


14

KAZUMA KAMACHI

ILLUSTRATION BY
KIYOTAKA HAIMURA



*A
Certain
Magical*
Index



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"I was just trying to shut these morons up!!"

Kamijou's classmate Seiri Fukiyose

"In conclusion, lolis look good in anything, so obviously, a bunny girl loli would still be the best, meeeow!!"

Kamijou's classmate Motoharu Tsuchimikado

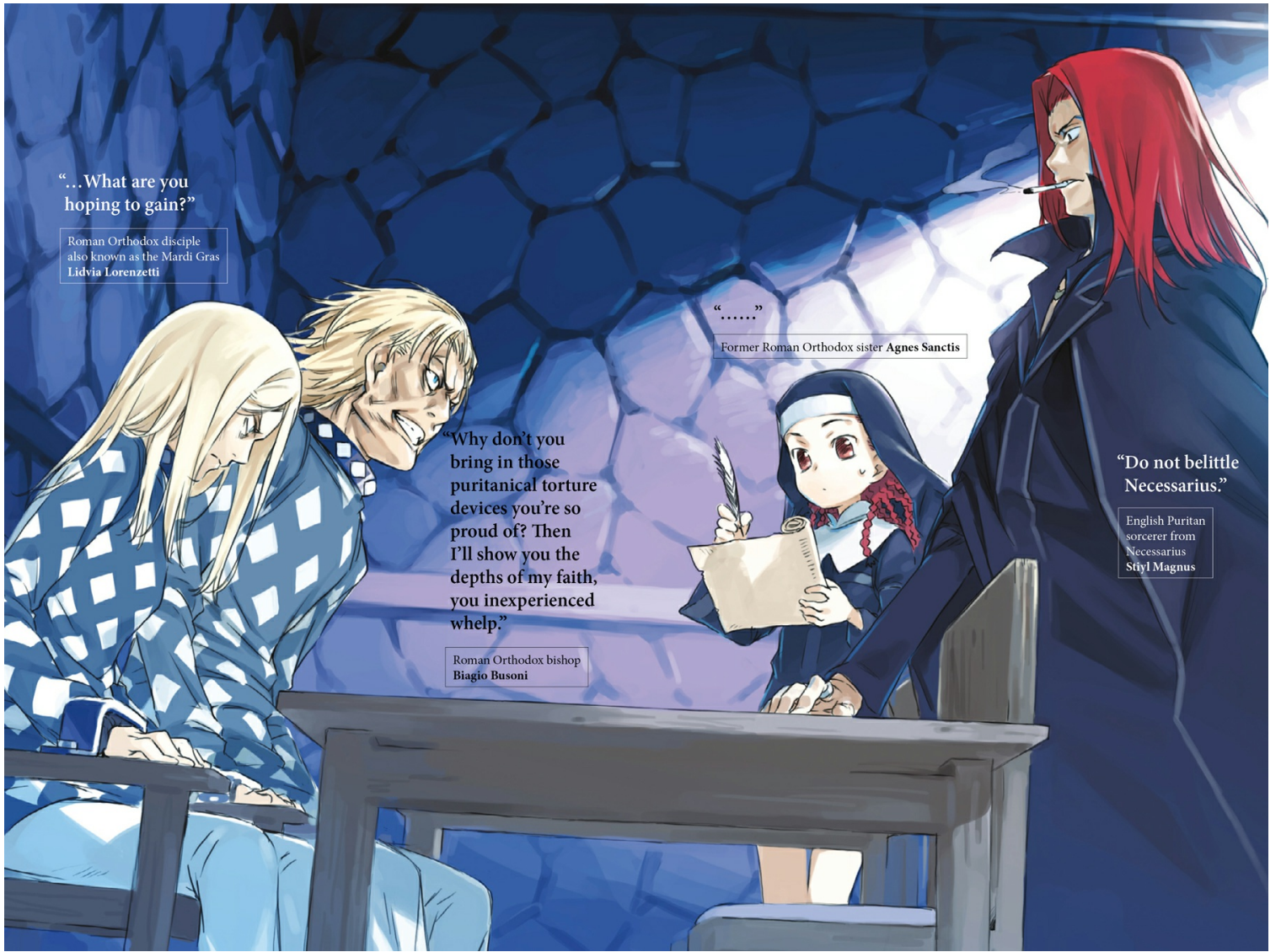
"I knew it! This isn't even about bunny girls to you!!"

Level Zero
Academy
City High
School
student
Touma
Kamijou

"...D-don't tell me you were part of this ridiculous argument, too..."

Math teacher at Kamijou's school Suama Oyafune





“...What are you hoping to gain?”

Roman Orthodox disciple also known as the Mardi Gras Lidvia Lorenzetti

“.....”

Former Roman Orthodox sister Agnes Sanctis

“Why don’t you bring in those puritanical torture devices you’re so proud of? Then I’ll show you the depths of my faith, you inexperienced whelp.”

Roman Orthodox bishop Biagio Busoni

“Do not belittle Necessarius.”

English Puritan sorcerer from Necessarius Stiy1 Magnus



“.....?”

Amakusa-
Style
Crossist
Church
follower
Itsuwa



“My turn on the stage has come at last. For you see, God’s Right Seat cannot use the normal sorcery of humans. I’d very much appreciate it if you would let me have a little fun.”

Member of the Roman Orthodox Church’s
God’s Right Seat **Terra of the Left**

c o n t e n t s

PROLOGUE A CHURCH TOO DARK Bread_and_Wine.

CHAPTER 1 THE SPEED OF TOO SOON A CHANGE In_a_Long-Distance_Country.

CHAPTER 2 DECIDING TRIGGER Muzzle_of_a_Gun.

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EPILOGUE THAT ANSWER LEADS TO THE NEXT MYSTERY Question.



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Certain
Magical*
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VOLUME 14

KAZUMA KAMACHI
ILLUSTRATION BY: KIYOTAKA HAIMURA



NEW YORK

Copyright

A CERTAIN MAGICAL INDEX, Volume 14

KAZUMA KAMACHI

Translation by Andrew Prowse

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TOARU MAJYUTSU NO INDEX

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PROLOGUE

A Church Too Dark Bread_and_Wine.

Terra of the Left.

He was in St. Peter's Square in the Vatican. It was an oval-shaped park about 240 meters wide with a public fountain a short distance away from its center. Terra sat on the edge of that flowing creation, quietly looking up at the stars overhead.

With few man-made lights in the square, his face wasn't visible. Only the gentle darkness enveloped his silhouette, operating as a kind of veil.

There came a small splash.

It wasn't from the fountain.

In Terra's right hand was a bottle filled with cheap red wine. He didn't have a drinking glass to accompany it; each time he brought the bottle to his lips, the alcohol contained within made a splashing ripple.

Nonetheless, there was no air of inebriation to him.

If it had been daytime and his face visible, all who saw him would think to themselves, *What awful wine that man drinks.* He wore the expression of someone working overtime.

"Are you drinking again, Terra?"

He heard a low, masculine voice. He turned his head back to look that way, remaining seated on the fountain's edge. It was another member of God's Right Seat—Acqua of the Back. The man wore mainly blue clothing, which resembled a golfing outfit.

Next to him was an old man wrapped in magnificent ceremonial robes.

The Roman Orthodox pope.

He was supposedly the most powerful person in the Vatican, but the two God's Right Seat members obscured the man's presence to a mysterious degree.

Terra wiped the red liquid dripping from the corner of his lips with an arm and said, "I am technically replenishing myself, you know. With the blood of God."

"Bread and wine," said Acqua. "Just like Mass."

"My Raphael, the healing of God, signifies earth. The land's fruits and blessings are the quickest way to replenish my strength."

He thought he'd answered seriously, but Acqua and the pope both sighed. Each let their eyes drop to Terra's feet.

Around them were several empty bottles.

After seeing the label on one, Acqua shook his head. "Cheap wine," he said. "You can't find wine this cheap even in stores trying to rip off tourists. You could have gotten a slightly better brand if you'd said you were with God's Right Seat."

"Please stop it," said Terra good-naturedly. "I don't understand the intricacies of wine. It's only a tool for a ritual, after all. If I asked for more, I'd be insulting *real* alcoholics."

After hearing the pair's exchange, the pope interjected, "...As a mentor to the faithful, though, I would prefer that you abstain from gaudier drink."

"Oh. Well, I didn't expect you to be criticizing *me*." Terra laughed in a low voice. "Wine is only necessary for this ritual. But you, Acqua, don't need any such thing—yet you seem to know quite a bit about tastes and brands."

The pope glared at Acqua, who winced slightly. Unlike the other members, he didn't make light of the pope, for some reason. "A carryover from my days as a mercenary," the man explained. "One of the battlefield's necessities."

"Ha-ha, well, you are a hoodlum, Acqua," laughed Terra. "A bad boy, unlike the rest of us pious believers."

The pope grimaced at this casual recommendation of himself. Being lumped together with the man was, perhaps, not something he appreciated.

As if to offset this, the pope took a moment to view the square that could hold three hundred thousand people. “Still...,” he said in the quiet of the night. “Two of God’s Right Seat and even the pope of Roman Orthodoxy outdoors without actual protection...Should we not hold these meetings inside? If security saw us now, they might start foaming at the mouth.”

“I think it’s fine, don’t you? The Croce di Pietro is still in effect,” said Terra, taking a sip of wine and looking up at the night sky. “*And just look at how disgusting the sky here is.* There are so many barriers colliding and competing that it looks like the aurora up there. It would be hard to magically snipe someone through all that.”

All spells, not just barriers, could be countered and reverse engineered if you solved their formulas. The library of grimoires that Puritanism was so proud about, the Index of Forbidden Books, was the culmination of that idea.

However, the layered barriers protecting the entire nation were intertwined by the Crossist “meanings” held by over 90 percent of the Vatican’s buildings, forming a complex web. Analysis with the Index of Forbidden Books wasn’t an option—even the nation’s highest authority, the pope, could no longer grasp the entirety of it.

One could spend a long time breaking an intricate cipher, but if the password’s pattern changed every second, any old solutions would lose meaning. Not only did the keyhole change shape; the number of keyholes changed, too, making it impossible to create a duplicate key.

Despite the Roman Orthodox Church—the pope first and foremost—no longer having anyone who could enact clear controls over the barriers layered around the Vatican, the shield still brushed off every analysis spell that came knocking.

“In any case,” began Terra.

He put the now-empty wine bottle on the fountain’s edge. That was the last of the cheap booze he’d brought into the sanctuary.

With slow motions, he rose to his feet, straightened his back a little, and said, “Now that I’m done replenishing the blood of God, I suppose I should be on my way.”

Acqua’s eyebrows moved slightly. “You’re using *it*, then?”

Terra’s lips opened thinly, and he laughed. He could tell from Acqua’s tone of voice that feelings of bitterness swirled inside the man. “You disapprove of using civilians, Acqua?”

“...Bloody battles are better left to the soldiers who thrive on it.”

“Ha-ha,” laughed Terra pleasantly. “A real *noble* viewpoint. Unfortunately...” He paused. “The Church’s greatest weapon is its numbers. The figure *two billion* is a big strong point. Begrudging the fact is less natural. Academy City only has 2.3 million in all. Different literally by orders of magnitude.”

“War decided by the quantity of people and goods?” said Acqua. “Barbaric. I feel as though I’m peering into a war of ancient times.”

“The simplest solutions truly haven’t changed at all since back then,” countered Terra, looking up at the sky through the canopy of barriers. Despite having practically drowned himself in wine, his gait didn’t waver in the slightest. “We of God’s Right Seat may be imperfect, but we lead the people with the mystery of those imperfections.”

He spread his hands to the side, stood on one foot, then swiveled around to Acqua.

“Why not let the scared lambs seek guidance where they will? By my shepherd’s hands...just like the children who vanished after the piper.”

CHAPTER 1

The Speed of Too Soon a Change In_a_Long-Distance_Country.

1

Academy City's School District 3 had several international exhibition halls, and it was connected to School District 23, the city's ocean-facing front door, by a direct railroad line. The former possessed many facilities for visitors from abroad, like hotels (all of the highest grade in the city), while the latter held all the airports. The distance and distinction between the amenities of the two was to curb flight noise around the city's upscale lodging.

