. A station on the same line as New Kizuna Station. Risuka was ten years old again. Not just returned to normal—but ten in the absolute sense. Other than the hat and knife, there was no sign she had ever been twenty-seven. The hat was too big for her again. Time had been canceled. Knowing how beautiful she would be in seventeen years did factor into my thoughts a little, but . . . it did not really matter. The Mizukura Risuka walking next to me, her handcuffs clanking, was the same person as the Red Witch of Time, the all-powerful, domineering queen. I felt more than a little sympathy for Risuka, faced with the task of developing her powers to that level in seventeen more years, but . . . that also did not matter. We had eliminated one waste of time—that had been the meaning in our work today. The only way to pare down options was to investigate them all, one by one. The Wind Master—a pawn I would not have objected to possessing, but since the man with that power was such a pathetic individual, it would have been useless. The only remaining problem was who, exactly, had taught Takamine magic, but . . . while we had no proof, Takamine had known the nickname "Red Witch of Time" and had been drawing formulas all over his hospital room, preparing for her arrival, which suggested . . . But even if it did, would Mizukura Shingo really do something like that? Would he really teach magic to a human who could never hope to master it? Was he aware that his daughter was chasing him? If he was, then—

"The train schedule."

"Mm?"

Heedless of my worries, Risuka was answering the question I had asked—a question I had asked without much interest. What had she said? The train schedule?

"The train schedule Kizutaka gave me. The xerox. The key to everything was that, really."

"I don't follow."

"Er, um . . . If I tell you, Kizutaka may be angry. Or perhaps just depressed."

"Me? What do you mean?"

"This is proof, not theory. Today is Sunday, also the right time. Let us go see."

"Go? Where?"

"New Kizuna Station."

I didn't understand, but I followed her lead. We went to the nearest station and rode away from home, back to New Kizuna Station. We got off on the second platform. Risuka stood in the best position—not counting the driver's seat. "Here, yes?" she said, checking. I nodded.

"Kizutaka . . ."

"Mm?"

"I don't want to grow up."

"Huh? Where'd that come from?"

"If I am grown-up, everything is boring. I don't mean Takamine only—there are boring grown-ups everywhere . . . even my father . . ."

"But if you grow up, you gain power."

She did not answer.

"True for you, true for me. Things we can't do now, we will be able to do when we're grown-up."

"I still do not want to grow up."

" . . . I guess I understand," I said, nodding. Risuka's personality in seventeen years—aggressive, heedless of her sur-

roundings, self-righteous. But that was only symbolic. Everyone ended up like that, more or less. Risuka knew that better than anyone and had been left hating the idea of her own magic maturing. "But I want power. Power that will let me control everything. If they are fools, possibly so foolish they have no right to live—then they must be controlled by someone like me, and to do that, I need absolute power."

"A difference of opinion, then," Risuka said. "I knew the driver was the killer by the process of elimination. To activate the Magic Formula, the killer had to have been nearby—but there were too many problems with the first platform, and the second platform was also no good. That naturally led to the answer."

"No, wait—we haven't ruled out the second platform yet, have we?"

"It was simply impossible," Risuka said, sliding the blade of her utility knife in and out. *Schk schk schk schk . . . schk schk schk schk . . .* "Now is . . . 6:20. The train will come in twelve minutes. Today is Sunday, so the schedule is the same."

"Just say it already."

"Kizutaka, go to the first platform and stand there," she said, pointing at the door marker directly across the tracks from us. "Tell me if you can see me from there."

" . . . All right."

I did as she said; up the stairs, down the stairs, and over to the first platform. I stood at the edge of it, looking across the four rails, looking for Risuka. Her red form was easy to make out. Red was the one color that could be picked out easily at just about any distance. That was why police cars flashed red. By the same logic, I instantly saw Risuka standing across from me. This was the spot; this was where I had seen the accident happen.

"Um . . . Risuka?" I called out, but at that voice, it would not reach the other side. "Risuka!?"

