

steins;gem

nekosensei

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*Mad Steins;Gate spoilers are contained within.
Madoka Magica spoilers also contained within.*

Contents

Tradition dictates that we open the work with introspection and philosophy. Let us consider a twist, then, on the classic question: Can a multiverse of diverging world lines be justifiably called infinite? We can trivially *imagine* an infinity of different configurations, but there is no guarantee that every world which is possible is real, let alone reachable.

What is the scale and the scope of the possible? Our own universe is quite finely tuned: a mere half-percent adjustment to the strong nuclear force would make *carbon* a precious rare element, and a full 2% would make stars as we know them impossible; our existence is already an exercise in the arbitrary and ridiculous. Surely then we ought keep an open mind when it comes to exotic universes. One writer I know would have you imagine a spacetime with a positive-definite Riemannian metric, where one can stop or reverse the flow of time itself by flying about in a clockwork rocket!

In our universe of ridiculous universes, what laws must we find to be truly immutable? What mathematics underlies the last bastion of sanity as our imaginary universes teeter on the madness of seething, untameable chaos?

Chaos. Order. The progression of order to chaos. Surely, in any set of laws one can propose, it must remain a fact that there are more ways to be chaotic than there are to be ordered. Statistics, then, must rule over all, and the ultimate law of all universes is entropy.

But we must put aside our feeble poetry for now and return to our ship of fools. Oh, yes, they chase phantoms as before. What will happen, I wonder, if they catch one?

Part I

Girl in Blue

Chapter 1

Despair in Ergosphere

August 2011

"Oh no! I just wound you! Don't tell me you're broken," cries the hostage in blue, holding her grandmother's pocket watch and saying these words for - is it, perhaps, the first time?

If so, tell me, lone observer: How is it that you've heard it before?

Well. This time things may be a little different than you remember them.

"So not fair. I've taken extra good care of you and everything."

The hostage has been shot.

Under other circumstances, these words would have made a lot of sense together. There are many like them. The mad scientist, forever working to unseat the ruling world order, has just been betrayed by his friend - well, his casual acquaintance - and delivered into the arms of the mysterious world shadow government for they are, after all, bent on total world domination. But our mad scientist is an innocent young soul, years of wearing his role as an amusing game has warped his instincts, and, well, there had been one or two untimely distractions after that text in the supermarket...

But Okabe's mind is not capable of appreciating this fact right now. It can see only his best friend, tumbling to the floor, lying on her back in a pool of red - so much red! - still breathing, eyes gazing up at the ceiling, through the ceiling, to the stars. She does not cry at the pain; instead, she *smiles* (how brightly she smiles!)

and reaches up her hand to the sky and

(his own psyche teeters on the edge of its own event horizon. he may have said something. "what the hell is this!?! you'll pay for this!!" but he's not quite all there)

the door to the lab splinters, kicked in, its cheap lock no match for the fury of a skilled warrior. Okabe's mind is still not working, and it finds itself distracted (now of all times!) by the trivial, the broken door, his fear of a confrontation with Mr. Braun. A flush of shame burns his cheeks as he realizes its triviality, but now the dust has settled and Moeka is pointing a gun at Suzuha on the floor and she is pointing one back: click-click.

(The warrior understands on a level below conscious thought: Moeka is no trained killer, and unused to the adrenaline rush of combat, she will find it hard to pull the trigger a second time. But the betrayer might still react if Suzuha were to move suddenly, and if either of them shoot or of she waits too long the thugs will waste no time turning the room into a killing zone. She will rely on the gambit, then, and risk herself -)

"The 42 inch television downstairs. It's on."

The part of Okabe's mind that understood the broken door makes itself useful, now. The 42 inch television belongs to Mr. Braun. The 42 inch television acts as a lifter to power the *PhoneWave (Real Name TBD)*. He can send a D-mail. He can do better than a D-Mail. He can save his friend -

he lurches towards the computer, unsteady -

another gunshot (*LOUD*) (*half-deaf*)

the computer is already on (thank God for small favors), screensaver ends at the click of a button, he puts on the headphones -

another shot, and Kurisu jumps - flies - through the air, shielding him with her self to buy him the seconds he needs to disable 'test mode' and initiate the sequence (*I hope to God he was paying attention when I showed him that*)

but

her body is not enough, the bullet flies on through her shoulder and strikes the CRT monitor and the glass *implodes* before his eyes

and he is in terror and he cannot

breathe and

it's all impossible it's wrong how can it *be* can it *be more wrong*

all his hope be snatched away

and

then, he
hears the impossible scream.

As a would-be mad scientist, Okabe has joked about his hostage's screams of terror. Indeed, as he played at the classical mad scientist he would gladly pretend to have *many* opinions on the topic of screaming, and also possessed several real opinions on the subject of maniacal laughter. As a true friend, though, Okabe in fact knows his hostage's real scream from various misadventures together and the occasional horror movie. It is a shrill noise, loud enough, but with a tenuous, wavering quality. Would it be strange to say that he cherished this scream? for knows of her strength and also her fragility, cherishes this facet of her too.

Yet even as she fell, struck the floor, Mayuuri did not make a sound. Her landing, even, was implausibly soft; the short, violent journey to the doorway of death, impossibly peaceful.

The sound now hurting his ears is shrill, wavering, but impossibly loud, impossibly long, a terrible scream of *tortured agony* and brutal, animal rage. The building shakes, a little. The lights flicker and go out, fluorescence replaced with a crimson glow of the deepest, reddest red.

"Grandma?" asks the little girl.

"No, no." says the voice. "Not just yet."

"Oh. I thought for a moment that I had been ... shot. That I was going to die."

"It's okay. You were shot."

"Oh. It was - it was Moeka, wasn't it."

"Yes."

"So if you're not Grandma," inquires the girl, a little older than she was a moment ago, "are you an angel?"

The voice laughed. "I would be *honored* to be called that."

The girl turns to face the voice. "Oh!" she says in surprise. "For some reason it seemed like you might be very, very old. That's why I thought you might be Grandma. But you don't look old."

"You weren't wrong, and you weren't quite right either. I am older than the stars, and I am as young as you."

"You're beautiful."

"Thank you," says the gold-eyed angel.

The girl in the blue dress pauses a moment.

"Why did Moeka shoot me?"

"Well, it's a long story. Much of it is her fault. She shouldn't have done it. But there are others, too. They wanted to use her to get at Okabe."

"Oh," says the hostage. "That's sad. I sorta thought we ought to be friends."

"In a better world, you would be." The angel sighs a weary sigh.

"What's wrong?" asked the girl.

"There are many people to blame for this, Mayuuri. There's Moeka herself, but she never wanted this. There are very bad people who used Moeka, too. You can blame them a lot. There are people using the bad guys, and they're actually trying to make the world a better place, and it might even work. And these people were good people, once."

The angel pauses.

"Go on," says the hostage, patiently.

"And then there's me, and I'm trying to use the bad people, to help make good things happen instead of bad things. And that means people get hurt, and I know that they're going to get hurt. Tonight, the people getting hurt are you and your friends. I could have stopped them, but I didn't, because then I couldn't save the other people."

"Oh," said the girl, and paused. "You're an angel. You have to ... save everyone, I guess. I understand."

"And you're too kind," says the angel, looking down at her feet, ashamed. "And I know you're too kind, that I can tell you everything, and you'll say it's all okay. And I tell you it anyway."

"Hey now. You're a good person. I can tell. And I know it's not just because you look pretty. And you care. And you told me. I forgive you." Mayuuri leans over and gives the weeping angel a hug.

"I know," says the angel, "just as I know that I don't deserve it."

"Well, I would offer an Oopa pillow if I had one," notes the hostage, "but I don't have one, so it had to be me."

The angel nods. "Of course. Thank you."

They sat quietly a few moments.

"So is this heaven?"

"Oh, no," says the angel. "This is just a vision. I usually can't do these, but you're

a special exception. As a matter of fact, you're not dead yet, though you are very, very close."

"Oh," says Mayuuri. "Then what am I doing here?"

"I brought you here," says the angel, "for a few reasons. The immediate one is that you need more time than you have. The one that is closest to my heart - well - well, we have something in common, you and I. I once had a friend, a very best friend, who loved me and cared about me very much, and would do anything to keep me safe. You have one too."

"Okabe?" inquires the girl. "I know he's a very good friend. I hope he's okay, and that he doesn't get shot too."

"Your friend is like my friend. He loves you and cares about you very much. He would throw away his life to save yours, in the blink of an eye. He would walk through Hell again and again and again. He would ruin his life for you, many times over."

The girl in the blue dress *blushes* and looks away.

"That's... stupid. I don't want him to die. Even for me. Why would he do something like that?"

"Because he cannot bear losing you, and because he would blame himself. Even when it's not his fault. Oh, he was reckless, yes, but it's more my fault than it is his fault."

Mayuuri kicks at the ground, but there's not actually anything here besides these tow, so she kicks the nothing instead.

"You're like him too. You care about your friend a lot, and you would blame yourself if he got hurt, even though you are *more* blameless. You would be very brave for him. You would die for him too, if you had to. You want to protect him."

"Yes," declares the girl. "I ... I'm just not very good at it. But he's taken good care of me. And now... I'm about to die, aren't I."