The city hosted many of its events in District 3. Some were motor shows collecting the very best in self-driving technology, while others were robotics expositions featuring the fruits of mechanical engineering. These exhibitions weren't purely for fun projects—mostly, they were for promoting the city's cutting-edge tech. City officials would present technology approved by the General Board to be of the proper standard to put to use outside the city, select the trade offers from the countless outside corporations that were most beneficial (not *search*—for Academy City, it was always *select*), and amass huge amounts of funding.

Another of those such shows was going on today.

On display were, among other things, unmanned attack helicopters, the latest in exoskeletal powered suit apparatuses, and even high-output optical weapons that could aid in aerial bombing.

Even the event's name was the Interceptor Weaponry Show, showing how absurdly dangerous everything was.

“Pfhaaa...”

Someone let out a deep breath—a girl in the domed exhibition hall’s corner with a powered suit attached to her torso, making the act look oddly humorous.

“It’s so hot...,” grumbled Yomikawa, her helmet tucked under her arm. “Why are these powered suit demonstrations so exhausting?”

Next to her, a woman in work clothes shot her a glance. She was a member of the powered suit development team, looking as out of place in her outfit as a small child in a tuxedo; she was used to a white lab coat.

“Don’t worry, it’s not just you,” she said. “There’s a lot of hot air floating around the hall.”

A laptop rested on the engineer’s knees. There was a thin card reminiscent of a cell phone inserted in its side. Its screen displayed technical data for their exoskeletons.

“Look, that doesn’t make me any happier, ‘kay?”

“I didn’t say it to make you happy.”

“Still, I wonder why there’s so many gosh-darn *people* here,” Yomikawa went on. “An interceptor weaponry show on a weekday is pretty hard-core, y’know? Doesn’t this hall look like it’s over capacity?”

“Actually, it’s press day, so there aren’t many here. Tomorrow it’ll be open to everyone. It’ll look like hell.”

“Look, that doesn’t make me any happier, ‘kay?”

“I didn’t say it to make you happy.”

Terribly discouraged by her engineer, Yomikawa placed the helmet under her arm on the floor with a clatter. The helmet was almost fifty centimeters across. It had looked like she’d been wearing one of the oil-drum-shaped city-patrolling robots on her head. The rest of the powered suit resembled thick plate armor, making the whole thing look pretty top-heavy.

“So hot. You know what, I’m just gonna take off the rest...,” she said, wriggling her neck out, then continuing to crawl out of the suit. Underneath the armor, she wore black clothing, like the kind special forces used.

Yomikawa sat down with her back against the motionless mech suit and started futilely fanning herself with a hand. “Jeez, these really aren’t made for wearing in combat suits, eh? Wonder if there’s a more breathable exoskeleton-exclusive outfit lying around.”

“I guess you should have gone along with the planning head’s idea. Take off the suit, and *bam!* a knockout bikini. It’d get a lot of applause from the press. They’d be ecstatic.”

As far as Yomikawa could tell from the monotone, the engineer didn’t care one bit about her problem. She used a towel to wipe off the beads of sweat sticking to her face. “That guy gets way too into it whenever we start talking about promotional models.”

“It’s probably his hobby, sadly.”

“You couldn’t find a more boorish woman in all Japan than me. I could never pretend to be a booth babe. How on earth did I end up in his sights?”

“I guess Anti-Skill has it pretty rough, huh? They make you do odd jobs like you’re the SDF or something.”

“If we get odd jobs, it means there’s nothing else to do and the world’s at peace. Still...” Yomikawa stopped and looked around.

Booths all over were displaying a myriad of tools for killing people. The usual tinge of “capturing berserk espers while doing the least damage possible” had been stashed in a corner. Instead, one could see nothing but super-powerful, highly lethal weapons—the sort that would penetrate a tank if a person tried to hide behind it, and then them, too.

The booth organizers had certainly changed course quickly. *And there’s only one reason I can think of...*

Yomikawa stole a glance at the laptop the engineer was using. Along with a diagram of the powered suit she’d just been demonstrating was a small window showing a television feed. It was a news program, with a reporter reading from a manuscript.

“Early this morning local time, large-scale religious protests have broken out in the industrial city of Toulouse in southern France,” said the newscaster. *“People*

have flooded onto a road several kilometers long that follows the Garonne River, which runs through the center of the city, and they continue to severely affect infrastructure networks like transportation.”

The program showed a recorded video of a pitch-black city lit brightly by torch flame, with massive crowds of people marching along. Some of the men and women carried banners with French vilification written on them, while other young people were setting fire to Academy City signboards and holding them aloft.

Technically, they were only protesting—these weren’t uncontrolled riots. Still, the sight of thousands parading through the streets with their anger on full display intimidated Yomikawa enough to give her a chill.

“In Dortmund, in central Germany, a bulldozer thought to be stolen has rammed into a Roman Orthodox church, severely wounding nine priests inside. Authorities believe it’s retribution for the recent string of protests, but nobody has claimed responsibility yet. With worries of the conflict between the Roman Orthodox Church and Academy City escalating in the future on the rise...”

She’d seen it already, but she couldn’t shake the bitter feeling. Like a tiny ember spreading to a dry heap of straw, the world had changed a lot these past few days. With the Roman Orthodox Church’s simultaneous worldwide demonstrations and certain people’s overreactions to them, the conflict was accelerating by the second.

And now, Academy City was throwing an interceptor weaponry exhibition as though in response. At a glance, one could take it to be the General Board officially announcing that the city would not yield to the protests.

But this...was all executed too well for that, she thought.

Weapons development wasn’t like building plastic models. One had to submit an application for development, go back and forth with budget proposals, carefully discuss it, design prototypes, do hundreds if not *thousands* of simulations with what they built, hammer out the numbers they were looking for, and only then would they have a “product” to display.

The string of demonstrations had worsened just these past few days. Weapons development needed years of work. They couldn’t possibly keep up.

Which meant...

Academy City was already prepared for this, she thought. They foresaw this happening to the world, and instead of stopping it before it started, they plotted to have control of things after the fact, didn't they? Shit. It made her want to spit.

Maybe Academy City wouldn't be the one to pull the trigger on a war, but it was clearly trying to profit from the idea.

The engineer, owner of the laptop, used her sleeve to wipe the sweat from her brow and reluctantly looked over at the news screen. "Every channel's the same thing. Times like these make me wish I had a contract for variety show channels or something."

"...What do you think?"

"Hmm." The weapons research scientist paused briefly. "I don't like having more work. Unpaid overtime is even worse."

"This expo is totally different from usual, isn't it?"

"Well, the head of planning was really into it. Saying things about overturning the foul stereotypes of the defense industry and thus opening up new markets. Crazy stuff, if you ask me. This whole place is specifically for developing weapons. He looked delirious from the heat, so I hit him with an ice cube."

"The technology they're showing off clearly isn't to sell to outside companies. Which basically makes this a military exercise...Showing our 'enemies' only the destructive power of a swarm of unknown weaponry, using intimidation to play the diplomacy card—that's all we're doing."

"I suppose. They are quite destructive. The head of planning lost a few screws because of it, though, and he started blurting out even more nonsense."

"They might be making deals on these products, but it's not like we're shipping the ones on display," said Yomikawa. "It's like taking the full-auto function out of rifles and lining them up in your storefront. We're just selling them stuff three or four generations worse...And even those are just barely reproducible by the technology outside Academy City." Yomikawa looked at a group of men in business suits talking to one another right next to a nearby

platform. “Plus, we’re talking about buying and selling licenses, but the only facilities in *any* country that can manufacture the core components of these weapons are already aligned with this city. Meaning we can tell exactly how many are produced and where they’re deployed to. Jeez, why does Academy City go so far to get money?”

“With enough capital, it can mass-produce silly weapons,” said the engineer. “The head of planning is apparently trying to send a giant humanoid robot into space next. And I bet the pilot candidate will be a teenage boy, too.”

“...You really have no enthusiasm for this, huh?”

“Not in the slightest.”

2

Though Aiho Yomikawa had no way of knowing, a certain boy *was* at the middle of this great conflict.

Touma Kamijou.

Other than his power, Imagine Breaker, he was supposed to be a totally normal high school student. But if what God’s Right Seat had said was right, he was now an enemy of two billion people. Thinking back on the incidents he’d been wrapped up in these last few months and how gradually they’d all been resolved, though, it seemed reasonable.

And so, this boy Touma Kamijou, relatively central to the conflict...

“—Now, I want you to tell me why you did something like this.”

...was being lectured harshly by a tall female teacher in the faculty room.

To be more precise, he wasn’t the only one being lectured. Blue Hair and Motoharu Tsuchimikado were right there with him, hanging their heads. Seiri Fukiyose was behind them, too, looking frustrated, wondering why she’d been called here.

The faculty room was filled with haphazardly placed office desks made of steel. Many teachers were around, probably because it was lunchtime. They were doing all sorts of things, like eating meals, grading tests, and riding electric

wooden horses to lower their body weight.

Their teacher, Suama Oyafune, wasn't eating a meal, nor grading tests, nor riding an electric wooden horse to control her body weight. Instead, she was sitting on a cheap-looking swivel chair, her legs crossed and clad in beige stockings, combing her hard, needlelike hair up with a hand, and glaring at the students out of brand-name inverted triangular glasses that must have been expensive.

"I'll ask again. Explain to me why you thought it would be all right to get into a huge brawl in the school building and have a lively clash of burning souls with your fists as weapons."

Silence.

A TV on the room's wall was broadcasting the news. *"Because of repeated demonstration marches and protests, Italian soccer leagues have determined their stadiums unsafe and suspended their morning games."*

"You can't explain it?" she demanded. This irritable teacher who always wore brand-name clothing and accessories was famous at Kamijou's school for being particularly strict with "disciplining." She was in charge of a different class, so they really hadn't talked to her much, but today she'd been the one to catch them.

Their class's homeroom teacher was Komoe Tsukuyomi, but even she couldn't keep an eye on the classroom during lunch break. Suama Oyafune had happened to walk by during their fight, then captured them and dragged them off to the faculty room by the proverbial ear.

"I mean...," said Kamijou, steeling himself and looking straight at the teacher, eyes glinting. "Come on! Blue Hair and I were arguing about whether red or black bunny girls were better, and then suddenly Tsuchimikado comes in and calls us idiots and says, *White ones are obviously best*, and that doesn't even make any sense!"

Clatter-clatter! Suama and her chair flipped over.

The volume of Kamijou's voice was one thing, but the opinion must have been a little too stimulating for a teacher wearing inverted equilaterals.

The math teacher looked away from the three idiots to Seiri Fukiyose, who was standing behind them.

“...D-don't tell me you were part of this ridiculous argument, too...”

“I was just trying to shut these morons up!!” shouted Fukiyose in reply, blood vessels appearing near her temples. “Why did I get dragged here, too?!”

Still, when Oyafune had stepped into their classroom, Fukiyose had Tsuchimikado in a headlock, had already kicked Blue Hair to the floor, and was in the process of giving Touma Kamijou a forehead slam. She was doubtlessly number one, the boss of the kids.

Meanwhile, Tsuchimikado, wearing his blue sunglasses, shook his head from side to side. “Flat-chested white bunnies for the win, meowsa.”

Blue Hair couldn't stay silent about that. “S-stop making everything flat, you asshole!! Besides, you're not even into bunny girls! You'd take anything as long as it was a loli!!”

“But it's the truth, nya, Blue Hair. When faced with such a powerful loli, any tiny, insignificant clothing attributes like bunny suits or gymnastic leotards or school swimsuits mean nothing. In conclusion, lolis look good in anything, so obviously, a bunny girl loli would still be the best, meeeow!!”

“Say that again!!” cried Kamijou. “I knew it! This isn't even *about* bunny girls to you!!”

As the three idiots rolled up their sleeves and got ready for round two, the triangle glasses-wearing, suit-clad lady professor Suama Oyafune, who was still overturned with her chair, took out a whistle and blew.

Pfwweeee!! came the whistle's shrill command as the gorilla-like civic guidance teacher, Mr. Saigo, stood up at the back of the faculty room and lumbered over.

