

鎌池和馬

イラスト/はいむらきよたか

とある科学の
超電磁砲

コールドゲーム



電撃大王文庫

Part 0

(the_fool)

Urban Sociology Professor Alfonso Brookman once said a bizarre social order exists in Academy City.

Eighty percent of its population of 2.3 million is made up of some kind of student. That creates an overwhelming number of minors, yet the city still ensures ease of use for the aged in its roads and elsewhere. Nor is its automobile industry in decline. Smoking areas are maintained over a surprisingly wide area and the convenience stores and supermarkets sell alcohol like normal.

Despite its unique population distribution, Academy City supports all ages in a wide variety of ways. The many do not crush the few with the tyranny of an overwhelming majority. That might sound nice, but there is a small loophole here.

Since their social system is built to match that of the outside world, the city's majority is burdened with the obligation of maintaining that. Even if the odds of selection are as low as being struck by lightning, they must fulfill that role to their fullest once they are chosen.

For example...yes.

...How does that city's court system work?

Part 1

(the_magician)

To be honest, few people would know what you meant if you mentioned Sakugawa Middle School. Typing the name into a search engine would only turn up a few results and the school's official website would only receive a few hundred hits in a good month. Not even all the school's students would know the site existed.

But even that plain and ordinary public middle school had a certain minor event: a field trip.

“Ohh, ohh. We're actually at the Central Anti-Skill Station.”

“Saten-san, your eyes and voice look and sound dead. The Anti-Skill officers working here have done nothing wrong, so let's not do that.”

Uiharu Kazari, a girl with lots of flower decorations in her short hair, gave that exasperated comment to her sailor uniform friend who had long black hair.

Officially, it was the school bowing its head and requesting a visit, but adolescent sensibilities could be cruelly honest, so if they were not interested, they were not interested. Saten Ruiko would have been more excited attaching a rubber band to her smartphone for a simple VR that let her peer into a world of swords and magic. She only felt any excitement at all because this got her out of having to take classes on a school day.

“Besides, Saten-san, I thought you liked hearing about crimes and such.”

“C’mon, Uiharu. My specialty is rumors and urban legends. I can irresponsibly enjoy those because they’re so vague and uncertain. I’m not so indiscriminate that I’d drool over some legit crime that’s not just in the online news but on the old-fashioned TV news and newspapers. I mean, you know someone’s really suffering then.”

The Central Anti-Skill Station was about the same as a prefectural police headquarters outside of Academy City. Saten was looking up at no more than a box of thick reinforced concrete. Since it was a government office, it was not given any unnecessary decorations. And unlike in a TV police drama, there was no one shooting their guns out front and no dump trucks crashing into the front entrance. To be blunt, it was a boring visual.

An Anti-Skill woman clapped her hands a couple of times to gather the uniformed boys’ and girls’ attention.

She wore a track suit instead of a proper uniform.

“Okay, okay. It’s time for the tour! We’ll start with the main lobby. And there’s no reason to be nervous just because it’s an Anti-Skill station. Most of the people here are submitting lost item reports, renewing licenses, and other standard business. It isn’t just wicked criminals who have business here.”

There were more than one hundred curious or inattentive middle schoolers, but the Anti-Skill woman managed to keep them together as she guided them. That may have been due to Anti-Skill officers generally also working as teachers.

They walked through the thick glass door and found a lobby much like in a city hall or bank. Several counters were lined up alongside each other and each booth was given a number. There was also a machine that spat out numbered tickets.

A bank or hospital would have TVs set up, but an Anti-Skill station could not do that. They were meant to preserve order in the city, so it would damage their reputation if they angered ZASRAC.

“This is the general reception area. As I said, this is the main lobby for the people here for completely ordinary matters such as lost items or licenses. Dramas tend to show the

arrested criminals taken in the front entrance while handcuffed, but we make sure normal people and suspects are never in the same area. Now, let's head further in."

The bulletin board was covered in posters with advice for avoiding bank transfer scams and how to use fire safely. But in an age of smartphone VR, the hand-drawn portrait drawings stood out. Would the day ever come that you could put on some goggles and view them from any angle?

"Uiharu, have you ever been to Anti-Skill before?"

"I barely interact with them at all."

Just then, Saten came to a stop while the group followed their guide.

"What is it, Saten-san?"

"Well..."

The posters were all standard for an Anti-Skill station.

...Wanted for arson. Urgently seeking all information. Have you seen them? This is their last known appearance. The reward money period has been extended. The reward is set at a maximum of six million yen. Do not let them get away with robbery! The security camera footage of the Nichimaru Department Store stun gun incident has been released to the public...

Anti-Skill would seek information from the public for anything from locating a missing minor to identifying a wandering old person they had taken into custody, but Saten was looking at the section for wanted criminals with reward money being offered. Red, black, yellow, white... Those posters were given highly contrasting colors to draw the eye and they were covered with images of mean-looking people taken from licenses or security cameras.

"Hoehhh. These are wanted criminals, missus."

"And the rewards have reached the millions because they're so hard to catch."

"I'm not interested in capturing them. I just want a photo of these. Doesn't it make you feel like a bounty hunter in a video game!?"

"That's actually a real job people do, you know?"

Just then, Saten's smartphone made an odd noise.

The two of them frowned and looked at the screen to see something flashing at the top right corner of the photo management app. It was informing them of one of the app's functions.

“What’s this? The album has started organizing the photos on its own.”

“Which means...the facial recognition kicked in? Eh? It found a connection between the wanted criminal poster...and the photos you’ve taken...?”

They looked in the app and saw two photos in an automatically-created folder.

One was the poster Saten had photographed.

The poster’s photo seemed to be taken from security camera footage. The person had their hoodie’s hood up and it was too grainy to see much of the face within.

They could not tell what the person looked like, but the machine had apparently done some kind of processing to see the face in the darkness.

Then there was the second photo.

It was a perfectly ordinary photo already on Saten’s smartphone.

She had probably wanted to show off on social media that she had gotten a convenience store’s new seasonal product before anyone else, but the selfie showed Saten sipping a toxically pink liquid through a straw.

However...

“Ah, look! There’s a cursor over here...”

“?”

“You can barely see someone on a bike in the back. Isn’t that the same person as the security camera footage on the poster?”

Part 2

(the_priestess)

“Yes, we are right in front of District 7’s Central Anti-Skill Station! Boy A, who was arrested without a warrant, was just transported here, so the press is rushing the place!!”

“It is possible that the person known online as Loophole was working alone. As you might guess from his name, he has committed various brutal crimes as a way of pointing out the flaws in our legal and social system, so we can predict that he has simply

gathered a large number of followers from the people who are displeased with Anti-Skill and Judgment.”

“You can’t find this on TV! They’re stuck following those boring broadcast regulations!!”

“Here is the information we have on the suspect, Innai Chigiri (15).”

“These are the cases most likely connected to Loophole: the Suicide Assistance Video Case (In which an incurably ill individual was sought out and euthanized. Was it acceptable or not to free him from his pain?), the Loan Shark Office Arson Case (In which a registry of people with multiple debts was burned. Was it acceptable or not to free people from debt placed on them through illicit means?), the Takarabune Bank Vault Imprisonment Case (In which a banker was threatened and locked inside the vault while the air was gradually removed. Was it acceptable or not to leak the internal structure of the vault to an external rescue team in order to save an individual?)”

“And the Cold Sleep Murder Case. A frozen girl’s corpse was discovered below a skating rink in District 15, which is known as Academy City’s largest shopping district.”

“Be as accurate as possible: the frozen girl’s name was Asajimo Saemi.”

“Have you seen what they’re saying on TV? The murderer is only called Boy A while the victim’s full name is given. There really is something wrong with this country...”

“Mattsuu> Huh? If she’s in cold sleep, isn’t she still alive?”

“ANZEN> Her brain and heart aren’t functioning and is there any way to safely unfreeze her? Biologically it’s uncertain and legally she’s probably considered dead. Even if she’s left like that for a few days, she’s officially in cardiopulmonary arrest until a doctor signs the documents. This really is the kind of thing Loophole would be a part of.”

“A comment on this article: Tah dah☆ But is this guy a winner or loser as far as esper powers go? Is he a high level intellectual? Or a Level 0?”

“Not much information has been released so far. Among the employed, unique abilities are more often seen as something that creates a feeling of alienation from those around you...”

“Chief! The investigation was having difficulties and rumor had it the case would never be solved, so what was it that led to this arrest!?”

“Well, I can only say that the tireless and diligent efforts of our many investigators have borne fruit. But this was also in large part due to a civilian-supplied photograph showing a bike thought to belong to the suspect. The license plate was a fake used by the current suspect and it led us to his hideout.”

“Once Boy A has had a psychological evaluation by an expert, it seems likely the prosecution will indict him to a criminal trial. This has been brought to you from in front of District 7’s Central Anti-Skill Station.”

Part 3

(the_empress)

“...Ugh. This has gotten out of hand.”

It was the next day. The entire world seemed to have changed in just one day.

Saten Ruiko commented on the current age of maximum speed trials.

The administrative agencies were gathered in District 1. She did not visit that area often, but today she had been brought there by a black van. Their destination was Academy City General Courthouse. It was generally known as a “court of first instance”, but they did not approach the front entrance. Needless to say, that was due to the TV and newspaper reporters and the voyeurs who claimed to be online journalists who were waiting outside.

The prosecutor in the van with her was supposedly the person who cornered the defendant until they were found guilty, but...

“L-let’s do our best, okay!? After causing so much trouble, that Loophole boy has finally been arrested and indicted, so we have to free the victims from their regrets and bring a normal life back to the surviving families!! Let’s do this!!”

(Ehhhhh!? We’re about to start the trial of the century, but this adult sounds panicked and can barely get the words out!? I thought prosecutors were supposed to be people who were nicknamed “the demon” and stuff like that!?)

If even a carefree middle school girl like Saten Ruiko was growing pale, then the world truly was over.

But while dramas often depicted the choice between a court-appointed attorney and a private defense attorney, they rarely showed a change in prosecutor. This woman in a cheap and baggy suit looked like a puppy giving you an upturned look. She wore her hair up to force a formal adult look, but it seemed more like something from the Shichi-Go-San festival. She may have been even shorter than Saten, but now that things had started, she would have to stick with it to the end!

She must have noticed Saten's extremely uneasy gaze because thus spoke the puppy prosecutor (who was more toy poodle than Doberman):

"It's unlikely, but there can be a risk if a witness's identity is discovered. So your personal information will be hidden as much as possible. That's standard practice."

"U-um, then do I really have to speak from the witness stand...?"

"Your photograph was the defining piece of evidence in arresting and building a case against Innai Chigiri, so you need to provide testimony on the circumstances of taking that photo. I know it won't be easy, so thank you for cooperating!"

"..."

It was not supposed to be like this. Saten Ruiko felt like holding her head in her hands.

She had not wanted to become the talk of the town and she had not wanted the reward. She had even refused the reward, but Anti-Skill and the prosecutor had not left her alone. Having lost the reward and gained nothing, Saten Ruiko was on the verge of tears. For one thing, she had not done anything at all. It was her smartphone that had found the suspicious face in her album app. But next thing she knew, all of this was going on. Part of her seriously wished they would just take her smartphone into the interrogation room and feed it the katsudon.

"Sigh."

Her name had yet to appear on the internet, but for the past few days, she had felt a squeezing at her heart every time "the person who supplied the crucial information" had come up on message boards or social media.

Discussing these things online was so much different than being the topic of discussion.

A large group of complete strangers were searching for information on her. That was more than enough to scare her. Plus...

"L-Loophole has followers, right? I heard he has a lot of secret fans."

"He is Innai Chigiri, the defendant. No more and no less, kay?"

(Kay?)

“They won’t try to take r-revenge on me for testifying, will they!? Will they!?”

“If you’re worried about any risks, then the best course of action is to make sure Innai Chigiri is found guilty and sent to the juvenile hall. Letting him go free would be the most dangerous option.”

Saten Ruiko really did hold her head in her hands now and the baggy suit puppy tossed her something wrapped in clear plastic.

“Um, what is this?”

“Let me ask you something instead: Do you really plan to appear in court wearing a uniform that identifies your school? Didn’t I say it’s standard practice to hide as much personal information as possible? C’mon!”

While wondering if this was some new diet that helped you lose weight by making sure you did not have an appetite, Saten tore open the plastic and spread out the contents.

It was a suit made of thick black rubber.

She could only assume it would be skintight from the neck down. Her bodylines would be entirely visible. Why did this dog prosecutor have what looked like a costume for a female phantom thief?

“...Are you serious?”

“Very serious. These days, the reporters can use a single strap to determine what store you bought it at and the general area in which you live. It wouldn’t hurt to get rid of every little thing of your own.”

The black van pulled around behind the courthouse, drove down a gentle slope, and entered an underground parking garage. A few people in black were waiting there. Fortunately, this was not a foolish team of 101 tiny puppies, so Saten breathed a sigh of relief. The suit-wearing Dobermans had apparently already gotten rid of any reporters trying to disguise themselves as staff members.

“Okay, let’s go.”

“Wah, wait! The zipper! I still have to zip it up!!”

Blushing, Saten pitched forward and stumbled out into the parking garage.

The puppy prosecutor stretched upwards and confiscated Saten’s flower-shaped hair decoration.



“I said a single strap, didn’t I?”

While surrounded by men in black like she was the president, Saten was led through a space of bare concrete. She nervously looked around, and...

“Wh-where are we going now?”

“There are waiting rooms for witnesses. There are snacks and drinks there for you, so try not to come out until the trial. If you absolutely must use the bathroom or something, use the phone in the room to contact us. We will construct a safe route for you.”

“Ugh.”

“During the trial itself, you will be partitioned off by frosted glass so the defendant and gallery can’t see your face. The only real danger is when you’re waiting in the back. A lot of different people claim to be journalists these days. It isn’t unusual for them to use the internal staff or small robots, so don’t trust someone just because they’re walking around like they belong.”

She smoothly answered Saten’s questions, but it was not that reassuring when the woman looked like a puppy. Were they really headed in the right direction? She wouldn’t accidentally open the wrong door and dump them right into the middle of the press, would she? Saten could only pray that hellish kind of thing did not happen.

They rode up in an unusually small elevator, walked down a small hallway that made lots of twists and turns, and finally arrived in an area that looked like a hotel. Either that or the waiting rooms in a TV station. A long hallway was lined with doors that needed a card key to open.

The prosecutor in a black suit opened one door, but she did not give Saten a card key.

“Even if someone knocks, tells you it’s time, or yells that there’s a fire, do not carelessly open the door. Make sure to check over the phone first. Do you understand?”

“It’s not like I have any other option...”

“Good.”

“Um, uh, couldn’t you leave someone in front of the door?”

“Umm. Only if you want to advertise which of these many doors has the witness behind it.” The prosecutor clenched her tiny fists at face height and gave a snort from her nose. “Okay, let’s work together in court!”

(I’m worried...)

“Oh, and...become deliiiiicious!!”

(I'm super worried!!)

After the men in black left, Saten was left all alone and the loneliness pressed in on her from all directions.

Actually being part of a criminal case was so different from just hearing about them.

And this case was not normal.

“...”