The angel nods.

"There is a way", says the angel.

"How?"

"I'm afraid I can't *tell* you, not exactly, or it won't work. But I can help you to the start of the path."

Your wish has overcome entropy, begins the creature, but Mayuuri is already moving, screaming -

The floor is doused in red blood, and the room glows with a red light, and at the center of it all is Mayuuri, hovering in the air, a foot above the ground. She is not dressed in her sundress, but a maid costume, with many frills, a pocket-watch at her side, and it is all the same red as the blood on the floor.

Okabe is not sure if he's ever seen Mayuuri wear red before. On some academic level he supposes he probably has, but she favors the light blue. Maybe once as part of some cosplay?

Her hair is no longer than usual, not at all like the wig she would use at Queen May's. (*Lone observer, do you remember Queen May's?*)

(*Well, you shouldn't, because it never existed in this version of Akihabra. Are you cheating? Do you have a save-file editor?*)

And the mad scientist is now very confused, so he calls out.

"May - Mayuuri?"

The cat-girl's ears twitch, and she turns to face him, with a *hiss*. Okabe jumps back in surprise, and she *pounces* but not on Okabe, on the Organization operative behind behind him, just in front of Daru (who is lying on the floor). Now there is another scream, mixed with the ugly gurgle of blood.

Suzuha, to her credit, still has her wits about her, her foot against Moeka's neck, but she is agape.

"I've finally lost it," said Okabe to Daru. The pair of them have scrambled over to a corner. "None of this is real, is it. They're going to take me away, to the funny farm."

"Don't say that, dude. If - if that's the case I'm just as screwed as you are, and I will *not* look good in a size-84 straitjacket."

The red light faded, and there was a familiar giggling.

The assistant's voice calls out. "May ... Mayuuri? Is that you?"

"Mmm-hmm! You're all better meow. I'll go get Okarin. Okarin!!!"

Drawn by her voice, he stumbles to his feet, still trying to piece things together. The hostage is still a catgirl maid, but the terrible *red* is gone, replaced with sky-blue frills. Mayuuri blue.

Kurisu is whole, but confused. "How are you - what happened? You were hurt ..."

"Well, Meoweka shot me, but I became a magical girl so I could save all of you guys!"

Daru stared. "Magical ... catgirl ... Mayuuri? M... m..."

This would prove to be the impetus to get Kurisu back on her feet. "... Daru, I swear, if you say one word that is less than perfectly appropriate I will relieve you of your spine. Is that clear?"

"But we need to get going really soon meow. They might have brought backup."

"Do we need to take the time machine?" asked Kurisu.

"It's too much. We can't possibly carry it all. Just ... take the important pieces and ... destroy the rest," declared the mad scientist. "We'll burn down the lab to destroy the evidence."

"Gather what you can, then," said Suzuha. "I'll go hot-wire a car."

"We've met online before, you and me," said Suzuha, loading the partially disassembled microwave into the hatchback. "I post as John Titor. I'm a time traveler."

"I hid my posts in plain sight," revealed the mad scientist...

Suzuha drove the car and explained at the same time.

"By the year 2036, the UN was dissolved amidst a full-out nuclear war. The Emergency Defense Committee which replaces them immediately began to stamp out dissent. Democracy is nothing but a memory. People sleepwalk through their lives, completely devoid of hope. Opposition is treason... and treason is death. At the heart of the Council's reign of terror is a shadow organization, the true world government, pulling the strings. Their ultimate trump card: the time machine. Their research arm is known to the public as SERN."

"Nuclear war..." said Kurisu, in shock.

The cat-girl-maid took her hand, wordlessly. She contemplating the empty space in front of her with a distracted, thoughtful look, one which would have been more characteristic of Okabe.

"A war arranged by the shadow organi-" she paused. "Okay, everyone, stay calm."

"What's wrong?"

"Enemy ahead. But they don't know we're in a car, so they might looking for us yet. Just play it cool, don't try to look."

They passed a van, and turned the corner.

"MSY Deliveries?" asked Daru. "But they're all over town..."

Suzuha nodded. "One of the organization's oldest fronts. They do real deliveries, but there are ties to the Yakuza. I'll take a detour, make sure they can't follow us. Play it cool."

She slowed, turning the van down an alley - then stopped, and shifted into reverse.

"Oh... oh, shit."

"What's wrong??"

"totally screwed we're *totally screwed*."

"Maybe we can negotiate! We have a hostage!" Daru looked back to the trunk, where Moeka was tied up.

"NO!" said Mayuuri. "No hostages. That's *my* job and I'm not letting you give it to anybody else. Besides, it's not really her fault."

"Not her fault?" said Kurisu, from the front seat. "How - I mean, I don't like the idea either, but - Mayuuri, she *shot* you! By all rights you should be dead right now, and -"

"No buts. You can tie her up for meow to be safe, but no being mean. She's not the bad guy here, she's just ... very confused. Besides, they probably don't really care if she gets hurt."

Suzuha *squealed* around the corner, and Okabe slammed into Mayuuri.

"Hey, careful!" said Daru.

"Oof!" said Mayuuri, but she had a distracted look.

"Confound it, woman! Where did you learn to drive?!" exclaimed Okarin.

Suzuha wore a grim expression. "Right, so guys, I don't know how to say this - well, no, I mean, I already said we're totally screwed - I think they followed me."

The black car from the alley swerved around the corner. Its headlights were still off.

"While I fully concur with the accuracy of your assessment, I'd say that it runs a little bit on the *obvious* side of things!"

"No, from 2036."

Kurisu was a little taken aback. "What? How ... I mean, the *physics* involved; if you change the future ..."

"Yeah the physics involved all work out fine if we're in a closed timelike curve where we were all *doomed before I started*."

"Oh. Shit." Daru swore.

"Exactly."

Okabe looked out the rear window. The black car was gaining on them. The driver was a girl with long red hair, and a ponytail - a young girl, younger than Suzuha. She wore an unsettling smile.

"Looking on the bright side", said Suzuha, "there are a couple of other unsettling possibilities. For instance right now I'm just *assuming* that we're being chased by a robot assassin from the future. It could be that SERN already has that technology." She laughed a nervous laugh.

"Robot assassin??!" asked Daru.

"SERN's top enforcers. Incredibly dangerous. They ... don't experience pain. You can shoot them full of holes and they just don't stop. And apparently someone has a depraved sense of humor because they all look like teenage girls." Suzuha ran a red light as she explained.

"Oh, how lovely," said Kurisu, with a nervous tone.

"I'm going to be honest with you," said Suzuha, "most people don't survive an encounter."

"What is she doing?" asked Okabe, staring.

The pursuer had opened the car door, and placed a hand on the top of the car. In a single, swift movement, she flipped herself onto the roof. The car, somehow, kept driving - accelerated, even.

Okabe's mind reached for something to say: an obscure curse, an appeal to Norse gods, a plea in the name of Science. He found nothing.

A mid-air somersault later, the girl was on the roof.

"Everyone sit tight," said Mayuuri. "I'm going to try and talk to her."

Suzuha swerved wildly, hoping to shake off the attacker. "No! We can't let them have it!" She took in her surroundings, made one last turn onto a bridge over the river.

"Are you out of your mind?!" exclaimed Daru.

knock knock knock, went a sound on the driver's window. A muffled voice came through the glass. "You guys mind stopping?"

"You won't take us alive!" exclaimed Suzuha, pulled the steering wheel *hard* the girl flew off the roof and onto the deck of the bridge, but she rolled over, out of control, on its roof, back upright for a moment but still flying through the air smashed a guardrail, and off the side of the bridge, they were falling and "Okarin!" cried Mayuuri, reached for his hand - grabbed it and **splash**

for a moment all Okarin saw was *red*

The floor is doused in red blood, and the room glows with a red light, and at the center of it all is Mayuuri, hovering in the air, a foot above the ground. She is not dressed in her sundress, but a maid costume, with many frills, a pocket-watch at her side, and it is all the same red as the blood on the floor.

Okabe has seen Mayuuri wear red before. It wasn't even that long ago. What he doesn't understand is why he's seeing it again.

The cat-girl's ears twitch, and she turns to face him, with a *hiss*. Okabe jumps back in surprise, and she *pounces* but not on Okabe, on the Organization operative behind behind him, just in front of Daru (who is lying on the floor). Now there is another scream, mixed with the ugly gurgle of blood.

Suzuha, to her credit, still has her wits about her, her foot against Moeka's neck, but she is agape.

"I don't get it," said Okabe. He was less panicked than before, still a little shaken, but ... it was just surreal, at this point. "How? It doesn't make sense. Have I actually gone mad? We were in the car ..."

Daru looked at him funny. "Dude... pull it together. You're way too calm, and you're kinda scaring me, and - I mean - given what just happened that takes some doing."

The red light faded, and there was a familiar giggling.

The assistant's voice calls out. "May ... Mayuuri? Is that you?"

"Mmm-hmm! You're all better meow. I'll go get Okarin. Okarin!!! We're back!"

"Back?"

Kurusu is whole, but confused. "How are you - what happened? You were hurt ..."

"Well, Meoweka shot me, but I became a magical girl so I could save all of you guys!"

Daru stared. "Magical ... catgirl ... Mayuuri? M... m..."