3

In the end, they were all ordered to do some weeding behind the gymnasium after school.

With little exposure to the sun, the area was damp, with weeds energetically overtaking the place. Just looking at how big the green surface was made Kamijou lose the will to work, and the thought *Why bother cleaning if nobody comes back here?* permeated the air from every mind.

However, something else was really responsible for draining his enthusiasm.

“Tsu-Tsuchimikado, Blue Hair, I’ll get you back for this vanishing act...”

Right now, out of the four ordered to weed, only Kamijou and Fukiyose were here.

Abandoned and alone, Kamijou’s shoulders drooped as he stared at the vast area behind the gym. On the other side of that thin wall, he could hear high-spirited voices he just knew were from the volleyball or basketball club as they enjoyed their after-school time to the fullest. It made the heavy mental chains of this unproductive weeding all the heavier.

Still, muttering under his breath about his nemeses disappearing wouldn’t make the weeds go away. Kamijou picked up a pair of work gloves from a wheelbarrow he’d brought over to carry the weeds to the garbage area, stating, “We’re not gonna be done weeding by the time they kick us out for the night anyway. Let’s just take it easy until then.”

He continued under his breath, “It’d be over a lot faster if we could get a pyrokinetic over here, too.”

Fukiyose wasn’t happy about being sucked into this, either, but she was pulling out the weeds more efficiently than her grumbling partner.

Five minutes later, having grown bored, Kamijou once more spoke to the girl squatting down a short distance away. “By the way, Fukiyose...”

“What is it?” She must have been bored, too, because it didn’t take any coaxing to get her to respond.

Kamijou started moving his hands again. “Weren’t they talking about suspending midterms in October? But you’re still using all your free time to study for them by yourself. How come?”

“What, that?” she asked curtly. “If we don’t have midterms, that means our

second semester grades are gonna be based only on our finals. And the finals will probably be at least twice as big. That's even more reason not to let up, isn't it?"

"..."

"And I'm not letting you see my notes."

Kamijou had been on cloud nine, thinking *No more midterms, whoopee!* but Fukiyose delivered the finishing blow with no concern.

The unexpected hit put Kamijou into coward mode. "H-hmph. School studies aren't everything, you know!"

"You make it sound like studying is all I can do."

"...You can do something else?"

"Yes!!" shouted Fukiyose from her stomach. "I may not look like it, but I can throw a forkball. Not that I have any real interest in baseball!!"

"Really," said Kamijou slowly. "Not from online classes or some kind of forkball health exercise, I bet."

"It...It doesn't matter how I learned it. All that matters is if I can pitch one or not! Don't give me that suspicious look—I'll prove it to you!!"

"Yeah, yeah. But we don't have a ball." Kamijou sighed.

Fukiyose took a ball the size of her fist out of her skirt pocket. "You can never be too prepared!!"

"...Um, that ball has something written on it. 'Squeeze this ball one hundred times a day to facilitate alpha waves...'"

Kamijou gaped, but the girl didn't care. She actually seemed pretty motivated and started digging at the ground a little with one foot.

Kamijou had no catcher's mitt for the ball, so instead, he put on several pairs of work gloves. He walked away with no small degree of reluctance, then squatted and did his best impression of a catcher's pose.

When he spoke, his words were monotone, like one big, long sigh. "Go ahead, Fukiyose."

“All right, Kamijou. Don’t be too impressed by my amazing one hundred and fifty kilometers per hour pitch!!”

“A one hundred and fifty kilometers per hour forkball?!” he cried in a fluster. “I’m already impressed by that amazing bluff!!”

Fukiyose, really getting into it now, gripped the white ball, slowly turned, and held it overhead.

It was just a windup, but Kamijou suddenly shouted, “S-stop, stop, Fukiyose!!”

“What do you want?!” she shouted back unsteadily, stopped midway through her pitching form.

But Kamijou had hesitated to give it to her straight, so he skipped the important parts and said, “*Skirt!!*”

“...?”

Fukiyose frowned, searching for the meaning in his gaze. She looked around her waist area, discovering there that holding up her knee had flipped up her skirt and revealed her cutely patterned underwear...

...before launching an overpowering fastball.

Kamijou missed the timing, and the soft rubber ball slammed into his belly with a hard, violent *splat!!*

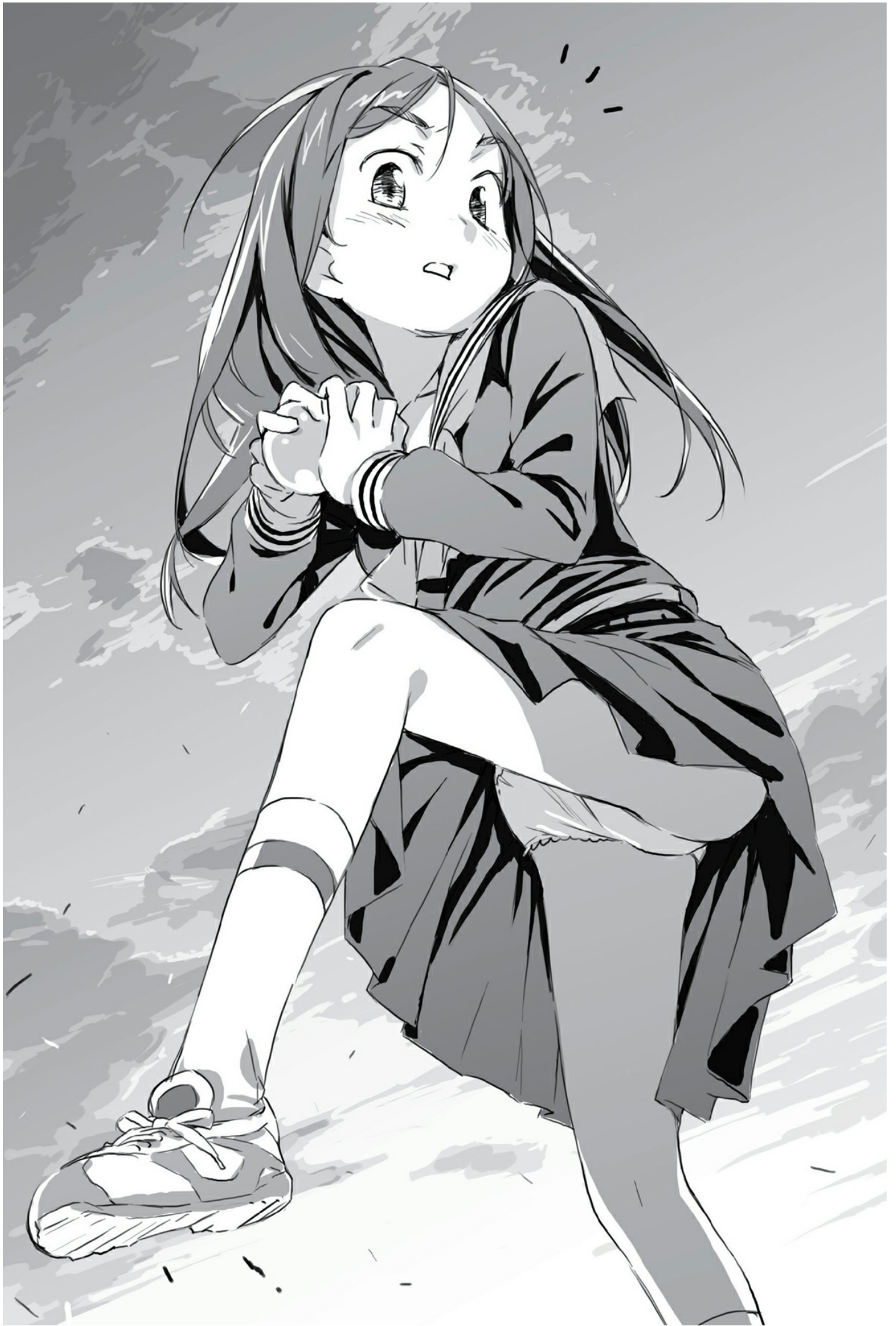
As Kamijou writhed in agony, he spoke, voice trembling. “...Th-that wasn’t a forkball. You just threw it as hard as you freaking could...”

“That one didn’t count!!” shouted Fukiyose, giving a quite masculine excuse, as she caught the ball from Kamijou. “Jeez. This time I’ll throw a forkball. It’ll drop pretty quick, so put your mitt lower.”

Saying something or other, Fukiyose began to go through the pitching motion, but since Kamijou had pointed out her skirt a moment ago, her leg movements ended up rather stiff.

Her balance was a bit wobbly because of that, but the pitch she threw had an astounding amount of force behind it. With a *splat!!* the ball struck the layers of work gloves he wore. It wasn’t even a hardball, just a toy, but it still stung his palm. Plus, she hadn’t thrown it underhanded like a softball player but

overhanded like a pro baseball pitcher, and that sealed the deal.



Kamijou squeezed the ball a little. “Did that...drop?”

“Yes, it did!! Weren’t you watching? Couldn’t you tell it dropped right before it got to the batter?!”

“Huh? It just looked like you threw it normally.”

“K-Kamijou!! You weren’t standing where the batter should be, so you wouldn’t know!! If you actually swung a bat, you would have realized how sharp my forkball is!!”

“Oh. Well, now you’ve said it, Fukiyose.” Kamijou smirked and took a small plastic-handled broom about fifty centimeters long from a few dustpan sets he’d brought just in case. “That sounded a lot like a challenge to me.”

Gripping the handle vaguely like a baseball bat, he rolled his hands on his wrists to gauge the timing of his swing.

Meanwhile, Fukiyose, for her part, having caught the ball Kamijou tossed back, gave a fearless grin. “Trying to beat Major League Fukiyose’s pitch, are you? You’re pretty funny—for a monkey.”

“I’ll knock this one out.”

“I’ll show you—the drop of a true forkball and the humiliation of defeeeat!!”

“Right out of the paaaaaaaaaaaaark!!”

A baseball thrown.

The sound of air parting.

If he waited to see if it really dropped, he’d be far too late on the swing.

Unable to assess Fukiyose’s true intent and ability, he moved to answer her challenge.

Power and tension coursed through his body.

He judged the timing, exhaled slightly, set his feet, turned his hips with his arms, swung the broom in both hands as hard as he could...

And...

4

Suama Oyafune, clad in a suit, inverted triangle glasses, and even stockings—all brand-name—understood that beautiful women had an advantage.

Of course, she only knew that because she'd been relegated to *constantly having disadvantages in the past*.

Anybody, no matter what they looked like, could become beautiful to some extent. Suama's theory went like this: Even if "high level" or "mid-high level" was aiming too high, "high middle" was perfectly doable. And if she got up to that "high middle" level, she'd begin to see the benefits here and there.

Beautiful people had an advantage.

Her students would listen to what she was saying in class, her fellow teachers wouldn't look down on her, and some would even give her their seats in the cafeteria. All of these advantages came from spending an hour in the bath every day, putting on face lotion before bed, eating a proper breakfast every morning, managing her weight so it wouldn't affect her skin, dedicating over an hour to putting on makeup before leaving, and freely using magazines and the Internet to shop around for Western-style clothes—a boon gained from keeping herself polished, both on the outside and the inside.

For Suama Oyafune, her makeup starting to fall off after school let out—especially if sweat was making her drawn-on eyebrows run—was a major source of anxiety. Still, beauty was defined by one's attitude and aura, too. If she was too obviously worried about her makeup, she would gain less of the benefits of being beautiful, so checking mirrors over and over and going back and forth to the powder room wouldn't be good.

...

Suama slowly looked around.

She was in the faculty room. At this hour, most teachers had gone to advise their clubs, so it was thinned out. If nobody was around, maybe she'd secretly check her eyebrows...

"Phew~! Making handouts sure is hard work!"

In a seat relatively close to her was a teacher who looked like an elementary school student, hectically working.

Komoe Tsukuyomi.

The stack of papers clearly exceeded what any one person could be expected to handle. This tiny teacher was known for creating the most effective teaching materials based off precise data on each individual student, but she must have been undertaking other teachers' work, too.

Right now, with the city's peacekeeping Anti-Skill being rounded up in great numbers, they didn't have time to make every single thing for their classes. Other non-Anti-Skill teachers would have to help them out.

