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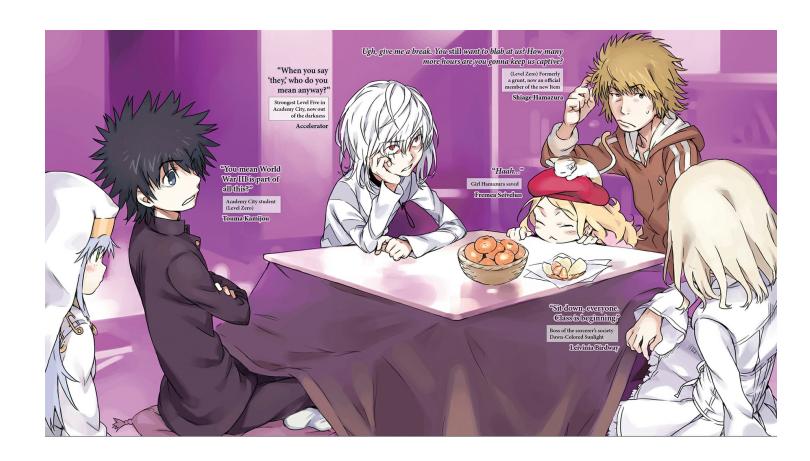
EPILOGUE RESPITE, BUT INTERPLAY IN THE DARK Birdway's Speech.

"Things my sister hates? I'd say underwear with big rabbits on them and literally anything bitter."

Little sister of the boss of a certain sorcerer's society

Patricia Birdway













## VOLUME 2

# KAZUMA KAMACHI ILLUSTRATION BY: KIYOTAKA HAIMURA



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A Certain Magical Index NT

**VOLUME 2** 

KAZUMA KAMACHI

Translation by Alice Prowse Cover art by Kiyotaka Haimura

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## **PROLOGUE**

#### A Threat Unaccounted For

Radiosonde Castle.

London, England.

St. George's Cathedral was swarming with people.

Call them priests and nuns, and technically, you would be correct.

Given their occupations, though, it would be more apt to refer to them as *sorcerers*. Numerous enough to shatter the cathedral's usual silence, men and women of every age crisscrossed and intersected, exchanging all manner of information while communicating with their allies in faraway places.

"What's the situation?" asked an Asian sorcerer named Kaori Kanzaki.

She had her black hair in a ponytail and her T-shirt tied up to bare her midriff; her denim jacket and pants were missing an entire sleeve and pant leg respectively, exposing her shoulder and thigh. Add the long Japanese katana hanging from her western-style belt to the mix, and she looked like the last person one would expect to have a connection with the Crossist Church. Nevertheless, she was the leader of a denomination brought over to Japan—their High Priestess.

"It's gained even more altitude than before," responded Sister Agnes.

She was a short girl, her hair tightly braided into locks the width of pencils. Originally, she'd been part of the Roman Orthodox Church.

"Fifty-two thousand meters," she continued. "It passed through UK airspace

and is on the verge of reaching the Eurasian continent...France, specifically."

Agnes waved her finger, and an image appeared on one of the cathedral's cold walls.

The airspace in the picture was so high up that it was bereft of clouds and almost entirely free of oxygen. Yet paradoxically, the lack of impurity in the clear blue sky gave one the impression that it was a hostile environment. In the middle of this scene was a floating cross-shaped structure.

With nothing else in the picture to provide a sense of scale, the size of the object was difficult to gauge, but...

"I hear it's twenty kilometers long and wide," said Kanzaki.

"If that thing falls out of the sky, we'll have another global ice age on our hands," said Agnes.

*"…"* 

Kanzaki looked at the image, her gaze sharpening a little. The structure's shape, its sense of scale, how it floated in the air like that—everything reminded her of a *different* fortress that had plunged the world into chaos, and she wasn't alone in that assessment.

"According to the intel the science side provided," said Agnes, continuing her report, "it's so high up that there's barely any air. No aircraft would have the power to stay at that altitude, because of... What did they call it? Dynamic lift? On the other hand, a rocket could get there, but it wouldn't be able to hang there indefinitely. It'd fly straight past that point in the sky, making it hard to interfere with the fortress. In any case, we won't be able to send paratroopers there."

"Then how is that thing floating there?" asked Kanzaki. "Magic, most likely...?"

"We can't say for sure." The short nun shook her head. "But apparently, one of Academy City's balloons can drift that high. What was it... A *mesosphere-capable radiosonde*, I think... Look—right around there. See that thing that looks like a gas tank?"

Agnes enlarged the image, revealing a couple hundred metallic spheres stationed on the underside of the cross-shaped fortress.

"For convenience, we're calling the target the Radiosonde Castle."

She paused for a moment before continuing.

"That group of balloons is the likeliest candidate for how it's generating buoyancy. The science side holds a similar viewpoint, but they don't know what kind of gas would be required to keep it afloat with that few tanks," she explained, adding, "We aren't sure if they *really* just don't know or are withholding information, though."

Kanzaki put a hand to her chin.

"...We don't even know if we're up against something scientific or magical," she pointed out to the nun. "And yet here it is all of a sudden, threatening to destroy the entire planet..."

"The higher-ups have formed a separate team dedicated to finding out where it came from. It rose into the sky from Iceland, so they'll be focusing on that region. I bet there will be plenty of other groups snooping around, too... But I think *you* should focus on your duties."

Kanzaki's job.

That went without saying. Her task was to resolve the Radiosonde Castle issue. They didn't know where the enemy intended to drop it, but they couldn't afford to wait and find out.

"Can you be more specific about my task?" she asked.

"The science side thought about shooting down the fortress with ballistic missiles," explained Agnes. "But like I said, nobody knows exactly how it's staying afloat. Even the balloons on the underside are just a hypothesis. If we're careless and damage its systems too much, it could plummet...and possibly cause as much destruction as a small planet crashing into Earth would."

"Then don't we need to find out how the castle is floating before they do something about it? We can't just observe from afar. We'll need to get up there ourselves."

"The primary objective is to figure out what's keeping it buoyant. You'll also need to decide on who, if anyone, to take with you, along with any weaponry or Soul Arms they'll need, whether it's to be used against the science side *or* the magic side."

Agnes went down her mental list.

"The best outcome would be for you to interfere with the source of its buoyancy right then and there so you can land it slowly and gently. Then we won't have an ice age on our hands."

"But like you said before, we don't have any way of boarding the castle," Kanzaki noted. "Aircraft can't get that much lift, and rockets would speed right past it. Right?"

She couldn't recommend magical flight here, either. There were heaps of spells that enabled flight, but spells for shooting down flying objects were very precise and could send a person or object plummeting at any moment. One of the of the main reasons flight spells were more easily countered was the widespread notoriety of the legend of Peter, one of the Twelve Apostles.

Naturally, there had to be someone keeping the castle afloat. Whether they were doing it with science or sorcery was anyone's guess, but if they were a sorcerer, it was more than likely they'd have countermeasures for any sorcery-based flight Kanzaki could use. In a situation where failure could mean the extinction of the human race, she couldn't afford to use such a method as unreliable as flight magic—not with the trump card she'd obtained.

"Regarding exactly what to do with Radiosonde Castle if you can interfere with it... Well, our leaders are still in talks with the science side about that," explained Agnes.

"...So they're weighing our options. And in the meantime, we wait."

As she stared at the image on the wall, Kanzaki realized she wasn't in control of her emotions.

Responding to a global threat?

This was exactly what a certain boy—one who had disappeared in the Arctic Ocean—had been doing, all to end World War III... Now Kanzaki finally knew

what that must have felt like.

She was a professional sorcerer, and she'd walked plenty of tightropes to resolve significant threats before. But ones of this scope? She could count them on one hand.

And while previous incidents had always taken place in a somewhat stable environment—where they *knew* the magic side was behind it—they weren't sure which side the enemy belonged to this time. In essence, almost all her prior experience was useless here.

But that boy had walked through such a world.

Moving between realms of science and magic, never even knowing if he was in a safe, stable place. And yet he'd battled many an enemy and averted many a tragedy.

...It's imprudent for a professional sorcerer to be thinking this way.

His existence was important.

So important that even she, one of fewer than twenty saints in the world, thought as much.

...If only he were here. He wouldn't even have to be on the battlefield—his presence alone would be enough. I can't help but think that would change everything...

Unfortunately, the boy had sunk into the Arctic Ocean. He was gone. And if they couldn't rely on him, then they'd just have to fight on in a world without him.

She doubted she was the only one who felt this way. Though the members of the Amakusa-Style Crossist Church, like Itsuwa and Saiji Tatemiya, didn't show it, she knew they'd all needed to steel themselves.

As Kanzaki chided herself for only being able to think of him in the past tense, Itsuwa—a member of the Japanese denomination she led—addressed her, palm covering the mic of her cell phone.

Itsuwa would have been just as depressed as Kanzaki, if not more so. However...

"...Umm, ma'am, I just received word that Kamijou is back in Academy City."

"What?! How?!"

## **CHAPTER 1**

## **A New Domain Called Sorcery**

<u>Lecture\_One.</u>

#### 1

Touma Kamijou. Accelerator. Shiage Hamazura.

With the Freshmen defeated and Fremea Seivelun safe and sound, they each took their cell phones out.

"Time to trade numbers."

"What a hassle..."

"Done and...done."

Hamazura fiddled with his phone, having changed out of his slim powered suit into normal clothing. Before doffing and hiding the suit, he'd used its communication features to contact someone; a group of people would soon be along to retrieve it.

"...What's with the torn string hanging off your phone anyway?" he asked Kamijou.

"Ack... The strap came off. Just my rotten luck..."

"You fell into the Arctic Ocean. It's a miracle your limbs are intact," said Birdway in astonishment. "...You want to come with me into the domain beyond? Well, if you only look at one side of the world, you won't be able to keep up. First things first—you've gotta look at the *other* side of the world. If

you hope to learn anything about them, that is."

They were apparently a huge problem, with connections to all the deepest places in the world. The reason Umidori Kuroyoru and Silvercross Alpha had been trying to use Fremea to kill Accelerator and Hamazura was to prepare themselves to battle *them*.

When Birdway referred to the other side of the world, she meant Academy City and the "science side's" opposite.

Magic.

"...All right, fine," spat Accelerator. "As long as it's stuff I need to know. But I can't afford to stand around talking for long. We took out the guys who were at the forefront of the threat, but that doesn't mean it's one-hundred-percent gone."

"True." Birdway nodded. "From what you're saying, the two of you... What were your names again? Anyway, we should assume the Freshmen must have seen a potential link between you as a significant risk. I'm up for finding somewhere we can sit and talk about it. We should look for other important takeaways like those."

"Sounds convenient," remarked Hamazura. "A little too convenient."

Birdway jerked her thumb back—toward Kamijou's face. "His house," she stated. "And it'll be a good chance for this idiot to apologize to *her*."

2

And so, Kamijou, Accelerator, Hamazura, Fremea, Birdway, and the black-suits under Birdway's command headed to Kamijou's high school dormitory. As they walked down the road under the setting sun, Kamijou was slouching for some reason.

"...What's wrong with you?" asked Hamazura, looking dubious.

"Well, it's just...," he replied weakly. "Apparently with all the World War III stuff that went down, they sort of decided I was dead. So, like... A lot of people are probably really worried about me, right? I don't know how I'm supposed to

face them and apologize for it."

I doubt I'll just get away with a few bite marks this time..., he added, though Hamazura didn't understand what that meant.

Birdway laughed in scorn. "But there's no reason to stay away if you're alive, right? And no matter how you proceed, you'll have to face them eventually. Might as well get it over with now."

"Maybe I should think of it as visiting the dentist..."

Watching Kamijou's mood plummet, Hamazura made a suggestion. "Hey, if you've gotta do it anyway, you might as well make a big splash with it."

"What do you mean?"

"Chug a beer or something. Get fired up."

Mikoto Misaka's state of mind had been gradually changing over the last few days. From the pit of despondency had risen anxiety and impatience.

At the end of World War III, Touma Kamijou had disappeared into the Arctic Ocean, along with the giant fortress. The very fact that he was right at the epicenter of the entire war made her suspect that something had forced things to end up that way—something that influenced the entire world. Even if that wasn't the direct cause of all this, she knew they'd have way more information—and more accurate information, at that—than she did.

Academy City.

And the darkness within it.

While she didn't want to get anywhere near the people of the underworld, their network had scraped together intel from across the globe that she'd never have access to otherwise.

Mikoto didn't have a clear connection to the darkness. But there were ways of getting in without one.

Those methods were risky, of course. They could easily realize she'd gotten in, and if they did, she knew they'd launch some kind of counterattack against her. The darkness might catch on to her even just *thinking* about messing with it and take measures to correct that.

...But still...

She needed to know if he was alive.

She couldn't just sit there wishing that were the case.

She wanted accurate information. Otherwise, she would no longer know how to proceed.

Her ideas had brought her this far, and she'd even begun to plan out an actual hacking process, when...

"Yooo... That you over there, Miko?"

Why was she hallucinating a drunk boy talking to her?

The spiky-haired illusion had a necktie wrapped around his forehead—she didn't know where he'd even gotten it—and between his index finger and thumb was a piece of string, from which dangled a box of sushi. He staggered over to her drunkenly, his legs bowed.

No, wait.

This was...

The boy wasn't an illusion created by the fifth-ranked Level Five esper in Academy City, but rather...

"What?! How?! Why?!" Mikoto shrieked. "What are you doing here?! You d-drowned in the Arctic Ocean during World War III, didn't you...? How the heck are you...?!"

"Brr. Right. Important stuff, forgot that."

"Yes! It's very important! Now tell me what happened after that. And why did you bust out of the city to go straight into the middle of a war zone anyway?!"

"Got a surva—soover—souvenir for you, Miko."

"That's not a souvenir! That sushi looks like it's from a famous skit from the eighties!"

"Woof, woof."

"No context, and you're not even speaking human anymore!...What is this

feeling? I know how to deal with my mom whenever she's sloshed, but I can't apply any of those experiences here!"

Mikoto stood there in bewilderment, clutching her new box of sushi. The drunken boy, however, appeared to think he'd done what he needed to and started tottering away somewhere.

But she couldn't afford to let him go.



Otherwise, she might not show up again for another three volumes.

That was what her gut told her, so she quickly chased him down.

"Wait a minute! Hey, wait! Screw this! You think I'm satisfied?! First, you leave without telling anyone, and then you come back without telling anyone! This is the day I finally get you to spit everything out!"

"There are...thirty-five days in November, right...?"

"Why you... Wake the heck uuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuu!" she screamed, unintentionally firing bluish-white sparks from her bangs.

She was the third-ranked Level Five in Academy City and the most powerful user of electricity. People called her Railgun because she could use her powers like a high-velocity firearm—she could control high-tension currents of up to one billion volts.

Because of that, even sparks of lightning she produced by accident packed a whole lot of destructive potential, but...

"Blehhh."

"Wh-what?!"

...the boy somehow avoided her electricity with a series of unnatural, drunken movements.

Mikoto went pale. The spiky-haired boy had the power to cancel out other people's abilities, though she didn't know how it worked or what part of his body he used to do it. He'd employed this technique many times to block her attacks in the past, but...

Did he not need his ability anymore?

Was that the message he was trying to send?

She'd been chasing him this whole time, and yet she wasn't worth any more seriousness than this? Was that what he was saying?

"Well, that's interesting..."

As she looked down, heat and emotion boiled and seethed within her. She hadn't been so eager for a fight in ages. Her third-place ranking meant she

barely had any chances to go all out. Now she felt she had one.

The drunken boy—Kamijou—looked at her. "S'wrong, Miko? You're all grinny. Somethin' good happen?"

"I—I am not grinning! And quit calling me that!"

"Wait, whaaa? Y'mean it's not bero—beburo—Bera Bera?"

"Argh! I have no idea what you're saying, but I feel like I should be denying something!" Mikoto waved her arms around in frustration. "My ability might be strong, but its real worth is its versatility! I'll show you just how many different kinds of attacks I can do, and... Wait, what?!"

By the time she pointed a sparking fingertip at the spiky-haired boy, he was nowhere to be found.

Panicking, she turned her head back and forth to look around and found him tottering a short distance away.

But the situation was changing by the moment.

So fast her thoughts couldn't keep up.

"Huh? What are you doing...in a place like this?" asked a girl as she walked up to the boy. She had black hair and would probably look great in a shrine maiden outfit.

"What?! Kami, you've got a lot of nerve to be taking a walk after skipping school!" shouted a girl (?) who was 135 centimeters tall, trying to catch hold of him.

"You! Kamijou! We're so busy with Ichihanaran Festival prep, and... Why do you smell like booze?! I can't believe this! Why are you trying to shorten your lifespan?!" yelled a high school girl whose chest was so big it pissed off Mikoto.

"Hey, it's Touma Kamijou. Touma Kamijou, huh? I don't really care about you, but let me purr like a cat anyway."

In the blink of an eye. In a single breath.

"Huh? Aren't you the one who called the ambulance during the Remnant incident?" asked Awaki Musujime, who had a pretty good rack herself but

would have been his enemy before.

"U-umm, it would have been nice if you'd said something about coming back," said a high school girl with enormous breasts and glasses who was wearing Kirigaoka Girls' Academy's winter uniform.

"Hey, it's Kamijou. I didn't think you would show up now, of all times," said a huge-boobed high school girl in a navy sailor uniform...

"Wait!" cried Mikoto. "Wait a minute! This is my scene! You all have to wait your turn! Crap. This is a weird demographic distribution. Like there are way too many girls here. And all the later ones have huge boobs! That's a dig at me, isn't it?! A-at this rate, I'll be lost in the background! If you want to hide a leaf, put it in a forest, I guess!"

The sparky girl screamed and yelled, but Kamijou didn't even seem to realize there was a crowd around him at all.

3

There once was a girl named Index.

She had silver hair that went down to her waist, green eyes, and fair skin that seemed to reflect all light. Somewhat shorter than average girls her age, she usually gave off a youthful impression. She wore a nun's habit colored like a teacup that consisted of white fabric decorated with gold foil. Some of the important seams on her habit had frayed, though, and they were being held together by big safety pins as a temporary measure.

Index was standing in a student dorm room in District 7 of Academy City.

It wasn't her room. She wasn't a student to begin with.

This room belonged to a certain boy. She'd been freeloading here. But the boy wasn't around. Nor was there any guarantee he'd come home. Given her background, she shouldn't have been staying in this city, much less continue to use this room. She ought to heed the advice of the group she really belonged to and go back to England.

But she just couldn't.

She couldn't help but think that he'd randomly show up one day. She really was convinced. Index had even started getting paranoid about the situation, thinking that if she gave up and left the boy's room, she'd be eliminating the slim possibility of his return forever.

She was being selfish.

And the group she'd belonged to before was allowing her to be that way. Were they being considerate toward her? Or toward the boy who had gone to the center of World War III to stop all the fighting, then disappeared?

"Touma..."

His name fell from her lips.

The room's other occupant—Sphinx, a calico and fellow freeloader—was going about his business as usual. He seemed to say, "Heard a lot about the food in England, but their pet food is all the same," as he poked his head into the souvenir package from the United Kingdom and chowed down.

Ordinarily, the familiar scene would have brought a smile to her face, but she didn't have it in her to grin.

Part of her worried that if she did as much, then things would go on like normal, despite the fact she'd lost something.

Would he come home?

How long should she stay here?

Was there a point to all this?

Did there have to be?

She didn't have full control over her own emotions. Her thoughts should have been coherent, yet they kept scattering away to the edges of her mind. Like sparks created during an electrical short, these thought fragments filled her head with all sorts of ideas and perspectives. But if she tried to wrangle these random images, she'd run into contradictions.

The smallest thing could wildly tip the scales. It was like balancing a plate atop a sharpened stake. No matter where you touched the plate, it was bound to fall.

Index could barely maintain the balance anymore. Maybe that was why she was stuck. Trapped in place, bearing memories so vivid.

But then, that last little bit of force appeared.

"...This is..."

The zero-yen cell phone Touma Kamijou had given her. An electronic device that she still needed his help to use correctly, despite her perfect memory. If she'd ever learned to use the phone, its call feature might have given her a connection to him.

Index's heart did flips as she looked at it.

Even she wasn't sure which way it had fallen.

For the time being, she just grabbed the cat, pulling it out of the pet food box it had its face in, and walked over to the front door. Nothing would come of waiting. It didn't matter if she had clues or not. She needed to look for him again. But just as she was ready to burst into the outside world...

"Uhh, blehhh... S-sor-sorry for the, uh, wait..."

Touma Kamijou opened the front door first and walked in, trailed by at least ten girls, as though he were a magnet attracting iron shavings in a sandbox.

First, Index blinked. Then she blinked several more times.

And saw the situation for what it was an instant later.

"T-Touma!" she cried. "You were gone for so long, and I was so worried, and tell me what's going on right now!"

"Hic... Bleh? What...what is?" he drawled.

"Ordinarily, I'd say you're being so Touma that the whole thing is normal. But you—I don't even know who you are!"

"Hello," said the girl she didn't know. "I'm the new animalistic heroine. Touma and I just met."

Everything was chaos. And Kamijou was too inebriated to explain any of it. So the chaos would continue.

Meanwhile...

Accelerator and Shiage Hamazura watched the mess from afar. The boy in question had gotten drunk, then immediately started walking off somewhere. Then the next thing anyone knew, he'd snagged a whole gaggle of girls.

"Thanks for bringing us...," muttered Accelerator. "But why's Musujime up there too? What's she so excited for?"

They were no longer attached to the underworld organization Group, but he never thought he'd run into one of his former fellow members in a place like this. Number One sighed, a little astonished and a little exasperated (but secretly impressed at how Touma Kamijou was showing that he was managing both worlds—he wasn't just combat personnel).

"I'm gonna start calling him *Master*. Like in martial arts," said Hamazura to no one, not thinking too much about it.

5

A girl in a track suit named Rikou Takitsubo was stuffing her face with a hot dog she'd bought at a convenience store. But suddenly, her sleepy eyes popped open with a *whoosh!!!!!* 

"...Hamazura is about to go down the path of evil!"

6

The girls clinging to Touma Kamijou like iron filings to a magnet were politely talked down by one of Birdway's black-suits, a man named Mark Space, who had them return to their dormitories. (Though one of the girls did nearly give another one of the black-suits an afro via a high-voltage current; the culprit was made to promise to explain everything later on.)

That was when Index, her teeth attached to the back of Kamijou's head, noticed Accelerator. She gave him a look of slight surprise.

"It's the lost child," she said.

"...That's how you remember me...?" muttered Accelerator. He didn't bother to try to make any further conversation, both because of his personality and because he really didn't want to remember the 09/30 Incident.

Birdway quickly stuck her legs under the kotatsu in the middle of the room. "Take a seat already," she said. "This isn't some pottery class for housewives. I'm not gonna look over your shoulders and tutor you on every little thing."

And so, Touma Kamijou, Accelerator, and Shiage Hamazura took their places on the other three sides of the kotatsu. But...

"Nyaa."

That was Fremea. For some reason, she'd decided to sit on Hamazura's lap, halfway underneath the kotatsu.

"I'm in position."

That was all well and good, but she was also exhausted after being chased around by the Freshmen. She fell asleep in fifteen seconds flat.

Birdway sighed in resignation. "Ready to listen now?"

"...Not sure what we're getting ready *for*, though," replied Hamazura, gently holding Fremea as she started to slide away.

"In that case," said Birdway, ignoring him, "it's time for that explanation you've all been waiting for."

She glanced at Index. The index of prohibited books. Though she knew the girl's role, Birdway would be the one doing the talking here.

"We'll be covering two topics. The ones I keep referencing, since you're all related to them now, along with the other set of laws underpinning them. Magic, that is."

7

Mitsuki Unabara was in an Academy City hospital room. He wasn't the patient; he'd come here to visit an acquaintance of his.

"...It's getting dark," he said. "Looks like another meeting is coming to an

end."

While the room looked normal, anyone with hospital experience would have probably noticed something was off. This wasn't a larger room where four to six patients all shared the same area, but it also wasn't a single-patient room, either.

Instead, two beds sat side by side in the rather large room.

Irregular approaches needed to be handled by irregular people.

"...I don't remember asking you to come here," said the girl occupying one of the beds. "But you do every single day anyway."

The girl's name was Xóchitl. As her name implied, she was far from a pure-blooded Japanese. Her skin was dark, and her black hair was wavy. She belonged to a sorcery-related group in Central America that had its roots in the Aztecan civilization. All the hair-raising, occultic weapons she'd worn fit that image perfectly, but Unabara had already confiscated those.

The person in the other bed was another girl from the same cultural sphere. Her name was Tochtli. Both of their names were very well known in their own language.

"So she says," remarked Tochtli to Unabara, "but if you didn't visit, she'd be liable to rip the pillow apart—or more. I want my stay in the hospital to be peaceful. So don't let this get you down, dear brother. Keep on coming."

"Don't get me wrong," replied Xóchitl. "I'm a corpse artisan. I pick up way too many vestigial thoughts in places like this. That's why I'm so ticked off."

