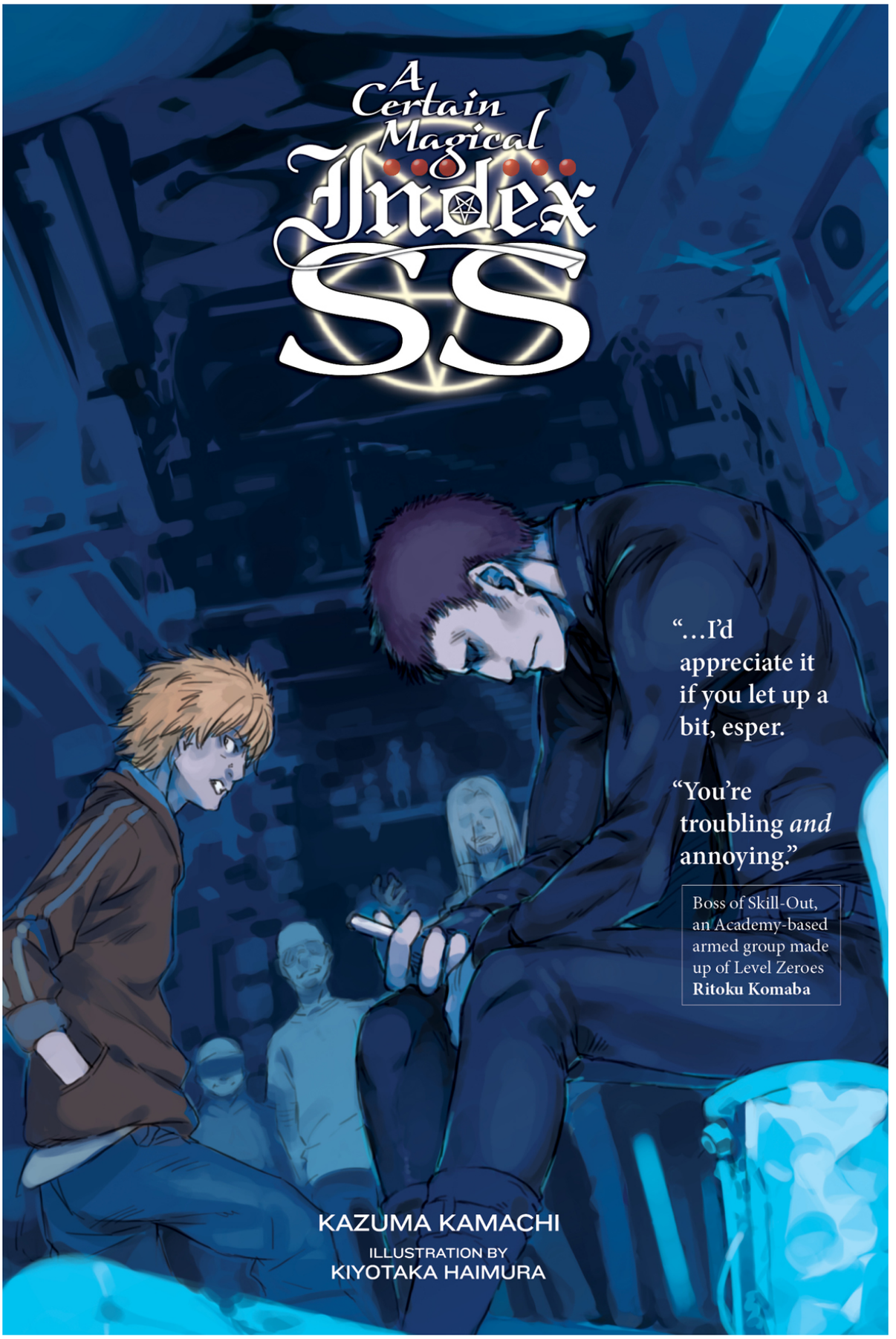

Kazuma Kamachi
illustration by
Kiyotaka Haimura
A Certain Magical
Index
SS
1


A Certain Magical Index SS
"…I'd appreciate it if you let up a bit, esper.
"You're troubling *and* annoying."
Boss of Skill-Out, an Academy-based armed group made up of Level Zeroes
Ritoku Komaba
KAZUMA KAMACHI
ILLUSTRATION BY
KIYOTAKA HAIMURA


"That meat is mine, nya!!"
Kamijou's classmate **Motoharu Tsuchimikado**
"Let me have that. You have to whisk the eggs faster, like this, see?!"
Kamijou's classmate **Seiri Fukiyose**
"Wha—?! You control freak!"
Academy City Level Zero student **Touma Kamijou**
"Touma, I'm hungry."
Nun managing the Index of Prohibited Books **Index**
"*Sigh*... Can everyone please eat more quietly?"
Kamijou's homeroom teacher **Komoe Tsukuyomi**


“Time to take out the trash.
I’ll finish this in ten minutes.”
Academy City’s strongest Level Five
Accelerator


"…the Church isn't a bunch of perverts… "…going to kill Vasilisa…"
Russian Catholic sorcerer Sasha Kreutzev
"Could be… With literally only the clothes on her back, too."
Former Roman Orthodox sister Lucia
"What, does she want to defect or something?"
Former Roman Orthodox sister Agnes Sanctis
"Hmm? Why's she wearing a swimsuit when it's not even summer yet?"
English Puritan sorcerer belonging to Necessarius Sherry Cromwell
"She, um, has a very unique outfit on, and…"
Former Roman Orthodox sister Angeline
"Shh! …I'm sure it has an important meaning in Russian Catholicism."
English Puritan sorcerer from Necessarius Kaori Kanzaki



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A Certain Magical Index SS

VOLUME 1

KAZUMA KAMACHI
ILLUSTRATION BY: KIYOTAKA HAIMURA

YEN ON
NEW YORK

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A CERTAIN MAGICAL INDEX SS, Volume 1
KAZUMA KAMACHI

Translation by Andrew Prowse
Cover art by Kiyotaka Haimura

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PROLOGUE

A Peaceful Day Before the Opening of Hostilities
Breakfast.

There was only one *chikuwa* left.

"…Hmm…"

In the kitchen area, Touma Kamijou groaned as he looked at the rolled-up, jellylike cake of fish-paste whose expiration date was today at exactly ten AM. His latest kick was throwing them into his salads instead of the more traditional slices of ham, but if he put any more on his plate today, it would undoubtedly ruin the taste. Still, it wouldn't be considerate to let the poor *chikuwa* sit abandoned when it was due to expire in another two or three hours.

For students, every moment in the morning was precious. Kamijou couldn't stand there mulling it over forever, but he was at a loss. What should he do with this leftover *chikuwa*?

Just then, their calico cat burst into the kitchen space, meowing loudly. Kamijou thought he'd noticed the cat getting a little bigger lately—maybe that was the cat's winter coat, or maybe he had just grown.

… Kamijou cast a furtive glance from the kitchen toward the bed.

Inside, there was a nun.

Her name was Index.

Normally, all she ever did was laze around on the floor, but maybe "early to bed, early to rise" was one of her creeds, because at this specific time of day, she was always kneeling on the floor, back straight, hands together in quiet morning prayer.

Chances were that the cat had come to pester Kamijou because Index wasn't paying any attention to him.

Hmm. Kamijou took the extra fish cake, squatted down on the kitchen floor, and then asked, softly and cautiously enough

to ensure Index would never hear, "…Do you want this?"

The cat responded with a loud "Meow!!" and raised his tail, making him seem like he had hit maximum happiness. Kamijou offered the entire *chikuwa*.

The calico bit down on the middle of the fishy tube, then ran out of the kitchen again like a dog who had just gotten a bone. Since cats had a habit of taking any food over a certain size to a secret hiding spot, it wasn't particularly strange to see.

He probably went and hid it behind the TV or something, Kamijou considered idly before returning to his breakfast preparations.

But then, as if to replace the cat, Index came barreling in.

"Did you want to give me a *chikuwa*?!" she shouted.

"Huh?There was only one left, so no!!"

She must have seen the cat holding the fish cake in his mouth, because her eyes were positively glittering—a mix of grand and dark emotions, as if she was angry that the cat could get away with snatching food when she couldn't.

Hastily, Kamijou tried to rein in Index. She was the opposite of a picky eater. Absolutely none of the consternation that many foreigners had when it came to Japanese food existed anywhere within Index. At this rate, the one *chikuwa* would be the least of his worries—*everything* in the kitchen would vanish.

"Index! Wait!! Breakfast is in ten minutes—no, seven—so don't go fishing around in the refrigerator—"

"*Chikuwa*, *chikuwa*—the *chikuwa*!!"

"You're not even making sense anymore! Don't you have praying to do or something?! What kind of nun lets her desires run wild like this?!"

Without even a chance to say *Wait, I'm not done making that, stop!!* Index's mouth began ravaging the kitchen. He almost thought he could hear *wakka-wakka* sounds.

October 3, 7:02 AM:

With his own food devoured alongside everything else, Kamijou could do nothing but stand there in a daze, long cooking chopsticks still in hand.

CHAPTER 1

The Grand Tactic of Pots, Meat, and Appetites
A Required Thing.

1

One thing after another happened, and soon it was lunchtime.

"Guhhh. My stomach's rumbling…"

Due to various circumstances, Kamijou hadn't eaten breakfast, but he'd still managed to last through morning classes somehow.

The students heading for school lunch in the cafeteria or school store had dashed out of the classroom the moment break started, vanishing in an instant. He could hear voices overlapping, with Ms. Komoe shouting, "Hey, you! No running in the halls!!" while his more athletic classmates shouted back, "We're not running! We're sock skating!!" and "Sock drifting deployed!!" They were going so fast their protests actually had a Doppler effect going on.

Kamijou, already devoid of energy, had totally missed the bus to excitement city.

Normally, his lunch-break tardiness would have been a fatal mistake, but today, it wasn't a problem.

With a thud, he set his thin, flimsy schoolbag on his desk. And then he took out his ultimate weapon: a bento box.

Just as Kamijou was thinking *Okay, it's time to eat* and was about to open the lid to his packed lunch, his phone suddenly started vibrating in his pocket.

He checked it and saw he had a text message from Mikoto Misaka, with whom he'd just recently exchanged phone numbers and e-mail addresses.

Unfortunately, the contents of the display caused him to flounder.

"Huh?" he muttered to himself. "DATA CORRUPTED. CANNOT OPEN MESSAGE?"

That's weird. I guess I'll text her instead. He pushed the buttons with his thumb, sending a reply that read I DON'T GET IT,

SEND IT AGAIN, I DARE YOU to her.

He returned his phone to his pocket. Right now it was time for lunch.

“Hrmm. I feel like this is rare for you.”

But before he could start, someone approached him—Aisa Himegami, holding a small pouch. The girl had very traditional long black hair, and she packed her own lunch every day like it was only natural.

“Ah, and here’s another one with something probably delicious.”

“I don’t have any sides to give you for free. If you must have some, it will have to be a trade,” said Himegami, dragging over a chair from nearby, its legs scraping across the floor.

As Kamijou popped the lid off his own bento box, he murmured, “…I had leftovers from yesterday, so I just randomly threw it in before making breakfast this morning… This must be the only thing that escaped her stomach…”

“?” Himegami tilted her head, not understanding.

The usual clamor that accompanied the beginning of lunch break had died down, with most of the kids who ate in the cafeteria having disappeared from the classroom and out into the halls. The remainder, those who always brought a bagged lunch, would rearrange the desks as they pleased, regardless of whose they were.

Kamijou fished around in his bag for the cold barley tea he’d gotten on his way to school (which meant it was now lukewarm). “It’s cool that you have the motivation to make your own lunch every day, Himegami. It was a pain for me just to pack leftovers.”

“Once you get into the habit, it won’t feel like as much work.”

The difference in their culinary craftsmanship was clear as day. After all, Himegami’s bento had vegetable tempura in it, the main dish not being white rice but rice mixed with other ingredients—somehow, it looked *extremely* tasty. Where Kamijou had only packed leftovers, Himegami had *planned* for this spread to be her lunch while she was cooking it. Plus, since Kamijou had packed already-finished food, the gloppy broth was intruding upon the domain of rice in his lunch box now.

With Himegami looking on in mild pity, Kamijou picked up his plastic chopsticks. “Presentation isn’t everything. It’s actually pretty good when the broth soaks into things.”

"…Are you being a sore loser?"

"Wrong, that's not it at all!! My cooked food today is perfect, from the softness of the potatoes to the quality of the broth! And the rice is only more delicious, after the broth soaked into it! Taste it, and you'll know Touma Kamijou's skills firsthand now that he's leveled up his mirin expertise yet again!!"

"Then I will trade for this squash tempura," she said, and their chopsticks crossed like passing planes, each pair air-dropping something to the other person's plate.

Not that it matters, but how long does this even take her? First thing in the morning, and she's already making something as labor-intensive as fried foods? Maybe she's a harder worker than I thought.

Kamijou considered that as he put the tempura in his mouth.

He hated to say it, but it was amazing. It must have been in that bento box for hours, but it was still nice and crispy. What a mystery. He'd have to beg for her secrets.

Meanwhile, Himegami looked at the deformed taro that looked like something out of the meager repertoire of a single-dad businessman who had grudgingly learned to cook. She eventually brought it to her mouth and started to chew.

"Yeah. This might not be so bad—"

But before she could finish, she suddenly made a muffled grunting noise. She keeled over, hands to her throat.

It must have gotten stuck in there.

"Are…are you all right?!" Kamijou cried out without thinking, but of course she didn't answer.

Himegami was vaguely teary-eyed as she reached for her plastic bottle of mineral water. Kamijou wasn't sure if he should do anything but then saw her free hand moving around to her back.

"Wait, what? You want me to rub your back?!" he shouted.

Himegami nodded, taking a drink of her water.

He placed his hand at the center of her back, covered in her long black hair, but wasn't sure how much force to use. He decided to gently go up and down, but Himegami's painful-looking shaking wasn't stopping.

"Crap! I think we'd better get you to the nurse's office—!"

"Mgh. Mgh, mgh."

"What's that? Harder?!"

Having brought her arm around to point at the middle of her

back, she nodded weakly. To provide her some relief as soon as possible, Kamijou wasted no time as he redoubled his efforts to rub her back, like she had requested.

But then there was a *snap*.

And then Kamijou's fingers felt the strange sensation of a bra hook being undone.

That very moment, Himegami wordlessly clenched a fist, then brutally drove it into his stomach (an act that drastically increased the amount certain parts of her bounced). With a brilliant *wha-bam*, Kamijou buckled forward, collapsing to the floor. Himegami ran off to the washroom, holding her chest.

"Urgh. I… I just did what you asked… Why do I have such rotten luck…?"

As he lay there trembling on the floor, his incredibly stacked classmate with long black hair and a prominent forehead came over, holding a plastic bag with stuffed bread in it. Seiri Fukiyose seemed to have just gotten back from retrieving food from her locker.

With a sigh, she asked, "…What happened?"



“F-Fukiyose?”

Kamijou got up, still wobbly, and reseated himself in his chair before looking at her lunch and saying, “Hey, why do you always eat that tasteless-looking bread?”

“My bread looks fine!! And it tastes fine, too!!” she shouted, angry, but the wrapping on the bread *did* say it was ABILITY-INCREASING BREAD WITH TWELVE VITAMINS AND MINERALS TO ENERGIZE THE BRAIN. Her lunch was practically medicine.

Miffed, Fukiyose noisily took a seat on Kamijou’s desk and began biting into her bread with gusto. But it still didn’t look like it tasted any good.

“If you don’t have anything else, would you like some of my taro?”

“…Just so you know, I’m wearing a front-hook today.”

“?” Kamijou tilted his head, confused at what that sudden revelation was supposed to mean.

Fukiyose noted this and then cleared her throat. “Anyway, it’s certainly not every day you make your own lunch.”

“Himegami just said that, too. And I guess that’s true, now that I take a second to think about it.”

Kamijou began poking his food with his chopsticks just as the crowd who had run to the school store came back to the classroom, their own various buns and sandwiches in hand. The cafeteria group would probably be a little bit longer. And the ones who enjoyed the latest celebrity gossip would purposely leave school and buy *oden* soup and peruse the magazine rack at the convenience store that the school had just recently forbidden students from visiting.

The students had many ways of spending their lunch break. Some would be playing catch with rolled-up printouts they no longer needed after eating, where others would watch the latest variety shows on their phones while eating.

But recently, the same topic had been on everyone’s lips.

Fukiyose, who had been listening to the chatter aimlessly, offhandedly spoke the word aloud, just like the others:

“War, huh…?”

Kamijou unconsciously stopped eating when the menacing word dropped from her lips.

She frowned at him. “What? You haven’t heard? You should really follow the news a little more.”

“No, I know about it. Hard not to.”

In fact, Kamijou might have understood it better than anyone else present. Not that sharing that would do any good, though.

“Yeah, I guess even you’re paying attention by now. This whole thing about us butting heads with some huge religious group. All those demonstrations and riots or whatever have been happening all over the world, right?” Perhaps because she was just echoing what she’d heard on the news, Fukiyose’s words were somewhat uncertain and vague. “I honestly don’t know what to make of it,” she said, letting a distinct color of unease and concern into her tone.

Kamijou’s face clouded.

Fukiyose continued with a sigh, not noticing that his chopsticks were still paused. “I mean, if a war starts, the price of meat and vegetables is going to go up, won’t it? And oil, too, of course, like always!”

The sudden out-of-place comment took Kamijou aback a little.

But that was in line with the rumors he could hear being discussed nearby.

The kids in his class who belonged to athletic clubs, watching TV on their phones, were saying things like:

“They’re talking about how we might not get to go on field trips since travel in and out of the city is going to be more restricted.”

“Are you serious?! That better not affect the Ichihanaran Festival!!”

And the girls next to them were laughing, saying things like:

“I heard in front of the teacher’s lounge earlier that the Anti-Skill teachers won’t have time for administering midterms since they have to figure out countermeasures.”

“Aw, yes, lucky me!! I had zero confidence that I’d do well in the next System Scan. I’m saved!!”

“Hello? I’m the one who was trying to blow past you all by cramming superhard, spoon in hand. What am I supposed to do now?”

These were the “huge problems caused by war” that were currently on people’s minds at school—in fact, that applied to the rest of the city, too. Everyone understood it was becoming more and more likely that there would be a big war between Academy City and the Roman Orthodox Church, but they hadn’t

yet imagined how much that might affect them personally.

And Kamijou was fine with that. If their current environment devolved into one where they *could* imagine the bloody consequences in detail, it would all be over. It was up to him to make sure that didn't happen.

"??? And why have you been so quiet anyway?"

"Uh? Er, nothing."

"…I *wish* you wouldn't clam up while looking at someone's chest like that. What could you be imagining right now?"

"I'm not imagining anything!! Damn it. I try to be serious for once in my life, and this is what I get!!" Kamijou irritably stabbed his chopsticks into a piece of taro. "Are meat and veggies really going to get *that* expensive? Doesn't Academy City have cloned meats and artificially cultivated vegetables and stuff? You know, at those agricultural buildings sprinkled all over. I thought School District 17's industrial area was famous for it."

"But that can only go so far, right? If we were completely self-sufficient, we wouldn't be cooperating with outside agencies!"

"Hmm." Kamijou glanced at Himegami, just returning to the classroom, out of the corner of his eye. "Then maybe it'd be most cost-effective to eat hot pot and stuff now, while we still can. That way, if the price shoots up, we won't regret missing out."

"Well, you do have a point. In fact, it looks like the prices at supermarkets and other stores are already starting to creep upward. It might not be winter yet, but maybe we *should* eat things like that now."

Then, possibly overhearing their conversation, Blue Hair and Motoharu Tsuchimikado, who had been deep in conversation near the blackboard, stopped their argument of "I told you, thigh-pillow ear-cleaning doesn't *actually* exist. The only place where it happens is fiction!" and "…Actually, it *does* exist, nya…" as they looked over at Kamijou and Fukiyose.

Blue Hair asked, "Wait, Kammy, are you going for hot pot tonight?"

Tsuchimikado followed that with "Nya. If you want sukiyaki, I know a great, cheap place."

The conversation continued to spread, pulling in more of their nearby classmates.

"It's still October. Isn't it a little early for hot pot?"

Then the ring of conversation expanded exponentially. Their classmates closed in on them, one after another.

"What's up? You guys goin' out somewhere today?"

"I cannot permit you to keep the good restaurants to yourselves."

"If anything, I actually like barbecue more than hot pot."

"Wait up, wait up. Since everyone's gonna be paying their share, let's decide democratically."

Huh? Kamijou's pupils shrank to pinpoints.

The topic of conversation had, at some point, veered off, turning from "we should eat hot pot or something before meat gets too expensive" to "how about everyone in the class go out for dinner together."

"Wait, *why* are we suddenly getting hot pot again?"

"To properly close out the Daihasei Festival—no, wait, we did that already."

"Maybe it's more like pregaming the Ichihanaran Festival?"

A myriad of guesses flew about practically on their own throughout the group surrounding Kamijou, but ultimately, they reached a point where people started saying "As if we need an excuse to eat out!" and "I'll be satisfied as long as I can eat hot pot!!" all while pushing aside Kamijou and Fukiyose, who had originally been at the center of the conversation.

"We live in a democracy, people!!"

"Sukiyaki!"

"Barbecue!"

"Oden." "*Oden* for me, too!"

"Who just used ventriloquism?!"

"Shaaabuuu-shaaabuuu!" shouted six people in tandem.

"5.1 channel surround sound?! Someone's using their ability to fabricate votes!!"

Gwaaahhh!! The entire classroom transformed into a stadium, erupting with raucous shouting.

Eventually, Motoharu Tsuchimikado yelled, "With my Tsuchimikado-style, hidden, hole-in-the-wall memo, we can respond to any kind of customer needs!!" and Blue Hair yelled back, "Then I want a place that has drop-dead sexy waitresses! Single ones, with huge racks and angelic smiles!!" thus turning the commotion into a nonsensical argument: "No, I'm telling you, there *are* waitresses who wear cheerleader uniforms!!" "No, there aren't! Though I *have* seen outfits that look like

tennis wear!!”

Gyah! Kamijou wavered, dazed. “F-Fukiyose? What should we do? It’s turning into a disaster!”

“Unbelievable…”

Fukiyose sighed a little. Then she hid her expression with both hands, as though washing her face, before immediately raising them around to the back of her head. After pulling back her hair, which had been hanging over her ears before, she clipped it in place with several hairpins.

She was getting *serious*.

In spite of himself, Kamijou shouted, “…It’s the Fukiyose Forehead Deluxe?!”

Fukiyose went up to the teacher’s podium, struck the blackboard, which wasn’t very well cleaned, and called out loudly, “All right, everyone!! I’ll be presiding over this! All of you are going to put in one vote each!!”

2

Komoe Tsukuyomi, a female teacher who looked twelve, and Aiho Yomikawa, an explosively large-busted gym teacher who wore a tracksuit every day of the year, walked down the hallway together. It was almost the end of lunchtime.

“…And that’s why a cat’s brain is about one and a half years old in human years. Academy City’s Curriculum starts at five years old at minimum, so the conclusion is that kitties can’t use abilities… At least, that’s what the thesis put forth by Isoshio from Kirigaoka Girls’ Academy hypothesizes.”

“Sounds pretty fishy to me. We’ve never seen any examples of abilities manifesting in other animals, have we? Of course, given Kirigaoka’s propensity for irregular ability development, maybe it’s crazy people like that who are the best at coming up with fresh ideas.” Yomikawa’s black hair, tied into a ponytail, waggled behind her. “Speaking of that school, didn’t you take in another runaway girl? How is she doing?”

“Ee-hee-hee. I was a little lonely after Hime moved into the student dorms, but I’ll be okay now that Musu is here. It seems like something happened at Kiriga, but for now I’m waiting for her to tell me on her own. Unlike Hime, she doesn’t know how to do chores, so I’m teaching her all about that, too.”

“Wow,” Yomikawa said in sincere admiration. “…The

freeloader at my place just up and left, like the coldhearted kid he is. Without even leaving a note, to boot. Got a scrap of paper all of a sudden this morning that said he'd been transferred to Nagatenjouki Academy. Apparently, he's staying in their dorms now."

"Huh?! Nagatenjouki is the number one school in the ability-development field! Remember? They even beat Tokiwadai Middle School at this year's Daihasei Festival and won the school division games."

"Yeah, I guess. It just doesn't quite make sense to me. Just seems unnatural that he'd leave the *other* freeloader behind… Well, I guess things are complicated for all of us."

As their conversation continued, they reached the classrooms they were each in charge of as homeroom teachers. Ms. Tsukuyomi's and Ms. Yomikawa's classes were next-door neighbors.

Though they were in the same year, the air, the coloring, was plainly different. Despite it being five minutes before lunch ended, Yomikawa's class had already gotten their textbooks for next period—history—ready, and they were using the spare time to compare homework assignments. Yomikawa was the physical education teacher, so she didn't have anything to do with it, but the history teacher would probably be crying tears of joy.

As for Ms. Tsukuyomi's class, however…

"It's decided!! We'll all be going to sukiyaki tonight!!"

Roooar!! A huge cheer shook the whole room, from front to back, like a soccer stadium that just saw the winning overtime goal scored. Ms. Tsukuyomi nearly jumped out of her skin at the thunderous clamor. It was even making the hallway windows shake and vibrate.

Ms. Tsukuyomi collected herself unsteadily and cried, "Ah, oh no!! Ms. Yomikawa, I'm so sorry, but I need to go calm things down in there!!"

Flustered, she barged into her classroom.

Watching her go, Yomikawa murmured, "Must be nice to have kids who do dumb stuff all the time."

3

With all that said and done, the main feature that night was sukiyaki.

Their group included the entire class, plus Ms. Tsukuyomi, plus Index, plus the calico. Index had already wormed her way into the class during the Daihasei Festival closing party and made herself at home in about five seconds, so nobody even needed an explanation for why she was here this time.

It was past the time every school was closed, so there were no trains or buses running. Because of that, they had to limit their choices to School District 7. In the end, Motoharu Tsuchimikado led them to a hot pot place he knew of.

They eventually found themselves sitting in a corner of the intricately tangled underground mall, in an area where it seemed that various cooking- and health-related schools had set up a wide array of eateries as an experiment. One of them even belonged to the home-ec school Tsuchimikado's stepsister Maika attended. Kamijou covertly sighed at that.

As for the sukiyaki place in question…

"…Whoa." He breathed out in spite of himself.

In contrast to the modern design principles pervading most of the underground mall, the sukiyaki place stood out as historied and full of character—or in a more colloquial phrasing, *falling apart*. It didn't seem believable that anyone ever came here. It wasn't a place you could assume was unexpectedly good because of some stubborn old man or whatever. No, this was more like a restaurant that couldn't possibly have even *survived* with this storefront if the food turned out to be bad.

Kamijou sucked in a breath. Whoever ran it must have been *very* confident. Kamijou happened to be in the front row, so he slid the door open with a clatter.

Behind the register was an unenergetic-looking student employee, but when he heard Kamijou was with a party of forty, he fled into the back room. Not long after, voices, thick with a lust for money, shouted back and forth to one another: "Aw, *hell* yes!! We hit it big time!!" and "Yo, this is gonna put a huge spike in our sales graph today!!"

Kamijou's shoulders drooped. "Well, we *are* a big group."

"I mean," said Tsuchimikado, "all forty of us suddenly showed up on their doorstep without calling in advance, and yet they're clearly welcoming us with smiles. That should tell

you how empty the place normally is—go ahead, take it in, nya."

"By the way," interrupted Ms. Komoe. She was staring at a list of items on the wall, which was quite yellow, probably from absorbing copious amounts of oil. "Tsuchi, how do you know this place? It seems to be all about the alcohol here. There's thirty different kinds of local beer alone."

"Guh?! I-it's not that, I promise, nya! A high school student imbibing alcohol? Unthinkable, nya!!"

"Tsuchi? Tsuuuchiii?"

Ms. Komoe's eyes had narrowed in extreme suspicion, but if they made a scene here, it was obvious the meal would be called off. Kamijou and his classmates restrained Ms. Komoe with their arms, trying to placate her while forcing her toward the party room for large groups.

