

GAS STATION

鎌池和馬

イラストはいむらぎよたか

創約

とある魔術の

インデックス
林書目録

8

創約

とある魔術の 禁書目録

鎌池和馬

イラスト
はいむらきよたか



HsMCV-o8 "Predator Octopus"

A next-gen mobile combat vehicle developed by Academy City. Its purpose is to timely eliminate dangerous elements from the city with its tank-grade firepower without damaging the major roads of Academy City. It doubles as a remote controlled unmanned ground combat drone.

"The Little Mermaid... Oh, what a tragic story."

A Transcendent of the Bridge Society. The "Goddess of Witches" who rules over the night and the moon

Aradia

"(Hey, hey, let's buy this, fool.)"

The Pillar of the Rosicrucian Order

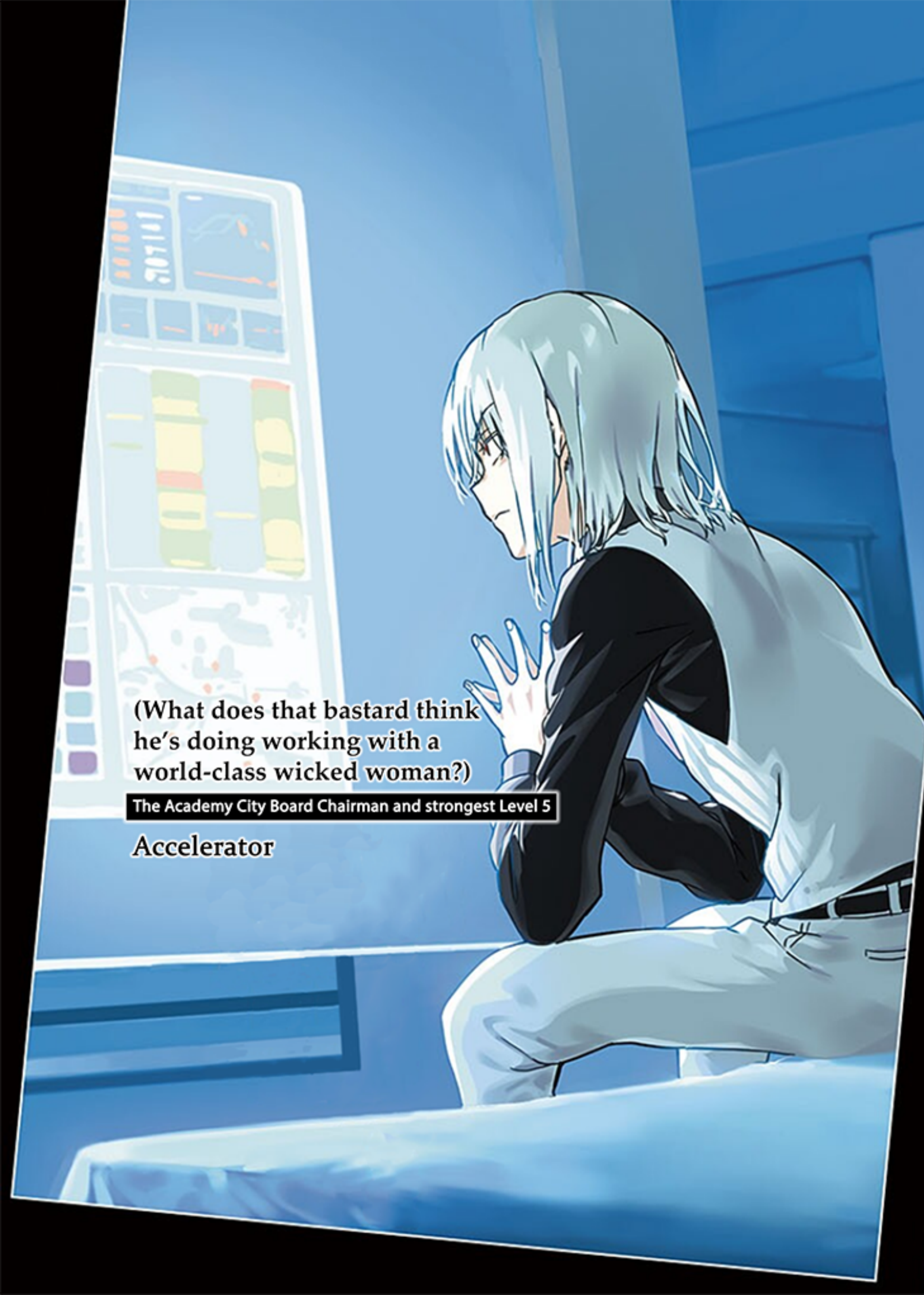
Anna Sprengel

"(Do you wicked women have a sixth sense for stuff like this!?)"

A boy with Imagine Breaker in his right hand, which can dispel any form of supernatural

Kamijou Touma



Accelerator is shown from the side, sitting at a console with multiple monitors displaying data. He has short, light blue hair and is wearing a light blue suit with black sleeves. His hands are raised in a gesture of surprise or contemplation.

(What does that bastard think
he's doing working with a
world-class wicked woman?)

The Academy City Board Chairman and strongest Level 5

Accelerator

Anna Kingsford is a red-haired woman with glasses, wearing a large black witch's hat decorated with stars and moons, a blue and white dress, and a long red cape. She is smiling and holding a small golden retriever puppy. To her left, a blonde woman with blue eyes and a pink dress looks on. The background is a warm, orange-toned street scene with a truck and other figures.

"Now, then. Where have those lost ♪ gone ♪ there?!"

The legendary magician who taught the founders of the "Golden" magic

Anna Kingsford

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"I will absorb as many shadows as necessary to create a free and fair society."

A Transcendent of the Bridge Builders Cabal who specializes in execution.

Mut Thebes

A CERTAIN MAGICAL INDEX GENESIS TESTAMENT

創約

とある魔術の 禁書目録 インデックス



KAMACHI KAZUMA

鎌池和馬

イラスト・はいむらきよたか

HAIMURA KIYOTAKA

デザイン・渡邊宏一(2725 Inc.)

Anna Sprengel was a wicked woman.

There was no getting around that fact. She was not following the events from a broader perspective and she had not been forced to do what she had to save even more people when viewed from the correct point of view. There was no tear jerking truth here.

What had R&C Occultics caused?

What about St. Germain who she had doomed to die whether Kamijou won or not?

Hadn't she played a role in Academy City's dark side as well?

What did you see in sandy Los Angeles?

Who had changed Alice Anotherbible?

...And had any of that *been truly necessary and unavoidable?*

She had countless options, she was free to choose whatever she wanted, and she had so much power she didn't even need to consider the possibility of failure. Yet Miss Sprengel had still constantly chosen the cruelest card.

That was undoubtedly an issue of her personality and couldn't be explained away with logic or efficiency. Also, Anna herself had no intention of making an argument to defend her case.

However.

When she regained her body from Madame Horos, she had found a world gone mad.

That was her honest impression.

She had finally regained use of her body and could once more produce an endless expanse of thoughts and imagination in her mind. She had been planning to travel the world as she saw fit. But...

What is this diseased world?

Why does no one realize how sick they are?

It all came down to that. Anna Sprengel was undoubtedly wicked. She was a bewitching wicked woman who desired stability and thus sought out a king who could act as her umbrella. She wanted to do as she pleased without accepting any responsibility

whatsoever. She was a glutton. But that was exactly why that demon lord refused to let the world shrivel away before she could devour all the enjoyment she desired.

That plan was out of the question.

She could not let the Bridge Builders Cabal succeed.

PROLOGUE

Attacked From Three Sides.