She waved. She'd seen me. Her eyes were not very good, so at this distance she would never have seen me if I hadn't shouted. And I was not wearing red clothes. So . . . why? Did she mean the second platform was too far away for the killer to see? But it didn't matter what we knew about Tahime Koutarou; at the time, we had only been looking for an unidentified killer, and we had no idea if he had good eyes or not. Or was there some statistical likelihood suggesting that the use of magic damaged vision?

"Hey! Kizutaka!" Risuka shouted. "Today was very fun!"
" . . . I guess so."

"Eh? I can't hear! I can't hear Kizutaka's voice!"

"I guess!" I yelled back. The platform was much more crowded than it had been at noon. I was a bit embarrassed, but they probably just assumed I was a dumb kid. I saw no reason to care if lower life-forms incapable of thought were looking at me. Whatever opinions of me they might form did not matter. None of them had any ability to evaluate. They would all die, clinging to common sense. "I said, I guess it was fun!"

"Maybe tomorrow will be more fun!"

"I'm sure it will!" I shouted confidently. "I'll make sure's even more thrilling! I promise I'll make your life worth-ing! I'll find your dad eventually! I'll even get rid of the Ce to Nagasaki someday, so . . . !"

So for a little while longer, I need you to remain my pawn. Doesn't matter if you're too much for me to handle or not, right now, I need you, Risuka. But before I could say anything, Risuka grinned.

"So let's be friends forever!"

While I was still left speechless, the PA system crackled

life. "Train approaching platform 2." The customary announcement I'd heard a thousand times. I tried to shout some objection or perhaps an curse back at Risuka, but no matter how loud I was, she could never have heard me over the announcement. Hmm . . . well. She could think what she liked. Whether she thought of her pawn or something else was up to her. As long as I saw her as my pawn—as long as I was sure of that, then I could make use of her. The longer I stayed with Risuka, the more useful people I would meet, whether they be magician or not. That was what mattered—she could think whatever she liked. I would generously allow her that freedom when: "Train approaching platform 1." The same announcement echoing over the top of the first one, like a round, this time it was on my side of the station—a round? Oh, ! "Please . . ." "Please . . ." "Remain behind . . ." "Remain bind . . ." "The yellow lines." "The yellow lines." The same round as the day of the accident! I looked at my watch: 6:32

"Risuka!" I looked up, looking for her—but I could no longer see her. The train had already entered the station and was slowing down to stop at the second platform. Its body was a wall, and I could not see out Risuka's red shape through it.

" . . . Ah, ahh . . . !"

A moment later, the train pulled up to the first platform. It was coming from the opposite direction, and at this end of the station—even if the train was the same time on the schedule, it would reach me a little later. That explained it—indeed, it was impossible to witness that truth from the second platform. The front of the train passed in front of me. I felt absolutely no desire to jump in front of it. I would never do something like that. A moment later, the round began again. "Train leaving . . ." "Train arriving . . ." "From platform

2 . . ." "From platform 1 . . ." The train on the other side moved first. I was at the front of the line but did not get on the train, so the fools behind me moved around me, climbing aboard. The doors closed, and the train pulled out, *ka-chunk, ka-chunk, ka-chunk*.

"Risuka!" I shouted again . . . but there was no one on the platform across from me. It was empty, as if she had skipped away through time. The people who had just gotten off the train glanced in my direction, surprised by the strange name, but soon went back to their own time. Feeling as if I'd been tricked, I scratched my head. Should I be angry? Or depressed? A little of both—even if four people had been pulped by a train right in front of me, I should not have forgotten the other train. Perhaps I had been a little excited, wondering if this case involved magic. Or perhaps worried that someone would suspect me. No, those were just excuses. From now on, I would have to pay attention to inorganic things as much as I did people. A perfect opportunity to get better at using them as well. With that in mind, I looked down at my left hand. Only a few hours had passed, and the new thumb was still a bit funny looking. I felt as if it were sneering up at me.

Naturally.

More than half my body was made from Risuka.

Subway accident is Q.E.D.