"... Daru, I swear, if you say one word that is less than perfectly appropriate I will relieve you of your spine. Is that clear?"

"But we need to get going really soon meow. There might have some backup and there are probably more bad guys waiting nearby just in case one of us tried to escape, so they can give chase."

"Do we need to take the time machine?" asked Kurisu.

"... Just the important parts," said Okabe, pulling himself back together. "The phone-wave unit. Computer. Headset. We'll find another monitor."

"Gather what you can, then," said Suzuha. "I'll go hot-wire a car."

"No driving it off a bridge this time, Titor!" exclaimed Okabe.

"... wait, what?" Suzuha froze.

"That's right. I know your game, future-girl. You're a time traveler from the year 2036. Did you really think you could hide your online identity from the great Houin Kyouma?!!? Your operational security is no match for my towering intellect! You're just lucky that we're on the same side."

"*Okarin!*" said Mayuuri. "Be *nice*."

"... right, sorry. The car! We shall converse while we are en route!"

Chapter 2

It Is An Accursed Business

July 2009

The transfer student was trying to get out of an awkward conversation.

"Are you protecting her? Just - let me know, and I'll let the matter drop."

It was a hot July afternoon, several months after the transfer student had transferred in. School was letting out, and she'd gone up to the roof: more to find a moment of quiet reflection than anything else, but it made a fine place to look out over the city for signs of miasma. The weather this time of year usually meant that she had it to herself, but today was clearly an exception.

"I told you before, I don't know anything," she replied.

"Yes, well, you were lying then and you're lying now," observed the busybody, ever-so-politely.

The transfer student closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. Maybe if she ignored the problem it would just go away.

"I'm sorry, but I know it's true," insisted the interloper.

In lieu of a reply, the other girl fiddled with her ribbon.

"Please. I know ... I know it's probably my fault, but she was ... she was my best friend." She looked down at the ground - struggling to maintain her composure.

Homura stopped fidgeting. *Damn it*, she thought. The worst thing is, she only knows half of what she was missing: not one, but *two* best friends, lost forever. It was quite sad.

She sighed quietly. When considered that way, well... she really should probably say *something* about it. *It's probably what she would have wanted*, considered Homura. *Actually, she would probably try to have us be friends with each other.*

The idea brought a wave of nostalgia. They *had* been friends before. Not for long, and long ago, but it wasn't a bad timeline, really, before Oriko had messed everything up. How many years had it been? Best not to think about that one too hard. A meaningless question in many ways. Forget about it.

But then again, if Hitomi *was* a friend, well, then, she's someone worth protecting.

Okay. Protection. I've still got this.

"I'm not protecting her. I'm protecting *you*. She was my friend too," said Homura, deliberately opaque in the phrasing, "and ... well, I'm sorry for brushing you off, but, it's kind of hard for me to talk about it."

Hitomi looked up at her with an uncertain expression, not quite sure what to think. Akemi-san, always cool and collected, was shaking - just a little - her voice unsteady.

"But, the thing is ... that difficulty ... it's all part and parcel of the reason I shouldn't tell you. Shizuki-san, please, if you listen to me at all, remember this. You don't want to know. No good can ever come of knowing. It is an accursed business, and you should have no part of it. *Do not seek to understand.* It has brought despair and ruin to many girls before Sayaka-chan, and it will not stop with her. One day, it will be the end of me, as well." She took a deep breath. It came out ... more emotional than she had planned.

Hitomi blinked. "So she is dead, then."

"It was the night she disappeared, the night of the concert - not even far from the concert. Her corpse? Annihilated. If it helps, I suppose, you should know that she went out trying to do the right thing, trying - hell, trying to be a true ally of justice. An exercise in futility, but she was never one to let that stop her. Stupid girl, but a brave heart... I'm sorry. I'm no good at eulogies. But you should think well of her." *And in the name of Kaname Madoka-chan, don't try to follow in her footsteps*, she added mentally.

"Oh." Hitomi closed her eyes, reflecting. "That's ... thank you, Akemi-san."

"You may call me Homura, if you like."

"Thank you, then, Homura-san. I guess ... well, it might have been a little self-centered, but, I was sure, I was almost *completely* sure, that it was about Kamijo-chan, and that it was all my fault."

It was about Kamijo, and it was your fault, thought Homura. *But what do you even say to that?* She reflected a moment.

"It was inevitable," she finally said, just a moment too late.

"... But it was still my fault."

Homura inhaled. "It's not -"

"It's okay," interrupted Hitomi. "You don't ... you don't have to pretend for my sake, or out of politeness."

Again, thought Homura. She'd paused too long, and now she was doing it *again*, still unsure of what to say. *Am I just that easy to read? Or am I out of practice? Wow, Homura. Two hundred months of the same conversations and you've forgotten how to talk to real live people...* Or ... no, when you got down to it, that was something she never actually learned to begin with.

"It... it's okay, I'll ... I'll just leave you be, Homura-san."

"Hitomi-san," she called – but the other girl was already running off.

Hitomi managed, somehow, *not* to cry until she had made it to her locker, and even then only for a bit. At home, though, safely cocooned in a pile of blankets and pillows, it was another matter.

"Well," said Mami-senpai. "What's done is done, I suppose. At the rate things are going, it's the last of our problems if she finds out more. And don't be too hard on yourself. It's not a bad thing to reach out and try to make a friend, you know. It's pretty lonely these days."

The other girl pondered. It *was* pretty empty these days, but she liked it better empty. Mami always had a bad habit of putting on airs to impress the less experienced girls - even Kyoko, if only as a matter of habit. Now, though, there was no reason save the force of habit to play at being anything but cynical old veterans. It was a small comfort.

Still, it wouldn't do to say so out loud.

"I did my best to warn her away, at least," said Homura.

A moment later, she started to laugh.

"What?"

"Oh, just - warning her away. Knowing my luck, that means she'll contract in a month, *maximum*."

"You," said Mami, "are too hard on yourself, as usual. You're not so unlucky as you say you are. In combat, you're about as good as I am, and if I may say so myself, that is really *very* good."

"Being good in a fight means you *don't* leave *anything* to luck."

"That .. is true enough," noted Mami.

They looked out over the city in silence, for a moment.

"So, speaking of people who blame themselves for Sayaka, and really shouldn't," asked Mami, quietly, "where do you think she'd be out wandering tonight?"

Homura shrugged. "In this heat? Somewhere with a beach, maybe."

The girl with red hair was not very good at wandering in the wilderness. For a week or three she had managed well enough, but one day after a mean little fight with some demons (and some girls who were doing a very bad job of stopping them) she'd gone into a train station, applied a very small amount of magic to a ticket machine (in lieu of cash) and found that her magical one-way ticket on the *next train to anywhere* was valid for all stations in Kazamino. Call it fate, perhaps.

So Kyoko went home. At least the local riff-raff would know better than to mess with her. She didn't mind the fights themselves, and frightening idiots was always a bit of an adrenaline rush, but badly hurting them when they kept *throwing themselves at you*, heedless of their own well-being... that was just depressing. Especially now. Better to be the legend, the scary girl everyone knew and avoided, *the Heretic of Kazamino City*. (They had wanted to call her a demon, but decided it was confusing.)

She disembarked at Kazamino North Station, a run-down part of town (Kazamino was no Mitakihara, that was certain) filled with old offices and the occasional warehouse. It was a slightly longer walk, but the streets would be emptier this way, especially on a weekend.

Eventually she reached the ruins.

When was it she been here last? Was it really with Miki-san? It seemed recent, and yet so long ago. *This must be what it is to grow old*, she realized. The neighborhood was looking rougher than it used to be, trash in the streets, graffiti, ruin inviting neglect. It looks like one of the corner groceries here had gone out of business, too. A nice black car, darkened windows, parked in front of an apartment block across the way, a little out of place. Huh.

The front door had fallen in last visit, hinges detached from the damaged frame. It lay there on the ground, unmoved. This was only natural, but still managed to

unnerv her. It didn't feel right. Or maybe...

Hmm. Maybe it didn't feel right because someone else was here.

"Hey! What's the big idea?" she shouted.

The other girl was dressed in white, a nice outfit - Sunday best, perhaps, blouse trimmed with a bow and lace - seated, hands folded in her lap, in the front pew. She turned to face Kyoko.

"Oh. I thought this was a place for contemplation," she said. "I'm sorry. I can leave if I'm bothering you."

Kyoko tilted her head to the side. "Huh. You sure picked a funny church to come pray."

"I know the history."

"Mmh. Well," replied the red girl, walking forward down the aisle. "Contemplation, huh. I guess it's still good for that." There was something about the girl which was bugging her, but she couldn't quite place it - something besides the fact that she was here to begin with, that is.

"Do you suppose God is real?" asked the girl in white. "Heaven? I wonder, sometimes. I could never see what comes after the end."

Oh, thought Kyoko, stopping in her tracks, tensing as she recognized the figure. It's her. The one with the bucket for a hat.