Proclaim_ML.

The Bridge Builders Cabal of Transcendents led by Alice Anotherbible.

Academy City led by Board Chairman Accelerator.

Aleister Crowley and his band of irregulars.

They were all enemies.

Anna Sprengel had spent the past while spreading malice on a global scale, but Kamijou Touma had still been unable to bear the treatment she received and reached out to help. So he had to accept the consequences of that action.

January 3, District 12.

That district was notable as the only one in Academy City with a large number of religious facilities built *from a scientific perspective*. The consulate used as the Bridge Builders Cabal base was also there.

[illegible]

The blue sky erupted with a low, deep noise that rumbled in the gut more than the ear. It was a strange noise that a modern high schooler would only hear during a summer baseball tournament.

In other words...

“A-a siren?”

A beeping noise joined in.

That alarm was playing from the old folks' smartphone in Kamijou's pocket. First Delivery Go Round and now this – modern phones had so many different alerts it was confusing.

“Damn, what's happened now!?”

The little wicked woman by his side had her strawberry blonde hair swept back in several fried shrimps and held a baggy dress in place at her flat chest.

Anna Sprengel provided an ominous prophecy.

“Either an emergency alert or declaration of martial law. Either way, this city is about to become a battlefield.”

“ ... ”

“Since you decided to get involved, you need to prepare yourself, fool. Although it isn't too late to hand me over and end all this.”

That could indeed end it.

When Anna Sprengel was arrested by Anti-Skill, she had easily escaped her cell and caused a major incident in Los Angeles. New Board Chairman Accelerator would know arresting Anna would not mean a peaceful ending.

If arresting her wouldn't work, then stopping her would mean killing her.

The same was probably true of Aleister's group who had turned her into a human film canister and kept her with them.

The Bridge Builders Cabal went without saying. They had openly announced their intention of executing her and even prepared the Shrink Drink, a specialized spiritual item shaped like a spear.

Kamijou Touma let out a long sigh before speaking.

He had made his decision.

“I'm still not abandoning you.”

“ ... ”

“Dammit, so who's the biggest threat!? Where can we go that'll be safe!?”

“They’re all too dangerous to ignore. And the first threat is already here. In the form of Academy City’s bizarre tech!!”

Aradia, goddess of witches, the night, and the moon, was a Transcendent recognizable by her giant wimple and unusual bikini. Her long silver hair spread out as she gave her warning.

Several tires loudly skidded long the asphalt.

In no time, they were surrounded by more than 10 vehicles, but these were not Anti-Skill vehicles with flashing lights on top. They sounded a lot deeper and heavier.

Anna Sprengel grinned while holding her baggy red dress to her flat chest.

“Not bad, new board chairman.”

They looked like 8-wheel armored vehicles with a tank gun attached on top. Needless to say, these were mobile combat vehicles designed to move quickly without damaging Academy City’s roads and to use tank-class firepower to swiftly eliminate any dangerous elements in the city. They had more antennae than the ordinary model, so these could likely be controlled remotely, effectively making them ground-based drones.

They were known as the HsMCV-o8 Predator Octopus.

A human like Kamijou would be blown to bits by the giant gun on top or even by its smallest machinegun.

“!!”

“Get back, fool!! This way!!”

He lost his balance surprisingly easily from an impact low on his body. Anna’s small body had practically tackled him to get him around a corner with her and Aradia.

The air was compressed and something exploded nearby.

He realized only a moment later the building wall right there had been blown away. A cloud of gray dust swelled out after a short delay. He could only just barely make out Aradia because she was right in front of him. She was shouting something into the fallen boy’s ear, but he couldn’t hear her over the sharp ringing in his ears. His vision and hearing were so confused he had trouble telling which way was which – including up from down.

“My, my.”

And yet.

This he heard clearly.

The strange voice seemed to enter his mind directly instead of by vibrating his eardrums.

A magician in glasses gave herself a witchy silhouette by wearing a large hat and a racing swimsuit plus sleeves and a paleo. But she was something else entirely from Witch Goddess Aradia. The Transcendent was the one who was trembling.

Reality returned to Kamijou in a way that put immense stress on his heart.

Aradia was supposedly a goddess for any and all witches, but here she spoke the name of a woman to whom that did not apply.

“Anna...Kingsford.”

“My, my, my. Are you alright, ♀? You must ✕ drag ordinary people into your problems, Miss Sprengel.”

“*Aiwass!!!*”

Anna’s small body shook and she raised her voice as if to shake off the terror.

Something burst from her young body. The glasses woman frowned only slightly when she saw the colorless and formless torrent rushing toward her.

He was known as a Holy Guardian Angel, a Secret Chief, and an extraterrestrial lifeform, but no one knew exactly what he was.

And he was the source of the limitless power Anna Sprengel drew on like a priestess.

Playing a trump card against a trump card.

...But Kamijou was too preoccupied to look at the site of the explosion or at the magician woman. The chill down his spine led him to look up into the sky before even getting up.

A small figure floated there.

She was a brown-skinned girl with long, wavy blonde hair. The binder she carried over her shoulder was made from several spears bundled together in an X-shape. Each one of

those spears had a glass container at the tip and had the words “Drink Me” written on the shaft.

That was the Shrink Drink, a spiritual item developed specifically for executing Transcendents. It contained Alice’s power to kill with a single blow.

And Kamijou’s side had already played their trump card.

Kamijou Touma shouted her name on instinct.

He shouted the name of a heavenly oddity – of a Transcendent from the Bridge Builders Cabal who specialized in punishment.

“*Mut Thebes!!?*”



With a series of deep booms, the spears dropped down like pouring rain.

The way the weapons flew out to the sides before taking aim at their target created a shape some might have likened to a bird’s wings.

They collided with the asphalt, sent orange sparks flying from the armor of the 8-wheel Predator Octopuses, and covered the entire area with enough destruction to keep even a Transcendent from escaping. When the transparent tips shattered against the ground, they created glass shards and a chemical smoke produced by the toxic pink liquid contained inside. That smoke quickly swelled out like a cumulonimbus cloud.

(Odd.)

One second, two seconds, three seconds.

The brown girl floating in the sky silently tilted her head.

(*That timing seemed off.*)

“I didn’t sense it capturing the center of her life. Did she escape somewhere?”

The Shrink Drink was a spiritual item specialized for use against Transcendents. That meant it didn’t do *all that much* damage to any other target. That was why it failed to pierce the armored vehicles’ defenses and why the asphalt was unharmed.

Puzzled, Mut Thebes slowly descended to the ground and set foot on the asphalt covered in small glass shards.

There was a shockwave of expanding air. Several even. Anna Kingsford and Holy Guardian Angel Aiwass appeared to be engaged in an intense confrontation a short distance away, but Mut Thebes wasn't interested.

She crouched where she was and peeked below a heavy 8-wheel vehicle that had gone silent as soon as its remote antennae were broken.

(Target: Anna Sprengel did not survive by hiding below the vehicle. Then did she leave the area under cover of the chemical smoke and glass shards created when the Shrink Drink hit the ground?)

Then Mut Thebes noticed something.

The 8-wheel vehicles were spread out a good bit. Also, the main gun of a Predator Octopus a decent distance from the Transcendent had rotated to aim directly at her face.

The explosive boom happened at just about the same moment she raised her palm.

A 120mm tank shell broke the sound barrier and Mut Thebes did not bat an eye as she snatched it from the air with a single hand.

But the tank shell was more than a hunk of lead. It had a fuse and it was set to detonate all of the explosives within when it sensed contact. That way it could pierce the armor and injure or destroy the crew and engine within the vehicle.

"Oh."