Unlike a movie or a drama, the prosecution and defense did not keep their evidence hidden and reveal it during the trial itself. They would declare in advance what their claims were and request for the evidence they needed. Even if they needed some other evidence afterwards, they could not bring it to court if they failed to request it. In other words, there would be no unexpected twists from a shocking new piece of evidence.

Thus, Saten had already been given an overview of the crimes committed by Loophole, aka Innai Chigiri.

The focus this time was on the Cold Sleep Murder Case.

A fourteen-year-old girl named Asajimo Saemi had been abducted, stripped naked, and frozen. The ice in the center of a District 15 skating rink had been removed and the “coffin” had been placed inside instead. Then water had been sprayed in from above to fill in all the gaps and the rink was back to normal in time for business hours the following morning.

The first to discover the corpse had not been an employee at the skating rink.

After seeing the perfectly smooth ice surface, they had apparently opened the rink like normal. It had been one of the first customers who screamed.

The crime scene investigation was complete and the part of the thick ice containing the girl had been cut out and sent to a university hospital for storage.

The culprit's identity had been unknown because he had cleverly avoided the surveillance cameras when entering and exiting the skating rink late at night, but that was where Saten came in. Her selfie had coincidentally photographed him leaving the skating rink and preparing to board his bike.

“Sigh...”

Saten sighed.

Her cellphone itself had not been confiscated. She looked down at the screen out of unease and loneliness and she saw a few emails and missed calls. Misaka Mikoto, Shirai Kuroko, Uiharu Kazari... She smiled at the names of those friends who knew her situation, but then doubt crept in.

(...Huh? I can't let people know my phone is here, can I? With the signal, I mean.)

She just about replied out of habit, but her fingers stopped. She breathed in and out. And she reconsidered. ...It would be best to avoid any risk. So she decided against replying and turned off the phone altogether.

The public prosecutor was a government worker. And the defense attorney would protect the defendant.

But what about the witness?

Saten Ruiko belatedly realized she had fallen into an unexpected gap, so she breathed a heavy, heavy sigh in the empty room.

She was certain today would be an adventure.

But what good was an adventure she could not post about online?

Part 4

(the_emperor)

“Oh, the line's moving. And everyone's getting a lot noisier.”

Meanwhile, Misaka Mikoto was standing in a very long line of people that stretched outside of the courthouse.

District 1 was seen as a strict place what with all of its administrative agencies and Mikoto felt like she would drown in the atmosphere if she stood still for too long. Other than one convenience store sign with restrained colors, nothing seemed allowed to draw attention to itself. Instead of the normal drum-shaped cleaning robots, Anti-Skill was accompanied by quadrupedal armored robots that played the role of military dogs, so everything felt higher pressure than in other districts.

“Y-you sure are lucky, Misaka-san. Weren't the odds of getting into this trial 1-in-208, making it a new record?”

“Uiharu-san, I'm more impressed with you and Kuroko for casually getting in using special educational Judgment slots...”

Mikoto stood in the line of gallery members who had won the lottery for a ticket. They passed through a metal gate, underwent a security check, and stepped into the courthouse.

“Uuh, this is all so annoying...”

“That gate there is emitting far infrared beams. By intentionally messing with our body heat, they can lead already unstable people to make a mistake, allowing easier detection of suspicious people. It’s a civilian application of an anti-sleep weapon. It only raises your body temperature by 0.5 degrees, but by emitting the far infrared beams in a grid, it can stimulate individual organs to leave you in an unstable state of mind.”

As their gadget expert, Uiharu Kazari explained it for them.

Shirai Kuroko looked exasperated as she walked by Mikoto’s side.

“...This is a normal school day, Onee-sama. There’s something wrong with how the world works if Tokiwadai’s Ace is skipping class for some stuffy court case.”

“I submitted the proper paperwork so it will count as an extracurricular lesson on the justice system. Of course, that means I’ll have to write a report on it afterwards.”

“That wasn’t my point.”

“I’m better than them, aren’t I?”

A deep electronic tone sounded. A girl hanging her head such that her bangs covered her face was caught by the metal gate and had a digital camera and voice recorder confiscated.

“A blogger claiming to be a journalist?”

“She might just be one of Loophole’s followers.”

“If cameras and recorders aren’t allowed, isn’t it weird for them to let us keep our phones?”

“Please turn that off, Onee-sama.”

Photographing the trial was not allowed, especially during a case involving minors. ...And yet eighty percent of the city’s population was some kind of student.

Uiharu spoke nervously as she caught up from behind.

“Th-these Loophole-related cases have given him cult-like popularity online, haven’t they? The odds of getting a ticket were 1-in-208 and I heard people were reselling tickets or counterfeiting IDs to get in.”

“And the people who lost the lottery are gathered around the courthouse. It’s like a concert for some famous person. ...And if they’re treating a criminal like an idol or cult leader, the electronic world must be as insane as ever.”

“Well, that actually helps us out in a way.”

They were not foolish enough to mention the name Saten Ruiko here, but it was said that a tree was best hidden in the forest. It might have looked suspicious if Saten alone took the day off of school, but with this many people skipping school, she could pretend to be the same as all of them.

“Gallery members, please follow the officials’ instructions and move to Court 103. I repeat...”

An announcement played, but a few young people were arrested after pretending to be lost and heading toward the off-limits waiting rooms.

Mikoto’s group obediently walked to their destination.

The double doors opened and they entered the courtroom.

“It’s just like a drama set,” said Uiharu.

“...Isn’t that because the drama staff did their homework?”

A few rows of benches were lined up like in a movie theater. Those were the gallery seats for Mikoto and the others. A metal fence blocked the way to the actual courtroom that felt separated from ordinary life.

The witness stand was in the center.

The prosecution’s seats were on the left from Mikoto’s perspective.

There was a wall behind the awfully-short prosecutor and it blocked off a box of frosted glass. That probably surrounded a door. That would be for witnesses who wanted to remain unidentified, like Saten. The double doors opened and someone entered the box, but they could not tell if that was Saten or not. They could not exactly call out her name or wave to her.

The defense and defendant were seated on the right.

That meant Innai Chigiri, who went by the name Loophole.

“...”

Out-of-place cheers filled the courtroom.

While the female glasses attorney whispered something in his ear, the boy leaned back in his chair, looking completely relaxed. His facial features had an androgynous beauty that made him look unrealistic and fairy-like. His beautifully glossy black hair and bright white skin had such fine lines that he looked like he would melt away like snow in your hand if a human so much as touched him.

His esper power was unknown.

Was it high or low? What kind of power was it? To protect a minor's personal information from the press, the Bank had been locked down, but that had only added to his strange charisma.

It was thanks to people wanting to see him like this was a concert that the odds of winning a ticket had risen to 1-in-208. Just like a bizarre medieval torture device, he had something that charmed people and drove them mad.

“(A criminal's charisma, hm?)”

Loophole certainly had that, but the female glasses attorney by his side also looked the part.

They looked like a handsome male idol and his beautiful manager.

“(Tsujinaka Kyouka, was it? They mentioned her on TV so much I couldn't help but remember her. That lawyer has grown quite famous. She's been active on video sites as something like the midpoint between a sharp-tongued commentator and a fashion leader.)”

“(So by sending a friend request to a serial killer's social media account, you might have a chance at making a name for yourself?)”

“(I can see how he got so many irresponsible followers...)”

At the very back of the courtroom, the seats for the judges and lay judges were lined up alongside each other. The presiding judge sat in the center. There were three professional judges, including the presiding one, and there were six lay judges chosen by lottery. Some of the lay judges wore sailor uniforms or blazers, but others had changed into black full-body tights, perhaps to hide what school they attended.

Mikoto frowned.

“The lay judges are the same age as us. Well, I guess that's not surprising when eighty percent of the population is students...”

“They apparently have a large computer assisting them so even minors can fulfill their civic duty.”

Uiharu was right. Every seat had a flat-screen monitor, but the lay judges' seats had far more equipment. The gravestone-like box was not the computer itself. It was the relay equipment that connected to a giant supercomputer.

"So they go through the trial in the same patchwork way as someone using their phone's word prediction?" Shirai sounded exasperated. "That seems a little too casual to me..."

The sound of a wooden hammer filled the courtroom.

The trivia that Japanese courts did not use a gavel flashed through Mikoto's mind, but when she looked closer, she saw the presiding judge had placed a finger on his keyboard to play an electronic sound.

The elderly man spoke through a microphone.

"Order in the court. It is time. The court will now begin the trial and I would like to start with the oaths."

He lightly raised his right hand and continued.

"We, the judges and lay judges, hereby swear to follow the fair and strict ideals of our judicial branch and to reach an impartial judgment for this Cold Sleep Murder Case with no falsehoods or exaggerations."

The judges and lay judges to his left and right repeated the exact same statement. The middle and high school lay judges chosen from the population at large sounded nervous. It was a lot like a choir competition in which the entire school year participated.

Next it was the prosecution's turn.

"We of the prosecution hereby swear to follow the fair and strict ideals of our judicial branch and to pursue an impartial judgment for this Cold Sleep Murder Case with no falsehoods or exaggerations."

It was almost the same with just the relevant parts swapped out. It seemed to be a standard statement that they did not give much thought to. Court was apparently not a place in which people suddenly pushed their glasses up their nose and shouted at the top of their lungs.

However.

The opening oaths had seemed like a tedious rite of passage, but that came to a premature end.

The entire courtroom was enveloped in the same uncomfortable tension as hearing a record needle skip.

That was due to the excessive time the next individual took.

The glasses attorney sitting next to the defendant slowly opened her mouth.

“...Your Honor.”

She was just like a stage actress.

She knew how to gather people’s attention and manipulate a crowd’s emotions.

“I apologize for the suddenness, but I cannot make that oath.”

“Objections are made during the prosecution’s closing argument or during the defense’s argument. The defendant has no such right during the opening oath. As an attorney, you should be familiar with these rules.”

“But I cannot make an erroneous oath. My contract with the defendant obligates me to faithfully defend him, so I am unable to bear false witness against him.”

“Continue with this and I will advise that you are removed from the court. You are no more than a private defense attorney, so you are not a necessary part of the court proceedings. We can always bring in a court-appointed attorney and reopen the trial. We are seeking a reliable trial, not a hasty conclusion. Do not forget that.”

If she took this too far, she could be removed for contempt of court or obstructing the trial.

Defense attorneys came in a variety of skill levels and attitudes. As you might guess from the fact that most defendants paid high prices to choose their own attorney, a private attorney whose remuneration was influenced by the outcome would participate in the trial much more actively than a court-appointed one that was paid the same either way.

But the glasses attorney did not stop speaking.

Was that due to her own charisma, or was she merely borrowing the charisma of the pretty boy seated next to her?

“My conclusion is as follows: the Cold Sleep Murder Case mentioned in the oath *does not exist.*”

Conclusion.

Did everyone there realize the significance of her choosing that word in particular?

Her opinion was so extraordinary that it inspired blank stares and confusion before anger or animosity.

“The brain and heart of the frozen victim, Asajimo Saemi-san, have ceased to function. Simply looking at her brainwaves or heartrate might lead you to believe she is no longer alive, but since she was put into cold sleep, she can be brought back to life if she is unfrozen using the proper method. Thus, this is not a murder case. I cannot disadvantage the defendant by discussing a crime that never occurred in the first place.”

The cracks of that silence were smoothly filled by the voice of the pretty boy’s representative.

Even a representative could fill in and solidify that space.

“And allow me to provide one piece of ‘advice’.”

This was the same as primitive humans acquiring fire to sweep away the darkness and gain peace of mind.

You felt uneasy when you did not know what a creepy person was going to say, but once you knew their reasoning, you could accept it. You felt like the danger had passed. That was why the words of a madman had such a strange power. If you understood them, you could predict their next action and restrain them. This took advantage of how reasonable people found peace of mind.

“Of course, I will not say he was entirely unconnected to this case, but the techniques used remain hidden in his mind. He can revive the poor victim. But if you mistake the charge, meaninglessly extend this trial, and find him guilty, that could change. If his freedom is unjustly taken from him, the frozen girl will die with no chance of being revived. ...There are many different kinds of cold sleep, after all. With some varieties, long-term storage will damage the cells and make it impossible to unfreeze the subject once enough time has passed. You can think of it like the juices leaking from a block of frozen tuna if you leave it in the freezer for too long.”

The glasses attorney’s mouth split open in a crescent moon smile as she made her final statement.

“...It is not he who will decide whether the poor victim lives or dies. It is your judgment here which will make that choice.”

At that very moment, someone silently raised his hand.

It was Loophole, aka Innai Chigiri.

That pretty boy, who took his nickname from the legal loopholes he took advantage of, opened his mouth for the first time.

“Trial results are a noble thing. And that is why you must choose very carefully.”

His statement was short in comparison.

But its attractive power was far greater. The true, non-borrowed charisma bared its fangs.

“You may not be charged with a crime, but the fact that you killed someone will be forever recorded in a public institution where anyone can view it.”

Part 5

(the_hierophant)

The victim was not yet dead.

Whether the frozen fourteen-year-old girl would live or die was in the hands of those making the judgment.

“Hey, what do we do? What do we do about this? I-is there a precedent!? Is there anything to guide us here...? We’re not bearing all the responsibility here, are we!?”

“Order! Order in the court!!”

“Kill...eh? What? Anyone can view it...you’re kidding. Why does this have to happen when we’re doing this? I’m sorry, wait, can I go to the bathroom? I’m feeling...u-ugh, gehhh!!”

The pressure of that simple fact was far greater than what they had been expecting. The lay judges had simply been chosen from the public at large, so one of them fell from her chair and began convulsing. It was the same as vomiting after seeing a photograph from a gruesome murder scene. This was made all the worse by the fact that she knocked over the computer terminal when she collapsed. Academy City’s speed trials required the support of those machines, so the trial was sent into recess as soon as it had begun.

“Wait, what do we do, Kuroko!?”

After the judges, lay judges, prosecution, and defense had all left, there was no point in remaining in the gallery, so Mikoto, Shirai, and Uiharu left the courtroom and began a strategy meeting in the lobby built in the hallway for taking breaks.

“Confirming his claim takes top priority, of course.” Shirai Kuroko placed a hand on her chin. “But I bet the defendant, Innai Chigiri, completely ignored the normal court proceedings with this absurd defense in order to mess with the computer.”

“The computer?”

Uiharu nodded at Mikoto’s question.

“Um, lay judges are chosen from the general public, but eighty percent of Academy City’s population is made up of students, right? We’re minors, so we can’t necessarily make choices that influence the rest of someone’s life. So a large computer is used to support their decision making.”

“It is not a sentient AI or anything like that,” said Shirai. “It is a learning machine that contains the results of hundreds of thousands of past trials. After all, precedent is everything in trials. Because of a past judgment, you know what to do with a very similar case in the present. Teach the computer those precedents the same way you teach a spam filter and the number of years in prison or total fine will appear on the screen like your phone predicting what you will type next. The middle and high school lay judges just have to judge whether those numbers seem too light or too heavy. However...”

“There’s nothing it can do when there is no precedent, hm?” muttered Mikoto.

Uiharu rubbed a finger against her temple.

“Without that specialized computer, they’re nothing more than middle and high school students just like us. Tell them they’ll be killing someone and that the record of that will be forever viewable by anyone, and of course it’s going to cause a panic. Especially since the lay judges didn’t volunteer for this, so not all of them wanted to do this in the first place.”