Kyoko had heard of Oriko more than seen her - usually she'd stay well away from combat, and it was her team full of murder-psychos that they'd meet. It was really annoying, because Oriko had precognitive powers, so her team would always know *exactly when* another group was overwhelmed and would swoop in, steal your hard-earned grief cubes, and occasionally stab magical girls in the face. Hard to sneak up on someone like that, easy to be ambushed. Through some good fortune, the Mitakihara Four only had occasional skirmishes, but the trail of bodies was legendary. Best to stay away, unless you didn't know any better, which is probably how that little girl ended up with the group...

And given it was probably her driver who had parked out in front, so, she might have brought her team, which means this could be her ambush right here, and -

"Kirika's outside, but I asked her to stay put. I didn't come here to fight you, Kyoko."

Kyoko exhaled. "What, so you came to talk religion?"

"Is that so strange? We each have what you might call a unique perspective."

"Hmh. You want unique, you should go back to Mitakihara and talk to Akemi-

san."

"Yes, well, I'm afraid she doesn't trust me. Apparently I hurt one of her friends in a previous life, I think. She's not very forthcoming about it, though. She never is."

"I don't exactly trust you either."

"I have a bad habit of unsettling people, I know." She reached into the back of the pew, pulling out a slightly moldy missal, opened it to a page in the middle, and began to read. "Death with life contended; combat, strangely ended. Life's own champion, slain, yet lives to reign... Angels, there attesting. Shroud, with grave-clothes, resting. Christ, my hope, has risen."

"Mm. That'd be an Easter sequence. You're a few weeks late."

"You came on Easter, didn't you?"

She had.

"... what's it to you?"

"And on Christmas. I find it strange. Many Christians have left the church for far less than what you have been through."

"Yeah, well, if you ask the church, we left a while *before* everything burned to the ground."

"The faithful heretic. A minor miracle. Even at the end of her rope, she cries out, 'Dear god, please just let me have one happy dream.'"

Kyoko glared.

"I'm sorry, I'm doing it again. I'll try to stop."

"You do that."

"It's a lovely place, though," said Oriko, "even in ruins. Stained glass, shattered. There's probably a metaphor in that, if you go looking for it. "

Kyoko sighed. "Actually, when I was little, I always wanted the windows to be more colorful, with lots of angels on them, but Dad was skeptical of those kinds of icons - and, of course, it was money, which we never had, not until the end."

Oriko nodded. "I guess I hadn't considered the theological implications of architecture."

"Oh, you can tell a lot about a church from that. I did a big report on it once for the bible study group. The Catholics really love the stained-glass saints and lots of busy color everywhere, but as you go north and west with the Reformation and the Protestants they prefer simple designs on fields of colors, or even just white, and

more geometry. White and wood interiors, too, and the *prettiest* pipe organs you ever did see. The eastern churches like to paint their saints on the ceiling, and if you go to America they have some that just meet in warehouses, and oh my god why am I telling you - "

"It's okay. I'll listen."

"You know you *really* don't live up to your reputation as the queen of the psycho-crazies, Mikuni-san," said Kyoko, just a little bit exasperated.

"Well, I can't say you're exactly the picture-perfect model of a juvenile delinquent yourself, Sakura-san."

For the first time in well over a year, laughter echoed through the church. "Yeah. Yeah, I was a real good little choir girl back in the day, wasn't I? Almost as sharp a dresser as you, if I'm honest."

She wasn't sure how long they talked, but Oriko left her with a bag of fresh apples and an open invitation to drop by next time she was in town. "No need to call ahead," she had noted; "stop by for dinner, maybe?" Okay, the idea was a little creepy.

Perhaps she would visit in a while anyway. Still, not too soon; maybe give it a few days, wait until the middle of the week. Besides, in this weather? Might as well take a little side trip and visit the beach.

make a contract with me, said the bunny - cat - thing to the emotional wreck, leaping onto a very elaborate canopy bed, *and*

Chapter 3

I'm Taking You Away to my Magical Realm

July 2009

"Oriko-onee-chan!!!" The little girl in green ran through the hall, and wrapped her arms around Oriko.

"Ah, Yuma-chan!"

"You're back!"

"Mmm-hmm. Right when I said I'd be back, right?"

Yuma nodded. "Right. It's exactly when. And Kirika is back too."

"Yep. She's gone to her room already."

"Is Hinata-san back yet?" asked Oriko.

"Don't you *knoow* if she's back?" asked Yuma.

Oriko shook her head No. "I only ever know things that are *going* to happen, silly. I don't know everything that's going on right now."

"Well," said Yuma, taking a deep breath, "Aina-senpai got back, and, and, Miroko-senpai did some magic in the hallway and trapped her in a giant ice cube and she said, she said, I've got you now, and, I'm taking you away to my magical realm, and, I'm going to have my way with ..."

"Oh my," interrupted Oriko, "I hope you stayed out of their way; that's ... a little bit of trouble."

"Yes! Trouble! The ice cube melted, and, there's a big, big, very big puddle, all over the floor."

"Goodness," said Oriko. "That won't do either. I hope you were on better behavior yourself, though."

"Mmm-hmm!" nodded Yuma, energetically. "I missed you though. Hey did my magic work?"

"It worked perfectly, of course." She scooped the little girl up in her arms, for a hug. "You're a magical genius, didn't you know?"

Yuma stuck out her tongue. "You keep saying that, but it's really really hard."

"Mmm-hmm. Hard work is behind every paragon of excellence in this world. Hard hard work. You're good at that, and you're really smart, and you have a *beautiful* imagination."

Yuma made a face. "Plus I'm super cute."

Oriko nodded. "Plus, you're super cute. And ticklish."

"Noooo!" squealed Yuma. "No tickles."

"Okay, no tickles. Do you want to pick our new story tonight?"

"No, you pick!"

"Oh, okay." Oriko pondered a moment, scanning the shelves. "I have just the thing. *The Secret Garden*."

Homura was having a bad morning when the delinquent showed up.

"How's it hanging, homu-slice?"

"In the interests of group harmony, I am going to pretend I didn't hear that, Sakura-san."

It was early in the morning, Kyoko was in the school uniform that she wore when she was pretending to have business on campus.

"Aww. You're just no fun anymore, Homura."

"We missed you these past weeks," said Homura, as flatly as ever. "We had speculated that you might have been at the beach."

"I - wait, now how'd you know that?"

"It is no use, Sakura-san. We have your number."

"Are you saying I'm predictable?"

"In the interests of group harmony, I would prefer to phrase it in a manner that

underscores the strength of our working relationship."

"Hey, I'll have you know that I do lots of unpredictable things."

"I'm quite sure. Will you be staying with us for a while, then?"

"I guess? I mean I haven't -"

"Enjoy your stay, then. We'll be starting the hunt from the usual spot. Let us know in advance if we should wait for you."

Kyoko said nothing.

A few seconds passed.

"... I must admit, you have surprised me here, Kyoko. I would have predicted another complaint about my attitude."

"Yeah, well, in the interest of group harmony, um, I suppose I can cut you some slack."

"Thank you. I appreciate it. Despite the facade of a cheery demeanor that I present the world, I am not having a good morning."

"Right," said Kyoko, pausing. "Anything I can do to make it better?"

"I'd greatly appreciate just talking business for the time being."

"Right. Well, I'll meet you guys at sundown, I guess? I'm a little low on cubes. Not badly, though. Will grab dinner ahead of time."

"Mmm-hmm."

"Hey, speaking of dinner, how's Team Psycho treating you of late?"

"Better than expected. They're busy bothering everybody else."

"Oh, that's... good, I guess."

"What does that have to do with dinner?"

"Oh, funny story. I went by my old place in Kazamino before the beach, and who do you think I run into?"

"A takoyaki vendor?" asked Homura.

"Nope! None other but the elusive Mikuni Oriko, herself, in the flesh. Just sitting around, waiting to talk to me."

Homura took a moment to consider that. "This does not bode well."

"No, it all turns out okay. We talk for a while, she invites me over to dinner, and of course because it's Oriko she's all like 'just come whenever, I'll be expecting you, because FORESIGHT.' Anyway, it was actually a real nice little talk."

"What did you talk about?"

Kyoko grinned. "Architecture."

"No, seriously."

"Seriously architecture. Didn't predict that one, did you?"

Homura tilted her head a bit to the side.

"Religious architecture, if it helps. A comparative study. She got me to totally nerd out; it was awesome."

"Oriko is bad news," said Homura, carefully, "and is probably up to no good. If I were you, I'd stay away."

"And what makes you the big expert on who's such bad news?"

"We ... have a history. It's not particularly pleasant. I prefer not talking about it."

"Sure. I suppose I can leave that be. *In the interest of group harmony.*"

"Thank you. I appreciate it."

"But I'm going anyway."

"Why?"

Kyoko signed. "Put yourself in my shoes for a minute, Homura. I mean, living outside the system is an okay deal for a magical girl. You've got lots of extra time to hunt, you can do whatever you want, it's *fun*. But you know what I really miss sometimes? A decent homemade meal. If there were a way to turn grief cubes into cash, I'd dine out, but I've got enough problems already. I don't want to be one of those girls who gets caught emptying ATMs and runs out of cubes in jail."

"Kyoko," said Homura, "I realize that this may sound a little far-fetched, but I do actually care about your well-being. The Southern Group is far more dangerous than the police, and Oriko is the worst of them. Visit at your peril."

"I'm touched," said Kyoko, and only a little sarcastically. "Well, I'll see you tonight, then, Akemi-san."