A loud boom became a shockwave that shattered all the nearby windows.

But it did not end there.

The brown girl parted the gray cloud of dust, revealing herself unscathed form.

"I see."

Then a change came over her. With a dull sound, a tank shell emerged from the outside edge of her right arm. More and more followed. Like a bizarre bird wing.

The weapons were colored a strange white and the brown girl smiled thinly at their appearance.

She even licked her lips.

“Interesting.”

Boom, boom kaboom!!!



The main gun of the 8-wheel mobile combat vehicle was blasted straight up by an explosion within the vehicle, its armor ruptured, and its axles broke, sending the giant tires rolling away with the wheels still attached.

Generally, those were land-based drones which could be operated remotely or run via a program. That was easy to forget given the way the Predator Octopuses broke ranks and fled in a panic. Which may have been why no one questioned it when one of those mobile combat vehicles departed a lot more calmly than the others.

And eventually...

“Pwah.”

Kamijou Touma took a deep breath *inside* that extra-thick tin can.

He hadn't been able to breathe before now because Miss Aradia had been hugging him to her large chest. Face-first. And quite firmly.

The 8-wheel vehicle was large enough you had to tilt your head back to look up at it from the outside, but it was dark and cramped on the inside. Frankly, it felt smaller than a boxy light vehicle. There were three separate seats within, so it was an awfully tight fit. Kamijou figured that was because the base of the rotating main gun stabbed down into vehicle, taking up a large cylindrical space.

The witch goddess didn't seem to care as she held Kamijou's head to her chest like a stuffed animal and looked up at the hatch overhead.

The eerie siren had stopped at some point.

Kamijou was starting to think the siren had been the grim reaper's approaching footsteps.

In other words...

“A-are we safe now?”

“Not yet, fool. If we flee without a plan, we will quickly run out of time,” said Anna Sprengel, sounding exasperated.

She directly poked at the flat-screen monitor in her seemingly 10-year-old body. Controlling a vehicle like this had to be complicated – driving the vehicle itself, aiming and firing the main gun, loading shells, general command and communication, etc. – but Academy City’s modern military vehicle did it all by swiping at a flat computer. Controlling the rotating gun and driving the vehicle at the same time seemed like it would be disorienting, but Anna did not look remotely bothered.

Kamijou felt lost, so he widened his eyes in the witch woman’s arms.

“So what did you even do? Why did this thing take our side?”

He wasn’t just talking about how it hadn’t run them over when they approached.

Before Mut Thebes had launched her downpour of spears, it had activated its smoke emitter to obscure her vision. That might not seem like much since it had only been a few seconds before the spears created their own chemical smoke, but Kamijou’s group couldn’t have snuck inside here without it.

“Hee hee. R&C Occultics was a world-famous IT company at the end of the year, remember?”

Anna put on a nasty grin.

She didn’t even look his way, keeping her focus on the flat screen console monitor.

“And if any IT company – not just the search engines – wants to call itself a global power, it needs to be linking and compiling data from every part of the world. Acquiring the Academy City format required spending Christmas spying on the contents of quite a few phones and tablets to analyze the code within.”

R&C Occultics.

Their official site had spread knowledge of magic to Academy City and the rest of the world.

Had that been for *more than* just distorting the world by revealing so much secret data?

“...Are you serious? You mean that entire site existed to suck data from the Academy City phones and computers that accessed it?”

“I know your technology is supposed to be 20 or 30 years ahead of the outside world, but you need to understand that future technology isn’t as flawless or safe as you might like.”

Kamijou was speechless, but she definitely wasn’t.

Anna covered her mouth to hide a wicked grin as she laughed.

“These vehicles can be controlled remotely and it isn’t that hard to hijack a military vehicle that’s fully reliant on the network. Of course, if I *show off* too much, Academy City will notice the vulnerability and patch it. Still...hee hee. I know it’s convenient to reuse the same components, but it seems awfully postapocalyptic for phones and ground-based combat drones to use the same basic OS and firmware. They’re too reliant on their strategic firewalls and dangerous behavior detection algorithms.”

“If you say so,” was Aradia’s exasperated response.

The witch goddess must not have been too fond of cutting-edge technology. She had blended in well enough back in the fashion space of Shibuya, but she had screamed quite loudly after seeing the religious (?) facilities in Academy City’s District 12.

“Let’s ignore all that creepy tech-bragging that could be all made up for all I can tell. You did this instead of using magic because you’re afraid of the Transcendents, right? If you use too much of your magic power, they can track you down using the traces of your magic. So no matter how many fantastic spells you might have, you can’t use them. And the same is going to apply from here on. For now, *Anna can’t use her magic.*”

Aradia said it with a cynical tone and Anna smiled darkly in response.

“And they aren’t the only magical threat here.”

Yes.

Anna had summoned Aiwass (?) as a trump card, but not for use against Transcendent Mut Thebes.

There was another.

One who was, for Miss Sprengel anyway, a greater threat.

(Anna called her Kingsford, but who is that glasses witch?)

If they really were being attacked from three sides, she probably wasn't with the Bridge Builders Cabal or Academy City.

So did that mean she was with Aleister?

Despite being combat vehicles, the interior did not stink of machine oil or smoke. If anything, it was more like a cold and sterile server room. Aradia had the look of someone trapped inside an industrial-size refrigerator as she asked a question.

"Wicked rose woman, I'm not opposed to running, but what's your plan now? Driving to the city wall, blasting the gate with this thing's gun, and escaping outside?"

"That would draw too much attention." Anna Sprengel flatly rejected the idea. "Plus, I doubt we can escape the Transcendents' pursuit by leaving the city. They have hideouts all around the world, after all. Really, they would probably have an easier time of it out there."

Then what were they going to do?

Kamijou couldn't even get the words out, but Anna sighed and answered it anyway.

"Only an imbecile stops thinking just because they have run out of options, fool. Although that might be better than the top-level geniuses who never started thinking in the first place and then get mad when you point it out."

"But what exactly are we going to—"

"Interrupt me again and I will murder you, fool."

The air froze.

Aradia's bare toes audibly scraped against the floor. Anna's shoulders relaxed some when she noticed the witch goddess had casually shifted in position to protect Kamijou.

"The correct choice is to stay here — in Academy City."

This appeared to be an answer Anna had ready from the beginning.

She spoke smoothly, not like someone who was in trouble.

"Fool. If fleeing will not improve our situation, then going on the offensive is our best option. But not by challenging those powerful freaks to a direct battle."

“?”

“The Anglicans, the Roman Catholics, and the Russian Orthodox – the so-called defenders of the magic side were bound to come after R&C Occultics, so I left a *backup* of its massive magic database right here, tucked away in a corner of Academy City’s servers. In the IT business, data is your greatest weapon. The best way to stop the Bridge Builders Cabal’s pursuit is to dig up some dirt on them.”

None of this sounded realistic to Kamijou.

Because...

“Y-you plan to threaten them? Threaten those Transcendents? Othinus would probably be upset with me if I said they seem more worse than Magic Gods, but they really don’t seem like the kind of people who will stop out of fear of you telling people something about them. How are you going to silence a group who I doubt keeps their promises or even obeys the law?”

“Now, now. Don’t let their vibes deceive you, fool. Stop opening your mouth and begging for answers like a baby bird. Try thinking for yourself first. That proactive attempt will help the knowledge stick in your head. Plus, your past experiences will show you the answer in this case – no advanced magic knowledge necessary.”

Young-looking Anna lifted one foot up onto the commander’s seat and rested her chin on the knee.

And she spoke with the wicked delight of tormenting someone.