"So you're saying his visits are working? Because they're alleviating your frustration?"

Xóchitl glared, but Tochtli deftly parried. Unabara gave a faint smile.

At the same time, he thought.

Originally, Mitsuki Unabara had worked in the dark side of Academy City. Together with Accelerator, Motoharu Tsuchimikado, and Awaki Musujime, he was part of an organization made up of rogues and villains called Group. They'd fought and fought, diving into the darkness to drive it out of the city for good.

Naturally, that darkness continued to threaten to take Unabara's freedom away. He felt like their warnings had suddenly waned over the last few days, though.

Take this hospital room. The darkness had always covertly stationed at least two cleaners here to keep an eye on the girls, since they'd serve as good hostages against him. But one day, they all vanished. He hadn't heard anything from the other Group members, either. He didn't reach out to them, and they didn't reach out to him.

His own independent research had revealed that the darkness had withdrawn from many other places in Academy City, not just Group. Something about World War III had changed things, and that change had affected Accelerator, Tsuchimikado, and Musujime as well.

How were they all handling the world right now?

And another thing.

If the system binding the people who worked in the underworld to the darkness was gone, then what had become of that girl who'd most kept Mitsuki Unabara linked to the dark?

Was he supposed to accept this peace without complaint?

Or did it fall to him to leap back into the dark?

Just then, the girls in the room spoke to him, pulling him away from his deliberation over what he was going to do from here on out.

"Actually, I've got a bit of a question for you," said Xóchitl.

"Ah. What is it?"

"...I know that your *Mitsuki Unabara face* is handy for staying undercover in the city, Etzali, but now you're surrounded by compatriots. *Why keep up the facade here?*"

"Well...," said Unabara.

Before he could answer, however, Tochtli said something troubling. "Would you get a clue, Xóchitl? Beauty always gets you ahead in this world. He uses his looks to seduce women and pry information out of them."

He heard a cracking noise. Xóchitl had been fiddling with a three-dimensional puzzle to kill the time, and now it had gotten unusually twisted.

"W-wait, Xóchitl, that isn't true!" said Unabara. "Simply put, this face was the ideal one to contact my target at first. You have my word that I did not choose it for its looks. And I didn't switch after that because my disguise spell requires human skin. I would rather not cause any unnecessary harm, so—"

"Why the hell do you talk like that anyway?! You're too damn polite! That's not how you used to speak!"

"...Come on, Xóchitl, keep your panties on. Etzali's got an important job, so don't be too mad. Even if he's just gotten used to the disguise at this point. You should just call him your sweet big brother, like you used to."

Tochtli grinned, clearly having picked up on something she could use to pour oil on the fire.

"Etzali...," said Xóchitl lowly. "If you don't want me to rip that face off your skull without using a spell, then do something about it. *Now.*"

Unabara smiled vaguely, which prompted her to claw at his face like a cat.

8

"I doubt describing *them* right off the bat will help any," said Birdway. "So first, I'll explain magic and sorcerers, who are like the soil from which *they* sprouted."

It seemed that this stuff was part of a world that Touma Kamijou had already gotten to know. He didn't look very surprised about any of this information. Birdway's explanation was really for Accelerator and Shiage Hamazura's benefit.

"As you all can imagine, sorcery isn't related to scientific rules and laws. It's the realm of the occult. Those who wield it can produce fire from their hands, create water, heal wounds, or make those wounds fester."

But if it were really that handy, wouldn't magic be much more common than scientific super-technology? When Hamazura asked a question to that effect, Birdway shot a glance at Index.

From her spot a few steps away from the kotatsu, Index explained, "It's not handy in the slightest. To begin with, aside from a few exceptions, magic is just a way for those without talent to catch up to those who have it."

"It exists for the powerless, in other words. For the places you can't reach on your own, you compensate with something else," said Birdway, wrapping up Index's explanation.

Naturally, humans couldn't fly without tools. Academy City probably had espers who could push through that limitation, but even their powers were based on scientific principles. That went for all espers, including both artificial ones created through drugs or electrical stimulation, and Uncut Gems, espers who were a product of their natural environments.

"It was envy."

Birdway smiled. Her grin could freeze a man alive. It was totally devoid of warmth.

"Before science and the occult were distinct entities, someone witnessed a natural esper who just happened to have the right environment to become one. That person didn't understand espers but still yearned to be like them. They wanted to be special, too. They were no longer content with being average. That's how it all began."

That was why, strictly speaking, sorcery and religion were treated as two separate frameworks. People usually felt it was disrespectful to even think about replicating true miracles.

"...But still, when it comes to making magic public...," said the sister in white. "Well, in a world filled with secrets, there's no guarantee those secrets will benefit the human race."

Birdway grinned. "Magic was born from people who lacked talent taking advantage of the fact that they lacked talent. That said, it *can* still be pretty handy. For example, your scientific abilities are generally limited to one per person, right?"

"Well, yeah," said Hamazura—though, as a Level Zero, he'd never relied on any such powers. He didn't have a good sense of how "handy" they were.

Accelerator followed up on his statement.

"...When you want to change up your attack patterns, figuring out how to apply the ability you already have can be the line between victory and defeat. Like, if an esper can produce fire, they could create smoke to rob someone of oxygen. Anyway, why bring that up?"

This time, Kamijou answered instead of Birdway. "Magic doesn't have that limitation."

"Exactly. We can freely create fire..."

Birdway snapped her fingers, producing a flame like one would get with a lighter at the tip of her index finger.

"...or water."

She snapped again, and an orb of water the size of a golf ball extinguished the flame.

"Of course, these powers have rules, just like your—for example, you might use Celtic or Norse sorcery. But even schools of sorcery aren't strictly separate things. You're free to assemble things as you wish, akin to Norse legends affected by Celtic culture."

"...Yeah," said Hamazura. "We just have a System Scan to tell us what category and level of ability we have. Can't do anything more at that point. Compared to that, magic sounds pretty useful."

Birdway puffed out her chest, though the act didn't particularly emphasize anything for her. "Oh, it is useful. You can use magic to fly in the sky or make yourself popular with women. As long as you have a clear goal, you can **set your own custom ability** by arranging things how you see fit. That feature is a huge advantage, since you're all dependent on talent instead.

"Of course, delicate adjustments do require a lot of work," she added.

If this is all true, thought Hamazura, then maybe even someone like me, who already got marked with the "you have no talent" stamp, can protect everyone from threats. Takitsubo and Mugino and Kinuhata and Fremea, too.

However, then Index said, "But that doesn't mean any of you should be using

magic."

"Huh? What do you mean?" asked Hamazura dubiously.

*""* 

Accelerator didn't react much, though. Did he know something?

"Remember what I said?" asked Birdway. "Magic is a technique people without talent use to catch up to espers who have it. They're two different formats. It was never made for those who already *have* talent. If you try to use it anyway, you'll wreak havoc on your blood vessels and nervous system."

Kamijou expounded on Birdway's statement. "And even Level Zeros get their heads messed with by Academy City tech. So magic's out of the picture for me... I doubt anyone from Skill-Out can use it, either."

"Magic is an accumulation of just as much technical skill and knowledge as science. Even **setting up your abilities** takes time. If you'd need over a decade to prepare for a single cast that would make you explode into a bloody mess anyway, it's more efficient to work with what you already have."

"Then what the hell are you lecturing us about all this for?" asked Accelerator.

"Because they're gonna set up their abilities before coming for you," answered Birdway. "You may not be able to use magic, but understanding its rules will let you find ways to counter it. Or did you intend to keep groping around in the dark for enemies who operate under a different set of laws that you know nothing about?"

"Give me details on the process," growled Accelerator. He'd produced a phenomenon very similar to this near the end of the war in Russia, basing it off the information on a strange piece of parchment, and had been hit with some nasty side effects as a result.

But this girl wasn't fazed by his razor-sharp tone and glare that would make anyone else in the city's darkness shudder.

"Well, naturally, the process depends on the religious denomination or school of thought," she explained, shooing Sphinx off the table as it leaped onto it. "But in general, you start by refining your life force into magical power. It's hard

to explain, since even among sorcerers, there are many definitions of the soul that contradict each other... Anyway, it's like the energy flowing through a human body is crude oil. Before you can start using sorcery, you need to refine that energy into gasoline."

Index continued in her place. "A simple way to achieve this is applying breathing techniques. But that's just one example of how you can control what's happening inside your body. You can also meditate or do warm-ups or restrict your diet. What's important is that you control your blood flow, heart rhythm, and all that stuff to be exactly the values you want."

"...Since you three dabble in science," picked up Birdway, "I'm sure you know that you can't consciously control most of your internal organs. Trying to mess with them anyway allows a person to refine the energy they wouldn't normally be able to reach.

"However," continued Birdway, "your organs work automatically because you'd be in life-threatening danger otherwise. It's like a new computer that hides all the system files when you first turn it on. Without the requisite knowledge, fiddling with them obviously runs the risk of backfiring. And people actually used to mistake those adverse effects for divine punishment or curses from evil spirits.

"Once you have the mana you need to use sorcery, you just need to control it in a way that matches your desire. For example, there are a lot of different vehicles out there—cars, bikes, boats, airplanes—but they all basically run on pistons or turbines propelled by explosions, right? On the other hand, that also means that if you want to cross the ocean, you'll have to think about what sort of vehicle you'll need *before* refining that crude oil and creating the appropriate fuel for it."

Birdway shifted, recrossing her legs under the kotatsu. "The processed version of the power humans have by default is called magic power or mana. Once your energy is in that state, you can manipulate it relatively easily. But controlling it requires commands. You can always build something without a starting point, but frankly, that's inefficient. It's easier to reference an existing legend or story instead. The reason for this is that the legends that have remained very popular in culture to this day contain extremely optimal answers

that have remained relevant during their longs periods of popularity."

"Optimal answers that are still relevant?" Kamijou had seen quite a bit of sorcery at this point, but that last part had him confused.

Index made a gesture with her hand as if she were holding a pen. "It's easier to write using your hand than your foot, right? And it's easier to use your right hand than your left... This is something anyone on Earth would consider common sense. Are you still with me?"

"I guess..."

"But the only reason it's easiest to write with your right hand is because everyone's been writing with their right hands for a really long time. Parents pass it down to children, and children to their children. It's in large part because of teachings like that. And as so many different people kept using their right hand to write, good handwriting naturally sprang out of the process... It's the same as if people had started using their left foot to write at the very start and a culture of left-foot-writing had evolved."

"Then when you said *building something without a starting place*, it would be like starting to practice using your left foot to write," said Kamijou.

Birdway nodded casually. "It's still possible to use mana like that. If you master the technique, you may even catch up to the right-handed writers. But what would be the point? If you can't use your right hand at all, then that's one thing. If you can, though, then it's more efficient to use it. After all, civilization has already been optimized for it.

"However, things will change," she added, "depending on whether you use a religious system to produce the desired effect or aim to produce the desired effect as a part of your faith in that religious system.

"You can use magic simply by passing magic power through your blood vessels and nerves, then using gestures to indicate symbols. But more precise rituals frequently call for specialized tools. For example, if you want to base your spell off a story in which a legendary spear appears, actually wielding a spear would be more efficient. You can basically think of it as the difference between drawing a line freehand and using a ruler."

That said, you didn't necessarily need some old, moldy item from a myth to use magic. You only needed the form and the role—in place of a spear, you could use a plastic umbrella or a drying pole for the same ritual. But getting all the details right would increase your chances of success. To do this for the spear ritual, you'd make a variety of modifications to your item of choice, such as sharpening the tip of the umbrella like a spearpoint. Tools like these would simply come off as weird, novel objects to normal people.

"We call such items Soul Arms," said Birdway. "Except in very rare cases, they're nothing more than tools. They don't have the gasoline-refining mechanism sorcerers do. When a sorcerer holds one, it becomes a part of their body, letting them channel and circulate the mana from their blood vessels and nerves into it. It's only at that point that a staff that *can* do something like produce fire would *actually* produce it.

"You can also supply Soul Arms with power from a distance, though. Apparently, some Soul Arms can maintain their own internal mana circulation for a while even if the sorcerer lets go of it."

With her knowledge of magic, Birdway was aware of many examples of this failing. But she simply gave a thin smile and skipped over that part.

"I'll use a theater analogy. A Soul Arm is like a prop in a play. It can be anything from a small tool to a large stage installation. If you needed even more support to make the prop work, you'd probably start looking at a temple for hosting that specific play. And naturally, demarcating the space for that production would make said magic more effective."

"...."

"Anyway, that was all an explanation of magic based on an individual refining mana for themselves. But there are other types of energy. Some have roots in the land, like ley lines, while others, such as a power called telesma, are stored in a different phase of our world.

"While these things possess great energy, they usually impart a specific aspect or element right from the start, unlike mana," explained Birdway. "So instead of creating the energy to use for a specific spell, you'd have to choose your spell based on the characteristics of the energy you get. "I doubt going into this much detail is going to help much, but you trigger power like this by using your mana to 'call out' to it. It's like the relationship between a bomb and a fuse. You use the fuse to create a small spark, which then reacts with a larger amount of gunpowder to produce an incredible explosion.

"...Naturally, this allows a sorcerer to use spells beyond the level they could with just their own mana, but they're really just changing the scope of the explosion, so it's riskier... And if you can't control your mana in the first place, you're safe assuming you won't be able to use telesma on a large scale."

Index expounded on that explanation. "There is one exception. A few people use telesma directly by utilizing the similarities between their own magic power and the telesma's energy, but that's a rare phenomenon, so it's probably not worth too much thought... And besides, while there's a lot more power, the quality is restricted by the corresponding angel. That prevents you from using magic at all, which just gives you less freedom."

Birdway continued, ignoring the calico, who had rolled on its back in front of her. "That's a general overview of how sorcerers do things. But now that you understand them, there's something else that's even more important."

"...And what's that?" muttered Accelerator.

"The issue of their identity. Sorcerers use sorcery—but why? Without knowing that, we can't discuss them as people."

"You mean their organizational structure? Well, this stuff is supposed to be like Academy City's twin. Bet you've got some awful group supervising everything."

"I'll explain that in time, but first, let me tell you what a sorcerer fundamentally is."

Birdway grinned.

"State religions, sorcerers' societies, tribal structures... Yes, sorcerers may be part of organizational hierarchies—but I expect you'd have a hard time finding one willing to *die* for their organization. They wield their power for *themselves*. There is at least one group of sorcerers that has 'dying for the organization' as

the goal of all individuals in it. But even that philosophy is still focused on the individual, not the group."

"....?"

Accelerator looked dubious. He probably couldn't envision something like that. Perhaps it was because he'd long been bound by the chains of a large organization.

"Like I said before, sorcerers are a bunch of talentless folk," Birdway explained.

"Yeah, so what does that mean?" he asked.

"It means they've experienced a setback somewhere in their lives. Not being able to save a loved one from an incurable disease, being forced to fight and kill comrades over food shortages... Without an experience like that, nobody would even think about trying to overcome the laws of physics. People satisfied with normalcy? They stay normal. Anyone clinging to something strange like sorcery must have a suitable reason for it."

At that point, Birdway jabbed her thumb at her own small chest.

"Sorcerers engrave their goals into themselves using Latin. We call them *magic names*. For example, mine is Regnum771, and Mark over there is Armare091. The numbers on the end are to prevent overlap... For people like us, who have our own clear objectives and build up all of our techniques to align with them, a structured organization is no more than a booster to allow us to put our magic names into practice. If we can use one, we'll respect it and swear fealty. But if it doesn't benefit us, we'll get disillusioned and abandon them without a second thought. It's a fundamentally different way of thinking from your perspective. You're all *being* used as a huge organizational project where Academy City creates and supervises every esper."

"...Then how do your organizations even stay together?" asked Accelerator dubiously. "With everyone just using each other for power, how can the higher-ups of big groups exert their will on the lower rungs? Seems to me you'd just be waiting for something like that to collapse on its own."

"The organizations on the magic side have suitable rewards and punishments,

too, of course," said Index. "Some rituals are too big to do alone; you need more than one person handling different roles for them. And groups will commonly put together pursuit teams to chase down traitors... But that doesn't matter, really. Your magic name does."

*"* 

As everyone fell quiet, Birdway continued. "That's why the sorcerer Sherry Cromwell marched into this city alone to start a war between the science side and the magic side. And why Lidvia Lorenzetti made off with the Croce di Pietro and tried to win control of Academy City... The size of the organization you belong to doesn't matter. If someone's gonna do something, they're gonna do it regardless. A true sorcerer would never waver for a second in pursuit of their goals, even if their magic name compelled them to shatter all the world's systems. Even if it doesn't stop at the magic side, where they live—even if it extends to other worlds as well."

"...Then they're the same?" asked Accelerator. Even Number One, who was well acquainted with the darkness, was out of his element here. He thought of the scales right below the surface, weighing Academy City's continued existence against its total destruction. "The people you're fighting in a place we can't see —do they have magic names, too?"

Birdway grinned. "Hence why I needed to explain the basics of magic before telling you about them."

A short silence fell over the dorm room as the three young men, brought up under Academy City's rules, reflected on this.

Touma Kamijou must have known a bunch of this stuff already, but Accelerator expected he'd be reviewing his own ideas after hearing Birdway's explanation.

...The problem, he thought, is which set of rules take priority if and when science and magic clash. Though I guess that's not quite it either. As soon as one starts to win out, neither side is going to be happy with how it all ends. If you really wanted to solve things, you couldn't join either side. You'd need to create a third.

Accelerator was sorting through information about a world he'd only seen a

glimpse of—so that he could take a big step into it.

...I don't care about this magic stuff. Or about worlds I've never dealt with—unless the people who live in them do something that could affect the realm I'm familiar with. I still can't get a grasp on who they are, but I'm gonna need some more detailed information.

On the other hand, Shiage Hamazura's eyes glazed over as he thought everything through.

...You know, when you think about it, the word we use for cooked rice is only just barely Japanese.

Accelerator looked closer; Hamazura was watching Sphinx chow down on the contents of a plate Index had set down.

Leivinia Birdway's face went blank. Then she took her hand, and—like a teacher waking up a student who never listened—slapped him across the cheek.

"Orgh?! Orph!"

"...Someone's been trying to talk to you. But I *know* you fell asleep midway through."

"I didn't! I promise I wasn't sleeping! I listened to every word!"

"Then tell me what I just explained to you!"

"Yeesh. Uhh, it was about how when you drink milk, your boobs get bigger..."

"...Should I be taking that as a challenge?"

"Wait. Maybe it was about how when you drink boobs, your milk gets—"

"That's not even correct Japanese anymore! Ugh! Go wash your face and get back here!"



## **INTERLUDE ONE**

The waters off Land's End in southwest England.

Kaori Kanzaki took in gentle whiffs of the salty breeze until she decided to take a look around and get her mind off things.

Everything in a 360-degree radius was ocean.

Her feet bobbed up and down with the rhythm of the waves.

But she wasn't on a boat. She was in a jet-black submarine that was now peeking just above the water's surface.

"...I never thought a sorcerer like me would have to use something like this," she murmured.

A familiar voice came back to her through the card-shaped Soul Arm near her ear. The person contacting her had to be Sherry Cromwell, of the English Puritan Church.

"The UK doesn't have any ground facilities that can launch ballistic missiles. Nor does it have any facilities for launching rockets, the more peaceful application of missile technology."

She was right. This nation's ballistic missiles were pretty much all SLBMs—ones launched from submarines.

Sending a manned rocket into orbit from a submarine was unprecedented. Though not for any technological limitations—agencies hadn't done it because they never felt it was necessary. Unlike with ballistic missiles, they had no reason to covertly launch a manned rocket for peaceful purposes (or peaceful ones on the surface). In fact, doing that without giving proper warning could

alert another party, who might intercept the rocket thinking it was a missile, or fire a ballistic missile of their own to shoot it down.

Despite all this, there was a simple reason Kanzaki had opted for such a roundabout approach:

As had been established, the UK didn't *have* any ground-based launch facilities.

"Let me just confirm," she said. "You're sure this rocket-based approach to interfering with Radiosonde Castle, which is 52,000 meters in the air, will work?"

"Yes," answered Sherry. "Doesn't matter if it's a plane or a rocket—neither is meant for such an altitude. They'd be sitting ducks. Instead, we'll shoot the rocket into space first, then have it reenter the atmosphere so that it lands on Radiosonde Castle."

"... Another absurd operation."

"Which is why we asked a saint to do it. You can do plenty of absurd things... It was easier said than done, though. We needed countermeasures for space radiation and atmospheric heat, we needed to solve the issues of pressure and oxygen, and we needed to develop controls fine enough to allow the rocket to land on the castle. We had a lot of homework."

"So simply dropping a rocket from orbit onto the castle wouldn't have worked?"

"I know we talked about any magical flight running the risk of interception, but a scientifically constructed rocket is totally defenseless against sorcery, too. To get back into the atmosphere, we'll need to make sure we have a way to protect against magical attacks, just to be safe."

"...Are we still unsure of whether Radiosonde Castle is magic-or science-based?"

"Orsola and a few people are looking into that right now, but they probably won't have an answer for you before launch," said Sherry, sounding bitter. "We don't know what type of tech they're using. Nor do we know why it's up there in the first place, of course. We can't even say whether it's meant to stay in the sky

indefinitely or fall. Nobody's claimed responsibility for it. All is quiet. We might not even get any proof of who's behind it during the actual mission."

Kanzaki exhaled. "I understand that we'll need to use sorcery for protection. But *any* magical flight is subject to interference. What should we do about that?"

"That only goes for stable flight. We're sending one of the science side's rockets down at the place from satellite orbit, remember? You won't be flying—you'll just be falling. Peter-based interception spells place emphasis on downing flying people or objects. They won't affect something that's been falling the whole time."

Finding loopholes was a fundamental part of magic. While they'd always be patched up once you found one, that just meant you would need to look for a different loophole in the new version of a spell. It was a constant back-and-forth that essentially made the entire magic side function like a single living being.

The hatch of the submarine opened, and a crew member peeked out, gesturing for Kanzaki's attention. After making sure she was looking, they shouted, "It's almost time! Please go inside and head for the missile launch tube. You can get into the rocket using the maintenance walkways."

"Understood."

"But, ma'am..."

The crew member sounded troubled. They'd borrowed this sub on the orders of Elizard, the queen of England, but the crew wouldn't understand the process; to be specific, they didn't have a proper grasp on sorcery. Despite the occult phenomena that had occurred during the British Halloween and World War III, the masses did not so easily understand the intricacies of magic.

"We didn't bring any space suits on board. Do you have one with you?"

"No," answered Kanzaki simply—not realizing that her flat response was causing the crew member to lose their composure entirely.

"Y-you can't possibly be planning on doing this in jeans?!"

"Actually, I am. A normal space suit wouldn't work for this mission anyway."

# **CHAPTER 2**

#### **Unchanging Days with Occasional Variety**

**Lecture Two.** 

1

"Boy, oh boy. Kami is always such a troublemaker," said Komoe Tsukuyomi, a teacher who stood at barely 135 centimeters in height. She was walking down the street that night alongside a black-haired girl named Aisa Himegami.

Himegami had been staying at Komoe's apartment until recently, but she'd since moved into the girl's dormitory for their school.

Komoe placed her little hands on her little head. "I don't even think he realizes he needs a certain number of attendance days. Ugh. At this rate, even remedial classes over winter break might not be enough... And he was out too many days during the first semester already..."

"It's surprising. That he's managed somehow. Thus far."

"It's not that he's stupid. It's just that he never learns any of the fundamentals. Of course, his test results suffer for it. And it isn't like he's asleep during that time, so I have to stuff his brain full of replacements... What could possibly be taking up so much of his mental space?"

"Hmm." Himegami tilted her head slightly, wondering. "Considering who he is. I wouldn't be surprised. If he was learning how to slay a dragon or something."

"Which is *not* a life skill! The only knowledge and skills he needs to cram into his head are the ones he needs for living a peaceful life!"

2

Birdway decided to take a short break. After all, lectures meant nothing if students didn't internalize them. Snapping her fingers, she called one of the black-suits over to her.

"Mark, I'm thirsty," she said. "Make me a cocktail. I'll have a Cinderella."

"A Cinderella?" asked Kamijou, evidently confused.

For some reason, she puffed her chest out in pride. "The quintessential mocktail," she told him.

"...Orange juice, pineapple juice, and lemon juice," Mark murmured to him, revealing the truth. "It's just a juice mix."

"No! It's a mocktail!" Birdway exclaimed, kicking the black-suit in the shins and sending him fleeing to the kitchen space.

Meanwhile, Fremea had turned into Hamazura's personal leg warmer back at the kotatsu. Sphinx had come over to her, so now she was playing with him, turning him this way and that in the air. The cat seemed to say, "I know it's rare to see a male calico, but don't stare at my balls like that," though he didn't seem flustered one bit.

"...Has the cat gotten fatter while I was away...?" wondered Kamijou out loud.

Sitting on the bed, Birdway recrossed her black stocking-covered legs. "Must've been a growth spurt. Every kid that age has 'em."

Though the comment was directed at the cat, Fremea was the one to react. Rolling Sphinx over the kotatsu, she looked over at the other girl.