"Farewell, Kyoko."

Homura joined the crowd heading into class. It was annoying; she'd actually arrived a little earlier today, in hopes of avoiding people. Especially people like ...

"Homura-chan!" called a voice.

Hitomi is a friend. Madoka would want it that way, she reminded herself, taking a moment to breathe.

"Good morning, Shizuki-san. I'm sorry I can't talk, I'm running a little late," said Homura, carefully avoiding eye contact. *Well, she's doing better*, thought Homura.

"After school, then?"

"I'm afraid I have plans. Another time, maybe," replied Homura, turning to avoid her.

Please, Homura-chan, thought Hitomi. It's important.

On the steps to the school, in front of a crowd of a hundred, Akemi Homura, the calm girl, the coordinated girl, prefecture champion of the pole vault, spun around too fast, tripped down the stairs, and planted her face on the concrete sidewalk.

A cry went out from the crowd.

"Whoa!!"

"What the -"

"Is she okay? Call the nurse!"

Hitomi blinked several times. "Akemi ... san?"

"Why... just..." She propped herself up.

Mami. Can't handle this. Send help.

What? What's wrong? she replied.

"... just *wiped out* on the stairs!" said a student, rounding the corner.

Front of school. Our friend, Shizuki Hitomi.

Oh my goodness, is she all right? asked Mami, already hurrying in that direction.

What? No, she's fine, but I need to go put on a show for the nurse's office.

I'm not sure I understand, she said, reaching the front entryway, and edging her way through a bit of a crowd. She wasn't quite sure what to expect, but Homura picking herself off the pavement was not it.

"No, no, I'm fine, I was just startled," said Homura to a mousey little girl who was crouching beside her.

"Well, just to be safe you should stay put anyway. A concussion is serious business. I won't have you taking any chances on my watch," replied her attendant.

"Ah, Nakihara-san, I think she'll be okay," said Hitomi to the over-eager health rep. She tentatively walked forward to the pair.

"I don't have a concussion," said Homura. *Spare me,* she sent to Mami. *I do not need another health representative in my life right now.*

Are you okay, Homura-chan? asked a confused Mami.

Please, just end me now, said Homura, glaring up at Hitomi.

Mami looked up at Hitomi, and saw the fluffy white animal now perched on Hitomi's shoulder. *Oh. Oh!*

Miss Tomoe, this is Miss Shizuki, she sent to both girls, and in the interest of group harmony, I will leave you two with each other.

Ah, good morning~, replied Hitomi, sheepishly.

Four hours after I warned her, sent Homura. Four.

Kyoko was having second thoughts. What if this was a bad idea? An ambush? *But if they'd wanted an ambush, though, she thought, she could have surprised me at the church.*

Still. There was something unsettling about the idea that Oriko would be *expecting* her in advance. It was rather like Homura calling her predictable, except even more so. It was almost a question of free will.

Actually, it was exactly a question of free will. *Which is something Dad was always ambivalent about,* considered Kyoko, moodily. Somehow the question seemed more real coming from Oriko than from an omniscient god, though.

I'm distracted, she realized, *and I should be keeping an eye out in case of any surprises.* Was that just the breeze, or was there a rustling sound in the hedge -

she spun around, transforming, and spied the attacker, but it was too late, and

-
"Gotcha!" said a small voice as Kyoko felt someone grabbing her by the legs.

"Bwuaa?"

A little girl with green hair had leapt out of the bushes and attached herself to Kyoko's leg. *Oh, this one,* she thought. What was her name again? They'd bumped into each other on patrol before. She was pretty cute, actually.

"Um... hi?"

"Got ya!"

Kyoko sighed, exhaled, de-transformed. "You shouldn't sneak up on people like that. I could have hurt you by mistake."

"Oriko-onee-chan said it would be all right," declared the girl.

Of course she did, thought Kyoko.

"So, uh... Yuma-san, was it?"

"No!!" She shook her head. "Yuma - *chan*."

"So informal!" said Kyoko. "Yuma-chan, then, would you mind, ah, letting go

of my leg?"

Yuma shook her head No. "I've *got* you now, Kyoko - onee - *chan*," she declared with a bit of a sing-song voice, "and there is no way to escape my clutches, so I'm, I'm... I'm taking you away to my magical realm and, and, and, I will have my way with you." She concluded this little performance with a nod of satisfaction and a smile.

A flustered Kyoko ran that statement through her mind half a dozen times, trying to understand the implications. This was the Southern Group, though, legendary for violence and depravity. And here before her was a cute little girl, *completely at their mercy*...

This is not good.

"Okay, what the *hell* have these wierdoes been doing to you in there?" she cried in outrage. "Listen, Yuma-chan, if those wierdoes have hurt you – so help me, if they have so much as laid a *finger* on you – I will end them all, and burn this place down to the ground!"

Yuma let go suddenly and fell on her bottom, aghast.

"Wha.. no! *nooooo!*" She scrambled backwards for a moment, trying to get to her feet, and in a flash of green had transformed into her costume. "You won't do *anything* to Oriko-onee-chan without - without going through me!"

Kyoko took a moment to blink.

Yuma hissed.

"Whoa, hey, I - I'm sorry, this is some kind of misunderstanding. I'm sorry!"

"Not as sorry as you're going to be!" retorted the grade-school girl, pointing her staff at Kyoko. It wasn't very scary looking for a weapon, a large white fuzzy sphere with a cat-tail on the end of a stick, almost as ridiculous as her cat-ear bonnet with green pigtails sticking out. Still, it's generally a mistake to judge a magical girl harmless on looks alone, and a thing like that, well ... there was no telling what it could do; at least you knew what you were getting with a pointy stick.

Smooth move, me, thought Kyoko. *How do I de-escalate this?* Probably best not to transform.

"Hey, now, let's not fight! Especially out here on the street. I was just here to visit Oriko!"

"Then why did you say you were going to hurt her?" She pointed the staff at Kyoko, accusingly.

"It's, uh, hard to explain - well, *normally* little girls don't hear things like that,

unless someone's doing bad things to them. Where did you learn to say things like that?"

Yuma stood thinking. A few different thoughts came together in her mind.

"Oh," she said. "I guess... huh. Oriko said it was trouble too."

"Yeah, big trouble. I'm just worried they might have been... doing bad things to you. Hurting you."

"Oh..." She tensed. "bad things... no... not anymore." She looked up. "Oriko *saved* me... from bad things." She nodded her head, and her pigtails wobbled.

"Oh thank *god*," said Kyoko, relaxing. *That would be one nightmare I didn't need in my life.* "Can I see Oriko, though?"

Yuma pondered briefly.

"Okay, but ... *I'm keeping my eye on you, Kyoko - onee - chan!*"

Oriko was waiting in the garden when Yuma opened the gate.

"Watch out!" declared the little girl. "This one is Trouble."

"Oh goodness," said Oriko, pouring some tea. "Was there a slight misunderstanding?"

"Yeah, something like that," said Kyoko. "Bet you saw it coming, too, didn'tcha? Real funny."

"While I am guilty as charged," said Oriko, setting down the teapot, "I assure you that it is nothing to laugh about."

"Uh-huh. Mind giving me an explanation, then?"

"In just a moment," said Oriko. "First, though, there is a small matter to attend to."

"Oh yeah, what's that?"

"Yuma-chan, if you will?"

Yuma fished around in a pocket, withdrawing a weathered old skeleton key. With a reverent gesture, she carefully inserted it into the iron garden gate, closed her eyes, and turned it shut. A shimmer of green filled the air around them, magical energies tracing their way along the rosebushes of the garden wall, leaping into the sky to draw, in ethereal colors, a shifting mosaic of flower outlines in the sky.

"... Huh. Now that's real pretty," observed Kyoko.

"As an explanation," said Oriko, "this is Yuma-chan's magical realm."

"Oh." She looked around. Not just the sky, but everything seemed just a lit-

tle more magical. The wrought-iron garden chairs, already fancy, had turned to ivory and gold, and the scent of the roses was... not stronger, but somehow more exquisite, elaborate. Magical.

"It's a secret garden," explained Yuma. "It's for telling secrets."

"Secrets?"

"While we are in here, we have absolute privacy," explained Oriko. "No recording devices will work. No magic can see what we are doing. Even Kyubey cannot materialize here. One could force their way in, yes, but we could tell. Speaking of which," she turned to Yuma. "Yuma-chan, my dear, would you mind stepping away for a bit?"

"But - but - I just *got* her here!" objected Yuma.

"Sakura-san might have occasion to call me things that a young lady shouldn't hear. Besides, there will be plenty of time for you two to play later, I promise."

"Hmmpf. There'd better be!" she declared, marching off.

"Now. Won't you have some donabe?" inquired Oriko.

Kyoko sat down, helping herself to some food. "Privacy, huh? Sounds handy, but, uh, it's a little paranoid, isn't it?"

"Oh, no, not in the least," said Oriko. "The Incubators have been such *terrible* busybodies. Besides that, there's a magical girl who keeps spying on people's conversations, usually before they even happen. Even when she's in the conversation herself, later. Quite a bother, really. I thought I'd keep her honest for a bit. Has a lovely hat, though, if I do say so myself."