“Remember, those Transcendents have some big plan in the works, they loathe the two of us for interfering with Alice Anotherbible who is the key to that plan, and they even split into Rescuers and Killers before deciding to eliminate us. *Which means our choices have the possibility of unbalancing and ruining their plan.* We should be able to threaten them with that possibility. Their panic regarding us is proof enough. If those arrogant and insolent Transcendents learn the switch we hold in our hands can ruin their plan, they should go pale in the face.”

“Huh, now that you mention it. If it really is so important that their plan succeeds, they should be focusing all their energy on that, but they’re dedicating valuable personnel to pursuing us instead.”

“Possessing the fearsome power of a Transcendent does not guarantee their personal maturity. They claim to be at the mercy of young and pure Alice Anotherbible, but are those serving her really what you would call mature adults?”

“...”

Aradia remained silent.

Was she simply considering Miss Sprengel’s opinion, or did she still have some dangerous pride left as a Transcendent of the Bridge Builders Cabal?

“So...if this database is something you typed in yourself, doesn’t that mean you have all the cabal’s secrets in your head already?”

“Fool. Are you trying to convince your teacher to step on you with these cute feet? But you do deserve some credit as a student for thinking up the question on your own.”

Anna rubbed her bare foot against the hard floor below her seat.

“But that would not work. Having the data in my head is insufficient proof. When threatening someone powerful, you need *physical, visible evidence*.”

“Physical...”

“Correct, fool. A document powerful enough that even those Transcendents will want to avoid fighting. We need the stopping power of a silver bullet – something that will take them out in a single shot, leaving no room for counterattack once we make our move.”

But if they didn’t end it so cleanly, they would be in the cabal’s reach.

No matter how badly damaged those Transcendents were, they were still Transcendents. If they got desperate, Kamijou’s group had no chance.

In Kamijou’s case, he had never escaped a battle with a Transcendent without losing his life.

“Also, as great a magician as I am, I do not have a perfect memory. Since we have a database, it would be best to find the relevant data and save it in a different medium. When threatening an enemy more powerful than yourself, you need to be strategic about the image you present.”

Small Anna found a flare gun next to her seat and twirled it like a character in a Western.

“At the very least, having some digital evidence on hand will be safer than trying to escape emptyhanded. Only then can we bring the fight to the Bridge Builders Cabal. Moving around with martial law in place won’t be easy, but we need to reach the backup facility I set up in secret.”

The Bridge Builders Cabal weren’t the only people after them. New Board Chairman Accelerator and Aleister’s group were as well.

But the most unusual and most frightening of the groups did have to be the Transcendents.

(And the fact that *she’s the only one capable of stopping the cabal’s ambitions* could be used to protect Anna from the other groups.)

Call it the enemy of your enemy is your friend, or call it a plea bargain.

It would be a dangerous balancing act, but you couldn’t just wish away a powerful foe. So when there was not just one but three enemies, *they needed to find a way of using that to their advantage.*

Kamijou Touma cautiously asked another question.

“You say you kept a full backup of R&C Occultics’s magic database, but where is it?”

“A decent question for a fool. It is in District 15, Academy City’s largest shopping district.”

Between the Lines 1

District 12, the Bridge Builders Cabal Consulate.

Time had frozen.

In her sinister leather outfit, Alice Anotherbible’s bare skin was exposed to the January air as she stared at a single point. She didn’t seem to have any interest in the outside world.

Even the powerful Transcendents were hesitant to speak to her.

They all knew a single careless word would be enough for an “ordinary” Transcendent to be pulverized.

“A-”

So it wasn't that H. T. Trismegistus was careless.

He was willing to be pulverized in the attempt to bring the flow of time back to his beloved master. The action was the butler's way of showing his loyalty.

"Alice?"

The following silence was deafening.

It carried so much tension.

Any Transcendent of the Bridge Builders Cabal knew firsthand that Alice Anotherbible's mood trumped the world itself. So they all assumed this was a landmine. They assumed a storm of destruction was imminent.

But nothing happened.

She had stopped. The small girl did not collapse or slump to the ground. She simply stood there, frozen. Not a single hair on her head moved, like she was a stone statue.

She reminded H. T. Trismegistus of a stopped clock.

It had been that great a shock to her.

Maybe Kamijou Touma being her "teacher" was something imprinted on her after the fact.

But his rejection had still hit her just as hard.

The butler bit his lip until it produced an unpleasant tearing sound.

"Ohhhhhh!"

But it wasn't just his lip.

The tearing sound continued. On and on. His entire silhouette collapsed.

He split right down the middle.

And even as he split himself apart, H. T. Trismegistus roared toward the sky above.

Using the giant fissure as his new jaws.

As a Transcendent, he could provide the ultimate cutting edge to any object or phenomenon.

“Mut

Thereseeeee
eeeeeebes!!!”

And so the punisher Transcendent was released.

Once dispatched, Mut Thebes would not stop until she had completed her mission.

“H. T. Trismegistus.”

An exasperated voice spoke to the butler who had been driven to such great emotion he had split himself down the center. The demon girl placed a hand on her hip, spread her batlike wings, and sighed at the butler who had gotten a little *too* inhuman.

The Bologna Succubus removed the red transfusion tube from her arm as she spoke.

“I’m free to do what I want now, but don’t get into a fight with Good, Old Mary just because I’ve skedaddled. Try to be chums. Mama is in extremely upset with you, so you need to make the first move to patch things up between y’all.”

“ ”
...

With a series of wet sounds, the butler grabbed his head in his hands and pushed his split body back together. The unharmed Transcendent wordlessly fixed himself up again before responding.

“Understood. Now that Mut Thebes’s *role is complete*, common sense would indeed dictate that you are free again. With that in mind, I would like for you to support her punishment mission.”

“Then what will you be doing?”

“Calling in some members from outside the city. Common sense says the battle has already begun.”

H. T. Trismegistus bit his lip after that.

He said nothing more.

The Bologna Succubus was with the Rescuers who supported Kamijou Touma.

(And that will likely be the greatest attack against Kamijou Touma who harmed our Alice.)

It wasn't just Anna Sprengel and her information on the cabal.

Kamijou Touma also needed to die.

CHAPTER 1

I'm Sick of Running. *Break_Through_MCV.*

Part 1

HsMCV-o8 Predator Octopus

Class: Next Generation Mobile Combat Vehicle

Crew: 4 (but can be 0 while controlled remotely or used as a drone)

Measurements: 10m long, 2.8m wide, 3m tall (not counting antennae)

Weight: 20 tons (not counting ammunition, fuel, crew, and additional armor)

Max Speed: 250km/h

Max Climbable Slope: 60 degrees (varies based on slope conditions such as moisture or ice)

Engine: Diesel engine with electrical assistance

Drive Method: 4-wheel and 8-wheel drive modes. Front 4 and rear 4 wheels can be turned independently

Sensors: Anti-personnel, anti-air, and anti-vehicle multipurpose microwave radar, facial recognition and object search using optical imagery, IR detection, audio detection, and laser range finding. Also includes detection and countermeasures to locks of same types

C4I Communications: midrange ground radio, close and midrange IR laser, close range ultrasound, high-speed satellite communication. Combined, these methods provide a baselevel equivalent to a front line communications base.

Armaments: 120mm tank gun (can use various shells as well as launch anti-ground and anti-air drones), 40mm auto grenade launcher, 12.7mm heavy machinegun.

Defenses: multipurpose smoke emitter, anti-missile metal net launcher, auto attitude angling program to reduce damage when hit



“Huh, that’s a weird thing to see parked here. Stopping for lunch maybe?”