“As I said, precedent is everything in trials. So the legal world wants to avoid setting a bad precedent at all costs. That would be like teaching your spam filter the wrong thing. Their focus might be on the influence this will have on the next decade of trials rather than on whether or not the defendant is guilty in this specific case. Without the support of the machine, can they properly judge this villainous criminal known as Loophole? It is possible the government will put a stop to all of this out of fear of a mistaken judgment.”

“...Um, uh, I only vaguely remember it, but wasn’t there a m-molestation case where it became apparent during the trial that the accusations may have been false as part of a scam? The computer could not handle having the position of the defendant and accuser swap out like that, so it crashed, right?”

“Is that why he started saying those ominous things about the lay judges killing someone and the result being a noble thing...?”

“With tricky judgments like this, it is possible to make an exception to the lay judge system that uses normal people and instead hold a trial judged only by professional judges. But the trial had already begun in this case, so it’s too late to request that kind of change. ...They made it look like a simple case and then turned that on its head. If they investigated the system’s vulnerabilities to take it down, then Innai Chigiri and the lawyer next to him are something else.”

But there was still the fundamental problem.

Misaka Mikoto frowned.

“Isn’t taking this all so seriously exactly what...Innai Chigiri, was it? Isn’t it exactly what he wants? Besides, this city is full of doctors, professors, and other experts. Can’t we just have them unfreeze the girl?”

She looked back and forth between Shirai and Uiharu.

They seemed to know something.

“...To dig a little deeper into this, cold sleep is not a medical technique recognized by this country.”

“Um, meaning?”

“Since it is not a medical technique, it cannot be performed at a hospital. Whether they have the skills or not, it would be like having a doctor give you a piercing or tattoo in the operating room, right?”

“Then what about a university professor!?”

“They can try. But if they fail and Asajimo Saemi *really* dies, things are a little different from attempting a surgery but failing to save the patient. Um, it would count as a clinical trial or human experiment, so they could be charged with professional negligence resulting in death.”

So no one would attempt the dangerous unfreezing.

It might be possible to save her with their techniques, but they could protect themselves if they turned a blind eye.

Sparks burst from Mikoto’s bangs.

She consciously took a deep breath to calm herself before she continued the conversation.

“...So did Loophole know this would happen from the beginning?”

“The arrest itself only happened because of the selfie that, uh...*she* took, right? I doubt he predicted that. But I can’t deny he could have started gathering useful pieces after he was arrested and built the current situation using those.”

Innai Chigiri was not after a not guilty verdict.

He wanted to erase the crime itself. He wanted the case dismissed.

“If this goes the way he wants, what will happen to, um, *her*?”

If they were not careful, they would accidentally use Saten's name.

They had to pause for a second to rephrase it.

"The prosecution is only protecting the witness because she is necessary to get a guilty verdict," said Kuroko. "If the entire trial falls apart, that will no longer be necessary."

This was not an issue of guilty or not guilty.

If the trial itself went away, the position of witness went away with it.

"Plus, Loophole will gain freedom. And *she* is the one and only person who cornered him to this extent. To put it another way, she marred his record of perfect crimes. It could not be more obvious who his next target will be once he is free once more."

That was all the more creepy when his esper power was unknown in the name of privacy. They had no way of knowing what method he would use once he was free.

"C-can't they get Innai Chigiri to tell them how to unfreeze the girl?"

"Uiharu. That is backwards. The process follows a standard order: arrest, questioning, indictment. After the indictment, Anti-Skill and Judgment cannot question him further."

Once he had been sent to trial, he was actually off limits.

He could calmly break the rules and make exceptions, but they had to do something about it while constrained by those rules. Just thinking about it filled the pit of Mikoto's stomach with irritation.

"...We of course can't let the unthinkable happen here. Giving Loophole freedom and thus a chance to attack *her* is out of the question. It would be dangerous to ignore the shaken judges and lay judges."

"But a human life carries a lot of weight," said Shirai. "If the chosen lay judges continue to refuse the role, the trial itself cannot continue. After finally getting Innai Chigiri into court, the prosecution will want to stick with it, but they will not want to take the blame for losing a life that could have been saved."

"Let's not forget how many followers Loophole has. Whether they're just joking or not, if they make a fuss online about this and it fills the lists of trending words, it could easily influence the decision of those at the top." Uiharu looked worried. "Are you familiar with the concept of double jeopardy? Because double jeopardy is forbidden, you cannot repeat a trial that already reached some form of result. And that applies not just to a guilty or not guilty verdict but also to cases that are dismissed like this one would be. But we can safely assume that Loophole has committed several serious crimes other than the Cold Sleep Case. So even if he escapes justice here, he can be found guilty of a

different crime and sent to juvenile hall. It is possible the judges will use that reasoning as an excuse here.”

But there was no promising evidence or testimony for any other case.

If Innai Chigiri was allowed out, he would effectively be free. Volunteers might keep an eye on him, but he would be free to wander the city and pursue his next target. And his gaze would most likely be on Saten Ruiko. He had an inscrutable power and anonymous followers. If he took action, it would be difficult to defend against it in advance.

What were the hurdles here?

Was there nothing they could do?

Mikoto mentally gathered what information they had and resumed speaking.

“...Yes. We’ve identified the problems here, so we’ll have to work through them one at a time. Kuroko, you said the trial won’t resume for a while after Loophole shook everyone so badly, right? Then we should be able to leave for a bit.”

“Onee-sama?”

“First, let’s find out what this cold sleep of his is all about.” Mikoto licked her lips. “Then we find a way to unfreeze the girl without relying on Innai Chigiri. If we can save the victim...Asajimo Saemi-san, was it? Save her and he’ll lose his bargaining chip. Then the trial would proceed as normal and he’ll be found guilty.”

Part 6

(the_lovers)

The strict atmosphere of a government office filled every nook and cranny of District 1. Leaving the courthouse was not enough to escape the oppressiveness of it all. The streets contained electronic guide posts that worked like AI speakers and fully-equipped Anti-Skill officers were patrolling with quadrupedal armored robots.

“Hyah. Even the convenience store has dull colors.”

“Try calling it a chic color scheme. They do the same thing in Kyoto and Ise, so it isn’t that unusual.”

Mikoto’s group held that conversation on the way to the subway station.

Having Judgment members with them meant a lot.

After being cut out of the ice, Asajimo Saemi, the girl who had been caught in the Cold Sleep Murder(?) Case, had apparently been transported to a university hospital in District 2.

They placed an IC card in the ticket gate and entered the station. Mikoto gave a curious glance toward the Anti-Skill officers who were standing on stepladders to view the crowd from a step above.

“Low temperature chemistry is a fairly major field of study, isn’t it?”

“Cooling technology is a foundation of modern society. These days, everyone uses a refrigerator or freezer, not to mention air conditioning. Computers and cars need cooling systems as well. Get a bit more specialized and you have the superconductor technology related to your Railgun, Onee-sama, the safe storage of germs and microbes, artificial weather alteration, the exterior wall settings for space ships and stations, and the methods to remove a mammoth from giant hunks of ice.”

The mention of giant hunks of ice brought a slight silence over Mikoto, Shirai, and Uiharu.

They boarded a train and traveled to another district.

District 2’s hospitals had expanded so much because the entire district specialized in vehicle development and the handling of explosives. They had the means of transporting delicate patients.

Presumably so they could contain so many patients, the university hospital looked like a stylish tourist hotel that stretched out lengthwise. A few out-of-place young people were loitering around it. They may have been people with too much time on their hands that fancied themselves internet journalists and wanted to sneak their smartphones in.

“Kuroko, you got us an appointment, right?”

“I merely made the suggestion and they did not respond. Although I cannot imagine why they would refuse. And I know you, Onee-sama. You plan on disabling their security if we don’t have permission, don’t you?”

The trio entered the university hospital through the main entrance and asked about their appointment at the reception desk.

Despite the suspicious people hanging around outside, they were readily allowed in.

There was a TV in the front lobby. A male host with a self-satisfied look was speaking on a morning news program.

“Next up is the popular segment where we dig deeper into the top trending terms on social media. Today that word is unprecedented. Yes, unprecedented. During a trial being held today, the suspect took advantage of a computer vulnerability to have the trial sent into emergency recess...”

“...Why is that information already out?”

“The reporters aren’t allowed to inform the news agencies, but they sometimes use a loophole where they claim they’re only gathering information found online. It’s the same idea as intentionally gathering negative opinions from message boards and then denying any and all responsibility for the statements because you were only relaying the general consensus.”

If so, the dangerous situation would spread to the hospital where the frozen girl was being stored. Onlookers could rush to the hospital to see for themselves whether Loophole would show up or not. The hospital’s immediate acceptance of Judgment members like Shirai and Uiharu may have been a sign of their concern.

There were apparently treatments that used liquid nitrogen to take care of athlete’s foot, but Mikoto’s group was led to a back corner of the hospital that felt more like a den of researchers than a hospital.

“Come in.”

Hearing the response to their knock, they opened the door.

And they immediately reacted with shock.

A black-haired girl was sitting in a chair there.

And it was the exact girl who should have been frozen in a thick piece of ice.

“...Is something the matter?”

Asajimo Saemi wore a white coat over a blouse and tight skirt. When she looked puzzled herself, Mikoto felt the need to say something.

“Eh? Um...but...???”

“*Oh, that. I’m her sister.*”

The girl sighed and added that.

She flicked the ID card on the chest of her white coat.

It did indeed provide the name Asajimo Mebuki.

“My sister is in the cold storage room in the back. Given how she’s dressed...or rather, undressed, I don’t really want to show her off to people.”

In the back was something like the silver refrigerators seen in restaurant kitchens. However, it was even larger than those industrial ones. The door alone was taller than Mikoto and it contained a round window like on a ship.

The double layer of insulated glass showed a world of death.

The digital display said it was thirty degrees below freezing. It must have been specially treated because it had none of the frost found in normal freezers. There was nothing more than the thick block of ice looking like a coffin inside the plain box.

That was Asajimo Saemi.

A cold girl without a shred of clothing.

She was in an incomprehensible state that was neither living nor dead.

That may have been why the scene felt almost divine in an odd way. After some thought and deciding this was a lot like being in a museum and seeing a mummy or death mask that showed some vestiges of what the person was like in life, Mikoto shook her head to drive out the unpleasant thought.

“We’re twins, so people have always gotten us confused.”

“Um, excuse me, but...”

“Setting this up over email probably confused some things. Since we’re twins, that means I’m fourteen just like her. But I am a legitimate university professor. I specialize in low-temperature medicine, chemistry, and physics. Well, I skipped ahead to university overseas and entered Academy City as a professor, so now I’m relearning the tech here as a student.”

Despite her apathetic tone, Asajimo Mebuki grabbed a digital picture frame from a steel desk. No, it seemed to be a smartphone sitting on a charging stand.

She slid her thumb across to unlock the biometric identification, flicked through an album app, and showed them a photo.

It showed two identical girls in the same frame.

They were holding out some kind of certificate with Western writing on it, but it seemed to be a diploma.

“Oh, and this is my sister’s smartphone. Um, I thought it was still too soon to cancel the service.”

Doing that would mean accepting her family member's death.

Accepting the death of a girl who looked just like her.

Mikoto wrinkled her brow like that had touched on a bitter memory, but then she realized something.

"...Huh? But didn't you just unlock the biometric identification?"

"Because we're twins," she explained. "There are theories saying identical twins won't have the same fingerprints and irises, but in our case, we're similar enough to fool a normal cellphone. A premium model for a corporate contract might be a different matter, though."

In the photo, it was hard to tell which was which. The one holding the diploma was likely Asajimo Mebuki, but Saemi also looked delighted as she hugged her from the side with a smile.

They must have been friendly sisters.

And that may have been why the girl in a white coat gave an exhausted smile.

"I believe I have at least a general understanding of the situation. Although I was a little shocked when the morning talk shows got here before Anti-Skill or Judgment."

But perhaps because she was with Judgment, Shirai Kuroko was willing to go ahead and ask what questions she had.

"Hm? But your sister is still in the ice. How did you get just her phone out?"

"I called her on the night the incident supposedly happened." The white coat girl slowly shook her head. "But she seems to have left her phone in her room that day, so there was no response. I thought that was strange, but I didn't think too much about it. ...That may have been some kind of sign. It might not have changed anything, but I can't help but wonder if she wouldn't have been frozen in ice like this if I had immediately left my room and gone looking for her."

Frozen in ice

The phrase held more weight from an expert and a relative of the victim. There was a strange pressure behind it. Mikoto found herself gulping. It was a perfectly normal phrase, but it was a shock to hear it used for a human.

"So...how bad is it?"

Mikoto hesitantly asked and the girl who looked identical to the frozen one breathed a slow sigh.

They were twin sisters – blood-related family.

If there was a way to remove her sister from that ice, she would have no reason to keep things the way they were.

That was how Mikoto saw it, but it seemed the situation was a little different.

“It might be difficult to understand if you only look at it from one angle.”

“?”

“With the thick ice in the way, we can’t do a detailed analysis, but there is one oddity I can see just from an exterior examination.”

Asajimo Mebuki pulled a medical chart from a shelf and spread it out on the desk.

“There seems to be a large vertical wound on her back. It was likely a sharp incision made with a scalpel. Simply put, she was cut open like a mascot costume’s zipper and then rapidly frozen without stitching it up.”

“Wait a second. So even if you do know how to unfreeze her...!?”

“Yes. The wound looks closed at the moment, but as soon as the ice melts, my sister will start hemorrhaging blood. That prevents us from using any normal unfreezing process.”

The medical chart was so full of small writing and arrows that there was barely any white left.

She had not been sitting around doing nothing this whole time.

She had been looking at every single idea that occurred to her, even if it was like grasping at straws. These were the records of her agony as she desperately wanted to save her sister but could not.

“Even if she is still alive, we would be delivering the finishing blow by melting the ice. So the situation is set up so whoever tries to save her will become the actual killer.”

Loophole.

This was exactly the rebellious setup that demon would like.

“But...”

“Go ahead.”

“But isn’t it dangerous to delay unfreezing her?”

“It is. Of course it is. The criminal permeated her cells with a saline-based preservative to prevent damage to the cellular membranes during freezing and unfreezing, but to be honest, that is an outdated method.”

“Saline?”

“In this case, it refers to water with a salinity of 0.9%, but I doubt that’s what you meant.” The fourteen-year-old professor slowly sighed. “The volume of matter changes when it goes from liquid to solid and vice-versa. Have you ever heard of drink bottles bursting when placed in the freezer?”

“Yes, I have...hm? Oh, I get it now.”

“I’m glad you’ve caught up. The body is seventy percent water. If there is too great a difference between the expansion/contraction rate inside and outside the cells, there is a risk of the cellular membranes rupturing during freezing and refreezing. That is the purpose of the saline which matches the human body as closely as possible.” Asajimo Mebuki paused for a second. “Of course, using saline as a cold sleep catalyst is an outdated method used only during the early stages of research into the field. These days, the leading method uses a synthetic preservative derived from the structure of egg white. There are several fields of medical research that have taken that in unique directions, such as artificial blood and collagen for treating burns.”

“Outdated?” asked Mikoto. “So is there a problem with that method?”

“Yes,” confirmed the white coat girl. “Do you think anyone wants to have their gut opened up with the Edo period surgical instruments you see hanging in a museum? Because that method does not quite cut it, it’s possible my sister’s body is being further harmed as we speak. We can’t try to unfreeze her, but we can’t delay making a decision either.”