"Huh? Wait a minute," objected Kyoko. "I thought your whole *deal* was knowing the future. So why?"

"Why would I want to have a conversation where I don't already know how it ends?" asked Oriko. "What a terrible thought! I must just like a challenge. Perhaps I'm some sort of a masochist."

"A masochist, eh? Can't say I'd be surprised, with some of the company around here."

"Oh my. How do the cool kids say it these days, now? *Sick burn*, Sakura-san. But perhaps you'll fit in! We could find room here for a juvenile delinquent with a death wish."

"Death wish! I'm still alive, ain't I?" she demanded with a glower.

"Ah, that's right, I'm sorry. In the interests of group harmony, I should refer to it as a Tendency to Thrill-seeking behavior."

"Okay, do you just spy on all our team meetings?" asked Kyoko, a little annoyed.

"I prefer to spend my attention on matters that shape the future of humanity, affairs of truly earth-shattering importance. Do you fancy your team the center of the universe?"

"No, I think you're a little bit full of it, and a petty eavesdropper," said Kyoko, dismissively.

"Well, you're be wrong."

"*Definitely* an eavesdropper, though."

"You're wrong about the Mitakihara Four. You are *definitely* the center of the universe. I've checked. Akemi-san, perhaps, slightly more than the rest of you."

"Like hell we are," said Kyoko. "Besides, it's only *three* of us now. Two and a half, maybe, if I'm taking a vacation."

Oriko's smile dropped. "Yes, how lovely, a vacation! And to think, you can take as many as you like, wander through the world as you will, heedless of demons and other girl's territory, fearless! Fate is on your side, Kyoko. Did it ever cross your mind to ask the oracle how long you would live, how you were fated to die? Because she really can't tell you. You're *special*."

"Like hell I am," Kyoko retorted. Wait - she was repeating herself. "What is this? Are you trying to butter me up to sell me on some sort of a contract? Been there already; thanks."

"Simply put, Sakura-san, I am jealous. I've seen some of the ideas that the future has in store for me. Now, this may make me a bit of a sentimentalist, but I thought the one where little Yuma seized my tools, betrayed me, staged a demon attack and joined *your* team was particularly compelling."

Yuma played by the koi pond while her two onee-chans had an important conversation. She was entertaining mixed feelings on the matter. Oriko had promised that Kyoko-onee-chan would really like her and they'd be very good friends and do lots of fun together. But when she showed up she said she'd do mean things to Oriko. But maybe she didn't mean it. And she liked the garden.

But she had really wanted to take Kyoko to her magical realm so they could play together and have lots of fun, and that was kind of ruined.

She poked at surface of the fish-pond like a bored cat. *Which is good*, she considered, *because my costume is like a cat, and so there's syn... syner-somethings*, or so Oriko had said, *and it makes your magic happy*. Then you could do better

enchancements. And Yuma was going to be the bestest enchantress ever. Oriko had promised.

She also promised was going to be a lot of hard work, though. This wasn't as fun. She swatted at the surface of the pond in annoyance. *Splash*.

"Hey," said a fish in the koi pond. "Stop that. I'm trying to rehearse."

"I'm sorry!" said Yuma. She stopped.

"It's too late now," said the fish. "You've broken my concentration."

Something seemed a little bit off. Granted, fish were not normally supposed to talk, but this was a magic garden, so while it wouldn't do to ask too many questions, it wouldn't do to ask too few, either. Not for a big enchantment, anyway.

"It looked like you were just going in circles."

"Yes, and I lost count. Round and round and round she goes!" said the fish. Or was she a mermaid? It was hard to tell, looking at her; she was more like a shadow than a proper shape. "Where she'll stop, nobody knows!"

"What's your name?" she asked the shadow of a fish.

"Call me D-ko. Do you think I've done enough circles?"

"How many is enough?"

"As few as eternity, as many as the embryo of philosophy. Counter-clockwise, of course."

Yuma pondered. "That sounds like a lot more circles than I saw." Eternity seemed like it would be a lot of circles.

"Maybe if I go faster, then," said D-ko.

"Slow down, you'll make a whirlpool," objected Yuma. The water was whirling about already, and Yuma did *not* like the look of it.

"Ah, it is empty motion! Just empty motion!" cried the fish, whirling around at a most furious pace.

Yuma backed away from the koi pond. She didn't want to get sucked in by a whirlpool. It seemed like a good way to get wet. Best to go back to Oriko. It should be just around the next corner ...

Kyoko was regretting having come, but was trying to keep her cool, at least until she was done eating. The food was her excuse for coming, too, and she didn't want to give Mami and Homura something to gloat about. The conversation had degenerated, however.

"I won't deny it for a moment," said Oriko, replying to a point Kyoko had made about Yuma. "They are all absolutely terrible role models for her."

"I'm surprised an ojou-sama like yourself would even hang around with that crew," she said. "How'd you convince *any* of them to join a team? Especially Hinata Aina. More importantly, *why*?"

Oriko paused.

"You know, for all our conversation the other day," she finally said, "there is one thing you never really answered. Whether you really believe God is real, or if you just go back for other reasons."

"Truth?" asked Kyoko. "I'm kinda taking it a day at a time on the matter."

"Is today one of those days?"

Kyoko took a sip of tea. "Well, there's a cute little girl who *isn't* in nearly as much trouble as I thought she might be. I'm giving it a definite Maybe right now."

"I see," said Oriko.

"What about it?" asked Kyoko.

"Tell me, Sakura-san. When God decided to save the world, where did he begin? Did he by saving the nobility? The pretty princess ojou-samas with nice clothes? The politician's daughters?" She looked Kyoko in the eye. "Or did he start by making friends with the thugs, the prostitutes, and the rough men who slept out in the fields with the sheep? Did he come to save the prosperous, or the insane and broken people?"

Kyoko blinked. A dozen different replies leapt to mind, but they were all half-formed, and most of them ... most of them were probably better arguments *for* Oriko here than against her, if you got down to it. *Damn it*, she thought. She was supposed to be good at this stuff, but she was *badly* out of practice. More importantly, it was all backwards. *She* was supposed to be the one on that side of the argument.

In the daze of her confusion, Oriko pressed her argument.

"Consider little Yuna-chan. Her father was going to sell her to the Yakuza. We saved her. Before that, she was abused. Her mother would sometimes burn her face with cigarettes. On the forehead, under her bangs, so no one would see. And we stopped them. We kept Yuma-chan safe," said Oriko. "Now, the question I have for you is this: What if Yuma-chan were not so cute? What if she were a little older? Suppose she had an attitude. When would you say that she no longer deserves a second chance at life?"

Ah, thought Kyoko, the Devil himself can quote scripture, but... damn, how do I put it?

Oriko was finishing her argument. "If God were to save only pure and perfect people, if the world only had room for such as these, the only place for me would be at my father's side, spending the rest of my decades in prison."

"You know," said Kyoko, picking her final approach to the argument, "there's something to that. But the idea of being *saved* is that you work yourself to, like, *stop sinning*. You don't threaten people and tell them you're going to be running their spleen through a cheese grater."

"Oh dear," said Oriko. "That would have been Kirika-chan, then, wouldn't it."

"That's the one. Where is she, anyway?"

"She's *out*, at the moment. For what it's worth, I'm working hard to keep her out of trouble, *and* helping people."

"Uh-huh. Sure."

"In the beginning," said Oriko, "Kirika and I were chronically short on grief cubes and did what we had to, to keep alive. And you or anyone would have done the same, and you know it. It's different now. We have a nearly full team, we have Yuma-chan is here to help the fighters recover. We hunt the demons that other teams would have never noticed, and stay out of the way. We are prosperous and efficient. The time for viciousness and fighting other teams is behind us. We have a sustainable cycle, and make a tidy little profit. I forecast the demon spawns, the hunters track them down, and Yuma keeps us well. We step on fewer ties."

"Forecasts, huh." Kyoko swallowed some donabe. "That sounds pretty useful." She pondered a little.

"Yes, it's an excellent scheme," said Oriko. "And it works, and I can take it further. I'm hoping to cooperate with other teams, trade information for cubes. I could easily double what magical girls harvest in Mitakihara. Unfortunately, it all runs through me."

"What's unfortunate about that?" asked Kyoko.

"I only have so much attention," said Oriko, "and saving the magical girls of Mitakihara is not enough. I intend to save the whole world, not just the part where I live. What we *really* need is statistical modeling, something we can do without magic. It's frustrating, though. I've seen it in action, but I don't understand it well enough to re-create it here."

"Wait a second," said Kyoko. "You can *do* that? Predict demon spawns with... statistics?"

"In theory. Demons feed on human emotions, so it's essentially applied psychology and demographics."

"Huh," said Kyoko. "That's ... a really neat idea."

"Oh, that's *Akemi-san's* idea. I'm just stealing it. But I don't know quite enough math to make it work. Of course, *she* doesn't know enough yet either."

Kyoko looked at Oriko askance. "So let me get this straight. You can see the future, but you anything about it because you *don't know enough math*?" she inquired, on the edge of laughter. "That could be the funniest thing I ever heard."

Oriko grinned. "You think statistics are bad? Three words for you. *Quantum field theory*."

"Aw, *hell* no."

"*I have Feynman diagrams on my writing desk right now*."