"Nyaa," she said. "You don't look old enough to be a lady anyway."

"Seems like you don't know how things work, brat." Birdway crossed her arms. "There's a massive gap between ten-year-olds and twelve-year-olds. You're still taking baths with your father. We live in different worlds!"

"Anyway, I live in a dorm, so my dad isn't even with me." Fremea started squeezing the calico's paws. "And I'm grown-up. At least I can sleep when it's all dark without any nightlights."

"Wh-what?! How?! Aren't you scared of someone attacking you at night?!" Birdway exclaimed, jumping off the bed.

Fremea pinched the calico's cheeks and stretched them out, looking at his white teeth. "And I know that Santa Claus is actually real, not fake."

"Wait! How did you get intel on the Nicholas Foundation?! You may be a shrimp, but you're still made in Academy City, huh? I can't underestimate you...!"

"...Umm, it feels like you're both misunderstanding each other," pointed out Kamijou quietly. But Birdway didn't hear that as she trembled.

Then Fremea went in for the kill. "Also, I wear a bra, so I'm already on the winning side."

"What kind of logic is that?! Are you picking a fight with me, you little runt?!?!?!"

With a *whoosh* of air, Birdway unsheathed a magical sword—a Soul Arm. Also, maybe it wasn't just the logic she had an issue with. Maybe the boss of Dawn-Colored Sunlight had done that because she didn't actually wear a bra. Maybe.

Regardless, Birdway examined the situation and found that she was on the back foot. Out of desperation, she put on airs again. "H-hmph. I lead a sorcerer's society belonging to the highest rank of the Golden. I don't have time to fool around with a brat like you. After all, you're just a wimp. I mean, all you can do is follow an idiot like Hamazura around."

"Nyaa!!"

That was when Fremea got a little too heated.

"Don't say mean things about Hamazura. Or else I'll duel you!"

"Will you, now?" Birdway's eyes shifted, filling with sadism.

Kamijou tensed as he watched the girl, whom he considered (provisionally) the third most sadistic person in the world. She wouldn't really go at it against a

civilian, right? Against a kid? he thought.

But then the situation took a turn for the unexpected.

"A one-on-one match with me?" continued Birdway. "I like that. If you want a duel, I'll give you a duel. How shall we decide the winner, then?"

Then for some reason, Fremea rose from the kotatsu. She balled her hands into fists and raised them slowly.

"Sumo."

"Wha... What?!"

After making the juice mix (which his boss stubbornly insisted was a nonalcoholic cocktail), Mark headed back over to the kotatsu. There, he saw—for reasons unknown to him—two blond girls around ten and twelve years of age grappling each other.

"Hey, ow! Pulling hair is against regulation sumo rules!"

"Nyaa! I have to win at all costs! Roooar!"

"You'd...better...listen to meeeeeeeeeeeeeee!"

Yelling, Birdway wrapped her arms around Fremea's waist and German suplexed her onto the bed. The maneuver did some crazy things to both their skirts, but the girls didn't have time to care.

"Mwa-ha-ha-ha-ha! You brat! You damn shrimp! You thought you could take me on when you still have to wear one of those kid's backpacks?! You're a hundred years too early to take on the boss of an organization!"

Kamijou and Mark traded wordless glances, then called Leivinia's younger sister, who was currently in London.

"Things my sister hates? I'd say underwear with big rabbits on them and literally anything spicy."

Mark proceeded to pour a lot of hot sauce into the Cinderella, making it into a Mexican-style drink. Then the two of them began their mission to make Birdway writhe on the floor.

Somewhere in District 8, a girl named Seria Kumokawa, who usually wore the same school uniform as Kamijou, was lying on her couch in her underwear. But she wasn't in a student dorm—she was in an apartment.

Apartments weren't just rare in the city—they were impossible to get unless you had special circumstances. Even the proper young ladies of Tokiwadai Middle School, who paid 40,000 yen per meal, used student dormitories. But Kumokawa was resigned to this life now. She was used to it. She'd put herself in a position completely different from those sheltered young ladies to begin with.

"...Mrrr."

She'd gotten a little too excited after encountering Touma Kamijou earlier, so she'd decided to cool her head. Upon returning to the apartment, she'd collapsed onto her couch and fallen fast asleep. She couldn't even remember when she'd taken off her clothes, so she assumed she'd done it in her sleep, like her unconscious mind had started hating the sensation of the starched uniform on her skin.

A simple electronic tone was going off. It was her cell phone. Without rising from the couch, she groped for the device on the table. Her fingers hit something hard but didn't latch onto it. The phone bounced away from her hand and fell off the table.

After thinking for a moment, Kumokawa turned over on the couch.

But one of the phone's buttons must have gotten pressed when it made contact with the floor. An elderly person's exasperated face appeared on the screen of the phone.

"...Please do something about your attire first, then fix your hair. You can't see most of your face without a hair band."

Kumokawa waved her hand around but couldn't grab her hair band either. It had fallen to the floor as well.

She glanced over. The apartment lighting shifted to restful mode.

"Wait. Don't fall asleep. I'll send a strobe through your cell phone if I have to.

There's too much you need to do right now. It all piled up for the last few days while that boy was gone and you were in a stupid daze."

"...I'm too used to do-nothing mode now. It's gone on too long."

"No. You are a high school student, and you can do this. You were the one who chose to live a school life. Why don't you try acting a little more like an upperclassman?"

"…"

Kumokawa slowly rose from the couch, as if injected with willpower from somewhere else. She picked up her hair band, then pushed her bangs to the sides and back.

With her forehead free of hair, she stuck a pose like she was shooting a gun and said, "Seria Kumokawa, the militant super high school girl with the power to order the General Board around, has arrived! Here to dull the judgments of every innocent young man she finds!"

*Ka-bam!* She landed the pose perfectly.

Then her shoulders drooped, and she fell back onto the couch.

"...Nope, not happening. I feel so empty. No power. I'm not like Number Five. How am I supposed to do this? I bet I'd fit right in at a social dance class for withered old people."

"Just put on your clothes."

She didn't listen. Instead, she tried to grab the phone with her foot, but her big toe bumped into it, sending the device flying across the room.

"...I just want to sleep for another three days."

"Remember to be thankful for your current situation. You don't get to be the brain of the General Board just by wanting to."

"Yaaawn...," she replied. She sat up on the couch, still in her underwear. If they could hold a conversation just fine like this, then why did she need to go grab her phone?

"Then what do you want me to do? I couldn't even save one boy from the war

in Russia."

"Enough sulking. Even Academy City couldn't control how the war ended. You're supposed to be the scary upperclassman, right? The kind even crying babies would go silent around? If you want to reestablish your link with him, you're going to have to do something about your slovenly attitude."

"I'm just stretching," she said offhandedly, taking a piece of almond chocolate from some candy lying on the edge of the sofa. "I've stopped the tragedies I could. But that's it. I couldn't prevent the rest... Like how I knew twenty thousand military clones were being used and abused for an experiment, but I couldn't do anything to stop it."

She tossed some of the chocolate into her mouth and crunched down on it.

"It happened before, it happened this time, and it's gonna happen again... It's made me start rethinking everything. What am I even doing? What point is there in having power that can't prevent a tragedy?"

"Which is why you're so concerned about the boy. He dives into the flames even if the task is impossible. He surpasses every armchair theory. He's saved people we never could have."

Kumokawa fell silent for a moment. She rolled around the remains of her chocolate in her palm.

"Frankly, it's a persistent issue. We may be on the General Board, but we're only one part of it. The projects in the deepest layers of the city are beyond our interference. And Academy City isn't the only place with mysteries. Or darkness. We're helpless against threats that come from the outside."

*"…"* 

Both Kumokawa and the person on the phone had so much power, but they'd interfered in almost none of the incidents that boy was part of. That was how dangerous his path had been, how thin of a tightrope he had walked, and how useless Kumokawa and the others had been.

Was her intelligence to blame for her having this power?

In so many ways, their authority was restricted. They could never truly get to

the core of these incidents.

"It's always good to reaffirm how powerless you are. But we don't have time for you to grow a lazy streak."

"The war is over. But this city still has its issues, huh?"

"It's annoying, but it's the truth," came the reply. Kumokawa sighed, still not having put any more clothes on. "And while there may be issues we can't get involved with, there are also some the boy won't be able to solve. You want to be proud of your work, right? So carry out the duties assigned to you. That's what it means to be an upperclassman."

4

After their short break ended, Leivinia resumed her lectures.

"...Aaanywaaay," she said, slurring her words because the super-spicy Cinderella had burned her lips. "We've gone over who sorcerers are as individuals. Now I want to go into more detail about their organizations."

"Are they like Academy City?" asked Hamazura.

Birdway shook her head. "While the Roman Orthodox Church may be large, most regular sorcerer's societies do things differently. In Academy City, there's one giant group giving everyone special powers and supervising them. With sorcerers, it's more like people who already have special powers get together and form a giant group."

Index expounded upon Birdway's casual remarks. "Since sorcerer's societies are intimately linked with mythology and the occult, people tend to perceive them as religious organizations. Or as societies that are formed in secret as a sect of one."

"Yeah, I don't really get that part either...," said Kamijou. "Like, how is the Roman Orthodox Church different from the sorcerer's societies you guys are part of?"

"I bet if said they're not, a whole lot of angry people would show up on my doorstep." Birdway paused. "System-wise, it's kind of the difference between

every individual wanting to act in a way that benefits their parent organization and ones that are just groups of people who got together for their own personal reasons. But..."

"But?"

"The biggest difference lies in whether or not a majority recognizes the group. Huge religions have been known to oppress other faiths, branding their followers heretics."

"I, er, I see..."

"The majority of civilians don't have a correct understanding of magic. They would, however, know about ethical perspectives expressed in myth and the occult, which underpin magic—like how there's always a moral to children's stories. When those morals seep fully into the land, practitioners of magic are treated as sacred. If they don't, however, they're disposed of as heretics."

Birdway refrained from going into detail on the history of such oppression.

Inquisitions, witch hunts, religious courts.

Religions like Crossism, which had expanded even under oppression at first, sometimes became the oppressors in later centuries.

Though from the point of view of her "field of research," those would come to mind as though they were her own memories.

"For example, a modern western sorcerer's society might use Crossist exploits. But if the society's members come to exceed half the world's population, it would then become the largest religion, right? Even if that would never actually happen... Reality is more severe than death, but theoretically, at least, that's what would happen. That's the only thing separating the official methods from the underhanded tricks.

"Of course, the *current* majority would probably never accept such a reversal," she added. "Like I said before, these groups are usually formed from people who had powers to begin with. Sometimes the individual is prioritized over the whole."

"...Since you keep saying them in the plural, they must be in a group, right?"

reasoned Accelerator, sounding fed up with the whole thing. "If a society's statutes would interfere with individual acts, why do they come together at all?"

"Well, I'm going to use a real-life sorcerer's society to explain this." Birdway grinned. "In a passive sense, it's largely a consequence of everyone *else* forming groups. Being in an organization gives you an advantage should things come to a straight-up fight. In other cases, groups form because some rituals can only be performed by several people working on different tasks. Additionally, certain individuals may join groups to gather information from a large area. Sorcerers may be generally looking out for themselves, but they'll come together for those reasons."

"...Then no matter how substantial their goal, if a source doesn't feel the need to get extra help and thinks it'd be more efficient to do it themselves, they wouldn't join a society at all?" asked Kamijou.

He was trying to relate it to school or to companies. This world didn't quite make sense to him. Would sorcerers feel anxious about not belonging to anything?

Hamazura, on the other hand, saw things differently. "Then we should assume *they* formed a group because they have some kind of objective they need several people for?"

"Most likely," said Birdway, nodding. "For rebellious elements like them, it all comes down to how well they can hide. As soon as they're found out, the majority will surround them. In other words, it's advantageous for societies to be smaller. The fewer people involved, the less risk someone will talk."

"And yet they got a bunch of members anyway. Whatever they're after, it must be a big enough reward to justify the risk."

"That's right."

Birdway's tone was casual.

"I'll go into more detail about *them* later, but yes—if they've formed a group, then they must have absolutely needed to. Magic has always been rife with secrets, so to get information, you have to slice things into itty-bitty pieces.

5

The term "sorcerer" covered a wide variety of people.

The members of the English Puritan Church's special-forces group Necessarius, also known as the Church of Necessary Evils, were one example. They were working on safely bringing down Radiosonde Castle even now.

But they weren't the only type.

In fact, the United Kingdom had always been host to a great deal of sorcerer's societies, each with different traits—ones that contributed to the state, ones that worked to overthrow the state, ones that worked toward a single individual's goal, and ones that worked toward the benefit of an entire group.

Groups of sorcerers that couldn't become full-fledged societies were called *reserves*. One such reserve had purposely kept a low profile so they could operate more freely: New Light.

Lesser, one of New Light's female members, threw open the door to one of its hideouts (an apartment in Edinburgh rather than some eerie cave), took one look at Lancis, the girl already in there reading an English newspaper, and shouted at her.

"Did you hear?! Get this! That boy was confirmed to be in Academy City!"

"Wasn't Bayloupe supposed to be intercepting intel from the English Church?" wondered Lancis aloud. "She said he was working with a sorcerer's society called Dawn-Colored Sunlight."

"That buffoon!" Lesser flung herself onto the couch, not caring about her miniskirt as she flapped her legs up and down. "How dare he evade my seductions! How dare he refuse to switch allegiances for the good of the United Kingdom! And now you're telling me he has ties to a sorcerer's society that was going head-to-head with the freaking British royal family?!"

After saying that, she grabbed her clothes.

"He needs to be trained! That's the only option! If the carrot doesn't work,

then the stick is my only recourse!"

Whoosh! Off came her clothes, revealing a black bondage outfit. The suit creaked and cracked as Lesser swung a horse-riding whip, giving off the characteristic scent of leather.

Lancis sighed in exasperation. "When did you learn how to strip that fast anyway? You must not be using magic. I didn't start to get ticklish."

"That doesn't matter! If only he'd become my servant! Now I'll just have to beat him so hard he awakens to a whole new world!"

"Or maybe you could recon the enemy?" suggested Lancis. "And see who it was who lured him in instead?"

"Hmm. Ah! These must be the photos we filched from the English Church."

Lesser looked down at the mess of photographs on the table. One showed Touma Kamijou, surrounded by a bunch of people... But the angle of the photo was strange. You couldn't get a shot like this unless you were hovering a few meters in the air or something.

Academy City was probably supplying it to the Church, and Lesser and Lancis's other friend had intercepted it. In other words, some kind of scientific technology was at play...

But that wasn't what Lesser was worried about. For on the picture, someone —likely an Anglican Church member—had written in several notes that said the following:

```
Umidori Kuroyoru ← Small.
```

Fremea Seivelun  $\leftarrow$  Small.

Leivinia Birdway  $\leftarrow$  Very small.

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"…"
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Lesser looked down at her bondage getup. She was on the smaller side herself, but at least she had something to work with. Her face went pale.

"...Did his interests change...?" she wondered aloud.

Then she looked at Lancis's unfortunate chest area.

"Lancis!!" she cried.

"No."

"Now's your chance to make your major debut! Wear this white Japanese school swimsuit and head to Academy City immediately! And also, it's November!"

"Say one more word and I'll punch your lights out."

6

Awaki Musujime sat in a family restaurant, resting her hand on her chin as she stabbed her salad with a fork. But her meal wasn't from an all-you-can-eat salad bar—it had cost over a thousand yen by itself.



Another girl sat across from her. She was the same age, and she had a wry grin on her face.

"That's not polite," said the girl.

"Can't have elbows on the table even if you're not using chopsticks, huh?" mused Musujime, not fixing her posture in the slightest.

The air around her was lax, languid. She knew it, but she didn't know how to deal with it. She felt like it was beyond her ability to control.

The girl sitting across from her had originally been locked away in the offlimits underground section of an Academy City juvenile reformatory. To save everyone there, Musujime had taken on all manner of dirty jobs on behalf of the city's darkness—as a member of Group, a small but elite special organization.

With the end of World War III, she'd suddenly been released from her obligations. She knew that was cause to be happy, but she couldn't help but worry a bit. Why had things changed? What had transpired that she didn't know about?

And what would she do from now on? Wasn't it risky to do *anything* if it had a chance of negatively affecting her situation now?

"Thinking about tough stuff?" asked the girl.

"Wouldn't have to think about it if it was easy."

"Why not break it into little pieces?" she suggested. "Most tough problems are big knots of smaller issues. You should try figuring out what all those little issues are."

"...Yes, I suppose."

It was always best to go at things one step at a time.

The issue, of course, was that *her* problem could easily take over a century to solve by dealing with each piece one at a time. But still...

"If I still want to jump up the stairs three by three, maybe it's best to at least get an idea of how long the staircase is."

Fremea woke up under the kotatsu.

Shiage Hamazura wasn't around. The only people there were strange foreigners in black clothes, a spiky-haired boy she didn't know, and a nun in a white habit. She tried to get a grip on the situation through her groggy mind, then felt a rough sensation on her forehead. A note was stuck there—it was like she was a jiangshi or playing a game of blindman's bluff. She read the note. It said that Hamazura had gone to a vending machine to get some juice.

"Nya-oh..."

Her voice was somehow weak—because she didn't know anyone here except Hamazura.

Everyone else had been having a difficult conversation the entire day, and now it was night. Fremea was running on fumes both physically and mentally because she'd gotten worn out from running all over the city. She wasn't in a state to make the subtle mental changes required to approach someone and try to get to know them by talking about whatever it was they were talking about.

She flopped down on the floor, then wriggled her lower body underneath the kotatsu blanket. She saw that Birdway's legs were crossed and reached for them.

"Quit that, you stupid brat! I don't have time to deal with a squirt like you right now!" exclaimed Birdway in a massive huff as she gripped a portable game device. "Mark! New info is up on the strategy guide site. Information just goes way faster in Academy City. Quick, log in! Time to beat that lightning scrap beast to a pulp!"

"I'm too old to maintain the hand-eye coordination needed for video games, but if you insist..."

"Nyaaa...," murmured Fremea weakly. But Mark and Birdway's attention was already on the veranda, where they could get a better signal.

She was tired. But she couldn't fall asleep. Which meant she was bored... which brought her back to being sleepy. It was a vicious cycle. She reached out

for another person's feet as they went to move past her, as though she were a cat trying to play with a dangling toy.

It was Accelerator.

"...Eh?"

If he'd been some petty delinquent haunting the alleys, she might well have wet herself. But she was sleepier than she'd ever been, and her ability to sense danger was way below average, too. She couldn't accurately gauge how threatening he was.

"Nyaa, nya, nya, nya..."

"...Don't ask me to iron the bugs out of your speech faculties..."

Even so, Accelerator didn't walk away. Maybe that meant he was more personable than Birdway.

"...Are you the one who saved me?" she asked.

"You've already got a hero, and it ain't me," spat Accelerator. "Only the guy who actually risked his life and stood in the firing line gets to be that. Not the dude who just helped out a little."

"Nee..." However, Fremea was still too exhausted to listen closely. Her tone sleepy, she replied, "But you still came to help me."

*"…."* 

"Haah..." She yawned and grabbed Accelerator's foot.

As Accelerator looked down a little at the girl sleeping under the kotatsu, he did some thinking. He had no interest in villains. Nor did he believe he'd become one of the good guys. He was in the strange position of not having figured out which side he was on... But even so, he felt like he'd been able to intervene in someone's life and produce a positive outcome.

8

That night, a girl who looked about ten named Last Order shrieked on the streets of Academy City.

Then Misaka Worst, who was massively affected by the Misaka network, also shrieked meaninglessly beside the girl.

9

Once everyone was finished taking a break, Birdway resumed her explanation session.

"I've given you an overview of sorcerer's societies and other groups, but there's one last important thing to discuss before I get to *them*."

"...Ugh, there's still more?" mumbled Hamazura, ever the poor listener in school.

Birdway ignored him. "In order to talk about them, I need to tell you about the situation that created them. And it's that foundation that will be annoying for me."

"Foundation?" asked Accelerator.

She waggled a finger. "Still, I'm not going to talk at length about myths and legends and whatever... Sure, that might be a mythical-class affair, but for all of you, at least, you'll be more familiar with it than occult legends."

"What are you being so vague for? Get to the point."

"World War III," said Birdway.

Touma Kamijou, Accelerator, and Shiage Hamazura all froze for a moment. Each of them had been embroiled in the core of the conflict.

"...It wasn't just a clash between technological nations. A war with an even larger framework than that was at its deepest part," she explained, adding, "In other words, magic and science."

Accelerator narrowed his eyes. "You're saying *they're* linked to the other force that caused the war?"

"...That's right." Birdway grinned. "The war was what brought *them* to the surface. So obviously, I'll need to explain just what kind of conflict World War III was, and then go deeper, deeper, and deeper still, right?"

### 10

It would be a long conversation.

Before it happened, however, the three young men had headed to the kitchen and a nearby convenience store to get drinks and snacks.

During that time, Kamijou went inside the bathroom. But not because he wanted to take a shower or anything. In his hands were a sandwich and a plastic bottle of mineral water he'd bought from the store.

This wasn't the best place to eat and drink—but the refreshments weren't for him. They were for the girl in the bathroom.

"...Gee," she said. "Thanks for getting me food, too, I guess."

Umidori Kuroyoru.

A girl of about twelve, she was a member of an Academy City underworld group called the Freshmen. Her hands and feet were bound, though not by any special tools or ropes. She was wearing a punk-style outfit that was covered with leather and rivets. There were strings hanging from the arms and legs of her getup, and her captors had altered the knots a little bit to make them function as restraints.

Kuroyoru could produce spears of nitrogen from her palms with her ability, Bomber Lance. To prevent this, they'd crossed her hands in a manner that would ensure projectiles she created would be directed at her upper body.

"You were just punching the crap out of each other, right? Makes sense you wouldn't want to see each other again. So I stepped up."

They'd actually been doing a bit more than just punching the crap out of each

other, but he didn't know the details, since he'd gotten there as the fight was wrapping up.

The bound girl gave him a sardonic grin.

"...I'm a cyborg," she said. "I haven't messed with much of my organs, no. But I can still induce a state of suspended animation in my individual cells by controlling internal signals. Since I can tamper with my metabolism, I can go about a week without water."

"Maybe you can, but it's still best to actually eat something, right?"

"Shit," she cursed. "You're a naïve little boy, you know that? I'm with the Freshmen. The new darkness of the city. I wanted to kill Fremea Seivelun just so I could group up Accelerator and Shiage Hamazura and finish them both off at once. I'd appreciate it if you were a *little* more guarded around me than this."

Oh yeah? murmured Kamijou. This was all news to him, so he needed some time to process it emotionally.

Despite that, he replied, "But that still doesn't give the two of us a reason to fight, does it?"

"....." Now that he mentions it, thought Kuroyoru.

But just for a moment. She quickly shook her head.

"No, no, no!" she exclaimed. "You got in my way, too! Right at the very end! You blocked my final attack! You decided who won and who lost, so you're definitely my enemy! In fact, I want revenge against you! You've got a lot of nerve, showing your face in front of me. Did it not occur to you that I might just tear you to pieces right here and now?!"

"How would you do that?"

"...Back home in the darkness, we have a term called *cyborg therapy*," said Kuroyoru with a grin. "Everyone who wants to be a cyborg wants to get rid of something about themselves they deem inferior. It could be you're trying to overcome a disease, or improve your motor skills, or touch up parts of yourself you think are ugly. Of course, anyone with a regular degree of shame would never be perfectly honest and just write those things down on an order form.

But even if someone were to only write roundabout, indirect things on the form, they'd still let you glimpse what they're feeling deep down."

"?"

"In my case... I have an inferiority complex about my arms. As in the fact I only have two of them. I can only shoot my spears out of my palms. If I had more hands, I would gain an advantage in combat. But people don't just naturally grow additional limbs."

She shook her body a little bit.

"I may call myself a cyborg, but I didn't alter my whole body. Instead, I focused on my shoulder blades and other points of connection on my upper body, all of which support my arms. My lower half is completely unaltered. I didn't feel the need to do anything to those parts of me."

A strange sound—*grrrrk*. It was too hard, even metallic, to have come from a human body.

"You still don't get it?" she asked, her tone changing. "If my arms are tied up, all I've gotta do is rip off the bonds, dumbass!"

Krrr-keee! An even more metallic noise rang out as Kuroyoru tore her left arm from her shoulder. Not the bone—the entire limb, as though it had been pulled off of a doll.

She grabbed her left arm by the long glove it had connected to her shoulder with, swinging it like a nunchuck. Then she pointed her freed right limb straight at Kamijou's face.

Bomber Lance.

She had plenty of reason to direct her ability at him, and she was the type to point to take aim at people even without justification. After all...

"Looks like you were underestimating a true villain—by just a little bit!"

Boooom!!!!!! A spear of nitrogen burst out of her palm. It had enough force behind it to pass through composite armor like a knife through warm butter, to say nothing of a human skull.

And with his death fast approaching, Kamijou just said, "Right, right. Which is

what Imagine Breaker is for."

"Wh-what?!"