Even Suama had handouts and such to make for other teachers, but the woman couldn't help but be more interested in Komoe Tsukuyomi's "minimalism."

"...What kind of health routines do you need to keep such young and lustrous skin? Actually, mathematically speaking, those values are impossible."

"??? What is? I'm pretty good at math, so I can help you."

One hundred and thirty-five centimeters quickly came pattering up to her after hearing her greatly perplexed voice. Suama admitted there were several things she could learn from the tiny woman as a teacher, but was anyone *sure* she wasn't actually in elementary school?

Komoe Tsukuyomi came over and took the papers on Suama's desk without asking, then went over them one by one, nodding to herself. "By the way, Ms. Oyafune, did my students cause you trouble? I apologize for that."

"No, not at all."

"Oh yes. As his teacher, I would like to take Kami and the others to task as well. Do you know where they are? They left right after homeroom. Have they gone home already?"

"Oh no," said Suama in a louder voice, reflexively looking at the clock hanging on the wall.

It was almost six o'clock.

It had been *hours* since she'd told them to weed.

"Ack...I'm sorry, Ms. Komoe, I'll go get them right now!!"

"Well, okay. But where are they?"

The relaxed senior teacher's words came at her back; Suama had already burst out of the faculty room. Club activities were winding down, too, and nobody who didn't belong to an after-school club could be seen. The hallways were dim and mostly empty, so as she walked toward the faculty entrance, she quickly began to feel how much time had actually passed.

Well, delinquents who cause fights at school shouldn't have that much patience. They've probably gone home already without doing any of the weeding.

Still, she'd meant to check on them after about half an hour, then scold them a little and make them go home, so she couldn't help but feel reluctant now. It had been a rash punishment, so she also couldn't easily apologize to the students now.

Meanwhile, after reaching the faculty entrance and changing into her relatively high-class pumps, she hurried behind the gymnasium.

And there, the inverted triangle glasses-wearing female math teacher saw...

5

"Come on, come on!! Thirteen wins, nine losses—that forkball of yours is nothing!!" challenged Kamijou, gripping his short broom with both hands and wagging it at Fukiyose.

"Be quiet!! Nine losses, and you're still running your mouth...Besides, if we were using a real hardball, it would spin a lot better!!"

After introducing a rule where each loss equated to five minutes of full-power weeding, the match between Kamijou and Fukiyose had gotten seriously heated. Their high school souls burned with such ferocity that it would make one forget that if they just took it easy and did the work together, it would have been much easier.

Unlike Kamijou, who was quite happily swinging the bat, Fukiyose was breathing heavily as she kept a firm grasp on the baseball, her shoulders moving up and down. She checked the time on her cell phone. “Besides, there’s still thirty minutes until schools close...That’s enough time to turn it around!!”

“By the way, are your pitches dropping like they’re supposed to?”

“I keep telling you they are! They’re forking great!! Why can’t you tell that they’re dropping suddenly right before getting to home plate?!”

“Really? I feel like they’re just slowing down and falling like anything else would...”

“Get a closer loooooooooooooook!!”

Fukiyose, roaring with all her might, lobbed the ball.

Whhhrrrrrr!! In response to the approaching baseball, Kamijou wound up for a full swing.

A forkball...

But then his body reacted unconsciously to Fukiyose’s words, causing him to adjust the short broom’s course down a little.

Once again, however, the ball didn’t curve much at all.

A normal straight pitch flew at him.

“You...You can’t do it after all!!”

He quickly tried to bring the bat back on track, but he was too late.

Nevertheless, he felt the ball’s edge nick the broomstick.

“Gwoooohhhhhhhhhhh!!” bellowed Kamijou even as he felt the hitting sensation fade.

After taking a chip out of the broomstick, the baseball curved slightly upward and continued to fly behind him.

Shit, I missed?!

Fouls were a concept that didn’t exist for this contest. If Kamijou hit the ball in front of him, he won, but otherwise, Fukiyose won. They made vague

judgments to decide whether her pitches were strikes or balls.

Plus—and this was the really annoying part—whoever lost had to go get the ball. The loser already had to do five minutes of full-power weeding as punishment. Having to chase down faraway balls was a huge pain.

So he stood there for a second in his pose, broomstick still out to the side, instantly starting calculations in his head. *Gah. That's thirteen wins and nine losses. No, wait, ten losses. Maybe I'll filibuster her, walk real slowly to go get it...*

Smack.

Then he heard an odd noise from right behind him.

“...?”

He didn't understand, but Fukiyose, who was facing him, had a shocked expression and was standing stock-still. He could practically hear the blood in her face retreating.

??? Is there something behind me?

When Kamijou turned around...

...he saw grass and dirt stuck to inverted triangle-shaped glasses...

...and, wearing them, the teacher Suama Oyafune, clearly having taken the ball to the face.

The baseball would have hit her in the stomach if not for Kamijou's swing glancing off it and changing its course—right into her face.

“...”

Suama Oyafune was taking slow, deep breaths, but she was obviously trembling.

Ahhh, aaahhhhhh...By the time Kamijou started shaking, it was too late.

Suama Oyafune plunged toward him and swung a clenched fist just as Kamijou, unaware, went down on his hands and knees in prostration, coincidentally dodging her knuckles, and now, the math teacher's anger at the ball and at her own missed attack compounding each other, she drove the

sharp heel of her pump into his back.

6

Suama Oyafune hastened back to the faculty room.

Ms. Komoe was absent; she must have gone somewhere.

Technically, she'd already gotten the grass and dirt off her face with a handkerchief, but still...

Waaah!! Dirt, dirt, dirt!! It's stuck to my face, I just know it! And maybe my penciled eyebrows are coming off because I accidentally wiped them!! What to do, what do I do, aghhh?!!

Her panic was so pronounced a blind person could have seen it. She made sure nobody was around before forgetting about going to the powder room and taking out a hand mirror to check her face right then and there.

For now, her eyebrows were fine.

But that wasn't enough to relieve Suama Oyafune.

Beautiful women had advantages. If she wasn't beautiful, she would be disadvantaged. That was how life worked.

Okay, so my clothes—dirty. Over here, too. And over here?! My hair's a mess, I'm sweating, my stockings are running from walking so fast, where do I even start?!

For now, she took her suit jacket off, brushed off the flecks of dirt that made it to her white blouse. But some clung stubbornly, so she took the blouse off and shook it out.

Then she removed her running beige stockings so she could change into the spare pair she had in her purse. Due to the way she moved, her tight skirt turned all the way up during that, but she didn't have time to worry about it. She had to go back to being the perfect, beautiful teacher as soon as she could.

But then...

...the faculty room door started clattering.

Suama froze, one leg raised to put through her stocking.

“Wait...I...wait!!” she said immediately.

“Huh? For what?”

She knew he’d heard her, and yet the door clattered open anyway.

It was Touma Kamijou.

And Suama Oyafune, her blouse open in the front and her black underwear visible, her tight skirt flipped up so she could put on her stockings, stayed absolutely still.

“Ky—”

She checked herself just before screaming.

Instead, she reached for a nearby desk and grabbed a fifty-centimeter super-large triangle ruler with a magnet for using on blackboards in class. Then she hurled it with all her might at the faculty room entrance.

Kamijou quickly slammed the door shut, and the triangle’s tip stabbed the doorframe like a shuriken. The lodged ruler wobbled back and forth.

A shout echoed into the room from the hallway. “Ooowwahhhhh!! That could have killed me!!”

“Explain to me right now why you came in after I told you to wait!!”

For the moment, she pulled the stockings the rest of the way up, closed the front of her blouse, put her arms through the suit jacket she’d hung over the back of her chair, and hurriedly started for the hallway when...

Brk.

This time, she heard a strange noise from near her thighs.

“...”

She’d just unsealed these stockings two minutes ago. *Are they running already?* thought Suama, thoughtlessly checking her thighs.

“U-um, excuse me...”

As if he’d timed it that way, Touma Kamijou nervously opened the faculty

room door once again.

To see Suama Oyafune, her legs in an O shape, her tight skirt up, bent over and looking around her crotch area.

Beauty aside—the scene did enough damage to her very womanhood.

“—!!”

This time, the math teacher silently threw a super-large protractor for blackboard use at the entrance of the faculty room. The door closed again, and the second teaching aid got stuck in it as well.

A quaking voice came in from the hallway. “I was just trying to explain why I came in before!!”

“It had better be worth making this situation so much worse. I demand a concise explanation of logical fact!!”

“Uh, the schools close down soon, so can we stop weeding now?”

“That was all?!”

Blood vessels appeared around Suama Oyafune’s temples. She grabbed a super-large compass for blackboard use from a desk, then burst out of the faculty room, ready to wallop the failure of a high schooler with it.

But Touma Kamijou wasn’t there.

All she saw was a figure dashing around a corner and vanishing toward the stairs.

“What on earth is going on...?” muttered Suama, decidedly exhausted, but her voice went unheard.

7

“Crap...I really thought she was gonna kill me,” muttered Kamijou to himself as he trudged home in the dying light.

With October starting, this time of day had been getting chillier, little by little. In response to the temperature change, there were somewhat fewer people around, too, compared to the summertime. The big screen on a blimp floating

in the darkening sky featured a newscaster telling everyone to be careful with flames because the air was dry.

As Kamijou weaved around the cleaning robots ambling along the sidewalk, he wondered what he'd have for dinner, then decided to stop off at the department store by the station. He was a little worried about his refrigerator's contents. If he traveled a little farther away, there was a cheaper supermarket, but he'd be late getting home if he went there now. That would lead to Index, who was waiting in his dorm room, throwing a fit because she was hungry.

In any case, with the station close, he caught a glance of a brown-haired girl wearing a Tokiwadai uniform, facing away from him. It was Mikoto Misaka, he realized.

Moreover, she delivered a high kick to a juice vending machine, then started to wonder if *all* the machines in the area were malfunctioning...

When Kamijou saw that, he decided not to say anything and leave and promptly made a 180-degree turn. "...They say a wise man keeps away from danger. Also, to let sleeping dogs lie," he whispered to himself.

"Who says that?" came the answer from right behind him. He gave a jerk and went ramrod straight.

Cautiously, he made a second 180-degree turn to find Mikoto Misaka. Bewildered, he groaned in spite of himself. "Please spare me..."

"Again, from what?"

"Mr. Kamijou is extremely worn out from weeding after school and many other things! So please spare me any further trouble!!"

"What the heck are you even talking about?!"

As he tried to flee at Mach speed, Mikoto grabbed the back of his neck and snapped into his ear, "And would you stop trying to end all our conversations whenever you get the chance?! You never answered the text I sent you, and I want to see what happened to that, so let me see your cell phone!!"

"A text...? You sent one?"

"Yes!!"

Kamijou thought for a moment, then took out his cell phone, opened his mailbox in front of Mikoto, and looked at it askance. "...You did?"

"I just said yes!! Geh, your in-box is empty?! It's not treating my address as spam, is it?!"

Mikoto was astonished at this whole text thing, but then she arrived at another fact.

As Kamijou pressed the buttons, she clamped onto his hand to stop him, then peered at the names in his in-box folder.

"...Okay. Why, exactly, do you have my mom's number in here?"

"Huh?" *Come to think of it, I did run into drunk Misuzu Misaka in Academy City the other day...*

Mikoto, still frowning, used her thumb to control his cell phone, then called up the person in question.

"Wait, hey!"

It wasn't on speakerphone, but between the volume being turned up loud anyway and the short distance from him to her, he heard the call tone.

"Okay, *Mother*, I have something to ask you."

"*Huh?!*" came back Misuzu, sounding shocked. *"Is my display bugging out? My phone isn't showing your number, Mikoto."*

Just from what Kamijou heard from their conversation, she seemed to ask how Misuzu ended up with his phone number.

"*Hmm...*" But Misuzu spoke slowly as she answered. *"I think I remember meeting that boy one night in Academy City, but...Mommy can't remember things from when she's drunk. Even Mommy doesn't know when any of this happened! Oh-ho-ho-ho."*

"Mm-hmm, mm-hmm." Mikoto nodded before hanging up.