Kyoko shuddered. "I don't even know what that *means* and I want nothing to do with it."

"And that's just the start. I've been copying engineering diagrams and schematics from memory for a *month*."

"Wait, schematics?" asked Kyoko. "You're trying to invent something from the future?"

"It's a long story," said Oriko. "The gist of it is that I'm trying to invent something so that *I don't have to do this anymore*. But it gets worse before it gets better." She pressed her hands together for a moment. "Worth it, though." She smiled.

"What's the payoff?" asked Kyoko.

The smile dropped.

"It's ... an end to a very bad business, hopefully," said Oriko. "I ... shouldn't say, not right now."

Something about her manner seemed familiar. *She's a lot like Akemi-san*, realized Kyoko, *when you get too close to one of her little secrets*.

Kyoko's thoughts were interrupted Yuma as returned, out of breath. "Kyoko-onee-chan!"

"Hey, squirt," said Kyoko, "what's up?"

"I was at the pond and I talked to the fish and she was swimming around in circles and she said, she said -"

"Wait, the fish talked?" asked Kyoko.

"What part of *magical realm* don't you understand?" asked Yuma. "Anyway she

was going *way too fast* so I came back but I got lost on the stairs on the way back."

Kyoko glimpsed in the direction Yuma had come from.

"I don't see any stairs. What kind of a magical realm are you running here?" asked Kyoko.

"It's a pocket!" said Yuma.

"A pocket?" Kyoko was confused.

"A pocket universe," amended Oriko. "Small worlds like this are useful, but the space likes to loop back around on itself, and they're quite sensitive to build-ups of emotional energy... especially with three magical girls inside them, and not much else."

"You do this often?" asked Kyoko.

"This is Yuma's second time. We practiced before you came. But there's a rather sophisticated book on the subject of enchantments that will tell you all about pocket realms. It's an excellent read - one of the foundational texts on magic, really."

Kyoko considered. "I don't remember *ever* hearing anything 'bout any books on mag - hey! Is this another one of your ... your future things?!"

"But of course. It's one of the reasons I'm teaching Yuma-chan all about magic."

Yuma nod-nod-nodded. "When I grow up I'm gonna be a beautiful enchantress."

"Izzat so," said Kyoko.

"Mmm-hmm! And we're going to be *best friends*, and go on adventures!"

"Oh. What *kind* of adventures?" Kyoko asked Yuma, with a wary glance at Kyoko.

"We can be, we can be, we can be Elite Secret Agents, saving the world from certain annihil - uh, annihilation, at the hands of an extra - an extra-terrestrial menace!" Yuma beamed.

"Yuma-chan, you're not old enough to be an elite secret agent yet," said Oriko.

"I thought you were going to be a beautiful enchantress?" asked Kyoko.

"A f - femme fatale!" said Yuma.

"Does this have anything to do with Mikune-san's little recruitment pitch, and why she asked me here today?" asked Kyoko.

"Actually, I was hoping to ask you for help with an errand," said Oriko. "After *that*, we're going to be taking down the Yakuza."

"Taking down the - are you out of your mind??!" exclaimed Kyoko.

"Well, it's another stolen idea, but *you* came up with this one."

"When did I do *that*?"

"... I want to say, 2040? Maybe 2045? I don't remember the date specifically," said Oriko.

"In what alternate universe is a magical girl like me still *alive* in 30 years?" demanded Kyoko.

"*In my universe, Sakura-san*," said Oriko.

In a more northerly portion of Mitakihara, three girls and an Incubator met on the school roof at the end of class.

"Ahh, good afternoon, Tomoe-senpai, Homura-chan" said Hitomi.

"Good afternoon, Shizuki-san. Welcome to the Mitakihara Three," said Mami. "We're glad to have you on the team."

"Mitakihara Four," said Homura. "I saw Sakura-san this morning. She should be here by nightfall... well, probably, anyway."

"Probably?" inquired Mami.

"She's having *dinner* with *Mikune Oriko*," said Homura.

"So she might be late?" asked Hitomi.

Mami and Homura glanced at one another.

Kyubey piped up from his perch on Hitomi's shoulder. "The Southern Group have a history of conflict, especially with the Mitakihara Four. I believe miss Akemi is concerned for miss Sakura's safety."

"Since you already know about Sayaka-chan," said Mami to Hitomi, "there's no point in candy-coating it. Magical girls can die in combat. In fact, it's quite common. It's one reason why we have teams. And it's not just a question of fighting demons; teams fight each other over territory. Oriko's team is notoriously violent. They've ganged up on girls, stolen their grief seeds, and left them to die at the hands of demons. They've given a lot of groups a lot of trouble, us especially."

Shizuki Hitomi nodded, solemnly. "Oh."

"I thought you said you wouldn't candy-coat it," said Homura. "I have no doubt that they have killed girls with their own hands."

Mami sighed. "Right. I wouldn't doubt it."

"Kyoko-chan has been on a reckless streak since Sayaka-chan met with her untimely end," explained Homura. "While the rest of us had a fine working relation-

ship with her, Sayaka was perhaps the first person she had gotten close to in a rather long time, despite their conflict of personalities - or perhaps, *because* of it. It culminated in Kyoko leaving town, under the auspices of 'wandering the wilderness'. But it's not safe to be a lone wolf, as a magical girl, especially not in someone else's territory."

"Being part of a team is what keeps us alive," said Mami, "especially when you're new. So it's very important. Fortunately, we're quite friendly - even Akemi-san! She's just intense."

"We are also understaffed, with or without Kyoko-chan." added Homura.

Mami nodded. "So we're very glad to have you."

"Oh, thank you so much," said Hitomi. "I'll work hard to do my best."

"That's the spirit," said Mami. "Your magic will generally teach you the basics of how to fight. What it won't really teach you is tactics, and how to work with someone else. Which brings me to the next point. We're all on the same team here, so we're kind stuck with another whether we like it or not. And we're going to go out there, every night, and put our lives into each others' hands. So it's important not to make this any harder than it has to be. We *need* to get along with each other; we simply can't afford to fight with ourselves."

"To be fair," said Homura, relaxed against the wall and idly leafing through a mathematics textbook, "a magical girl *can* take on demons by herself and win, almost every single time. But do not let that fool you into complacency. But when there is only one of you, it likewise only takes one mistake to die, and every fight is an opportunity to make that mistake. To leave your team is to invite death."

Mami nodded. "We place a lot of value on group harmony. You'll hear us say it a lot."

"In order to survive," said Homura, "we must accept and value each other, even as flawed and fallen people. And in order to thrive must put aside our differences and be fast friends. The brutal reality of our shared fate will put to lie many conceits and fantasies, but in one, we can yet find solace: that no matter what, our strongest arms in any fight are the sword of Love, the shield of Hope, and the armor of Friendship." She closed her book.

"Oh my, Akemi-san," said Mami. "That's ... that's quite lovely."

"It's harsher than it sounds. Not everyone can handle the true meaning of friendship. May the goddess preserve you, that you not be put to the test."

"The goddess?" said Hitomi? "Oh -"

"In the interest of group harmony," said Mami, "we do not tease Akemi-san

about her beliefs, and cherish them as part of her irreplaceable character, accepting her *unique* blessings with grace."

"Ah, um ..." Hitomi made a face. "Thank you, Akemi-san."

"Please, Hitomi-chan. We are friends now. Soon, we will be *close* friends. This is my friendly disposition, I assure you."

"... Homura-chan?" asked Hitomi, tentatively.

Homura actually smiled. "Thank you, Hitomi-chan. You will be in good hands here."

Oriko pushed aside the Feynman diagrams, pulled out a notebook, and began writing. *Yuma-chan greeted Kyoko with remark about magical realms. Probably imitating Miroko-san. Used Kyoko's distress at this to pitch salvation story for the team...* The details would take a while to get down in full, but she should have just enough time before the others got back.

As the sun was set, Kyoko snuck into the school through one of the side doors that was easy to unlock with a bit of magic.

She'd promised Oriko to think about it, nothing more, but questions gnawed at her. The prophetess had gotten under Kyoko's skin. It was... weird, definitely too much weird stuff going on there. She wouldn't be comfortable throwing in with a group like that. Besides, why was she even thinking of it anyway? She already *had* a group. It was high time she got back to them.

Certain remarks kept bothering her, though, like the one about the Mitakihara Four special to fate. If they were so special, why did Sayaka have to die? And she just wasn't quite willing to believe it was a mistake. That girl was playing a long game, and she knew *exactly* what she was saying. So what did it mean? Oriko wasn't implying Sayaka was still alive somehow, was she? No. No way. She couldn't be. Okay, sure, there was no body. But that's normal.

You know better, Kyoko, she told herself. You shouldn't be letting your imagination run wild. Get real.

Her train of thought was interrupted by the door to the roof. It was locked, which was unusual. Not a real obstacle, of course; another bit of magic and it was open. But it was *never* locked.

Homura was sitting on the roof, reading, idly stroking the resting Kyubey at her side. Kyoko let the door close itself, with a satisfying *clunk*.

"Good evening, Kyoko," said the Incubator, replying to the noise. "We were wondering when we'd have you back."

"Wondering *if* we would have you back," added Homura.