She seemed to want to say something, but nobody would let her.

They obviously couldn't have forty or so people pecking at a single pot, so they ended up naturally splitting into groups to sit at different tables. Some were already busy, shouting "It's starting!" "Let the hot pot begin!!" and getting excited over nothing, twisting the handles for the gas burners on the table and having contests to see who could break their chopsticks apart the cleanest.

The calico moved its tiny nose around, sniffing and mewing happily, but once again, as cats aren't allowed to have onions, they'd have to put his sukiyaki on hold.

It seemed too cruel to Kamijou, so when he got a palm-sized rice ball he'd ordered as an appetizer, he placed it in front of the cat. His tail puffed up, and he seemed displeased, as if trying to say, "Bastards!! You all get beef, and I only get salmon?!" But still, he grabbed both sides of the fish-filled rice ball with his front legs and started digging in.

While they were waiting for their hot pot orders, the topic at hand was still the chaos happening outside of Academy City.

In a subdued voice, Himegami was talking to Fukiyose, who sat back-to-back with her.

"Come to think of it, I heard they were saying they want Level Fours and above to submit identification papers."

"Level Fours and Level Fives are the real experts, right? Hmph. I wonder if they'll put *us* in the firing line, too, if things

get bad!”

No, it might be the opposite, thought Kamijou, sitting next to Fukiyose. Nearby, Index looked on with a gesture of confusion.

As one could tell from the relationship between Mikoto Misaka and the Sisters, abilities didn’t seem to be determined by simple DNA alone. That meant it would be all the more damaging were they to lose precious ones. Especially Level Fives—they were worth enough for specialized research institutions to be built just for them.

And in related news…

“Hey, is it true Tokiwadai Middle School’s buses are bulletproof and blast-proof? I heard a rumor that they’d be safe even under sudden artillery fire.”

“Nya. Any info the Garden of Learning people are whispering about is fishy. There’s no way those secrets would ever leak to the public.”

This conversation was between Blue Hair, who was sitting diagonally across from Kamijou, and Tsuchimikado, who had just come back after taking a call, and while what he’d said did sound absurd, Kamijou felt like it was oddly trustworthy.

If a slew of the refined young ladies at Tokiwadai Middle School were to become victims, it would without a doubt cause tremors, starting with the financial world. Kamijou sighed. Human lives just weren’t equal, were they?

Other conversations were popping up, too…

“Haaahhh… Academy City will be in danger if war breaks out, so a lot more requests from guardians are coming in to pull their children out of school.”

“Huh? I didn’t know that was happening.” Kamijou directed a blank stare at Ms. Komoe, who sounded a little worn-out.

Worried about their hot pot, which was taking a while to come out, Ms. Komoe, seated across the table from Kamijou, took a sip from her glass of cold water. “Their children are their world, after all. I partly understand how they feel, but… Where would be safer than Academy City? I doubt there are many places, whether inside or outside the country, with such substantial security that keeps residents safe.”

I wonder about that, thought Kamijou with a wry grin. He’d been sent to the hospital many times in the last few months. In fact, he’d lost count.

And then, sitting next to him, Index said, “Touma, I’m

hungry.”

“The hot pot will get here soon… As a side note, you really take things at your own pace, huh?”

“I want some rice ball, too.”

“No! That’s for the cat!!” he spat.

All the cat’s fur stood up, and he started to hiss threateningly, as if to say “Screw off! I can’t eat meat, and now you even want to take my salmon?!”

Then…

“The hot pot is here!!” Tsuchimikado cried out, like a little boy gleefully pulling a trick on everyone present.

Kamijou directed his attention that way just as several employees brought over black-iron pots. A bubbling sound was already coming from the pots—and it certainly seemed Tsuchimikado was right in recommending the place, because aromas the likes of which could rarely be enjoyed at home wafted from the kettles.

Excited, Kamijou tried to get a look in one of the pots being carried.

And it was here that the classmates around him held him back. Index, nearby, let out a little yelp, and Fukiyose gave an annoyed-sounding sigh.

“Gwah??! What the heck are you guys doing?!”

“You idiot! If you get involved, the pot’ll probably flip over or something!!”

“It’ll totally happen without warning, too! Look—that waitress with the cute face and the huge rack, she’s in a ton of danger right now!!”

“It’s just not right for us to go hungry so *you* can be happy!”

He wanted to make several counterarguments, but he was outnumbered. The Imagine Breaker in his right hand wouldn’t have any effect against his classmates, who had given themselves entirely over to their appetites.

Perhaps because of all this, all unforeseen bouts of rotten luck stayed away.

The cute-faced, busty waitress in question, though, looked at Kamijou, who by this point was basically treated like a convicted criminal, and asked, “Are…are you all right?” which seemed to make his classmates think he’d managed to get on over the rest of them.

“(…Makes me even *angrier* that there wasn’t at least *some*

bad luck involved.)”

“Don’t grumble like that! You’re scaring me!!” shouted Kamijou, having finally untangled himself from several arms, but the class’s attention was already back on the hot pot.

Collecting himself, Kamijou tapped a raw egg on the corner of the table, then cracked its shell and dropped the contents into a small side bowl. Then he stirred it up with his chopsticks.

“…Kamijou. Why are you beating that egg so *slowly*?” said Fukiyose, who was sitting next to him. Her voice suddenly sounded extremely unhappy.

“Huh?”

“Gah, it’s driving me nuts just watching you!! Let me have that. You have to whisk the eggs faster, like this, see?!”

“Wha—?! You control freak!”

His bowl stolen, he casually moved his long chopsticks *away* from her. At this rate, the sukiyaki might end up just being a big pile of vegetables.

Meanwhile, Blue Hair, as though he’d predicted this development, spoke easily to Kamijou while maintaining a safe distance from Fukiyose. “As far as I can tell from the menu, the prices still haven’t changed.”

“R-right. Stocking ingredients might already be more expensive, though. Businesses can’t tell if it’s going to be temporary, so maybe they’re waiting to see what happens for now even if they would prefer to raise prices right away.”

“Which means we’ve gotta eat our hearts out while the eating’s still good! Hi-yah!!”

“Don’t *hi-yah* me! Stop taking all the meat! And, Fukiyose, do something about this carnivore trying to destroy the fragile ecosystem of our pot like some kind of black bass!!”

Kamijou thrust forward with his long chopsticks, too, not wanting to be defeated, but it was only at times like this that what he thought was meat just turned out to be shirataki noodles that had absorbed the broth. When he actually did manage to grab something he wanted, it invariably ended up being just a little piece. It was terrible. And then Fukiyose came in and told him to stop stirring up the pot so much because the tofu would break apart, which earned him a fist.

Even so, despite his trials and tribulations, it *was* fun to eat hot pot with everyone. In fact, he started wondering why they’d never done this before.

“Ah?! Oh, right… The issue of Index’s capacity…!!”

A moment before he realized the imminent problem, a glint entered the eyes of the girl in the white habit.

He had a *very* bad feeling about this.

4

The growing high schoolers were dissatisfied with just the set hot pot meal, so they ended up with some free time while waiting for their supplementary orders to arrive. Most of their group was still in the restaurant chatting away, but Kamijou had gone outside to get some air. Of course, they were in an underground mall, so it didn’t feel much like *outside*.

War, huh…?

The word appeared in Kamijou’s mind without warning—a word that didn’t feel real to him. Just as he’d hoped, frankly. He didn’t *want* it to feel real.

The people milling about the underground mall were somewhat older than him, mostly college students. Every one of them was smiling, enjoying themselves—it was just like a regular old street corner you could find anywhere, the very picture of peace. Ordinary enough that it called into question the very idea of the word *war*.

But there were scars.

Several buildings in one part of the city had been destroyed during the disturbance on September 30, and the nearby city outskirts had been bombed into oblivion. It would take more than a couple days to heal those kinds of wounds.

And now, those things might start happening all around the world. There wasn’t even any guarantee that someone wouldn’t try to shatter the globe itself to pieces.

The Roman Orthodox Church.

God’s Right Seat.

…I have to do something.

He didn’t know what he *could* do, though, not concretely. He still felt like this was beyond what any mere high school student could meaningfully affect.

But Vento of the Front, who had visited this city just a few days ago, had said something.

Specifically, that she’d come to Academy City to kill Touma Kamijou.

He could no longer assume finding himself in the middle of everything was simply coincidence. Touma Kamijou undeniably stood at the very heart of this momentous course of events.

I have no idea what to make of any of this, but maybe that means I can still do something. I'm not being kept in the dark. I don't know who made the decision, but if I'm essential for some unknown reason, doesn't that mean there's still enough time for me to change the state of affairs?

He'd been so excited for the meal with everyone, but the more he thought about this, the more his spirits sank. To shake it off, he took out his phone and saw that a text message had arrived at some point.

The sender was Mikoto Misaka.

He tried to open it, thinking she wanted to talk about what happened during lunchtime, but when he went into his received messages folder, it said there were zero messages. It must have been moved to the spam folder? But his swiping thumb didn't uncover a single thing there, either. It wasn't a feature he used very much, so at this point, he couldn't even begin to guess what had happened.

"What the heck…? That's so weird." In the end, he put the phone back in his pocket, deciding to leave the details for later.

It was then that a voice from behind suddenly said, "Kammy."

He turned around and saw Motoharu Tsuchimikado standing there.

In his hand, he gripped a small metal bottle about fifteen centimeters long. It probably had whiskey or something in it. Maybe he'd come here to drink while keeping it a secret from Ms. Komoe.

At a glance, Tsuchimikado seemed the same as he always was. Not a single bandage on him. But he had, apparently, been fighting with his life on the line during the events of September 30, and when Kamijou looked closer, he could see that his gait was a tiny bit awkward.

Plus, this was the person always calling himself a spy, too. If an amateur like Kamijou thought he looked awkward, then his injuries must have been worse than a few scrapes and bruises.

He seemed to understand why Kamijou had stealthily slipped away from the rest of the class. Grinning, he said, "If you're thinking the war about to happen is all your fault, you're

wrong. The rest of our class isn't going to get wrapped up in this because of anything you did. You've done nothing but protect those around you. It doesn't make sense to feel alienated from them."

"You…think so?"

"Yeah. This war is happening because certain people are pulling the strings behind the scenes. All an amateur like you has to do is get mad that someone somewhere is to blame for all this."

Kamijou smiled in spite of himself at that. In the end, it seemed both he and Tsuchimikado had each been trying to shoulder their own burdens in exactly the same way.

"It's starting," Tsuchimikado said.

"Yeah."

"The scope of the war will change. It'll go beyond kids brawling in the streets. Make sure you understand that. You won't be able to just squeak by like you have up till now."

"…Yeah." Kamijou lowered his gaze slightly. He stared at his own right hand, loosely balled into a fist. "I doubt I'll be enough as I am now. I'm missing something—actually, I'm missing a lot of things. In fact, it's a miracle everything's kind of worked out so far. I don't think I'll be able to make any progress unless I can understand that properly."

"The bad guys aren't gonna wait around for us to prepare."

"Probably not. But I know what I need to do. I'll just have to learn one thing at a time, no matter how small it seems," Kamijou resolved, looking back up. "There's no point in complaining that I don't have what it takes. I'm gonna keep moving forward, even if it's just by a centimeter or a millimeter. The problem was difficult enough to begin with. If I don't do at least that much, I'll never be able to reach the people I need to."

"Kammy…"

Tsuchimikado was about to say something, but then he decided against it.

Unlike Kamijou, he was a professional spy. He was far more familar with just how brutal the world could be. But even he found himself unsure of what to say in the face of Kamijou's unwavering resolve.

"I've been too soft until now. Whenever anything that had to do with the world came up and I didn't understand, I left it to others. I think you've let me lean on you a lot, too,

Tsuchimikado. But from here on out, that won't cut it. I *need* to step into this new world and see what I've never seen before."

While Tsuchimikado was still faltering, Kamijou steeled himself. Quietly, he clenched his right hand, where the Imagine Breaker slept.

"Tsuchimikado, I've made my decision," he said sharply, voice full of firm determination.

He directed his tenacity at the spy who was, in a way, his mentor in this shadowy world of theirs.

"Yeah. Starting right now… I'm gonna study English!!"

"……
……"

"Wha—?"

Ignoring Tsuchimikado, who couldn't help but be flabbergasted, Kamijou took his phone out of his pants pocket.

"Check it out, Tsuchimikado! I downloaded this app called *Super-Easy English Training*! Right now, I'm on level three of the everyday-conversation chapter. Man, English sure is hard. But I've gotta knuckle down and learn a language other than Japanese already. The Roman Orthodox Church and God's Right Seat and whoever else might not always speak Japanese for me, after all!!"

"I, um."

Having immediately backed away, Tsuchimikado's tone unconsciously shifted to one he might use when meeting someone for the first time.

"Why English and why now?"

"What? Oh, well, I guess Rome is in Italy, so maybe Italian would be better. But they've got like two billion followers across the world, right? Isn't English the right choice?" asked Kamijou blankly.

It seemed practical survival methods and such weren't even on his mind.

He was seriously planning on challenging a two-billion-strong organization with *words*.

"Well, even if they don't understand my words, I think they'll understand the soul behind them. But having them understand can only be a positive. Not everyone can speak Japanese like Lidvia and Biagio. Actually, *everyone*'s been using Japanese for

me until now. But I can't keep assuming everyone will keep doing me favors. Anyway, what I'm trying to say is—"

"…"

Ka-wham!! A dull sound echoed through the underground mall.

It was all so ridiculous that Tsuchimikado had, practically out of reflex, thrown a punch.

Shaking his head in resignation, he ignored the young man sprawled on the ground nearby. Shoulders drooping, he went back into the sukiyaki restaurant.

Needless to say, none of the extra meat was left for Kamijou after that.

CHAPTER 2

A Dull Gray Alley
Skill Out.

1

On the same day, October 3, early morning.

Inside the rectangular, underground concrete bunker, Accelerator naturally couldn't tell if it was day or night. But that wasn't a problem. He stood under a fluorescent lamp casting uniform light below, leaning on his crutch.

It was a firing range.

The room was about fifty meters deep, but people could only freely walk around in the front ten meters or so. Everything past that was cordoned off by long horizontal tables barring entry. Past the tables were a handful of human-shaped targets, which were designed to move in every direction along a metallic grid of rails.

The long tables were divided by thin partitions that separated about thirteen lanes in the firing area. Each lane was about the width of a telephone booth.

Accelerator was around the midpoint, in lane number eight.

His slender hand gripped a small gun. A stench reminiscent of fireworks drifted through his surroundings.

"Beginning drill number forty-two."

After the prerecorded female voice announced the start of the exercise, five targets started moving at once.

Hit them in order, starting from the front. Just shoot them one at a time.

Leveling his gun with just one hand, he shot them all with precision.

A series of gunshots rang out in the wide-open underground space. The sounds, already loud, bounced back to his eardrums with even more pressure.

Accelerator was right-handed normally, but the crutch forced him to shoot with his left.

"Beginning drill number forty-three."

Each exercise lasted around seventy seconds.

Don't focus too much on aiming. Always remember to look at the big picture, even movements in your peripheral vision.

Accelerator just kept firing as he thought. For him, reloading the gun was the bigger hurdle. With his right hand on the crutch, he could only use his left for it.

He popped out the magazine, then spun the gun around his index finger, which he kept on the trigger, bringing the magazine well faceup. Then, after using his mouth to pull another magazine from his left sleeve, he slid it home before finally spinning the gun one-eighty again, this time using his mouth to pull the slide.

That took him about two seconds.

Still too slow, he thought.

"Beginning drill number forty-four."

It was clear he'd tested out many other guns as well.

I guess my selection standards should focus on reload speed, how much it weighs when I shoot with one hand, and the recoil.

On the lane table in front of him was a pile of weapons: various handguns for military, personal, and competition use—there were even shotguns, submachine guns, and rifles.

Empty casings blanketed the area at his feet like a pile of fallen leaves. These, too, came in several shapes and sizes depending on the type of gun; some were metal of a bronze-like color, while others were blue and made of plastic.

"Beginning drill number forty-five."

The targets sped along the rails before they were all struck, one after another.

Don't rely on a single powerful shot to get the job done. Being able to easily fire several bullets is way more versatile.

Though the different exercises varied the targets' speed and used one of the many switch-off points to rapidly alter their trajectories, Accelerator still landed his shots with accuracy and precision.

Even an officially trained Anti-Skill officer would have trouble with this kind of combat drill. It hadn't been long since Accelerator first started using guns, but even with his crutched, unstable posture, he was already handling them like one would a well-worn ballpoint pen.

However…

"…Useless," Accelerator spat, irritated, before the machine

could output his records. He hit a calculator-like object on the lane table and cut off the training program. Then he shoved the gun in his hand back onto the table.

Without turning around, he said, “What do you want, you frickin’ poser?”

At that, a single sharp footstep rang out as if on purpose. The sound came from behind him. Probably meant to be in lieu of knocking.

“And here I thought I’d been hiding my presence pretty well. It seems I still lack training.”

The soft voice belonged to a male.

Accelerator turned around and saw a young man with a thin frame and brown hair standing there. His name, if Accelerator recalled, was Mitsuki Unabara. But right after he’d introduced himself, he’d claimed both his appearance and name were fake.

“If it’s all right, I’d like to learn from this. Given that we’re in a firing range, you must not have relied on sound. How did you detect me?”

“Blah, blah. Shut it already. I’m not here to make *you* stronger,” Accelerator snapped, but in reality, he *hadn’t* noticed Mitsuki Unabara approaching.

At least, not in the sense of using normal, physical sensory organs.

But…

Gah. I’m shaking again…

The hand that had been holding the gun now hurt for a reason other than exhaustion.

He didn’t know why, but it had been like this since his first meeting with Unabara a few days ago. Whenever Accelerator was near this man, his fingertips would start to tremble on their own. Plus, he felt a slight pressure weighing down on him, like someone had left a basketball on top of his chest.

At times like these, he only ever thought of one thing.

Amata Kihara.

That pelting rain, that dull pain, the taste and stench of blood like iron.

Last Order.

A small life, abused by unjust violence, ready to disappear at any moment.

And…

…*Those* black wings *that came out of my back.*

It was no more than a vague image, an abstract idea. And he'd first become conscious of them after he'd started working with Group here… No, more accurately, ever since he'd taken down the scientist named Amata Kihara.

But it wouldn't do him any good to ask the man in front of him about it.

Accelerator wouldn't gain anything by showing weakness.

"I *said*, what do you want?"

"Have you decided on a weapon yet?" Unabara's smile didn't waver. "We don't have much time for you to do a careful investigation. There's always work to be done, and we need you to get familiar with our processes quickly."

"None of 'em really speak to me," Accelerator grumbled, looking at the numerous firearms on the table. "Might not ever find one I like, even if you collected them from all over the world."

"Why not narrow down your equipment list, assuming you'll be using your ability?"

"Don't talk like you know a damn thing." He rapped the choker-shaped electrode around his neck. "I can't rely on *this*."

"Why is that? It's been upgraded since then, hasn't it? According to the report from Group's engineering department, they've extended the ability duration from fifteen minutes to thirty."

"Group, huh?" Accelerator repeated derisively.

Ever since he'd been dragged here by those powered suits who had shown up after he'd smashed Amata Kihara on September 30, Accelerator had been integrated into a framework by the name of Group. But even now that he was an official member, he still didn't know much about it. What he did know suggested that Group was a team of four people, including him, who would be acting in concert. However, he had no clue how many other teams like theirs existed, or even if they were the only one. Even those powered suit pilots might have belonged to a different Group than Accelerator.

His transfer into Nagatenjouki Academy… That was the cover story he'd given Aiho Yomikawa and Kikyou Yoshikawa. Accelerator agreed that it was a good arrangement. Academy City's top school was a place where it wasn't strange to have special classes that were top secret. A laboratory for just one person, unbeknownst even to the current students there.

They'd probably taken advantage of that to register him as a student on paper only.

They—the ones managing Group. I still can't quite see the full picture, but it must mean they have both the means and the motivation to go that far. Everything about this is shady.

He knew that the Group he was in had many subordinate teams, or subsidiaries. Odd jobs, errands, all performed for the sake of *just four people*: the development and maintenance of equipment, the transfer of personnel, the removal of evidence… There seemed to be a vast number of people in place to do all these things.

Mitsuki Unabara, one of those on the receiving end of such blessings, stared at him blankly. "Are you not happy with how we tuned your electrode?"

"Ha. Doesn't matter if it's thirty minutes or three days—it doesn't fundamentally change anything. If something out of the ordinary happens, that's it. If this thing craps out on me, and I can't fight, I'm dead."

This was something he had become acutely aware of after his confrontation with a powerful enemy—Amata Kihara—while his battery was dead. The dimension of him being safe by relying on something had long since ended.

From here on, he'd need to fight no matter what situation he found himself chased into.

"Ha-ha. Then all the work Group's engineering team put into analyzing that electrode was for nothing."

"Fuck if I care," said Accelerator flatly. "Are you done?"

"No. Here's the main reason I came." Unabara spread his hands. "We, Group, have received a work order from the General Board."

"…"

"Academy City is in the process of shoring up its defenses against the Roman Orthodox Church, but for all the weight they put on anti-Church measures, the city's inner defenses are growing weaker by the day. In all the confusion, a certain faction is planning an attack on Academy City's facilities. Our mission is to wipe them out."

"Heh. Ha-ha-ha." Accelerator couldn't help but laugh when he heard that. "They ruin people like this, slap collars on them, and now the big 'job' we've all been waiting for is just to take out the trash? Ha, I guess life's full of surprises!"

Narrowing his red eyes in amusement, he curled his lips into a derisive grin.

“They were talking about us filling in for that Kihara shithead, but I never thought we’d get such a stupid job! Ha-ha—guess to them, I’m just as much garbage as Kihara was!”

“Don’t take it out on me. It’s your own fault you sank so low.”

In response, Accelerator reached out with a slender arm and grabbed Unabara by the collar—purposely aiming right for the middle of his chest.

Using his fingertips—with which he could reverse the direction of any vector if he wanted to, including his victim’s blood flow—he grabbed Unabara’s flesh.

“Listen to me, kid. Let me tell you just one thing,” Accelerator vowed, expression unchanged as he pulled the shirt he’d grabbed in front of him. “Human lives are flimsy. So flimsy I could break them with a flick of my finger. So be a little more considerate. Or else I might go too far and break something I shouldn’t.”

“I’ll be careful.”

Unabara’s tone, in contrast to Accelerator’s words, was smooth, and his mouth was still curled in a relaxed smile.

“Ugh.” Accelerator released Unabara’s clothing with a grunt.

“May I continue?”

“You were going to anyway.”

“Our target is Skill-Out. You may be more familiar with them than I.”

Accelerator frowned. Skill-Out was, broadly speaking, an armed group of Level Zeroes.

Status in Academy City was determined by two factors: academic abilities and esper abilities. If someone was labeled a Level Zero, they essentially led their school life with tests marked with zeroes hanging from their necks, and some among them apparently couldn’t handle such treatment.

Skill-Out theoretically had around ten thousand members in Academy City. That being said, most of them were people renting dormitories but not going to school, or those who did go to school and left their Skill-Out activities for nighttime. The ones living on the streets without attending classes or living properly in a dorm, the ones who had gained themselves a reputation as a violent group, only made up about 1 percent of the total.

They had no clear-cut objective. If any young men loitering on the streets at night were Level Zero, that was already enough for people to treat them as members of Skill-Out. Thus, their presence could vary from three or four Skill-Out members gathered in a convenience store parking lot one night—or there could be a mob a hundred strong swaggering on the streets.

"Whoa, whoa, wait a second. This job just got even more insignificant. Are the higher-ups gambling on when they think I'll lose it and go crazy?"

"No, not at all. In fact, there's been talk about reorganization recently even with Skill-Out. Apparently, a team of Anti-Skill officers who went to suppress them were outplayed and had to beat a hasty retreat, so it's not really strange this would fall in Group's lap, given that we're an unofficial organization."

"Hmph," sniffed Accelerator contemptuously. Was it wisdom or combat strength? Those back-alley delinquents had clearly found a windfall of one or the other.

"Skill-Out currently seems to be making some toys."

"Toys?"

"Made by hollowing out oak logs and stuffing them with explosives. Five centimeters across, seventy long. They seem to be planning on using them as rockets; we've confirmed that they're generally aerodynamic and have three vinyl-chloride wings."

"Hold on. Burning arrows?" Accelerator snorted in spite of himself. "Those are experimental weapons from the Edo period, for crying out loud. What, are they all obsessed with archaeology or something? They can fly maybe two thousand meters, but it's not like they're powerful even if they get that far. Maybe they would be if they stuck high-grade plastic explosives in the tip or something, but they probably make all their own explosives themselves, too. If they want to cause trouble with those, they have another think coming—toys like that wouldn't even scratch the outer walls of research facilities."

"Unfortunately, with some preparations beforehand, they seem to be very effective," said Unabara quietly. His voice carried well in the firing range, surrounded by thick walls. "They've been laying traps all over for the last few days. Moving the bikes stationed next to disaster evacuation routes, stuffing garbage into the ventilation near entrances to VIP facilities… What they're doing is small in scale—hardly a public safety

concern, but…”

“…Since when were we supposed to be cleaning up after a bunch of kiddie pranks?”

“But each generates an issue with a low chance of evolving into a more severe error, and twenty thousand of them have already been ‘reported.’ And even though we could leave them alone during times of peace, during an orange or red warning, they’ll be detected as errors. In other words…”

“If these fire arrows ignite, they generate problems.”

“If they use rocket weaponry, they’ll cause at least a code orange. And as the warning level increases, the twenty thousand ‘bombs’ Skill-Out has spent the last few days scattering across the city will all cause error reports at once. That’s what they’re after. If they can take down the servers maintaining the communication network with all those error reports, they’ll be able to do whatever they please, and Anti-Skill will probably never come.

“This ‘hole’ probably wouldn’t be fixed in a day or two,” finished Unabara.

“That’s all well and good, but… Why are you so certain about what they’re going for? If this is all your personal speculation, I will physically destroy you.”

“No, not at all. We caught several of them and *made them talk*. We don’t think there’s much doubt.”

Accelerator fell silent for a moment, but really, he had no right to criticize their tactics. If he wanted to compare records, *he* was clearly the one who had commited far greater atrocities.

“They can’t even run amok without doing all this prep work… Considering they thought through all this stuff, they must be a bunch of chickens at heart,” Accelerator grumbled. “What are they after? Attacking military research facilities, stealing powered suits?”

“No. Those sorts of facilities have their own independent security teams inside. Their goal is probably simpler than that… A rebellion against espers.”

“Ha. So what? They’ll cut off communication lines, surround the espers, and kill them? Sounds like the kind of thing those numbers-obsessed Level Zeroes would do.”

Hundreds of people ganging up on a single esper and killing them. Repeat that, and even Skill-Out, a gang of Level Zeroes, would be able to cause significant tragedy.

“…Should Skill-Out’s plan succeed, at least two or three school districts’ worth of communications will be down. We should assume the casualties will be major in that kind of scenario.

“But,” Unabara noted, tilting his head, “as you can see, Skill-Out is considering something grandiose, but will it really go that well? With weapons like guns and bodyguard gear, even if they surrounded someone with a dozen or so people… I find it hard to believe they’d be able to defeat Level Fives like you, for example.”

“As long as parts of the plan look attractive, idiots will go for it even with all the holes. Incomplete combustion—that’s probably how this plan of Skill-Out’s is gonna end. Half-assed plans that bring about half-assed results and half-assed casualties.”

The ones Skill-Out currently hated the most, and had the most obvious sense of inferiority toward, were Level Fives like Accelerator.

But it was doubtful this plan alone would enable them to take any Level Fives down. In which case, Skill-Out would probably switch to easier, quicker targets and content themselves with that.

In the end, they’d be killing powerless Level Ones and Level Twos.

And the Level Twos… The mass-produced military espers and the higher being who controlled them.

Who did they plan to target with their nonsensical violence that had no goal or greater meaning?