She smiled sweetly, closed the phone with both hands, and returned it.

"What...do...you...think you're doing, getting my mother drunk like that?!"

"What?! What kind of eccentric reasoning is that?! And I'm sure your mom

remembers! That laugh at the end was too suspicious for her not to!!”

It only took a moment's thought to figure it out, but she seemed convinced that her little family was on the brink of destruction, since her face was bright red and she'd lost her cool.

Time for a change of subject!! thought Kamijou, deciding to take the plunge and steer the topic away through brute force. “C-come on. Mr. Kamijou has to go home and polish rice now...Wait, don't you have a curfew, too? The sun's already down!”

“What? Curfew? Easy to get past,” she said flatly.

Kamijou was already feeling fed up with this conversation.

Mikoto, meanwhile, didn't seem to care about his mental health whatsoever, but the change in topic seemed to be successful. “The checks do feel like they've been getting stricter, though. Maybe because of all the stuff going on lately. Even people who never read the newspaper are all busy checking the news on their cell phone TVs and looking for info sites on the Internet.”

“...”

“I guess everyone's worried, huh? ...*Especially after how it got like that before.*”

Mikoto was probably talking about September 30.

The incident that directly triggered the current “unseen war.”

The incident where Academy City's gates were destroyed; residents all over the city, student and teacher alike, were systematically “attacked”; the peacekeeping groups Anti-Skill and Judgment were completely shut down; and a road demolished into a hundred-meter-long crater.

No one person was responsible for them all. Thanks to several organizations and opinions intersecting, not even Kamijou, who was directly involved, had a full view of it...Actually, he was starting to think *nobody* could understand the whole thing. And if a central figure felt that way, those who were only dragged into it would have pretty limited information.

Maybe the farther from the center one was, the more opportunity they had

to observe from a safe location. And even Mikoto probably didn't take Academy City's announcement that "foreign religious groups were conducting scientific supernatural ability research in secret, and espers they'd developed were the attackers" at face value.

Mikoto looked away from Kamijou and stared off in the distance.

About five hundred meters from here was the street leveled by a certain great "angel's" appearance. Kamijou thought maybe she was thinking back to what happened on September 30, but she actually appeared to be gazing at the airship in the darkening skies. The giant screen attached to its side was running a news program right now.

"The large-scale Roman Orthodox demonstration and protest activity, which was limited to European nations until now, has begun in the United States."

The newscaster reading the script was calm.

"Today, protests have occurred in San Francisco and Los Angeles, shore cities on the West Coast, but they are predicted to spread throughout the entire country."

The image changed to what was probably Los Angeles. It would have been the middle of the night there, but the video took place during the day, so it must have been recorded.

Damn it. It made another big jump... Kamijou's face unconsciously twisted, like he was looking at terrible wounds.

As though a marathon had just started, an ocean of people was covering a big three-lane road. They were holding what appeared to be homemade Academy City banners, setting them on fire and holding them overhead or slashing through horizontal ones.

The idea was to tout how angry they were by marching down a mostly set route for hours. It wasn't like a riot, where everyone let their anger consume them and destroyed everything in sight.

But that didn't mean it was safe. The video showed a man bleeding from the head leaning against the side of an ambulance—there must have been a brawl. A sister, her face black-and-blue, was helping an exhausted priest to his feet,

calling for help.

All of them were just normal people. None seemed related to anything like espers or sorcery.

Maybe, in a broad sense, the demonstrators were Roman Orthodox followers. Some would be wearing crosses around their necks, and others would be singing hymns from the Bible.

But unlike Vento of the Front, it was hard to imagine them being involved with the dark side of the religion. They went to their schools and jobs like normal people, and on days off, they would chill at home and have barbecues in their big backyards. That's all they were, really—wasn't it?

"...What is happening?" muttered Mikoto as she stared at the airship screen. "I don't know what happened on September 30, but we didn't want this, did we? They say that one incident triggered all this, but Academy City was minding its own business. Why are they fighting and hurting one another? The mastermind won't even show himself, either, so those people are the only ones suffering. Isn't that weird?"

"..."

Kamijou silently listened to her words.

A mastermind.

Mikoto had been using that term unconsciously. Part of that was probably hopeful: If someone was making everything worse, one just had to get rid of that someone and everything would go back to normal...Mikoto had raw power in the form of her Railgun, so maybe she found that easier to understand.

But there was no "mastermind" behind this.

Sure, certain people had been responsible for the incident on September 30 that started everything. Vento of the Front and Hyouka Kazakiri—plus whoever was behind them. Maybe if they could have stopped whoever that was on that day, they would have solved everything by "defeating the mastermind."

Still, in fire terms, it hadn't been kindling that started the damage. It was a giant wildfire, born as a result of something else. They were past the point

where they could stop anything just by capturing the mastermind.

The demonstrators and protesters were completely normal people living over there. Nobody was ordering them, forcing them to do this. They'd seen the newspapers, seen news programs, and gotten angry, so they were participating in the protests—acting purely on individual beliefs.

To use the “defeat the mastermind” method to stop worldwide demonstrations, that meant beating up every single protester throughout the world.

They couldn't do that. Shouldn't.

But then how were they supposed to fix everything?

“...What's happening?” Mikoto repeated. Her words lodged in Kamijou's heart.

This wasn't something children would come up with an answer for.

INTERLUDE ONE

The Tower of Execution, also known as the Tower of London, was a tourist attraction in England.

Once it was said to be the end of the road for prisoners, a facility for blood and torture and beheading, one so harsh that people said that none who passed through its gates could return alive. Now, however, it was open to the public, and it was easy for anyone to take a field trip to it, costing a mere fourteen pounds—less money than going somewhere for afternoon tea. The exhibits showed both its history as a place of execution and many of the British royal family's jewels.

Meanwhile, however, an enormous blind spot lurked just out of sight, where its “facilities” were still operational.

It sat right next to the tourist attraction, but like a shadow cast by a bright light, one would never see nor enter this labyrinth from the outside. The dark group of facilities retained their past roles, which had given the building its “Tower of Execution” nickname—namely, capturing prisoners and, if necessary, torturing or even executing them without hesitation.

Enter from the front, and one would never see the shadows.

Enter from the back, and one would never escape them.

“...It's oppressive in here, as usual.”

Stiyl Magnus muttered in spite of himself, as he breathed out a cloud of cigarette smoke. Unlike the touristy part, these more practical hallways were narrow and dark. Smoke from his lantern clung to the chaotically arranged stones in the walls, and with each flicker of the flame within, the human

shadows it cast appeared to writhe. The floor was covered in a light layer of cold dew, as there were no systems to let moisture escape.

Then the girl walking beside him spoke. She was Sister Agnes Sanctis, a former Roman Orthodox nun.

“About this interrogation of Lidvia Lorenzetti and Biagio Busoni...”

“There are things I need to ask them about God’s Right Seat,” he replied. “If someone leading an entire force like you hasn’t heard of them, asking a *VIP* would be faster.”

“...Think they’ll talk, those aristocrat priests?”

“Well, that’s part of why I’m letting you see firsthand how we do things in England,” he quipped. “It’s too much effort to lecture every single person in your unit about it, though, so I’ll leave that in your hands.”

He stopped in front of one of the doors. It was thick and wooden, blackened, and weighed down by absorbed moisture. He opened it without knocking, then entered the quite cramped three-meter-square room beyond. This was still only an “interrogation” room, so the commonplace Inquisition torture devices were absent. The only things in the room were a table bolted to the floor and two chairs on either side of it, also secured in place.

The chairs on their right had minimal cushioning.

The chairs on the left, however, were exposed planks of coarse wood. Their armrests featured belts and metal fixtures, too—they were made for holding people’s arms still.

And those two left-hand chairs did, in fact, have people bound to them.

Lidvia Lorenzetti.

Biagio Busoni.

Both were “high executives” in special positions in the Roman Orthodox Church.

Stiyl sat down in one of the chairs on the right and, sounding like this was a pain for him, said to them, “You know what I want to ask, yes?”

Agnes seemed to hesitate to sit down in the other chair; she remained standing next to him, looking uneasy with nothing to do.

Biagio, the middle-aged bishop anchored with belts and clasps to his chair, glared sharply at Stiyl. Agnes, formerly of the bishop's own cloth, winced even though the look wasn't directed at her, but Stiyl didn't seem to care.

Biagio's face was pallid; he had been sufficiently sleep-deprived to wear down his mind but not enough to damage his health. The shine in his hair and skin was gone as well. It was like he was steadily drying out.

"...What do you want to ask?" he said. "If you want a lecture on the Bible, leave it for Sunday."

"God's Right Seat. Tell me everything you know."

"Why don't you bring in those puritanical torture devices you're so proud of? Then I'll show you the depths of my faith, you inexperienced whelp."

Biagio maintained an insolent attitude. Lidvia, in the meantime, didn't seem interested in exchanging words at all. It wasn't that she was willing her emotions away; her expression was perfectly natural and unchanging. Biagio was letting his irritation show. Perhaps she was the one with more perseverance here.

Biagio's answer came as no surprise whatsoever. Agnes determined that this might take a while.

"Do not belittle Necessarius."

But Biagio wasn't the only arrogant one in the room.

Stiyl Magnus puffed out a thin cloud of smoke and smiled.

A chilling, brutal smile.

"I don't particularly care if you die during torture. Necessarius has ways of extracting information from the brains of corpses. Depending on protection and injuries, of course."

Those words were enough to shake even Agnes, standing nearby, to the core.

Biagio realized Stiyl wasn't bluffing and made a woefully bitter face. Lidvia

seemed to finally take an interest as well—she glanced sharply over at Stiyl without moving her head.

The man didn't get particularly worked up over this; his voice was beleaguered, like he was staring down a pile of paperwork. "What I mean is, what you call 'torture' is a different beast than what we call 'torture.' None of this thinking it'll be easier if you died. I don't mind if you resist, but let me say that would be a waste of your lives."

Silence continued for a few seconds.

As Biagio kept his glare on Stiyl, Lidvia spoke readily. "*Such trivialities mean nothing to us,*" she said, looking straight at him. "That aside, there is one thing I'd like you to tell us, however. What is it like 'outside' right now?"

Stiyl frowned at that but remembered a moment later...*Come to think of it, I did get those reports, didn't I?*

From what he knew, Lidvia Lorenzetti was an eccentric even in the Church, one who only reached out to help people society couldn't accept. From her point of view, being locked in the Tower of London and not having the information she wanted from "outside" made her worry about those under her patronage. The fragments she'd caught about "worldwide chaos" served only to deepen her anxiety.

After thinking that far, Stiyl grinned.

Then he said, "*I'm sure you can guess.*"

Lidvia's expression twitched with a growl. It went without saying—the first victims of the revolts and disorder had been the weak ones.

"...Hmph."

On the other hand, Biagio Busoni had a strong sense of elitism, believing those in the priesthood were supreme. He seemed more interested in the fruits of the chaos than its harm.

Lidvia watched Stiyl. "In exchange for my cooperation, I request the release of my own who are currently being held in this tower. The release of people who can quell this chaos, even if only slightly, and build a roof over the heads of the

weak.”

However, it was Biagio who reacted to this, not Stiyl. He spat, not trying to hide his vexation.

Stiyl, meanwhile, was nothing if not relaxed. “You think I’ll accept?”

“I will make you accept.”

“And how?” he asked. The woman caught her breath.

As she sat there, both hands fixed to the armrests of her bolted-down chair, her lips began to move quickly.

“...San Pietro elude le trappole dell’imperatore e del mago.”

Stiyl frowned. They’d confiscated anything Lidvia could use as a Soul Arm or spell. No decent sorcery would activate just from a verbal incantation.

A light appeared anyway.

But not from Lidvia Lorenzetti.

It emanated from Agnes, as she stood next to Stiyl—more accurately, from the *cross hanging at her chest*.

“Damn!” Before Stiyl could react, a pillar of light flashed madly from the cross. It extended toward Lidvia in a straight line, destroying the belt and clasps holding her right arm down.

With that hand, she grabbed a sharp piece of broken metal from the ruins and thrust it at Stiyl’s chest.