And...

“If we do nothing, she will merely die. On the other hand, if we do something, we will be held legally responsible. Thus, the higher ups will not give me authorization.”

It was like a puzzle that used a human life.

And it was not a cruel puzzle with no answer. Loophole, the creator of this deadly artwork, said he could solve the puzzle.

But how exactly would he do that?

Part 7

(the_chariot)

After returning to the university hospital's front lobby, Mikoto's group sat on a random bench and looked over at a poster on a nearby column.

"Neat. You can use cellphones in hospitals these days."

"They still ban them around the operation rooms and examination rooms. But who was it that claimed cellphone signals would damage medical equipment anyway?"

They needed to organize what information they had.

"Oh? Onee-sama, you still aren't using a smartphone?"

"I'm attached to this flip phone. And it can use the internet just fine."

They attached rubber straps to their multipurpose mobile devices and positioned the screens in front of their eyes like goggles.

The images presented there were reconstructed using the footage taken by other cameras. In their case, they used the cameras on each other's phones.

Mikoto looked around.

"Huh? Is this our classroom???"

"I chose that setting. The classrooms and gyms of prestigious schools like Tokiwadai and Nagatenjouki are pretty popular backgrounds."

Uiharu must have already set everything up for them. Several files were pasted to the blackboard and entries were linked by red and blue lines of light.

Also...

"Hm? Saten-san?"

"Hi."

Someone was here who should not have been.

She must have been sitting on a chair or sofa in the courthouse waiting room, but that data was not here and she looked like she was sitting in empty air with a smile on her face.

Mikoto widened her eyes in surprise.

“Should you really be doing this? Using your phone might give away your location. If it gives a reading from within the courthouse...”

“Oh, I borrowed a phone and web camera from the prosecutor, so it doesn’t matter if this phone’s location is discovered.”

...That sounded like it would cause other problems, but the trial was stopped for the time being. Since Saten was a witness instead of the defendant or accuser, she may not have been as strictly monitored.

“Ho, ho. Uiharu-san, what kind of technology is this? I see it can reproduce things perfectly even down here.”

“Gyawah!! Do you have to look there even in VR, Saten-san!?”

“...In the courthouse, wouldn’t it look like she’s just crawling around on her own?”

“That no one is getting after her for that motion may be all the proof we need that she is being kept safe,” said Shirai.

The pervert was not bothered by the perverted action.

At any rate, Shirai Kuroko got down to business.

“Now, we went over this with an expert, but the thread only feels more tangled.”

“At least we have a clear view of what hurdles we have to overcome. It’s no longer a tangled mess of video cables, is what I’m saying.”

They began by sharing their information, including what Saten had inside the courthouse.

According to Asajimo Mebuki, the low-temperature chemistry expert, melting the thick ice to remove Asajimo Saemi would be a gamble. And even if the ice did melt well, the large wound on the girl’s back would open up and she would hemorrhage blood.

The standard method of closing a wound was to wrap it with bandages or sew it up with thread, but they could not do that while she was frozen.

They needed to treat the wound before melting the ice, but they had to melt the ice before treating the wound.

It was a lot like locking your key inside an auto-locking hotel room.

Mikoto viewed the documents covering the blackboard and gave a frustrated sigh.

“...I knew it was going to be bad, but this is even more twisted than I was expecting.”

“But looking at it in reverse, Loophole, aka Innai Chigiri, may have actually been afraid.”

“What do you mean, Uiharu?”

“I mean, since he included the wound on her back as insurance, he must have considered the possibility of her being unfrozen from cold sleep, right? So there might really be a way of safely unfreezing her.”

Incidentally, the simple VR using a mobile device was not completely immersive. Mikoto’s group could still hear the noise and chatter of the hospital lobby.

Within that was the lobby’s large TV continuing to discuss the top trending terms on social media. People made a fuss about TV going into decline and the internet rising to the forefront, but since the TV programs were not making anything original and simply relying on topics and videos from the internet, it felt like they had just given up resisting it.

And those people were holding the following discussion while taking no responsibility for their statements:

“The top trending term has been updated. Oh, what’s this? We have a very interesting topic in first place: the accusations against Boy A might be false? What does this mean, Sensei!?”

“According to those in the know, a new email from Loophole has arrived at various news organizations. Needless to say, Boy A could not have done this since he is in the courthouse.”

“I see. But couldn’t that be set to a timer like is often done with blog posts these days?”

“You can tell when these things are done on a timer, but there is no sign of that here. This is no more than online speculation, but the consensus seems to be headed toward the idea that the true criminal is someone else.”

Mikoto could not believe her ears.

“W-wait, what is going on!?”

“Ah, Misaka-san!?”

Saten tried to stop her, but Mikoto removed the cellphone affixed with a rubber strap.

The real scene of the hospital lobby filled her vision, but nothing really changed.

The irresponsible content was still coming from the TV.

“I can’t believe them...”

“What they are saying is awful, but it does seem to be true.”

Shirai and Uiharu also removed their mobile devices. Rules against mobile usage in hospitals had been relaxed in recent times, so Uiharu pulled out a mobile device resembling a handheld game system and gathered information from a browser.

“Someone claiming to be Loophole is making posts to video sites and message boards as well: ‘I have no words for that poor, foolish Boy A, but I will continue to commit my crimes as before. I have no intention of forcing all responsibility on him and making a clean escape.’ ...Quite a few people think this person is the real criminal and Boy A being held in the courthouse has been falsely accused.”

“B-but! This is just on a computer or with a program, right? If he had set this to post with a time delay, Innai Chigiri could be the one sending these messages, couldn’t he!?”

“At the very least, this does not appear to be a simple timer.”

“Innai Chigiri? We still don’t know what his power is, so could he be using that?”

“I don’t know how rare his power is, but using a unique power would be like leaving a calling card. And none of Loophole’s crimes have shown any trace of an esper power being used,” explained Uiharu. “But Loophole does have a lot of followers online. So even if this isn’t him, it is possible a follower of his is posting these videos and messages and the others are agreeing with it to suck up to him. The change was too soon after the news came out and I doubt the trending word could have naturally risen quite that quickly.”

...If there was a direct connection between Loophole and his followers, he could even order them to rid him of the troublesome witness.

Not even Anti-Skill or Judgment knew how many followers he had in all, so it would be almost impossible to fully ensure someone’s safety.

The only remaining option was to swiftly divulge Loophole’s crimes, reveal that there never was a perfect crime, and disillusion his followers. They had to prove that his wicked charisma was a sham.

Mikoto glanced over at the lobby TV and placed a hand on her slender chin.

She set aside the fact that the producers had given up on making anything of their own and were entirely reliant on the internet.

“If the followers did this all on their own, then wouldn’t it be outside of Loophole’s own expectations?”

If they spread the false idea of a “true criminal” and that was easily revealed to be a lie, then the suspicion against Innai Chigiri would only grow. Was this situation actually working against him?

“The effect seems too big for that.”

“The message supposedly from Loophole may have started out as something his followers invented, but it seems to have gathered the interest of completely unrelated people now. It’s a lot like how people will line up for a restaurant they know nothing about just because they see it has a line.”

“...So this wasn’t just a spontaneous occurrence. Should we assume the email message and masked video were prepared in advance?” Mikoto thought for a moment. “Maybe this was a form of insurance. Innai Chigiri could have left his more trusted followers with this material and instructed them to start distributing it once they received some kind of signal.”

“Since he wants to have the case dismissed before the issue of guilty or not guilty even comes into play, pressure is what he should want most. If this grows into a social phenomenon, it will be all the harder to keep the trial going.”

“B-but how would he give a signal!?” asked Shirai. “He’s being confined and monitored and they won’t allow minor suspects in front of the cameras. He won’t be allowed to so much as touch a mobile device or computer. Even if he had his followers waiting, he has no way of hitting the activation switch!”

“Could he have borrowed a phone from someone like Saten-san did?”

“I think the actual defendant would be treated differently from her.”

Mikoto sighed, but something about Uiharu’s comment gnawed at her.

“...Could the trial going into recess have been the signal? No, that introduces the risk of it being triggered by some unexpected turn of events. I’m not an expert at psychological warfare like that stubborn #5, but I’m sure that delicate give-and-take is important. So you wouldn’t use a method that prevents you from putting on the brakes if necessary. If you want to effectively attack in waves while adjusting to the situation, you would want to give direct instructions.”

Loophole, aka Innai Chigiri, could only contact so many people.

Mikoto did not want to think a follower had worked their way into the security personnel. It was the higher ups that decided who was assigned to that position, so they would have no way of knowing if they would be assigned to Innai Chigiri’s security today. It seemed unlikely he would include a gamble like that in his insurance.

It would have to be someone he knew would be by his side no matter what happened.

Which meant...

“...His lawyer,” said Mikoto. “Tsujinaka Kyouka, was it? He whispers something to her and she uses her phone to call up his followers. That allows him to get his instructions out there.”

Shirai Kuroko and Uiharu Kazari of Judgment frowned at that.

“If that came to light, she would more than just lose her license to practice law. No matter how clever she might be, I doubt she would go that far.”

“And cell phone anonymity is not as convenient as it might seem,” added Uiharu.

“Then maybe she isn’t using her phone. She just has to use a payphone instead. There are some in the courthouse...but she might be overheard there, so I guess she would head outside. Uiharu-san, can you check for the location of any payphones near the courthouse?”

“Y-yes, I can do that.”

“But even if you can find who the call was made to, you can’t know who made the call, can you?” asked Shirai. “Even if we have the call data, it will not be enough to corner that Tsujinaka Kyouka lawyer.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure.”

Part 8

(strength)

If the case itself was dismissed, it was all over.

Loophole, aka Innai Chigiri, would be freed and he would almost certainly target Saten Ruiko.

To prevent that, they had to do something about the both the Cold Sleep Case and the commotion on the internet.

They were definitely approaching the end of this.

Mikoto’s group left the District 2 university hospital and returned to District 1.

On the way, they passed a police van that looked like a large bus covered with armor panels and wire mesh. They mixed into a group of people carrying smartphones to broadcast a report on a video site and they entered the courthouse.

“Ugh.”

“Misaka-san, that’s the far infrared beam grid coming from the gate. It’s to locate suspicious people, so try to get used to it!”

“...Does this mean Onee-sama is a powder keg waiting to go off?”

It seemed more than one trial was being held that day.

There were a surprising number of people moving every which way.

“This is Nakamura from the prosecution. I have the evidence needed for the phone scam trial. It’s about thirty cellphones in all.”

“Thank you. It’s the same place as always, but I’m obligated to explain it to you: the temporary storage room is around the corner in the hallway to the left.”

“Thanks. And thanks for signing the form.”

Mikoto’s group cut across the main lobby while giving a sidelong glance at the adults casually discussing a topic that would determine someone’s future.

Tsujinaka Kyouka, the female glasses attorney working for the defendant, was sitting on a sofa in the break area lobby. She was nonchalantly viewing her smartphone and smoking a cigarette. Or perhaps moving away from strictly-monitored Innai Chigiri gave her the chance she needed to use her phone freely and send out some instructions.

“You...!!”

“Oh, and who might you be?”

Hearing that, Mikoto immediately shut her mouth. With that shady group’s information network, they might be able to determine the witness’s identity, but telling the enemy she was “Saten Ruiko’s friend” would still count as offering up a sacrifice.

Shirai Kuroko stepped forward instead.

“Excuse me. I am from Judgment.”

“The defendant has been placed in the prosecution’s custody, so there is nothing for you to do here.”

“Concerning the charges he was indicted for, yes. But that changes if he is currently spreading false information to obstruct the trial’s progress. We must gather the necessary information, take appropriate countermeasures, and bring an end to this confusion.”

Then Uiharu spoke up as another Judgment member.

And this field was her specialty.

“Tsujinaka-san, you have turned off your cellphone three times since the recess began, haven’t you? And for about ten minutes each time.”

“I must express my shock that you would abuse your investigative abilities to research that, but I have a habit of shutting off my phone when I take a bath or use the restroom. Or do you need me to tell you which floor’s bathroom I used and which stall I was in? I have a right to privacy.”

“During the time your phone was off, suspicious phone calls were held at the payphone at the convenience store in front of the courthouse. And instead of calling someone else from the payphone, someone called to the payphone. The times match up perfectly, so do you have any idea why that might be?”

“I see...”

The female glasses attorney laughed and showed her smartphone’s screen to Mikoto’s group.

It showed a social media app with various messages popping up in real time.

“Are you trying to say this was the defendant’s doing? You can make whatever accusations you like, but I seriously doubt he could trigger a social phenomenon while trapped in a small room and monitored at all times.”

“That’s why he gave you his instructions and you relayed them to his followers outside! And you used the payphone so there wouldn’t be a record!!”

Mikoto shouted at the woman and Tsujinaka raised both hands.

She showed no sign of fear.

“Now, now, sheriff. Act all courageous if you like, but to be honest, I don’t really care.”

“What...?”

“I remember now. I saw you in the gallery.” Tsujinaka Kyouka laughed. “You know someone involved in this case, don’t you? These days, it isn’t unusual for people to monitor the lay judges and show up in the courtroom to intimidate them. It would seem

you wish to ensure a guilty verdict no matter what it takes. Perhaps by intimidating me and having me back out as his attorney?”

“I don’t want you of all people treating me like a criminal...!!”

“You can’t, Misaka-san. Grab her and you really will be breaking the law!!”

When Uiharu stopped her, the female glasses attorney shrugged with a triumphant look on her face. But Uiharu was from Judgment and she did not want to protect the woman.

“All unnatural social phenomena fall apart eventually. Overseas, supporters of a bill banning UFO research used bots to make more than a million posts that pushed support for the bill into the trending topics, but once the method was discovered, public support fell away. Your confidence will not last forever.”

“You really shouldn’t criticize people with baseless speculation. If we were in court, I could accuse you of a crime for saying that.” Tsujinaka placed her cigarette back in her mouth. “No matter how much you struggle, this is a constitutional state ruled by the people and the results apply equally to everyone. This trial cannot continue. If the pieces cannot advance along the board, they cannot pass a verdict. And you cannot make someone guilty with mere assumptions and speculation. That is how the system works, thank you.”

Mikoto immediately snapped back at her.

“Did you really think you wouldn’t leave any trace at all if you turned off your phone and used a pay phone?”

“Oh? Are you going to use hacking this time? Falsified information or information gathered through illicit means has no power as evidence.”

“...This trial is gathering a lot of attention.”

Mikoto licked her lips.

It all came down to this, so she gathered her focus.

“The odds of being selected for the gallery were 1-in-208. The people who weren’t chosen still wanted to ride the wave of popularity, so they took the day off school and surrounded the courthouse. There are a lot of eyes out there. And a lot of phones and cameras too. No matter how sneaky you were, you would have left some trace.”

“What, do you think you can use facial recognition on every single social media photo to find me hunched over with the payphone’s receiver held to my mouth?”

The woman's words were infuriatingly smooth.

She may have seen this as a possibility from the beginning.

"Yes, a picture could be difficult." Mikoto grinned. "But what about your voice?"

"...?"