“…”

“This is bullshit,” Accelerator muttered to himself. Returning his attention to Unabara, he said, “Then Skill-Out isn’t the danger here.” He spat on the floor. “The real danger is some religious group exploiting the damage they cause to strike, right? Those rotten General Board assholes aren’t the kind to care about people in the alleyways to begin with.”

“Very discerning.”

“Anyway, what are you dragging your feet for? If you know what they’re after, you can just disable the automatic alarms. As long as we don’t get a code orange or above, the communication network won’t go down.”

“If it wasn’t wartime, we could have done just that. But that’s

like telling someone to turn off the antivirus software on their computer without knowing when it might be attacked."

"Nothing but enemies inside and out, eh? Really seems like Academy City is on a lot of people's shit list."

"And it's our job to do something about those people," continued Unabara, flashing a smile. "It's too late to rethink Academy City's security systems. Anti-Skill and Judgment appear to be trying to remove the 'obstacles' on evacuation routes and VIP facility entrances—the sources of the errors—but there's no guarantee Skill-Out will sit around and wait until they're done. That's why we need to physically stop them ourselves."

"How clever," he drawled. "In underhanded ways we can't ask Anti-Skill for, I assume?"

"Our target's name is Ritoku Komaba—the current leader of Skill-Out and the brains of the operation," Unabara explained, presenting a photograph on his phone screen. "He seems to be fairly influential in the darker streets of School District Seven. Do you know him?"

"Nope. No reason to."

"Our mission is to swiftly deal with this Ritoku Komaba and prevent Skill-Out's plan from coming to fruition."

"You think those shitheads will give up and stop just because of that? Their preparations are already finished, aren't they? If they set off a code orange or above, they win. All of Academy City is at a code yellow right now. They're close enough to see their goal. Even if their leader dies, one of his lackeys can take over."

"No, they can't," said Unabara smoothly, cutting him off. "It seems that their plan hinges on hitting specific locations. As I said before, they've been laying little traps everywhere, like at VIP facility entrances and along evacuation routes…but it seems they're following a specific methodology. They use one explosion to cause a code orange in a certain location, then induce an error in certain areas' automatic security. After that, the machines will come on by themselves, decide there's a public security problem in facilities in the appropriate area, then start checking nearby areas in order to move people that way… Then, Skill-Out uses that fraction of a second to immediately expand the error area. That's their ultimate goal.

"Incidentally," Unabara added, "only Ritoku Komaba seems

to know where that initial target is. At least, none of the Skill-Out members we arrested had that information. It seems the whole thing needs someone to take the reins for the plan to succeed—and to prevent it from going out of control."

"Ugh. He's just trying to keep his own position secure," Accelerator sneered before waving a hand lightly. "I'm free to destroy this Komaba guy, but my rampage won't cause a code red, will it? Unlike you, I can get a little *flashy*."

"If a code orange or above *does* get declared outside of the initial bombing point Komaba has in mind, their plan still won't be achieved. Academy City's security districts are subdivided, so it will probably end with the warning only affecting a very small area. They need careful coordination for the lockdown to jump across a wide area."

"…Great. You know all that, but not where this initial bombing point is. We could have had security get there in advance if we knew."

"Well, the only way to know would be to ask Ritoku Komaba himself," Mitsuki Unabara said, smiling. "But don't you think it would simply be quicker to crush him instead?"

2

He headed to the site on wheels.

Accelerator was riding in the passenger's seat of a garbage truck. However, the truck's body had been painted black, and all the windows were heavily tinted.

"We deal with corpses a lot, too, so a garbage truck is handy in various ways," said the middle-aged man gripping the steering wheel next to him. "The internals of the packer in the back are made to be used once, then discarded. Every time we do a collection, we abandon it all, including the corpses, and exchange everything for new stuff."

What, like a vacuum refill pack? Accelerator thought, utterly amazed. "A garbage truck scavenging for the dead bodies of shitheads? What a bad joke."

The truck seemed to be running on electricity rather than gasoline; the engine made almost no noise. It was perfect for covert operations, in a way.

While looking at the scenery going past the window, Accelerator said, "Anyway, what's up with the black paint and

the tinted windows? We're not playing chauffeur for some rich asshole."

"Well, in our line of work, it'd be problematic if anyone sees our faces."

Accelerator was pretty sure that neither the truck nor the driver's clothing were anything makeshift. Academy City had provided the genuine article for this job. He didn't know where in the budget leadership was squeezing the money from, but they must have received funds equal to that of an entire school district's worth of Anti-Skill officers, then poured it all into research and development for equipment.

The middle-aged man answered him between responses to some kind of conversation he was having over the onboard radio. "You're one of Group's members, right? I hear this is your first time."

"So what?"

"Nothing," said the driver, still looking forward. "Lackeys like me don't have the ability to do much more than drive you all around like this, but sometimes I get to thinking. Maybe if I wasn't here, a few less people would fall this far."

"…"

"Of course, I'm sure they could get as many replacement drivers as they needed. Still, I think about it. If I really floored it and got away, maybe I could save a person or two."

"Ha. You've got grit. The kind of grit that shouldn't be wasted in a place like this."

"Tsuchimikado, Unabara—everyone in that passenger seat says the same thing. I wonder why."

It's because you're a good guy. One who's too optimistic, quietly thought Accelerator.

The recorded female voice on the GPS announced that they'd arrived at their destination. The electric-powered collection vehicle silently drew to a stop.

Accelerator opened the passenger-side door, then put his distinctly cutting-edge crutch onto the ground before stepping onto the somewhat dirty road.

He heard a voice from behind. "I'll come to pick you up in twenty minutes, as instructed. Be careful."

"Win or lose, I'll be going back in that thing, huh?" Accelerator answered without turning around, a thin smile on his lips. "Whether I'm dead or alive."

Ignoring the collection vehicle as it drove away behind him, he took careful stock of his surroundings.

It was just a normal street. The kind you'd find anywhere.

But the air felt different. He could sense eyes here and there over by the entrance to an alley, stabbing at him with sharp hostility. This would be like a swamp—once he went in, it wouldn't be easy to get back out.

When he moved to the alley's entrance, he found several iron stakes pounded into the ground underfoot.

The half-rusted stakes came in various lengths, from ten centimeters to thirty, and were stuck in the ground about a meter into the alley from the entrance, packed together. It was like a meadow of iron.

This must be to prevent the security robots from getting in.

Accelerator snorted. The oil drum–shaped robots in Academy City were designed to overcome height changes, to an extent. And when it came to things like elevators, the robots could still use infrared signals to search inside.

But with a deliberate barricade like this set up, they wouldn't be able to make any headway. After repeating their obstacle avoidance sequence a few times, they would file the data away, saving the location for later investigation and skipping it for now, then go off somewhere else.

"…"

He looked up and saw vinyl sheets hung between the buildings, blocking out the sky. Most of them were blue, though red and yellow ones occasionally joined them. He knew they were an ersatz way to cover the sky. Sunlight took on strange colors when it passed through, and those colors produced a mottled pattern on the ground like stained glass.

These sheets were to evade satellite surveillance.

Anti-Skill officers and other officers would forcibly remove such obstructions once every week or month. But Skill-Out guys would always put up new obstructions as soon the old ones were removed, purposely making it into a tedious game of whack-a-mole.

That was how they did things.

They casually made things, casually discarded them, and casually remade them as needed.

If their barricades were broken, they'd throw up new ones. If their main base was destroyed, they'd find a new place to stay

right nearby. If their organization was crushed, other outcasts would eventually gather and give birth to a new one.

Skill-Out would never die.

Like how the cockroach seemed like it would never go extinct, they learned, little by little, and strengthened their resistance.

A form of evolution centered on the negative. A form nobody desired.

"…This sure feels familiar," Accelerator muttered, breaking into a grin.

The dark alley stretching before him was a lawless area unreachable by either security robot or satellite. Nothing anyone did within this world would be seen. And of course, *nobody would come to the rescue*.

"All right, then."

As he thought *Let's get started*, his phone went off.

Looking annoyed, he took it in hand. All it displayed was CONTACT 3.

"Tsuchimikado?" he said.

"Thought your first battle would be starting soon. I wanted to warn you about something before you began."

Here comes the warning, Accelerator thought with an eye roll. "And what's that, *Mr. Mentor*?"

"*Don't trust us*," Tsuchimikado said simply. *"Like you or me, all of Group's members are people who would cause issues just by becoming revealed to the world. There's no winning in an organization made up of people like that."*

"…You trying to suggest I'm hoping for a *reward*?"

"No. Only that you'll need to do more than follow the General Board's rules to outwit them. They're set up to reap the benefits no matter how you choose to do things. Keep that in mind when you think about what you should do. We both have something we need to protect, after all."

"…" Accelerator fell silent for a moment.

What he thought back to then was a certain girl. One who was probably still in the hospital at that very moment.

But his expression, his behavior, his words—he suppressed all of it before that reached the surface.

"That all you wanted?"

"Yeah, I guess so. Finish up quickly and come back. Musujime should be getting started on her job now, too. You may not need

to hear this, but you won't want to get yourself caught up in that."

"Her job?" Accelerator frowned.

Ka-bam!!

A high-pitched explosion rang out from deeper down the ever-so-narrow alley.

It sounded distant, but a burst of warm air hit Accelerator's face. Maybe the air had been compressed—the atmosphere around him had been laced with dust and dirt.

For an instant, Ritoku Komaba's plan crossed his mind…but Tsuchimikado was strangely calm on the other end of the call. After thinking for a moment, Accelerator offhandedly offered his own prediction. "Is Musujime using explosives or something? Also, I didn't hear anything about a competition."

"*She's not after their people. She's after their money*," answered Tsuchimikado idly. *"Skill-Out needs funds to stay active. They seem to have split it up using various ploys, but we're having her take care of whatever's here. Better to burn it all than let them run away with it."*

The explosions continued.

Skill-Out, however, was used to fights involving those sorts of weapons. They wouldn't be daunted. You needed a powerful ability to stand on this battlefield alone.

If he recalled, Awaki Musujime's ability was Move Point: a way to move objects to other places, unbound by three-dimensional limitations. Was she using it now?

"And here I thought she was just Group's mascot. She's still useful? Thought she couldn't move how she wants when she's mentally unstable."

"*Same as you*," said Tsuchimikado flatly, listening to the explosions through the phone. *"She's* boosted."

"Really? That's great. Anyway, should I just take advantage of the chaos to flatten their whole group at once now that they're lacking leadership?"

"I doubt any leader will run away so easily while their funds are being destroyed, but the name of our primary target is Ritoku Komaba—the bastard leading all of them. Make absolutely sure he doesn't get away."

"I'm more worried I'll flatten him *too* hard. Digging his flesh

out of rubble would probably be awful," Accelerator offered blithely, hanging up.

After putting his phone in his pocket, with one hand still on his crutch, he placed his other hand softly on his neck. The gesture was one you might make if you were checking your joints, but in his case, his hand landed on his choker-shaped electrode's switch.

"Well, then, let's get started, shall we?"

He sensed several people appearing.

About twenty guns and crossbows had just been trained on him—from deeper in the alley, from the windows of buildings, from the smallest shadows.

Faced with all that, Accelerator smiled very, very thinly.

"Time to take out the trash. I'll finish this in ten minutes."

And then, he returned to that place he would have gladly crawled through mud to escape from.

3

Awaki Musujime was walking down a dark alley.

Because of the multicolored vinyl sheets stretching from building to building overhead, other colors mixed into the sunlight, casting blues, reds, and yellows onto the road below. The air seemed stagnant, suffused with the smell of garbage and dust. The walls were covered in sloppy graffiti, and she spotted the remnants of a rusting ATM—who knows where they found it—with its lid pried open. Other things were strewn about, too, like a chipped saw and broken lumber. It seemed the incidents around this area never ceased.

As Musujime walked through it all, she had a camisole-like cloth wrapped around her bare chest and her school blazer hanging from her shoulders. She paired that with a skirt that was incredibly short, too. Overall, her clothing was quite suggestive.

But no one was able to touch her.

Not a single person.

"…Piece of cake."

A large man set upon her with a metal pipe, and a skinny woman aimed at her from the window of a building with an arrow. Musujime would deal with both the same. Using her Move Point ability, she teleported nearby rusted cars and metal

dumpsters in front of her to serve as shields. Once she'd blocked their initial attacks, she went on the offensive, plunging the corkscrews she carried directly into her targets' limbs. After that predictable series of events, it was over.

Musujime twirled the ability-bolstering military-grade flashlight in her right hand; she could also use it as a police baton. The item was mainly to assist her in aiming her ability, though. Her power offered too much in the way of freedom, so her aim would fluctuate unless she set her own standards.

As she waved the tool in her hand, she spoke with evident boredom.

"Numbers don't always give you an advantage, and you can't ensure victory just by preparing weapons beforehand. I suppose it's very much like back-alley delinquent groups not to understand that."

In contrast to her cool demeanor, her surroundings had transformed into a howling storm.

She'd raised a miniature tornado all around her in order to block the attacks coming from all directions. It was composed of thick pieces of metal, like manhole covers and iron plates. Move Point didn't make any noise, but countless bullets were very loudly clanging off the impromptu shields.

Musujime used her mouth to pull the pin out of a grenade, then tossed it into the now-coverless manhole.

A muffled explosion reverberated in the underground sewer.

According to their intel, a trove of reserve cash was hidden down there, enough to purchase expensive handbags.

"That makes nine… They're not putting up much of a fight."

Ever since Kuroko Shirai from Judgment had turned the tables on her during the incident on September 14, the negative changes in her mental state had put her in a condition where she was unable to use her ability.

And the reason it had come back to her like this today was…

…I'd thought the whole thing was fishy when I first heard about it, but I guess this means the engineering department is actually pretty skilled.

Musujime currently had external electrodes that looked like compresses attached to her shoulders and back. Miniaturized low-frequency vibration machines: Broadly speaking, they were medical-grade massagers that fed electric currents into her body. They measured the agitation of her brain waves, then

created pulse patterns that would be most effective.

She couldn't exactly call it perfect, but she did admit that it had lowered her stress levels somewhat.

Of course, walking around the city with compresses attached to your body isn't exactly the kind of life girls should be leading.

That incident on September 14 really had been a major factor in why she'd needed to borrow the power of technology to get her powers back.

Musujime herself had been the mastermind behind that incident, but she wasn't the only one in the criminal group. She'd asked for dozens of like-minded espers to help her steal the Remnant, a part of the Tree Diagram. Most of them had been taken down by that Railgun and arrested by Anti-Skill.

She was the only one able to be out in public.

Academy City didn't currently have a clear punishment for treason. But she didn't think anyone would bother to preserve the human rights of lowly traitors who threatened peace in the city. That meant all they needed to do was have the punishment conducted outside the law, unbeknownst to others. In detestable ways that took advantage of the fact that the long arm of the law couldn't reach them.

She had to do something about that.

The ones who had once walked the same path as her were in danger.

"…"

Musujime tossed a hand grenade into the opening of a large external air-conditioning unit, shredding all the paper bills hidden inside and tearing apart the unit itself.

…Hard cash, gold bars, IT bank access card under fake organization names… I have to say, they were going to quite a lot of trouble to spread it all out. I wonder what they did to get all this money in the first place.

Ritoku Komaba, the leader of this entire area, had apparently outlawed sex trafficking. If he'd purposely cut off one of the quickest ways of amassing cash, that must have meant he had other ways, but…

None of my business anyway. My goal is to destroy it all, and that's all I have to do. I just have to take out fourteen more places and go back home, she thought, carefree, swinging the flashlight in her hand around lazily.

"…I'd appreciate it if you let up a bit, esper."

Suddenly, a man's voice broke into Musujime's thoughts.

In the narrow, straight alley, a man as big as a gorilla stood about ten meters in front of her. He must have emerged from the back of one of the surrounding buildings. He clothed his block frame with a cheap jacket, but it seemed like one flex of his muscles would rip it to shreds.

The man looked like destruction incarnate, but his voice was cheerless.

Sounding like he was spitting out copy paper, he continued:

"I'd been keeping our funds separate…to prevent it all from being stolen in one fell swoop. Like a…timid person who carries multiple wallets out of fear of extortion. And as such, I feel as though it's a touch childish for someone to realize all that and then to go on and strip them of everything anyway…"



Without responding, Musujime boldly took out her phone.

She looked at the screen and checked the photo on it. Then she sighed, mildly exasperated. “Ritoku Komaba… Well, well. Looks like I ran into the target first.”

At some point, the Skill-Out members who had been surrounding her had disappeared.

Komaba had probably used his authority to get them to withdraw.

So that they wouldn’t hold him back.

“Don’t blame me for this, Accelerator.”

“…That name… I should have abandoned the money and escaped, rather than cling to greed. I hadn’t thought someone of his caliber would be here…”

Musujime didn’t really bother to respond to anything Komaba said.

She flipped her phone closed, stowing it in her pocket.

Then she slowly brought her military-grade flashlight back into position.

“Move Point… A troubling power.”

“I can assure you, it’s a little more than *troubling*.”

“Yes, that’s true… You’re troubling *and* annoying.”

Dark emotions, the hallmark of a Level Zero gang like Skill-Out, crept into his words.

So what? thought Musujime. He was ten meters away. They were on a straight, narrow road. In this situation, she could easily shoot her corkscrews at him. Regardless of how much stamina Komaba had, he would crumple to the ground before walking three steps. Even if he did have a hidden projectile weapon like a gun, Musujime only needed to summon a “shield” to deal with it.

“Then I’ll shove this between your eyes and end it for you in an instant.”

“Before I can even feel the pain, huh…? How considerate.”

Without saying anything more, Musujime swung the flashlight and sent an order to the corkscrews in her pocket. Ignoring visible, three-dimensional vectors, the corkscrews made use of theoretical eleven-dimensional values to pass through space and appear right in the middle of Ritoku Komaba’s forehead.

But they didn’t hit.

“What…?”

Musujime opened her eyes wide in shock, looking at the corkscrew, left hanging in empty space. A little pain sprang forth in her spine. The low-frequency vibration machines had sent a stronger pulse through her in response to her tension to decrease the stress she felt.

She hadn’t missed.

Komaba’s body had simply disappeared.

Roar!!

A dull blast of wind, like a dump truck had just passed right by, echoed from directly behind her.

“…Too slow.”

The flat voice was a harbinger of a dull pain that shot through the crown of Musujime’s head, right around the whorl of her hair, like something heavy had hit it. Through a hazy, unsteady consciousness, she realized Komaba’s fist had swung down right on her.

Electric currents ran through her shoulders and back.

The devices had been helping her before, but like this, they were nothing but impediments.

“Ugh?!”

Looking behind her, she called forth an abandoned car, then pushed it onto the position where Komaba stood. Not to defend herself, but to crush her target.

But Komaba wasn’t there.

He’d jumped seven meters clear into the air from that spot.

“No need to be so surprised…”

His legs, in midair, found a rectangular iron pole sticking out of the wall around the second story of a building, where a signboard or external air conditioner must have been in the past.

Wha-bam!! The kick broke the rectangular pole, sending it flying toward Musujime like a missile.

“I’m serious about this, too.”

Musujime couldn’t even hear the *tap* of Komaba landing.

The jagged edges of many pieces of the iron pole were all flying at her at once.

“?!”

Musujime frantically called back the car that she’d used to attack.

She’d intended to use it as a shield, but with a high-pitched

screech of metal on metal, the fast-moving pieces of iron pierced that defense easily. Unconsciously, Musujime raised her hands to cover her face; one shard skimmed her thigh, and then the terrible makeshift weapons finally gouged deep into the asphalt and came to a stop.

Musujime looked at the iron rods, vibrating with a shrill noise, and felt a chill run up her spine.

There's no point in using shields if they're broken so easily…!!

"Don't look so unhappy." Komaba gave a low chuckle. "I have to fight against a monster like you. I think a handicap like this is more than warranted…"

Musujime spotted his face through the glassless windows of the abandoned car, which was rusted bright red. He was standing some ten meters in front of her in the narrow alley, sides blocked by concrete.

I'll finish you!!

Power gathered between her eyes. She nimbly swung the military-grade flashlight that could also be used as a police baton, then called out five of the corkscrews lying on the ground nearby and sent them all at once to the coordinates of Komaba's body.

However…

"…You won't hit me."

Fwoom!! came a loud roar of wind. That was not a sound that normally came out of a human body. Komaba had used overwhelming speed to zigzag left and right through the narrow alley, dodging all the attacks in Musujime's warping barrage.

Not only that…

"Allow me to repay you. I prefer cheap sake to fine wine, you see."

After dodging the wave of corkscrews, Komaba swung his leg up.

"Corkscrews do nothing for me."

Phyoo!! His leg lashed out like a whip. It connected precisely with one of the screws left hanging in midair and launched it right back at Musujime with incredible speed.

"…!!"

She didn't even have time to move, let alone use her powers. The corkscrew flew straight through the wreck in front of her, hurtling straight at her.

Musujime swung her head to the side at the last second, and a glancing blow left a thin, straight mark on her right cheek. At the sharp sound of wind whistling in her ears, the electrodes attached to her shoulders and back sent out incredibly strong signals to help her relax.

Ow… His movement abilities, they're beyond human…

Komaba's movements were different than a car's. Cars just moved forward.

Instead, his had the subtle adjustments that were the hallmark of living creatures.

"You've got Hard Taping under your clothes. That's how you're moving like that, isn't it?!"

"I should have guessed you'd realize it."

Komaba edged out of Musujime's range, footsteps so soft they were inaudible.

Even with the wreck between them, Komaba's leg strength could easily get him over the obstacle and within striking distance.

To stop that from happening, Musujime used irregular steps, moving forward and back in a random pattern to throw off his sense of distance.

At some point, the hunter had become the hunted.

"In my case… It protects the six ligaments in my legs, externally bolstering the muscles in each part of my legs that connect to my femurs, tibias, and fibulas. Additionally, there are metal plates in my shoes that prevent my feet from destroying themselves… Ultrasonic and elastic taping specialized for military use… It took a lot to obtain this."

In all likelihood, it wasn't just his legs—he probably had smaller pieces of taping all over his body, reinforcing it. You needed more than just your legs to keep your balance. Without the whole package, you'd lose your center of gravity when moving at a high speed and topple over.

"It's a powered suit, so to speak…but an independent version containing only its mobility features. If you meant to kill me, you should have brought heavy weapons meant for use against armor."

"Hmph. I don't remember Hard Taping being that convenient," Musujime said, putting a smile on her lips. A cold sweat had, however, formed a thin layer on her face.

Musujime could move objects through theoretical eleven-

dimensional vectors, ignoring the limitations of three-dimensional space, but there was an exception: her own body. Moving it would come at the cost of extreme psychological damage. She didn't know if she'd be able to pull it off properly, even with the support of the low-frequency vibration machines. In fact, she reckoned the chances were lower than fifty-fifty. If she wasn't careful, she'd buckle under the mental pressure, which could scramble her memories or lower her decision-making abilities, all while not being able to use her power well.

There was no easy out.

Even if she wanted to withdraw and pull herself together, she would need to create the opportunity for it herself.

As she thought about it, her mouth moved, trying to buy her time. "They don't make powered suits that big because their power systems are large or because the armor is so thick. All that bulk is dedicated to the systems that keep the pilot safe."

Musujime continued vigilantly observing her surroundings even as she spoke. The alley was narrow and straight. If Komaba charged, it would be virtually impossible for her to run away. She had a car wreck shielding her from the front, but she doubted that would be much of a hindrance on its own.

"Powered suits have far higher mobility than their wearers… They can even move over ten times faster than the average person. But the wearers are never more than human."

Musujime wouldn't be able to avoid or block Komaba's attacks. She continued her analysis, reaffirming her grip on her flashlight.

"Hmph… You refer to their physical protection."

"Trying to suddenly fully use that mobility while plowing straight forward would run the risk of tearing all the muscles in the wearer's body. That's why powered suits have so many safety mechanisms—to prevent that from happening. It's like the low-frequency vibration machines I'm using. They're always delivering electrical stimulation to your muscles, keeping you in a constant state of warm-up, shielding you from the potential damage that sudden and rapid movements would otherwise cause."

Ultimately, all she could do was use her Move Point power to put down Komaba before his attacks reached her.

"That Hard Taping of yours doesn't have any of those safeties," she asserted, twirling the military-grade flashlight.

Komaba's expression remained the same. "It's a failed product—it didn't even get to the testing phase with Anti-Skill. It's putting a considerable burden on your body, isn't it? That stuff is doing more damage to you than I ever could."

"Heh." Despite the obvious weakness being pointed out, Komaba still laughed. "I already came to terms with that. Waaay back, when I first swore to fight monsters like you as a Level Zero."

His gorilla-like body swelled to even larger proportions.

Most likely, he'd tuned his body to reduce the burden by as much as possible, delicately and logically, going a step further than pro athletes did. And that body was now transforming into one large weapon.

"Let's finish things quick—"

Damn it.

"—'cause I still have a lot left to do!!"

Just as I thought; he won't back down!!

Boom!!

Even while ravaging his own body, Komaba charged toward Musujime at a speed that could keep pace with trains.

"!!" Musujime automatically took a step back, then twirled her military-grade flashlight. She crashed a giant, rusted signboard into Komaba's path.

But at the moment her command was executed, Komaba was no longer there. He kept on running, ever forward, cracking the asphalt beneath him as he raced toward her like a rocket.

Ugh… He's so fast I don't have time to designate coordinates!! Musujime thought, her mouth turning dry.

A thunderous *bang* ripped through the alley.

Komaba's body had leaped up swiftly, then landed on the roof of the abandoned car Musujime was using as a shield. The rusting red-metal plate cracked and gave way as his legs sank deeply into the vehicle. He ignored it, swinging a shoe up into the air—so that he could crush his opponent hiding behind the wreck with a blow from above.

She was only a single step away from falling into Komaba's clutches.

"Ah, aaaaah!!"

Feeling a terrible chill, Musujime backed away.

At this point, she gave up on attacking. For now, she placed a metal dumpster from nearby in front of her. She tried to use the

thick metal box, the size of multiple small rooms put together, to stop Komaba's assault.

However…

"Too thin…"

Musujime then heard a slightly amused voice come from the other side of the supposedly thick wall.

"…A thin *film* like that cannot stop me."

Musujime simply watched as the dumpster expanded explosively, starting from the middle.

Komaba had used his legs, bolstered by Hard Taping, to kick straight into it from the other side like a steel pile driver.

Did Musujime's ears catch the booming that whipped up right after?

Zha-bam!! The bottoms of Komaba's feet plunged through the dumpster like a garbage truck, crushing the thick metal box in a single attack, tearing it completely apart while scattering its contents everywhere.

Clank, clank. The awful noise of metal hitting the ground echoed in the alleyway.

The blasted remains were scattered over an area of ten meters in front of Komaba. It looked almost like a giant dragon had projectile vomited all over.

He couldn't even discern a corpse. Just a lot of dark-red splatters mixed in with the rotting trash. Perhaps that purple was her organs. Her military-grade flashlight was there as well. It was battered and gummed up with a bright-red fluid.

"Hmph…"

Even upon seeing what was left behind, with matted hairs and blood sticking to the unidentifiable mass, Komaba's face remained stoic.

Then, in a tone that still sounded like a printer droning on, he said, "What a shame. It ended before I had to bring my *real weapon* out…"

4

Accelerator silenced the Skill-Out group in ten minutes, as he said he would.

He hadn't been using his ability the whole time, though.

In the first moment, he'd manipulated the atmosphere to produce a gust of wind traveling at over fifty meters per second, sending all the enemies toppling to the ground. Then, with the group's movements thrown into chaos, he'd cut his ability and put bullets into them. Whenever one looked like they were going to counterattack, he preemptively created another blast of wind, disabling them before silencing them with a bullet. He repeated it over and over.

It was an easy win, with ten whole minutes allocated for it. On top of that, his total ability-usage time hadn't even reached thirty seconds yet.

His fight against the Hound Dogs led by Amata Kihara had shown him how much of a weakness his electrode's battery was. Accelerator had needed to learn how to conserve it.

"Let's see. Wonder where this Ritoku Komaba I've heard so much about is. Don't tell me he happened to be mixed in with *these* punks."

Accelerator put his hand to his neck and turned off the electrode. After looking around and spotting no more enemies, he continued down the alleyway.