Kuroyoru watched, dumbfounded, as he casually swatted away her very identity with his right hand.

But even Kamijou couldn't just let that one slide.

"...So we can't just tie you up, huh... But unless you look like you truly can't resist, you'll be in danger."

"Wait! Just wait! Don't try to brush off what you just did! Right—this happened before, too, when I failed to take out Fremea! What the hell did you even do?!"

"Oh, I know. If you can take body parts off a cyborg, maybe I can just detach your other arm. You won't be able to use your ability if you don't have any hands, right?"

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, owwwwww?! You dumbass! You can't just pop my arm off like that! There are a ton of locks holding it in there!! Also, you're the one with a twelve-year-old girl trapped in your bathroom! And you're trying to pull her arms off? I'm from the darkness, and even I think that comes off as freaking macabre! Do you get that?!"

"...Maybe, but I can't put your left limb back on."

"I'm trying to tell you that I'm not some old TV set, dumbass! I can't fix it just by sticking it back on! That would be too analog! Hey, quit grinding it around! My body isn't supposed to feel the metal connectors like that! It sends noise through my whole pain system!"

She groaned, snatching her left arm back from Kamijou and reconnecting it via a special method. Kamijou was unfazed by the gruesome display—maybe because she wasn't losing any blood, since the connectors were all man-made. Instead, he watched her with interest.

"Being a cyborg sure seems handy..."

"Do you know how long precision instruments last?" she asked. "Think of a computer. If you're running that thing at full load twenty-four hours a day,

you'd be lucky to get three years out of it. You really willing to undergo surgery every couple years?"

Kamijou never listened to the important parts of what people said, though. He crumpled the clear sandwich wrapper, saying, "But if you're a cyborg, couldn't you get installed with fish gills and live underwater? Not just to swim—you could have an entire life down there. You could completely change the kind of world you live in."

"...Actually, I feel like you'd have to change your body pretty thoroughly to solve all the problems that would arise from that. Like your cells' osmotic pressure."

"And if you put on cat ears, maybe you could get a better sense of hearing from far away."

Kuroyoru completely froze when she heard that. And then, despite her hands and feet still being bound, she practically flew backward over the floor to get away from him.

"N-no, stop! I don't know what you're picturing, but *stop*!"
"2"

"I'm part of the darkness, you know! One of the Freshmen, the hunters of the Alumni! Are you stupid or what? How did you even shoehorn that into this conversation?! What, do you think this hood is for hiding cat ears all the time?! Did you actually think your fantasies would just unfold in front of you like that?!"

Hearing the commotion from the bathroom, Accelerator (extremely uncharacteristically) went pale.

Everyone who called themselves a villain, or a part of the darkness, had a certain feature in common—they lost all credibility once someone broke down their cool façade.

No matter how villainous a person was, if someone put them in an apron and tossed them into a kindergarten, they'd have no choice but to become a caretaker.

Normally, you'd use violence to get rid of anyone who could do such a thing as fast as you could. That was how you maintained your personal image. But that Level Zero had a very strange right hand.

Accelerator shuddered to imagine what would happen if he couldn't eliminate someone like that.

Umidori Kuroyoru had part of his mind, specifically an aggressive part. You could even say she was basically a version of Accelerator who had chosen another path.

But this was what happened when you messed up.

Even though Accelerator was already distancing himself from evil and darkness, he swore to himself that he'd do his utmost to avoid getting caught in that kind of situation.

## **INTERLUDE TWO**

The vast, blue planet outside the window would never be fully shared.

In full zero gravity, her long black ponytail waving unnaturally, Kaori Kanzaki spoke into her Soul Arm communicator. Since she was using a Soul Arm instead of something like a radio, she wasn't speaking with anyone from the science side, like a member of the submarine crew or the rocket control facility. She could only be talking to someone magical.

She'd borrowed the power of science during her ascent. But from here on out, she was in the domain of magic.

"I've finished connecting the prescribed Soul Arm. Are you monitoring?"

"Um, we've confirmed your signal. The connection looks fine on our end."

The response came from the girl named Itsuwa.

"Using magic will be different up here than on the surface, where you can work in cardinal directions and regional requirements. I'll be as careful as I can, but you're in a better position to tightly monitor minor value fluctuations. Please stay alert."

"We're constantly checking for variations, including the influence of other celestial bodies. All values are within acceptable range, including tattva-related forces that shift elements by flowing from the sun and revolving around the earth. Our estimate is that there won't be any errors significant enough to adversely affect the operation."

Naturally, the science side's records on solar winds and sunspots would have been disclosed to their team as well.

Keeping the channel open, Kanzaki headed for the spaceship's hatch. She didn't walk; it was more like she kicked off the wall and drifted there.

A slight clinking sound followed in the wake of her every motion. Though she couldn't feel its weight in this zero gravity environment, she was wearing a Japanese-style suit of armor. A mess of layered apparatuses were stuck to her back, basically folded-up layers of metal.

It would've been very heavy gear for someone walking on the surface. As a saint, Kanzaki could handle it, but your average athlete would have been crushed under the weight.

But anyone doing research and study on outer space would have very quickly tried to stop her as soon as they saw her—kindly informing her that going "outside" in such light gear was tantamount to suicide.

It wasn't just a matter of breathing. You'd die instantly from the pressure and ambient temperature before you suffocated.

"Equipment check complete. I'm opening the hatch and going out. There's still oxygen in the cabin, but you said that was fine, right?"

"The pressure difference may destroy the equipment inside the cabin, but it's all disposable, so it shouldn't cause an issue. But be careful when you open the hatch, because all the air in the cabin will rush out."

"...If that was enough to break this Soul Arm, I wouldn't be able to go outside at all, much less reenter the atmosphere," remarked Kanzaki, grabbing the handle.

"The spaceship should reenter in thirty minutes if left alone. They say it will naturally burn up. Its trajectory was set up to completely incinerate it, so we apparently don't need to worry."

"Understood. In that case..."

"One thousand. The operation starts now. Best of luck, and may you return in triumph."

Without hesitating, Kanzaki spun the handle. About three rotations later, she saw a tiny gap in the hatch—and instantly it was blown off into the void,

propelled by the cabin's remaining oxygen. Gases always flowed toward lower pressure.

But Kanzaki didn't lose her balance. The strangely shaped breastplate she was wearing automatically maintained it for her.

...In Japanese myth, there are many stories of disembodied heads flying around in the sky, whether they belong to oni or nobles bearing a grudge, she thought, slowly leaning out of the ship. And there's another tale about a katana that could chase down such malignancy. As far as weapons that fight for you go, though, I suppose that's just part of a broader category—they exist in Norse and Celtic myth, too.

She looked over her shoulder as the full ship she'd just been inside came into view. It was mostly conical and was more lead than silver in color. She assumed it wasn't too different from Cold War—era spaceships. The technology inside supporting its exterior, however, had wrought massive change.

A blinding light reflected off of the conical ship—the light of the sun.

Much less energy was lost in space than on Earth because of the lack of atmosphere, whether that was visible light or invisible space rays. And so they reached much farther. That part of the ship's exterior, bathed in sunlight, had a surface temperature of almost four hundred degrees Celsius.

But Kanzaki's face still showed no sign of pain. If she hadn't had protection against it, she would have already been dead.

In fact, she was calm enough to feel a slight admiration for the moon, was vivid and eerily close, and the sea of stars, normally hidden from sight by lights from the ground and the atmosphere.

"Any problems?"

"Not at the moment. I'm new to spacewalking, though. I know I have plenty of backups equipped in case of anything unforeseen, but please do keep an eye on the monitors."

She looked at her feet as she spoke. There was no "up" or "down" here, but she still felt like she was looking down.

"...I have a visual on the target."

If anything rejected the Earth's azure, it was the white clouds. But something was pushing through them. A giant cross-shaped structure sitting in the sky. Perhaps because of the altitude it floated at, she could make out its contours much more easily than the shorelines of the continents, which were obscured by the atmosphere.

Kanzaki created a slight branch in the flow of magic power coursing through her body, feeding some of it into her breastplate. Once it began to circulate, the plate changed.

The metal parts folded up on her back opened wide. They looked like angel wings, but made of metal—or like katanas expressing beauty through their sharp but subtle curves.

"Beginning my descent."

"We're monitoring your reentry angle."

"If I can just get into the atmosphere, I should be able to land on Radiosonde Castle," said Kanzaki, slowly looking around at her mother planet.

Slowly but surely, her speed was increasing.

"After all, the target is massive. It's rather hard to miss."

# **CHAPTER 3**

### **Worried Acceptance**

**Lecture\_Three.** 

1

"The world's biggest religious organization, Crossism, has a new way and an old way. And the old way consists of three massive groups," said Leivinia Birdway. "They are the Roman Orthodox Church, the English Puritan Church, and the Russian Catholic Church."

You didn't have to be familiar with the occult to have heard those names—they showed up in textbooks. That was how well-known worldwide those organizations were.

"There's always been friction of some sort between them, but the direct trigger was the series of events involving a Roman Orthodox nun named Orsola Aquinas."

The calico used its paw to smack Fremea, who was sitting on Hamazura's lap again, but the blond girl was fast asleep and didn't react.

"It was thought she could decipher a grimoire written by an extraordinary sorcerer named Crowley, so the Roman Orthodox Church executed an assassination attempt to protect their own domination over the system. The English Puritan Church blocked the assassination attempt, then secretly obtained Academy City's help to resolve it...which set them up as clear antagonists."

Birdway didn't actually know what it would have meant for someone to have deciphered that grimoire. But she didn't really care to put in the effort to find out, either. She was far too aware of how Crowley-related grimoires could pollute a person's mind and the miserable end that awaited the sorcerer's who had been tainted by it.

"The Roman Orthodox Church followed up with several attacks on Academy City, which it saw as an ally of the English Puritan Church. But a single idiot repelled their entire assault with his special right hand. And each time an incident like that occurred, it fanned the flames of the great war even more."

Hearing her explain those incidents in order made Kamijou realize, again, how thin a tightrope he'd been walking until now. If he'd failed even once during any of those moments, there could have been an enormous loss of life. Yet he couldn't help but be angry with himself for having ignited the war after succeeding so many times.

"More recently, the Roman Church, feeling inferior, negotiated with the Russian Catholic Church. They leveraged fear, saying that the global balance of power was about to be tipped massively in favor of Academy City, and by extension the science side. This tactic worked. And at the same time, they were forced to bring out their own tiger cubs they'd been hiding."

And then Birdway said it. Their name—the wire-pullers of their generation.

"...God's Right Seat. The darkest organization in the Roman Orthodox Church, which boasts a good two billion followers."

The room went quiet at the word "darkest."

The science side and the magic side worked differently, but Accelerator and Shiage Hamazura could imagine what that darkness was like.

Whether it was because the war pitted science against sorcery, or because the 103,000 volumes didn't have any knowledge of God's Right Seat, or because her consciousness had been hijacked during the war, Index said nothing. So Birdway let her be and continued.

"You might already be aware of part of what they did. On September thirtieth, most of Academy City's residents fell into an abnormal slumber.

Dangerous riots sprang up around the world, and in another incident, the problem was solved by turning the city of Avignon in France into a sea of fire. And then there's the matter of the horrendous damage to Academy City's biggest underground center, School District 22... These were all acts in a play where God's Right Seat clashed with Imagine Breaker. Several of these developments sent ripples through the darkness on your science side as well, and so they might have caused further incidents."

September thirtieth? School District 22...? wondered Hamazura, frowning as he tried to remember the things he'd seen on TV news.

0930 and Avignon...? wondered Accelerator, feeling a bit of tension rooted in his concrete experience with the darkness.

They had both been involved in major incidents that could have shaken the foundation of the world and had at times helped resolve them.

But there was something else, just out of sight. Something so big that those incidents were nothing but shock waves from a huge explosion.

It let them know just how deep and how dark the places they'd be treading in were.

"God's Right Seat...," murmured Hamazura. "Who the heck are they?"

"The darkest part of the Roman Orthodox Church...but not the same sort of militant darkness you're used to. In fact, it's the kind of darkness that manipulates military forces like those."

"Like the General Board, eh?" said Accelerator.

"Well, there's a chance you're fine being the Board's test subject, so I don't think the analogy works that well."

Fremea was still fast asleep, so the cat hopped onto the kotatsu and wandered over to Birdway. She grabbed him by the nape of his neck and tossed him over to his owner, Kamijou.

"To put it in simple terms, God's Right Seat is a group of people trying to attain the same level of power as the one and only God or something of even greater quality. In Crossism, after death, you'll generally be tormented by

original sin until the last judgment. But there are a tiny number of exceptions, such as the Holy Mother Mary, who were cleansed of original sin while alive. God's Right Seat trying to figure out a way to do just that—a pretty easy-to-understand goalpost for modern western sorcery."

A goalpost.

Academy City was the magic side's opposite. Did it have a goalpost, too? As he listened to these stories of another world, Accelerator reflected on a world closer to home.

"God's Right Seat chose the Roman Orthodox Church because its two billion followers enabled convenient research and improvements. But the English Puritan Church and Academy City rocked their very foundations...and then a right-handed idiot linking the two got in the Roman Church's way. God's Right Seat had caused a few far-reaching incidents before the world war, but we don't know if they were directed at the science side and Academy City in general or at Imagine Breaker specifically."

Those were chilling words.

When God's Right Seat set its forces into action, it wasn't due to international disagreements. If anyone opposed their objective, whether it be an entire country or a single person, they'd use the same overwhelming force to crush them.

"So God's Right Seat launched attacks on Academy City and the United Kingdom in an attempt to maintain the Roman Church's dominance... You're telling me that's why World War III happened?" asked Hamazura.

"No," said Birdway immediately. "The full organization of God's Right Seat never intended on starting the war."

"?"

"I mean, while their group's goal is completely arrogant, they still used exploits within the rules of Crossism. Basically, they operated in various ways, but always within a Crossist framework. Maybe they were even convinced they were pious Crossists, too."

Birdway sounded a little amused as she said that. Was it because her field of

specialty was investigating the unique psychologies of the leaders of organizations?

"But one of the people in God's Right Seat was a little *too* extreme," she said, gazing at the cat curling up on Kamijou's lap. "His ideals went outside the bounds of Crossist rules. The Roman Orthodox Church never wanted to cause a war of that scale. They already have two billion followers, and their religion is spread across the world—if they caused a global war, they could easily destroy their own lands... But this one man decided to put his own goal above all that. He left both the Church and God's Right Seat for it, and he started a war to achieve his aims."

The cause of it all.

A man so extreme that not even the already-twisted God's Right Seat could stop him.

"Fiamma of the Right," said Birdway, giving his name.

"A man who has another right hand, one unlike this dumbass's."

2

Itsuwa, a girl belonging to the Amakusa-Style Crossist Church, was in love.

So even as Radiosonde Castle was floating overhead at a super-high altitude, threatening to cause planet-wide devastation at any moment, just knowing that the boy had survived had affected her mental state in no small way.

She was currently in the great hall of St. George's Cathedral, doing data analysis. But her efficiency had dropped to less than half of what it normally was.

She was too excited.

She couldn't focus on anything.

There was far more information coming from inside her than from outside. Perspectives, thoughts, and ideas spun around in her head, exceeding her brain's ability to organize it all.

In a few words, she was about to blow a fuse.

Unable to watch any longer, a tall man named Saiji Tatemiya, formerly the vicar pope of the Amakusa Church, sprang into action. He came up to her and tossed a *shinai* at her.

She startled and caught it in her hands. "?"

"I'll help optimize your thinking using a bit of an old-fashioned method. You've had way less chances to hold one of those since coming to London, I'm sure. Go on—come at me," said Tatemiya, his own *shinai* riding his shoulder.

"Um, oh. You know I normally use a spear, though...," she said weakly, readying the bamboo sword in both hands.

That was all it took for her to get serious. She was very talented in her own right.

Then a couple of blond nuns, completely oblivious to Itsuwa's Japanese spirit, pointed at her half in jest and whispered to each other.

"SSister Lucia, look! I think a Japanese samurai battle is starting!"

"It isn't right for nuns to encourage conflict, Sister Angeline."

"I bet she's going to catch the sword barehanded! Like this—between her palms—and *bam*, the sword stops!" cried Sister Angeline happily, clapping her hands in front of her to demonstrate.

A bead of strange sweat rolled down Tatemiya's face. Amakusa had naturally evolved to match a Japanese environment, so its members had learned quite a few eastern martial arts...which was exactly why their skills were so predicated on battle. Unfortunately, that meant techniques like sword catching—which would make you an undeniable master if you could pull them off but would never actually be used in real life—formed a big hole in their knowledge.

Still, though, they couldn't just betray those innocent, sparkling eyes.

Itsuwa lowered her voice to a whisper. "...Umm, I, um, well, what should we do?"

"...Looks like we don't have a choice," Tatemiya whispered back, tossing the *shinai* in his hands aside and assuming a perfect empty-handed posture.

Then he looked Itsuwa square in the face and shouted, "Come at me, Itsuwa!

We'll show them the true bushido spirit—with a sword catch!"

"What?! We're really doing it?! It might just be bamboo, but you're not wearing protection!"

Unfortunately, her loud cry drew the interest of several *other* sisters who couldn't have cared one way or the other before. They all began to gather; soon there were *hundreds* of them in the great hall. Even Kouyagi and Ushibuka, members of Amakusa, joined the crowd of onlookers, grinning as they did.

Left with no way to back out of this, Itsuwa cringed. "O-okay, here I come. I'll count down from three. Is that okay?"

"No need for any countdown! Just come at me!"

"Um, three, two, one..."

Baaaaam!!!!!!

The cracking of her *shinai* digging into Tatemiya's skull resounded through the entire cathedral.

Everyone froze.

Itsuwa was dumbfounded to have scored a clean hit, her mouth hanging open. Tatemiya had brought his hands over his head in a very uncool manner. It was clear for all to see that he hadn't been able to keep up with the movement of her blade.

I... I have to back him up...

Itsuwa, ever the docile stereotype of a "proper" Japanese woman, immediately started thinking of ways to support Tatemiya, rooted in the Japanese concept of "living disgrace."

And I have to do it soon, or the former vicar pope will turn into white ashes!

"Th-that was just practice, right?! It doesn't count! Do-over!"

Tatemiya, however, moved his lips without making a sound. "You idiot," he mouthed. "That just means I have to try a second time—shit, no!" The end of his sentence was very flustered.

But Itsuwa's words had already been uttered. The second attempt had to

begin.

### Baaaaam!!!!!!

The result that fell upon Saiji Tatemiya bore no explanation.

The vicar pope went bowlegged, and his hands wandered in the air; he seemed like he was about to disintegrate into ash and blow away on the wind.

I... I—I have to do something! thought Itsuwa frantically. "O-oh, I know! I shouldn't have used a bamboo sword, right?! A real katana would be heavier than this! You must have been having trouble timing the catch since this one is too light!"

"...Y-you idiot!" he whispered in protest. "I can't believe you'd do this to me!"

Kouyagi, another member of Amakusa, made a suggestion. "Then can't you just use a katana made of wood? They use real forged steel, so they're the same weight as a real katana... Though since it has no edge, it'll hit that much harder."

"H-h-h-hey, hey, hey now, Kouyagi! You're doing this on purpose! You have to be...!"

#### Krrrraaaack!!!!!!

His skull couldn't have been fully intact after that one.

Saiji Tatemiya writhed on the floor and held his head in his hands. He no longer cared about his pride or who else was watching. After failing several times to help Tatemiya out, Itsuwa was totally panicked. *Oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no, oh no!* She racked her brain, trying to think through it all.

"We can't use a wooden sword!" she shouted. "Nobody would use one in a real battle! It needs to be a real blade! A genuine Japanese katana—he could catch a hundred of those in a row! But we don't have anything like that in St. George's Cathedral, do we?!"

"Sure we do. Right here. If you don't mind using the Bateren Hono Kanemitsu Tosho."

The wavy-blond-haired Tsushima, another member of Amakusa, couldn't have had better timing if she'd tried. Itsuwa took the sword and trembled as

she stared at Saiji Tatemiya.



In her hands was a katana of the highest caliber that had never taken center stage in the course of history.

A Japanese sword made with Western sorcery in mind.

Its nickname was the Paper-Cleaver, and it was said to be based on a legend where it cut through a thousand pieces of Japanese paper in a single slice with pure sharpness alone. Frankly, even a bullet from a magnum wouldn't be able to get through a thousand sheets. If someone were to overlay their magic power on top of the blade and make it into a Soul Arm, that would boost its destructive force in an unfair way. What would happen if someone did?

"Wow! I think it's for real this time! This time he'll catch it for real!" exclaimed the sisters, eyes sparkling.

Tatemiya lowered his voice again. "...A-actually, I think this is enough. I mean, I get an A for effort, right? So, Itsuwa, please, stop trying to look tough..."

"No," asserted Itsuwa, sliding the blade out of its sheath, having evidently resolved herself. Without his permission. "I cannot bring you any more shame. Now that you've allowed it thus far, it is my job to make this your crowning glory. All's well that ends well."

"Uh, this is a little bit beyond shame at this point! If you hit me with that, the only thing I'll be good for is a human dissection study! And if you're going to do it, you could at least swing the blade with less force, or slower, or anything—wait! This is like all those times a cornered man awakens to his true abilities, isn't it?! A-all right! I'm gonna grab hold of those hidden talents and use them to become a main character!"

Whhhhhmp!!!!! went the first-rate blade as it cut through the air at a terrifying speed.

Where will the naked blade land?

Find out next time!

had gotten a phone call just after bringing up Fiamma of the Right. Apparently, it was from her younger sister, Patricia, so she put the lecture on hold temporarily.

He gazed out past the railing. The sun had long since set, and the city had been plunged into darkness. The landscape was far better suited for the person he'd been in the past. Turning around and leaning back against the rail, he took a sip from his mass-produced can of coffee.

Once again, he was sick at how this world of theirs was still expanding.

Academy City wasn't everything. It didn't oversee every last weird, mysterious thing that happened in the world. He'd gotten a murky impression of that during the war...but he hadn't expected it to be this bad.

This place was just a tiny fragment of a whole.

All those fights, all that killing, it had all been at a far remove from the core of events. That fact had sapped his vital strength more than he could have imagined it would.

Then he heard a familiar male voice.

It wasn't coming from inside the room—but from the next balcony over, which was partitioned off by fireproof paneling.

"Yo," the voice said. "Let me guess. You took apart Academy City's darkness, and now you're in an even stickier situation. It's got ya feeling down."

"Tsuchimikado...," muttered Accelerator in disgust.

Motoharu Tsuchimikado. He'd been part of the small, elite force known as Group, just like Accelerator.

"What are you doing here?" Accelerator demanded.

"Might want to get intel on the surroundings before entering a room next time. I live next door."

"Shit."

"Still, I've got a bunch of free time now that Group's gone. And I've got you to thank for that. So I hope you're willing to help sort things out."

Accelerator fell silent for a moment. Eventually, he opened his mouth to speak again. "How much did you know about the Freshmen?" he asked.

"Enough, I guess. I'd predicted guys like them would show up." Tsuchimikado leaned against his handrail and smiled. How was he taking this? Did he think of it as an escape? Or as his darkness being stolen from him?

"...Y'know," he continued, "Unabara and Musujime would never say it, but they're grateful. They may be confused now, but once things set in, I bet they'll thank you. Not sure we can leave those loose ends alone, though—namely Aiwass and Dragon—but I digress."

"No point bringing up people who aren't here," muttered Accelerator. "...But what about you? Personally?"

"Me?" Tsuchimikado's grin dampened slightly. "I guess I don't think it's good or bad. Just futile."

*"…"* 

"Even with the city's darkness in shambles, there's plenty for me to do. My spying isn't just for the science side. I'm pretty deeply involved in this new darkness you're about to set foot into. This new world. So my work goes on. Same as always. As long as I don't get too addicted to it, like the Freshmen.

"Still, though," he added, "whatever the actual effects for me were, I'm grateful you would try to lift not only me out of it, but the people around me, too."

Accelerator clicked his tongue.

Tsuchimikado chuckled at him. "I won't stop you from quitting the darkness altogether, but if you do, you'll want to establish your own stance soon. Trying to surpass good and evil isn't a fence-sitting excuse—in fact, it's a much more difficult path than simply clinging to black-and-white ideas about right and wrong."

And then it happened.

First, he heard a pattering of rushed footsteps on the street in front of the dorm. Then he heard the black-suits shouting for someone to stop, and the

front door flew open.

"So this is the spot, you thieving cat! says Misaka says Misaka, stepping into the room!"

"Dear! Honey! This Misaka is here to hit you over the head with a glass ashtray to find out if you've been cheating on me!"

As soon as they heard the voices, Tsuchimikado left the handrail on the other side of the fireproof paneling and retreated into his room without a word.

"What the hell are they doing here...?" Accelerator muttered in annoyance.

Misaka Worst approached him, a small paper bag from a shop hanging from her left hand, which was no longer in a cast.

"Sup!" she called out. "Found a few neat optional parts when I pilfered the Freshmen's castle! It's time to put that cool, narcissistic girl in some cat ears and paw gloves! It'll be the best human modification ever!"