"Smartphones, car navigation systems, electronic guide posts, AI speakers – the streets are overflowing with internet-connected voice recognition services these days. We live in a crazy age, don't we? You're essentially surrounded by listening devices at home, in your car, and wherever you might go during the day. And just like a fingerprint, a voiceprint can be used for biometric identification. You sometimes see products to fool facial recognition since it's so well known. Like how you see people wearing masks even though they don't have a cold or allergies. But what about your voice? Even if you place a machine over the receiver to change the tone of your voice, any surrounding speakers will pick up your original voice. So the odds are pretty good that the unaltered conversation data can be found somewhere."

The attorney's words had been so smooth before, but now they ground to a halt.

It had the same awkward feeling as a record needle skipping, so this was probably the real deal.

"Changing your voice on the level of breathing in helium can be corrected for with a computer. And since we can speak with you normally now, you probably didn't even do that. If you really were holding a suspicious conversation at the payphone by the convenience store, some of it would have been picked up by the devices flooding the streets. ...But if you really believe that data doesn't exist, then you can relax. Just like the story of the tortoise and the hare, we will slowly but surely catch up to you. Modern program analysis is incredible, you know? Software for use on criminal sites and message boards can sort through the hundreds of thousands of posts on a server in no time at all."

With that said, Mikoto snapped her fingers.

After signaling to Uiharu who held a mobile device, she spoke a few terms with a pause between.

"You know what. The incident. The goods. Ice. Sugar. In the bag. Dispose of. Eliminate. A feeling. Extract. Take care of it. Reward. The usual place. Can I ask that of you? Adjustment."

The Judgment device emitted an electronic warning noise before she had said even half of them.

But Mikoto finished the list regardless and winked.

“See? If you can do it with text, you can do it with voice. Even if you avoided the more incriminating terms and used code words, you shouldn’t think you can escape.”

“...Nothing you say will change the conclusion.”

The flame in the cigarette brightened and faded irregularly.

She was breathing erratically.

“The defendant was indicted on false charges and he has not participated in a single crime. I will follow my own ethics and beliefs by justly defending his dignity and right to a free life.”

“A single witness brought an end to Loophole’s legend. Once his identity was known, Anti-Skill narrowed their focus onto him, so they searched his home and found plenty of material evidence. There is simply no way he can be acquitted!!”

That was obvious enough from the fact that they were trying to prevent the trial from continuing instead of winning a not guilty verdict. This defense attorney was well aware that he could not be acquitted by any normal means. Even with all the dirty methods she was familiar with.

But she showed no sign of concern.

(?)

Mikoto’s group had supposedly played the perfect hand. The payphone conversation data had reached the point that she could not ignore it. And yet it felt like she was slipping from their grasp. It was not quite like they had been off base. They had to have done some damage. And yet she would recover from that.

She would make a comeback.

She still had something hidden up her sleeve.

The attorney breathed out some cloyingly sweet smoke and spoke with a smile.

Her words seemed more like a mantra to calm her heart than something directed at Mikoto’s group.

“...A pile of cardboard boxes may have been taken from his home, but how long will those last?”

Part 9

(the_hermit)

Misaka Mikoto felt an indescribable sensation in her temple.

She could not help but look away from Tsujinaka Kyouka, so Shirai immediately gave her a puzzled look.

“Onee-sama, is something the matter?”

“What did you do...?” muttered Mikoto.

Her tone made it clear this was not a response to her underclassman.

“What did you bring to this courthouse!!!????”

Her enraged shout was like a nearby lightning strike, but the female glasses attorney was unfazed. She acted like she had known that reaction was coming.

“I have no idea what you mean.”

Mikoto clicked her tongue and walked off, following the odd feeling. Shirai and Uiharu hurried after her.

“You went too far, Onee-sama.”

“She’ll feel more confident if I intentionally act like I’m out of control, right? But we did manage to shake that intellectual glasses woman. Without that, we wouldn’t have found out they had played their trump card!”

“Wh-what is this trump card, Misaka-san...?”

When she heard Uiharu’s nervous question, Mikoto took deep breaths in an effort to cool herself down.

“You know I’m the strongest when it comes to electricity types, right? I’m sensing something really strongly here. Something is going haywire... It’s just like what I felt that time an office worker’s laptop burst into flames in a café. Something is short-circuiting. No, it would only feel like this if sparks were bursting from a lithium ion battery like fireworks!”

“A battery...is burning...?”

There was no need to say it out loud.

That female glasses attorney had said it herself: *A pile of cardboard boxes may have been taken from his home, but how long will those last?* If there was a fire in the courthouse, the material evidence would be burned along with everything else. That would make the trial even harder to continue and it would be even more difficult to avoid the claims of false charges on the internet. They had yet to solve the cold sleep and false charges problems, yet the problems kept piling up. It felt like ending up in an impossible situation in a falling block puzzle.

“But battery failures are not a very reliable way of starting a large fire, are they?” asked Shirai. “And the courthouse is equipped with sprinklers, fire doors, and other fire prevention equipment. I don’t know where the fire will start, but could it really reach the well-protected evidence?”

“The fire doesn’t have to reach the entire building. What if they directly start the fire in the temporary storage room where all the trial evidence brought by prosecutors is kept?”

“...”

“I don’t know if they keep anyone in the storage room. But if they only have guards outside it and the room itself is unmanned, then no one will notice until the fire spreads enough for smoke to leak out the door. And if protecting the evidence takes top priority, they actually won’t put sprinklers in there.”

A bulletin board in the hallway had a list of scheduled trials for the day.

One of those was a phone scam case set to be held in a different courtroom from the Cold Sleep Murder Case. Mikoto tapped that display.

“This is probably it. A phone scam case would use a lot of cellphones. Modified phones could be sent into the temporary storage room to ignite the other evidence.”

“Th-then, Misaka-san, we need to tell the courthouse officials!”

“If they want to protect the evidence, they can’t let even their own people inside for just anything. And we only have this sense of mine to go on. The battery is already shorting. By the time they get all the paperwork in order, it’ll be too late.”

“Then what exactly are we supposed to do, Onee-sama!?”

“That’s obvious.”

There was only one thing to say here.

“We do whatever we can.”

Part 10

(wheel_of_fortune)

The temporary storage room was used to protect all the evidence for the day's trials, so its security was of course strict. Mikoto or Uiharu could handle electronic security like cameras or sensors, but they could not do anything about the two guards standing in front of the locked door.

“Can't you pop right inside with your Teleportation, Shirai-san?”

“It's probably a cramped room full of shelves. I would rather not find myself embedded in a shelf as I appear.”

But a hint had already shown itself.

“Kuroko, and Uiharu-san too. Can you two head up to the second-floor hallway directly above here?”

“Sure, but what for?”

“I want to get rid of the two protecting the door. And without violence. It won't be hard to find something that will make them panic.”

Yes.

Why was the temporary storage room not equipped with sprinklers?

One only had to think back to that question.

“It can be a water pipe, a toilet, a drink vending machine, or whatever else. Just flood the second floor so the water leaks down to the first floor.”



It only took a single drop to frighten those men who were both more than two meters tall.

Confused by the water dripping on their noses, they looked up and then bristled.

“Hey, what's that? There's water leaking down!!”

“Are you kidding? Where from? We're storing evidence in here!”

They shouted into their radios, but that was not going to immediately stop the water from the ceiling. They must have been extremely panicked because they ran toward the stairs to see what was going on up above.

“...”

Mikoto poked her head around the corner and approached the vacated door. The electronic lock with a palm reader meant nothing to her. She tried unlocking it with her powers, but then she frowned.

There was no response.

And she sensed the unpleasant smell of burning plastic.

(Don't tell me...did the heat damage it...?)

She frantically opened the door.

That must have sent more oxygen inside because a cardboard box that had been smoldering and giving off black smoke grew as red as heated metal.

“Not good...”

It burst into flames.

She had no idea what evidence was connected to what case and she did not have time to check the labels on the cardboard boxes. She instead grabbed the fire extinguisher in the hallway. The fire was spreading the entire time she removed the pin, aimed the hose, and prepared it for use.

A somewhat pink-colored foam sprayed out.

With the sound of compressed gas being released, the fire extinguishing substance reached the base of the fire. The flames showed signs of reigniting a few times, but she ultimately managed to put it out. Everything was covered with black soot, but a surprisingly few number of the boxes themselves were burned and scorched. It may have meant a lot that she extinguished the fire early on.

(The Cold Sleep Murder Case. Good, the boxes with that label don't look harmed. This shouldn't affect the trial.)

“Oh, dear.”

Just then, she heard an affected voice behind her.

She turned around to see that attorney. And there was a smile on Tsujinaka Kyouka's lips.

“It would seem there was a problem with the evidence storage. I have no choice but to report this to the presiding judge and raise an objection against the evidence gathered for this case.”

“...?”

“Simply put, the evidence in here cannot be trusted.”

“What are you-...? But the boxes for the Cold Sleep Murder Case weren’t touched! There might be a bit of soot on them, but the evidence is sealed in plastic bags. That won’t even get them dirty!!”

“But you clearly wish for a certain outcome to this case, so the impartiality of the evidence must be brought into question now that you have infiltrated the temporary storage room. You could have destroyed information that disadvantages the defendant, or you could have planted some false evidence.”

“You have no proof of that...!!”

“Exactly. There is no proof one way or the other. And since there isn’t, we will have to investigate the matter. But while each piece of evidence is being investigated, the victim will almost certainly run out of time.”

Of course, Innai Chigiri and Tsujinaka Kyouka would have preferred if the evidence had simply burned away.

But they had a backup plan in case the fire did not spread and it ended as a dud.

“The amateur lay judges cannot bear the weight of a human death, public opinion is tilting toward the charges being false, and the prosecution’s evidence must be questioned. Surely it would be easier to just call off this trial. Easier for everyone involved.”

“...”

Mikoto had to think. She had no choice but to think.

A method of cheating was unbeatable as long as its effects lasted. But it was all over once the trick was discovered. It was a deal with the devil that would tear down everything you had accomplished when that happened.

Which meant...

“This was only a backup plan for you. It wasn’t what you really wanted.”

“What are you talking about...?”

“You’re pretending everything is going flawlessly, but this is just your recovery from a mistake. That’s why the biggest problem for you still exists here.”

The answer was simple.

Misaka Mikoto pointed at one partially-burned cardboard box.

Below the pink fire-extinguishing foam, it contained the evidence for the phone scam case: a bunch of cellphones with lithium ion batteries.

Meaning...

“The ignition devices are still there.”

“!?”

“There is no textbook for toys like this. Everyone has to teach themselves, so they always develop some kind of idiosyncrasy. Investigating those might just turn up something interesting. ...And if we can track down the ignition devices’ manufacturer, we might just learn who hired them.”

The winds were changing.

“You can’t. You can’t. That just can’t be possible.”

It was now Mikoto’s time to make a challenge.

She slowly spoke to the female glasses attorney who could not seem to move.

“If you were involved, then you won’t be able to defend Innai Chigiri any longer. Because then it will be your turn in the defendant’s seat.”

Part 11

(justice)

“This is the work of Fire Bug,” said Uiharu.

The burnt cellphones were evidence for another case, so they could not gain access to them. Instead, Mikoto had taken a lot of photos and Uiharu had compared those to the Bank, Academy City’s database.

“Of course, that’s just what he’s called online. Misaka-san, you said you saw a laptop burst into flames in a café, right? That reminded me of the Fire Bug case where someone used that as camouflage.”

“Cheh. If this had been Loophole’s esper power, we would’ve had him in checkmate.”

“If he did things that straightforwardly, he could not have set up this theatrical crime,” added Shirai with a sigh.

Uiharu rolled her shoulders with her mobile device in hand.

“Fire Bug uses an esper power called Ion Trade that lets him freely manipulate microscopic ion exchange. He apparently used that to heat up batteries and to cause myocardial infarctions or instant aging just by touching the human body.”

“Would that be Level 3 or 4? It sounds pretty dangerous.”

But if he had a decent esper power, he would have received plenty of support from Academy City. Mikoto’s group could not understand why those in the dark side would dive into that bog themselves.

“During the Fireball Case where surveillance drones kept bursting into flames and crashing, the electronics company apparently falsely accused him of doing it. A recall would have cost the company billions, so they invented themselves a criminal to avoid that.”

“...Wouldn’t that be way too obvious?”

“As you can guess from the fact that we know what happened, it was discovered that the company fabricated the charges and they ended up having a rough time with the Civil Rehabilitation Law. But that was not enough to heal the psychological wounds. Fire Bug kept posting dangerous ‘how to’ videos online in order to teach people how to trigger fires and explosions without using an esper power. It seems quite a few people committed crimes based on his instructions.”

It was a miserable story, but it seemed unlikely Fire Bug was innocent now.

He was not just criticizing corporate vulnerabilities; he had started accepting money and doing jobs for people.

“Messing with batteries isn’t as flashy or reliable as using fuel or explosives, but it becomes a lot easier to pass the result off as an accident. While explosives and arson announce the presence of a criminal, this method is more surreptitious and doesn’t cause as much of a stir.” Shirai paused for a beat. “But a lot is unknown about Fire Bug. He was arrested, but he was never actually indicted. Then he managed to slip past Anti-Skill and Judgment’s surveillance and disappeared.”

“Disappeared?”

“He most likely got plastic surgery. But that would leave him without an ID to use, so life in Academy City would be difficult and he could not leave the city either. Honestly, I just don’t understand why someone would drop themselves into the cracks of society like that.”

He already had an inclination toward crime and supporting himself would be difficult. ...It was a stereotypical case for a repeat hired criminal.

“So we of course cannot kick down his door and search his home right away.”

“That isn’t how we’re going to investigate this.” Mikoto nearly cut off Shirai as if she had expected to hear that. “Kuroko. The batteries used by Fire Bug aren’t as reliable as normal bombs or Molotov cocktails, right?”

“Y-yes. What about it?”

“Uiharu-san. Since you confirmed that the incident in the café was a criminal case, you’ve gathered the records for that, right? Do you have the security camera footage of when the laptop started burning?”

“Yes. I do have all that.”

“Fire Bug specializes in disguising his crimes as accidents in order to avoid an investigation, but that eliminate any guarantee that he will actually hit his target. In that case, wouldn’t he be dying to know whether or not his setup actually worked? It would be one thing if it was just a hobby, but he would need to confirm it when it was a hired job. ...For example, he might need to see it happen with his own eyes.”

“Ah.”

“He will appear at the crime scene,” stated Mikoto. “He will be someone who was at that café and at the courthouse today. ...I guess that technically makes me a suspect, huh? Just to be sure, check a few other cases Fire Bug was involved in. If you find someone who was at all of them, then we’ve identified Fire Bug.”

Part 12

(the_hanged_man)

Mikoto manipulated magnetism to move from building to building while Shirai intermittently teleported after her.



They were jumping around Academy City in pursuit of a fleeing work van. Once they had their target, it had not been difficult to use facial recognition and other methods to determine the individual's location. And their suspicions were all but confirmed when the van started ignoring all of the traffic lights and racing through the streets with its tires screeching and its tail end swinging side to side.

“Uiharu! Are you really guiding us in the right direction!? That work van is most likely a serial arsonist's mobile lab! Ah, ahh!! It's driving right into a hydrogen plant of all things!!”

“If we hadn't lured him in that direction, he would have crashed into the lithium ion battery plant he uses as a home base! And a facility that specializes in explosives will be designed for damage control in case of a fire.”