He'd planned to mow anything and everything down with gale-force winds, but after walking merely a hundred meters farther, he saw rusted metal trash starting to dot the scenery again, with the multicolored vinyl sheets blocking out the blue skies.

Abruptly, Accelerator stopped moving, shifting his weight on his crutch.

Musujime's explosions, which had been going off in the distance for some time, finally stopped.

"Great. Her quota's filled already? Can't believe I'm doing overtime by myself," he murmured, shaking his head with a sigh.

"In that case," came an abrupt voice, "why don't I let you take a break?"

A little farther down the narrow alley was what seemed to be an active construction site. It was little more than an assembly of girders, looking like a jungle gym, and on one of its middle floors—the fourth floor—stood a large, gorilla-like man.

When the man spoke, all that came out was a flat voice that sounded like the whispering paper slipping out of a printer. "Accelerator… You're quite the celebrity… But to think you'd

become the General Board's lapdog and let them deploy you on such a trivial crackdown operation…"

"That must make you Ritoku Komaba," said Accelerator, looking up at the steel frame. "Might as well ask. Why'd you put this plan together?"

"You ask Skill-Out's reasons for destroying espers… The answer's not all that interesting."

"Pff. The way you talk… Sounds like you're not only planning on wrecking the city but attacking people indiscriminately."

"It's not indiscriminate… We *do* have enough decency to pick and choose our targets, you know…"

"You seem pretty relaxed. Do you know the kind of situation you're in?"

"Earlier…there was a woman who said something similar," Komaba noted, taking something tucked under his pants belt before casually tossing it down from the framework.

It was a military-grade flashlight, covered in blood.

With a loud *clack-clack-clack*, it struck several of the beams on the lower floors, then finally fell to the asphalt, shattering both its protective glass and the electric bulb inside.

"I killed her."

"…" The simply spoken phrase made Accelerator go quiet for a moment.

Instead, it was Komaba who frowned. "You've gone soft… Nothing like the stories I've heard… You've really changed, then. Those living in the shadows would *normally* never hesitate here… She stood in the way, and so now there is another person dead. Worrying over what to do with her corpse is what a third-rate operator would do."

"You don't say?" murmured Accelerator, giving a slight grin. "But did you know this? Any shithead who stands in my way—*normally*, they turn into mincemeat."

Grinning, Accelerator put his hand on the switch of the electrode around his neck.

"Heh…" Komaba breathed out, seemingly without meaning to. "If you're going to show off…you might as well have gotten ready beforehand…"

"Do you even know who you're talking to? I'm Academy City's strongest Level Five."

"And confronting monsters like you is Skill-Out's way of life."

Komaba used his own index finger to tap at his neck.

“That electrode… It’s sending and receiving some kind of electronic signal, isn’t it?”

Accelerator cursed and flicked the electrode’s switch.

He executed a vector change on his leg strength. Smashing the asphalt at his feet, in a breath he soared with the force of a rocket toward the fourth floor, where Komaba stood.

But Komaba was faster.

He took out something that looked like a spray can from his inside pocket and launched it with a whiplike kick. The kick was far more forceful than any normal man seemed capable of, and it shredded the can, scattering its contents into the air.

They glittered, even in the dimly lit back alley: thin metallic strips, each piece the size of a stick of mechanical-pencil graphite. All of them had two thin wings, making the strips look like incredibly small helicopter rotors.

Hundreds of metallic strips whirled slowly like bamboo copters, hovering in midair.

“…Chaff Seed, a weapon that jams electric signals. They use a micro-motor and work off the concept of how Dipterocarpaceae seeds native to southeast Asia float in the air,” Komaba explained, his face still stoic. “I originally got it to disrupt radio waves…to get rid of those bratty Judgment kids.”

“…!!” With a jolt, Accelerator’s upward momentum abruptly dropped.

Without reaching the fourth floor where Komaba stood, Accelerator plunged onto the steel frame of the third floor below.

And then, as though the minimum reflection he always had active was gone as well, a shooting pain spread through Accelerator’s back.

“Gh…ah?!” he grunted in spite of himself. Unfortunately, he had no time to writhe in pain.

“I saw something similar…a little while ago.”

Accelerator looked up with a start at the dispassionate voice he heard from above.

“The attacker using teleportation had similar machines on her shoulders… I’m sure the systems are different, and I don’t know why you would need to equip them… But things like that are usually designed to assist your ability, correct?”

A shadow fell over Accelerator.

Komaba had descended from the fourth floor, his legs held together, aiming for Accelerator's gut.

If he took an attack like that, his internal organs would rupture.

He still held his gun, but a bullet wouldn't stop the giant plummeting toward him.

"Bastard!!"

Giving up on offense, Accelerator drew his limbs in close and rolled backward like a ball across the narrow steel beam.

Komaba's feet slammed down into the spot Accelerator was in just a moment before with a dull metallic echo. *Gonnng!!*

Accelerator stopped his roll, then used one hand to raise up his gun and open fire. But his adversary dodged two or three bullets just by swinging his upper body out of the way. Komaba wasn't looking at the bullets themselves, but simply moving to avoid wherever the muzzle aimed.

Spent casings fell to the ground far below, smelling like fireworks.

"…How crude." Komaba's smile widened. "If your ability was working properly, you wouldn't need to rely on a gun…nor avoid my attack at all."

This piece of shit. In that case, I'll just blow a hole right through your torso! That'll stop you!!

Accelerator clenched his teeth and tried to readjust his aim.

"Hmph… Careful you don't get thrown off," Komaba said as he dropped his legs straight down, causing the steel framework on the third floor to crack and break like tree branches.

…?! This leg strength is…!!

This wasn't an attack someone unarmed could pull off, and Komaba was a Level Zero. That must have meant he was using some kind of gear to boost him.

"…Guh!!"

With the narrow, already unstable foothold tipping diagonally, Accelerator's aim veered far away from Komaba. And before he could swing it back on target, Komaba's enormous frame dove toward Accelerator.

Still can't…use my power?!

The countless Chaff Seeds glittering at the corners of his eyes were still floating in midair, spinning like bamboo copters. They completely saturated the area, so just batting a few away wouldn't get him out of this situation.

He cursed as the man named Ritoku Komaba approached.

Fwoom!!

The wind howled.

Komaba had crossed several meters in the blink of an eye, even with unsteady footing.

And then—

Using his unyielding legs, he attacked with a kick that could crush Accelerator flat.

"…!!" Accelerator immediately twisted, but the kick struck his gun, sending it tumbling below. Komaba must have been after the weapon the entire time. Accelerator couldn't have reacted to that speed.

"…Paint the walls red."

And this time, Komaba pulled his own gun from his pants belt. Two fat magazines were stuck into the gun in front of the trigger. A large gun with an odd shape.

Accelerator wouldn't be able to dodge something like this just by swinging his head to the side.

Damn it!!

Making up his mind, Accelerator sent himself into a sideways roll, falling from the steel beam.

Next was the second floor.

But since he'd dived without looking below him, he messed up the timing of his landing and crashed into the beams without properly breaking his fall. Because of that, he fell down another floor with a dull *bang!*

He'd gotten cushioned once during the drop, but he'd still dropped from the third floor all the way to the ground. The pain was far too terrible for him to grit his teeth and bear it. In fact, it hit Accelerator all the harder because he'd never trained himself physically, as he always relied on his ability.

"Graaaaah!!" screamed Accelerator, holding his shoulder.

Komaba ignored his cry and pulled the trigger.

Accelerator managed to somehow avoid the bullets by rolling across the grimy ground.

The power of the bullets Komaba had fired was insane. They penetrated steel beams in the way, making the thick metal explode from within. Transformed into so many tiny fragments, the shrapnel poured down on Accelerator from above. He rolled evasively again, but they still sliced his skin up.

"Tsk!!"

Searching for something, Accelerator's eyes darted across the ground.

…! There it is!!

Then he grabbed the gun Komaba's kick had sent hurtling from above.

He rolled faceup, took aim at the steel framework above, and pulled the trigger.

Bang!! came the sharp discharge.

But Komaba wasn't there. The bullet, shooting through empty space, struck the edge of one of the vinyl sheets blotting out the sky. It fluttered wildly into the air. He must have blown off whatever was holding it down.

"…Checkmate…"

He heard the monotone voice that only formed words mechanically from diagonally above him, in his blind spot. Komaba had evidently already moved to another beam.

"I'll give you one last choice… Where do you want the killing shot to be?"

"…A smart weapon, huh?" Accelerator grumbled bitterly, though he wouldn't be able to move his own gun in this situation.

Komaba's voice rang from outside his vision. "This smart weapon of mine uses infrared waves…to accurately measure a target's composition, density, hardness, and distance… Then it chooses the optimal charge of gunpowder for the target's destruction… The synthetic resin hardens, instantly forming a bullet. It can penetrate pure steel—or lodge a round in a block of tofu. If you have a preferred way to die, tell me quickly… I'm confident I can create most kinds of corpses with manual control…"

"How about that?" Accelerator murmured.

If he fell here, Komaba would ruin communication lines by exploiting a hole in the code orange alert, then take advantage of the chaos to launch indiscriminate attacks on all espers in the vicinity. But that would yield no real results. Skill-Out's strength, in the end, would not be enough to take over all of Academy City.

That was why their violence would stray far from their original targets, changing instead to appropriate "enemies" that even *they* could defeat.

Toward "enemies" that were easier to handle, instead of the

ones they truly despised: the Level Fives and the General Board.

The skin on Accelerator's face crawled.

The law of dark alleys, built not on good and evil but on strength and weakness. Being presented with that once again made Accelerator's insides churn in pain. It was all too familiar to him; he wanted to vomit. And in order to fight against *this*, he had parted ways with the world of light and jumped headfirst into Group.

Accelerator gritted his teeth.

…Was this how he planned to lead Skill-Out?

Your habit of being cautious when other people say nice things to you is one you want to keep, I think. Especially if you know how much what you're protecting is worth.

…Was this how he planned to rejoice in crimes done for his benefit?

…It may not look pretty, but all you can do is pay it back one coin at a time. Eventually, your efforts will open the way for you. If anything, unlike me, you have the strength. There are plenty of ways for you to repay it all at once.

…Was this how he planned to bring misfortune to innocent people, one by one?

I'm back, says Misaka says Misaka, giving the proper greeting… Ow! Why do you keep karate chopping me like that?! cries Misaka cries Misaka in an exaggerated fashion, cradling her head!!

Was he going to utterly undermine the happiness of others just so he could be satisfied and blow off some steam?

"Get the hell out of here with that garbage."

With those words as a signal, bullets leaped from the muzzles of two guns.

5

And so, the battle was decided.

The results were clearer than fire. Accelerator's ability was blocked by the metallic Chaff Seeds scattered through the air, and his lifeline, his gun, was pointed in an entirely different direction from his target, Komaba.

On top of that, Ritoku Komaba had been pointing his smart

weapon's muzzle right at him from a blind spot. A perfect checkmate, in chess terms. In their current positions, Accelerator's attack would not reach, and the enemy's would take his life without question.

One bullet ripped into soft flesh.

The smart weapon's projectile tore through his side with a crunch. Even the remnants of clothing that peeled off were covered in blood, before entering gravity's hold, not even permitted to float, and falling to the ground like raindrops.

A moment later, a searing pain ran through him.

But he couldn't even put a hand to his wound.

"Why…?" he murmured naturally.

The taste of blood spread through his mouth, and eventually, the red fluid began to seep from the edges of his lips.

"…Why has your reflection come back?"

Looking at Komaba, who was coughing up blood while still up on his vantage point atop the steel framework, Accelerator, lying flat on the dirty ground, smiled thinly.

"What are you, an idiot?"

His smile was thin, ultimately thin, exceedingly thin—the very definition of the word.

It was like someone had sliced open his face with a razor blade. A smile hungry for blood.

"Chaff jams signals by scattering fragments of metal in the air. It's pretty simple to fix. *I just had to move the drifting metal strips. By giving it ventilation, for example.*"

"…That… Wait…"

Komaba looked overhead.

One of the colorful vinyl sheets they'd strung up between buildings to shield them from satellite surveillance had flapped completely upward—because of Accelerator's bullet having blown off the clasp.

Because of the sudden draft of wind that had blown in, the Chaff Seed formation ended up thinning out. The winglike pieces were able to stay in place to some degree, but they weren't advanced enough to resist such a strong gust of wind. What had once been a tight, uniform distribution of chaff now had a gaping hole.

"Anyway."

Bam!! came the sound of something hitting the ground.

Accelerator, lying faceup, must have transformed vectors somehow or other—*because he rose up like a doorframe swinging open*.

“For a Level Zero, you got guts pickin’ a fight with a Level Five! Show me that again, eh?!”

“…Damn!!”

Komaba sluggishly reached for his inside pocket. Special gun, unrelenting leg strength—it didn’t matter what it was. With Accelerator’s vector-transforming abilities back in play, Komaba had no chance of winning, no matter what he tried.

Which meant he was probably trying to spread some more Chaff Seed around, then use the chance to withdraw and regroup.

“Too slow, idiot!!”

Accelerator kicked a pebble by his feet.

That was all he did.

Nevertheless, the vector-transformed pebble traveled as fast as a bullet and shot straight through Komaba’s palm. *Crunch!!* came the noise, finally, a moment after his hand’s flesh had burst.

“Gaaahhhhhhh?!”

Komaba dropped the container of Chaff Seed and keeled over, clutching at his ruined wrist. But when he did, he lost his balance. Still hunched over, he began to fall from the third story of the steel framework.

It would take more than that to kill Komaba. He had the leg strength to bend steel beams. As long as he could regain his balance, it would be simple to make a gentle landing on the ground.

But that was exactly why Accelerator showed no mercy.

“Ha-ha! Let me have some more fun!!”

Boom!! Transforming his own leg-strength vector, Accelerator shot forward like a rocket. Then he grabbed Komaba’s side just as he was about to land and slammed the large man as hard as he could into the nearest steel beam.

The attack had even involved Accelerator transforming Komaba’s descent vector, redirecting it to send him straight ahead.

The impacted thick steel beam warped unnaturally with a *kreee!!* Komaba’s huge frame twitched and trembled. The

contents of his pocket, including his phone and spare Chaff canisters, scattered all over the ground.

“Gh…rgh…?!”

Komaba coughed up blood, but right as it was about to hit Accelerator’s face, it splashed out to the sides, not a single drop of it sticking to him.

Even that, he rejected.

“And that’s checkmate. Bet you can’t even feel your lower body anymore.”

“Urgh…”

“I’ll give you props for not letting go of your smart weapon during all that. If you still want to have at me, then go for it. Watching that kind of suicidal behavior is amusing all its own.”

As Accelerator spoke, he still grasped his target’s side, dangling it, the edges of his lips turning up.

“Level Zeroes may be pretty weak, but that doesn’t make a person evil.”

So that he could relish the act of sullying even this man’s final moments.

“You guys only get treated like pains in the ass because Skill Out and other people like you are making fools of yourselves. Gaining rights? Securing safety? You morons. You never noticed how your own actions tightened the noose around your neck?”

“…Heh.”

Despite his teeth being dyed completely red, Komaba laughed.

“Let me…ask you something.”

He laughed in a voice that sounded like he was coughing up printer paper.

“What if there were rotten espers who recently picked up the fad…of attacking harmless Level Zeroes, as you call them… without reason… What would you do?”

Accelerator’s brow furrowed, unamused.

“Issues of character are never factored into one’s merits as an esper… Some of them are horrid creatures, beings who want nothing but to gloat and wield their immense power on the weak… I’ve seen several, dozens, of espers for whom *that* is their only talent…”

Komaba wasn’t even begging for his life; he was just looking Accelerator dead in the eyes as he spoke.

Skill-Out.

The original reason for their formation was to protect people from powerful espers.

"Let's say, for instance…that it became a fad for people like them to attack Level Zeroes outside Skill-Out's ranks just to one-up one another… What would you do?"

Something on the ground glowed.

It was his phone; he must have dropped it when Accelerator had slammed him into the steel beam. The flip phone had opened up from the impact of its landing, and the screen had blinked on, coming out of standby mode.

On the home screen was a low-resolution photograph.

It showed a small girl, about elementary school age, and Ritoku Komaba, standing by her with an uncomfortable look.

The very ideas of *back-alley* and *Skill-Out* had no place in that peaceful scene.

Or perhaps it was something Komaba had endeavored to cut himself off from.

This bastard…

The reorganization of Skill-Out.

The goal of the incident—and its results.

That photo Komaba carried with him.

"I knew if I kept acting out, things would eventually end up like this, but…"

Accelerator looked up again at the voice.

"…In the end, you showed me something great. That will have to be enough…"

Komaba watched Accelerator's expression, then smiled, his mouth covered with blood.

What had Komaba just gained from the change in the Level Five's face?

With sluggish motions, Komaba placed the muzzle of his gun right up between Accelerator's eyes.

"It seems…that you and I…*are in a similar position.*"

There was no hesitation in Komaba's face.

"A souvenir. Carve this pathetic sight into your heart."

Bang!! A gunshot rang out.

Accelerator's reflection made no exceptions. The bullet bounced back, plunging into the smart weapon's barrel, shattering the entire metal weapon to pieces from within, then

continuing on its straight trajectory toward Komaba's face. And then his face was gone. Something hit the ground with a graphic *splurtch*. The torn-off pieces looked like a rice bowl dish without the edges. A crude container sprouting skin and hair, made only to hold in a brain.

Accelerator witnessed it from point-blank range.

From a position closer than anyone else.

"…"

He let go.

The body fell to the ground, its limbs bending awkwardly until the whole thing collapsed. It wouldn't be saying anything more. There would no longer be any resistance from this man who had stood in his way as such a troublesome enemy.

That marked the end of his job.

His first mission had ended smoothly.

6

"*Excellent work*," said Mitsuki Unabara over the phone. *"Transporting the corpse, destroying the evidence—we'll collect the spent casings and bloodstains. I'll also send the black collection vehicle to give you a ride back."*

"Don't bother," said Accelerator shortly, gripping the phone. "I'll get back on my own. Don't need any favors from you bastards."

"Feel free, but please avoid running into anyone you know. It's important for us to blend in; standing out will only cause problems. It would be against the interests of everyone, not just us."

"Quit saying everything like you're better than me. I'll kill you," Accelerator threatened offhandedly before hanging up.

…Chaff, eh? I'll need a way to counteract artificial EM interference. Maybe I could carry around bombs or something that would blow away anything in the air that shouldn't be there?

Internally considering what he'd have to do in the future, he looked at the filthy ground one more time.

There lay Ritoku Komaba's corpse, the upper-half portion of his face gone. And the military-grade flashlight, which had been rendered unusable from the impact of its fall.

Accelerator snorted, unamused. "I know you're alive, Awaki Musujime," he declared.

He heard the clacking of footsteps from deeper into the alleyway.

“I watched part of the show through a building window… When did you notice me?”

“Hmph. It was completely obvious.”

It had been right after he’d dropped himself to the second floor of the steel framework to avoid Komaba’s gunfire.

Once Accelerator had landed on the ground, he’d picked up his gun, which had fallen earlier, and begun his counterattack. There was just one thing that was strange. Only a moment of inspection was necessary to realize it had simply been too convenient. The moment he fell down, his gun had been right next to him, within arm’s reach, something that should have been impossible in any other circumstance. Musujime had used her Move Point ability to bring it close to him ahead of time.

“You’re such a damn pain…”

“Oh? Is that how you talk to someone who just saved your life?”

“…You *want* me to kill you or something?”

“I should say the same to you.”

Musujime offered a thin smile, then brought her face close enough that he could feel her breath.

Her eyelids were opened wide as dinner plates.

“Are you forgetting something? The only reason I’m in a place like this to begin with is because *you* stuck your nose in places it didn’t belong that day. If not for you, I would have gone back into hiding, regrouped, and organized arms and personnel again. And then I might have been able to attack the detention facility and rescue my comrades.” Musujime spoke slowly, a thin smile splitting straight across her face. “Heh. Heh-heh. If you use that power to help me and contribute to Group, and that leads to the freedom of my comrades, then sure, I’ll forgive you. But if you hold me back, *in any way*, you’re dead. Try not to undercut your own worth any more than you already have. Otherwise, I’ll impale your whole body with corkscrews.”

“You sure know how to bark, woman,” answered Accelerator like she’d said something ridiculous, cracking his neck. “I should ask *you* if you really understand this. You’re nothing more than luggage I demolished in a single attack, so don’t get cocky. Get *that* through that malfunctioning brain of yours. If you waste even a *second* of my life, I’ll use you to paint the

alley.”

“…”

“…”

The two glared at each other for a short time, but then a car horn went off several times in quick succession. The black collection vehicle must have reached the entrance of the alley.

“What a waste of time,” Accelerator spat.

“You got that right.” Musujime nodded smoothly, backing off.

This wasn’t the right moment.

“How’d you trick Komaba?”

“It was actually pretty easy. The sheer power of his kick wouldn’t have left behind a corpse to begin with. I used a dumpster as a shield. It was from the back of a restaurant. They used it to discard pig bones and organs and stuff.

“I did throw up somewhere in the middle, though, since I had to move my own body with Move Point,” she added.

She told him that to add to the detail, she’d pulled out some of her own hair and wrapped it around the flashlight. She’d probably used Move Point to cut the hair, too. Despite being able to pull off such delicate handiwork, she wasn’t able to move her own body very easily.

“…A dumpster with viscera in it just *happened* to be nearby? You’ve got the devil’s luck.”

“Yes. If I’d been unlucky, I would’ve used a different shield. Like a Skill-Out member. I consider myself fortunate that I didn’t have to resort to that.” Musujime picked up her military-grade flashlight from next to the corpse. “You did a good job breaking him,” she said, sounding bored. “Unabara got in touch with you, right? What did he say?”

“To go back on the dump truck. That was what the car horns were, right?”

“Yes. My collection point was a little far away, huh?”

“You stay here and take the truck instead of me. I’ll get back on my own.”

Musujime frowned dubiously at that. “Oh. Where might you be stopping by? It’s a little early for lunch, I think.”

“That candy-ass man asked the same thing. It’s nothing important.”

Accelerator held another phone in his hands.

A plastic model, one that was no longer covered in blood.

On the home screen was the picture of a little girl smiling.

He pressed a few buttons and found several phone numbers.

They were tagged as LEVEL ZEROES IN DANGER OF ATTACK.

Accelerator ran his eyes down the list.

As he did, he relaxed and said, “Just overtime. Unpaid overtime.”

CHAPTER 3

The English Puritan Church's Women's Dorm
Russian Roulette.

1

London's morning came nine hours after Academy City's.

With birds chirping and the soft sunlight shining down, Kaori Kanzaki stood, stupefied, in the changing room of the women's dormitory.

In front of her was the latest in fully automatic washing machines made in Academy City.

"This is why I told you not to... Don't believe the advertising saying you can put a whole futon in!"

It had finally started getting colder out recently, so in addition to her usual T-shirt and one-legged jeans, Kanzaki wore a jacket that reached her navel. Similar to her jeans, though, the jacket's right sleeve had been removed, exposing her arm all the way up to the shoulder.

"After all, this washing machine already operates on complicated theories..."

Kanzaki heard a *clatter*. Her Seven Heavens Sword, which she'd stood against the wall, had fallen over, but even that didn't distract her.

She was assigned to clothes-washing duty on this day, October 3. Agnes Sanctis, however, had said something about the machine being able to wash futon bedding, too, after which she'd rolled up her thick bedding like sushi and shoved it into the washing machine. That was how it all started.

Currently, the precision appliance, complete with artificial intelligence, was bouncing from side to side, emitting low, anxiety-inducing groans, as though it were going to start spurting out black smoke at any moment.

"..."

The culprit who had caused this whole mess, Agnes, seemed to be at a loss herself; her face had gone white, and she was nearly tearing up. Her back was up against the wall of the

changing room, probably to get as far away from the machine as possible. She was shaking nearly as hard as the machine was, which was practically hard enough to make whipped cream. As such, Kanzaki couldn't find it in her to blame the girl.

And that was when Orsola Aquinas arrived.

Veiled from head to toe in an all-black habit save for her face, the very well-endowed nun smiled at them and called, "It's time for breakfast!"

"Where did you come from?! Please, be a little more conscious of timing!!"

"Oh! But we always have breakfast at this time. In fact, I would say the washing machine is what's irregular today."

Kanzaki grunted and fell silent. She had to admit Orsola was right, now that the nun had pointed it out.

Meanwhile, Agnes took advantage of Kanzaki's lapse in attention to race out of the changing room singing "I-i-i-it's time for breakfast! Breakfast, breakfaaast!"

Kanzaki breathed a sigh, scratching the base of her black ponytail. After retrieving the katana that had fallen to the floor, she headed for the dining hall. Next to her, Orsola actually seemed a little sleepy; despite walking down the hallway with a smile, she would sway to the left or right from time to time.

"By the way, Miss Kanzaki?" Orsola asked.

"Yes?"

"What was in the package addressed to you that arrived the other day? If I recall, it was from Mr. Tsuchimikado in Japan."

Kanzaki's shoulders gave a shocked start. Her index finger and thumb twirling into her bangs, she said, "Uh… Nothing, nothing much. Nothing special to report."

"Oh, is that right? It had the words *Fallen-Angel Maid Costume* written in big letters on the label, and everyone was treating it with trepidation. It was nothing to worry about, then?"

"N-nope!! Nothing to worry about!!" cried Kanzaki, her neck swinging side to side at an alarming rate.

"By the way," continued Orsola, perhaps not catching on to Kanzaki's behavior, or maybe her train of thought just veering back on course, "does that katana not get in the way with its prodigious length?"

"A-actually, the extra weight makes it a little easier for me to wield."

“Oh, I see. I had thought the length held religious meaning.”

“I mean, it has a meaning in Japanese mythology, too, of course, but…,” Kanzaki said as she walked with her down the hallway, sighing with relief now that the conversation had finally gone in another direction. “The only reason there are so many religious katana is because the ruling class in Japan valued katana and swords so highly. If they’d valued axes more, there would be more axes. Some regions also respect fish or vegetables, while still others honor knives or pots. What matters is what the people of the area considered to be most important.”

Her finger stroked the Seven Heavens Sword’s hilt.

“In the case of Shinto, people generally believe in the Myriad Kami theory, which states that *kami*, the essence of divinity, resides in all things, and that every object has the potential to become a tool for sorcery, no matter what the object is. The Amakusa-Style Crossist Church’s frequently used tactic of utilizing everyday items to weave spells is one application of that theory. Of course, different *kami* reside in different objects, so you can’t use a single item to cast any spell you want.”

Orsola gave a big yawn. “I am just so sleepy today!”

“!! You were the one who asked me, and now it’s going in one ear and out the other!” cried Kanzaki, baffled, but Orsola just rubbed under her eyes and went straight for the dining hall.

Left behind, Kanzaki let her shoulders hang and trudged in after her.

The inside was large. There was a time when this space served around seventy people, but the former Agnes unit and its 250 or so members had suddenly been added to their ranks. The room was still able to host their numbers, which gave a good idea as to how much space was left over.

Necessarius didn’t have a set time for its activities, so the nuns ate their meals at various hours. This meant the dining hall was never normally filled to capacity. Normally.

“…We only have a full house on the days Orsola is in charge of cooking duty. It feels…extremely calculated on the part of the diners.” Kanzaki sighed as she arrived at the table.

Near her sat Agnes, Orsola, Lucia, and Angeline. Judging by how the stern-eyed Lucia was pulling on the cheeks of the smaller, round-shouldered Angeline, Kanzaki wearily guessed that the latter had been secretly swiping food before mealtime

again.

“I shaid I was juft trying to afk Fifter Orfola her fecret!”

“What secret? Don’t be absurd.”

“You might say that, but even I wanna know how to make my boobs bigger!”

Kanzaki put her hands to her head. What were they even talking about?

In the meantime, Lucia and Angeline continued their loud argument.

“Sister Angeline. Nuns have no need for cleavage. What would you even do with the ability to entice strangers—you, a nun, who is supposed to be cut off from worldly desires? In fact, you could say Sister Orsola and I are more lacking than you in that respect.”