Slash!! Two hands intersected like bullets.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Stiyl and Lidvia remained silent.

Both had pressed something against the other’s throat—Lidvia the metal fragment and Stiyl the corner of a rune card.

“—! Lidvia!!” Agnes recovered from her momentary shock and hurriedly grabbed the Lotus Wand from the wall she’d stood it against.

But Stiyl, still glaring at Lidvia, waved Agnes back with a hand.

The sorcerer was clearly having fun with this. As if to say *this* was what made it an interrogation.

“Did you think so little effort sufficient to take my life?”

“I have no other choice if you will not release those relevant,” said Lidvia, her voice dispassionate. “Oriana Thomson. I request her release and that you let her lead away those overwhelmed by the revolts.”

“Why don’t you consider your position again?”

Stiyl’s voice didn’t shake, either. Oriana was the talented “smuggler” who had joined up with Lidvia.

“Your smuggler knows what’s happening in the world right now, too. On top of that, she offered a deal—to have her mentor Lidvia Lorenzetti shelter the weak, and she’s already agreed to temporarily cooperate with the Puritans. Tell me to release her all you want, but Oriana won’t have any of it.”

“...”

Lidvia and Oriana had both been thinking the same thing.

And Oriana had acted first.

Lidvia quieted, and Stiyl continued, “...Let’s not let her resolve go to waste. If the Roman Orthodox Church—or rather, God’s Right Seat—is creating this situation, there must be a clue as to how to overthrow them, correct?”

Lidvia didn’t answer for a few moments. Biagio tsked and looked away, as if to say this was all a farce.

After a period of heavy, heavy silence, she slowly opened her eyes. “...What are you hoping to gain?”

“Necessarius’s goal is explicit,” he said wearily. “To save the lambs lost and engulfed by the overwhelming power of magic. That’s what it was back then, and that’s what it is now.”

Lidvia stared sharply at him.

He didn’t flinch.

Whatever she was searching for in Stiyl's expression, eventually she slowly exhaled and relaxed. "...I haven't met them directly," she said. "I *have* heard fragments of information by chance, however."

Lidvia Lorenzetti's words echoed through the dark interrogation chamber.

Next to Stiyl, Agnes finally took a seat and spread out a piece of parchment to record.

"According to that information, God's Right Seat is..."

CHAPTER 2

Deciding Trigger Muzzle_of_a_Gun.

1

After Kamijou split up with Mikoto, he paid a visit to the department store near the station like he'd been meaning to. He peered into the fresh food section on the ground floor and saw that vegetables were cheap today, so he went in and bought about four days' worth of ingredients.

...Ready-made food seems really popular, but nobody's going for the ingredients like vegetables and meat and stuff. Maybe less people are cooking for themselves these days, he wondered as he left the store.

He looked up to see the airship still there, a news program on the screen on its side. Initially, he thought it would be more about the protests in the U.S.... but now it was on Russia. News about the demonstrations was the only thing going right now, so it was starting to get hard to tell what was new and what was old.

"..." Kamijou stopped and thought, grocery bags in both hands.

Something Mikoto Misaka said earlier was bothering him.

Demonstrations and protests happening throughout the world. These huge "incidents" weren't unmotivated—rather, there were so many motivations, they left no clues as to how to solve them.

The thing Mikoto was angriest about was having been used during the September 30 incident. The people of Academy City had done everything in their power, endeavoring to bring back the peace they used to have, but it had been used against them to help create new chaos.

Kamijou still wanted to do *something*.

Even Vento of the Front, who caused the upheaval, had her reasons. Even Hyouka Kazakiri, who stood at the crossroads of science and magic, didn't want this kind of discord. Outsiders, those whose names and faces they didn't even know, had butted in and made the world into this mess. That was wrong, no matter how one looked at it.

But...

What do I do...? Kamijou gritted his teeth as he stared at the airship floating in the sky. *I have to stop the problem. That's the biggest goal and easy to understand. But what am I actually supposed to do?*

Perhaps one way was to contact Tsuchimikado, who knew the inner workings of Academy City, or someone from the Puritan camp, like Kanzaki.

But now that the problems were so much bigger, Kamijou couldn't imagine any of them settling the situation at all. If pressed, he felt more like they were backstage specialists who took the initiative before the problems grew this large.

Anyway, standing around here isn't going to do me any good, he thought. *Still, I don't know how to contact the Puritan Church. I guess I'll go back to the dorm first and pay Tsuchimikado a visit, partly just to ask about that.*

And about how he skipped out on the wedding, too, he added inwardly. *Though maybe I've got it better than regular students just by having contact with an agent like him...?* He forced himself to think positively as he mused, walking down the dark streets again. Thinking in circles was making the grocery bags in his hands feel oddly heavy as he walked.

It was the homebound rush hour, so a lot of people were around. Still, he felt like he was bumping into more people than usual. Going back to the dorm, getting dinner ready, and taking a bath was going to be a chore. *Wonder if there's any shortcut recipes that bypass the annoying parts, like using the microwave or rice cooker,* he thought with some seriousness. Normally, there was a chance Index surrendered to hunger and bit him if he took too long to make food.

As he wondered, he ran into another person walking. This time, it was an old woman about fifty or sixty years old.

“Whoops, sorry.”

“No, don’t be,” said the old woman with an elegant smile, bowing her head to him instead.

She didn’t walk hunched over, but even standing up straight she was two sizes smaller than Kamijou. A coat was folded over her bent arm. Plus, she wore a scarf around her neck, looking rather overdressed for the beginning of October. *Maybe she’s sensitive to the cold*, he thought idly.

The old woman brought her head back up and said in an unhurried tone, “I’m the one who should apologize.”

“Oh, no, I’m the one who bumped into you.”

“No, no, not about that.” The old woman smiled.

Kamijou was about to frown before she spoke again.

“About the trouble I’m about to put you through.”

He heard a soft metallic *click*. He looked toward the sound—near his stomach.

The old woman’s arm was there. But with the folded coat hanging over it, everything from her elbow to the front of her wrist was covered with its thin fabric, completely out of sight.

All he understood was the feeling against his gut.

It felt like a hard, pointed stick. He cringed slightly.

“I really do apologize for this,” said the old woman gently, bowing her head again.

2

Suddenly, Mikoto Misaka stopped.

Hmm...

She’d forgotten about it when she ran into that idiot, but now she remembered she had something to talk to him about.

...The Ichihanaran Festival.

Mikoto had a citywide cultural festival on her mind. This year's festival was still over a month away, but due to how terribly the Daihasei Festival, the aggregated athletic festival held in September, ended up (in reality, it was a succession of good, bad, and bittersweet, but she only felt it had been terrible), she'd been thinking about taking measures early for the Ichihanaran Festival.

Actually, half of that seven-day-long Daihasei Festival was one big string of problems related to that idiot. If I'd known it would end up like that, I would have taken the reins earlier...

When she said "taking measures," she meant, of course, securing from him a promise to go around the festival with her.

Why did it turn out like this? ...Well, I guess I can just call him, she thought noncommittally, taking out her cell phone.

She'd formed a pair contract with Kamijou on September 30, so his number was naturally registered in her phone. The whole setup was painful, but she had it, so she might as well use it. As she lined her cursor up on the number in her address book, her eyes went to the antenna symbol in the corner of her screen.

She was out of range.

"...!!"

She looked around, and though the road she was on wasn't small by any means, she ran all the way to a real main street, watching the antenna display at the edge of the screen. Then, after confirming she was having no reception issues, she brought the cursor to the entered number once again and pushed the Call button.

But all she got was an emotionless voice telling her the person she was trying to call was unreachable or his phone was off. This time, *he* was the one out of range.

"Urgh, this is hard to use...What's a cell phone good for if you can't talk to someone when you want to?!"

With anger on her face, she put her phone away, looked around, then ran off

to search for him personally.

Not much time had passed since they'd parted.

The idiot was probably wandering around nearby anyway.

3

Kamijou and the elderly woman walked side by side down the street.

Many people were out and about, but nobody gave them a second thought. Anyone would see a high school student with grocery bags in his hands and an old woman with a coat draped over her arm and think they were completely harmless.

As Kamijou stared at her out of the corner of his eye, not bending his neck, she was the one to give a dry grin instead. "You don't need to be so nervous."

Having said that, though, she had already ordered him to turn his phone off and given him precise instructions on how quickly he should walk. Whatever was hidden under that coat, it was the real deal. He didn't know exactly what it was, but he clearly couldn't make a mistake here.

He considered waiting for a chance to jump at her and turn the situation around. *The problem is, I don't know what's really under there...If I do something careless and make things even worse, it wouldn't be funny.*

As Kamijou worried about this and that, the old woman quietly said, "Please act naturally. It isn't like I'm demanding you not move a finger."

"...Well, still...Why don't you bring out what's under your coat—?"

"Ahchoo!"

"Whoa!!"

The woman had suddenly sneezed, and Kamijou reflexively cried out. A group of students walking nearby glanced at them curiously, then continued on their way.

"I told you, it'll be all right. You've been so scared for a while. What is it?"

"Mainly the thing you're hiding in your coat!! What exactly are you sticking

into me right now?!”

“Oh my. It’s all right, everything’s fine. It won’t fire just because I sneezed.”

“F-fire? It fires—you mean it really is one of those?!”

“It also makes a loud noise. Although I do have a little thing on it to make it quiet.”

“That was a pretty huge hint!!” squealed Kamijou, trembling in fear. The older woman didn’t worry about his shriek.

Escorted by her, they walked through a large shopping district and onto a side road. He realized they were heading for a part of town with a lot of student dormitories—though not the area his was in. Students made up 80 percent of Academy City, so admittedly “parts of town with a lot of student dormitories” were all over the place.

Where on earth are we going...?

If it had been a strange, abandoned factory or something, it would have maxed out his danger gauge. But that wasn’t what it seemed like. Not with the scent of white stew for dinner coming from a nearby dorm and a group of elementary school girls secretly giving food to stray cats, as though making up for the fact that their dorm didn’t allow pets.

As he was busy observing, the old woman stopped abruptly.

“Here it is. Right here.”

“?” That wasn’t enough for Kamijou to get it.

They’d come to a children’s park.

It felt more like this place had been made because there was a little extra space left over from the buildings around it, not as an actual zoned park. It seemed somehow squeezed together, with the proper amount of playground equipment for a narrow area bundled into a set and shoved in.

But why, though??? Kamijou’s mind reeled as he looked at the entrance to the empty space. It wasn’t a special place. At least, not the kind where you’d hold an object against someone on the street and bring them there, prepared for them to see your face.

“I’m sorry. Please go in,” said the old woman, ever so casually poking him with the thing in her coat.

He had no choice but to obey, but he still had no clue what all this was getting her.

At her instruction, they sat next to each other on a bench at the park’s edge.

He initially suspected somebody else was waiting for them, or perhaps would be coming later, but that didn’t seem to be the case.

Kamijou hunched over a bit and placed his two shopping bags on the ground. The woman didn’t especially try to stop him. If he’d had a weapon in his shoe or something, maybe he’d be able to counterattack, but he wasn’t armed to the teeth like some kind of ninja.

He also considered picking up a rock, but he had no clear opportunity to. If he messed up and made her more cautious, it would come to nothing anyway.

For now, he decided to give up and stand.

He asked the woman, “So what on earth are you trying to start here?”

“Oh, no. Nothing as important as you’re thinking,” she said with a sweet smile, poking him with the very much *important* object in her folded coat.

“Let’s talk,” she said.

“Talk?”

“Yes. About the chaos happening throughout the world right now.”

4

She couldn’t find that idiot anywhere.

“This is so strange...” Mikoto swerved onto a small road she’d already been down, looking to and fro, wondering where he was.

She didn’t think it had been that long since they’d parted, but he wasn’t at the place they’d last met. She’d searched several roads around that point, and still, he was nowhere to be found.

Maybe he’d gone into a store or something. Or maybe he’d gotten on public

transit and gone somewhere?

...Where is that idiot's dormitory anyway? It's not like I'm a stalker. How am I supposed to know where to find him? They tended to run into each other without particularly wanting to, so he couldn't be very far away now. Thinking on it more, though, she had no idea where he even lived.