Hamazura Shiage, a delinquent boy wrapped in plenty of gauze and bandages, made that comment in front of a large discount store that was open for business so soon after New Year’s. But since this was District 12, the floor above it seemed to contain a shrine or church or something.

The dark gray 8-wheel vehicle designed for urban warfare wasn’t something you normally saw while walking around town, but fire trucks and ambulances would also stop by convenience stores for food when there was no emergency to respond to. You would sometimes see photos of it people had posted on social media.

Takitsubo Rikou tilted her head in her pink track suit.

“Probably part of the martial law they talked about on the emergency message sent to our phones. Remember when they beeped like they do before an earthquake?”

“Martial law. You can’t be serious. Surely it’s only training and they forgot to check the right box or something. Y’know, one of those false alarms where they don’t even give you any free gems to apologize. But now that you mention it, the convenience stores and supermarkets do all have their shutters down. I thought they were just closed for the holiday, but maybe not. This could be bad...”

“At least you’re out of the hospital. If you had been there any longer, they might have shut you inside in the name of protecting the sick and injured.”

Those two were only all the way in District 12 because they wanted to avoid the crowds at the few stores that were still open among all the closed shutters. But what if that wasn’t people after holiday sales and were actually buying up what they could before everything shut down?

Meanwhile, Takitsubo Rikou spoke to him with her usual blank look.

“We’ll be fine as long as the global search engine and that penguin logo discount store are still open for business. The Earth isn’t in danger yet.”

“I hope you’re right...”

With the deep rumble of diesel engines, a convoy of military vehicles drove past them. Another of the 8-wheel armored vehicles was in the lead, a trio of military trucks carrying materiel and ammo followed, and an anti-air tank with a radar and two humongous autocannons took up the rear. What were they planning to fight?

Takitsubo didn’t seem to mind as she removed one of the plastic baskets by the entrance and placed it in the cart.

“The others said they were sick of New Year’s food, didn’t they? So how about we have roast beef tonight?”

“I’m pretty sure Mugino and Kinuhata meant they don’t want any more fancy food, not just the Japanese kind. I bet they’d love it if we made curry udon.”

“Or a rice bowl? Okay, how about we make roast beef bowls as a compromise.”

“Wow, it’s the exact same ingredient, but it sounds way cheaper now!!”

Part 2

The aisles were cramped.

Kamijou was already feeling loopy from the theme song being played ad nauseam.

He held a shopping basket as he ventured into a modern dungeon packed full of every sort of product: food, cosmetics, toys, video games, camping goods, and even bicycles.

He stared at the boxes of masks stacked up by the entrance.

“Is the flu going around or something?”

Discount stores – especially the entrance area – could be used as a scientific form of divination. The in-season items they hoped to sell the most would be shoved to the front, reflecting the current trends.

Aradia picked up a box of over-the-counter cold medicine from a stacked pyramid of them.

“These colorful capsules are supposed to be medicine? Really, Academy City’s love of strange chemicals knows no end. These kinds of problems are for your local villagers and witches, not some scientist up in his ivory tower.”

“Hold on, Aradia. You aren’t seriously saying all-natural medicines made from tree roots or whatever have no side effects and you can’t overdose on them, are you? Ugh, that stuff is so gross.”

“You don’t have to look away when you say that. And come to think of it, didn’t that little god say you bought that sturdy foreign duct tape at a discount store? Hee hee hee. Oh, don’t worry. I’m not bringing that up for any particular reason. I’m only stating a fact, so I’m not going to hurt you or anything.”

Was he imagining it or was there a burning fire behind her dark expression?

It was just like a discount store to lazily be pushing ordinary cold medicine when it was the flu going around. And some of the masks in the clearance section were for sports and may not have done much at all to prevent the spread of disease.

Meanwhile, little wicked woman Anna was focused on something else entirely.

The bare-skin girl(?) who probably never caught a cold or the flu spoke up.

“All the alcoholic drinks have been moved to the back and locked up. Is that because of the martial law?”

That wasn’t something a high school boy like Kamijou paid much attention to.

Would people cause trouble because they were drinking or because they had been denied their drinks?

“This is awfully ironic.”

“What is?” Aradia tilted her head.

It was January 3 and Board Chairman Accelerator had apparently declared martial law across Academy City. Or so they were saying on the show displayed on all of the TVs advertised at their holiday sale prices. The given reason was to bring a swift end to a battle that had broken out at a foreign consulate, but Kamijou knew it was so they could hunt down his group (or Anna really).

“Fool. This shop is still open with martial law declared. You know what that means, don’t you?”

“The time will come when we can’t buy food and water?” asked Kamijou in shock.

Little Anna grinned.

“We’re on the run, remember? It’s too late to search out supplies once we need them. Our 8-wheel vehicle has plenty of horsepower, so it couldn’t hurt to stock up. Unless you want to risk your life for a cup of water later on, I recommend buying thrice the supplies you would consider the bare minimum. So for now, two or three days’ worth?”

Thanks to the martial law, no one would question the tanks and armored trucks driving down the streets or the unmanned attack helicopters and self-destruct attack drones flying through the sky.

“Damn. Does that bastard have to be taking his board chairman job so seriously?”

“He’s assumed the mantle well – including the part where he makes stupid decisions,” said Anna. “Hee hee. Anyone who sits in the executive seat seems to end up thinking the same way.”

Yes, this also meant that no one paid any real attention to the Predator Octopus that Kamijou’s group was driving around. No one reported it or tried to stop them.

It didn’t matter how much firepower someone had if they couldn’t locate their target. What could you call that but ironic?

Ideally, they would make their way to District 15 right away.

If Academy City learned of the Bridge Builders Cabal’s plans and that Anna was in the unique position to stop it, they might decide they needed her.

(Sigh. Down blankets and microwaves. They really sell everything here. Can’t I just live here? Are pets and other living animals the only thing they don’t have?)

Kamijou amused himself by checking out some colorful clothing cases that probably weren’t as useful as they looked. Maybe he just needed something to distract him from the fact that they were on the run.

But while the pointy haired boy entered old man mode, something concerning was underway behind him.

“Anna, you look much too conspicuous for someone on the run. Shouldn’t you wear actual clothing instead of holding that cloth up to your chest? Your butt could use covering.”

“You’re one to talk when it comes to clothing, bare navel bikini witch. And is it scored for easy tearing? Hoping someone will rip it off of you?”

Kamijou’s smile remained but a tear trickled from the corner of his eye.

Before they even addressing how much skin their clothing covered, he really wished they would note the fact that both of them were walking around barefoot in the frigid January weather. Thanks to the diagonal slash Aradia had received from a certain butler, her already revealing bikini had been hastily repaired with thread and needle. That looked 100 times more precarious than an ordinary bikini knot.

He was doing his best to pretend he didn’t know them, but he too was making a pretty wild fashion statement with his coat’s missing right sleeve. You could call it Kanzaki style.

But he couldn’t run away from reality.

So he turned around.

“Are you sure we don’t need a cart?”

“Stick to the one basket, fool. If you don’t set an upper limit for yourself, you’ll start shoving everything you see into the cart. Like this stamp-sized mobile router. It looks interesting, but how would we even use it?”

Small Anna was right.

Discount stores were experts at using the low prices to fuel impulse buying, so it was best to assume an amateur like him couldn’t fight it. The store had experts in psychology and economics on their side, so the vague feelings of an individual could never win.

“What about you, Aradia? Kamijou-san is a little overwhelmed by the wide variety of stuff they have here.”

“There’s a lot I want, but food should probably be our priority. ...What is this long, angular bar? Ew, what kind of meat even is it?”

“It’s just chicken!! They gather up all the small pieces left on the bone and press it together for an economical food! Why does it scare you so much, Aradia!?”