"Hey. Am I early or something?" She looked around for Mami. "I mean, sure, I didn't expect a big welcome-back party or anything, but locking the door in my face?"

"My apologies. We thought a little bit of extra privacy was in order today," replied Homura.

"Where's Mami?" Kyoko inquired, taking a look at what Homura was reading. It was a mathematics text. On a second inspection, it was a university-level mathematics text, *Intermediate Statistics*.

"She'll be back soon, but she's off playing senpai right now. It's her favorite."

A sparkle of magic glimmered in the distance. Mami, and ... someone unfamiliar. Kyoko understood. The Mitakihara *Four*, Oriko had said.

"Oh, that is *cold*, Homura" said Kyoko. "Sign up a new girl to the team when I'm gone, sure, *fine*. That's the price I pay. But you could have said something about it this morning."

"Oh, a funny coincidence, that," said Homura, turning a page -

Incoming! came a telepathic shout.

A magical seal formed itself on the roof around them, an elaborate fractal of delicate green lines and flowers. The surface of the roof glowed bright white. From the distance, a yellow-green projectile arced up, heading towards the school, leaving a trail of light behind it. As it drew closer a *non*-telepathic scream grew louder ...

pouff

The energies of the seal released themselves with a flurry of flower petals, slowing the incoming pair down as they landed on the roof, tumbling to a stop with a burst of laughter.

"That was a *little* more energetic than I had in mind," said Mami, looking at the sky from on her back. "Nice catch, though."

"You said... you said *get us both out of here fast*, and to go somewhere *safe*," replied Hitomi, picking herself up.

"Well, I suppose you delivered!"

Kyoko stared at the interloper. She had just materialized a tall silver staff with a great green gem on top to help her to her feet. With this she wore a flowing, floor-

length dress, green with white trim, that was pleated down the center with extra folds of fabric. The bodice, set off from the skirt with a ruffly pleplum, was adorned with military style details: large buttons, decorative waist pockets, shoulder pads with tassels, and a little cord which made a loop from her right shoulder to the center of her chest, just below her soul gem. The top was sleeveless, but there were showy cuffs at her wrist, held in place by goodness-knows-what - probably just magic, actually. Her hair was in an elaborate up-do, just a trifle dishevelled from her flight, held in place with a five-point *tiara*.

"Sakura Kyoko, this is Shizuki Hitomi," offered Kyubey. "She just made her contract yesterday evening."

"Oh, I know who *she* is," said Kyoko. "She's that violin boy's little princess, isn't she. Isn't that special."

Special. Favored by fate. Not like the girl she's replacing, obviously. Fate would never give a crap about her.

"Ah!" said Hitomi, still catching her breath. "Sakura-san. Very pleased to meet you."

"So tell me, princess, what did *you* wish for?" demanded Kyoko.

Homura looked up at her, surprised at her tone.

"Uhm," said Hitomi, surprised at the sudden attention, "I just ... I just wanted to do right by Sayaka-chan."

"Aww *hell* no," said Kyoko.

"Kyoko?" inquired Mami. "Is everything all right?"

"Hell no," repeated Kyoko. "Fuck this noise."

"Whoops!" said Kirika. "Looks like you're fresh out of grief cubes!" She dangled the stolen pouch full of treasure by its strings, feeling its weight. "A pity! You've been saving up, haven't you? How *responsible*! Your mentors would surely be pleased."

"Unfortunately, they can't help you *now*, little bitch," added Hinata Aina.

Miroko Mikiro gazed into the trapped girl's eyes. "There is no way to escape my clutches. Your soul is forfeit," she declared, holding aloft the gem, freshly pried from the girl's costume. She fended off a few more attempts at biting and jumped back.

Nakanishi squirmed in panic and in pain. "What are you ... what are you *doing*?" This was bad. She was completely at their mercy and, by all rights, ought be

dead by now. That she somehow *wasn't* (and was, instead, merely separated from her soul gem and trapped in Mikiru's ice cube prison up to her elbows) was perhaps *more* distressing than the alternative. And the grief cubes - if it were just hers, that would be one thing, but Nagisa-chan had been so generous with them. Perhaps if she could free just one hand...

"It's just what she said," Kirika explained, nonchalantly. "Your soul is forfeit. It belongs to us now." Kirika *liked* explaining. It was so much fun.

"I wonder what Oriko-san wants to do with it," said Aina, grinning. "I can't even begin to imagine. The possibilities are endless."

"Well, regardless," said Kirika. "It's the *soul* she wants; we can just leave her *body* here. We definitely don't need *that*."

"You know," said Aina, looking out the window, "there are boats out there in the park."

"What ... what does that have to do with anything??" asked Nakanishi, unable to concoct an appropriately depraved nautical scenario.

"I'm thinking, Viking funeral," replied Aina. "We can do burning *and* drowning at once. A beautiful way to go. Sheer poetry."

"No," declared Mikiru. "The ice would float. Or it would melt, and she would go free. Besides, it would drain her gem, and we want it intact. You can do it to dispose of the body, though. I will go on ahead with the soul."

"What do you mean?" demanded the prisoner.

Kirika leaned her back against the ice cube as Mikiru strode out of the building. "Listen. What's-*yer-name*. You're pretty new to the magical lifestyle, right? So I'm guessing your friends never told you how if a magical girl is more than 100 meters from her soul gem, her body goes limp, and she blacks out?"

"What?!? That's ... that's crazy. Why would that happen?"

Kirika smiled. "Because it's your *soul*, silly!"

While Nakanishi's eyes went wide in horror, Kirika reached out and put a finger to the trapped girl's nose. "Boop!" Then the body went limp.

"A classic performance," opined Kirika, with a golf clap. "The look on her face!"

"I'll go take care of the body," said Aina. "Don't you have an appointment?"

"Crap," said Kirika. "What time is it?"

When Kirika arrived at her appointment - on a rooftop, several miles away from

the school - she found Kyoko was sitting by herself, looking out over the city. It looked she was pretty bothered about something. But the redhead interrupted her seething to whirl about and point a spear at her neck.

"Hey, cool it, pocky-brains," said Kirika. "I come in peace."

"Like hell you do," said Kyoko.

"Got something for you from Oriko." She tossed a small pouch to Kyoko, and it landed at her feet. "Payment up front. No strings attached. Except the strings of fate, obviously. Always got those."

"I told her I'd *think* about working with her."

"Yeah, well, you just thought about it, didn't ya, so now I'm here," said Kirika. "Got some more things for you, too."

"Your boss couldn't be bothered to come out here herself?" asked Kyoko.

Kirika laughed. "That's not how it works, new girl. Everything's all planned out in advance, so that Oriko can check that it all still works. You'll never talk with her *during* a mission. That could mess it up."

Kyoko bent down, cautiously, to pick up the sack. That was... a very good number of grief cubes, actually.

"I guess you have my attention. What's this errand?"

"Deliver a letter," said Kirika, "and make two purchases at a certain convenience store."

"All this to play errand girl? What's the catch?"

Kirika reached out and offered Kyoko a slim envelope. She accepted it, warily, peeked inside.

"What is this? Plane tickets?"

"You're going to Amsterdam."

"Like hell I am! Hell, I don't even have a passport."

Kirika pulled out a larger envelope. "Sure you do. It was sitting in a fire safe in a church in Kazamino."

Kyoko snatched it, angrily. "What the hell? You were going through my stuff?"

"Could be," shrugged Kirika. "You kind of just left it there, though, you know? Didn't seem like you cared for it that much."

"Why Amsterdam?" demanded Kyoko.

"How's your English?" asked Kirika.

"It's crap. What does that have to do with anything?"

"They get lots of tourists there and they're pretty good with English. How's your French? German? Any better?"

"Hell no," said Kyoko.

"Well there you go."

Kyoko rummaged around a bit and extracted a stack of bills from the envelope, euros, mostly fifties. It was a *lot* of cash.

"Petty cash for expenses," said Kirika. "There's also a debit card, prepaid; you're supposed to get yourself something nice while you're over there. Treat yourself, just keep to the itinerary. If anyone asks, you're doing a self-directed study on cathedral architecture. There are some on the itinerary, by the way. You take the bullet train, head back via Paris, swing by Notre Dame along the way."

"What."

"Oh, and you get a gadget. Catch." She tossed Kyoko a small object.

"What's this?" It was a tetrahedron, black, with a white 0 inscribed on all each face.

"Grief cubes freak out the X-ray machines, so the airport security wants to go through them all by hand. You put that little toy in with them and they all disguise themselves as dice." Kirika grinned. "Pretty neat, huh?"

It was pretty neat. Elite secret agents, huh?

"I'll think about it," said Kyoko.

"Better think fast. Flight's in three hours."

"What the hell? Am I supposed to just sleep on the plane?"

Kirika shrugged. "It's what, a twelve hour flight? You were probably gonna do that anyway. Besides, isn't it supposed to be first class? That's supposed to help with the grief cubes at security, too. You get the special line and they don't ask as many questions."

"Holy shit," said Kyoko, checking the ticket again. She looked up at Kirika. "Seriously. Is all this actually *normal* for you guys?"

"The cloak-and-dagger? Kind of. It's been getting more fun. This one's a little over the top, though." Kirika beamed. "The look on your face is *amazing*."