“Meaning?”

“Fire Bug, aka Matsuoka Raita, can use his Ion Trade on batteries to trigger all sorts of fires and explosions here. Please stop him before the fire can spread!!”

Mikoto's group had the advantage here.

The biggest threat was his ability to directly touch someone and mess with their body's cells. But since Shirai and Mikoto could fight from midair or long distance, they could avoid a struggle on the ground.

There were a few boxy reinforced concrete buildings and countless metal pipes running between them like walkways. Hydrogen fuel was said to be more eco-friendly than gasoline, but its production was not exactly a non-polluting process. Using electrolysis to separate ordinary water into oxygen and hydrogen sounded simple enough, but what would happen if you did that with river water? The answer was simple: the impurities that were neither oxygen nor hydrogen would be concentrated down into something a lot like consommé soup stock. Seawater would leave you with salt, sand, and fish poop while tap water would leave you with calcium buildup, dead microbes, and things you are better off not knowing about. And factories would grow larger as they installed the various facilities needed to handle those pollutants.

The girls were pursuing the van in the air, but there was no truly safe area on this battlefield.

Several dry popping sounds came from the fleeing vehicle.

“!? Are those pencil missiles or something!?”

“Those are a diversion. Watch out for the light plane drones sent out along a wide circle at the same time! If they're set to self-destruct by blowing up their batteries and have short-range fuses, they can shower shrapnel on us without actually getting close!!”

Fortunately, they were controlled using EM waves.

It was unthinkable for Misaka Mikoto to overlook a signal like that. She launched lightning spears from her bangs to shoot them down one after another.

“Kuroko! Where do you think he’s going to make his last stand!?”

“Everywhere here is full of oxygen and hydrogen, so it’s a huge problem no matter where he does it!!”

“Then let’s hit him with something that isn’t oxygen or hydrogen.”

Some small sparks burst from Mikoto’s bangs.

The work van was racing past a cylindrical tank, but that tank’s pressure control malfunctioned and it suddenly exploded. An incredibly thick brown substance erupted out. That was the extremely condensed waste product that was neither clean oxygen nor hydrogen.

The substance hit the work van like a flashflood, the van slid to the side, and it could not regain its balance. The sludge slipped between the tires and the ground, robbing them of friction, and the tires simply spun. It was pushed off the road, toppled onto its side, and rolled along while a metal fence wrapped around it. It finally stopped after crashing into a thick car barrier shaped like an upside-down U at the entrance of a park.

Mikoto made an announcement while hanging upside like a bat from a group of thick pipes running above the road.

“Come out and do not attempt to resist!! You can try to use your special battery fires, but if this sludge burns, it will produce the dioxin used in herbicides. Don’t try anything unless you want to be caught in the middle of some toxic smoke of your own making!!”

“Urp, uehhh... N-no response.”

“Is he being stubborn and holing up inside the van?”

“Um, couldn’t he have simply passed out from this horrific stench?”

“...”

“...”

Mikoto and Shirai exchanged a glance.

An unpleasant atmosphere hung over them.

What did it mean if he could not leave the van...?

“Onee-sama, one of us is going to have to wade into that scrapped van covered in what looks and smells like a pile of crap and drag Fire Bug out of there...”

“Ho, ho ho ho. Let’s decide who with rock-paper-scissors. Yes, a nice fair game of rock-paper-scissors. C’mon, c’mon. Don’t look away. Let’s play on the count of three...ah!? Don’t teleport away!!”

Part 13

(death)

Mikoto and the others were not the only ones feeling irritated.

In District 1’s Academy City General Courthouse, time seemed to be passing calmly in the defendant’s waiting room, but the female glasses attorney, Tsujinaka Kyouka, was actually already in a rage.

“...This is bad. This is really bad.”

“What is?”

“The Fire Bug part of the plan is falling apart!!”

After snapping back at the boy, the attorney glanced back toward the closed door.

She lowered her voice and opened her mouth as if to slowly release the pressure of her tension.

“It would have been difficult to prove actual wrongdoing with the voice data. But when he was arrested, I was the one that kept him from being indicted. He owed me for that and I tamed him with money after he got plastic surgery and had trouble getting by without an ID. Do you understand? I doubt he would let himself be captured so easily, but it’s all over if he is. The hotline will lead them back to me!! And then I won’t be able to defend you any longer. You have to know what fate awaits you if you’re given a court-appointed attorney who lives off of everyone’s tax money and gets paid the same whether they win or lose.”

This beautiful boy was done for if a guilty verdict was reached.

But his expression remained almost creepily unchanged.

“I have more than one safety in place. Even if one fails, there is still another.”

“Then let’s assume Fire Bug is captured. If I am arrested by Anti-Skill, they will also discover the fake videos and praise your followers are spreading outside. That means two of the three safeties have already failed!!”

“...”

“That just leaves the negotiation to unfreeze the cold sleep girl, but I honestly doubt that will be very effective on its own. No one will want to be involved in the life or death of an innocent person, so they will want to delay making a decision. That much is fine. But they might start looking at this in a different way. *If they can’t stand to let a living person die, then they just have to start thinking of the frozen victim as already dead.* It’s irrational, but if they get just one doctor signing a statement to that effect, they’ll be able to shake off the guilt.”

That was the first thing they had discussed.

Even with the negotiations centered on the cold sleep, there was no guarantee the trial would be called off.

So they had needed several waves of attacks. They had wanted a result where the specific reason could not be given, but *after weighing all the factors*, it was concluded the trial could not continue.

That would be difficult with just one point of pressure.

And if the trial was resumed now, the pieces would progress in a direction Innai Chigiri and Tsujinaka Kyouka very much wanted to avoid. As an attorney, she was no longer just receiving money from this. Her current status came from covering for his wicked charisma.

And just then...

“To be honest...”

“?”

“I have more than just those three safeties. As you said, there is always a chance of something going wrong. So it’s best to have as many lifelines as possible.”

“You still have something up your sleeve...? Wh-why didn’t you say so sooner!?”

The female glasses attorney’s face lit up like all her agony had been a lie. Loophole smiled thinly at that calculating woman who shared his fate here.

“By the way, I was entirely reliant on you for all of this. Of course, that was because I’m the defendant, so I’m always under observation and can’t act freely.”

“Um, what about it...?”

“You don’t get it? If a certain someone keeps their mouth shut, almost all of this will never come to light. There will be suspicions, sure, but no definitive answer. Isn’t the presumption of innocence a wonderful concept? I just need to use it to my advantage. And I had everything set up that way from the beginning, so you don’t have to worry about that.”

If she had known what he meant, the attorney would not have simply stared. So it was not the pretty boy’s words that clued Tsujinaka into the change.

Quite the opposite.

Silence, quiet, stillness.

...She finally realized something was not right. Things were far too quiet beyond the door. They should have been monitored at all times, but those watchful eyes had completely vanished.

Esper powers determined one’s status in Academy City, but they meant nothing here.

It was something else that ruled this place.

“My followers are many. And they can be found anywhere in Academy City.”

The doorknob immediately turned.

Several men in work jumpsuits walked in.

“And there is a clear and simple way to stop this trial dead in its tracks. The current trial system requires the defendant to have at least one attorney. To put it another way, if that number drops below one, the trial must stop. Which means...”

This was so unexpected that her mind must have gone entirely blank.

The fear finally caught up to her once her mouth was covered with adhesive tape, but by then it was too late. Her arms and legs were bent and bound with adhesive tape like she was being packed up by a moving company. Her eyes widened as she was stuffed inside a plastic box on a wagon. This was not the look one gave a companion. Tsujinaka Kyouka may have finally recalled the most basic fact of all: what kind of person Innai Chigiri was.

He thought nothing of human life.

And that brutal criminal said one last thing.

“You just have to die.”

Part 14

(temperance)

Mikoto had a bad feeling about this.

They had captured Fire Bug, the creator of the ignition devices, and they were on the verge of having proof that Attorney Tsujinaka Kyouka had crossed a line, but Mikoto felt an odd sense of impatience, like that trump card was crumbling in her grasp.

“I can’t reach Uiharu,” said Shirai. “But I doubt that high-tech freak would turn off her phone.”

“She’s at the courthouse, so aren’t phones banned in a lot of places?”

They had never expected Fire Bug to confess to everything during just a few hours of questioning. The key had been the mobile device Matsuoka Raita had with him. By having Uiharu investigate that, they could find a link back to the attorney and deliver the finishing blow.

This should have been a triumphant return.

But as they approached the courthouse, Mikoto definitely felt an ominous racing of her heart. She noticed something just as they passed by a quadrupedal armored robot lying on the mat to a wireless charging station.

“What...? Isn’t there a lot of noise coming from over there?”

“I sincerely hope there hasn’t been even more trouble.”

But their hopes could not change the truth.

The result was as follows:

“She fell!! From the roof!!”

“Don’t push! Clear the way! Let the ambulance through!!”

“The defense attorney committed suicide? What’s going to happen to the trial now...?”

As soon as their minds managed to parse the flood of noise as individual voices, it felt like a mass of malice hitting them in the head.

Defense attorney.

There was only one person that brought to mind.

Anyone who did not think of Tsujinaka Kyouka was either incredible or incredibly stupid.

“Wait a second. Are you kidding!?”

Mikoto’s shouting would not turn back time. Once the stretcher was loaded in, the ambulance activated its siren and left the courthouse.

They had no idea if the woman would be fine or if it was already too late.

“What happened...? Did she give into the pressure as we closed in on her...?”

“I doubt that woman was such a sensitive soul.”

Had they been unable to reach Uiharu because she had had her hands full with this chaos?

They entered the courthouse.

Even now, they were forced to go through the metal detector and have their body temperature manipulated by a grid of far infrared beams. It was normally a minor change, but it was unimaginably irritating when they were in a hurry. In a way, that may have been proof it would be effective at revealing terrorists.

Perhaps because it was a judicial agency, a lot of people were hurrying about inside. But due to jurisdiction issues, Anti-Skill had been sent out to investigate the scene instead of having the prosecutors do it directly.

Mikoto and Shirai could hear Anti-Skill discussing the investigation:

“Was it a suicide?”

“We don’t know! Gather any of her documents you can find. We need to test the handwriting!”

The mention of handwriting caught Mikoto’s attention.

She leaned against a column where she would be out of the way.

“Does that mean she left something handwritten on the roof? Like a suicide note?”

“They still don’t know if it was really written by that Tsujinaka attorney. Personally, I think it would be best to assume Innai Chigiri was feeling trapped and made his next move.”

Capturing Fire Bug would only lead them to the female glasses attorney, not Innai Chigiri himself. So if Tsujinaka Kyouka was silenced, it would be difficult to reach the very top from Fire Bug.

In fact...

“The worse the attempt to make it look like a suicide, the worse this could be for us.”

“What do you mean, Kuroko?”

“We captured Fire Bug and reached the point where we can get him to talk about his connection to Tsujinaka. But what if all the information surrounding her is suspected to be a trap making this look like a suicide? Even if all of our information is accurate, won’t any testimony or evidence that works against *the victim* of the attack look suspect?”

It felt like they had worked so hard to find this one fleck of gold dust and then a dump truck full of dirt had been dumped on top of it. The truth they had supposedly found would lose all value as it was covered by later lies. All that would remain was the exhaustion from the effort, but they could not stop here. They were still in the palm of Loophole’s hand.

“But to put it another way, we’ve cornered that criminal to the point that he had to sacrifice his right-hand woman, right?”

“Onee-sama...?”

“He calls himself Loophole. He might think he’s outwitted us with this bold move, but the exact opposite is true. I doubt Innai Chigiri would attempt this tightrope walk for no reason. Of course, if we could have caught him in the act, we could have prevented this sacrifice, but...”

Loophole had proven that he could do something like this while being monitored so strictly. The attack on the attorney may have been infighting between villains, but his next target could be anyone. Would it be the witness? Or a lay judge? No, they would not let there be a next target. Mikoto renewed her resolve.

What hurdles remained?

Innai Chigiri was trying to pass off the guidance of public opinion with faked videos and the fire in the temporary storage room as actions taken by his attorney without his knowledge. It was unknown if Tsujinaka Kyouka would recover in the hospital, but she at least could not provide testimony for the time being. They would have to temporarily set aside any method of closing in on the villains with Fire Bug.

“This isn’t over yet,” forced out Mikoto. “Attorney Tsujinaka Kyouka said there was a risk of me having tampered with the evidence since I set foot inside the temporary storage room, but they were all packaged in plastic. A close examination should quickly

prove whether or not the bags were opened. Loophole's failure had already begun from the moment that small room wasn't fully burned."

How could they close in on that brutal villain without using Fire Bug or the attorney?

Where was his Achilles' heel?

...When she thought about it, she realized they had to return to the very beginning.

The very first hurdle was right there in front of them.

"Unfreezing the cold sleep girl..."

The trial could continue.

With that in mind, they had to make their attack here.

"We have to save that girl without Loophole's help. If we can solve the Asajimo Saemi problem, we can greatly increase the likelihood of the trial continuing."

Part 15

(the_devil)

The scariest thing of all was to find yourself unable to do anything.

Left all alone in a waiting room that just looked like a bland box, Saten Ruiko breathed a heavy sigh in her full-body skintight rubber suit.

How many times had she looked at the wall clock now?

She had a habit of messing with her phone when she had some spare time, but that had come back to bite her here. She knew having her phone's location set to here would cause problems, but the inability to maintain her normal rhythm and cycle created all the more pressure. She wished she had not returned the prosecutor's phone.

There was nothing to do and she had nothing but time on her hands.

There was a TV, but she would only find talk shows at this time of day. Those cruel programs liked to discuss depressing stories, and all of them would be focused on the story she was a part of. The witness would not be named or pictured, but there was only the thinnest of layers protecting her. She found it hard to breathe when she started imagining what would happen if they revealed her information by mistake.

That was when a light knock came to the door.

Was it that puppy prosecutor?

That woman could be seen as the one who had placed her in this situation, but Saten did not care who it was if it would free her from this oppressive atmosphere. She called out to the door.

“Yes. I’ll open-...”

“No!! Do not open the door!!!!”

The girl’s shoulders jumped.

Her body tensed up in confusion, but real time continued like normal.

The reverberation of something flipping over reached her through the door. Was there some kind of scuffle going on in the hallway? Or was someone being restrained as they tried to run?

Then she heard a deep male voice she had never heard before.

“Shut up! Let go, let go!! You are violating the freedom of the press! I am the administrator of a news forum! Get the hell away from me! The age of TV is over!!”

“Take this man away immediately! Hurry!!”

“Don’t get so mad. Don’t you feel silly getting worked up over every little thing? Just so you know, I’ll be writing all about how you’re oppressing me here!!”

It was bizarre and nonsensical.

What would have happened if she had not been warned and opened the door? She had a feeling it would have been worse than having a camera or microphone shoved in her face while she was pelted with questions. The fear crawling up her fingertips was the same she would have felt if the doorbell rang late at night and she looked through the fish-eye lens to see a man wielding a knife.

This was what it meant to be on the chopping block.

Of course, she did not think these were bad people to the core. But she also doubted they saw her as a living human being from the same city as them. They only saw her as “news”. These people would rob someone of their future like it was a way of scoring bonus points. It felt like watching as the price of each of her organs was haggled down.

Finally, another light knock came to the door.

This time, the lock knob turned on its own.