The nature-loving forest witch goddess kept her distance from the block of meat that couldn't look more processed if it tried.

"We want a quick source of nutrition, so...how about bananas? But raw ones don't keep for long, so the chips might be best. Honey, nuts, and dried fruit sound like good options too."

Was there any hidden meaning in that or not? She was probably focused on foods that would keep, but that lineup sounded like it would make you thirsty. And were banana chips really that nutritious? Kamijou had always thought they were junk food.

(Do they sell minifridges here? They do have microwaves.)

Kamijou took a bunch of stuff from the shelves and stuck it in the basket. With three of them, the basket was getting pretty full after a few minutes. Especially when cooking wouldn't be an option. Also, not being poor was a wonderful thing. Running around Shibuya while being killed repeatedly by Aradia had been worth it. He did wish she would apologize at least once, though.

"What about water? Should we buy some?"

"There was a 50 liter tank in the vehicle. And try to picture our entire daily routine. We'll need water for washing our faces and bathing."

"Ugh, then will we have to buy toothbrushes too? Oh, god. I have all this stuff back at my dorm, so this is all wasted money! This is worse than accidentally buying a manga volume you already own. Can't we stop by my dorm real quick? I know all this stuff is already there!"

"You know we can't, fool. They will absolutely be watching it. Do you want to die?"

This was all Anna's fault, so why was she being so condescending about it?

Kamijou wasn't about to give up yet, so he looked elsewhere while trembling.

"Oh, they're selling fukubukuro."

"What are those? Giant fortune cookies?"

"Fool and country witch, don't even think about it because no one bag will have everything you want. Remember, these are an assortment of unsold products at an already super-

cheap discount store. Besides, Mr. Misfortune here has a solid 0% chance of choosing a good one.”

Aradia gently placed an arm around the shoulders of the boy who thought he was going to cry if this kept up.

Anyway, he never imagined he would be carrying a shopping basket and checking out the fresh foods and daily necessities sections while chatting with a witch goddess. Since she had quite literally killed him in Shibuya on December 31, it really did prove how strange life could be.

Aradia herself picked up some body soap and skeptically read the back of the bottle.

“It’s not just the food – everything in Academy City is creepy. What is this collection of chemicals? How do you even use it?”

Kamijou wondered how you could even make soap without chemically processing oil in some way.

“It’s quick-drying body soap,” he explained. “You rub it into your skin, wait a bit for it to bring up all the filth, and then peel it off. It’s popular with poor students who can’t even afford to fill their tub with water.”

“We also need new clothes for you. Who tore off your right sleeve anyway?”

“You and Anna need new clothes more than I do. Why are you both showing off so much skin for free? At this point, it should definitely be behind the paywall. And were you unaware that January is midwinter in the Northern Hemisphere? Stop kicking me, Anna!”

And so they also checked out a section across the store from the food.

They wanted a new coat for Kamijou, but there were plenty of other useful items like an electric heater and a collapsible bed. But if they started buying everything, the contents of his wallet would quickly run out, so Kamijou had to fight the urge.

Then he felt a tug on his sleeve.

He looked down to see Anna Sprengel holding something. It appeared to be a video game box. Her small size made it look like a little sister begging her big brother for a game, but then he saw the title: Jiggly☆Witch Trial.

“(Hey, hey. This says it’s a touchscreen game where you capture witches hidden around the city and reveal their identity using some lewd interrogation techniques. Is this part of the retro game rerelease boom? It’s been marked down a lot, so it’s a great price. Let’s buy it, fool. Hee hee. Japan really is a crazy country.)”

“(Do you wicked women have a sixth sense for stuff like this!? No, we aren’t buying that! Aradia would explode! And in a way that left my bones and organs visible! This isn’t the time for jiggy stuff!!)

“(Read between the lines, fool. That’s what I want to happen. Specifically, I want to see her kick you in the balls so hard it lifts you 2cm from the ground. Oh, now look what you made me say. How embarrassing.)”

“You trying to be tsundere works so poorly it’s triggering a bunch of unheard-of errors in my brain.”

Maybe discount stores had a little too much variety.

A short distance from Kamijou and Anna’s whispered conversation, Aradia (who was back in full Transcendent mode with her feet freed from the duct tape) was viewing a different product on the wall. She would likely grab Kamijou’s hair and rip his head from his body like a vegetable from the ground if she found out what he and Anna were discussing, so what had her so preoccupied?

(A picture book?)

“The Little Mermaid... Oh, what a tragic story. The sea witch gave the sheltered mermaid exactly what she wanted and even rooted for her, but everyone treats her like some kind of troublemaker!!”

“Are you sure that’s the tragedy of the story!? Are you sure it isn’t the princess who turns to foam!?”

After calming down the witch goddess who was trembling with her hands over her mouth, they continued shopping. At Aradia’s request, they put a few rolls of fabric in the basket. What was she going to use them for?

Even after their shopping was complete, they couldn’t let their guard down. The checkout area was loaded with traps.

“I want a roasted potato.”

“Do you go for any kind of natural food, Aradia?”

Kamijou Touma’s poor life was over. He had the results of his year-end job. So he carried the shopping basket up to the college girl cashier without hesitation. However...

“Oh?”

Anna’s small foot kicked him in the shin.

He really hoped she didn’t make a habit of it because that little girl’s foot hurt like hell.

“No using your phone, fool. Pay with cash. Why is it even still powered on? Do you want to die?”

“?”

“Anything you do with your phone is recorded. Not counting my special model where I fully swapped out the chips inside.”

He didn’t understand any of that, but he decided it was worth listening to the little wicked woman since she had run a global IT company. He paid in cash as told and left with the products in shopping bags. The two enormous yellow bags were both crammed full. Was this what it felt like to be rich? There was a parking meter on the curb, but the vehicle parked there was a mobile combat vehicle that looked like a tank gun sitting atop an 8-wheel chassis.

Anna pointed elsewhere while holding her dress against her flat chest.

A very temporary-looking 10m metal tower rose up from a small park there.

“That’s a phone interception antenna tower. It can see any data moving to and from your phone.”

“Are you serious?”

“Martial law, remember? Your right to privacy goes right out the window.”

Kamijou panicked when a helicopter loudly passed by overhead, but it didn’t seem to have found them. Because they didn’t hear any sirens or phone alerts in the area. Several transport helicopters flew elsewhere while using thick cables to carry barricades made by arranging thick steel beams in an asterisk shape.

(Come to think of it, who makes Academy City's defense weapons? I get the feeling they don't contract out to an ordinary company, but does that actually make a profit?)

"Fool. Everything from the production to the deployment of Academy City's weapons is done in the name of technological research. The funding is 100% tax based, which means their budget is effectively endless. And they also create downgraded versions they force onto the cooperative institutes around the world, so they never go in the red no matter how many they produce. Just by saying the weapons have been field tested in Academy City to ensure safety, they can take Anti-Skill's old, worn-out weapons, remove the components they want to keep secret, and force those cooperative institutes to buy them for 3 times what they're worth. Quite the economical display of recycling, don't you think? Even more underhanded than calling yourself a religious corporation to avoid paying taxes."

Could Anna rattle off all of that unpleasant trivia because she spent so much time online?

A blimp with a large screen drifted through the January sky. Even that scared Kamijou now. What if it started dropping bombs? After seeing all those tanks and armored trucks driving around, he had lost sight of what was possible or not.

The ecological city of spinning three-blade wind turbines felt like a stage backdrop now.

(And you could even say that we're the ones who caused this.)

The one saving grace was that he was still confident he had done the right thing.