"The hell you doing?"

"Misaka gets a bad feeling from that guy...," she whispered back. "He's the type to act on our behalf, or so he thinks. He doesn't need a reward, but his actions result in a complete rejection of this individual Misaka's sense of worth, since she's a cluster of all the malice from the network..."

Meanwhile, Last Order had narrowed her eyes and was glaring at Fremea and Birdway. But when she saw Accelerator and Misaka Worst standing awfully close to each other, she yelled, "The enemy was one of us all along! says Misaka says Misaka, growing desperate to maintain her position!"

"God, you're all such a pain in the ass...," muttered Accelerator.

robot. The last buses and trains from school had run their courses, and the veil of night had settled upon Academy City as her smooth procession went on.

Then a girl called out to her. "Heeey, Maika."

"Hey! What's up, Kumokawa?"

Maika gave the cleaning robot a few light taps with her palm to get it to stop; she had total control over it. The other girl walked up next to her, wearing a maid outfit. Her classmate, Maria Kumokawa, had long, black hair in sausage curls and sported a modest bust.

"...That maid outfit of yours is always so suspicious. I wish you'd keep that stuff to cosplay cafés!"

"We just have different goalposts."

The other girl's outfit was nonsensical—a miniskirt, a corset in fluorescent colors, and a bunny-shaped name tag hanging off her skirt. However, she was also at the top of her class at Ryouran Girls' Housekeeping Academy.

She toyed with her black sausage curls. "Unlike you, my goal isn't to devote my time to someone else."

"C'mon, you've given me this runaround a million times already."

"Fortunately, I have a little thing called *talent*. Both when it comes to Academy City's ability development and when it comes to other studies and physical activities... But that does, unfortunately, mean I'll almost never find myself in a sticky situation. Not that I mind waltzing through life scot-free, but the worry is me getting into a tight spot and not being hardened against it. I need to be hurt—but just enough that it won't break my pride. And I do that by serving those who are clearly below me."

"Yeah, yeah, heard it all before. Blech."

"...Oh, but I'm just getting to the good part." Kumokawa pursed her lips. "But this was all very fortunate. My pride is wounded now. And that means my resistance will go up again! How wonderful!"

"Hrmmm. This is why you're so annoying at school. You start twitching in pleasure without anyone doing anything."

"More important, Tsuchimikado?"

"What is it, Kumokawa?"

"I heard a big commotion earlier. Did something happen?"

"A man who should have been dead suddenly showed up and freaked everyone the heck out."

"Like something from a suspense movie?! Hmm. But if I do too splendorous a job intervening, my finally scarred pride will probably just get bigger... Ah, how awful it is to have talent."

"Unfortunately, that guy's my friend! You always misunderstand everything."

"I see... I see! Today was clearly meant for a focused strengthening of my own pride, then! So much good fortune... Will I even be able to survive?!"

"The fact that you're not mad you lost is the most annoying part about you," said Maika in exasperation.

Her super-genius classmate was, once again, eager to have new incompetent, moronic masters to serve.

5

The world could be divided into several groups. The colors on the map would change depending on how you sliced it up, but one of those methods, at least, went like this:

First, there was the magic side—a conglomeration of people dealing in the occult, divine mysteries, and miracles that had exerted its influence on the public stage in a variety of ways throughout all of history.

Next, there was the science side—despite the magic side's long history, they were abruptly expanding in the modern era and making themselves known, reforging the entire world's sensibilities in the process.

And then, there was the last group.

Strongly influenced by the first two but composed of people who didn't perceive themselves as belonging to either—the civilian side.

Until just recently, one may have called them the "peaceful side," but that was difficult in the wake of World War III.

Of course...

...even with all the scars from the war, civilians were equipped with the strength and reliability to keep on working.

"My husband works away from the family, and my daughter lives in a dormitory. I'm not mega happy about us being so scattered, but one of the few benefits is not having to worry about when they'll come home."

Enter Misuzu Misaka—wife, mother, and student at a women's university. She'd learned the necessary skills of a housewife and had fallen into a rhythm as a home keeper, but now she was back at school, battling her way through exams.

Though it was a November night, the temperature of the indoor pool at the fitness club was just right.

Another woman was soaking in the pool next to her. "I'm just scared that if I'm out too much, he won't want to come home to relax."

Shiina Kamijou—coincidentally *also* a wife, a mother of one, and married to a man working away from the family on business.

Sparks flew between their children in Academy City, and their husbands' stories weren't shonen battle manga but business magazines, embroiled in secret dark-money games not of the science side *nor* magic side—a different "dark side" of the world.

But the two women had nothing to do with those. Right now, the only things that mattered were being in the pool and doing anti-aging aerobic exercises.

Misuzu's gaze dropped to the mechanical wristband the club loaned out, and she made sure she was at her desired level of physical activity. "But what's the exception today? I don't think you've been coming here much recently..."

"Yes, that's right. Well, I suppose I was worried... (I swear, though, Touma suddenly went missing, then I saw that scrap of TV report out of Russia, and then I contacted Academy City, and they were no help at all...) And, well, I didn't

really have the time to dedicate to hobbies."

...Part of what she said had been so quiet and so fast that Misuzu didn't pick it up. So she just put on that classic vague Japanese smile and nodded.

Shiina, on the other hand, seemed to have boarded a train she couldn't get off. "(And then today I get word from the city that he's suddenly back, but I called the city again, and they said they were still confirming, and I had no idea what was going on but he does have Touya's blood in him, so, heh-heh-heh, oh dear me, why do I find myself wanting to throw a Blu-ray deck at him now, heh-heh-heh...?)"

Seeing the terrible shadow beginning to creep into her smile, Misuzu cringed unconsciously.

Despite fathers and their children constantly being tossed into the middle of battles to determine the fate of the world unbeknownst to everyone else, perhaps it was the normal-as-could-be civilians gripping their reins who truly steered the history of mankind.

6

"Fiamma of the Right."

Birdway said the name again after a short break. With everyone's attention on her, she continued.

"He's the leader of God's Right Seat, the most secretive organization in the Roman Orthodox Church, and a heretic. Unlike the other members, he wasn't acting within the bounds of Crossism."

Kamijou's face tensed a little. But it didn't seem to contain only hostility.

"His strength, however, was the real deal. At first, he was bound by several restrictions. But after worming his way into the British coup, he unlocked his powers and became nearly invincible. So many factions were at play in World War III—Academy City, the English Puritan Church, the Roman Orthodox Church, the Russian Catholic Church...but another one of those factions consisted of a single man: Fiamma of the Right. That's how powerful he was."

The conflict had gone beyond nations. The factions were composed of federations of several nations. Except one of those factions was just Fiamma of the Right by himself.

Touma Kamijou remembered how terrifying he'd been.

Accelerator, Academy City's Number One, could imagine how terrifying he'd been.

Shiage Hamazura, mostly a grunt, couldn't really picture how terrifying he'd been.

"If Fiamma of the Right had actually gotten to a point where he could release one-hundred-percent of his full power, the world would have ended right then and there. That was how he manipulated the others in the Roman Church—with fear. He got them to ally with the Russian Church to fight against Academy City and the English Church…all for his own ends. He wanted to meet the conditions for unlocking the power stored in his right arm. And *that* is the truth behind World War III."

A world war, staged only for a single right arm.

Faced with the insane power hidden on the global conflict's underside, Accelerator and Hamazura fell silent.

"What could he... What could Fiamma have possibly wanted to accomplish by doing all that?" asked Hamazura eventually.

Birdway's response was casual. "Oh, it's simple."

Even a world war was just one of the pieces he'd needed to use. And she was about to sum up the dictator's mindset in just a few sentences.

"He wanted to correct the unfairness in the world. To stave off tragedies that occurred through sequences of almost-miraculous coincidences. He wanted world peace. He wanted everyone to be happy... And that idea, by itself, isn't really that unusual."

"How the hell did that turn into a war?" asked Accelerator. "Fiamma's the one who started the whole thing, wasn't he?"

"All he really wanted to do was perfect his right arm," Birdway explained. "He

truly believed it was powerful enough to save the entire world—and, in a way, he might have been correct... Perhaps that clear path to saving the world twisted him. There must have been plenty of other ways to save the world. But Fiamma could only see this one solution."

A professional craftsman might think you need an oven to bake bread. But you could actually do it with a rice cooker or a microwave. You needed a slightly different recipe, and different equipment for the task, but you didn't necessarily need an oven. But it was exactly that deep knowledge of the "standard" method that trapped professionals into a cage of their own preconceptions and stereotypes.

Fiamma of the Right had been born with the power to save the world. He'd always had it. He'd probably never given it any more attention than regular people gave to their ability to walk.

"It was a shame to lose him," said Birdway, offering her evaluation. "Not only for who he was as an individual, of course, but also because researching him probably could have helped us analyze *that which lurks even deeper...* But there's no point crying over spilled milk."

"The war is over. The world didn't change. We still live on an unfair planet. But that also means we have the freedom to fight that unfairness and win or lose... So in the end, it's a good thing Fiamma's plan didn't work out, right?" said Hamazura, checking to see if he was following between every sentence.

Birdway smiled thinly. "Unfortunately, we didn't get that world peace like in some cheap RPG."

"?"

"While the war was all about Fiamma of the Right trying to get the power in his right arm back, he got too many other people mixed up—he involved even the Roman and Russian Churches, which were on his side... Along with the Russian Army, who fought with regular soldiers. As well as the forces of the science side, based in the English Church and Academy City. And those were only the factions at each other's throats. If you include all the other people he indirectly involved, it would actually be harder to find someone who wasn't part of it—from the magic side, science side, and the civilians who don't belong to

either one."

"And even when Fiamma knew he was finished, not everyone on his team laid down their arms...," murmured Kamijou. "Not many people can understand what he was after. Even less would agree with him. And frankly, his goals don't even really matter. Those working with him, those fighting him, and even people who weren't related... Everyone involved in the war participated because they had their own individual goals. So things are getting concerning now. People are starting to think, well, we haven't achieved our goals, so why should the war end?"

Those who rejected war.

Those who rejected the new world.

Those who didn't care what global tragedies they wrought on the road to their own goals.

"And those people are..."

"Yes. *Them*," said Birdway, grinning. "And now we can finally dig into the meat and potatoes. World War III gave rise to *them*. Their home is the world's underbelly, where they wield powers that most don't understand."

7

Fremea, girl leg warmer, squirmed. She'd been sleeping on Hamazura's lap, her legs under the kotatsu. But she'd been roused when he got up and said he was going to the convenience store.

Before he could leave, Fremea lightly grabbed his jacket. "Nyaaa..."

"I don't know if you're half-asleep or what, but I can't understand you unless you talk like a real person."

"I'm bored. Really bored. Stay here, Hamazura..."

"Yeah, but if we stay like that forever, my legs will fall asleep."

"But it's my spot." It didn't seem like she was trying to be mean about it.

But then they heard a noise just outside the front door and a girl saying, "Hm?

I think I just heard Hamazura's voice from over there." And despite the fact he was just in some random guy's apartment, the next thing he heard wasn't a doorbell—it was the knob turning.

"I knew you were in here, Hamazu—"

The girl in the pink track suit, Rikou Takitsubo, trailed off and froze.

Because she'd witnessed it.

Her boyfriend, Shiage Hamazura, had a very young blond mystery girl in his lap. The position every girl was jealous of when it came to their one and only. But doing that right after first meeting someone? That definitely broke a whole bunch of laws for sure. That was the situation. And as she gazed at them...her sleepy eyes popped wide open.

She tightened her grip on the knob of the front door, though her face remained expressionless.

"...Hamazura? What are you doing...?"

"How the hell are you making those creaky-cracky sound effects?! I didn't think you were that kind of character! You're not just Mugino in special makeup, are you?!"

Nevertheless, Takitsubo was a veteran herself, having navigated Academy City's darkness while her body was eaten away by Crystals. While she wasn't normally in the starring role, and she never had a chance to use her full strength because of the drug's various side effects, that didn't mean her physical abilities were below average.

"You disappeared earlier today and didn't contact me, and I've been running all over the city looking for you, only to find you lazing around in some stranger's room with a girl who looks somehow familiar cozying up with you around a kotatsu..."

"Huh?! Wait, this doesn't count as cheating, though, right?! She's a little young for that! And besides, I'm with the rest of the boing-boing crowd, so you have literally nothing to worry about!"

"...Sometimes Kinuhata says you're being really Hamazura, but even I would

lose hope if you're really this much of a wild animal..."

Fremea, on the cusp of slipping into her dreams, decided to say something to shut up Takitsubo, even though she had no idea what the two of them were talking about.

"Rrrgh. Don't say mean things about Hamazura. Anyway, he may look like a loser, but when things got really serious, he risked his life to save me... Nnn..."

Hearing that, Takitsubo—face still impassive—began to dig into the side of the door she was grabbing.

"Yes, I know! I know that better than anyone!"

"Hang on, Takitsubo! She's just a kid!" exclaimed Hamazura, trying to get his girlfriend to refrain from tearing the metal door off its hinges and slapping him with it.

And then more assassins appeared.

They waltzed right on in and pushed Takitsubo away from the front door—Saiai Kinuhata and Shizuri Mugino.

"Shit! Takitsubo totally got here first! But as long as I'm not last place, I won't have to humiliate myself with the bunny outfit!"

"Are you stupid?! That kind of sexy stuff is right up your alley, Kinuhata!"

As they shouted at each other, they charged for Hamazura. Apparently, the first one to touch him would be the winner.

Based on their current positions, Kinuhata was at a very slight distance advantage.

"But my legs are longer!" Mugino launched herself into a kick that flung out like a spear, striking Hamazura mercilessly in the face.

She did a fist pump, ignoring the awful crunching noise of her target's skull and his cry of pain. "Yes! I'm not last!"

"No... It can't be, can it...?" asked Kinuhata in disbelief. "Humiliation enough to be written in the history books, and it, like, fell on my head?!"

Neither of the two shrieking girls seemed to notice Fremea, who was still on

top of Hamazura. But he was sure given ten or twenty seconds, the excitement in the room would abruptly change to something else.

Before that, though, Takitsubo tilted her head in confusion. "Huh...? Did we have to touch him?"

Mugino and Kinuhata whipped around to look at her so hard you could hear the whoosh.

And so the loser of the bet was decided.

8

...And the problems kept on barreling in.

Fremea, who had been fast asleep on Hamazura's lap, had woken up after he'd been kicked over.

Her eyes met Mugino's, and Mugino took a step back. That girl is looking at me! And she looks exactly like Frenda!

"A ghost?!" she exclaimed. "Has Academy City's body analysis finally set foot in the domain of ghosts?!"

"Even dead, the bitch is *still* totally trying to make herself look young!...Hm? Wait, this girl—is she the girl Number One was talking about...?"

"...Nyaa..."

Still half-asleep, Fremea rubbed her eyes.

Hamazura pressed down on his nose. "...Owww. R-right. Her name's Fremea Seivelun. Frenda's little sister, apparently."

After hearing her name get called, Fremea looked around, eyes still half-closed.

Since one side had been introduced, the other side to do the same. That's what Hamazura thought anyway, as he said, "Oh, right. Fremea, this girl's name is Shizuri Mugino, and..."

After getting that far, he suddenly doubted himself.

How was he supposed to explain this?

Sweat began pouring down Hamazura's face like a waterfall.

He couldn't exactly say, Yeah, she's the one who totally snapped and cut your big sister in half. But telling her She's the best partner ever for you, since she also survived Academy City's darkness, would be whitewashing things.

As he sat there frozen, Mugino said smoothly, "A pleasure. I killed your sister."

"Noooooo!" yelled Hamazura, moving Fremea out of the way before he grabbed Mugino by the arm and pulled her to a corner of the room. That was the idea anyway, before she put him in an armlock instead. Still, even screaming in pain, he managed to maneuver her away from Fremea.

Fortunately, Fremea was still too sleepy to have heard what Mugino had said.

"...What are you doing, Mugino?! It's too soon! Too soon to come out with that stuff! Why do you always have to be so direct?!"

"Because it's behind me now."

"...That's not really something to brag about, you know! Crap. Now Fremea's looking this way. I'll tell her whatever, so please don't make the situation worse!"

Her eyes still half-closed, Fremea was trying to bite a 3D puzzle. Hamazura went over and told her it wasn't an apple. Mugino watched them but then noticed a new figure enter the room.

It was Accelerator, fresh from the convenience store, a can of coffee in hand.

"Number One, eh?" she said.

"Quit it with the good manners. I don't care about rankings. What the hell are you doing here anyway? What's going on?"

Maybe if they were normal, their conversation would have been all small talk, vanishing into the city streets a moment later. But these two were anything but regular. A couple of words from either of them could completely divide the mood in the room in half.

Not particularly making any expression, Mugino continued, "Just ran into a relative of a girl I killed a while back. And I told her as much, but she didn't seem

to comprehend."

*"…"* 

"It was all pretty deep in the city's darkness. There's basically no chance of Anti-Skill arresting me or putting me on trial, so if I'm going to settle my debts, I figured this was a good place to do it."

"Look, I don't care how much lip service you want to give. But if doing that is gonna drag someone else into the darkness, you're missing the point."

"Then I'll prepare first. Set it up so that she doesn't get dragged in. No matter what I have to do. I'm not gonna be a Goody Two-shoes and avoid being honest for her sake or whatever."

That was all they said. Number One and Number Four were both standing in the same small one-room student dorm—yet they were both clearly on separate paths.



Hamazura figured that the members of Item should kill some time outside so that the conversation would go smoothly. So he'd pushed on their backs, directing them to leave the apartment, saying, "Just get out of here already! A bunny suit? Of course I want to see that! This doesn't mean the bet is off, got it? Better yet, you should *all* dress up!"

His plea, however, had made all of them—including Takitsubo, who was supposed to be his girlfriend—give him really disgusted looks and scatter like spiderlings.

Still confused by that, Hamazura went back to the kotatsu so that Birdway could get to the core of the conversation.

The first one to broach the topic was Accelerator. "So who, and what, are they?"

All of Birdway's prior explanations had been leading up to this. They'd needed to cover so much groundwork before getting here.

"We have Academy City, the English Puritan Church, the Roman Orthodox Church, and the Russian Catholic Church. And then you have the other large factions swept up in the fighting. But even though *this* organization sprang up because of World War III, it doesn't mean they're anything like the ones involved in it."

Kamijou and Hamazura both listened to Accelerator.

"Where did this organization come from?"

And as they listened, he simply spoke.

"And what are their names?"

"Where to start?" Birdway paused before eventually opening her mouth again. "Just as a disclaimer, I think the answer will betray your expectations of how they're linked to World War III."

"This much lecturing and now you're trying to dodge the issue?"

"No, that would be annoying. But the backbone of the situation is something I'll also need to explain—because that part is *more* of a pain to you guys. But I just figured I'd leave that aside for now and start by telling you their name."

*"…"* 

"And that's a really easy one. *They* chose their name to represent what they want to show the world. What's the point if it's weirdly hard for other people to understand?"

Birdway spoke smoothly and directly.

"Yes. Their name is..."

# **INTERLUDE THREE**

Kaori Kanzaki set foot on the upper surface of the giant structure—of Radiosonde Castle.

She was so high up that she couldn't even get a sense of where the clouds were. The sky was painted a mix of indigo and black both above and below her, and she could only make out specks of blue very far down.

The surface almost felt like rocks beneath her feet. The castle was made of a jumbled mix of cathedrals and temples, all assembled in the shape of a huge cross. The structures were varied in architectural style, but the stone they were built from had the same level of wear. That was to say, they were brand new.

To put it bluntly, it looked like someone had taken a single type of building material and shoved it into a big mold to produce a mix of cathedrals and temples from throughout the world.

"Landing complete! I'm heading for Radiosonde Castle's deepest level and will be interfering with the balloons as needed. I'll need your support when it comes to exact values and calculations!"

Agnes's voice immediately played in her ear. "Roger that. Setting the Indian Ocean and Pacific Ocean as two possible landing candidates depending on speed of descent. Please destroy one of the balloons first so we can gauge how much the castle loses. We'll be able to do exact calculations from there and factor them into your future interventions."

Over two hundred giant metallic balloons had been confirmed to be attached to the underside of Radiosonde Castle. It was unlikely that taking one of them would cause the entire structure to plummet.

Kanzaki sprinted through the fortress, dashing down steep staircases and aiming for the deepest section. She didn't encounter anyone who looked like a crew member, whether from the science side or the magic side.

...And I was never hit with any magic or anti-air weaponry when I landed, either. What's going on?

But Radiosonde Castle was so gigantic that she couldn't be sure it was empty. People could be hidden elsewhere in the structure, and they could have been avoiding her on purpose.

She still couldn't figure out why the supermassive facility existed—despite feeling it directly under her feet.

And that creeped her out.

The staircases resembled scaffolding at a construction site, but the building materials themselves were the same as other temples. It looked as though they'd forcefully twisted the walls to make staircases, like some kind of candy-molding process.

"...We only have observational reports from a distance, but the castle certainly seems to be based on the Star of Bethlehem."

"The Star was like an exchanger that altered the flow of power on a global scale, right? Is this doing the same thing...?"

"If it is, I don't sense that it's being used to accomplish that. This thing feels more like a transformer that isn't being powered. I can't begin to guess why they'd treasure it like this."

"Then maybe having it float isn't the goal, but having it fall."

"You'd have to be quite the doomsday fanatic to want to enact anywhere near this level of indiscriminate destruction. So I doubt it."

Whether they wanted to keep it in the air or drop it, she couldn't see a logical goal. Naturally, preparing this giant structure, launching it, and keeping it in the air must have cost an exorbitant amount of money.

And that was the source of her sinking feeling.

Kanzaki couldn't tell what the people behind Radiosonde Castle were trying to

accomplish. It was a small thing, but it could easily point to a much larger misunderstanding. That was making her very anxious.

"Ugh... All right, I'm in the deepest layer," she reported, banishing her negative train of thought.

Above her was a thick stone ceiling, and far below her was the blue sky. You'd never see something like this on the surface. Once again, she stood on what looked like construction site scaffolding—a tight mesh walkway hanging underneath the stone ceiling.

While it resembled scaffolding in form, it was made of stone. And it certainly didn't seem like it had been built to adhere to safety standards. Ever attentive to her footing, Kanzaki looked around.

And saw giant spherical tanks, each dozens of meters long. They hung like fruit from the enormous stone hulk spanning a few dozen kilometers. There was nothing else to compare the size to; the entire scene was throwing off her sense of scale.

"We still haven't pinned down how it's floating. If they are using something like gas, please keep in mind it may be flammable."

"The balloons themselves are very large, but Radiosonde Castle is so gargantuan that even if the gas ignited, I doubt the explosion would leap to the other balloons." She kept calm and analyzed the situation. "In fact, my guess is that the only things affected would be the walkways around the balloon. I'd rather not plummet from the fortress before my job is done."

Both the metallic balloons and scaffolding-like walkways hung from the enormous stone hulk overhead. She couldn't predict how widespread the damage from an explosion would be. In the worst case, the stone holding it up could all fall apart and send the entire structure plummeting to Earth.

Holding on to her nearest exit—the staircase that would take her back up—Kanzaki reached for the katana at her waist. Or, more specifically, for the seven slender wires packed into its sheath.

"I'll get started. What's the situation down there?"

"No civilian, military, or magical facilities detected. You're above a central

Eurasian region filled with flat plains. We also have permission to go from the Russian Catholic Church."

"Well, then," said Kanzaki, and not a moment later...

Seven Glints.

*Pop!* A blinding light erupted from the space between her sheath and katana pommel. The complex walkways between Kanzaki and the metallic balloon fell to pieces, and that destruction reached the balloon.

There were no sparks.

Her wire-based slashes had been incredibly quick, and everything before her split apart like clay.

But the enormous balloon did fall in a unique way. It wasn't being blown by a strong wind from one side. Instead, it burst into a million pieces, scattering in every direction.

"It looks like they were filled with some kind of gas. But I don't know if that's the only thing it's using to stay—"

Before she could finish, her footing shook a little.

Then fell about ten centimeters.

But that made Kanzaki feel unstable, as though she were on a suspension bridge whose wires were breaking off one by one.

"Confirmed change in altitude from balloon destruction. We have the exact specifications for each balloon. It does seem like the gas in the tanks is the source of the castle's lift. I'll send you the process for venting it. The work itself is simple, but considering the scale of the fortress, time is of the essence."

Several diagrams and values came to her mind. Most of them were about the same as what she'd expected. The only difference was that she was working under a much more severe time limit than anticipated.

"I should poke a hole in the balloon to let it drift away slowly instead of destroying it outright, then?"

"Yeah. If you go overboard, and it suddenly drops unexpectedly, we won't be

able to keep up."

Kanzaki ran across the lowest-level area, taking a roundabout route to avoid the walkways she'd destroyed. While Radiosonde Castle was an enormous hulk that was several dozen kilometers long, a saint like Kanzaki could run on land faster than the speed of sound.

"...This one first," she murmured as she reached the side of a huge metal balloon several dozen meters long. The touchstone of armchair theories was whether or not they could work in real life. The situation would greatly change depending on if she had to use one of the cards in her hand for this balloon.