“What the—?! Did you just casually brag about having huge breasts?! Why wouldn’t I rebel against such a coldhearted line in the sand! Anyway, Sister Lucia, you were so worried when you came to me and said *I thought I’d stopped growing, but lately I feel like I’ve been getting bigger. It feels like it’s straining, and it hurts a little…* So how could *you* ever understand my feel —*aghu*?!”

Lucia, red in the face, pushed Angeline’s blond, braided head onto the table before she could finish. Every time they struggled, the knives and forks on the table clattered.

Next to them, Kanzaki had seen and heard quite enough. She decided to warn them. “Angeline—and you too, Lucia. It’s time for grace, so stop flailing around like that.”

But Angeline wasn’t in the mood to listen to anyone. Casting a glance somewhat below Kanzaki’s face, she cried out, “The secret is Japanese food!!”

“Would you please give this profane topic a rest already, Sister Angeline?! Kaori Kanzaki, you too. If you are a nun, then you should rethink such slovenly attire!!”

“I… I’m not exactly trying to show off, you know!!” Kanzaki nearly shouted in spite of herself, but the other nuns who watched in a modest way (in both body and mind) looked away from her or tsked softly to themselves.

Even with the strange unfriendliness tainting the air, they offered their pre-meal prayer and began eating breakfast.

The meal system in the women’s dormitory could hardly be called well organized. First, they’d take all the cards submitted

by those who would be eating breakfast the next day, then get an enormous pot that could have been a huge heated bath and threw in all the ingredients everyone requested, creating one type of meal every time.

But Orsola was quite skillful in this regard, preparing several different meals for a single breakfast. She couldn't prepare breakfast for hundreds of people by herself, of course, so she borrowed the help of a dozen or so other nuns. She knew many different recipes, and she was very good at accurately describing them to others.

So while Kanzaki had white rice and miso soup in front of her, Agnes and Lucia had pasta, and Angeline had a French home-cooked meal.

After putting her hands together and murmuring "Amen," Kanzaki picked up her chopsticks and said, "Still, I wonder what will happen with that washing machine. It took the color out of my yukata obi, and it malfunctioned quite easily today. Don't tell me Academy City sent us the machine so they could remove the Soul Arm effects from our clothing…"

"H-ha-ha-ha. Why don't you focus on the rice for now? Look, see?" said Agnes, changing the topic with an awfully dry laugh.

Meanwhile, as for the tall Lucia and the round-shouldered Angeline…

"Er, is that all you need until lunch, Sister Lucia? The pasta is only filling half your plate."

"Sister Angeline, you simply have far too much to eat. What is going on with that dish of yours? A nun's breakfast requires no chocolate drinks nor ice cream for dessert. If you always take care to eat in moderation and give thanks for your food with discipline and faith, a single plate's worth of pasta should fill you. In fact, you could say I have been blessed far more than I should be."

"Really… Well, if you don't want it, then I'll eat it for you."

"?! Get your fork out of my pasta, Sister Angeline!!"

Kanzaki sighed at the big-small pair of nuns wrestling over their meal as she skillfully removed her pan-fried fish's skin from its bones. For all their previous arguing about chests or whatever, Kanzaki would have never guessed she'd be seeing something like this from people who were, just a few weeks ago, raging about killing all heretics.

Does human worth really change that much based on your

perspective…?

Feeling strangely subdued, Kanzaki finished removing all the fish bones and then popped open a small jar and took out one of the *umeboshi* within. The pickled Japanese apricot was closer to beige than red, possibly because food coloring hadn't been added.

Then.

She looked up abruptly to find Lucia and Angeline staring wide-eyed at her.

"What…what is it?" she said, drawing back.

The two nuns whispered to each other.

"(…Sister Angeline. The Asian woman is about to eat something strange, something I've never seen before. Could that be the rumored *ooh-may-boh-shee* from the land of the samurai?)"

"(…She probably needs it for an Amakusa spell. Don't they have this thing called the rising sun bento over there? I hear it's supposed to resemble their national flag.)"

"(…Perhaps there is some religious meaning attached to the act of eating the national flag. This may be a good chance for us to learn the origins of Amakusa spells, since they followed a unique direction in their development.)"

While worrying about whether she should correct the strange misinterpretation, Kanzaki felt Agnes tap her on the shoulder.

Kanzaki looked over and saw Agnes's eyes glued to her *umeboshi*.

"What does that taste like? Can you share one?"

"I, er, I don't mind, but… Wait, on your *pasta*?!"

As Kanzaki looked on blankly, Agnes had already dropped the *umeboshi* right into the white sauce covering her cream-colored noodles and mixed it in, mashing it into a paste with her fork. The pasta's color steadily changed to a light pink.

Kanzaki blanched as she watched, but when Agnes twirled some pasta and put it in her mouth, her expression softened, making it look like it was good, surprisingly.

"*Hompf.* This is a new taste. And it's quite refreshing."

"Seriously?!" "Truly?!" Lucia and Angeline both flared up with an odd excitement. The most surprised, however, was Kanzaki. When it came to seasonings added to pasta to make it more Japanese, most thought of soy sauce or *mentaiko*, the roe

of a pollock served with spices. Was mixing *umeboshi* with creamy sauce really that good?

Incidentally, Orsola, the only one who hadn't jumped at the opportunity, had had her head bent to the side for a while now with an extremely happy expression. She murmured "Hee-hee. I wonder how many meters of pasta there are here…" and twirled her fork around endlessly in empty space. She must have been asleep. Kanzaki couldn't help but wonder about how her own rice tasted so good when the cook had been…like that.

Setting that aside…

"K-Kanzaki! Here, here! Me too!! Please! I want to eat the *ooh-may-boh-shee*, too!!" called out Angeline, leaning over the table. Her main dish was a soft-looking croissant. Kanzaki nearly wondered aloud where she planned to put the *umeboshi*, but then she had a thought.

No, I cannot let myself be shackled to the preconception that umeboshi *must be eaten with rice. I must have an open mind like Agnes. First, I'll introduce them to the taste of* umeboshi *and use that as a jumping-off point to show them true Japanese cooking. There should be no problem with that.*

"O-okay. Well, I have enough, so if you want to try one…"

It was a reserved affirmation, but these *umeboshi* were actually ones that Kanzaki, unsatisfied with store-bought products, had made herself, having borrowed the rooftop to sun-dry them. Worried about them getting enough sunlight in the ever-changing London weather, she'd guarded them with a plastic greenhouse; the results were satisfactory end-products of a trial-and-error phase that saw her going back and forth between "Just use magic to create light" and "No, the sunlight would have no meaning, then." At this moment, with the pickled fruits about to be approved and accepted by her peers, Kanzaki was actually delighted on the inside. But she played the part of the ideal traditional Japanese woman and hid all those emotions behind a mask of still calmness.

Kanzaki used her chopsticks to take one out of the jar, setting it on a small plate. Angeline gave a whoop and took it.

Kanzaki watched Angeline's expression, waiting to see what kind of reaction she'd get.

"*Ooh-may-boh-shee* is eaten with the main dish, right? I just can't help myself with fruit stuff like jam and marmalade."

What? Kanzaki's eyes shrank to pinpoints. Was Angeline

misunderstanding something really important?

Ignoring her concern, Angeline said, “Asian sweetness tastes different from ours, right? What was it called—*wah-gah-shee*? I’ve always been interested in it!” And then, with zero caution, she plopped the *umeboshi* into her mouth.

A moment later.

Angeline’s eyes turned into big *X*s, and her lips puckered before she fell over backward in her chair.

Abandoning her food, shouting something in her wake, she dashed out of the dining hall.

These *umeboshi*, a concentration of the essence of Amakusa-Style Crossist Church history and expertise, were on a whole other level compared to the store-bought variety.



2

With breakfast over, it was at last time to resume the battle with the washing machine.

“Instruction manual, check. Screwdrivers and other tools, check… A-and if things come to worst, the warranty… Wait, the customer service center’s phone number is from Japan… Does that mean it would incur international fees?!”

Unable to tell whether her determination had hardened or dulled, Kanzaki plodded wearily down the hallway.

Then one of the doors lining the passage suddenly opened.

Sherry Cromwell emerged, scratching her head roughly, looking like she hadn’t gotten enough sleep. She ran her hand through the mane-like blond hair that hung wildly around coppery skin the color of wheat. The sun was nearly at its summit, but she was still wearing a black negligee.

Her hands gripped a chisel and hammer for sculpting.

“…Hey, Kanzaki. Any breakfast left?”

“Were you so preoccupied with carving stone again that you forgot the time? There’s probably no breakfast left, but Orsola was on cooking duty today. She’ll probably make you something if you plead with her,” Kanzaki advised, peering into the room over Sherry’s shoulder.

Sherry was borrowing two of the rooms in the women’s dorm. One for sleeping, the other for working. More than a few rented multiple rooms for purposes such as maintaining their Soul Arms, but it was relatively rare for someone to have an extra purely for a hobby.

Although she’d named it the sculpting room, there were no sculptures in Sherry’s room, just piles of smashed-up stone fragments.

Save for one—a statue of a young boy, standing in the room’s center.

Carved on the marble pedestal of the life-size statue was the word *Ellis*.

“Another failure,” sighed Sherry in annoyance after realizing what Kanzaki was looking at. “Not even fit to show other people. But for some reason, I can’t bring myself to break it down,” she continued in a mutter to herself.

Still, Kanzaki didn’t know anything about this Ellis except for

the fact that it was the name of Sherry's golem. She decided to be straightforward and asked, "Is that the name of the spell, or…?"

"…When the time came to name it, that was all I could think of," Sherry said, sulking. "When I created the puppet to protect myself, and I needed to give it a name, *his* was the first thing that came to mind. Clearly, I don't know how to let go…"

Sherry casually tossed the sculpting implements into the room behind her, then locked the door before heading to the dining hall without another word. Kanzaki didn't know what to make of all that, but for some reason, Sherry looked small as she retreated.

Well, I probably shouldn't pry. Meddling in other people's affairs isn't always the best way to save them.

The magic name Kanzaki bore—a hand of salvation for the unsaved—itched within her, but she decided to leave it alone for now.

"Oh! There you are, Miss Kanzaki…"

Just then, Angeline came to her at a trot. She'd run off during breakfast, but for some reason, she was now holding what looked like a tube of toothpaste. There was probably chocolate ganache in it.

"What's the matter, Angeline? Where have you been? Oh, yes—I believe the rest of your breakfast has already been cleaned up."

"Nooo… W-well, it's okay. I don't mind. It'll make lunch taste even better."

"In that case, would you like another *umeboshi* for lunch? You can put it on rice like you're supposed to—"

"No, thank you. I am totally fine!! What even *was* that *ooh-may-boh-shee* anyway? Food of the devil, I say! It made my mouth feel all weird, and even drinking hot milk didn't help at all, so I'm eating chocolate now!! All that wonder I felt toward Japan, gone in an instant!"

Kanzaki was as downtrodden as anyone would be at hearing that, but she aspired to the traditional Japanese ideal of being a woman who could control her emotions in a calm and graceful way, so outwardly she showed none of her inner turmoil. Though, contrary to what she thought, her shoulders *had* visibly drooped.

"I won't force you, but… Anyway, did you need something

from me?”

“Oh—right! Well, not me in particular, but, um…”

“Ah, has someone given you a message for me? Is it from Agnes?”

“Um, no, it wasn’t a message, but she wanted me to call the dorm’s representative, so… Oh, and also, um, it’s not from Sister Agnes.”

“Lucia, then?”

“Um, well, no, not Sister Lucia—or Sister Orsola, either. Or Sister Catherine or Sister Agatha or anyone else from the dorm, for that matter.”

“???”

This was, after a fashion, an English Puritan Church’s women’s dorm. *Who else would be here aside from the tenants?* wondered Kanzaki.

“Er, what did she say her name was again…?” Angeline muttered, tilting her head. “Oh, that’s right. Sasha—Sasha Kreutzev.”

3

Sasha Kreutzev.

An official member of Annihilatus, a special team of the Russian Catholic Church geared for sorcery combat. Their field of expertise was the annihilation of the inhuman Unhallowed. For that purpose, they didn’t hesitate to make use of magic, which was completely forbidden in Russia ever since the scandal-tainted Rasputin era; they were also purported to completely demolish entire areas the Unhallowed appeared in, along with any historical sites, often totally changing the geography. Apparently, this reputation led certain nations intent on protecting cultural landmarks to bar the group from entering their lands.

In terms of individual combat abilities, they were generally inferior to the English Puritan Church’s Necessarius.

Sasha, however, made up for that disadvantage by equipping herself with several English-made torture devices like a saw and a hammer. Physically, she was a petite girl with blond hair, but just as with the seven tools at her waist, one could call her a versatile sorcerer who could respond to any situation by quickly adapting. Her true abilities were probably quite close to

ideal for an agent of her organization.

…Kanzaki had also apparently seen a different side of “her” on the Japanese coast once, but it seemed prudent to discard that from her memory.

In any case, Sasha Kreutzev was an agent of the Russian Catholic Church.

Why was she in London? And why, specifically, at the English Puritan Church’s women’s dorm?

She clearly wasn’t a tourist or a lost child.

With the Roman Orthodox Church and Academy City in a touch-and-go situation, Sasha’s visit naturally smelled of politics.

Consultation? Conversation? A deal? Or perhaps a warning?

Kanzaki had steeled herself for all the possibilities that came to mind as Angeline brought her to the dorm’s front entrance.

“Answer one. I seem to be lost.”

“What?!” Kanzaki cried in spite of herself.

Sasha watched her astounded expression and nodded slightly. “Answer two. Thank you for the good reaction.”

“You were lying?!”

Kanzaki was dubious. Was Sasha Kreutzev always the type to make jokes like that? She and the *other* girl seemed to be separate people.

“Answer three. As I’m sure you’ve surmised, I come here as a messenger of the Russian Catholic Church. To give additional explanation, however, I am not here for an official meeting of the Church. I have personal reasons in mind and simply wish to speak with you in an unofficial manner.”

It seemed, then, that this wasn’t an overt display of hostility from the Russian Church.

Kanzaki relaxed her guard somewhat. “I see… Well, let’s not talk while standing around. Please, come in.”

“Answer four. Thank you for your consider—”

Sasha suddenly paused.

Kanzaki turned around, then thought she saw the girls’ *fingertips trembling unnaturally*, but…

“Question one. Is there a magical defensive mechanism applied to this facility, as I thought?”

“No… This women’s dorm is like *bait* to draw out disruptive

elements within the United Kingdom, so we purposely didn't do anything like that."

"Question two… Then has there been any other magic-related work done inside the facility?"

"Well…" Kanzaki thought for a moment. "Come to think of it, some of the members here do use preservation spells to keep Soul Arms safe. But I think barely any mana leaks out this far."

She tilted her head. Was this related to her fingers trembling before?

Meanwhile, Sasha, seeming satisfied with that explanation, nodded a little. "…Answer five: Never mind, then. Where can we go to talk?"

The girl put a small hand to her chest as she took a deep breath, then looked forward again. Kanzaki must have been imagining it; she couldn't see anything wrong with her fingertips anymore.

Moving to the side to allow Sasha room to pass, Kanzaki wondered where she should bring her. This was a dormitory, so it didn't have any spaces meant for entertaining guests. But with Sasha having come as a special envoy of the Russian Catholic Church, Kanzaki couldn't invite her into a private space like her bedroom.

It'll have to be the dining hall, she thought. "But why have you come? The English Church's representative should be in St. George's Cathedral."

"Answer six: Vasilisa—oh, as an addendum, she is my superior whose personality I don't wish to describe in detail—she has headed there. That conference was to be the main goal of the visit. I entered the United Kingdom as her aide."

Kanzaki, Angeline, and Sasha all walked back along the hallway.

"That makes the situation even more confusing," Kanzaki noted. "If you're her aide, shouldn't you be at the Russian Church's representatives' side for the conference?"

"Answer seven. It has to do with internal Russian circumstances. This may come off as rude to the United Kingdom, but for me, personally, this felt more important."

"…"

Under these unstable circumstances, no Russian Catholic sorcerer would enter the United Kingdom on a whim. That must have meant Sasha had used the conference to her advantage to

come here.

Kanzaki's sense of caution heightened. Things had just gotten more suspicious.

"(…Um, excuse me, Miss Kanzaki…)"

Angeline tugged on Kanzaki's pants a little to get her attention.

"What is it, Angeline?"

"(…Do you know this person? She, um, has a *very* unique outfit on, and…)"

Sasha Kreutzev's shoulders gave a start.

Her outfit consisted of only a black belt, a very exposing straitjacket that looked like underwear, and a red mantle worn over it.

"Shh!" Kanzaki put a finger to her lips. "(…There are many cultures throughout the world. I'm sure it has an important meaning in Russian Catholicism.)"

"(…R-really? Is that true? To me she just looks like a strange old man who would show up in a dark alley—)"

"(…Angeline! You mustn't speak like that. If someone was making a mockery of your faith, you'd be mad, too, wouldn't you?)"

Sasha trembled, but she didn't explode. From her mouth, however, came muttered fragments of sentences, like "…not wearing this because I like it…," "…the Church isn't a bunch of perverts…," and "…going to kill Vasilisa…"

In the meantime, they arrived at the dining hall.

Breakfast was over, but a lot of people were still at their tables chatting—mainly, the formerly Roman Orthodox sisters. They didn't have a fixed time when they had to go out, and while they were standing by, they simply stood by.

"Hmm?"

Sherry was eating a ham and lettuce sandwich, which Orsola had probably made with whatever ingredients were on hand (the sandwich's innards were poking out, evidence of Orsola's sleepiness). Noticing the three who had just entered the cafeteria, Sherry wondered aloud: "It's not even summer yet. Why's she wearing a swimsuit?"

A vein popped out on Sasha's temple. It must have come as quite a shock to be told off by someone wearing a negligee that was even more exposing. Scarily, she started repeating "death to Vasilisa" over and over again.

Kanzaki raised a finger to her lips to silence Sherry. “Er, this is Sasha Kreutzev,” she said. “An agent of the Russian Catholic Church. She says she’s come for an unofficial meeting with us.”

Everyone in the dining hall started listening in. The only exception, possibly, was Orsola. She must have been very sleepy, because she was moving between tables in a wobbly fashion while holding a tray with an expensive tea set on it in both hands.

In her place, Agnes, currently holding playing cards, gave a sigh. Kanzaki shifted her gaze their way. Across from her sat Lucia, who was maintaining a poker face; they were joined by a teary-eyed Catherine, who was next to Lucia, and Agatha, glancing at her cards, looking pleased.

“And this Sasha wants an unofficial meeting…,” said Agnes. “What, does she want to defect or something?”

“Could be,” responded Lucia, the two of them placing their cards on the table. “With literally only the clothes on her back, too. You’ll be safe here, so please, rest easy.”

Sasha’s lips turned down and she hung her head. Kanzaki desperately gestured for them to stop mentioning her clothes. She suggested Sasha sit down to collect herself.

Eventually, Orsola, who seemed to have come out of her spell of drowsiness, brought a cup of black tea over.

Sasha raised the cup to her lips and, after taking a drink, said, “I come to you today with question three.”

The words carried clearly through the dining hall, creating a solemnity in the air.

“During the war that will break out between the Roman Orthodox Church and Academy City… *Which side do you plan to support*?”

4

War.

The word was no longer one that anyone could treat as irrelevant.

Wars in the past had been conducted along national borders, but in the future, they would be different. There were no borders in a clash of ideals, and they carried the threat of suddenly evolving into a war that spanned the globe, excepting none. Stories of safety in a specific country or so-and-so having

strong defenses were just that—inapplicable legends. In the worst cases, conflicts could arise even within individual teams or units.

“Answer eight. This is a nice city,” said Sasha, looking out the large windows. “As an addendum, the Roman Orthodox and science-side protests seem to be mostly absent from London. My homeland of Russia, however, rests on a razor’s edge. Many stores have completely closed up for fear of abrupt riots, even during the day.”

English Puritanism and Russian Catholicism were both the national religions of their respective countries, but they didn’t force everyone in the nation to adhere to the state faith. Roman Orthodox followers likely lived even in Russia. As for science, it didn’t need to be explained—there were fewer who *didn’t* rely on its fruits.

With such circumstances coming to mind, Kanzaki asked, “But why did you come to us? We’re only one part of the English Puritan Church, and we’re forbidden from taking independent organized action. If you wanted to know about what we’d be doing with regard to the war that is probably about to begin, wouldn’t you have been better served by visiting the Archbishop in St. George’s Cathedral after all…?”

“Question four. Is that truly the case?”

“What?”

With that one short question, Kanzaki, Agnes, Lucia, Angeline, Sherry, and all the others turned a dubious expression on Sasha. Only Orsola was dozing off, without a care in the world.

“Question five. In this war, do you all truly plan on continuing to follow the English Puritan Church?”

“…”

The vast cafeteria was silent save for the Russian Catholic’s words.

“As an addendum, Kaori Kanzaki and Agnes Sanctis hold symbolic positions in other organizations—the Amakusa-Style Crossist Church and the former Roman Orthodox Agnes Unit, respectively. The same goes for the majority of other Necessarius members… You are aligned with the English Church in order to fulfill your own goals; you did not join Necessarius *because* you were followers.”

It was a direct, straightforward assertion. She seemed to

have come prepared for today, not the least of which was actually getting into the United Kingdom.

Sasha continued. “To elaborate even further, it is the view of the Russian Catholic Church that the Roman Orthodox Church and Academy City are currently evenly matched in terms of combat strength. The two other players, the English and Russian Churches, will likely be vital in determining the war’s outcome. We of the Russian Church have little interest in the war. We don’t care who wins or who loses, but we *would* like to secure an advantageous position by joining the winning side. That’s why I wanted to get your opinions on how the United Kingdom might move.”

The English Puritan Church was a sorcery-side faction.

At the same time, however, its relations with the Roman Orthodox Church were poor due to religious differences, and it had a special connection with Academy City.

It would be incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to predict which side this large magical organization would ultimately go with.

In addition, there were countless others in the Church, like Kanzaki and Agnes, who were simply smaller organizations that happened to be working under the Puritan umbrella. There were individuals like that as well. Stiyl would serve either side as long as he could protect a certain girl, and it wasn’t even clear whose camp Tsuchimikado was truly in. Others, like Sherry, while purely followers of the English Church, had even targeted Index’s life, despite her being in the same organization, because of internal disputes.

The key to this great war that would rock the world was utterly unpredictable.

It was only natural Sasha was looking for answers.

…Or maybe, by creating a stir about it, she wants to guide our decisions in a way that is *predictable.*

If that was what Sasha was doing, then her actions could be taken as a demand to start infighting. Kanzaki decided to think for a moment about the war.

Kanzaki had already distanced herself from the Amakusa-Style Crossist Church, but that didn’t mean they were no longer people she needed to protect.

Plus, the current Amakusa had opposed the Roman Orthodox Church during the Orsola Aquinas rescue. Considering that

Amakusa had only about fifty members capable of fighting, it would be essentially impossible for them to continue overt operations without the English Church's backing.

In the same way, after the incident with the Queen of the Adriatic, Agnes's former unit was now entirely considered an enemy by the Roman Orthodox Church. They wouldn't gain anything from using the war to cut themselves off from the English Church.

To add to that, there were people who were precious to Kaori Kanzaki in Academy City. Ones who had been saved in the past —more precisely, saved by a certain boy who lived there.

My heart tells me Academy City…

If the Roman Church won this war and expanded its influence throughout the world, the English Church's checks on their power would fail, and both the current Amakusa and the former Agnes unit would be destroyed. Thinking about it that way, she'd want to cooperate with Academy City.

But they're still on the science side…

They'd also be in a dangerous situation if Academy City won. It was possible that the science side might ride the wave of their victory to obliterate the sorcery side completely. If that happened, it didn't matter whether a group was big or small. Both Amakusa and Agnes's unit would be annihilated as just two more magical organizations throughout the world that needed to be expunged.

War was very multifaceted.

Thinking about it that way, it started to seem like the English Church stood to lose a great deal no matter which side won and no matter which side they were on. The Archbishop, then, would likely devise a plan to stop it from ending in the worst way possible.

Kanzaki could understand why Sasha and the Russian Church would be interested in how they moved. They would need plans within plans in order to overcome this situation, and it *was* important to decide how they'd position themselves during it, but…

Ugh… Is there truly no recourse but to fight?

Kanzaki agonized about the very act of being shrewd about the whole thing.

If there's any type of thinking I hate, it's this—and it's why I have the magic name I do. Is there not a single option that will

allow us to choose a path that will avoid bloodshed?

Depending on what happened, Kanzaki might need to brandish her blade against an “enemy.”

She would have to recognize them clearly as such—and to kill them, not save them.

She might even wind up tearing apart the peaceful life that boy and girl had seized with their own hands.

Sasha Kreutzev had presented them with a poignant question.

Which faction would they side with in this war?

I’ll…

Kanzaki unconsciously clenched her teeth.

I will…!!

“I believe we will be perfectly fine.”

But then there came a sudden statement from Orsola Aquinas, who had supposedly been dozing until now.

Everyone in the dining hall looked to her.

They doubted how much of the conversation she’d actually heard, but her assertion had been awfully unreserved nevertheless.

“Question six. What do you mean by ‘fine’?”

“It’s exactly what it sounds like.”

Her response came smoothly. She didn’t even seem to think about it. Or perhaps it wasn’t worth worrying over, for her.

“No matter what faction we ally ourselves with, it will not change what we need to do. We help those who seek salvation. We heal those who suffer from pain. We mediate for those who don’t desire conflict. That is all we need to worry about, isn’t it?”

“Question seven. That would be easy if it were possible. As an addendum, kind words won’t be enough for the war about to __”

“Even so,” said Orsola, cutting Sasha off, “it does not change what we need to do. Just because a war breaks out, we have no reason to reject those who seek salvation. We have no reason to neglect those who suffer from pain. We have no reason to force those who don’t desire conflict to hold swords.”

“…”

Sasha Kreutzev fell silent for a moment in the face of such clear-cut words.

Orsola was an expert at spreading Crossism to pagan lands.

She had, countless times, walked alongside hostility and violence that Sasha had never dreamed of… And still, she never once came close to picking up a weapon. She had carried through, using only words to accomplish what she needed to.

"We understand what it means to have a small strength."

That was probably why her words held so much weight.

More than Kanzaki's, at least, who brandished *her* weapon whenever a conflict started.

"A small power that has allowed us to move forward without ever breaking, resolving quarrels that others believe to be unavoidable, saving lives thought to already be lost. The power that has given us all the chance to come together like this, to grant salvation to the future of our allies without taking from those of our enemies… Why would *he*, with no authority or background, be able to do something that we could not? If *he* could save so many, by himself, then how many could we save if we all came together? There is no meaning in giving up. If you want for meaning, indeed, you must *not* give up."

Everyone listened to those words.

Agnes sniffed and turned a cheek; Angeline lightly grabbed Lucia's clothing. Lucia put her hand on the shoulder of her short colleague, and Sherry narrowed her eyes. The other nuns reacted the same. Each had heard Orsola's words, remembering a certain young man, wondering about what to do now. About the paths they needed to follow.

Kanzaki naturally thought back to her first meeting with him.

She'd sliced into his fist with the wires of her Seven Glints, whipped his entire body with the sheath of her Seven Heavens Sword, and even then, standing in the way of a saint, the young man had said this:

What the hell are you doing here?!

What had her…?

You have all that power; you have all that talent…so why can't you do anything…?

Kanzaki wondered—what had her face looked like?

"Then…"

The only one among them who *didn't know* that young man, Sasha, spoke carefully.

"Question eight. What do you plan to do?"

"Personally," said Orsola, "I could do without this two-

dimensional logic of winners and losers. If we cannot choose the third option, to, at the very least, create a happy ending where *nobody has to die*, I doubt I would ever be able to face the one who saved us."

And still, on the verge of war breaking out, she brazenly offered a trite opinion—the most radiant in the world.

5

Sasha Kreutzev left, saying only that, in the end, she'd learned nothing.

Kaori Kanzaki remained in her seat in the dining hall after that, leaning back against it, staring at the ceiling for a while.