They put a coin in the parking meter and reentered the vehicle. That was a rare experience for a high schooler.

Aradia tore apart her own clothing.

She used the fabric she had bought to sew back up the part that had been temporarily fixed. She was quite handy.

"Silk dyed with hyssop and rosemary flowers... Why did they only sell mesh fabrics?"

"Those are probably ventilation fan covers designed to keep bugs out. Ones made without chemicals."

Kamijou put on his new jacket.

"So what did you two buy?"

Aradia dug through the yellow bags and then grimaced.

She had the look of a mother disappointed in what her child had spent his allowance on.

“A jelly drink, a nutrient block, and cup noodles? Oh, no. You were aware the point was to buy enough food to get by because we don’t know when we’ll get another chance to shop, right?”

Kamijou had tried to choose things that were easy to eat and would keep, but the nature-loving, banana-obsessed woman did not approve. She viewed the contents of the yellow bags (advertised as made from plant materials) like they contained the mystery food from a dystopian SF movie.

“My selection is a lot healthier,” said Aradia.

“Ew, insect snacks!?” said Kamijou. “I’ve seen those for sale before, but I thought they were for people who lost a bet or for people to buy as a joke!”

“They’re a next-generation protein source. With this salted caramel flavor, it’s a lot like munching on popcorn.”

“ ... ”

Kamijou had thought edible insects would be on the way out now that high-quality tofu meat was available, but it didn’t sound like Aradia had bought them just to freak him out. She made sure to remove her food from the bags to keep it separate.

He was worried about the dietary habits of this goddess who lived in the sacred forests of Europe. If she could reliably capture insects, he felt like she could use those as bait to catch fish.

“What’s that look for? Sigh, your Eastern culture weeps. This country has a wonderful culinary tradition of cooking insects like grasshoppers and hornet larvae. Your people stand at the forefront of the world there, so it would be a shame to let the tradition die.”

It was hard to tell if this goddess was extremely old-fashioned or cutting edge. And Aradia appeared to be the kind of person who relied on snacks and chips for nutrition when she was short on time. Like the messy young woman who ate snacks all day because she didn’t know how to cook.

“This stupid banana woman and her lewd outfit.”

“What was that you let slip just now?”

“Wait, no! I apologize, so please explain to me what you plan to do with that clenched fist, Transcendent! Good, Old Mary isn’t here now, so that’s t-t-terrifying!!”

Anyway.

She circled behind him and gave him a (gentle) two-handed noogie.

“Nweee? But, Anna, this 8-wheel vehicle really is conspicuous. There are people snapping photos with their phones.”

“Foolish fool. This thing weighs more than 20 tons, which is twice the weight of a dump truck. If we tried to hide it inside a turntable parking garage, it would break the elevator.”

Meanwhile, Anna didn’t seem to have an issue with chemicals. She even licked her lips as she grabbed a muscat flavor jelly drink. The weirdly alluring mannerisms on the young-looking body caused Kamijou’s brain to glitch a little.

He looked away, but that had him looking at Aradia who had ended the noogie, sat in the gunner’s seat, flipped her clasped hands around, and stretched them forward while her back trembled.

“Uhhh... I really am feeling weak. Is that cause I haven’t been getting much exercise?”

“Or maybe it’s just awkward being in such a cramped space?”

She gave Kamijou quite the depressing glare for that comment.

“No, I think it has more to do with being left wrapped up in duct tape for days on end. I’m just glad I don’t have any bedsores.”

What could he do but apologize?

An amplified voice outside made it through the thick armor.

It had to be absolutely deafening outside.

“Indefinite martial law has been declared for the entirety of Academy City. Please avoid heading out and remain in your dorm or home.”

The announcement was probably coming from the blimp’s screen and it repeated.

“Water, food, and other necessities will be supplied to you if you contact your dorm manager. Please remain calm and stay where you are.”

“They’re kidding, right? What dorm manager? I’ve never even seen an adult at my dorm. Being locked in the same building as a pretty young dorm manager in an apron sounds like heaven to me.”

“What makes you so sure the manager would be a young woman?”

What could he do but clear his throat and look away from Aradia?

Just like with the school doctor, it was about having dreams. But he got the feeling she would punch him square in the face if he said that out loud.

Aradia must have picked up on his adolescent fantasies because she frowned cautiously before speaking.

“Do they really expect a bunch of teenagers to stay indoors just because they say it’s dangerous outside? And who knows how long they can get away with it, but that discount store was open.”

Small Anna had her legs elegantly crossed up in the command seat while she messed with a monitor that could apparently pick up civilian frequencies in addition to the military ones. That meant it got TV and radio. The New Year’s holiday was winding down, so everything was returning to normal while the TV stations were still doing live variety shows. The set was still flooded with New Year’s props, but the entertainers were dressed normally now.

“Martial law might sound scary, but there is nothing to worry about. People were already staying home more due to the Kotatsu Syndrome, so will this even have that much of an effect?”

“Plus, it’s the holiday. Everyone’s exhausted from working so hard, so this is the perfect chance to relax at home☆”

“Also, the hospitals across the city have been asked to prepare for soldiers arriving as emergency patients. They have to reserve 40% of their beds for that, so everyone else is asked to refrain from visiting the hospital except in true emergencies. Your careless action could be a nuisance for our civil servants.”

Kamijou frowned.

Don't go outside. Stay home. Don't use the ordinary services. Being asked all that during winter break seemed like it would cause a lot of stress, but everyone on TV was reacting positively to the violation of people's freedom. Or maybe it was more accurate to say any opposing views had been removed in advance.

"Fool, this is martial law."

Anna Sprengel wagged her finger and gave a response he wasn't sure really counted as an answer. He wasn't sure what she had used since there was no remote, but she called up a TV guide.

Even Kamijou noticed something then. There should have been a few movies playing during the holiday, but all of the war and disaster movies had vanished from the schedule and were replaced by unusually long shopping shows.

And those ads were unusually cheerful.

"Have we got a New Year's campaign for you! Every single roll is guaranteed an SSR or better and you earn 10 times – that's right 10 times – the usual rate of magic gems, so make sure to pour all that XP into your favorite character. This is our New Year's gift to you here at Samurai Street!!"

"That's probably part of the plan to keep everyone inside," said Anna. "Note that the event is nothing more than manipulating numbers."

"?"

"The idea is to keep everyone glued to their tiny screens so they aren't interested in going outside, fool. Instead of taking away the option, they give them a more attractive option. It's a common tactic rulers use against people like you. And major campaigns from every company at once won't raise any eyebrows during the holiday."

Kamijou wasn't sure if any of that was true, but he felt a chill when he saw the nasty grin on the face of that wicked woman who had created a global IT company and manipulated 7 billion people.

(The new board chairman must have put a lot of thought into this.)

Aradia didn't seem too interested in the ordinary media because she started rummaging through the yellow discount store bags.

"We bought a lot, but did we think to buy a mirror?"

“Why not use the fool’s phone? The black screen works just like a mirror.”

“Stretchy, stretchy.”

Kamijou watched as the witch goddess looked into the mirror(?), placed her hands on her face, and began stretching her cheeks. Was that...a massage? This new discovery about a girl’s daily life was kind of surreal.

(Wait. That green light on the side of the screen doesn’t mean what I think it does, does it?)

“Is this recording? Why would you record someone in such an unguarded moment, you pervert!?”

It finally hit home to Kamijou (while receiving a much less gentle noogie this time) that he was living with girls here.

He got the feeling that sharing a single living space like this was going to cause many more problems.

“Anyway, fool, let’s review our situation.”

“Okay. We bought what you said we needed, so what now?”