"First, reinforce the balloon's walls as much as you can. If you just poke a hole in it, the gas will rupture the rest as it tries to get out."

"Like putting a piece of tape on an air balloon before sticking a pin in it. That'll be convenient for setting up a Soul Arm with the role of a valve, too."

"The balloon's hardness is estimated to be on par with a thirty-millimeter steel plate. We believe they purposely made it weaker so that if anyone tried to fire ballistic missiles at it, it would immediately spell ruin. The opening should be about thirteen millimeters wide, but rather than do it all at once, please push through over one hundred seconds."

"Japanese people do love stories of water dripping from stalactites eventually wearing away at the rocky foundation beneath. In fact, I have several spells at my disposal based on them."

Originally, apart from special cases like saints, the use of sorcery was unrelated to talent. In fact, many spells had been developed specifically for those *without* talent. And many of their sorcerer predecessors seemed to think a slow, steady buildup process was preferable to causing a huge phenomenon all at once.

Kanzaki put down some paper that resembled wet cloth on the balloon's surface. Then she layered several more pieces on top of it. In a flash, she'd covered a thirty-square-meter area with five-centimeter-thick paper armor.

"...Japanese people really like paper walls, too, huh? They're always stopping knives and blocking bullets."

"The idea isn't that unusual. People once used bundles of paper as armor in China, for example. It's like covering your whole body in phone books. And you couldn't really make it any lighter."

Atop that wall of paper, Kanzaki attached several bundles of sticks tied together with cotton yarn. They looked like compasses used by scholars from long, long ago, or like tools for digging out wells.

"I have to stay here until the very end to test this, but normally there's no reason to sit and stare at a hole being dug over a period of time. Once I confirm this works, I can leave them on automatic before going to the next balloon. That should save time."

Knowing that there was always a chance a balloon might just explode, she kept close to the staircases leading up and away, then channeled magic power into the digging Soul Arm to turn it on.

Krrrrk-krrrrrk came the awful sound, like a pencil being sharpened.

"Well, it doesn't look like we need to fear the balloon walls bursting."

"Opening confirmed... The specified level of gas leak is being maintained. Radiosonde Castle has gained a tiny bit of descent speed."

"Contact me if there are any issues. I can close the holes back up by enlarging the stakes I'm using to dig them," said Kanzaki, jumping from walkway to walkway.

True to her word, she stopped bothering to observe each of the metal balloons she was digging into. Once she'd gotten the Soul Arm into place, she would head straight for the next.

"Confirmed interference with the seventieth balloon! Radiosonde Castle has fallen to eleven thousand meters! We're seeing a significant load on the anti-air-pressure spell!"

"Current position?! The Indian Ocean or the Pacific? Where is it falling?!"

"The fortress is currently passing over Korean airspace. It will have to fall into the Pacific!"

When she'd destroyed the first balloon, the structure had been over central

Eurasia. Radiosonde Castle was moving faster than Kanzaki thought.

She hurried along to the seventy-first balloon. "Do we know where in the Pacific Ocean it will fall?"

"Seventeen hundred kilometers north-northwest of the Midway Islands of the USA, at a point around six thousand meters from the sea floor."

Kanzaki created a rough mental picture of the route from their current position to their landing spot.

...Japanese airspace.

Her face quickly drained of color.

It's going to cut right over Academy City?!

"Agnes, it's an emergency! Please calculate a way to divert the fortress's route by interfering with the balloons!"

"What?"

"It's fine if it passes over Japan, but not that city! If Radiosonde Castle was created to fall on anything, then the masterminds must want it to be—"

And then it happened.

Krrrzzzz-krrrzz-kbrzzzzz-bzzzzz-krrzzzz!! A massive amount of noise hit her ears. A moment later, Kanzaki's magical connection via the Soul Arm was cut off.

She was being jammed—clearly by magic.

We got too close to the truth, then?

Radiosonde Castle wasn't only a threat because it could slam into the ground. It could easily cause widespread damage if it split apart into smaller pieces and rained down on the earth. If that happened, Academy City would be hit with the equivalent of a large-scale bombing run, while the main part of the fortress left with Kanzaki's team would land safely on the water.

Assuming their opponents were thinking logically, that is.

But as soon as their foes decided to prioritize their ideals over the future to come, they could just drop the entire fortress on the city without thinking any

more deeply.

That was the sort of creatures sorcerers were.

And they were what Necessarius, the Church of Necessary Evils, existed to stop.

...The jamming was very well timed. They wouldn't have been able to pull it off without remotely collecting information from the entire fortress. Which means... Which means some of the enemies are stationed on board specifically to descend...?

Kanzaki tensed again, then heard an awful noise in her ear. Shrill, like crystal glasses scraping together. Not just five or ten times, either; they scraped in her ear at length, but without regularity.

The source of it was...

"Above?!"

As soon as she realized this and jumped backward, something fell right on the spot she'd been standing a moment ago.

Not a human.

A heavy stone cylinder, about fifty-five centimeters across and a meter tall.

Then it turned to face her, like an oil drum that could move of its own volition.

## **CHAPTER 4**

## An Invitation and a Name

**Lecture\_Four (and\_More).** 

1

"Hrm?"

Right before giving their name, Birdway suddenly frowned.

"...You better not be putting on airs again," said Accelerator, visibly annoyed.

"I'd have no reason to... But it looks like we don't have time for that anymore," she replied, pulling her legs out from beneath the kotatsu blanket and moving across the room. She went to the window leading out to the balcony.

"Something outside?" asked Kamijou. "I mean, we've basically just got a bunch of the same dorm room all lined up here. It's only a few meters to the next building over. You're only gonna see walls out there."

"No, just wait... I'll do this, and this...," said Birdway, stepping out onto the balcony before pressing up against the handrail and leaning out. It seemed she was trying to get a good view from the gap between buildings.

"Damn it. I knew it...," she said with a groan.

But other than the inside of her skirt, which was on full display to the rest of the room now, the others couldn't tell what she was looking at.

"What's out there?" demanded Hamazura.

Eventually, Birdway moved away from the handrail, setting herself down on her feet again. "They're here," she said.

"Who?"

"...Them."

The three of them rushed to the balcony in shock. Kamijou tried to lean over the railing like Birdway had, but Accelerator just kicked down the thin fireproof wall between the rooms.

That gave them a view.

"Huh? What the hell is that?!" cried Hamazura.

Academy City was filled with lights of every variety at night, but you could still see the stars twinkling above. Except now, their glow was blocked by something gigantic in a small portion of the sky. A massive object—the likes of which you would never see in the course of your ordinary life—loomed over the horizon, like a cumulonimbus cloud.

"...I thought that if I got Academy City involved with this, they'd have taken it down already," said Birdway, crossing her slender arms over her pointlessly small chest. "But their response has been slower than I expected. The effects of a so-called error in his *plan*, perhaps?"

"The hell did you just say?" demanded Accelerator, narrowing his eyes. He couldn't let that one slide.

Birdway nodded, acting extremely casual about the whole thing. "Originally, they were chasing us—or, more accurately, the Imagine Breaker, who was missing at the time. They were conducting a worldwide search around the clock, using a floating fortress of the highest quality... And that's not the kind of thing you can just swat out of the sky. Even if we did, they could decipher what Dawn-Colored Sunlight has up its sleeves. Best to leave the annoyances to other annoyances."

"...So what are you saying?" Hamazura's face was pale. "Thunderheads are like twenty or thirty kilometers wide, aren't they? You're telling me the object is that big and made of concrete, and it's about to fall on Academy City?! And that you purposely set it up that way?!"

"Wait, you didn't tell me about this either! That's not the Star of Bethlehem, is it?!"

Even Kamijou was panicking at this point, but Birdway was as calm as ever. In fact, she almost looked boastful.

"Well, you're the kid who brought down Fiamma of the Right and stopped World War III. And since the war created *them*, I'm sure they wanted to know if you'd survived, and where you were. But it takes a lot of effort to search the entire planet. Plus, they'd want to hide how they're following you as much as possible—and if you want to hide a tree, you put it in a forest. By making this a huge incident, they'll force the rest of the world to see it as a planet-destroying risk."

All this commotion just to find a single high school kid.

These people could tolerate the risk of destroying the world just to find him.

That was how sorcerers acted.

All they cared about was fulfilling their goals—to hell with the rest of the world.

"What do we do...?" Kamijou groaned. Then he raised his voice. "We know what they're after now. But they can't drop a moon-sized fortress onto Academy City! How would we even protect ourselves against something like that?!"

"...We'd leave it to Academy City—at least, that was my plan. They had plenty of options while that thing was over the sea, but now that it's over land, its shards and fragments could fall on us."

"...You have a plan, right? Please tell me you have a plan," begged Kamijou with a shudder.

But Birdway wasn't stupid. "That search structure...," she said. "Uhh, I think the English Puritan Church is calling it Radiosonde Castle? I have a good idea as to how it's tracking Imagine Breaker. And if we know how, we can reverse-engineer it and create a countermeasure."

"How is it doing it?" asked Hamazura.

Birdway pointed a finger at the ceiling and twirled it around for no reason. "Do you remember me mentioning ley lines?"

"...Yeah, you said they're a kind of energy that can be used for magic that is distinct from the energy humans have," said Accelerator. "They have to do with regional geography or some shit..."

"That's right." Birdway nodded. "And Imagine Breaker erases *every* kind of supernatural power. The same goes for the very power circulating throughout the planet."

"So his right hand is like a snowplow, and that big fortress is just following the path he's digging?" asked Accelerator.

"It's not quite that simple," answered Birdway with a smile. "Imagine Breaker has huge effects when it's equalizing abnormal values, but for something that's equalized to begin with, it doesn't do as much. It destroys but only to create harmony... For example, you can't destroy a human soul by touching someone with it, and you can't destroy the planet by touching the ground with it. Even if a strange power is flowing through both."

"...I don't know. That sounds a little too convenient," said Kamijou.

As he looked down at his right hand, Birdway got on her high horse again. "Oh, it's not just Imagine Breaker. When people talk about Uncut Gems, they're referring to people who were stimulated by their environment into acquiring a special power, right? For naturals like you, that power grows in correspondence with surroundings and situation."

She went on, keeping her explanation simple.

"Back to ley lines, hmm... I know. Let's use your snowplow analogy. Even if Imagine Breaker removes some of the snow on the ground, more immediately falls and hides the path again. It's less of the planet having more in reserve and more that the cycle was already in place from the very beginning."

"Then how's the fortress following this Level Zero?" asked Accelerator.

"They can't search for him normally. So they used a trick."

"A trick? You mean they programmed something into the fortress?" Kamijou

looked dubious.

But Birdway's answer was way out of left field. "No. They programmed it into the planet."

u .....

The scale of their operation was so huge that Kamijou's thoughts ground to a halt.

But Birdway ignored him. "The environment naturally replenishes whatever energy Imagine Breaker gets rid of. So *they* interfered with that cycle. And as it's replenished, the world leaves behind a signal that only Radiosonde Castle can understand."

"But how...?" asked Hamazura. The whole magic thing wasn't quite setting in for him, but he decided to ask anyway. "You say they messed with the planet like it was nothing. But how the hell would you even do that?!"

"Through the application of geomancy. The flow of energy changes based on the positions of mountains and rivers, for example, so you'll generally find the optimal location and create what's called a palace there—but that means you can also do the opposite. If you want to alter ley line energy to meet your own ends, you can just destroy the right mountains and rivers in the right fashion."

She made it sound so easy.

But the truth was that *they* had completely rewritten some region of the world for just this one spell. Another example of the individual surpassing the whole. The sorcerer's sin—ignoring the consequences and exploiting whatever you need to reach the goal you envisioned.

Hamazura audibly gulped. "They would... They would go that far just to look for one person?"

"Compared to Radiosonde Castle itself, reprogramming ley lines is nothing more than a secondary spell. How much energy do you think they needed to put that much mass in the air? You certainly couldn't do it with a bunch of gas turbines," said Birdway smoothly.

"But back to my main point. They're interfering with the system of ley lines

sprawling underground throughout the planet. Imagine Breaker destroys that energy, and during its replenishment, the lines automatically leave behind a signal. Like a potato, or a gemstone or something. That way, no matter where Imagine Breaker runs, Radiosonde Castle will always be able to track him. Are you still with me?"

"But then he has no way to run!" Hamazura's eyes were wide.

Birdway's tone didn't change, though. "They might be feeding off the cycle of ley lines replenishing lost energy, but their spell doesn't keep creating these signals constantly. They'd need to think about the cost. Imagine a series of transmitters set up at regular intervals—that would be more accurate."

"…"

"To give some concrete numbers, their signals are automatically produced underground about every fifty kilometers. If Imagine Breaker isn't within that range, they go to the next signal. If he is, they up the precision for their tracking. So..."

"...So if we destroy the buried transmitters, Radiosonde Castle won't be able to track me anymore?" said Kamijou. "But they get created automatically at regular intervals, right? If they make a new one, won't it be able to correct its course?"

"Rest assured, they aren't omnipotent," said Birdway offhandedly. "Yes, they destroyed the right parts of mountains and rivers and such to interfere with the planet itself. But that won't last forever... They're at their limit already. They can't make any more transmitters. So we only need to destroy the ones they've got set up right now. If they're placed every fifty kilometers, then chances are good the final one will be set up underneath Academy City. If we do that, Radiosonde Castle will pass right by. After that, the English Puritan Church—bless their pointless hustle mindset—will take care of things safely."

One magical transmitter.

Constructed underneath Academy City.

Destroy that, and there would be a way out.

*"…."* 

Kamijou glanced at his right hand. His open palm. He clenched it into a tight fist.

Other people said he was always at the center of incidents. But he didn't actually know much about this world. Was he really worth the lengths they were going to track him down? Would there be a point in getting the city involved to stop them? He didn't have the foundation to find a logical answer to those questions.

However.

He knew that the result of those actions would endanger the city and those close to him. And he knew what he needed to do to prevent that.

It didn't change what he had to do.

It was the same as it always was.

However, there was one thing he was caught up on: That despite the great war's end, things like this were still happening.

"Could I ask a question?" asked Kamijou.

"What?" said Birdway, looking at him.

"If I were to get away from Academy City as fast I could, what would Radiosonde Castle do?"

"Normally, it would change course to keep following you," she replied instantly. "...But we have to remember the time issue—we don't have much of it. If they've set up the last mark here, the whole fortress would probably fall on the city regardless of where you are."

Despite being one of the contributing factors, Birdway wasn't shy about saying it.

"I see."

Kamijou clenched his right hand into a fist. A clear one. Without realizing how worried Index was getting.

"Then that's all I need to know."

It was time to wield his right hand.

Actually, that wasn't quite it. Even if his right hand wasn't imbued with a special power, he'd probably be doing the same thing. Confronting the impending disaster in front of him and opposing the great forces at its core. That's what he'd done before. He was no longer so weak his path would change based on whether he had power or not.

And if it didn't matter anyway...

"Wait."

Hamazura interrupted him.

He had the will, at least. He'd overcome a few crises himself, though not as many as Kamijou. Hamazura had protected his own personal world around him.

But if the greater world around that personal world wasn't protected, he'd lose everything anyway.

He took Fremea by the shoulder and moved her. The girl's face was clouded, as though she'd picked up on everyone's distress, if not the actual details of what they were talking about. And he spoke clearly.

"If Birdway's telling the truth about World War III, then the whole world owes you. No need to make that debt any bigger. Let me help repay it, a little at a time."

*"…"* 

Accelerator said nothing, but he seemed to agree.

...In reality, Touma Kamijou wasn't the only person responsible for stopping the war. He had, in large part, been supported by all kinds of different people with complex, intertwining relationships. He was just a high school kid with a special power, but his allies' support had been enough to put him at a crossroads of history. And Accelerator and Shiage Hamazura had helped get him there.

Still, at the very least...all three of them had come together here because Kamijou had managed to survive until now.

Academy City's Number One flicked the switch on his choker electrode and flew straight up off the veranda.

Hamazura headed for the dorm's front door, too. Without turning to Kamijou, he said, "You wait right here. I think you might be a little overworked."

Kamijou heard the door open and shut.

Then he looked at his right hand one more time, smiling a little.

Just because he had a special ability didn't mean he had to do special things.

Just because he could cancel out strange, unusual powers, it didn't mean he had to make himself a shield and jump out in front of them all.

As he reflected on what that meant again, Birdway yawned. "Still, without all the necessary pieces, those who will die will still die."

"Goddamn it! I knew I couldn't stay out of this!"

2

A black stone. Polished like a mirror, without even the barest of scratches.

The heavy rock had been wrought into a cylinder. And now the massive object rolled along like an oil drum moving of its own volition, zooming straight for Kanzaki—fast enough that it would cause a terrible steamrolling traffic accident. If she'd been a normal person anyway.

"Great. The caster doesn't like to show their face, then!" grumbled Kanzaki, reaching for the Seven Heavens Sword on her waist—a katana measuring over two meters long.

To be more accurate, it was *her* slashing attack that used seven wires, not the sword.

Seven Glints.

Rather than aim for the strange cylinder, she aimed for the walkway the hunk of rock was heading toward. It didn't matter how durable this "enemy" was—she knew she could slice through a walkway. And without it, even the strongest foe would plummet from the fortress floating 11,000 meters in the air.

She slashed without hesitation.

The walkways here hung from pillars connected to the enormous ceiling

overhead. Thin pillars supported this walkway on both the left and right; she'd cut the right-hand ones. That caused the walkway's floor to tip over diagonally, then vertically. Kanzaki was standing right on the edge of the unaffected part of the walkway, but then...

"Huh?!"

A terrible wind began to blow.

By the time she realized it was a giant sphere hurtling at her, which had bounced from one remaining pillar to the next, Kanzaki felt a dull impact shoot through her gut.

Yes.

A sphere—not a cylinder.

Ugh... urgh...! It changed shape?!

She didn't even have time to hold it back with her sheath. The sphere dug into her. As she struggled to breathe, it continued to move—changing its shape once again.

Reassuming its cylindrical form, her "enemy" parted like a pair of double doors, revealing what was inside. The process resembled an iron maiden opening, but its interior wasn't packed with nails.

Instead, what greeted her was a humongous crossbow.

Kanzaki threw herself to the side before she could even catch her breath.

Then it fired—a projectile weapon the thickness of a human arm, more a pile than a bolt. She dodged it by a hair, but the cylinder had already closed itself, returning to its original state.

It bounced off the pillars the walkway hung from, trying to get as close as it could to her. It landed on a foothold, then assumed a slanted posture, balancing precisely on the tip of its curved edge.

Then it spun around.

A moment later, something happened to the metallic balloons giving Radiosonde Castle its lift. With a sound resembling rushing steam, they began

to expel huge amounts of gas.

And Kanzaki wasn't responsible for it. This was far too fast for that. The "enemy" was clearly trying to drop the fortress on a specified location.

...I knew it. They're dropping it on Academy City...! she thought, gritting her teeth.

The cylinder opened like double doors once again, revealing its contents. But this time, she wasn't met with a crossbow.

No, instead it was a full row of matchlocks. And their hammers, burning like the tips of cigarettes, all fell at once.

Drumfire sounded.

And a moment later...

Kaori Kanzaki charged forward without hesitation.

She could already move faster than the speed of sound, so taking on subsonic bullets was nothing. It was like a professional boxer throwing out a serious cross counter to a child; the professional's speed and reach were far superior.

The crossbow had caught her off guard, so she'd been late to react. But if she could foresee more projectiles coming at her, then she could easily time her movements.

Ka-bammm! Her foot fell so hard and loud it could have destroyed the entire walkway as she dropped herself low against the oncoming barrage of bullets, moving her head out of the way to dodge them all. As her "enemy" began to fold back in on itself just as quickly as it had opened, Kanzaki increased her own speed even more.

It can open faster than I thought. I won't make it in time to draw my katana.

Her judgment was swift and calm as she drove her right foot straight into the cylinder.

Perhaps to defend itself, her foe changed into the form of a perfect cube, but that wouldn't help it stop anything.

Kanzaki's kick sent her enemy dozens of meters away.

Some of the pillars holding up the walkway snapped, causing it to slant. Kanzaki had intended to drop the cylinder over the edge and into the void. But out of sheer coincidence or the cylinder adjusting its own angle, it came to a stop, hanging from a piece of what remained of the walkway.

...Damn it. The sorcerer behind this would be one thing, but I don't have time to play with a toy right now!

She gritted her teeth. Then she shuddered, feeling an awful chill.

She was wrong.

The way its magic power flowed—it wasn't like a Soul Arm.

It isn't drawing from a stockpile of power given to it... It's tempering and circulating magic power by itself. But that would mean... Wait...

There were many ways to unfold a three-dimensional object—but one of them formed the shape of a cross.

And if you adapted that cross to the shape of a human...

"Wait... That isn't a Soul Arm at all. Are you telling me that thing is the sorcerer?! And they've optimized their own body into that form?!"

Kanzaki had more than just sheer power. Only because she possessed the ability to perform subtle analyses and delicate tasks was she able to notice what was out of place.

In response, the cube object spread out, unfolded into a single surface, and took the shape of a cross.

Then she heard a very strange noise.

Laughter.

It was like a young girl covering her mouth, giggling to herself in a barely audible way.

A chuckle.

Many chuckles, in fact. Kanzaki listened carefully to the sources of the sound, wondering if there were other sorcerers about...but then she frowned in confusion.

The cross-shaped geometric net.

Countless pairs of lips both big and small had appeared on its surface.

That made Kanzaki even more confused—how were the lips so lifelike and seductive when they had formed on a structure made of cold, polished, inorganic stone?

Chuckle.

Chuckle.

Chuckle.

"Yes, it would theoretically be possible to change oneself by matching the human body to a cross... But why would anyone go that far?!"

"Wrong," said all the lips at once.

The voice was a delicate soprano, utterly incongruous with what it was coming out of.

"Norse mythology's Mjölnir sometimes corresponds to a cross, but the weapon's owner, Thor, was not just the god of thunder. He was also a god of fertility and was said to control the climate. Sometimes the hammer is used as a symbol for granting children."

Exactly.

The form of her "enemy" wasn't fixed. It could be a cylinder, a sphere, or a cube. But only the cube could correspond to a cross. All three of them, however, could unfold into one specific shape.

And that was...

...an iron hammer.

Were the projectile weapons earlier—the crossbow and the matchlocks—based on that property?

As soon as Kanzaki put everything together, the lips that had appeared chanted a spell together.

The unfolded cube took the form of a hammer...and around it arose a storm of blue-white lightning bolts, spreading out in every direction.

Having flipped the switch on his electrode and temporarily regaining the powers that had earned him the title of Number One, Accelerator jumped all the way up to the roof of the dorm in a single leap.

He set foot on a railing, then took a look around.

During the war in Russia, he'd found a singular item—it must have been magic—and used a part of it. While its power had torn his insides apart, it had also saved a girl from the brink of death.

He'd already come into contact with sorcery through independent research.

And now, after Birdway's explanation, that vague impression had been given a clear outline.

He inhaled, paused, then used that power.

"...!"

Krrrick-krrrick! The blood vessels around his temples began to pulsate unnaturally. Despite the fact he was fully exposed to the cold wind blowing, sweat burst from his every pore. The situation was like a cup filled over its brim because of surface tension. Even a slight tilt to one side would spill the whole thing. And he could feel that very keenly.

He wouldn't ignore it.

With the delicacy of placing an index finger in the bottom of the cup, he controlled the strength inside him and continued his task.

Yes.

His task.

He watched as the power traveled its path, flowing throughout the city—circulating in from outside it and out from inside it.

But he wasn't perceiving this directly, as one would streaks of light. Like how swaying, rolling grasslands showed the colorless flow of wind, he wasn't observing the power itself, but the things the power affected around it. He sensed it indirectly.

In other words, he was sensing the flow of people.

...The Birdway brat said that in geomancy, you can construct an ideal temple at an ideal location using the energy from ley lines bending around mountains and rivers. I don't know if that's a global rule, but it seems like the flow of power splits this planet into places that are comfortable and places that aren't.

Of course, even without the occult layer atop it, the value of property changed based on the quality of its view. In real estate, those "comfortable conditions" were very strictly defined.

Was geomancy purely occultic in nature? Or was it nothing more than people statistically figuring out what places lasted a long time? Accelerator wasn't sure.

But whatever the case...

What he did know was that the enemy was using the same geomancy.

And people naturally flow toward places that are more comfortable. Like wind flowing across grass. It's not easy for me to sense the actual current of magic power or whatever, but I can at least observe how people move around from a high spot.

As he did just that from the roof of the building, he noticed that more factors than just density of shops or public transportation presence were responsible for how people flowed.

A single street might have been populated with a few similar convenience stores, but each establishment would have a far different number of patrons.

Trains and buses headed for the same destinations, but the two modes of transportation still coexisted, almost unnaturally.

Of course, even the center point of the science side, Academy City, was just a small part of the world. Even if the whole city had aggressively eliminated manmade magic, it could never reject the very traits and energies of the planet itself.

Which made a lot of sense when you thought about it.