That which I must do…

Her particular circumstances were different from Orsola's. As someone bearing the talents of a saint, one of less than twenty in the whole world, she possessed combat strength equivalent to the science side's nuclear weaponry. In a war scenario, she could not only use her words, but take direct action by herself.

How will I remain loyal to my magic name and its meaning?

She wouldn't hold the key to victory or defeat in a major conflict, but in smaller, more local battles, she could turn the tides.

Those little victories could add up, chaining into something that would affect the situation at large.

She had a mountain's worth of options before her.

She worried—not because she couldn't do anything in a war, but because she *could*.

The power to fight, which I alone possess… What an arrogant way of thinking that is. I would be better off worrying about the washing machine at this point, she thought, a sigh escaping her.

Her philanthropic mindset could largely be attributed to the existence of her immense powers as a saint. She had the power, and more freedom to use it than others, so in theory, she should be able to save that many more people…

That could be seen as looking down on others, and self-admittedly, it derived from a terribly warped nature.

From Kanzaki's point of view, the way Orsola and that boy lived, staying true to their principles and reaching out to help others despite their distinct lack of power, glowed radiantly in

her eyes. The very expression felt to her like it indicated her own lack of training.

“Miss Kanzaki? Is something the matter?”

As her thoughts lingered on the subject, Orsola herself arrived in the dining hall again.

Kanzaki kept her eyes on the ceiling, somehow feeling too uncomfortable to meet the nun’s gaze. “…Just being ashamed at my own lack of training,” she said. “It makes me shudder to think that someone as inexperienced as I would have ever led Amakusa, even for a short time.”

“All people take time and effort to mature. It is simple to decide one has understood the Lord’s teachings, but it is incredibly difficult for one to truly realize the path. Even I feel as though my comments earlier were somewhat inexperienced and lacking.”

“Really? I generally agreed with what you had to say: We can’t fixate on killing people just because a war breaks out. I think you’re right.”

“Hee-hee.” Orsola laughed mysteriously.

Still leaning back in her chair, Kanzaki shot the woman a sidelong glance.

“*Generally*, you say?”

“What about it?”

“Oh, nothing. That simply means you have additional reasons to fight. It would seem Mr. Tatemiya and the others were correct in their statement that their Priestess was in love with someone from Academy City.”

Kanzaki fell backward in her chair with a *crash!!*

Having fallen to the floor, she cried out, “That’s… That’s so inappropriate! What is happening in Amakusa right now anyway?!”

“Oh my. It was when the Knight Leader visited Japan Town, stiff as a boulder, with a bouquet of flowers in his hands. Mr. Tatemiya, the vicar pope, responded by telling him that. The Knight Leader had wanted to invite the Amakusa Priestess to a ball, but Mr. Tatemiya kept telling him it was useless. When pressed, he claimed that you, and I quote, ‘like taking the lead with younger people, not being led around by older people,’ and then explained what I just mentioned. It is becoming something of a legend.”

“That… That is utterly unfounded! And why are people

passing it down as a legend?! Curse you, Saiji Tatemiya! You could have picked something a little more tactful for your excuse!!”

“I also remember Miss Itsuwa, also from Amakusa, reacting to this incident by asserting that she’d be giving it her all as well.”

“Why are you telling me all this like you’re reporting the daily news?!”

Kanzaki loudly lamented, but Orsola was never one to listen much to what other people said. She smiled warmly, said, “Oh, I wonder how our stock of tea leaves is doing,” and withdrew to the kitchen.

Belatedly notified of the current situation, which had turned grave without her realizing it, Kanzaki remained baffled for a few moments, her face pale.



“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh!!”

But this time, she heard Agnes shrieking from outside the cafeteria.

“It’s just one thing after another today!!”

Kanzaki stood up and rushed out of the cafeteria.

She didn’t know where Agnes’s voice had come from, but she had a rough idea of the direction. She just had to run down the long hallway now.

And then she discovered Agnes sunken to the floor in front of the changing room.

When Kanzaki approached, she pointed into the room, still sitting. “The… The washing machine… It—it…”

Veins visibly popped on Kanzaki’s head at those breathless words.

The washing machine *again*?

It had caused a problem before breakfast, too, which they hadn’t solved yet. And now it was making *more* trouble?

Kanzaki already had enough to worry about, between the war and the rumors of lovers. Why the washing machine *now*?

Was it a hateful high-tech AI spy sent by Academy City after all?! That’s the only way to explain all the trouble it’s been causing!!

Commited to tearing the machine up with the Seven Heavens Sword if it caused any more issues, Kanzaki charged into the changing room.

The tub next to the room was a large communal bath, rare in the Western world, and so the changing room was large, too. The washing machine in question should have been in the corner of the vast room, along with the scale.

She looked that way.

She looked at the piece-of-trash, Academy City washing machine, that good-for-nothing, useless thing that had taken the color out of her yukata obi and started malfunctioning when they had put the futon into it.

And as it gave off a loud clattering—it was properly cleaning the futon stuffed inside.

“Wha…?”

Kanzaki’s breath caught.

The quietness of this washing machine was originally its

selling point, so it was strange that it was making that noise at all. It must have meant the machine was working that much harder. Exceeding its design limitations, accepting an order far beyond its operating restrictions, and yet still, it endured, it withstood, it had borne its duty until the end—and now, it was finally about to accomplish the titanic feat of washing all those futons at once.

I don't believe it…

The strength left Kanzaki's body. Her legs buckled underneath her, and she knelt down on the changing-room floor.

The emotion of anger had been replaced with an intense shame.

She had been reflecting on her own inexperience not moments ago. And it had happened again. Even after they'd stuffed it with all those futons it couldn't possibly have washed, even after they'd forced it to turn on, even after they'd given up on it and left it alone, that washing machine had kept on doing its best, all alone. It endured the pain, endured the agony, always working dutifully to complete that which needed to be done, and now, at last, it was about to accomplish an impossible task. And yet she—*she* had wanted to tear it apart with her Seven Heavens Sword if it caused any more trouble…

The washing machine said nothing.

It was only natural that the onboard AI would have no speech functions.

But Kanzaki knew she could hear it.

She could hear the voice of the AI.

Kanzaki, it said.

I did it, just like you asked.

"~~~~!!"

Tears burst from the corners of Kanzaki's eyes.

She was speechless. She tossed her Seven Heavens Sword aside, then clung to the washing machine's square body, hugging it, as though reuniting with a long-lost family member.

CHAPTER 4

A Drunken Mother's Circumstances
The Two Leading Roles.

1

In Academy City, one could describe ten PM as relatively late.

After all, the last trains and buses here lined up with the final school closing time. Many stores closed at the same time as well, so it always started to feel like only stores geared toward adults were open at this point in the day.

Anti-Skill, the city's peacekeeping force of teachers-slash-police officers, patrolled the streets, so unless you were going out with the expectation of being guided to your destination, regular students would be staying in their dorms.

On the other hand, the delinquents were condensed into this time period of Academy City. If a normal student was to go out without taking proper care, they would easily get wrapped up in some "minor trouble."

And through this night echoed the clapping sound of a crutch.

It was Accelerator.

Great… Thanks to my "overtime," it's gotten real late…

He wouldn't be returning to Aiho Yomikawa's apartment.

He also wasn't going back to a dormitory of Nagatenjouki Academy, despite being a registered student, on paper.

Instead, he was headed for a building called by the code name *nap room* among Group.

Still, it wasn't exactly a rule that Group had. Motoharu Tsuchimikado went to a normal high school and lived in a student dorm, while Awaki Musujime was apparently freeloading at a nosy female teacher's place. Accelerator didn't hear much about Mitsuki Unabara, but he'd heard he'd put together a place for himself on his own. It seemed they generally had the freedom to be out and about, just as long as they didn't make too much of a commotion on the *front stage*. The higher-ups had never come to Group to complain about

their living arrangements.

It didn't matter to Accelerator what the other members were doing or where, and they probably felt the same way toward him. If he was being brutally honest, as long as it didn't negatively affect him at all, it would be no skin off his back if the organization called Group was destroyed right this moment.

That certainly would make things simpler, Accelerator admitted to himself.

The times of awkwardly making friends to change things for the better were at an end.

"Ugh. Guess I'll stop by a convenience store and grab a coffee or something…"

The can he was currently drinking from was nearly empty. Deciding he'd replace it with a new one, Accelerator slightly altered his course. And then, as he let the fluorescent lights creating Academy City's motley nightscape guide him toward the convenience store on the first floor of a nearby multipurpose building—

"Uh, unh…"

—he suddenly heard what sounded like sleep talk from right next to him.

But there couldn't have been anyone *there*. After all, it was just a red mailbox. Nothing but a metallic mailbox, which he doubted really served any purpose in this age of e-mail. It certainly wasn't a bed.

And yet.

"Uh, urgh… I feel sick…"

A strange, drunken woman lay there, rubbing her cheek against the mailbox's pillar, cradling it with both hands like a body pillow.

She was probably around college age or so. She wore a simple button-down shirt and slim black slacks…but they were probably somewhat expensive brands. Plus, a small handbag had been dropped a short distance away, which appeared to have had nothing in it but a wallet. Her entire body was almost threatening "Try something if you dare." She seemed so helpless, it probably made would-be attackers hesitate instead.

Deciding to get himself to the store, Accelerator started to pass her by.

Hmm? Wait, her face—have I seen it somewhere before…?

Accelerator stopped in his tracks.

He checked the drunk college student's face again. Brown shoulder-length hair and a face with pretty features. Her eyes were closed, but he could easily imagine they'd be brimming with energy. Her height and proportions could not be more different, but in them, oddly, he still glimpsed *that girl*.

It couldn't have been Last Order's family.

Nobody like this existed among the clone espers, either.

…Who is she? Is it just coincidence they look so similar…?

Letting his curiosity get the better of him, Accelerator went up for a closer look at the woman's face.

"Ahhh… Hello, hello, Misuzu Misaka here…"

Suddenly the drunk woman's eyes blinked open, and then her arms were around Accelerator. Her movements were sluggish, but Accelerator was also on a crutch.

They both fell to the dirty road.

The woman, who was holding him by the waist, didn't seem the least bit concerned about how her body was clinging to his.

"My hobby is studying number theory, my talent is swimming, and my bust is ninety-one centimeters… Wait, I can't. I just remembered I'm married. I'd feel bad for my hubby, so quit touching me like we're buddies!"

After saying that, she pushed Accelerator away, then plopped down into a sitting position a few steps away. For a moment, he had the impulse to pump a lead bullet into her head.

"Wait… Where's the Dangai University database center again? You, the boy who's all white. You have any idea?"

The drunk woman, however, was at this point unstoppable.

It could have been the General Board chairperson or the president of the United States; she'd blather on drunkenly at this point to *anyone*.

This… This is so dumb, it's gonna ruin my *reputation… I should get to the store, buy a coffee, and go home. Who cares about this woman?*

Accelerator, using his crutch for support, slowly stood up. After patting the dirt off his pants with his other hand, he sighed, then began to step away.

"Hey, wait, don't be so mean. Stop freaking ignoring me, you colorless runt…"

She latched on to his ankles.

With a loud grunt, Accelerator fell over again.

The strange drunk woman began to climb on top of him.

“Look, I’m a bisexual-disaster cougar, let me kiss you…”

“You’ve been spouting nonsense this entire time!!” Accelerator shouted reflexively, then realized his mistake.

He looked at the drunk woman’s face; now that she finally had someone to talk to, she had a positively awful smile.

“I just wanted to know, where’s the Dangai University database center again? Misuzu, you see, she needs to go and study there now. Because she’s got reports to do. *Belch.*”

Accelerator managed to hold back the wave of anger about to escape him in the form of *God, you reek!!* “I don’t fucking know! Go get a taxi or something!!”

“Ah. How do I get a taxi again?”

Right on time, fortunately, a taxi passed by. Accelerator, still on the ground and mostly pinned there, got a hand up to wave the vehicle down.

The taxi came to a smooth stop, and for some reason, the older man in the driver’s seat burst out of it.

“Are…are you all right?! Is this a crime in progress?!”

“Anyone else bothers me today, and I’ll kill every last one of you…,” muttered Accelerator in a low voice, shoving the drunk woman leaning against him to the side.

Ignoring the strange woman as she said “Wait, hey, the taxi…,” he shouted to the driver, “You’re on your own now!!” and this time, for real, started walking away. He didn’t care about the convenience store or getting another can of coffee anymore. For now, he just wanted to get away from that drunk as soon as possible.

Even Academy City’s strongest esper was human, bound to have at least one thing he couldn’t handle.

2

“Well, that’s why I’m saying I think even croquettes should be part of hot pot,” explained Touma Kamijou to Index, who walked next to him.

They’d left the sukiyaki restaurant, parted ways with his classmates, and were now going back to the dorm. They’d stopped at a convenience store on the way back, so the other boys living in the same dorm were gone, too—of course, he couldn’t have anyone knowing Index was living with him, so he had needed to stagger their arrival time somehow.

“You, like, put a portable stove on the table, then put a pot with oil on it, then put the pre-breaded ingredients into the oil ahead of time. Wouldn’t that taste the best? It would take some time, but you can eat your other add-ins while you wait. Then you’d have ready-fried croquettes waiting for you.”

“But I think *all* foods taste best right when they’re finished.”

“I mean, you’re not wrong.”

“What?! Wait, in that case, wouldn’t food taste best if you made it in front of me, and then I ate it all?! This… This is a major discovery, Touma!!”

“Give me a break!! I wouldn’t get to eat a single bite of it then!!”

Kamijou made the argument anyone would make, but all Index (and the calico) did was sulk, complaining (and meowing) about how good the plan was.

He wasn’t feeling like cooking, so he decided on an extremely irresponsible counterattack of just eating frozen food for breakfast tomorrow. But then, he suddenly spotted a taxi in their path, parked on the side of the road. Its yellow blinkers were flashing, the back door was wide open, and for some reason, the upper half of a woman who looked college age was hanging out of it.

The woman was smooshed onto the road, face-first, and a middle-aged man who appeared to be the driver was arguing with her.

“Ma’am, we can’t move if you keep the door open like that.”

“What’d you say to me? Are you challenging the all-Japan half-open-door alliance, damn it?!”

“Yes, yes, well, I’m sure you’re the only member of that particular alliance. I’m getting tired of listening to you, so please, get in your seat already.”

“What was that?! Now I’m gonna be stubborn and not get back in. Heh-heh.”

Kamijou heard a completely nonsensical conversation between the driver and the woman.

Yikes, what an awful customer!!

Kamijou debated changing their route. That person wasn’t the type who enjoyed conversation; this was the type who enjoyed attention, regardless of who or how. In the unlikely event that Kamijou ended up getting involved, that would without a doubt wrap him up in one troublesome incident after

another—all the way until morning came and the woman sobered up.

If there was any kind of person Kamijou, who was already drowning in rotten luck on a daily basis, wanted to stay away from, it was her.

“Hmm?”

The drunk woman’s head flopped over to look his way. Her lower body was still in the taxi, and her upper body was still stuck to the ground.

“Ahhh, ahhh! You’re Kamijou, right? Kamijou!!”

Kamijou’s shoulders lurched in surprise. How did she know his name?! He looked at her again and realized it was Misuzu Misaka, a woman he’d met during the Daihasei Festival. The mother of Mikoto, that sparky middle school student.

“…Well, I guess if it’s *her* family, I’m not surprised about this.”

The comment was rude to everyone involved, but when Misuzu heard it, she simply flashed a slack grin. “Wow, the Earth’s gravity sure is crazy, huh?”

“What?”

“Feels like Miss Misuzu doesn’t need anything else. She’s going to sleep now, so good night, *mnn*.”

Kamijou heard what honestly sounded like a snore, so he wondered if he should wake her up.

But before he could, Misuzu’s eyes shot open. “Whoa, wait. Didn’t stretch or even rub on any lotion! Damn, stop puttin’ in the effort, and your skin’ll feel it, huh? After all, I’m mothering an only child!! Urgh—I think I’m gonna be sick?!”

Kamijou swore to himself he’d never give Mikoto any alcohol.

Besides, minors were forbidden from imbibing by law.

Meanwhile, the taxi driver looked at him with eyes sparkling like diamonds that seemed to say “I’m… I’m saved! The drunk’s guardian has finally shown up!!” but Kamijou couldn’t accept that.

Misuzu, for her part, seemed to have shifted her attention from the driver to himself. She remained in her current position, lower half sticking in the car and upper half lying on the road.

“Hff, hff. I can’t…can’t stand…”

She seemed to be trying to get up, but she wasn’t moving any

of the right muscles—actually, she looked just like a fur seal at the aquarium.

I don't want to get close, but can I leave her...? thought Kamijou, carelessly moving to her side. And that was when Misuzu latched on to him with all her might.

"Awright!! I caught a younger boy!!"

"Gwaaahhh?!"

The squeezing might have made his heart skip a beat, but Misuzu didn't seem like she was the type to skip regular exercise; instead, he heard an odd cracking noise coming from near his spine.

"What are you doing out so late? What happened to my little Mikoto anyway? *Belch.*"

"Guah! A breath attack?!"

"Huhhh? Isn't a mom sexy when she smells like alcohol and her eyes are all drowsy?"

"None of those are a plus!! H-help me, Index!!"

Kamijou immediately requested assistance, but Index just stared at him with incredibly cold eyes for some reason, not bothering to lend him any help at all. The calico in her arms, unable to cope—for once—with the stench of alcohol, was struggling.

Misuzu gazed at Index with vapid eyes. "By the way, who was she again? Introduction, pweez!"

"H-hmph. I don't have any name to give to someone like you."

"What'd you say, punk?! Introduce yourself this instant or my fingers are going up your nose!!"

"Waaah! Index! My name's Index!"

And thus, even Index, second to none in throwing her weight about, found herself unable to resist the Misuzu typhoon currently tossing her around.

"Hey, where's the Dangai University database center again?"

"What?"

"You know! The database facility where they gather all that programming-related information, like AI and arithmetic software and stuff."

"N-no, I wasn't asking for an explanation of the database center. Um, Dangai University? I think it's..."

"Oh, right, want to trade numbers and e-mails?"

"That was sudden!"

“I bet you already did with my cute Mikoto. Let me be part of the group, too! Anyway, here’s my e-mail…”

Misuzu rattled off a series of letters and numbers. The e-mail address that Mikoto had only obtained through copious sweat and tears and a grand plan to upgrade her phone had just been seized by her mother in a mere three minutes.



“Okay, got it. I’ll tag your info as Friend.”

“…This is all starting to feel a lot like talking to Orsola…,” said Kamijou, his exhaustion having maxed out. He peeled off Misuzu, who was still clinging to him with Herculean strength. “Anyway, what’s Misaka’s mom doing in a place like this? I thought you couldn’t get into Academy City without permission.”

“Yeah, yeah. Miss Misuzu is a university student, and she needs to submit a report. But they said I could only get the stuff for it from Academy City, so I had no choice but to come here.”

“So that’s why the database center… Well, I doubt there’s AI-type databanks anywhere but Academy City,” said Kamijou, sighing to himself. The taxi driver seemed to want to flee right at that moment, but Kamijou pinned him in place with a glare.

“I thought I’d say hi to Mikoto on my way there… But apparently the girls’ dorms at Tokiwadai are super-strict, and they wouldn’t let me in. I’m her mother, for cryin’ out loud!”

“…I mean, name-dropping yourself as a parent of a student there isn’t going to help when you’re drunk and smell like booze. Nobody would believe you. And you don’t look at all like a mother to begin with.”

“Oh—why, you. You’re pretty smooth. But no, that’s not it. Miss Misuzu is actually trying pretty hard. She swims around in an indoor pool every week and puts moisturizing cream all over her when she gets out of the bath. If I get even a little lazy, the changes will happen right away. Gah, I hate how teenagers can be so bursting with vitality without having to do anything!!”

Misuzu flailed her arms, but because of the alcohol, her footing seemed unstable. Taking advantage of the opening that had given him, Kamijou grabbed the taxi driver, who was secretly trying to sneak away again, and had him help push Misuzu into the backseat of the car.

“Hey, you! I’m not finished talking yet!!”

“All right, all right. We can leave it for later. For when you’ve done something about all the booze circulating through you.”

“Damn it, a little kid just scolded me!!”

Misuzu looked withered, but Kamijou waved a hand as the taxi driver started the car reluctantly, his face betraying his concern as to whether she’d actually pay him for the ride. As Kamijou listened to the *vrrmmm* of the muffler as they drove off, he exhaled slightly.

“Anyway.”

Suddenly, Kamijou felt a presence behind him, one he could sense was out for blood, and he shuddered in spite of himself.

The source went without saying—the sister holding the calico.

“…How am I going to get through *this* little problem…?”

3

Kamijou, who had, in the end, been bitten right in the head, rubbed the injury as he unlocked the door to his dorm.

“Mm… Starting to feel a little chilly now that we’re back,” he said, grabbing the remote control for the room’s lights and air conditioner, flicking a switch. Watching Index run to the TV out of the corner of his eye, Kamijou headed for the bathroom. There, he used a panel next to the bathtub to turn on its automatic water heater. Today was the cat’s bath day, too, so he put out a washbowl.

Man, eating out sure is nice. No dishes to do.

Stretching his arms out and yawning, Kamijou left the bathroom. His stomach was full. Now, he just had to soak in the bath at his leisure, brush his teeth, and go straight to bed. Absolute heaven. He hadn’t expected all this to happen today, and his heart was about to be won over by the temptation to eat out more often… Unfortunately, as far as he could tell from the household accounting he conscientiously kept up-to-date on his budgeting app, eating out that much would, at around the midpoint of the month or a little later, put them in a situation where they would only be able to afford water and salt.

Wait, how much did the hot pot tonight set me back? wondered Kamijou, ever fainthearted about these things, immediately pressing some buttons on his phone with his thumb. Just then, his ringtone went off.

He changed the display. It flashed Mikoto Misaka’s phone number.

Kamijou pressed the Call button. “??? You need something, Misaka?”

“First, tell me if you’re gonna answer my text anytime soon!”

Text? wondered Kamijou. “Hmm… Now that you mention it, I think I did see that earlier.”

“?! How…how dare you just pass it off like that—”

Mikoto was about to shout more, but then her voice grew distant, and then the call suddenly ended. Kamijou looked at his phone screen, but his reception seemed fine.

…Maybe something on her end? he thought offhandedly, switching back to his household budgeting app.

Taking a seat in front of the glass table in the middle of the room, he said, “Index, don’t sit so close to the TV.”

“But… But the Intelligence-Booster S.F. Health Quiz is about to get to the good part!!”

“…I feel like there’s more of these quiz shows linking science and stuff to your brain lately.”

Well, some of the stuff is taught in Academy City classes at least, he thought idly, looking over at the calico, who was faceup enjoying the heat emanating from the air conditioner, clearly uninterested in the quiz show.

“Hmm. Nothing to do, so maybe I’ll wash you first,” Kamijou mumbled, taking out a bottle of animal shampoo and a small sponge cut in the shape of a cat’s face. The calico, figuring it out, beat a swift retreat into the kitchen as if to say, “I hate all those bubbles and hot water!!” He was probably hiding between the fridge and the cabinets, trembling.

Thinking he’d have to be extra thorough since the cat had just gotten even dustier, Kamijou got to his feet, an act that required effort.

“Hmm?”

His phone vibrated.

This time, it wasn’t Mikoto.

Instead, on the small screen was a number he’d just put in his phone.

4

Misaka.

That had definitely been what the drunk woman collapsed in a heap on the road had said.

…Coincidence? Can’t be, Accelerator thought idly as he walked down a dark road with his crutch.

Mikoto Misaka was the one who had provided Last Order’s genetic code…but that woman hadn’t been her. An older sister or something? Her presence in Academy City meant she might have been some kind of esper, but Accelerator didn’t remember

having heard any intel like that. Of course, he wasn't very interested in others to begin with, so he didn't know many details about other espers.

Still, one thing struck him as odd.

Her clothes. Ermo, Az, Scale, Russiv—and her perfume was a new Zero Plus product… Wait, wasn't that aimed at teens? Anyway, she was covered in brand-name shit from head to toe. But what bothers me is that they're all companies from outside *Academy City—not a single one of them are from the inside.*

If she'd liked a specific brand, it was feasible she'd order an outfit from the outside…but that woman's clothes were all different brands. Her shirt, her slacks, her belt, her shoes, her handbag—she'd simply chosen what she liked. Didn't seem like she had an attachment to one single brand.

And in that case, she might as well have had at least one internal Academy City item.

But she didn't have any. And yet here she was.

Which means she could have come from the outside.

Accelerator thought it over, purposely choosing an even more deserted path than the already-unpopulated Academy City night roads.

Why's she here, then? She mentioned having business at the Dangai University database center, but who would allow that kind of access when we're preparing for a war that's about to start? Guests from outside the city go without saying—they're even turning support organizations like goods transporters away at the gates. Or does the woman have a different reason?

A reason.

One for a Misaka family member to come here during these times.

It might have had something to do with Mikoto Misaka, the original. Or perhaps…

…It's linked to the kid.

Accelerator tsked, fishing his phone out of his pocket.

He opened his contact list, highlighted the entry labeled simply CONTACT 3, and pushed the Call button.

The number belonged to another member of Group: Motoharu Tsuchimikado.

Accelerator put the phone to his ear, and the call connected immediately without ringing.

"Accelerator. Did you need something?"

The polite voice that came back was a male's. But when Accelerator heard it, his eyes widened slightly. This voice didn't belong to Motoharu Tsuchimikado; he *certainly* wouldn't talk so courteously.

Someone intercepted the call, thought Accelerator. "What, is this a hobby of yours? Are you one of Group's bosses?"

"I would like to hear the nature of your question."

"Tsk… Nothing I want to ask the likes of you. I'll handle my own business. Drop that stupid guardianship act of yours, or I'll rip you apart."

"Private business, then? Well, that is *a shame. I actually had a matter I'd like to discuss with you, if you have the time."*

"Eh?"

"It regards one Misuzu Misaka. Actually, well, I suppose the name alone won't make sense to you."

"…"

Accelerator glanced around without meaning to. Studying the utterly normal night streets, he thought, *Is this guy just providing information? Or is he watching me from a satellite feed…?*

"Who's this Misuzu Misaka? Someone related to Railgun?"

"Yes, that's correct. Ah, excellent timing. It looks like it's just getting started."

"What?" said Accelerator, frowning.

Boom!!

A portion of the city was suddenly illuminated by bright-red light cast by explosive flames.

It was distant. The sound reached him a few seconds after the light.

Phone still at his ear, Accelerator turned in that direction.

Near the horizon, practically hidden by countless buildings, an unnatural light was shimmering.

"A certain Misuzu Misaka has requested to use the Dangai University database center, so I had the facility attacked. She was the only one using it, and we confirmed several private security guards there, but, well—all within tolerable limits. All of the important data has been backed up on the network, so we don't need to concern ourselves with the damages."

"Attacked?"

“Yes.”

“…Who is this Misaka person? She can’t be a professional spy.”

“It is as you surmise. Misuzu Misaka is the mother of Mikoto Misaka. Her background is clean. You may rest assured of that, if you find that comforting.”

Mother? Accelerator wondered, thinking back to Misuzu’s face, and his own expression became slightly dubious. But something was more concerning: “Why attack her mother? Didn’t you just say she had a clean background?”

“*Normal people present a danger all their own. I mentioned a matter to discuss with you a few moments ago, so allow me to explain that*,” said the voice on the phone flatly. *“Are you familiar with the* recovery movement*?”*

“That thing people are whispering about? All the guardians who want to pick up their kids and get them to a safe spot, since Academy City could go to war?”

“*The idea is no more than a foolish plan that doesn’t take into consideration our national defense circumstances at all, but it still presents a problem. If too many students were to leave Academy City, it would cause* a variety of issues*.”*

“…”

Why the concern?

Did the higher-ups not want to let go of students when they were usable as combat power?

Did they want to avoid espers getting outside and potentially becoming leaks for research data?

No, thought Accelerator suddenly.

He was having this phone conversation with a superior of Group. Nobody in such a position would generalize it away like that. If *they* were concerned, then it must have to do with considerations that ran deeper down than that.