“!!”

“Sigh, looks like we got that worked out...wait, wait!! Put down that floor lamp! Slowly now!! Okay?”

Saten just about split open the head of the puppy prosecutor who poked her head through the cracked-open door.

She tried to let go of the light fixture that was as long as a mop, but...

“Huh...? My fingers are stiff...and won't let go.”

“Oh, honestly.”

The small prosecutor pried off the girl's fingers which had become as stiff as rigor mortis.

And she slowly breathed a sigh of her own.

“Once we have a chance, let's move you to another room. I had everyone removed, but it's possible they left a web camera in the hallway during all the confusion. I need to check over everything first.”

“Do you really have to go that far...? I mean, I haven't done anything wrong! You said the courthouse would be perfectly safe and I would only have to make a statement or two!!”

“We just need to keep going a little longer. We need to get a guilty verdict for Innai Chigiri in order to bring an end to all the crimes committed by Loophole.”

“How does that improve my life any!?”

Saying that made her feel so ashamed tears welled up in her eyes.

But her entire life had been tossed onto the poker table without her knowledge. If they lost this mysterious gamble, she could lose everything, but she would not gain anything even if they won. Justice, duty, and accomplishment? It was not normal to discuss something like this using those formless concepts.

“How am I supposed to bear this...?”

To clear the victim's regrets.

To prevent a future victim.

Those things were simple enough to say, but they felt so flimsy now. Saten felt like a tiny boat being tossed about in the stormy sea. She was supposed to lower her anchor and desperately bear with it, but that anchor was too light and she would be swept away to who-knows-where.

“...What am I supposed to use for support?”

The small, puppy-like prosecutor slowly exhaled.

And then she spoke.

“Saten-san. You don't have to do anything special.”

Those were nothing but meaningless words.

They were so flimsy that Saten felt abandoned.

“Do you need courage to stand on your own two feet? Do you ever get tired of holding chopsticks and a rice bowl? You just do what's normal and ordinary. That is what preserves society's peace. Think of it like that and the fear and anxiety should all go away.”

“But...they're targeting my life and everything else.”

“Even so. Even when you're drowning, you don't stop seeking air. Even in a fire and surrounded by smoke, you still breathe in and out. It's during the emergencies that you most need to do everything like normal. You never let yourself waver and you remain firm.”

Oh how wonderful it would be if she could do that.

But the blade was already at her throat.

And it was not just Loophole and his followers. All of society was trying to take everything away from her for its own amusement.

This woman did not understand.

A prosecutor was thoroughly protected by the government while Saten would have to return all alone to her student dorm and tremble through the dark night. How could the woman understand how she felt? She only needed Saten to last until they had their verdict. What happened to her after that was of no consequence. A witness was no more than a disposable tool.

“Saten-san.”

Or so Saten thought.

However.

“To be honest, being a prosecutor isn’t as cool as dramas make it look,” said the puppy prosecutor. This somehow felt like more than just meaningless words. “Investigating the case and arresting the perpetrator is Anti-Skill and Judgment’s job. We simply handle the trial to tie up the loose ends. It’s true we have to put together all the necessary documents, but Japanese trials almost always achieve a guilty verdict once they reach the point of indictment. This isn’t a job that has you on the edge of your seat very often. ...The prosecution will establish a special investigation department for some financial cases, but even those rarely lead to a spectacular victory. Most of the time, an indictment is never made and no clear reason why is ever given. There’s just so much you have no control over.”

“...And so you can’t protect me? Is that it?”

Saten just threw the words out there, but the prosecutor shook her head.

She denied that idea.

“Why do you think we stay with this job we have so little control over? Why don’t we quit and become a private detective or join a think tank instead?”

The puppy prosecutor took just one step away from Saten.

That way the girl could see her entire body at once.

“...?”

“So we can continue to do what we consider normal. Because we believe that is what preserves stability and brings peace to the world.”

The small prosecutor slowly reached for the bottom of the white blouse inside her cheap suit. Then she pulled it up to expose her belly to Saten.

There was a stiff knife scar there.

Saten gulped.

...She had thought a prosecutor could not be targeted by criminals, but she had been wrong. In fact, Saten could return to the normal world once this one trial was over, but the puppy prosecutor would continue to involve herself in criminal cases. She would get involved with cases she had neither caused nor witnessed and gather plenty of resentment and interest in the process.

“Yet I am still alive.”

She was nothing like her appearance.

This prosecutor had lived through countless deadly situations and she now looked Saten square in the eye.

“The ‘normal’ I have continued to live to this day is all the guarantee you need, Saten-san. I will not let anyone take away your life or your future here. I have already walked that path, so you can trust me. I’ve been stabbed out of the blue. And I’ve had a bomb attached to my car. But not once have I lost a witness. Every last one of them is a part of my ‘normal’ and I will not let Loophole destroy that. Because I know that weight is the greatest weapon to drive back that kind of brutality.”

“...”

“And I can never break my word in this because I must tell the same thing to my next cooperator and the next witness. Saten-san, I will send you safely back to your normal life and I will continue on to the next case. So I want you to join me here without regret. I need your help for this case.”

Perhaps this was not a new experience for the prosecutor.

She may have been asked the exact same thing by a similar person during her previous case or the case before that. And she may have given the same answer each time, brought an end to each case in the same way, and built things up like that.

The criminals were arrested by Anti-Skill or Judgment.

The presiding judge gave the verdict.

Prosecutors were administrators of justice, but they did not get to be the stars. They were preceded by a general image of being the elite, but no one would recognize any of them. Nevertheless, this woman had come this far walking the path of the prosecutor. At times she had been stabbed or shot by strangers, but she had never compromised in her work.

That provided a great weight to her words.

That was an anchor capable of holding the small boat firm in the storm.

“How can you do all this...?”

The puppy prosecutor’s expression was unchanged by Saten’s hesitant question.

Perhaps this too was no more than part of a conversation she had held countless times.

“Do you need a reason to do what’s normal?”

Part 16

(the_tower)

They had to organize what information they had.

Mikoto leaned against a column in the courthouse lobby.

“With his lawyer gone, they’re sure to call someone in to take her place.”

“This is as good as over once the court-appointed attorney arrives here. This series of unexpected events has left both the professional judges and the lay judges hesitant to act. They must not want to create a negative precedent. At this rate, it’s entirely possible that they’ll wash their hands of the entire issue by dismissing the case.”

That would end the trial without a clear guilty or not guilty verdict. And it could not be appealed to a higher court. That did sound a lot like simply washing their hands of the issue, but the principle of *res judicata* applied to a dismissed case. That meant another trial would qualify as double jeopardy, so a dismissal meant Innai Chigiri could never again be tried for the crime of the cold sleep murder.

“B-but then Loophole...Innai Chigiri will be free to do whatever he pleases.” Uiharu had grown pale. “And his record of perfect crimes has been marred.”

Mikoto breathed a heavy sigh.

If they were to overcome the worst of this, they could not avoid looking at the problem.

“I don’t know if he’ll be angry or curious, but the odds are good Saten-san will be in danger after unwittingly doing that to him.”

Mikoto’s group wanted to prevent that.

That was their top priority.

“If you want to unfreeze someone from cold sleep, you need finely-controlled speed,” said Uiharu Kazari while messing with her mobile device. “Whether from liquid to solid or vice-versa, an object’s mass changes when it changes state, so the larger the difference between the inside and outside of the cells, the greater the risk of the cells rupturing. That means rapid changes are off limits.”

“But would there be a problem to do it slowly but surely?”

“There is still a problem there. If the unfreezing process is too slow, the recovering flesh and blood will be unable to bear the cold and get frostbite. You’d essentially be throwing a naked person into temperatures a few dozen degrees below freezing.”

It had to be slow enough for the cells to survive but fast enough that the person did not freeze to death.

It would be simple enough to say you just needed the perfect level of heat in the perfect quantity, but that was not very helpful when you were the one who had to supply that heat.

Too much or too little would put the girl's life at risk. It was like getting the right angle of entry for the atmosphere.

“Another difficult problem is melting an entire human body equally and uniformly. If you place a normal ice cube on a table, it slowly melts and the corners round off, right? That isn't enough for this.”

“Hm...”

“It's like how fighter pilots constrict their thighs to cut off blood flow to their legs so the blood can reach their head even during intense Gs. If the unfreezing is uneven across their body, it will have a similar effect. Just like when you squeeze a bag of water from the outside, the internal pressure – blood pressure in this case – rises. And that too will put her life at risk.”

It was already a very difficult problem.

Simply unfreezing a body from cold sleep was not easy.

“To avoid that, a CT or MRI will need to take detailed cross-section photos to get an accurate map of her organs, fat, muscles, and bones. With a diagram, the heating and unfreezing can be accurately applied to each part evenly. If a diagram like that can be made, that is. I'm not sure those detailed scans will work while she's frozen.”

And on top of all that...

“There is still the wound on her back.”

There was even more.

Uiharu viewed the information on what looked like a handheld game system.

“There is a deep vertical cut from between her shoulder blades and down to her tailbone. Even if she is properly unfrozen from cold sleep, this wound will reopen. Mass blood loss will be unavoidable. And it is impossible to sew it up or give her a transfusion before the unfreezing is complete.”

“...”

“Blood pressure comes up again here. This time, the loss of so much blood will make her blood pressure rapidly drop. She will enter a state of shock.”

This was where the troublesome double standard branched off.

If they did not unfreeze her from cold sleep, the girl would die.

But if they did unfreeze her from cold sleep, the girl would die.

“Loophole has an answer to this puzzle. But what is it? Why did he go out of his way to use a saline-based preservative for the cold sleep? Was it just to create a time limit for her frozen state? And why wasn’t he satisfied with just freezing her? Why did he go the extra step and cut open her back? What was he afraid of...?”

“About that.”

Just then, Shirai Kuroko broke her silence.

Her throat shook as she hesitantly spoke up.

“...Onee-sama. Aren’t you trusting Innai Chigiri a little too much? You are assuming he is capable of saving frozen Asajimo Saemi, but we have no proof of that outside of his word. It is possible he does not actually have any way of saving her.”

“Eh? But...that’s his lifeline. If he can’t save the frozen girl, then there’s no reason to end the trial in a hurry.”

“That depends on when the dismissal of the case occurs. He is saying he cannot go save Asajimo Saemi until he is freed, so he only intends on attempting that difficult problem after the dismissal. To put it another way, the trial will already be over whether he saves the frozen girl or not.”

“But! If he breaks his promise, he can just be thrown right back into court!!”

“Don’t you remember? That would qualify as double jeopardy. Once a case has reached a conclusion, it cannot be retried. That of course applies to a guilty or not guilty verdict, but it also applies to a dismissal when the trial is called off without reaching an actual verdict. That is the theory anyway.”

“You mean...it could all be a bluff?”

“As long as the judges and lay judges succumb to the pressure.” Shirai sighed. “You’ve seen how manipulative he is. Even if he does fail to unfreeze Asajimo Saemi and she dies, he will point at everyone around him and accuse them. He will say his theory was perfect, so it was everyone else who screwed up. He will deny all responsibility.”

That was insane.

With the self-satisfied whispering of an emptyhanded and ignorant amateur, he would manipulate the experts. He would break down the systems of society. He would continue committing strange crimes that pointed out loopholes in the law and fan the flames of public anger against those systems. This was the ultimate form of his malice.

“If Innai Chigiri’s original statement was a bluff, then he has been manipulating us from the very beginning,” said Shirai. “We are searching in the wrong direction, so we will never find an answer here. Not even if we search every last branching path leading from there. There was no saving frozen Asajimo Saemi from the very beginning. It was hard to tell because she appears to have been frozen in time, but it might be best to assume she is already dead.”

“...”

This would be a lot simpler if that was true.

If Innai Chigiri had no bargaining chip, the trial would swiftly get back on track. There were still claims of false accusations on the internet and there had been a fire in the temporary storage room for evidence, but those were not enough to stop a trial on their own. Human life was obviously what mattered most. Once that restriction was gone, everything would begin moving once more.

However...

“But wait. That’s only if you assume he’s bluffing. What if he really does know a way to save that frozen girl?”

“Onee-sama...”

“Then we would be leaving her to die when we could have saved her. It wouldn’t be someone else doing it; it would be us doing it! We need to give this more thought before we jump to conclusions. Let’s not worry about whether or not Loophole would be able to do it! Let’s think about this puzzle in our own way!!”

“There might be a way. We might be able to do it. Even if no one else can come up with something, maybe we can. That hope is proof that you’ve already fallen for Loophole’s trap. I mean, clinging to hope is a lot easier, isn’t it? Because it lets you avoid looking at the horrific truth before your eyes!”

Shirai intentionally raised her voice to overwhelm Mikoto’s words.

Like she was desperately trying to stop a friend who was racing toward a cliff’s edge.

“It’s true the current judicial system can’t confirm Asajimo Saemi’s death. Death is defined in terms of brain death instead of cardiac arrest, so it refers to when the brain’s primary functions cease and can never recover. The victim has been ‘stopped’ and preserved by cold sleep, so we can put off answering that question.”

“Then-...”

“But do not forget: Loophole is a freak who enjoys creating cases that take advantage of legal loopholes so they can’t be judged under current law! *Simply creating a dead body that can’t be defined as such using the brain death definition* may have been his goal here!”

“You can’t, Kuroko. We still don’t know which one of us is refusing to look at reality. I mean, wouldn’t it be easier to decide there’s no way to save her so you can give up!? That way you aren’t trapped by the pressure of holding the victim’s life in your hands. By *deciding* that she was dead from the beginning, you can escape the fear of making a choice. You remove the weight of Asajimo Saemi from your shoulders! By deciding nothing you could have chosen would save her, you’re just shoving all the irresponsible hatred onto Loophole alone! You benefit from giving up and deciding she’s already dead!!”

“Onee-sama! You mustn’t let him cloud your judgment!!”

“Kuroko! You can’t look away from the fear of making a choice!!”

They glared at each other from point-blank range.

Neither one of them had said anything wrong. This was not a conflict between a good side and a bad side.

The one at fault was Loophole, aka Innai Chigiri.

But some unnecessary negative emotions had started to clash over the issue of whether or not to trust the words of the last person they should be trusting here.

The two girls turned their backs on each other.

“I will go speak with the prosecutor and judges,” said Shirai. “I will ask them to stand strong against this criminal’s twisted game and to make a fair and impartial judgment. If they accepted your compromise, they might start focusing on that nonexistent hope and try to make a deal with the criminal.”

“I’ll visit the university hospital. If they go with your hardline choice, they might pull the plug on that girl.”

That was it.

Mikoto and Shirai walked down their chosen paths, leaving behind a flustered Uiharu.

It was not that they did not trust each other.

It was because they trusted each other that they could clash like this.

With a human life on the line, they could not hold back out of concern for each other. They let their opinions clash so that, no matter what happened, they would reach the best possible conclusion in the end.

Part 17

(the_star)

Misaka Mikoto ran across District 1 on her own and ignored the suspicious look from the Anti-Skill officers operating the stainless-steel accordion gates as she rushed into the subway station. She continued on to the District 2 university hospital.

She could not use the name of Judgment while on her own, but the trust built from their previous meeting seemed to remain. The guard men did not stop her as she made her way deep into the hospital where normal patients and visitors were not allowed.

She knocked on the door, but the white coat girl may not have noticed.