She folded her arms. *Well, the Ichihanaran Festival thing isn't urgent or anything, so I'll give up and go home for today.*

At least, she *tried* to brush off her irritation, but as soon as she spotted a side road out of the corner of her eye, she fidgeted.

...N-no, maybe one more road, she decided. Wondering if there were any roads around that she hadn't checked, she called up her GPS map on her cell phone—and just then, she spotted Kuroko Shirai among the crowds of homeward bound.

With a terrific *whoosh!!* she hid herself behind a building.

Wh-what? ...What am I hiding for?

It was a mystery even to Mikoto, but she vaguely felt like she couldn't let her twin-tailed underclassman find her just now. The other girl was a teleport esper, so if Mikoto was discovered, it would be really hard to shake her off on foot.

The Level Four Shirai was saying something to a girl next to her as they walked down the wide road. The girl had a voluminous crown of fake flowers on her head, so she was probably Kazari Uiharu from Judgment.

...Mikoto had the feeling that they were coming this way, so she entered the narrow road her hiding place had put her near. For now, she went farther and farther down.

And then she realized it:

Huh? ...Was this road always here???

She looked around closely again, realizing she didn't recognize the place. She'd thought she knew most of School District 7 by heart, but this was her first time coming here.

It was a typical Academy City residential area—not of apartment complexes and single-family houses, of course, but of crowded student dormitory blocks. It was filled with nothing but rectangular buildings five to ten stories tall, not big enough to be called high-rises. A garbage dumpster was set up directly under a wind turbine propeller. Maybe the propeller's movements were also used to keep pigeons and crows away.

All the meals at Tokiwadai Middle School were prepared by the school itself, so for Mikoto, the smells of dinner floating to her from nearby felt kind of fresh or something.

“...Well, this works. If I don't see him here, I'll call it quits for the day,” she said vaguely, continuing her walk through the residential district.

5

Kamijou gazed at the old woman dubiously.

The chaos happening throughout the world...She could only have wanted to talk about one thing: the large-scale demonstrations and protests split between those on Academy City's side and those on the Vatican's.

However...

“...Talk about it?” he said. “There's nothing I can actually talk about to begin with.”

“That isn't true. We need your opinion in order to solve this problem.”

“My opinion? Not the opinion of some UN people or the president of another country?”

“Groups centered on the state have a tendency to be weak to religious and ideological strife,” replied the woman easily and unexpectedly. “We commonly call these groups ‘modern nations,’ and it is quite rare that one solves problems like that. Many don't hesitate to *claim* they solved one, but most of the time, they are squashed with military force. Nations, in many cases, actually make the problems worse.”

The old woman continued to speak, the park empty around them. Intellect came in many shapes and sizes, but hers was close to the teacherly kind.

“The chaos happening throughout the world right now is serious. Nobody will be able to solve it easily, and it could also be the flame to spark a second conflict. If they fail to put the flame out correctly, they could cause internal strife severe enough to paralyze national functions. That’s part of why no nation has carried out a military intervention against the demonstrations and protests. This is a difficult problem for them, and to be honest, nations would love to have a solution manual for it. Everybody is watching, waiting, until another country acts, so they can see what effects and results they achieve.”

“...Who in the world *are* you?” asked Kamijou carefully.

The woman sitting beside him seemed a little different than other agents like Motoharu Tsuchimikado and Stiyl Magnus, who were armed for combat and assassination. And from her manner of talking, she almost sounded like an educator. But a mere teacher probably wouldn’t make contact with him using a weapon hidden inside her coat.

...She seems somehow different than the people I’ve met before, he’d thought, so he’d cautiously put the question to her.

“Monaka Oyafune.”

Her full name promptly came out.

“Maybe you’d understand if I said I was on the Academy City General Board.”

It was one bombshell after another with this woman. “...What?” asked Kamijou in spite of himself.

The General Board was, so to speak, the highest agency in the sprawling Academy City—twelve people who focused on running the place. There was apparently someone even higher than them, a leader called the General Board chairperson, but nevertheless, the General Board’s privileges were nothing to shake a stick at.

But at the same time...

...Is she really one of those big shots?

As one of only twelve members of Academy City’s General Board, she could freely control Anti-Skill officers and private security police with a single

command. It would be weird for her to come personally to talk to him, armed, and calling him to a tiny little children's park.

As Kamijou wondered in doubt, the woman who said her name was Monaka Oyafune smiled. "Is that not believable?"

"Yeah, um, it's just weird. Like that scarf around your neck, it's weird and shriveled—or, like, I get the sense that if you were on the General Board you could get a better one."

Kamijou was too confused to say anything sensible, but it startled Oyafune more than he expected. She suddenly brought a hand up to touch her scarf. "M-my daughter made this scarf for me. I will not let you insult it."

"O-oh," answered Kamijou with an awkward nod before thinking of another question. "Wait...I'm sure your daughter is a full-fledged adult at this point. But she doesn't seem very good at— Okay, I get it, I get it!! I won't mention it again!! I won't, so stop shaking whatever's inside your coat already!!"

Now he was being contained when he didn't need to be, so he decided to stop pointlessly exciting her.

Monaka Oyafune. The General Board...Those two pieces of information might not be correct, he concluded. But maybe she's using a fake name so she can give me some kind of correct information. I don't like dancing in the palms of other people's hands, but I'll be the one to decide whether to dance and how.

"...Anyway, you said you wanted to talk. About what?" he began.

Oyafune nodded, seeming happy. "A major problem is occurring throughout the world right now. A chain of disruptions with demonstrations and protests first and foremost."

"Well, I know that..."

"I want to ask you to solve it."

"How?" asked Kamijou, frowning at those sudden words. "If I could do it myself, I would. Wouldn't everyone in the world feel the same? But in reality, nothing's changed. Nothing is solved. Everyone knows we have to solve the problem, but nobody is trying. Do you know why?"

Kamijou continued, not waiting for an answer: “Because there’s no simple reason or cause behind it. Nobody can solve a problem that doesn’t have an answer. That’s why nobody can do anything, even though the problem is being paraded right in front of them. It’s just not solvable, is it? I hope you’re not about to ask me to go around the world and talk down every single protester individually.”

“What if,” answered Monaka Oyafune, not backing down, as though she’d predicted that problem from the start, “there *was* a simple reason or cause? What would you do?”

“What?”

“This brings me to why I’m talking to you. I’m hoping for something that no United Nations or nation representative has—something that only you have.”

“And what’s that?”

“Your right hand.”

“...”

Something only Touma Kamijou had. Without thinking, he glanced at it.

The Imagine Breaker.

It would be appropriate to consider for this. Whether sorcery or supernatural ability, the special power could erase anything related to any strange abilities. But for things that weren’t, normal things like demonstrations or protests, it wouldn’t have any effect. Which meant...

“Wait...*Is that how it is?*”

“It is.”

“You’re saying that a strange power is behind this chaos and that person is the cause of everything? And that if I destroy that one cause, everything will go back to normal? That if I act now, while it’s still a continuing problem rather than a result of September 30, I can solve it?”

“*That’s what I’m saying.*” Oyafune nodded simply. “By the way, Academy City isn’t the one creating this discord. According to the chairperson, the Roman Orthodox Church, a religious organization, apparently possesses a scientific,

supernatural Ability Development agency.”

“...?” Kamijou almost frowned at that but then realized to the general public... or rather, by Academy City’s announcements, sorcery didn’t exist.

That was the story.

The idea of “sorcery” was what “scientific supernatural abilities” were called in ages past. It wouldn’t do him any good to mention that here and now. If he interrupted without thinking, he’d just make the situation worse.

Oyafune, never letting go of her “scientific viewpoint,” continued on. “Well—and this goes without saying—Academy City has no reason to sow discord. Naturally, if a problem has happened, it was the Roman Orthodox Church, not us.”

“I see...” Kamijou almost agreed, but thinking calmly, something bothered him. “Wait, hold on. You’re kidding, right? They don’t gain anything from this, either. The demonstrations and protests are all happening in Roman Orthodox areas. The ones in the middle suffering because of it are people of that religion, aren’t they? They can’t benefit from making their own suffer.”

“What if I said they *did* gain something?”

“...What?”

“It’s simple,” said Oyafune smoothly. “For example, official records state that there are over two billion Roman Orthodox followers. It’s an incredible number, isn’t it? Even all the children and elderly in Academy City combined only come to 2.3 million. If it came to a straight-up war, it would be a pure contest of numbers, and we would have no way to win. Even considering the geographical problems a war would pose for them, I’m pretty sure it won’t make up for the numbers advantage.”

“So what?” asked Kamijou.

“Oh, but don’t you think that’s strange?” she asked back. “The Vatican is currently making a serious effort to destroy Academy City. Why would they choose worldwide demonstrations and protests to do that? Why don’t they take the simple approach and crush us with their numbers? Focusing everything on Academy City would be more effective than causing violence elsewhere in

the world. Don't you think it's circuitous?"

"...You don't mean..."

"Yes." Oyafune smiled. "*The fact that they control two billion people is a lie.* If they could destroy this city, they would have done so long ago. Perhaps those people do wear Orthodox crosses, carry Bibles, and go to church on Sundays. And maybe there really are two billion people like that in the world.

"However," she continued, "the issue is *whether they could commit murder in the name of Crossism...*and that makes things different. Though I'm sure there are people who would. Right now, the world is split in two: Academy City and a giant religious organization. But...what is the truth, really? Is there actually a clear-cut line in the sand?"

"..."

"Even people who go to worship on Sundays watch TV and use cell phones. Even athletes who train their body according to scientific sports medicine might pray to God during important games—that's what it's like outside Academy City in the so-called normal world. The lines are vague. People take the good parts from both sides, fortify it with their own beliefs, and then create their own worlds to live in."

"The science side and magic side...overlap..."

Oyafune knitted her brows and said, "Magic side...?" but still continued after a moment. "Yes. The world's great majority...the winners of its rule by majority—that's what it is. Everything is spread thin and wide. People will take out loans and plan their lives at banks managed by Academy City-related groups, then have their wedding ceremony in a Roman Orthodox Church...They're the ones populating the world: those who reap the benefits of both science and religion."

"Then...," said Kamijou. He felt the back of his throat starting to dry out, little by little. "The Roman Orthodox Church's goal...Wait, it's to get those people who reap the benefits of both science and religion to...?"

"Most likely. Having the best of both worlds concerns them. They want all two billion of those people secured. They want as many allies as they can get. So I

believe they did *something*. And as a result, the cogs fell out of alignment and induced the demonstrations.”

Something, she'd said. Was that the key to this incident?

“Inciting protests isn't what they're after. They want the boost from chaos to attack the foundation of the world Academy City's very existence has established.”

Oyafune's words clearly came from someone on the science side. That bothered Kamijou a little, but there was no point arguing with her right now.

“Academy City is especially concerned by this part of what the Church is doing.”

“Really...Because they're scared of all the people rallying to the Church because of the demonstrations?”

“That is one thing,” admitted Oyafune, “but even if that didn't go their way, a different development is possible. We're currently in the middle of working out countermeasures to what we're calling *economic bombing*.”

“...Economic...bombing...?”

“The longer this chaos drags on, the worse the effect on our economy. It's dangerous, and it could trigger a worldwide scare. If that happens, then the Church wouldn't need to be big enough—Academy City could be torn apart.”

Kamijou didn't quite get all this talk of economies and scares. He turned to the woman sitting next to him on the bench and said, “...These ‘modern’ nations you're talking about...Would they really fail that easily? They haven't been shaken at all yet, right? All this economics stuff—I don't know anything about money on the national level, but I can't see big armies getting ruined by business.”

“If there is one representative or symbol of the scientific world outside of Academy City that's easy to understand...it would be so-called military powers. But even those nations have weaknesses to economic trends.” She spoke slowly. “To maintain a military, you need tremendous capital. The worldwide chaos is limiting the sources of money they're using for that. In addition, no matter how small their income, the military always expends a certain amount of

it. In other words, when an economic scare happens, military powers immediately take damage. The bigger the military, the more extreme their collapse is.”

Is that real? thought Kamijou. A few countries like that came to mind, but they didn't seem like they would get jolted very easily. “But those countries that have big militaries...Don't they have a ton of oil and lots of ammunition in store for times like these? Couldn't they go off that for a few years?”