For example…

The things he’d glimpsed on September 30—Amata Kihara, the Hound Dogs, the giant winged monster, the injecting of the virus into Last Order, the silent attack on Academy City—it would have to do with the *many fragments lurking behind the scenes*.

“Misuzu Misaka occupies a representative-like position in the recovery movement. We know she is not purposely attempting to cause problems for us*, but even if it is a coincidence, it is*

nevertheless concerning… And so, we decided to nip this in the bud.*”*

For a moment, the drunk woman’s face crossed Accelerator’s mind.

She was an annoying person for sure, but that didn’t make it acceptable for her to be dragged into the world of darkness.

But he was too late.

The explosion had already happened. Misuzu Misaka had probably been blown to smithereens in that initial blast.

However, the voice on the phone said, *“Will you join them, Accelerator?*”

“What?”

“I’m saying it could go toward paying off your debt. We gave Skill-Out money, requesting them for this operation, but—well, they’re not very skillful. We’d decided bringing out Group for a problem of this size ran the risk of exposure, but it turns out that worked against us. If you would assist us, it would earn you quite a few points. It would be the first step toward repaying the damages incurred on September 30. Your debt is approximately eight trillion yen, and I know you want to repay that quickly.”

“…” Accelerator thought for a moment.

If the voice on the phone *was taking this seriously*, it meant Misuzu Misaka was still alive.

“I refuse.”

He cut the proposal down in two words.

“Skill-Out? Why would I do odd jobs with a bunch of Level Zero trash? Also, I don’t need to grovel to people like you and make *your* lives easier. I’m not here because of my debt.”

As Accelerator spoke, he checked the choker electrode on his neck.

He’d let loose today, but he still had some battery left.

More than enough to handle a group of idiot Skill-Outs.

He would *save* Misuzu Misaka.

That was the conclusion Accelerator naturally reached. He’d felt the same with the whole Amata Kihara business, too. Small lives in danger because of an unfairly large power. Even Accelerator couldn’t help but laugh at himself, but that was all it took to incite a loathing within him. Enough to make him want to give the people responsible for the situation a scare. Enough to make him remember the time he fought for Last Order.

As someone who claimed to be darkness.

But even though he was darkness…

“Someone like you might not understand this, but my life is my own. I don’t care what plans you have up there. I make the calls. Got that? I’m not your pawn, you hear me?”

“*I see. Well, if you will not take on this job, then please return home quickly,*” said the voice on the phone, sounding somewhat disappointed.

“I will hold on to your ability until then.”

Bwee!! His neck electrode made a strange electronic noise of its own accord.

What…?!

Accelerator hastily flicked the switch. Nothing. Just a clicking noise. It didn’t switch his ability on.

“You fucked with my electrode?!”

“Oh? Was there a matter you needed to use your ability for?”

Accelerator sucked his teeth. He’d given the choker-type electrode to Group’s engineering team temporarily so they could upgrade the battery. They must have planted something inside it. It probably had a safety in it that the voice on the phone could control remotely.

Don’t trust us.

The words Motoharu Tsuchimikado had spoken this morning suddenly felt a lot more real.

“If you have no further questions, I will be taking my leave. Sleep well, Accelerator.”

The call ended.

“Hmph.” Accelerator sniffed, bored. *This is good. Shit like this only gets me more riled up.*

A terrible light shone in his eyes.

Putting the phone back in his pocket, Accelerator clenched his teeth.

…All I can use is a single gun and about fifty bullets. I don’t know how many people, weapons, or power Skill-Out has committed. Can I get that drunk out of there with just this?

It would be tough, but it would certainly be easier than when he’d gone up against the Hound Dogs led by Amata Kihara. Skill-Out could take down average espers with weapons alone, but that didn’t mean they’d gone through any professional training.

The biggest problem right now was actually Misuzu.

The attack had already begun. Skill-Out may have been a Level Zero organization, but delinquents who had armed themselves with guns and protective gear were more than enough to threaten ordinary folk. In the worst case, they might kill Misuzu before Accelerator got there.

"…"

For just a moment, Ritoku Komaba's face flashed through his mind, but he ignored it.

He didn't have time to think about a villain who had tried to rise above his station.

Steeling his resolve, Accelerator arrogantly pushed onward.

That was all he needed.

Shit. Annoying problems are best solved quickly.

The location of the attack was the Dangai University database center.

It was several kilometers away. Accelerator couldn't go there on his crutch—he'd have to acquire a car somewhere. He changed course, heading toward a major road.

Clap!!

A certain boy suddenly dashed right past Accelerator.

"…"

It was a boy he remembered.

One, in fact, he could never forget.

Average height and build, black spiky hair, and his right hand balled into a fist. He was running, talking to someone on the phone as he went, toward the under-attack Dangai University, currently in flames. It was clear what he was going there to do. It would have been far harder for Accelerator *not* to imagine it.

That…bastard!!

Thanks to Accelerator being in a dark spot, the boy—his focus fully on the database center—didn't seem to notice him there at all. Of course, if they ran into each other here, they might have gotten into a death match. That was the kind of opponent the boy was.

Accelerator forced himself to shake his head and refocus.

Damn. Not him, not now. I need to take down Skill-Out. I don't give a flying fuck about what the higher-ups want. I'm not

obligated to go along with their plans. Just think about how I can solve this with fifty bullets.

Clenching his teeth hard, he started walking, crutch under him.

Mikoto Misaka's mother.

He didn't have a right to interfere in her life, but she also wasn't unrelated to the brat. Radio Noise didn't have any relatives, and Misuzu probably didn't know about that small life she had created, but even so, she *was* linked to the kid.

The two would probably never have a chance to meet, and it would absolutely be an issue if they did, but that didn't mean it was all right to let her die. That was probably something he couldn't lose in a place like this. Even if neither of them ever knew anything about the other.

Accelerator was a villain.

But he didn't place restrictions on himself for being one. He'd abandoned all those stupid assumptions, like villains not being able to save good people or not being able to walk a proper path in life because they weren't good guys.

Now, then.

Coming out onto a main street, eyes settling on the headlights of the taxi that had been hanging around to drive drunk people home, Academy City's strongest esper smiled thinly.

Let's pretend to be super-serious and do something completely out of character. I'll save you in a way that doesn't even resemble a rescue—by spilling blood everywhere.

5

A little while before all this.

Misuzu Misaka was in the database center.

The main building was shaped like a dome, about fifty meters across, with several smaller buildings of squarish construction around it. At first, Misuzu had been using the computers inside the dome to do her research, but she had since moved to one of the adjacent buildings.

There had been an emergency.

First, an earsplitting explosion. Next, all the lights in the facility had gone off. The simulators were the only things still up, probably because they had backup meant for protecting

data.

Wh-what? What the heck was that?

Holding her breath in one of the buildings next to the dome, in a space about as large as three school classrooms put together, Misuzu's nerves were on edge.

It felt like even her giddy, alcohol-driven mood had been washed away.

Large flames had seemed to break out at the same time as the explosion, but it appeared that had already been extinguished. The situation, indeed, seemed unexpected even for the people pattering back and forth just past this wall—in the main domed facility—they hadn't expected it, with voices calling out to one another:

"The hell?! Who forgot to cut the security?! Shit, we were supposed to take it out in the one attack and get out of here!!"

"How much time we got?! If they got an automatic report, it won't even be five minutes!"

"Well, we cut the normal security. The only alarms that activated were isolated to protect the simulators."

"Then it's just a fire alarm? Either way, we don't have much time… All right, let's find that woman."

Judging by their tones, they were young men, around middle school or high school age. Ten to twenty of them. Misuzu couldn't tell what they were holding, but the sound of clacking metal alone made her cringe. As far as she could tell by the explosion earlier, they could have firearms and explosives.

Woman. Find that woman? Was…was there someone here aside from me?

She was the only one using the facilities at this hour, and the guards had all been men… At least, that was what she thought. Considering how they were talking, their goal wasn't just robbery or sabotage, but "that woman."

Nope. I'm the only one here. I'm the only woman in this building! What the hell is going on here?!

Misuzu leaned against the wall and slid to the floor.

This appeared to be the room where they stored the less important processors. Metal shelves all lined up, like a library. Except, instead of thick books packed together, they were large motherboards covered in clear cases. They used liquid cooling for the CPUs, not air cooling, so she didn't hear any fan motors. Instead, countless tubes ran every which way like blood vessels.

With the fluorescent lights off, the only light in the room came from the red-and-green blinking access lights.

I… I need to find an exit. An emergency exit…

She looked around, but she didn't see any doors like that.

She couldn't escape. Once they found her, it was over. Once she accepted that, she grew, for whatever reason, a little excited. Maybe it was the alcohol being weird; she felt strange. Wrapped in a strange energy, like moments before starting a marathon. Earlier, she had felt like her drunkenness had been punched out of her, but some of it still remained. She would have liked to completely shake it off considering the situation, but it seemed she wasn't able to sober up that easily.

What is happening…?

Misuzu got her phone out of her pocket.

The first thing on her call history was a three-digit number. It was the emergency number for Anti-Skill, this city's peacekeeping agency. Even with the alcohol affecting her mind, she remembered that. Yes, she'd called them right after the attack had gone off, and a man with a polite tone of voice had answered her. The young men strutting about in the main dome-shaped building were afraid of warning reports being sent off automatically, but Misuzu had already made the call anyway. Several minutes had passed since then, so Anti-Skill must have already been on their way here.

But for some reason, it seemed nobody had shown up.

…But why?

Misuzu couldn't help but stare dubiously at her call history.

The number there was unmistakable. She *had* contacted an Anti-Skill station. But nobody was actually coming. Anxiety crossed her mind. Had it really been Anti-Skill? Who, exactly, was that *man with the strangely polite tone of voice*?

Why? Why aren't they coming?! I know I called them. I didn't mess anything up! Why do I have to be the loser here?!

Misuzu's fingertips started trembling harder.

Her fear, which had been initially dispersed by the booze, finally crept back into her mind.

Any noise at all would spell her doom, and yet she wanted to forget everything and scream.

I can't do this alone. Can't do it alone. They'll corner me by

myself. I need to talk to someone—to anyone, I just need to tell all this to someone before I explode.

Misuzu opened her phone's contact list.

For some reason, at this time, she didn't think of her husband. She could contact a third party outside Academy City and have *them* report this to the police, but Academy City had near-complete control in terms of internal policing and wouldn't allow other police departments to interfere in their jurisdiction. (The majority opinion, though, was that they didn't have independent laws, but rather regulations, which was nothing more than an expedient to guard Japan's national pride.) That meant that even if she contacted a third party, it would have to be someone inside the city.

But she hesitated to call her own daughter. That would probably spell the end of her pride as her mother. If Misuzu showed weakness and relied on her, she would never be able to call herself a parent again.

It had to be someone inside Academy City that she could contact right away.

Someone other than her own daughter.

There was only one person who fit that description.

Ha-ha…

Misuzu pressed her phone buttons with her thumb.

In order to lighten the pressure threatening to crush her, if even by a little, she called a certain boy.

6

Academy City's last trains and buses coincided with the final school closing time.

"Damn it!!"

So all Kamijou could do was run through the dark streets. Seriously starting to consider getting a scooter license soon, he kept on running toward his destination, the Dangai University database center.

As he did, he shouted into the phone at his ear. "Mrs. Misaka, you said those guys making a mess over there had guns, right? It's probably Skill-Out. If it was a bunch of regular espers, they'd be relying on their powers instead!"

"Um, I don't really know what 'Skill-Out' is…"

"They're basically an armed gang. A group of delinquents

with seriously dangerous weapons!”

Finally, the facility’s silhouette came within view.

As he ran, Kamijou realized that the flames he’d seen earlier were gone now. Just as Misuzu had reported, the database center’s automatic extinguishers had kicked in.

“These delinquents—why would they be after me?”

“Well… I don’t know,” Kamijou admitted, wondering if it had to do with Mikoto—and then he realized it. “Did you call your daughter?”

“Huh?”

“She’s a Level Five. There’s only seven of them in Academy City. She’ll be way more useful than regular Anti-Skill officers! If you haven’t called her yet, I can—”

“*Wait!!*” interrupted Misuzu in the firmest tone he’d heard from her yet. *“That’s a hard no from me! It’s not about how much she can bring to the table. If I get her mixed up in this, I won’t be able to face her anymore!!”*

Normally, Kamijou would have thought that opinion irresponsible. That she sounded like she was just reading what she was supposed to say from a newspaper.

But Misuzu’s life was actively under threat. And in that situation, she had immediately rejected involving Mikoto.

“…All right,” he said as he ran, squeezing the phone harder. “Then I’ll go. The sub-arithmetic logic unit warehouse is where I’m sneaking in, all right?!”

“Huh? No, wait—I wasn’t asking that of you!!”

So hard to please, Kamijou thought.

The database center was already just a stone’s throw away.

The facilities were adjacent to the Dangai University campus, but the database center was almost twice the size of the main college. He could already hear the odd gunshot or the sound of shattering glass from inside the domed silhouette. Quite a few onlookers had come to check out the disturbance, probably drawn in by that big explosion at the start. In contrast, though, there were hardly any Anti-Skill officers around. They were hiding behind cars, using a radio to request backup, as though they were afraid of potential snipers. But something was wrong; they were practically arguing with one another.

Kamijou sped by them and ran straight for the building.

The officers yelled from behind for him to stop, but he put them out of his mind.

I've gone toe to toe with Skill-Out a whole bunch of times in the past, but…

Fortunately for him, at least, they seemed to have their hands full searching the facilities and weren't paying enough attention to the outside. Even when he ran through the cover-less plaza, nobody shot at him.

…Generally, my only two options were either to run away or hide around a corner to counterattack. I don't think I've ever jumped straight into things like this!

This one was going to be a pain, he thought, as he jumped through the completely smashed front door glass.

7

Shiage Hamazura was pissed.

The original plan was to go to the facility with a stolen car under cover of night, fire homemade incendiary rockets at it, and flee. That was it. They'd been told, ahead of time, what places to burn so that it would block off all exits, getting the smoke to efficiently fill up the inside.

Their first blunder had come when three out of the eight rockets had turned out to be duds.

And even the five that went off were immediately extinguished by the database center's automatic extinguishers. The explosions had twisted the building's superstructure, but not enough to completely destroy one part of the outside wall, which was covered in soap-like bubbles. If their main weapons —the flames and the smoke—were useless, their target would probably survive.

Now Hamazura and the others couldn't leave. Now they had to kill the target personally.

To make matters worse…

"Haven't we found that woman yet…?"

All they'd been given by the person who'd made this request was a photograph; they knew nothing of the woman herself, not even her name. If she escaped the facilities, donned sunglasses and a knit hat to hide her facial features, and blended in with a crowd, they'd have no way of searching for her. They *had* to deal with her right here, right now.

"I *said*, haven't we found her yet, damn it?!" he shouted in a deep voice, but the other Skill-Out guys only glanced his way,

not saying much of anything, resuming their search.

Yes—*other* Skill-Out guys.

Until a few hours ago, they'd all been led by a man named Ritoku Komaba. Now that he'd disappeared, Hamazura had slid into the top seat, but the new chain of command hadn't been properly hammered out yet. In fact, it *felt* like there was a lot of dissatisfaction in the air. If this mission ended in failure, they'd immediately push all the responsibility on him.

The differences between Ritoku Komaba and Shiage Hamazura were clear as day. Komaba naturally stood in the middle of people, at their center, but Hamazura just forced people to do the shit he didn't want to do himself. It was like a foreign body sensation, and it wouldn't go away no matter how well they did their jobs. He'd never get rid of his sense of being out of place in the eyes of others.

He knew that, and that was why he was pissed.

Their as-yet unspotted target, this command-structureless method of searching—all of it was starting to seem like acts of betrayal, holding him back.

Irritation evident on his face, Hamazura fiddled with his nose ring. He'd just had it pierced last month, but it was incredibly bothersome. The subtle sensation threw off his focus, and worst of all, it collected sweat.

"…No turning back. There's no turning back for us. Damn it, Komaba. You put together this big, crazy plan, then went and flopped over on your own. What the hell are the rest of us supposed to do now…?"

Then several of the young men gathered in front of a door.

They seemed to have found a room they hadn't searched yet. Generally, none of the doors in the facility were locked. The boys entered without issue, and Hamazura heard a woman's short shriek from within.

Looked like they'd found her.

Nobody bothered to use their radio, so Hamazura, without a choice, decided to give instructions to those searching other locations. *I'm more like an errand boy than a leader*, he thought, heading for the room a few moments after the others.

"This is the central dome crew. Target spotted in the sub-ALU warehouse. We'll deal with her, so I want the rest of you prepping our escape. Bring the car around."

He figured he'd get an unenergetic "okay" in response.

“Gah?! You—bastard, wait—zhzhhzhzhhzh!!”

A nonsensical cry came through instead, followed by ear-piercing static.

As if that wasn’t enough, he heard two gunshots from somewhere in the same facility.

Anti-Skill? Damn, we took too long!

Watching the target as the others dragged her from the room by the scruff of her neck, Hamazura started considering what instructions he should give over the radio, but then:

“Why, hello there, shitheads!”

Hamazura’s shoulders gave a start.

He could tell even through the poor sound quality on the radio—that was clearly *not* one of his people. You didn’t hear a voice like this much, one that sounded like metal scraping together. And the person wasn’t even trying to hide anything, either. His unique voice came through, loud and clear.

“Attention all units. All you Skill-Out bastards have just won a free one-day trip to paradise. Boy, is it a good deal! It’s so good you may not even want to come back. Anyway, time to enjoy some near-death experiences.”

After saying all that, Accelerator cut the transmission.

A moment later…

…earsplitting gunshots began to ring out.

8

Touma Kamijou pushed his back up against a corner of the passage.

In both hands, he held a rectangular pane of bulletproof glass he’d taken from a window. It was heavy, somewhere from seven to ten kilograms, about a meter to a side.

He’d picked it up at some point inside the facilities, but it probably wasn’t *that* bulletproof. After all, the glass panes on the front door—which should have been the strongest—had all been shattered in the attack.

But it was better than nothing.

Skill-Out frequently carried guns with them.

If nothing else, he felt like this was safer than stuffing a bunch of manga magazines under his shirt.

“…”

At his feet lay an unconscious man holding a taser. Kamijou

had hid here in ambush, and as soon as he saw the guy, he'd swung the bulletproof glass as hard as he could, sending the stainless steel edge crashing into his target's nose. The man fell over like he'd stepped on a banana peel and lay still.

Kamijou had already taken out about four Skill-Out guys like this.

When fighting against people who had weapons, the rule was to never give them an opportunity to attack. If they had clashed in a straight-up fight, Kamijou would have already lost. On the other hand, though, he didn't need to fear *any* weapon as long as he could prevent it from being used beforehand. Blade, gun—the principle worked the same.

If they'd been moving in groups of two or three, I wouldn't have been able to use this tactic... Thanks for being stupid, you guys. Every single one of you, walking around alone. Maybe figure out how to use your numbers a little better.

Kamijou picked up the taser.

He'd been confiscating the weapons from all the Skill-Out members he'd taken down, but in this case, it was less because it was a weapon and more that he didn't want to let it fall into enemy hands again.

Either way, with the bulletproof glass pane taking up both his hands, he wouldn't be able to use a second weapon.

"All right... Now where's this sub-ALU warehouse?" Kamijou murmured, adjusting his grip on the big glass sheet.

The database center featured a domed facility in the middle, with several smaller two- and three-story buildings connected to it.

He doubted Skill-Out would be gathered anywhere other than the main facility, so Kamijou was using the access passages between the smaller buildings around the dome to make his approach in a roundabout fashion.

A few of the places were ones he could only enter from the dome, but Kamijou hadn't hit a dead end yet. For now, deciding to use the connecting hallways to go around a full time, he started toward the next building.

Bam! Bang!! He heard gunshots.

"...?!"

For a moment, a chill ran down his spine. Was he too late? But as far as he could tell from the ensuing commotion, the hornet's nest had just been poked. Misuzu didn't have a gun, of

course. Which meant someone else was in combat with them now.

Anti-Skill? Or maybe Skill-Out is fighting itself? Well, doesn't matter. This is my chance!!

Each time Kamijou came to a passage corner, he'd carefully look around the other way to make sure nobody was there before moving to the next building.

But before long, he ran into a dead end.

More precisely, the only hallway left was the one leading directly into the main domed building.

Crap, figures this would happen! But I can't stop here!

He ran down the hallway for now, getting closer to the door that led to the central dome.

Then he quieted, reached out with a hand, and—after hesitating once—slowly touched the doorknob.

With the delicate motions of a bomb defuser, he carefully twisted the knob around and around. He heard the hard click of the door mechanism moving. The door opened, revealing a very thin crack.

Kamijou peered inside.

Circular office desks were set up like the concentric rings in a tree stump, and countless computers were on them. The facility's lights were off, but the room was bathed in the dull glow of the monitors.

In one corner of the domed building were four or five young men, standing stiffly.

And at their center was a woman who had to be Misuzu Misaka, forced to sit there.

They were about ten meters away, but those kids must have higher-ranking members of Skill-Out, since they all carried guns. If Kamijou was careless in his approach, he wouldn't be able to prevent them from riddling her with holes.

...The situation's so bad I almost want to laugh. How the hell am I supposed to save her?!

The young men seemed to be arguing. They appeared to be split over what to do about the current gunfire in the facilities; some wanted to kill Misuzu now and get out, while others wanted to use her as a hostage.

The ones on the "kill" team would push their guns against Misuzu's head, and the ones on the "hostage" team would push those guns away before the process repeated itself. Even if they

didn't honestly intend to kill her, someone's finger could accidentally slip and pull the trigger.

"Damn it…," Kamijou murmured, withdrawing from the door for a moment.

Four or five of them. All of them armed. Can't exactly shout and charge in.

He checked the weapons he'd taken off the Skill-Out goons.

He had a taser, a police baton, and even a long-range insecticide probably meant to stand in for tear gas. Not only were all of them unreliable…

…but since my hands are taken up by this shield, I'll have to decide to either attack or defend. Not both…

Kamijou glanced at his large bulletproof glass pane again. *No, I can't get rid of this. Tasers and insecticide can't disable someone wielding a gun in one hit. And if I can't do that, they'll definitely have an opening to counterattack.*

Which meant he'd just have to enter the dome with it in hand.

Kamijou reaffirmed his grip on the pane, his palms slick with sweat. He got close to the metal door and cracked it open again.

No change in the situation.

Four or five young men arguing; Misuzu surrounded.

They were about ten meters away, but the rows of computer-laden desks were in the way.

He couldn't go straight toward them.

So far away.

But then Kamijou spotted a slightly dirty bag near him by the entrance. It had been tossed aside on the floor right next to a desk. It probably belonged to Skill-Out. It was unlatched and open, and an object that looked like a spray can—and a gun—peeked out at him.

"…" Kamijou gulped.

The bag was about three meters away; he wouldn't be able to reach it from where he was. If he was going to grab the gun, he'd still need to open the door some more and sneak into the dome.

Can I…do it?

The facility's power was off. The only illumination came from the computers, which were running on emergency power supplies, and they only dimly lit the air. It was virtually pitch-black around Kamijou's feet.

On top of that, the dome's floor was covered in a short-fibered carpet.

He'd never be able to sneak all the way up to Misuzu and sneak her back out.

But if it was only three meters…

If he could just get that gun, leaving aside whether he'd actually fire the thing…

He wouldn't have to go down to Misuzu, who was in the middle of a crowd.

If he could go three meters in a situation where nobody had noticed him yet…

…*It's my only choice*, he thought, regripping the glass sheet's frame. *I have no idea how to use a firearm, but if it's an equal weapon to what they have, I should be able to threaten them, at least. And I have this bulletproof glass. I should have the advantage even if things turn sour.*

Forcing himself to focus on the bright side, he flexed his trembling legs and placed his palm on the surface of the slightly ajar metal door.

Slowly, he pushed it forward.

The Skill-Out guys didn't seem to notice the door moving a little. Crouching, Kamijou walked into the dome. Slowly, carefully. Just three meters—that distance to the bag with the gun in it felt terribly far to him.

And then, Kamijou's eyes met Misuzu's, ten meters away.

"Huh?"

The moment Misuzu accidentally let out a grunt, everyone from Skill-Out looked toward Kamijou.

In a flash, Kamijou dove behind the nearest desk. *What is she, some kind of moron?!*

He was shaking, but now he couldn't do anything. They might not have been able to see where he was hiding, but it would be obvious the door was unnaturally open.

Kamijou could hear someone coming his way.

Since he was hiding behind the desk, he couldn't see the person's features or weapons.

Only the clicking and clacking of footsteps.

The footfalls came in an irregular rhythm because of the carpet. He might have been checking to see if any footprints

were left behind. Kamijou doubted the person could check accurately in the dark, but if they were to find him, it would all be over.

What about the gun?!

Kamijou glanced around him, still lowered, but the bag on the floor was across the narrow aisle running between the desks. He could probably reach it, but if he did that, they'd spot him immediately.

Imagine Breaker wouldn't work against their guns.

He felt a cold sweat break out along his back.

His heartbeat seemed to dominate his ears.

Damn it… His teeth nearly started to chatter.

It may have been the extreme tension, but the more he tried to hold his breath, the more raggedly it escaped him.

From his blind position, he could only hear the footsteps.

I've gotta do it. They'll find me for sure at this rate. I have to do it! One hit. Land one hit to scare him, then I'll manage. Before he can regroup, I'll dive for the bag with the gun and turn the tables!!

Just then…

Crack.

The big bag right next to him was trampled on.

He couldn't wait any longer.

If he waited, it would only give the opponent the initiative.

"!!"

Kamijou inhaled deeply, then launched himself out of his crouch and out from the cover of the executive desk. As he sprang up, he swung the glass pane sideways.

A tall man with a nose ring looked baffled.

A moment later, his face disappeared from Kamijou's sight. *Wham!!* came the dull noise as the Skill-Out member's body slammed into the floor. Kamijou must have cut flesh, because the metallic nose ring floated by itself in the air for a moment.

One down.

But there was no joy on Kamijou's face.

The bag with the gun in it was right there, but he'd forgotten to even reach out for it.

Right in front of him, not even a meter away, stood another young man, whose face was oddly pale.

Two people came to check?!

Kamijou unconsciously stiffened up, but so did the young man, apparently. The person, aside from the fact that he was holding a gun, was a student with no training or experience. He probably couldn't hide his confusion at seeing his colleague suddenly knocked out.

He heard a small *tink*.

The nose ring floating in the air had hit the floor.

""…!!""

Kamijou and the pale-faced young man moved at the same time, but right then, something else happened:

A different man who had been waiting by Misuzu pointed his gun at Kamijou. A sharp *clack* rang out—he must have cocked the hammer back with his thumb. Two captors were near Misuzu, and one of them… One of them, with thin chains around his arms, gripped his gun with trembling hands. The other one nearby—a young man with dozens of rips in his shirt and pants—tried to stop him, but the trigger was pulled before that.

"You can't be serious—!!"

The shout came not from Kamijou, but from the pale-faced kid next to him.

But the gunshots continued.

Bam, bang, bgree!! came the sounds, not quite roars and not quite booms.

Kamijou, who had immediately brought the bulletproof glass up, felt a stinging pain shoot through his wrists. No bullets had struck him; the impacts on the glass had transferred to his bones.

Meanwhile, the amateur near Kamijou was blasted to the floor like he'd been struck by a hammer. Kamijou clenched his teeth, noticing the dark-red liquid coming out of the kid's side, but he couldn't do anything for him right now.

For a moment, he wondered whether to hide behind something.

Damn it! No, I've gotta stop that *from happening…!!*

Glass before him, Kamijou dashed for Misuzu—or rather, the two people standing next to her.

About ten meters separated them.

Kamijou ran, twisting around the lines of desks.

Then the next gunshot came.

The bullet struck the window's surface, but that alone sent Kamijou's upper body reeling backward. He tried to regain his balance, but another bullet connected with the glass, forcing the frame out of his hands.

With a metallic crash, the large window fell to the floor.

There was no time to pick it up again.