Asajimo Mebuki stood motionless in the empty laboratory and stared at the thick silver door of the freezer.

“...It’s less than three hours until the limit now,” she said. “Even if the criminal does know how to unfreeze her, it would be too late by the time the processing and other preparations were complete. That may be for the best. Academy City has shown to the world that we will not negotiate with criminals no matter what.”

“We don’t have to wait for Loophole.”

For one thing, the possibility had emerged that Innai Chigiri did not actually know how to unfreeze the girl.

“We can still make it in time. But only if we get started here and now instead of waiting for someone else!! You don’t want to just sit around twiddling your thumbs when you’re surrounded by the techniques and equipment that could save her, do you!?”

“But how...?”

The fourteen-year-old university professor finally turned around.

It was a slow action.

Her expression was a collapsed one that looked both like she was crying and smiling.

“I wanted to do everything I could to heroically and emotionally save my family—my sister! I stared at her photo album, read her journal, and thought back on our memories together to carve into my heart that I simply could not lose her!! ...But I would be charged with a crime... Once I take up the challenge and make the attempt, I’ll be pushing the ball down the hill and there is no going back. If I fail, I will be handcuffed as a murderer!! Of course I’m scared of that. My tongue freezes up, my fingers tremble, and no amount of idealistic words will change reality! The barrier won’t lower itself just because of my circumstances!! What am I supposed to do? If I could trade my life to save her and failing would cause me to drop dead right then and there, I wouldn’t have hesitated!! But when failure means falling to the very, very bottom but having to keep living afterwards, of course I’m going to be afraid!!!!!!”

This was not a lovely story.

It was an ugly story of someone weighing their familial bonds against the practical risks.

But this told Mikoto something: She was not a bad person.

If, as the final seconds counted down, the girl had continued saying lovely-sounding things that she did not actually think, wasting time in the process, that would have been the real problem. Asajimo Mebuki understood the value of time here. So she had thrown out all else and dragged out what she really thought. Because each minute and second mattered here.

It was not that she did not care.

It was not that she did not want to save her sister.

A lengthy excuse would be no more than a defensive action meant to hide what she really thought. But the white coat girl had given an explanation of why she would be right to abandon her frozen sister and avoid the risk. She had that explanation, yet she had not actually made the decision to give up. She was reluctant and she clenched her teeth. To put it another way, she had been unable to even think about the option of abandoning her sister without first arming herself with such a thorough argument for it. In fact, even after that well-reasoned argument, she had been unable to convince the soul that resided in the very depths of her heart. That was not like the aforementioned waste of time. She had endured to protect that life.

And so Misaka Mikoto asked herself what she had to do.

Criticizing Asajimo Mebuki for the ugly words coming from her mouth would be the height of folly. That would show a complete lack of understanding of the core of the issue. Those were not the words needed here.

She had to think back.

She had to line up all of the information she had gathered thus far.

There had to be a key there which would unlock a conclusion in which everyone could smile.

“You’re saying you have to give up because there is no way of saving your frozen sister, Asajimo Saemi, correct?”

“What...? You have to ask?”

“I just needed confirmation. So to put it another way, you would never give up on your sister as long as there was a way to save her! I’m going to hold you to that!!”

Now was the time to provide the answer.

No more lengthy excuses were needed. It was time to reach into Asajimo Mebuki’s heart and drag out what it was she really wanted to do!!

Part 18

(the_moon)

“It’s not possible ...”

The white coat girl produced a low voice that seemed to carry a curse.

And it soon grew to a cracked yell.

“That convenient option just doesn’t exist!! Unfreezing someone in cold sleep isn’t the same as taking an ice cube from an icemaker and placing it in room temperature. I can’t think of any way of removing her from the ice without damaging her body tissue!!”

“Is that really true, though?” Mikoto replied in a challenging way. “Not possible, not possible, doesn’t exist. You keep saying that about the issue as a whole, but that leaves me in the dark about the number and variety of hurdles in the way. What isn’t possible? What doesn’t exist? Can’t you start by explaining that?”

“You wouldn’t understand if I did...”

“Are you afraid I’ll prove you wrong?”

“You can’t just use a stove or hairdryer to blow hot air on the ice! Heat transfers differently through bone, muscle, fat, and organs.”

“And you call yourself an expert? I’ve already found an answer to that one. Do you want an amateur to prove you wrong!?”

“Yes, yes. There are machines that can emit far infrared beams in a grid to get the heat where it needs to be. For example, the downsized anti-sleep weapons used to detect suspicious people at metal detector gates. One of those could be adjusted to the precise structure of an individual’s body to apply heat like filling in a coloring book with pixels. But we have no diagram. There’s nothing we can do without a diagram of her body – of Asajimo Saemi’s body!!”

“Those grid-style toys would speed things up. But what about an actual heavy-duty version? Do you have one in this lab?”

“Are you stupid? That doesn’t solve anything! How am I supposed to scan my sister’s body through that thick ice!? A CT? An MRI? There’s no way to map her body either way. There’s nothing we can do without the diagram compiled from the cross-section photos!!”

In other words, that was the first hurdle.

The victim girl was trapped in thick ice and her flesh and blood had been transformed like sherbet, so normal medical techniques and scans were useless. It would be like having to do surgery in the dark. And the more precious a life it was, the less lightly she could make that decision.

However.

Mikoto thought of her information like a hand of cards. Was there really no way of acquiring that diagram? It would be quite a feat, but there was still a chance.

“Just to be clear, you could acquire the diagram itself if you used normal hospital equipment like a CT or MRI, right? And as long as you had that, you would take on this great challenge even if it means betting your future on it?”

“Again!! Those won’t work on her when she’s trapped in that thick ice...!!”

“I’m not talking about scanning Asajimo Saemi.”

Mikoto rudely pointed.

Yes, at the white coat girl, the fourteen-year-old university professor named Asajimo Mebuki.

“You would be the one taking the scan. I mean, you’re identical twins, so you’re identical on the genetic level, right? In fact, your fingerprints and irises match as well, so you two match even more closely than normal identical twins. It was enough to confuse me when I first met you. So a map created by scanning Asajimo Mebuki’s body should be usable for frozen Asajimo Saemi.”

“...”

A short silence followed.

But the white coat girl shook her head.

“I won’t let you trick me! I won’t fall for this anymore! Even if we have the diagram and can follow the appropriate formula to melt the ice with a grid of IR beams, it still isn’t over. What about the large wound carved into her back!? If we unfreeze her like normal, she’ll start bleeding and she’ll die. Frozen or unfrozen, there is no saving her. So no one can touch her!!”

If the girl was not unfrozen before the limit, she would die.

If the girl was unfrozen before the limit, she would die.

That double standard was the next hurdle. ...But was that really, really true?

“...The catalyst used for her cold sleep was saline-based, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, what about it?”

“The closer a substance matches the human body, the more convenient it is for that. That’s why the catalyst research started with saline but now primarily uses an artificial preservative based on egg whites.”

“What about it!?”

“You’re afraid of the blood loss because the rapid drop in blood pressure would cause shock, right? To put it another way, she could overcome that immediate threat as long as she did not go into shock no matter how much blood she loses.” Mikoto breathed a gentle sigh. “If someone is inside a liquid that matches the osmotic pressure, then their flesh, blood, and internal organs can float around just fine even without the skin to protect them. It’s probably easiest to think of it like a strange culture solution or like the egg white that protects the chick. And the cold sleep preservative was made from saline with a concentration of 0.9%. Do you still not get it? It might be hard to picture since it’s frozen solid and shaped in a rectangle, but your sister has been trapped in a large egg from the beginning.”

“You don’t mean...”

“You just have to submerge the ice coffin in a large pool of saline with a 0.9% concentration and then melt it with the kind of far infrared beam grid used in the metal detector gates. If necessary, you can add some impurities to make it even more like an artificial egg white designed for human use. It can’t be too thick or too thin. If it’s adjusted to precisely the osmotic pressure of human cells, there won’t be a huge difference in blood pressure and she won’t die from shock. After the ice has melted in the pool and her skin has softened up, you can sew up the wound to stop the bleeding. You can save Asajimo Saemi!!”

The barriers had been shattered.

The hurdles had been kicked over.

Was there anything more? Was there any other reason why Asajimo Mebuki would have to bite her lip and give up on her blood-related sister!? Was there any logic leftover that forced them to remain under Loophole’s control!?

“It isn’t possible...”

Her voice was trembling.

But this was somehow different from before. There was more than just fear there. It was because this was for someone she cared for that she could not easily broach the topic. She began discussing the realistic hurdle that remained.

“Even the metal detector gates require an industrial power source. Do you have any idea how much power it would take to supply the grill-level heat needed to precisely and stably melt that thick ice!? It just isn’t possible unless you have exclusive access to the diesel engine of a battleship or something!!”

“In other words, you just need enough electricity to power a battleship railgun?”

The white coat girl’s entire body shook.

This should have been an impossible request.

But those two girls stood in very different positions.

Misaka Mikoto had the girl’s word, so she pointed a thumb back at her own chest.

“Then I’ll take care of it. As the Railgun, Academy City’s #3 and the strongest Electromaster.”

“Then...”

She sounded dazed.

The white coat girl moved her trembling lips like she stood in the middle of a wasteland.

“...Then we really can save her?”

It was time for the conclusion.

At this point, the answer was obvious.

There was only one truth here – just one thing that Asajimo Mebuki really wanted to do. So what were the words that would help push her in that direction? It was time to speak the words that girl truly wanted to hear as she held herself back while crushed between the ideal decision and the practical risks!!

“You can save her. No, *only* you can save her!!!!!!”

Part 19

(the_sun)

Saten Ruiko’s head shot up inside the courthouse waiting room.

The puppy prosecutor had just reported something to her and she emphasized it with a snort.

“This isn’t just a bluff meant to wake us up. It sounds like they really did it!”

She grabbed the TV remote.

It gradually started to feel real as Saten Ruiko watched what was shown on the screen.

“You mean...?”

“The trial can continue. We can keep going! Loophole really is cornered now. All we need is your testimony!!”

Saten understood what that meant.

And she quickly stripped off the rubber suit covering her body.

“Wahyah!?”

“Where’s my uniform?”

“Eh? U-umm! If you want to protect your personal information, you really shouldn’t appear in court wearing your readily-identifiable school uniform...”

“I don’t need the partition or the rubber suit. How could I wear anything but my proper uniform? Everyone risked their lives and futures on this trial, so now that it’s continuing, it’s finally my time to risk something!!”

Part 20

(judgment)

The twintail girl arrived at Loophole’s waiting room. A gloomy young glasses man, presumably the court-appointed attorney, tried to keep her out, but Innai Chigiri stopped him.

The pretty boy invited her inside and laughed.

“Oh? You aren’t the usual prosecutor. I’m ready to go at any time. *Just say the word and I can go save the frozen girl.* Now, let’s resume the trial and have the case dismissed.”

“If she had seen you in person, she probably would have punched you, so I am relaying the message as a member of Judgment.”

“Are you raising the white flag without even beginning the war of words?”

“Quite the opposite. The trial will resume shortly. And you will be punished for your crimes as normal.”

Innai Chigiri’s eyes widened somewhat.

Then he began observing her, perhaps to determine whether or not she was bluffing.

“Do you really think the judges and lay judges are in any mental state to continue the trial? The computer meant to assist them is still malfunctioning, isn’t it?”

“Did you think that would give you an advantage? Do not worry. People are not as weak as you seem to think they are. Because this is so hard for everyone, they say they must ensure a good precedent is set today.”

“There was a fire in the temporary evidence storage room and a gallery member supporting the prosecution set foot inside without permission. The evidence has already lost all impartiality.”

“The plastic-packaged evidence did not get any soot or foam on it, so worry not. And you seem to be claiming that my Onee-sama tampered with it, but the plastic packages were sealed by melting the plastic itself and a testing kit can easily determine whether or not they were opened. In other words, that method will not work.”

“Loophole continues to release videos on the internet and quite a few people support the idea that the charges against me are false. Public opinion will not allow the trial to continue.”

“I asked the judges just to be certain, but it seems trials are governed by the law. This is not a TV show trying to gain popularity, so they intend to solemnly pass judgment no matter how much the people outside protest.”

“What about the cold sleep case? Without me and my method, you can’t save Asajimo Saemi. Or are the judges, lay judges, and prosecution going to let an innocent victim die?”

“Yes, I wonder what happened with that.”

It was now Shirai Kuroko’s turn to smile.

It was an ephemeral, lovely...and callously teenage smile.

Most likely, the boy was only so talkative because he was trying to hide the panic in his heart. If he was absolutely confident in his victory, he would not even need to respond. He would not have had to shake the other person’s emotions in an attempt to draw out information.

“Not even I expected this, but it seems my Onee-sama actually did it. So I can throw this all in your face with no bad aftertaste whatsoever.”

“What are you-...?”

“There is no need to give up on this world quite yet. That is what I mean. Now, how do those words sound to you, as someone who the world is about to give up on?”

With that, Shirai Kuroko grabbed the remote to the waiting room’s TV.

The LCD screen came to life and voices came from the speakers:

“The university hospital has just released a statement. A medical examination has confirmed Asajimo Saemi-san’s survival after being freed from cold sleep. I repeat, Asajimo Saemi-san’s survival has been confirmed!”

“We are in front of the hospital where it all happened. The crowd that had gathered to leave flowers in her memory cannot hide their confusion, but it seems the unfreezing has been safely completed and you can just feel the tension fading from everyone here.”

“That was being used as a bargaining chip by Boy A, aka Loophole, so what will happen with the trial now? Let us ask the experts for their impressions.”

“.....”

He had no more words.

From the look on his face, you would have thought the flurry of camera flashes was occurring right in front of him.

He was an unprecedented serial killer with a dark charisma and a rusty allure. He was an intellectual criminal who acted all-knowing and all-powerful while using his crimes to highlight society’s deficiencies. But that Loophole was no more. There was only a puny mass of emotion trembling in fear of the verdict that would soon be given to him.

He did not even have some power wrapped in an unnerving veil of mystery.

There was nothing there but a zero.

“Society needs me.”

“Does it really?”

“This changes nothing. Everyone will break under the pressure of responsibility and fail to pass judgment. I will still escape with a dismissal! The trial will end and the laws against double jeopardy will protect me!!”

“Now, I wonder if you’ll have changed your tune five minutes from now.”

Innai Chigiri suddenly turned toward the gloomy young glasses man.

But the court-appointed attorney provided no real support. He was simply paid from the people’s tax money. Unlike a private attorney, his remuneration was not influenced by how he did his job. He had no reason to step out onto the thin ice here.

Loophole’s mouth flapped wordlessly for a moment, and then...

“This isn’t over. Even if I’m found guilty in this court of first instance, there’s always next time. I’m not going to just sit around in the juvenile hall. I have countless followers. They’re everywhere. Listen, you’d better live in fear. I know what you look like!!”

“We live a society of mass consumption. It can be shocking how readily people move onto the next thing once something stops being interesting. You had better hope your share of fans holds out for a while longer.”

To finish it off, an announcement played over the speaker.

“I apologize for the long delay brought on by a variety of circumstances,” said the presiding judge. “But the recess will now end and the trial will resume. All related parties please report to Court 103!”

Part 21

(the_world)

Finally reunited, two girls lightly slapped their hands together.