But Accelerator slowly sucked in a breath at the fact.

...It wasn't made by force. It's just a lattice made of comfortable places. And

right in the damn middle of science's home base? It's absurd. It's like the whole city is being controlled by a strange power.

Doing that intentionally would result in a spell like the wards sorcerers used... but Accelerator wasn't deep enough into the world of magic to realize that yet.

For now, he simply reached out for the goal right in front of him.

I understand how people gather at brand-name stores or station terminal buildings or whatever, but I see one place that stands out. An unremarkable traffic circle. They, whoever they are, are using geomancy to mess with ley lines, right? Which means...that must be a trace of their tampering.

An unnatural amount of such power was gathering in one spot in the city.

The power that should have been strung out like a lattice, creating the flow of people, was accumulating there in a strange way—like the water from a bathtub draining out.

The way it encouraged people to travel in a single direction wasn't deliberate, but the concentration of power was subtly yet undeniably interfering with how they were moving around.

That must be it.

Arriving at this conclusion, Accelerator took out his cell phone. He'd only say what he needed to.

"Found the strange spot. A central transformer hub in District 7. Right in the middle. The energy or whatever is all twisting around and stalled up there. Like it's stuck or something."

4

The cross-shaped geometric net stretched four hundred meters in every direction.

The high-tension currents unleashed into this world all burst out at once like a spherical storm.

Kanzaki had just jumped up the stairs leading further up the structure. Wanting to get as far from the rectangular entrance as possible, she practically rolled across the stone floor to head farther inside.

Her incredible maneuver then came to an abrupt halt.

The sorcerer had interfered when she tried to jump.

...The current... It somehow just...ignored the stone...?!

"Gah ... Ugh ...!"

Kanzaki deliberately tried to calm her breathing, which had grown erratic.

The sorcerer had modified her body in pursuit of her personal goals. Kanzaki was the opposite—she'd been born with physical characteristics resembling the Son of God and could draw forth a small portion of that power. This sorcerer, however, had taken a very different path. Her attacks had grown in intensity, as if in proportion to what she had lost, what she had abandoned.

The fact that the sorcerer had even been putting up a fight against one of the world's less-than-twenty saints was abnormal to begin with.

But that form isn't in any of Necessarius's previous records... Is it a new one that appeared after the war...?

Kanzaki began to hear sizzling, like oil jumping off a frying pan. It was traveling through the rectangular cutout that served as an exit.

The second wave was being prepared.

The shape of the attack is almost entirely dependent on the laws of physics. Simpler than a formless curse, perhaps, but I expect she wants to keep on showering me with it to dull my movements little by little...

The high-tension current cracked through the air. Krrrr-zapppp!!!!!!

That same moment, Kanzaki unsheathed her Seven Heavens Sword with expert timing, whipping its tip around to point at the stone floor.

She sliced through the stone like it was tofu, but at the same time, she felt her blade slashing through something else.

That was the sensation of cutting through the electrical current itself and

disabling it.

There is a katana in Japanese legend said to be able to cleave lightning. The weather conditions change quickly and often in Japan. I couldn't call myself a sorcerer if I didn't know how to deal with thunder deities!

This was magic.

It surpassed the laws of physics. It was something you brought to a fight where the odds were stacked against you.

Kanzaki had still needed to remain vigilant—she would have eaten the full force of the sorcerer's strike if she'd mistimed her slash. But she was more than capable of handling a spell of this level.

Just as she was certain things were going her way, she felt an awful sensation around the nape of her neck.

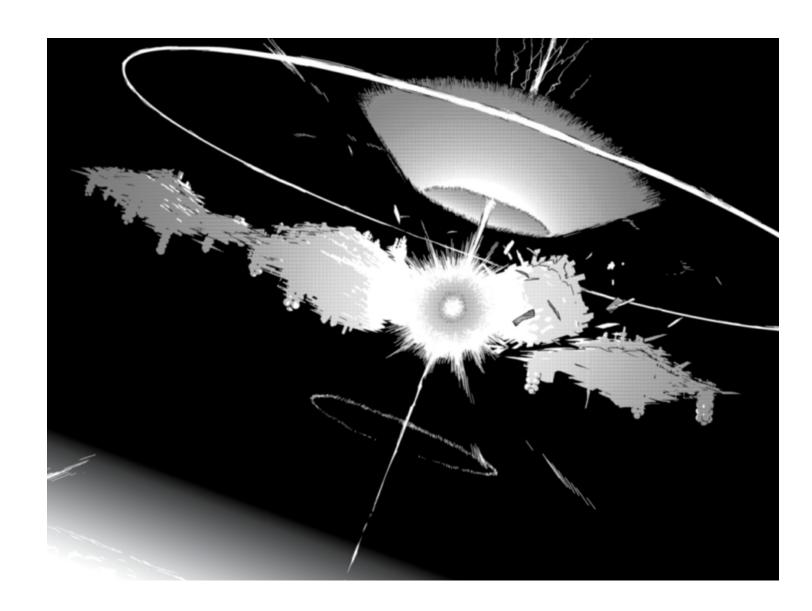
It wasn't physical.

In simpler terms, it was like a foreboding premonition. But when there was a concrete cause behind it, it wasn't so easy to laugh away.

In other words...

"Wha... What ...? What is all this magic power? There's so much...!"

She headed over to the exit to get a read on her opponent. Peeking her face out to look, she saw the sorcerer's unfolded form. Her cross-shaped body modeled after Thor's great hammer was neither standing straight nor lying on the walkway. Instead, it was drifting leisurely through the sky like a kite.



There was a regularity to its movements.

A giant circular shape with a radius of twenty or so kilometers. Bluish-white sparks fluttered behind it like a tail as the "throwing hammer" traveled in a neat circle. Its speed increased. Not uniformly, but parabolically, advancing very rapidly. In the ten seconds Kanzaki used to observe it, her opponent's physical form was already gone, replaced by a huge shining ring in blue and white.

It was an altogether ominous phenomenon—like an angel's halo.

From the flow of the mana, from the symbolism of the ring shape, from the sorcerer's attitude, Kanzaki registered what would happen next.

Without wasting another moment, she fled.

Then a flash of bluish-white light that seemed strong enough to pierce the very heavens rose precisely through the center of the twenty-kilometer ring.

And obliterated a third of Radiosonde Castle.

5

Touma Kamijou ran through the nighttime streets of Academy City, heading for the central transformer hub facility Accelerator had told him about.

The city got its electricity from wind turbines filling every nook and cranny of the streets. The advantage of this configuration was that accidents and disasters could take out part of the grid, but there would seldom be a blackout. But since the transmission routes formed a lattice rather than straight, one-way paths, you needed a facility to control the electricity's flow. Each school district had one such central hub.

But why would it be there again...? Kamijou thought as he ran, unable to come up with an answer. Maybe the electricity or something served as an occult symbol of some kind.

He didn't catch up to Shiage Hamazura on the way there; he'd started moving to the same destination ahead of him. Kamijou was pretty sure he was on the shortest route. Was Hamazura taking a different path?

Eventually, he made it to the front of the central transformer hub facility. The

name itself sounded so intimidating that Kamijou had imagined it would look like a gigantic industrial or military complex. But now that he was actually here, he realized his assumption was off the mark.

While the facility was technically surrounded by concrete walls and barbed wire, there wasn't a single security guard on the premises. Security robots patrolled the place at regular intervals, but even children's playgrounds here had those.

Kamijou looked up at the thick walls.

...Guess climbing up would be fastest.

His mind made up, he picked up an empty can on the ground near him. He wanted to make sure the barbed wire at the top of the wall wasn't live before he climbed it.

He hurled the can up there. It hit the taut wire but didn't produce any sparks.

"Then here we go," he murmured, heading to the wall.

While there were barbs to prevent intruders, they were spaced out at even intervals. Everything between was just wire fence. Carefully, he grabbed the top of the wall without injuring himself and heaved himself up.

Would have been safer with a thick rubber mat... But I guess the barbs are long enough to get through one of those anyway, he thought, taking a good look at the rest of the facility from his vantage point on top of the wall.

The plot of land wasn't that large. It was thirty meters square at most and consisted of a single rectangular two-story building. But he also saw a few installations here and there that seemed to be holding rows of oil drums. Judging by where the electric wires came out of the ground and converged, they must have been part of the transforming process. He wouldn't want to touch those.

Jumping off the wall, Kamijou began his infiltration of the facility.

Now came the important part.

One third of Radiosonde Castle had been obliterated.

The mountain of rubble did not crash down at the Kanto area like an avalanche; instead, the massive energy blast had blown it all to smithereens. The spell was like a solenoid, and it had been so destructive it might have even wrecked some of the ozone layer. The "throwing hammer" had continued to revolve on a circular path, wrapped in incredible electric force, giving all the charged air inside the ring a vector that traveled vertically.

On its own, the explanation would have made sense. But in reality, the attack was physically impossible. If it were operating only under the laws of science, the phenomenon would be contradictory.

But the sorcerer had bolstered it with magic, essentially strong-arming her attack into working anyway.

"Haah...!"

Standing on the very brink of the destruction, Kanzaki tried to catch her breath.

The edge of the walkway she was on glowed orange, like a blast furnace. There were no longer any stone walls or ceilings to impart the strange sense of intimidation from before. A short hop was all that separated her from the wide-open sky.

She used up all her supersonic movement, not caring about the consequences. Slicing through walls and pillars, she continued forward.

There wouldn't be a next time. If she was hit with that again, she wouldn't be able to deal with it.

A few walls were too strong for just her katana and wires. Luckily, she had enough speed to just ram her way through them. Though she was using minimal defensive sorcery, it was making the inside of her body scream.

Most important, two more of those attacks, and she'd lose all hope of escape.

It was a desperate, life-or-death situation. But at the same time, something struck her as odd.

...Did that sorcerer—or her organization—not actually plan to drop

Radiosonde Castle on Academy City?! She didn't seem concerned about destroying a significant portion of the fortress...!

It was a mystery whatever the "throwing hammer" was trying to accomplish, too. She was creating a destructive force to rival a floating fortress with only the strength in her own body. But that was just a means—not an end. The fact she'd altered her body to that extent indicated that the sorcerer was doing more than a simple efficiency calculation or a bit of logical thinking. There had to be a goal behind it—the kind only a sorcerer would have.

To protect someone close to her. To kill someone she hated. To resurrect someone dead. To produce a giant dragon that didn't actually exist.

All sorcerers used Latin-based magic names that engraved their goals into their hearts, regardless of whether they were achievable. But she couldn't sense anything like that from the throwing hammer.

The enemy sorcerer had so much firepower, and yet she wasn't using it to directly attack Academy City.

Her goal was *supposed* to be to drop Radiosonde Castle on it. But she'd obliterated a third of the fortress without a second thought.

Her methods were all over the place, maybe even incongruous. Kanzaki could sense none of the behavioral patterns particular to sorcerers that, in a way, demonstrated their extreme attachment to their goals.

Was it some logic only the throwing hammer could understand?

Or...

"...Or has she already lost her goal...?" murmured Kanzaki.

For example...

If your magic name told you to protect someone precious, and you gathered every little thing you'd need in order to do that, then turned into something like this sorcerer...only to allow that person to die in the throes of your obsession, then your goal would be lost.

And the only thing that would remain was power.

Without a moral compass to guide it, that power would simply drift along.

Lacking a strong direction in life, the lost sorcerer would drift into others, sometimes wielding their power for no particular reason... But strength without intent could become an overwhelming fury that endangered the world.

Once you had power, you couldn't get rid of it.

A true monster destroyed simply by walking down the street. If trivial things like television commercials or tip jars next to cash registers determined what that monster would do every day, how much damage would it do to the city?

An apathetic destroyer.

A natural enemy who never considered the consequences.

One who would, purely on a whim, obliterate everything people had so desperately accumulated over many years.

...Nobody who had fallen so far could have existed for very long. Otherwise, the planet wouldn't even have an atmosphere anymore at this point. Necessarius was meant to capture such sorcerers, but none had ever appeared in its case files. So perhaps one who was corrupt enough had finally appeared.

And only one thing could have caused that corruption.

"...World War III."

Publicly, the war had ended in two weeks—a very short span of time—and major military forces centered around Academy City had kept casualties to an absolute minimum...but the conflict had been vicious enough to wipe whole places off the world map. It was possible that some skirmishes just hadn't been made public or that tragedies that no one was left alive to witness had occurred.

"A fool, then."

Narrowing her eyes, unable to even imagine what the root cause could be, Kanzaki still cleaved it in two.

"Even if she had fallen, all she needed to do was realize how many other people close to her she wants to protect just as much. At least that way, she wouldn't have gone down this path."

Perhaps sorcerers weren't the type of people who could understand that.

They went in one direction and no other. They obtained explosive propulsion by limiting the path they walked of their own volition. Was that why they couldn't understand the feelings of those who walked other paths?

But Kanzaki was different now. She knew of other sorcerers who had risen once again even after losing their original goals. One sorcerer in Necessarius had failed to protect a single girl, but he still used his rune cards to fight and protect the world she lived in. Another had lost her precious partner after being caught between science and magic but now controlled a golem named after her lost friend. Sisters who had been treated like disposable pawns by their leaders in the Roman Orthodox Church continued to have faith in God even in exile.

Loss was always sad.

But it didn't always twist a person. Nor did it excuse them.

Above all...

A person would never find the kind of salvation they hoped for by walking a path of simple destruction.

Because salvation wasn't something you solely relied on others for.

Kanzaki had seen people who would stand up over and over again, even while coughing up blood. She'd seen them smile again. And that wasn't her romanticizing things—she had a real, physical understanding of it. She respected those people because they had a strength she lacked. And that was why she didn't have sympathy for the throwing hammer and the end she had met.

"...Salvare000. The hand of salvation for the unsaved."

Instead, she thrust her magic name before the sorcerer—that Latin word engraved in her heart—clearly and smoothly.

The throwing hammer who had lost even that magic name began to fly again, attempting to form another huge ring. But it was unstable this time. Like a kite with a snapped string, it bobbed and weaved in the wind.

This time, the forty-kilometer-long ring rose vertically.

If Kanzaki aimed poorly, Mjölnir could obliterate over half of the fortress. But

7

According to Accelerator, the transmitter produced by the enemy's use of ley lines was almost right in the middle of the central transformer hub facility.

Kamijou broke the keyhole in the back door with a flathead screwdriver, then went inside.

The space was lit only by the pale glow of fluorescent lights; he couldn't see any humanlike figures inside. One room had over a dozen computers whose monitors were flooding with figures, even though no one was operating them. The devices must have been set up for remote work. Maybe the employees were accessing them at home.

...I don't think this is exactly the right facility to allow work from home...

Still, it was better that Kamijou had stumbled into an empty room than ran into an employee who was working in person out of a troubling sense of dedication. He didn't have time for any extra trouble.

He walked through the facility, quickly reaching its center.

He came upon a square room that lacked almost any design sense. It was filled with large computers for monitoring and controlling the latticelike transmission network that delivered electricity to the right places at the right times.

Since there was so much delicate equipment inside, it wouldn't have been strange if the room felt like a freezer, but that wasn't the case. Did those bookshelf-sized computer towers have cold air going through them? Or were they liquid-cooled?

"The center...," murmured Kamijou. "The center of the facility..."

Unfortunately, he didn't see anything that looked like a magical transmitter. He waved his right hand in the air, thinking maybe it was like an invisible gas or energy, but didn't feel anything of note.

Was this really the right place?

Was the transmitter somewhere else? Or would only a professional sorcerer be able to sense it?

... Wait a minute, thought Kamijou, suddenly dubious. He stared at the center of the room.

The floor was made of thick concrete.

There wasn't any rain leaking down from the ceiling, yet there was a strange black muck on the floor.

"Underground...? Are you telling me it's underneath all this concrete?!"

8

The Mjölnir spell worked by rotating a giant supercharged ring extremely quickly, which moved the charged air in the middle of the ring as well. Once it fired, it had enough punch to wipe out a third of Radiosonde Castle, which was itself dozens of kilometers long. Saint though she was, Kanzaki no longer had the stamina to avoid it.

Nor did she intend to.

The true value of sorcerers lay in their ability to overcome difficulty using knowledge.

...Come to think of it, why did we resort to such a roundabout method for interfering with the fortress at all?

It was an advanced problem; Radiosonde Castle's very nature prevented aircraft and rockets from working. Kanzaki had taken a rocket up into orbit first, then reentered and landed on top of it. That was the only way she'd been able to get here.

But...

Most modern sorcerers are forbidden from doing a very specific thing—at least, as long as you're not a special exception like the number-ten saint. That restriction is why I needed to land on the structure from above instead of flying there directly.

The reason they'd chosen the descent option.

The reason she hadn't flown straight here.

Kaori Kanzaki searched her knowledge.

She thought of the legend of Peter, one of the Twelve Apostles. He'd once confronted a famous sorcerer named Simon Magus—the namesake of Simony, the act of buying and selling church offices. Simon had flown freely through the air. What had Peter said to him then?

It was this.

"Demons lifting the sorcerer, release your hands from him at once!"

The restriction on flight.

One of the walls no sorcerer living in modern times could surpass.

It was simple, it was effective, and it was based on a very famous story. Because of that, interception spells had proliferated. While people could indeed fly without wings, the moment they took flight, they had also been given the barren restriction to be brought down.

I must not let her confuse me, thought Kanzaki, although the altogether strange appearance of the sorcerer threatened to make her forget the fundamentals.

Instead, she slowly approached the throwing hammer.

"If I had viewed you as a Soul Arm or a weapon, I would have assembled an interception spell to deal with you. That's why it was important for you to put me in a situation where I had no choice but to fight you personally and respond with something *other* than an interception spell. If Thor's hammer cannot fly, it's pointless. But in this age, those who fly are quickly brought low. So you came up with a way to befuddle your opponent's perception by constantly placing them under the gun."

*Kriiick-kraaack.* With a sound resembling plastic sheets bending, the throwing hammer tried to fold back up into a cube. She'd given up on flying. Did she want to roll toward Kanzaki and close the distance?

It wouldn't work.

The sorcerer Simon had died when he fell. Magical flight obstructions didn't

simply drop the enemy to a height of zero meters. While it depended on which parts of Peter's story you decided to adapt more strongly, spells like them always involved something extra, beyond the normal injuries you'd sustain from the fall.

Which is why the unfolded net didn't return to its cubic form.

The crackling noises continued, but none of its sides ever connected. It was like a child failing to fold up a die from a marked sheet of paper.

"And that's why you used that ability even if it meant blowing away so much of the fortress. Because you sensed a risk greater than this short-term conflict if I figured you out... Have you acquired the fear of your methods being stolen, even after losing your objective? It would have been easier to search for a new goal had you stopped pointlessly clinging to the past."

The throwing hammer was controlling the metallic balloons providing Radiosonde Castle with lift. Kanzaki couldn't let her go. If she took her down right here, she'd stop the fortress from falling. It would miss Academy City—and avert the possibility of a global catastrophe.

Kaori Kanzaki recalled her magic name.

Salvare000. The hand of salvation for the unsaved.

But it certainly didn't seem like her name should compel her to let the throwing hammer continue living in this way. She had faith in her magic name—and the salvation it promised—not being quite that simple.

"...If your way of life causes you inconvenience, you must dwell on it before committing to action. I will give you a time and a place to think—whether you like it or not."

The throwing hammer was silent.

Without a word, the enemy sorcerer gave up on returning to her threedimensional form and threw her unfolded self onto the broken floor.

But it didn't end there.

A lattice of some sort suddenly appeared on her surface. Then parts of her began to break off in a complicated pattern, following those lines. While it

looked random at first, Kanzaki eventually realized that each of the fragments were also unfolded cubes. They were like puzzle pieces now, and they all flew off like a group of butterflies, fluttering weakly away.

...Even in escape, she chooses flight.

Kanzaki wondered if that was a hint at her—or his, for that matter—magic name. But a moment later, she ruthlessly activated her Peter-type interception spell.

The swarm of parts fell, as though they had been swatted by a giant metal plate from above, but once they lost their strength, the wind carried them off into the blue skies, scattering them.

Kanzaki doubted the sorcerer was dead.

She didn't know how to kill someone who could separate herself into that many pieces in the first place.

*"…"* 

For just a moment, Kanzaki dwelled on the throwing hammer—but then she snapped herself out of it.

Salvation could be granted later. Before that, she had something to do.

9

The deafening sound of heavy metal clashing with something hard.

Kamijou brought down the shovel he'd found in the facility again, but it wasn't enough to break the concrete. He'd already tried one or two dozen times, and while he'd created several white scrapes on the surface, they'd only torn it up a few millimeters. He hadn't managed to make a single crack yet.

His arms were likely to give out before the floor did. Giving up on the attempt, Kamijou threw the shovel aside.

"Damn it!"

His goal was right under there. All he had to do was lightly brush the transmitter guiding Radiosonde Castle with his right hand, and it would

probably fall apart on the spot.

But if he couldn't touch it, he was powerless. The thick layer of concrete—a material that had no connection to the occult world and was basically everywhere—blocked his path.

His right hand held a power called Imagine Breaker. He'd used it to defeat countless opponents, including the number-one esper, and the leader of God's Right Seat.

But his hand was *only* good for erasing supernatural powers. Obviously, he couldn't destroy concrete. Obviously, bikes could catch up to him. Obviously, he'd bleed if someone slashed him with a hobby knife.

He was only human.

In all his fights thus far, he'd managed to set things up so that his humanity didn't count as a demerit. But now, all of his tricksiness had come back to bite him.

What now...? he thought, looking at his throbbing hands. If we don't do something, Radiosonde Castle will crash into Academy City. Running away by myself might not avert the crisis. I have to do something to destroy that transmitter, but I can't even get one finger on it because of this stupid concrete!

Time was ticking. Radiosonde Castle was approaching.

Kamijou was starting to panic, but he knew that wouldn't solve anything. He picked up the shovel again, its edge now whittled down. He was really starting to worry about his wrist bones now, but he had to do *something*.

And then it happened.

Gaboom!

Suddenly, the wall right next to him exploded inward.

Hundreds of shards and thousands of dust particles flew into the room.

In came a construction machine, having punched through the wall. It backed up into the room to protect its arm. But the arm didn't have a bucket on the end for digging up the ground of normal construction sites—instead, it was equipped with a sharp, electrically oscillating pile.

Kamijou knew the man at the wheel of the vehicle very well.

It was Shiage Hamazura.

"Hey, General! Need a hand?"

Kamijou responded with a bout of violent coughing. "Wh-what's all this? Wait, where did you even get that?!"

"It's a boring machine. Made for carving out little tunnels to pass underground cables through. Didn't you see it outside?"

Construction machines like this weren't that unusual. Academy City had no electrical poles; instead, its power and phone lines were laid out underground.

"I don't know the first thing about any of this magic stuff," he continued, "but we've just gotta bust up whatever's causing that damn huge fortress to track you, right? You're gonna need a crap-ton of power for that, right?"

Keeping the metal treads under the chassis steady, Hamazura brought his seat around—along with the arm of the vehicle—then got the sharp pile ready at the center of the room.

He didn't have any special powers at all.

So if a strong esper showed up, he'd never confront them directly. He'd try to find somewhere safe first. And if this weird occult stuff was involved, he'd have even *fewer* options. Sure, he'd faced off against people with ridiculous power levels to protect someone he didn't want to lose, or to rescue friends from a completely unfair situation. But that wasn't exactly something he excelled at. Generally, he wasn't great with either science *or* magic. He was the kind of guy you could find anywhere. The kind of guy who would die at the drop of a hat.



However.

None of that unfair stuff had anything to do with this problem.

And so he would solve it with the obvious machine for the job.

The borer produced an ear-splitting sound as it quickly drove a hole through the concrete floor; the shovel hadn't even managed close to this. Gray dust flew everywhere, cracks joined together, and the thick floor began to break apart.

The imposing sounds of the concrete's destruction only lasted a few minutes; after that, the noise took on a wetter quality. The borer had begun to dig through the soil underneath.

And that was when something strange happened. They heard a shrill noise, like banging against metal, and the super-sturdy heavy pile bounced back up with a shower of orange sparks.

"Damn it! What now?!"

Hamazura forced the arm back into place and started again, but then the sturdy tungsten-alloy pile's tip broke off like a piece of rock candy. It must have struck one of the cables along the arm when it flew off, because the pile itself stopped moving afterward.

Kamijou peered into the dark hole Hamazura had bored. Something was down there. Something with a clouded red glow, like a strange jewel. It was cold as glass, hard as stone, and emanated a bloodcurdling light.

A crystal, about the size of a clenched fist.

There was only one thing it could be.

"Come on, reach..."

Kamijou stretched his hand over the side of the hole. He strained his joints to the limit, causing pain to shoot through his limb. But he pushed through it and slowly lowered his fingertips deeper and deeper inside.

And then...

### 10

In a remote section of Academy City, there was the sound of glass shattering.

A moment later, Radiosonde Castle passed through the skies above.

Its descent had quickened slightly, but its horizontal-movement speed had remained constant.

In that thirty-second window, the fortress passed directly above the city.