When Kamijou looked up from his hands, which were sweating from pain and nervousness, he found two muzzles glaring at him. This time, it wasn't just the man with the chains —the one with the ripped pants wouldn't hesitate, either.

Just five meters.

The fluorescent lights were off, but Kamijou could still see the faces of the young men from Skill-Out. On one of them, Kamijou definitely saw a line of sweat trickling from his nose to the corner of his lips. His aim quivered; his index finger moved awkwardly, like a rusted doll. And in a moment of total silence, *that* sight burned itself into Kamijou's retinas.

And last, Kamijou found Misuzu's face out of the corner of his eye.

She was sitting on the floor, baffled, shouting something.

Her lips were moving, but the words didn't register for Kamijou.

It was like time had stopped. He couldn't move a single finger.

Zzz-bang!! came a high-pitched gunshot.

And then sound returned to normal.

In that moment, Kamijou thought his heart had literally stopped.

But he found his body hadn't sprouted any new nine-millimeter holes. He saw one of the people pointing a gun at him, the man with the chains around his limbs, had been blown sideways in an unnatural way. A spurt of dark-red blood trailed behind him, and then he crumpled to the floor helplessly.

Kamijou heard Misuzu raise a wordless scream.

The young man in the ripped pants spun around, looking to the side—toward a different entrance than the one Kamijou had used.

Someone had shot the Skill-Out guy from there.

"You—bastard!!" the kid shouted.

The paralysis affecting Kamijou's senses finally dissipated.

As though he had regained his flexibility by breaking a hardened string, Kamijou immediately hid himself under a nearby desk.

Maintaining his posture, he shouted to Misuzu, who was sitting there in a daze a few meters away, "Get down!!"

Despite his shout, Misuzu continued being flabbergasted and didn't move.

"Mrs. Misaka, get down!!"

A bang and a boom of gunshots cut off Kamijou's cry.

He didn't know who had started this firefight, but at this rate, Misuzu could get hit by a stray bullet.

Damn it!! Kamijou, hidden under the desk, took a shallow breath. *Can I do it…? Shit, I just have to charge right in!!*

Still bent low to the ground, he burst out from behind his cover.

He ran the five-meter distance, barreled into Misuzu—who was still sitting on the floor—then pushed her all the way down, covering her with his body.

The gunshots continued.

"Let's run…"

He didn't need to do something crazy to stop this fight.

"Now!!"

Kamijou grabbed Misuzu's arm and started running so they could escape this dome as soon as possible.

9

Accelerator, upon stepping into the main domed facility, decided, for the moment, to put a bullet in anyone holding a gun. He started with one of the two standing near Misuzu, aiming his muzzle at a man with chains around his limbs before casually pulling the trigger.

Bam! came the dry noise.

Seeing the man blown to the side, blood spurting from his torso, Misuzu, who was sitting nearby, let out a short shriek.

Being human could be such an inconvenience.

No matter how big your body was, all it took was a single nine-millimeter hole to take you down.

"You—bastard!!"

The remaining Skill-Out guy, shouting something, brought

his weapon to bear, but Accelerator waited out several bullets behind the metal door, then sprayed gunfire in response.

The man with the tears in his shirt and jeans hid behind a desk, but Accelerator ignored it, shooting through the desk to get to him, thus silencing him.

Anyway. How many Skill-Out are left…?

"There we are."

Accelerator turned his muzzle toward a black shadow dragging Misuzu's arm in an attempt to get to the exit door and casually fired.

"Owaahhhh?!"

He heard an exaggerated scream, but the bullet missed the figure slightly to the side. Accelerator must have been too conscious of Misuzu being next to the target. He'd clearly been lax in his aim.

The figure continued to run, with Misuzu in tow, to escape the muzzle. Apparently, the idea of putting his hands up and stopping never crossed his mind.

Accelerator tsked. "Really? Interesting… Still loyal to your client? You've got balls."

A smile split across Accelerator's mouth. He reaffirmed his grip on his gun and took aim.

"Hey, you worthless piece of shit! I'll turn you into scrap!!"

"Shut up already, idiot! What did Misuzu ever do?! Not only are you after someone innocent, but now you're fighting among yourselves!! I don't care what happens to you—you could all die for all I care!!"

The annoyingly loud voice reached Accelerator's ears, but Accelerator ignored it, focusing on his trigger finger. However, Misuzu's back was still in the way, and he couldn't fire.

While he was trying to take aim, the two of them ran through another exit.

Accelerator scratched himself with the hot barrel of his gun.

…Wait? Fighting among ourselves?

He thought about the words for a moment.

Which means he thought I was one of them. Does that make him someone from outside Skill-Out? Misuzu Misaka should have been the only one scheduled to use these facilities… Was it Judgment or something?

It also bothered him how the kid hadn't used a gun and fought back. His movements certainly hadn't looked trained.

And I don't get how he knew the woman's name... Though maybe they're not acquainted, and Skill-Out actually did get ahold of her name.

Deciding to aim his gun that way and fire a few parting shots anyway, Accelerator proceeded farther into the domed facility.

"Now, then."



For now, he decided to chase down the figure that had run off with his target.

He didn't know who that figure was, but he hadn't killed Misuzu and run away by himself. In the worst case, even if that person was with Skill-Out, he clearly didn't intend to kill Misuzu before going to a safe location. The fact that the stranger hadn't opened fire when Accelerator had stepped into the dome meant he probably didn't have a gun.

Which meant…

I'll just have to catch up to him before he leaves the premises and take care of him.

So he thought, but then the pattering of multiple footsteps in several directions reached his ears.

They'd probably heard the firefight earlier.

It probably wouldn't be easy to get much farther.

I'll just have to fall back and deal with them first. The desks in here won't provide hard cover against bullets.

Searching for a place to fight, Accelerator glanced around, then suddenly stopped.

There were three pieces of trash now collapsed in the dome.

But there were four guns on the floor.

10

Kamijou and Misaka went through the hallway that ran from the main dome facility to another smaller, rectangular building, then used an emergency exit there to finally get outside.

Curious onlookers had gathered by the front entrance, but the two of them had emerged from a back door into an empty area.

Pulling on Misuzu's hand, Kamijou said, "For now, let's go somewhere with more people. Rubberneckers and Anti-Skill are out front, so if we go around to them, we should be pretty safe."

Misuzu sighed. "Despite all the talk, you're still just a boy. And I relied on you from start to finish. You really are eclipsing my title of *guardian*."

She was oddly dejected, but it would have been harder to tell her to stay resolute in that situation. Frankly, Kamijou didn't want to do that ever again, either.

So instead of blaming her too much, he decided to urge her onward.

“Quick. We managed to get outside, but it’s not like we got rid of all of them. If we get attacked again here, we’ll have to start from scratch.”

“Yes, yes. Thank you for escorting a lady by the hand,” said Misuzu.

Kamijou suddenly got embarrassed. He tried to release her hand from his grip, but Misuzu grabbed his hand instead.

She appeared to be teasing him, but maybe she was actually seriously scared beneath the surface.

Kamijou decided not to argue and to focus on getting away from the premises.

The dome was about fifty meters across, and even combined with the buildings around it, the place wasn’t that big. It would only be a few minutes’ walk to the front entrance. They’d escaped the most dangerous situation, so Kamijou thought they were safer than he let on. As long as these guys weren’t the type to try to kill them along with the bystanders, getting to the front entrance would probably cause Skill-Out to retreat on their own.

However.

“Don’t move.”

A figure stood there, blocking their path to the front entrance.

It was the one Kamijou had hit with the bulletproof glass in that dome. He’d probably woken up shortly after. His nose had a dark-red color stuck to it, maybe due to his nose ring getting yanked out. Despite the situation being what it was, Kamijou should still have tied him up while he was unconscious.

“Don’t you dare move… Who the hell are you? Why did you come here at the worst time? Was that request a fake after all? Have we been tricked…?”

Kamijou frowned. “Request?”

“Why is *that* your question? You know what this is all about. Komaba went and got himself killed, and now I have to be the one to lead them in his place. This is me dealing with the aftermath. I figured I had to curry favor with *them* in order to avoid their back-alley crackdown … Damn it. Were they just trying to get rid of us from the beginning?!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” said Kamijou,

putting together the fragmentary words. “But I only came here because I got a phone call. From her. I don’t know what you’re imagining, but my circumstances aren’t very complicated.”

The man’s mouth hung open.

And then he grinned.

“Ha-ha…” He began to laugh mirthlessly. “So what, then? There’s almost no doubt we’re all about to retire and get caught by Anti-Skill, yet you, in the middle of all this, barely even have a motive? My life as Shiage Hamazura is about to end, and this is the finale… Couldn’t you have lied and said it was all some giant conspiracy, or planned by a genius tactician, or *something*? Ha-ha-ha. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

The man, who called himself Hamazura, reached behind him as he spoke.

It must have been tucked in his pants belt.

His hand came out with a retractable police baton, which he gave a shake to extend.

“I can’t deal with this. I’ll need to beat you to death to be satisfied.”

Hamazura immediately dashed for Kamijou.

Kamijou pushed Misuzu to the side.

Because of that, he lost valuable moments, and he heard the whoosh of wind at his ears. It was like a tennis racket swinging —and it was, of course, a baton.

“!!”

Kamijou put his left arm up instantly to protect his face.

The strike, which had aimed for his temple, gave off a dull noise as it connected with a spot lower than Kamijou’s wrist.

A terrible creaking raced through his bones.

As he winced in pain, Hamazura gave him a hard knee in the side.

Bam!! It roared like a beaten drum.

“Guh, ah!!”

All the air came rushing out of Kamijou’s mouth.

The impact sent him sprawling to the ground, along with everything that was tucked into his belt. The self-defense weapons he’d stolen from the Skill-Out members he’d taken down—tasers and police batons and such.

Damn it! Imagine Breaker won’t work on a Level Zero!!

Gritting his teeth, Kamijou quickly crouched to pick up the taser on the damp ground.

"Did you think I'd just let you do that?"

Hamazura's sole crunched down on Kamijou's hand after it grasped the weapon.

Kamijou didn't even have time to feel the dull pain.

"Nobody knows better than us how to use these things!!"

An awful *boom* resounded.

Hamazura, still stepping on Kamijou's hand, had used his other leg to kick Kamijou in the jaw.

"Brgh?!"

Kamijou's consciousness wavered.

But maybe he was just lucky he hadn't bitten his tongue.

Kamijou's body keeled over backward like a bridge, then fell to the ground faceup. Misuzu let out a quiet cry, but Kamijou couldn't think about that now. He scooped up some dirt from the ground and flung it toward Hamazura's face.

"!!"

It didn't blind Hamazura, since he'd covered his face with a hand, but he still flinched backward a bit.

Kamijou swiftly rose, then kept himself low and tackled Hamazura's gut with all the strength he could muster. A roaring *thump* rose from his shoulders, as though he'd broken through a doorframe.

Hamazura's legs scraped across the ground.

But he still didn't fall over backward.

This guy…?!

"Sorry, but I'm a Level Zero."

Kamijou heard the quiet voice right next to his ear.

Hamazura was speaking to him, while he had his arms around Hamazura's body, from point-blank range.

"Gotta have a strong body to go toe to toe with espers in back alleys. Man, it really is stupid. We're out here doing the same stuff as athletes, but where's *our* applause?!"

The butt of the police baton slammed into the back of Kamijou's neck.

There was a *crack*, and a new sharp pain Kamijou hadn't anticipated shot through his whole body.

As he moaned, the baton came down a few more times. Then Hamazura used his left hand, which wasn't holding the baton, to grab Kamijou's chest before he staggered and fell.

Hamazura laughed, right up close to him.

“Ohhh. Wait, I get it. If you’re not with them, our deal with them is still valid. If I take the corpse of their target to them, maybe we can even get them to protect us. Ha-ha-ha!!”

But those words were, perhaps, a mistake.

Gree!!

A clear power resided in the light given off by the eyes of Kamijou, who by all estimations should have been exhausted by now.

“You try…saying that again…you asshole!!” he roared, slamming his own forehead into Hamazura’s jaw and lower lip. With a cracking like a flowerpot falling from a high place, Hamazura’s neck reeled backward.

And then, Kamijou rammed his clenched fist into the crown of Hamazura’s nose.

Hamazura’s body, which had formed a bridge, immediately crashed to the ground.

“Agahhhh!!”

Kamijou tried to use his feet to follow up on his attacks as Hamazura rolled, holding his nose. However, his footing was wobbly; maybe the damage had affected him more than he’d thought.

“Damn… You fight so recklessly.”

Meanwhile, Hamazura managed to get himself on his feet.

His lips were bright red; the head-butt earlier must have broken his front teeth.

“Quit dragging this out and give us that woman’s corpse. That’s the deal we had. Komaba failed, so we don’t have any other way out. We *have* to fulfill this request…”

Despite having been on the offensive so much, Hamazura’s words were strangely weak.

Kamijou frowned, then realized why.

They had formed this group of Level Zeroes because they feared unilateral attacks from the strong.

That was why, no matter how much strength they gained, they weren’t used to people seriously punching them.

Kamijou thought about it but then spat.

“Don’t be a moron,” he said, reflecting on how the words dug into him at the same time. “All this request bullshit? You think I’ll let you kill someone for no reason like it’s some kind of *homework*? Does human life mean nothing to you? You really

believe you can put it on a scale with money and goods? That's the stupidest shit I've ever heard!!"

"We can't help it. If we don't do stuff like this, we Level Zeroes can't survive! No matter where we go, we're made fools of, and whenever we make places for ourselves, they destroy them all and call it city beautification or some shit… What other path do Level Zeroes have aside from preying on others?! You tell me!!"

Skill-Out.

A self-defense group formed by Level Zeroes.

There must have been a good reason they had to make such a thing to defend themselves.

Events where violence and unfairness reigned, the kind that would never be brought out in the daylight.

However.

"…Don't lump me in with you."

"What?"

"Don't lump all Level Zeroes in with you shitheads!"

"You're… That's right. What is your ability…? You haven't used it even once…," murmured Hamazura, wiping the blood from his mouth, glancing around.

Kamijou ignored him and said what he wanted to say. "Of course Level Zeroes have a place to be. You want to know if there's a way to live other than preying on others? Of course there is!! There's tons of Level Zeroes all over Academy City. And they all go to school like normal kids, make friends like normal kids, and live their lives like normal kids! What do you mean, you get made fools of wherever you go? That kind of thinking is the number one thing making fools of Level Zeroes!!"

"Wait. Are you…? You're the same as us…!!"

"I'm *not* the same. At least, I don't do the shit you guys do. I don't attack people who have power just because I don't have any! I may be a Level Zero, but I haven't fallen so far that I get my kicks from making life worse for others!"

"Fallen?" repeated Hamazura, frowning. "You think we've *fallen* down? That's ridiculous. We've *ascended*! Skill-Out is a hundred times better than those guys who discriminate against us for not having power, and they don't give us any of theirs if they have it!!"

"Then have you ever reached out to help anyone who needed

it?”

“…?!”

“If you can’t answer that, then you’re the same as they are. This is ridiculous. Who’s going to do anything to save people who won’t let others borrow their strength? Who would ever want to get involved with people who act like their happiness is a right but don’t even think about others being happy?! In the end, all the problems come back to you!!”

It was all getting just so stupid that Kamijou couldn’t help yelling.

This Level Zero was altogether too weak.



And on top of being weak, he tried to reason his weakness away. Because of that, he never grew.

“If you had used the power you used to make Skill-Out to help people weaker than you, everything would be different!! If you used that power you have to fight against strong espers to help those in trouble, you’d all be accepted by the people of Academy City!! I don’t understand why I even have to spell any of this out for you!!”

“Shut up!!” shouted Hamazura, face twisting. “That’s how our Level Zero leader, Ritoku Komaba, lived his life, and he just got killed earlier today. Trying to protect the weak, even though it wasn’t his place! In the end, we can’t do the same amazing things as him. If back-alley dropouts like us tried to do what he did, society would just look down their noses at us!!”

“Is that right? But he had something that you don’t. I don’t know what kind of person he was, but his world must have been a lot bigger than yours! Isn’t that why he fought until the end without running away? To protect his own, without calling them weak! Did people really look down their noses at Komaba? I bet he fought and died for it. He tried to protect his own even if it meant dying! That was why he was revered in Skill-Out, right? Unlike you!!”

“How dare you…”

A few heavy words escaped Hamazura’s lips.

The words seemed to be teeming with filth.

“How dare you talk down to me like that! You’re a Level Zero! You don’t have any real strength! How dare you act so high-and-mighty!!”

Hamazura regripped his police baton and charged in, his legs trembling.

Kamijou clenched his fist.

He wasn’t scared of this guy anymore.

Now that he’d peeled away the monster’s skin, this was *all* he was.

“You haven’t been mocked because you lack power. And I’ll prove it to you right now.”

Ignoring Misuzu as she tried to stop him, Kamijou took an intentional step forward.

Not even thinking about the baton headed his way, he simply gripped his own fist more tightly.

“This is the difference between you and me! You can do something about those stupid illusions yourself, you ass!!”

A dull *wham* rang out.

The police baton and the fist each slammed into their respective targets. Blood spilled from cracked foreheads, and both of them wobbled as they lost their balance.

But only one of them fell.

The other would *never* fall.

11

Kamijou wanted to just go back to his dorm and sleep, but Misuzu insisted his blood loss was awful and not to be trifled with, so he ended up waiting for an ambulance. A big reason for his initial refusal, as pathetic as it sounded, was that the medical fees and hospital bill would strain his finances.

With that, he was now lying in a stretcher, the first stage in getting into the ambulance. Along with the ambulance crew wearing white helmets was, for some reason, Misuzu, who was peeking out at him.

“Academy City really isn’t safe after all. Well, I guess no city is safe. Maybe there’s nowhere in the country we can safely leave our children.”

Kamijou couldn’t hear much of what Misuzu said over the clattering of the stretcher’s wheels.

“...To tell the truth, I came to bring Mikoto back.”

But those words, for whatever reason, rang oddly clearly.

Misuzu’s eyes lowered. “It’ll get dangerous if a war starts. The news said Academy City is safer than any other city in Japan, but we could just flee overseas in that case. It’s a shame about the university I attend, but I’ll have to take an extended absence. I could take a year off just fine anyway, and I don’t have any intention to quit yet—I *was* serious about writing that report, though.”

She said that with a laugh. It must have come out naturally when she looked at Kamijou’s face.

“But, well, I’m more at ease now.”

Before Kamijou could ask *about what*, she continued.

“In the end, my problem is the same as his, from before. No matter where we run, nowhere is truly safe. People in those

other places can change their minds all they like. Which means, instead of carelessly changing where that girl lives, it might be safer to put her near a kid like you."

In the meantime, they reached the ambulance. Kamijou felt a little shaking near his back; maybe they were folding in the legs under the stretcher.

The ambulance would probably leave immediately.

Misuzu, perhaps realizing that as well, got to her point and spoke it quickly. "Anyway, I'm saying that if kids like you will protect Mikoto, there should be no problem at all."

The stretcher with Kamijou on it was loaded into the ambulance.

At first he'd only been vaguely listening to what Misuzu was saying, but he finally frowned.

Kids…? Plural?

Before he could ask about it, the ambulance's back doors slammed shut, and that irritatingly loud siren started to blare.

EPILOGUE

One Will and a Small Key
The Present Target.

“Hmph.”

Accelerator, lurking in the dark, cast a glance at the front gate of the Dangai University database center; upon finding Misuzu’s face there, he averted his gaze.

There had been more Skill-Out goons left in the facilities than he’d anticipated, and it had eaten up a lot of time neutralizing all of them.

Still, considering he’d had to do that, and Misuzu was safe anyway, the person Accelerator had met in the dome must really not have been her enemy. That person might have been wounded on the way, though, seeing as how Misuzu was seeing off an ambulance.

Doesn’t matter to me, concluded Accelerator, exiting the lot from the database center’s back door.

There, he was addressed by a voice.

“I heard you’d be here. Judging by your expression, I’d say things went well.”

“Unabara,” he stated tersely, instantly looking that way.

His smooth brown hair and friendly, youthful features didn’t mesh with this darkness. And when he came closer, Accelerator felt an odd *pressure* weigh down on his chest.

Without letting it show, Accelerator casually stepped away from the man.

Unabara’s hazy visage spoke to Accelerator, who had blended perfectly into the dark.

“Even so, more overtime? You aren’t getting paid, and I cannot abide overwork.”

“Quit blabbering,” Accelerator quipped flatly.

Looking again, near Unabara stood Motoharu Tsuchimikado,

and even Awaki Musujime. That meant all of Group's members were here.

"…What do you want? The higher-ups tell you to come punish me?"

"No way. It's about the future," Tsuchimikado said, eyes slightly wide and staring at Accelerator from behind sunglasses. "First, about Misuzu Misaka. It seems, *from what we gleaned listening from a distance*, that she indeed no longer wants to bring her daughter out of Academy City. So the hit is off. A lucky fluke, but things are settled for now."

"You think our bosses are gonna accept such a vague conclusion? They can say anything they want. Who knows when they'll change their mind?"

"They'll accept it… Mostly because the idiot Unabara over here tried *real* hard," said Tsuchimikado, like he had given up.

Accelerator gave Unabara a dubious look, but Unabara smiled amid the darkness and said, "Well, it seemed like *that young man* kept his promise to protect the one I love and the world around her, so I just figured I needed to do my best as well. Maybe I was a little too gung ho about it, though."

"…That's all this gallant bastard's been saying. He won't give us any real answers," said Musujime, shaking her head, a hand to her forehead. "Whatever he did, it must have been ugly."

Tsuchimikado relaxed his shoulders. "Anyway. Misuzu Misaka should be fine. You did good for your first assignment, including the overtime, Accelerator. How do you like Group's MO? We generally just clean up after other people and the half-eaten food they leave sitting around. But did you find this to be worth it?"

"Piece of shit. I had violence, betrayal, and killing all in one day like some kind of sick parade," Accelerator spat in response.

Tsuchimikado nodded. "That's true, but even in those situations, we need to protect our own weak points. Abandoning them would make life easier, but nothing we do will ever rid ourselves of these…useless treasures."

"…"

"I have my stepsister to think about, and Unabara has the one he holds dear. For Musujime, it's the friends who once worked with her, and for you, it's the clones." Tsuchimikado's lips twisted into a sardonic grin. "We'll need to think outside the box to protect what's precious to us. The higher-ups give us

surface-level victory conditions, but to be perfectly frank, they're all lies. The same as gambling joints on the outskirts of town. It's designed so that the house wins, no matter what. We can't outwit them while playing by their rules. We need to always be thinking about how to win anyway, or searching for exploitable holes in the rules, or flipping the entire chess board and storming off."

"Why talk to me about this? It's not like I'm trying to make friends with you people."

"Because you could end up being a good card for us to have," answered Tsuchimikado lightly. "We don't know what they're planning, but the higher-ups seem to think you're pretty valuable. Fiddling with your electrode seems to have placated them for now, but that might actually give us an opportunity. Let's join forces, Accelerator. I'll teach you how we live around here. Don't go dying on us too easily."

"…"

Accelerator looked at the members of Group.

Motoharu Tsuchimikado, Mitsuki Unabara, and Awaki Musujime.

They all seemed very peculiar, and there was no telling what they were actually thinking, deep down. But Accelerator fit into that glove nicely, too. He wouldn't hesitate to use them as disposable pawns if he needed to do it to protect Last Order.

"Interesting," said Accelerator. "But hold me back, and I'll leave you behind. Our relationship is based on net value. Ask for anything that tips the scales, and I'll destroy all of you."



“Ha. You’ve got lip, kid,” said Tsuchimikado with a laugh, turning his back.

And then, so casually as to invite them to karaoke, he waved a hand to urge them on.

“Come with us. And soon, we’ll get back at the bosses.”

Accelerator’s greatest shackle was the safety on the electrode that allowed the higher-ups to control it remotely.

Since he couldn’t use the Sisters’ proxy calculations in areas where radio signals didn’t reach, he couldn’t circumvent the higher-ups’ controls by simply blocking them. That would mean cutting off his own link to the Sisters as well.

At a glance, it might have looked like a perfect means of control. But on the other hand, if he could just solve that problem, it could give them an opportunity to outwit their bosses.

First I’ll need the blueprints, he decided.

He’d pay the frog-faced doctor a visit and acquire the blueprints for his choker electrode. Then he could reverse engineer the safety mechanism and, if he had time, maybe even create a second electrode.

Oh, this is fun.

He broke out in a grin.

From afar, they might have looked like a group of kids around the same age, walking through the city streets at night while chatting.

But for Accelerator, there was only something hot churning within him.

——That “man” who he’d talked to on the phone, just before his electrode had been switched off.

He might have been comfortable sitting on a sofa somewhere right now, or walking through this very location nearby, like them. You could use devices to fake your voice over the phone, so even the man’s gender was questionable.

But that shithead would lead him to the mastermind.

The one behind all the misfortune.

It’s so fun when there’s a goal.

That night, in the hospital, the frog-faced doctor doing adjustments on Last Order’s body received an urgent communication. It seemed the usual young man had once again

overtaxed himself and was being brought here now. He'd answered the first-aid team's report of an emergency case with a dry grin, though maybe he shouldn't have.

The virus that had been injected into Last Order's head by Amata Kihara on September 30 had been entirely eliminated, now a thing of the past. A little rehabilitation, and she'd be able to return to her regular life.

A virus, though…

Had overthrowing it obstructed a part of Aleister's plan? Probably not. If that was a possibility, he would have never released Last Order so easily. As always, it was like all the important parts had been painted over, dealt with in a quiet, peaceful way, at least outwardly.

But there was no doubt he *was* using Last Order's unique physical condition for something. Follow that line of thought, and one might realize what he was trying to do.

The frog-faced doctor looked at the girl, who lay on the bed.

Her body, at least, indicated that she was about ten years old. So small she made it seem like they'd gotten the wrong size bed for her.

"That's enough adjustments for today. I need to see to another patient. Be a good little girl and go to sleep, all right?"

The girl, Last Order, nodded a little. And then, moving her small lips, she spoke.

"He…"

The frog-faced doctor remained silent and listened.

"…Where is he? asks Misaka asks Misaka."

That was, in all likelihood, a question nobody could answer. The frog-faced doctor, of course, couldn't say; but even Aiho Yomikawa, his provisional guardian, and Kikyou Yoshikawa, who had created the clones, apparently didn't know where Accelerator was right now.

Even so, the frog-faced doctor said this: "He'll be back soon. Very soon."

"Okay… Misaka wants to see him soon, too, says Misaka says Misaka, nodding."

"Good night," said the doctor, leaving the hospital room.

He walked down a long, dark hallway, heading for Touma Kamijou, who had just been brought in.

As he did, he saved Last Order's words in his heart.

He was the kind of person who would procure anything his

patients needed.

AFTERWORD

For those of you who have been reading one volume at a time since Volume 1, it's good to see you again.

For those who bought all the volumes at once, it's nice to meet you.

I'm Kazuma Kamachi.

This volume was an irregular one. The cover "number" even says SS. The editor, if I recall, told me to write something I can't usually write, but I wonder if I succeeded at that.

With such circumstances in place, this book has an impossible structure compared to the main series, where neither the sorcery side nor the science side are important keywords. Because of that, as I'm sure some of you have realized, there are several developments that haven't happened yet—like the ending of each story being strangely clean-cut, the spiky-haired boy making full use of a weapon other than his fist, and the all-white being starting to think in terms of teamwork.

I tried making it all feel like something I couldn't do in the main series: On top of removing all the main pillars that should be at the very center of the stories, I built up the big picture by giving glimpses of subtle parallel threads that ran between the various stories. I hope you've found the unbalanced atmosphere of the whole thing satisfying.

I'd like to thank my illustrator, Haimura, and my editor, Miki. I was only able to take this short-story detour from the main novels because you both had the ability to take that detour with me. I'll look forward to your continued support in the future.

And I'd like to thank all my readers. Thank you so much for sticking with this short-story detour from the main novels.

Now then, as I conclude Volume SS,
and hope that you will open the pages of the next main volume as well,
here and now, I lay down my pen.

Frogface keeps snatching all the good parts.

Kazuma Kamachi

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