“Ha-ha. Wars don't happen after reserves have actually depleted. Militaries wouldn't be able to fight at that point. If you can make them look at the current situation and think, *Eventually our reserves will run dry*, you can make them pull the trigger, and everything goes up in flames. And when a major power goes on a rampage—I think that's more than enough of a factor to tear apart the science world centered on Academy City.”

Her strangely decisive tone struck Kamijou dumb. She probably had the numbers in her mind she needed to back that viewpoint up.

“I don't know if that process is related,” said Oyafune, “but right now, Academy City is desperately trying to acquire war funds. Are they trying to make up for the numbers difference with cutting-edge equipment and unmanned weapons...or is there some other reason? We're holding weapons exhibitions, using the pretext of lowering our products' grade for the sake of mass production to manufacture 'mundane weapons' without actually using significant technology. Then we call them Academy City's newest weapons and sell them at high prices.”

“ ... ”

“Meanwhile, the Roman Orthodox Church is also amassing a war chest, in the form of contributions from the faithful. On the surface, they're peace funds to quell the chaos, and the people donating probably have no ulterior motives... but it's plain as day what the higher-ups mean when they say they'll use the money for peace.”

The bigger the chaos got, the more funds they could raise.

The Roman Orthodox Church was enormous. With its two billion followers, even if everyone only donated one yen, they would have two billion yen. Of

course, it wasn't compulsory, so plenty of people wouldn't donate, but wealthier strata apparently had a tradition of gaining status through how much money they donated. And going by what Oyafune said, they'd already gotten a lot more than two billion.

"Their system of indulgences is still around, though in a different form," said Oyafune.

Kamijou didn't really understand that. Was *indulgence* a historical term of some sort?

"You'd have to be quite the zealot to weigh science against religion and choose the latter. If someone told you heaven existed, you wouldn't decide dying was all right. Science is realistic, which means it's almost ridiculously easy to understand. People will flock to whatever's easy to understand. But there are people who still worry about it. And those are the people they did something to. Whatever it was, as I can see it, it affected the gears in their normally functioning minds and resulted in bringing about all this chaos."

"..."

Was this all true? For example, wasn't it possible Academy City caused this, not the Roman Orthodox Church? Academy City would have to fight the Church and its two billion followers with 2.3 million people. So they caused the chaos in the Church to whittle down the enemies' numbers a little. Wasn't that possible?

...*This is hard.*

The Roman Orthodox faithful were the ones central to the demonstrations and protests. But if they were spread thin like Monaka Oyafune claimed, they wouldn't be a direct combat force. And they wouldn't properly understand the sorcery aspect of the Church, either. It was hard to think about big shots like Agnes Sanctis or Biagio Busoni participating in the protests and rampaging around doing whatever they wanted.

If this was a plan of Academy City's, then it was hard to imagine it doing damage to their *actual* combat forces.

In fact, if the demonstrators were halfway between science and sorcery, then that would make them important people supporting capitalism. If they were too

preoccupied with protests to do their actual jobs, that by itself would lead to economic damage. And if it was two billion people doing it, those losses would be no laughing matter. If they just wanted money for wartime, they wouldn't purposely constrict their own sources of funds.

If there was some kind of conspiracy going on behind the scenes, Kamijou decided that it would be appropriate to think the Church had caused this chaos—to win over the people on the fence.

And when things came to the dark side of the Church, Imagine Breaker likewise became more valuable.

"But still," he began after thinking it through, "let's say the Roman Orthodox Church was doing something, and they were related to some kind of trick or whatever. What on earth would the trick be? My power doesn't amount to much. I don't know where they are or what they're using. It's not a convenient tool I can use to meddle in things like this. If I'm going to cause trouble, I'd at least want someone to take me to the stage."

"Yes. About that—" began Monaka Oyafune before stopping.

A new figure had appeared in the small children's park.

"Tsuchimikado?" muttered Kamijou, seeing his sunglasses-covered face.

It was Motoharu Tsuchimikado, his classmate. He should have been at school after it ended, but he'd vanished when it came time to do the weeding. Kamijou considered griping about that, but this was clearly neither the time nor the place. He couldn't—not with the way he seemed.

The air about Tsuchimikado was completely different from how it usually was.

"...Finished talking?"

He didn't speak to Kamijou. His eyes, behind his blue-lensed sunglasses, were only looking at Monaka Oyafune.

Oyafune, for her part, wasn't surprised. Maybe she was acquainted with the agent known as Motoharu Tsuchimikado. "We are not, but this is fine," she said. "If you're to be the one, I can accept that."

"I see," said Tsuchimikado shortly before exhaling quietly as if he was bored

with an annoying job. “You’ve taken care of business?”

“I did yesterday.”

“Then I’ll start, if you don’t mind.”

“There is nothing you need to hesitate about,” answered Oyafune with a smile.

Tsuchimikado looked slightly away from her. He reached behind him and took out something from the belt of his pants.

“Tsu...chimikado?”

There, as they left the confused Kamijou out of the conversation, he saw something unbelievable. A black, shining metal item in Tsuchimikado’s right hand. An object just fifteen centimeters long. It was...

...a pistol?

Though his mind caught up, Kamijou couldn’t stop him.

Not because he couldn’t predict what was going to happen.

But because even if he had predicted it, he didn’t believe his classmate could follow through with such a heinous thing.

Bang!! The dry gunshot echoed through the tiny park.

Monaka Oyafune, nevertheless, was smiling.

Her body wavered, then fell off the bench and onto the dirt.

6

Mikoto startled at the loud noise.

It sounded like the crack of gunfire.

The shrill noise drilled into her ears, then echoed into the air.

Wha...? What was that???

Fireworks? But October wasn’t the season for them. In terms of other possibilities, maybe a fire-creating esper had done something...?

She heard several windows opening in the student dorms nearby. With such a

loud sound, they must have been worried. None of the students went so far as to leave the building, though; it seemed spectating didn't hold enough interest if it meant interrupting dinner.

Guess an esper's going crazy. Well, this just turned into a chore, she thought, heading in that direction.

She was a Level Five electromaster, the Railgun. She could handle most espers on her own, one way or another, and was confident that if dragged into an incident, she could turn the tables. Even if someone threw her into the middle of a fight between a berserk esper and Anti-Skill, she'd probably return unharmed.

Still, even she had once faced *a problem she couldn't do anything about alone*, but...

...!! Th-that's only because the two key people were way too irregular! And that doesn't have anything to do with this! A-anyway, I'll go see what I can find over there. Um, which way was it again?

Mikoto shook her head, focused, and started walking toward the noise.

All she could see in this seemingly normal neighborhood was student housing to every side.

7

Monaka Oyafune had been shot in the gut.

It took several seconds for Kamijou to realize that fact.

Motoharu Tsuchimikado had shot her.

It took another few seconds for him to process that.

Oyafune hadn't resisted. She'd been poking Kamijou with something in her coat before, but he never saw her point it at Tsuchimikado. She knew exactly what was coming and took the bullet anyway. Such was the scene before him.

Tsu...chi...mika...do?

Kamijou's gaze slowly moved away from the fallen Oyafune.

Tsuchimikado's expression remained the same.

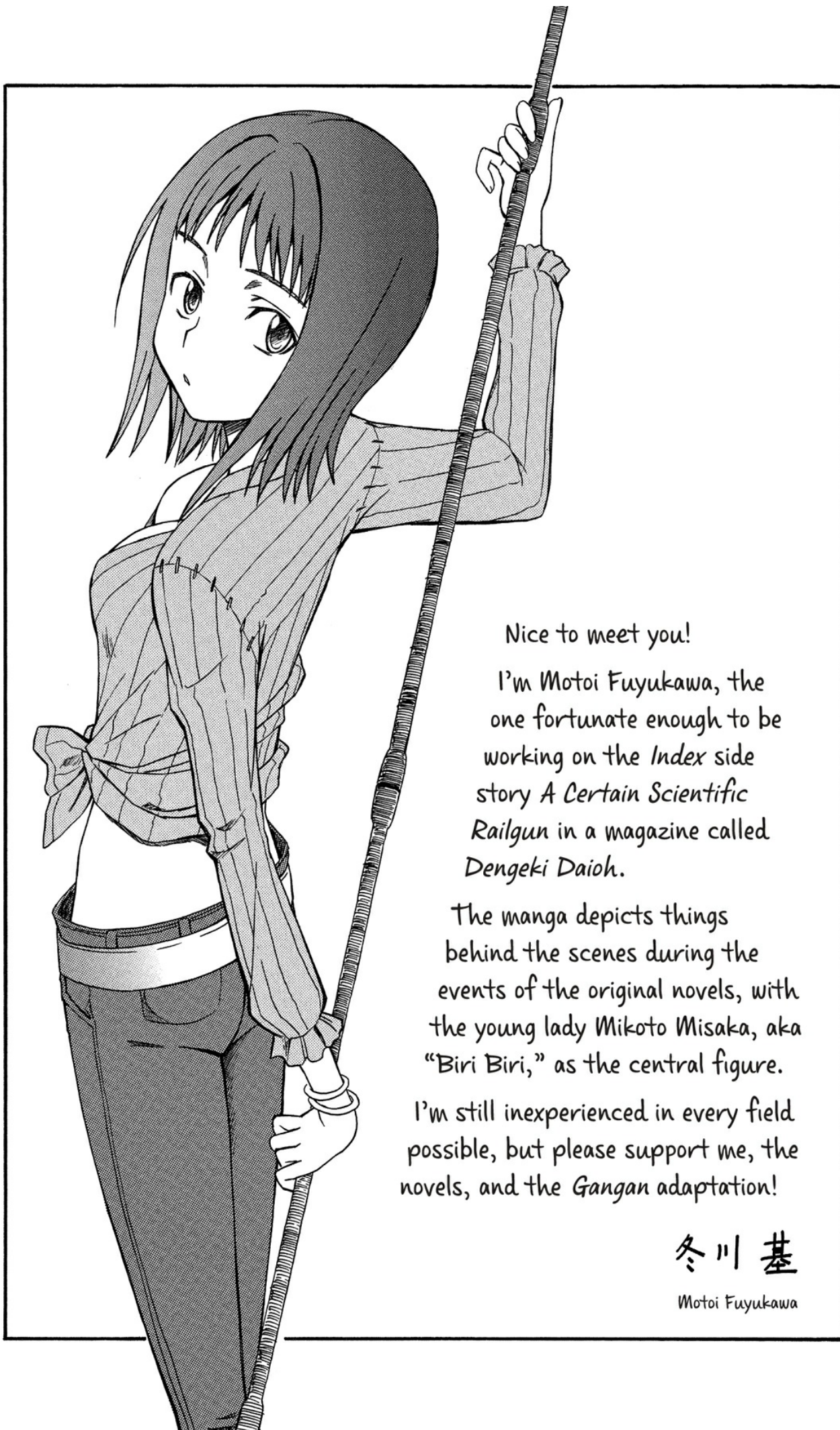
White smoke still billowed from the pistol in his right hand. He brought it behind him, then hid it between his shirt hem and his pants belt, picked up the empty shell casing from the ground, and put it into his pocket.

All of those were completely calm, simple actions to him.

That made Kamijou explode.

“Tsuchimikadooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!”

He shot off the bench and grabbed his classmate's shirt. When he saw that the eyes behind the sunglasses still didn't change in the slightest, Kamijou clenched his fist and threw a punch. He felt the uniquely dull sensation in his fingers and wrist joints as he connected. Hit in the face, Tsuchimikado reeled back, and he fell to the ground. But even after falling over, his expression remained the same. He clearly didn't feel any of the damage whatsoever.



Nice to meet you!

I'm Motoi Fuyukawa, the one fortunate enough to be working on the *Index* side story *A Certain Scientific Railgun* in a magazine called *Dengeki Daioh*.

The manga depicts things behind the scenes during the events of the original novels, with the young lady Mikoto Misaka, aka "Biri Biri," as the central figure.

I'm still inexperienced in every field possible, but please support me, the novels, and the *Gangan* adaptation!

冬川基

Motoi Fuyukawa

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