#### 11

Hamazura climbed out of the now-useless vehicle and fled the central transformer hub facility with Kamijou. While everything they'd done had been necessary, they probably wouldn't have a good opportunity to explain themselves.

Accelerator jumped off the rooftop and landed right next to them. There wasn't a scratch on him. He flicked his electrode switch off in mild annoyance, then shifted his weight onto his modern-looking crutch.

"...Guess it's over," he said, thumbing his cell phone and putting it on speaker.

Birdway's familiar voice came from it. "It looks like Radiosonde Castle adjusted its speed and landed in the seas off Boso Peninsula in Chiba. No damage from high waves. Academy City's slow response concerns me, but things seem to be resolved."

Kaori Kanzaki took a seat on the upper surface of Radiosonde Castle, which was now floating on the ocean like an artificial island, and finally let out a breath. Her Soul Arm's communications had recovered, and she was listening to Agnes.

"We've confirmed that the threat has passed. Our next task should be gathering information. We don't know how long the fortress will be floating there. Please collect as much data as you can before all our hints disappear."

"...Understood. I might as well focus on putting up a defensive barrier to prevent water pressure damage to it—that seems like it would get us more data in the long run. But I digress."

She stood up again.

She didn't much feel like delving deep into the fortress when it could flood or sink at any moment, but Agnes was right. They needed whatever information they could find.

"This is the part where I'd thank you for all your hard work," said Birdway over the phone, "but I just remembered we never got to the actual point of the lecture."

"You *still* want to blab at us?" asked Hamazura, fed up with it. "How many more hours are you gonna keep us captive?"

"Actually, the only thing left is the core of it all—their name."

And so it was that Kanzaki discovered something extremely out of place in a corner of Radiosonde Castle.

While they didn't know if their enemy was scientific or magical in nature, the castle had always resembled the Star of Bethlehem—a magical fortress—in its construction. Perhaps it was only the image of that older fortress sticking in her mind. But a lot of old shrine-and temple-like design was littered about.

This discovery, however, ruined that entire impression.

It was a message—spray-painted all across a wall in bright red.

A single, rough sentence.

It was completely different from normal graffiti. These letters had been sprayed on an entire wall without any artistic intent. It destroyed her mental image of the fortress.

Them.

A group born from the fires of World War III. People who yet crept along in the dark, despite the conflict's end.

Information the three who had protected those they cared about in the war

would have to know about.

"That's right," Birdway said. "Their name is..."

The message taking up the whole wall in front of Kanzaki said this.

#### Welcome home, hero.

She knew to whom that referred.

Just before this mission to deal with Radiosonde Castle, another sorcerer named Itsuwa had given her a report claiming that the boy had been sighted.

*"…"* 

That wasn't all, either.

The message also included the sender's name at the end.

And it said this.

"...They're apparently called Gremlin."

#### From Gremlin.

Gremlins were a type of fairy that some believed were responsible for producing mechanical failures and ruining weaponry such as on airplanes.

They were a new, modern occult idea that had begun to spread with the proliferation of machines.

A symbol of one side of the world undermining the other.

On a planet where World War III's victors, the science side, had begun to spread massively.

And so a new form of the occult had been born—one that would devour it.

# **EPILOGUE**

#### Respite, but Interplay in the Dark

Birdway's\_Speech.

"Gremlin's next aim seems to be the United States of America," Birdway said to the three of them after they'd returned to the dormitory. "We don't know what they're planning, but we have intel on several sorcerers already arriving in Hawaii. Since this was all just them saying hello, they could likely throw the entire world into chaos if they so choose. If we're going to crush them, it has to be now."

A hello.

An incident that could have ended with humanity's extinction—but for Gremlin, it was just a way to confirm Touma Kamijou's survival and introduce themselves to those who would know who they were.

When Gremlin really got going, the world would be plunged into a calamity that involved *everyone*.

Perhaps those here were lucky to have even detected the impending crisis... but whether they would use that knowledge depended on what each of them chose individually.

"Wait a damn minute," said Accelerator. "Are you kidding me? I was only listening to your shit because there were a few things I wanted to know. I'm not going to be your little puppet and bend to your every whim."

"You misunderstand me," said Birdway, waggling her index finger. "We're not

here to request your help anyway."

*"…"* 

"Oh? You just told me you didn't want to be involved. Are you mad now that I said you wouldn't be? Selfish, that's what you are."

She turned her lips up in a sneer.

"You seemed like you had questions, so I figured I'd answer them. But now you're behaving like you're somehow at the center of all of this... I can tell you've been pretty pampered in the past. I bet you always ask for the Santa figurine that comes on Christmas cakes when mommy's cutting you a slice."

"Buzz off," spat Accelerator. "I don't give a rat's ass about any of this. I have my own life to live. And it doesn't involve me being here."

"...Yes, just go away. If you can, that is."

"Fh?"

A dangerous glow came into his red eyes. He was anticipating the possibility that she'd use the people he was close to as bargaining tools.

But she shook her head. "Don't worry. I'm not Academy City. I'd never force you to do anything, and I'd certainly never try to exploit something to bring you to the negotiation table."

*"…."* 

"It's just, well... My sorcerer's society analyzes organizational leadership and charisma. That's how we search for the most optimal way of learning about what's happening at the very core of the world. I'm an expert in the field. So believe me when I say this."

"Say what?"

"There's a fundamental difference between those who choose to languish in peace and those who have lost it once, then taken it back with their own hands. Sure, there are plenty of different hero archetypes. But when you helped Fremea Seivelun, you set your course... So I just think it's a shame. You'd probably come along even if I tried to shoo you away, and that tendency will only get stronger the longer you live in the peace you craved. This may all sound

cryptic to you, but you'll come to see it for yourself eventually."

Accelerator didn't answer her. He just whipped open the front door and left.

"...What...is going on...?" murmured Hamazura, stupefied.

Because he was pretty sure what Birdway had said just now applied to him, too.

People who simply chose to languish in peace were different from people who had won it back for themselves.

The longer you were at peace, the more you craved heading off to battle.

It didn't really make sense to him. But it *did* send a chill down his spine—because her speech made it sound like Hamazura *wanted* conflict, that he *wanted* to drown in blood in the underworld.

Birdway came up behind him.

"... Want a spoiler?" she asked.

"Wha-huh?!"

"I mean, you'll figure it out once you leave the room... But apparently, some people need to be spoiled on everything, or they'll experience physical pain. Ah, the age of the search engine and its consequences."

She shook her head and sighed.

"There's one thing I really don't want you to misunderstand, though. I'm not underestimating any of you, and I don't hold any ill will toward you. Heroes come in all shapes and sizes. But some of them are at their most charismatic when they have something to gain, and these types get praised for absolutely insane things, like not showing any mercy against women and children. Yet you all saved Fremea without asking for anything in return. That makes you *much* more heroic in my book."

"...So then why—"

"But that *image* is the problem. You saved the girl without considering how that would put you in danger. I'm sure you had your reasons. But even if you didn't know who was in trouble, you'd probably have saved them all the same.

You're one of those—someone who saves both individuals and the world at large without losing or gaining anything from it.

"And that's exactly why," she continued, "you'll never be able to escape battle. No matter how hard you try to savor the happiness and peace you fought so desperately to attain, you'll eventually come to another realization—that you personally are happy, but your neighbor might not be. And this will lead to another thought: If you have the strength to save both individuals and the world, is staying quiet and forsaking others truly the right thing to do?"

*"…"* 

"You can deny it all you like. But when faced with a situation like that, you'll always choose action—just like you did with Fremea. You're not a weakling who just languishes in peace. You're strong. As that peace was slipping away, you snatched it back. People like you are destined to fall into anguish over their need to fight back like you did then... Even if you risk spoiling the very peace you so desperately fought for."

A flaw born of excellence.

The danger lurking behind acts of goodness.

Birdway had seen this happen countless times, which she could hold forth to Hamazura so candidly.

"Like I said before, there are all kinds of heroes. Some have even developed a code where they do whatever it takes to protect those they're close to, even at the expense of strangers. But you're unable to make that kind of choice. Because you *already* acted on behalf of Fremea—after preparing yourself for significant risk."

And now.

If the threat Gremlin posed to the world was left alone, a lot more people than Fremea would get hurt.

Hamazura, Takitsubo and Mugino, Kinuhata, Fremea, Hanzou, Kuruwa... Every time he spent his days in peace with them, a thought would spring to mind.

He had enough power to protect and build something amazing.

But was it really okay if he was the only one who was happy?

"...I'll skip to the conclusion. You're allowed to be happy. And there's no need to feel any guilt for it. But I doubt any of you will listen to me. *Even if you agreed with me right here, right now,* the time will come when you won't hesitate to plunge forward. A noble ideal, perhaps, but also a very sad way of living, in my opinion. And it will bring out those who are drawn to strong people, and they'll want to tell stories about your heroics."

*""* 

Even Hamazura didn't understand his own heart. But Birdway's conclusion was assertive—like she knew it was undeniable fact. Was her deduction based on statistical data? On what she'd personally observed from so many people in her life?

You've gotta be kidding me, he thought.

He'd risked his life to protect Takitsubo. And he never wanted any harm to come to Mugino or Kinuhata, either. He didn't *need* to march into dangerous situations. There were already people working to neutralize threats all over the world. They'd ensured humanity's survival this far. Hamazura didn't need to put himself in the line of fire. He didn't need to put the people he was close to in danger.

But.

What if.

What if there was an innocent person crying right in front of him? Like Fremea? What if they had a gun to their head?

Could he stay quiet and watch it happen?

Could he watch the person be killed out of fear of damaging that which he had?

This wasn't like Skill-Out anymore. He no longer believed he was a weakling who was incapable of effecting change.

He'd triumphed in battles where the odds were stacked against him. He'd protected those precious to him from a global conflict. And after that?

Was he supposed to say he couldn't protect someone because he was powerless to do so?

Could he even face himself like that?

"I won't tell you to give it a lot of thought," said Birdway, lowering her voice.

She sounded like she actually felt bad for him. There was a rare sincerity in her tone.

"...It'd be easier on me if you could deny what I said, if possible. I will pray you can, even if I know you won't."

Following Accelerator, Hamazura left the dorm with heavy steps.

Birdway folded her arms in front of her too-small-to-be-of-import chest, then looked over at Kamijou. "Should have known the last one left would be you."

"Well, I do live here."

"I know it's weird coming from me, since I saved you from the Arctic Ocean in order to get you involved. But I think you're a much rarer sort the other two are."

She went into the fridge without asking, grabbed a piece of fish sausage, and bit into it.

"I've done a lot of research on a lot of different leaders and charismatic figures, so I knew exactly what to say to the other two. But even I have a certain trait—I unconsciously want to try to get others involved."

"I'm not doing any of this because I want to."

"But you won't stop halfway through."

"They're coming to me, not the other way around. What choice do I have?"

"Which is why you don't need an initiation. You end up right in the middle of things without putting in any effort to gather information or form connections."

Birdway smiled thinly.

"...About half of the people in the world exhibit that particular trait, actually. But in most cases, they'll either try to ignore the connections and mind their business or bungle things if they do get involved. And they all give up before they even get to the end. But your type isn't about beginnings or endings—it's about the process itself."

"?"

"Having rotten luck isn't a special trait. What's special is how incredible you are at counteracting that rotten luck and turning it into strength."

After taking a few bites of the fish sausage that Kamijou had brought back as a souvenir, Birdway headed to the front door, accompanied by all the black-suited men. She didn't turn around.

"...Well, I'll be counting on your unique qualities for a little while. Hawaii's up next. Now that Gremlin knows you've survived, their plans will incorporate countermeasures for your right hand. The fight will be even tougher than usual...but I'll let you be involved like you always are."

He heard the door open and shut.

The only ones left in the room now were Kamijou and Index.

"Touma?" said Index.

And then she continued. "Touma, are you going off again?" she asked, knowing what he was like and worrying about his future. "I was really concerned about you. Really, really concerned. You don't have a magic trick that lets you win every single time. There's no guarantee you'll always come back home. And the chances of you staying alive decrease as long as you keep fighting battles you don't know if you can win. Are you still going?"

"You're right about all that...," Kamijou murmured. He lowered his gaze to his left hand, then closed and opened his fingers loosely. "I don't want to have to keep doing this over and over either. But this time, I have to admit I'm connected to it for once. I think the way I'm involved with incidents in the future is going to change from now on, too."

"?"

"At the end of World War III, the mastermind, Fiamma of the Right, told me one of the reasons he started the conflict was to get rid of my right hand." Kamijou clenched his fist. "And this time *they're* wary of it...Gremlin, that is.

They put that stupid huge castle in the sky just to figure out where I was. I don't know if they want my hand or want it out of the picture, but I think I'm standing at another crossroads. Just like I was during World War III."

"Touma..."

"I want to know what this power in my right hand really is," he said.

At the end of World War III, Kamijou's right arm had been cut off. And it hadn't simply been reattached, either.

A new one had grown in its place.

He had no idea what matter it was composed of, what energy it used, or how it had regenerated. But ultimately, there was no doubt that he had regained his original Imagine Breaker.

"I have to know. Especially if the scope of Gremlin's activities expands. I have to understand how my right hand is related to them. And I have to figure out how I can use it to stop their ambitions."

*"…"* 

"But Imagine Breaker is already beyond a pure scientific ability. If I'm going to find out exactly what it is, I'll need information from both sides—science and magic. Information buried so deep even your 103,000 volumes have no record of it... So I can't get left behind by everything going on. If I don't take the ticket Birdway is offering me, I don't think I'll ever find out about myself."

After that, Kamijou fell silent for a moment, squeezing his right fist so hard it hurt.

"...Which means, I'm going to take part in fights to the death for my sake. Haha. How am I any different from a berserker now?"

He laughed at himself, but there would no longer be any stopping him.

Still, Index thought this.

That he would have leaped into the chaos again even without those reasons.

A major magical incident was set to begin in Hawaii.

Many people lived there, and they would undoubtedly suffer when Gremlin's

operation got underway. Depending on how things went, people might even die.

That was reason enough for Kamijou to do something about it.

Kamijou never needed dramatic reasons to act. He'd get caught up in situations without doing anything. But even in the middle of danger, he never gave up, and he had the ability to solve these problems using his power. He'd saved more than a few people this way; in fact, Index was one of them.

Some would probably ask what he did it for.

And Kamijou, without realizing how much danger he was always getting himself into, would say this.

It's for myself.

Accelerator walked along the street that night on his modern crutch. Last Order and Misaka Worst flanked him.

"Whoaaa, walking around the glittery city at night makes me feel like I'm a hard-boiled adult, says Misaka says Misaka, looking around."

"Hard-boiled, eh? Then why are you only looking at the places that sell food?"

"My own *little* sister looking down on me—it's laughable! says Misaka says Misaka, making sure she knows about our pyramid structure!"

"What value is there in an older sister with a significantly smaller bust than her little sister?"

As he watched Last Order launch into a tantrum and Misaka Worst deftly dodge her, Accelerator did some thinking.

He'd abandoned the path of evil to get this back—deciding that he would do anything, no matter how incongruous it felt.

And now he was satisfied. He'd protected the few people he felt he'd needed to.

However...

He'd been so preoccupied with getting to the goal he now watched that he never realized something.

That the road continued.

What's the road for? And where does it lead? he thought quietly.

Shiage Hamazura was walking down a city street that night too.

They all shared the first leg of the journey home, so Takitsubo, Mugino, and Kinuhata were all with him. Fremea was on his back, fast asleep, and Takitsubo's impassive eyes had never lost that dangerous glint.

"I gotta say, Academy City's darkness is being, like, totally persistent, huh? At this rate, I bet there's gonna be a bunch more groups springing back up all over the place, not just the Freshmen."

"Everyone in the underworld got there because either they turned their backs on a normal life or were barred from having one. Plus, there will always be people who just can't adapt. And it's a quick way to support the city's abnormal rate of technological advancement. Unless anyone has any brilliant ideas for an alternative, we'll still be getting the same old stuff happening the same old way."

"But maybe it was still an achievement, even if it only separated those who wanted to be in the darkness and the ones who were, like, thrown into it against their will."

"...Other people will probably think differently based on how much they tried to help."

Hamazura thought to himself.

The city's darkness was still around. And the possibility of new threats popping up remained. However, the acceleration of the darkness seemed to be linked to something *outside* of Academy City.

In that case, what would it mean to fight against the outside?

They couldn't stop people from willingly diving into the darkness. But what if the fact that they felt like they had to was in itself part of a countermeasure against Gremlin?

Could Hamazura really say it was someone else's problem? Weren't he and this group already involved just by being part of Academy City?

Surrounded by the friends he'd taken back with his own hands, Hamazura pondered this in silence.

As the quiet dark of night had settled upon the city, the three young men thought one thing:

Where does this road lead?

Jolted out of his sleep in the middle of the night by his cell phone going off, Kamijou headed for the location in a message he'd gotten—the railroad bridge in District 7.

When he arrived, the sender was there waiting for him.

"Misaka...?"

"You forgot something," she said, throwing something to him.

Kamijou caught it. It was a frog cell phone strap. But he'd lost his when he nearly drowned in the Arctic Ocean—the string holding it on to his phone had snapped. Except now it had a string of a different color looped through it.

"We did sort of get matching ones," she said. "Don't just lose it willy-nilly."

"Sorry," said Kamijou, putting it on his cell phone again.

Mikoto smiled a little as she watched. It was like she wanted to say that everything had finally gone back to normal.

"I know you're never gonna stay in one place for very long, but still... Are you going away again?"

"Looks like it." He sighed. "To be honest, I may look like I know what's up, but I have no clue what's happening. And the only thing I know about the root cause is their name. But the ripples have already reached Academy City. I didn't just get mixed up in it because they were after the city—the city got mixed up in it because they were after me...so I can't exactly ignore it, can I?"

"Welp, I know you don't like listening to other people's advice, so I'm not gonna try to stop you at this point."

Mikoto's business with him seemed to have been just the cell phone strap. Kamijou put his phone in his pocket. With nothing more to talk about, their connection was about to split apart again.

"Well, see ya," said Kamijou.

He turned his back to Mikoto.

He was about to leave the bridge.

He was taking a giant step from the city's sensible, scientific realm into the world beyond the walls.

Mikoto grabbed his hand.

She grabbed it and held on as he tried to totter away.

He stopped. Then she whispered in his ear.

"But this time, you won't be alone."

Meanwhile.

As each of the three young men were stealing their resolve, Birdway quietly sprang into action as well.

She was on her way back to her posh hotel in School District 3.

Daring to walk back at night instead of using a car, Birdway was reviewing some more mundane communications with her black-suited subordinates. Most of the messages regarded the gigantic golden arms that had appeared throughout the world at the end of the war, as well as the cleanup status of all the similar matter their explosions had produced. Other than that, a few were about the recovery work involving all the church and cathedral pieces taken from around the world and used to construct the Star of Bethlehem—the fortress that was quite possibly the true symbol of World War III.

...She and *her* group weren't doing these things, though. They were basically just eavesdropping on national-scale or larger religious organizations, such as the Roman Orthodox Church and English Puritan Church.

Once most of their discussions were over, Birdway suddenly muttered to herself.

"...Looks like you've got it pretty rough yourself, Aleister."

She wasn't speaking to any of the men around her. She was only talking to

herself. But she knew the truth—not what the specific principles behind it were, but that the details of the very conversation she was having with them were nevertheless being delivered to one man.



"The Freshmen debacle before was one thing, but this Radiosonde Castle incident has me one-hundred-percent certain—and I'm sure Gremlin's reached the same conclusion, too. You can't act freely. I doubt the Freshmen showing up and doing what they did was in line with your goals. You let them run rampant, too, which is another thing I can't overlook. And obviously, you should have had no reason to just allow Radiosonde Castle to pass overhead."

Leivinia Birdway investigated leaders and charismatic figures from across the world and from all eras in pursuit of her goal of efficiently understanding the central structure of societies.

There was one person, one sample, that she'd been chasing in particular—the sorcerer named Aleister Crowley.

"This was outside the tolerable error margin of error of your 'plan,' wasn't it?" she said. "I don't know exactly what it is you're trying to do now...but I *did* fully research your goals in the 1900s, when everyone still considered you a dead man. If I had to say from that perspective...I'm pretty sure this whole situation is quite far off from what you desire. Am I wrong?"

She was talking to herself, so there was no answer.

Yet she continued anyway. "Touma Kamijou was the center of your plan, but after he took part in World War III and contacted Fiamma of the Right, that plan went awry. You seem to be trying to correct your course, but now nobody knows what direction to push to get things back to normal. Until you unravel all the complex, intertwining conditions at play, you can't take any real action. It all comes back to that—you knew he'd drowned in the Arctic Ocean, but you couldn't pull him back up. You knew he'd come back to Academy City, but you couldn't secure him."

Touma Kamijou, Accelerator, and Shiage Hamazura.

They each had their own life, and they each had formed their own personal relationships. There were plenty of people who could have been used as hostages. The breadth of Kamijou's relationships was especially large, and his personality meant he would be greatly affected depending on how the hostages were taken.

And yet, Aleister hadn't gone that route.

No, that wasn't right.

He couldn't go that route.

Strictly speaking, he probably could have if he'd wanted to, but as a sorcerer, he wouldn't be able to calculate how much of an effect it would have on his plan.

"Osiris to Horus. Cast off the old world bound by Crossist domination and awaken to a new world filled with true law and freedom. That was your cherished view...though I'd guess that view isn't purely logical, but affected by your background—by how you've witnessed the adherents of a certain stringent Crossist faction and the uglier parts of modern magical society that claim to have abandoned the lusts and desires of the everyday, mundane world."

As she looked at the nightscape, glimmering with more spectacle even than the starry sky, Birdway gave a very sincere and very mean smile.

"...That's right, Aleister. World War III has wiped the old rules from the world. Including the rules you yourself dominated. It was a second death for you. With the Touma Kamijou error, the future is now impossible to envision, much less control—why, the world seems like a hell of a lot of fun now, doesn't it? You'd better enjoy this, you hear me? Savor this chaos. Take pleasure in all those people acting out of free will, obscuring your view of the situation."

Then came a dry wkk-shhh noise.

Two or three hairs right next to Birdway's cheek had abruptly and unnaturally come off.

After seeing the golden strands dance in the wind, the men in the black suits finally began to take caution, but Birdway waved them down.

That was a greeting from Aleister.

Birdway had no idea what had just happened—the science it had used was far too cutting-edge—but it still couldn't wipe the smile off her face.

The finer details of the science weren't the problem. No—she'd gotten an answer to something *much* more fundamental.

"...You had no reason to stop at a mere warning."

Her tone didn't change a bit. She continued to smile.

"My head is still attached. It's clear as day, Aleister. You're impatient. You're worried."

## **AFTERWORD**

Uhh, so, whether you've been purchasing these books since the original Index series or started with volume 1 of New Testament, or just bought everything at once, or just bought the two New Testament books at once, or only grabbed the newest volume—there are so many paths you could have taken to get here —but in any case, hello!

I'm Kazuma Kamachi.

And that was the second volume of New Testament. The point of it was to get everyone thinking about magic again, one of the foundations of the setting. The story also brought *them* into focus and touched on what Touma Kamijou's second death meant. Essentially, I was trying to drag all of the stuff happening behind the scenes out into the open for everyone to see.

One of the themes was the word *radiosonde*, which refers to a disposable observation balloon. Based on that, it's probably easy to figure out what *they* did.

And I'm sure some of you have started to realize the power balance is crumbling, both between individual people and between organizations. Interference from Aleister especially—it may look like he's getting in the protagonists' way, but in reality, it's sometimes done to prevent further problems from happening. In a way, the structure of fights by kids protected by the power of adults has broken down, and now they need to stand on their own and risk their lives in a world that won't support them... Though when I write it like that, I suspect (without reason) that maybe it'll be taken as that second death being the boy breaking out of the first stage of his growth. That's not the right line to be thinking along, but maybe it is an interesting theme to be

enjoyed in parallel.

After Five Over last volume, this one coincidentally starred Mjölnir. I can see a certain sparky girl getting very worried. But just as the science side's pyrokinesis is part of a different framework than the magic side's flame swords, it wouldn't be weird for someone on the magic side to have super-easy-to-understand lightning attacks—in fact, it would be weird if there wasn't someone like that. So I made it happen. Of course, the whole "enormous scale but difficult to use" bit might actually be a better description of Mugino than Mikoto.

My thanks goes out to my illustrator, Haimura, and my editor, Miki. I had a whole lot of characters show up because I wanted things to feel lively, but I'm sure it was difficult figuring out which scenes to choose for the pictures. I'm really, really grateful for your work.

And a big thanks to all my readers. I added a bunch more comedy here to make it looser and more optimistic on the whole, but at the same time, I think in general that it was a bitter story that kind of laid out all the things behind the scenes for you to see. The story probably had a difficult structure, especially for my debut work. Thank you so much for letting me have my way with things.

Now then, as you close the pages, and as I pray you will open the pages again next time, here and now, I lay down my pen.

Mikoto's in the picture again! Finally!...I guess it's my fault for not having her appear before now, but...

Kazuma Kamachi

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