Kamijou was released by the sexy and intellectual young woman, so he reached for the chocolate-flavored nutrient block he had bought.

It seemed the closest to a snack to him.

“We’re being directly pursued by three forces right now: Academy City, Aleister, and the Bridge Builders Cabal.”

If any of those three captured Anna Sprengel, or Kamijou and Aradia who were assisting her, they would be in serious trouble. For Anna in particular, there was a growing trend toward killing her instead of capturing her.

Given what Anna had done, Kamijou didn’t want to just let her go free either.

But that did not mean he was willing to let her die.

Would that ending really satisfy St. Germain, Helcalia, and Melzabeth?

“For now, we need to focus our attention on the Bridge Builders Cabal,” said Anna. “To do that, I would like to move from here in District 12 to District 15 where my magic database is hidden.”

“District 12 is on the easternmost end of the city and District 15 is to the west. We can’t pass through District 23 since it’s full of airfields and thus off limits. The shortest route would be to travel through Districts 6, 5, and 7.”

“But this is all in the same city, right? We aren’t talking about inland Australia where you have to travel dozens of kilometers of near-desert to find the next house. The trip shouldn’t take even an hour in the vehicle.”

Aradia had a point, but a convoy of tanks passed by just then, throwing an unhealthy-looking cloud of asphalt dust into the air. Funnily enough, the Predator Octopus had a sideview mirrors, turn signals, brake lights, and a license plate. Which meant they had to obey the traffic laws while on the public roads. If they floored it and drove at top speed, the unusual behavior would quickly rouse suspicion.

Furthermore...

“The city isn’t as stupid as you are, so they will have set up checkpoints. Still, we should be safer in this billion-yen tin can than if we were walking outside where everyone could see who we are. It just means traveling very, very slowly,” explained Anna, slurping up her pack of jelly drink. Adding in some toxic laughter seemed to be second nature to her at this point. “Like I said before, the vehicle itself weights 20 tons. While that is better than a tank which could mean 40 or even 70 tons, I wouldn’t want to cross an old, rundown bridge in it and it’s too large to sneak through narrow back alleys. With any smaller or older roads, one of us will need to get out and make sure the MCV can get through before we make our move, so keep that in mind. That might sound simple enough to you, but large trucks usually need to submit a route in advance to make sure they don’t damage the pavement.”

“Then what is even the point of hiding in this cramped tin can that costs more than 8 times as much as an Italian sportscar?” asked Aradia. “Emerging to check the way ahead sounds risky to me.”

“I’m saying even that is better than being constantly exposed in this surveillance society chock full of everything from security cameras to drones and even satellites, foolish witch.”

Kamijou sensed an argument brewing, so he quickly intervened.

“A-anyway, you two! We’re all in this together, so arguing inside this cramped vehicle would only-”

“.....
I do despise people who interrupt me without even attempting to grasp the situation first,” said Anna.

“Eh? Huh?”

“Shut up! Whose side are you on? Eat bugs!”

“Mgahhhhhh!!?”

In a complete surprise attack, Aradia shoved a generous handful of insect snacks into his mouth. His spine straightened with a start. This was likely the dried caterpillars, not the type with 6 legs. ...But the worst part was how the salt and caramel transformed them into a nice sweet and salty snack. They reminded him a lot of a certain super popular caramel-flavor round snack, so he found them unexpectedly good. His brain was confused about what exactly he was even eating here, so he honestly found it hard to comment on.

“I-I’m not even sure how to categorize this as a memory. ...But anyway, if we’re going to do something, shouldn’t we do it right away? I don’t know how these things are done, so could you tell us, Anna?”

“Bow to me before asking anything of me, fool. But you are right. We can start by circumventing the checkpoint they are running up there. That should make for a decent tutorial. You need to take measurements to see if the road can withstand 20 tons. Do that using this handheld ultrasonic sonar kit by-”

After he heard that much, Anna Sprengel’s voice grew unnaturally distorted.

Gravity vanished.

“?”

Without any warning, Kamijou Touma collapsed.

Part 3

Kamijou couldn’t see anything.

He also felt off balance, like he was floating in warm water.

He heard voices from somewhere.

“When...think about it...isn’t surprising.”

“I told...letting him rest...our top priority.”

Where was he?

That thought led Kamijou to realize what had happened. He hadn’t gone anywhere. He was in the same place as before. That is, inside the Predator Octopus.

He could hear voices.

Two voices speaking to each other.

“Most likely...Old Mary’s resurrection...but it isn’t perfect.”

“That spell rewinds...to the exact...of death, doesn’t it?”

“And it doesn’t...the lost blood. He probably...due to anemia. Oh, no. And...from the extreme exhaustion and tension...played a role too.”

“Then the best...give him something nutritious to eat. That way...create his own blood.”

(Aradia? Anna?)

Two names floated to the surface of Kamijou’s mind and he slowly opened his eyes.

Only then did he realize his eyes had been closed.

“That aside, was there any need to return your body to that size?”

“I want to see how it’s doing whenever I have the chance. Besides, this is my proper form – I just can’t maintain it for very long.”

Their voices were growing clearer, but probably because he was recovering, not because anything about the voices had changed.

And.

For some reason, he was sharing this enclosed space with two naked women.



Both of whom were using wet towels to wipe down their bodies.

They were probably using that thing.

That is, the Academy City quick-drying body soap that was like a combination of soap and hand disinfectant. First you rubbed it on your body, then you waited while it brought your body's filth to the surface, and finally you wiped it off, leaving your body squeaky clean. But when you saw someone covered in the dried red cream and wiping it away with a towel, it felt a lot like coming across a naked person washing off their flashy body paint.

He wasn't confident either of them actually wore underwear and their ordinary outfits showed off a lot of skin, but it was still something else entirely to see them fully nude. And when they were squishing their skin down with the towels, the visual information taught him exactly what the word "supple" meant. He was certain he would never ever forget that word on a vocabulary test.

He also understood it was an emergency and having him lie on the cold floor had been the only option.

But the low angle view that gave him was no laughing matter.

Also, Kamijou Touma very much wanted to say that they should not use him passing out as a "convenient" opportunity to engage in some girl-only activities! Really, wasn't this their just deserts for doing that!?

He wanted to say those things, but his mouth was petrified.

But not because he was admiring how big and busty Anna Sprengel was now. Certainly not.

"I am more than ready for an easy life. All I want is a powerful king who can keep me in line."

He had no idea why the bewitching woman version of Anna Sprengel was saying this all of a sudden.

In what she called her "proper form", she grinned down at him.

"But I have no use for a horny king, fool."

She stepped on the bastard's face.

Part 4

Evening had begun.

They had left District 12 and arrived in the adjacent District 23.

Thanks to the martial law, the ordinary roads were blockaded and the district was being used as a cargo and air force base. So if any ordinary people were to climb the fence, they would be shot without even a warning, but these three didn't care at all.

Aleister, Anna Kingsford, and Kihara Noukan.

They walked along the fence, passing right in front of the fully-equipped Anti-Skill officers guarding the perimeter of the district. No human and no mechanical cameras or sensors could detect the intruders.

"What are we doing here?" Kihara Noukan sounded deeply exasperated. "I get the feeling you are involving me in your magic nonsense without bothering to explain any of it."

The general public was aware of magic's existence thanks to R&C Occultics, but that website had already been shut down. The city's Anti-Skill didn't know enough about magic to use it without the assistance of the site or the app.

Except...

"Hee hee. This is ✕ anything difficult. ✂ has always been hidden from the 🕵 at large."

That was all the glasses woman had to say on the matter.

At her level of expertise, ordinary anti-recognition spells and people clearing fields could reach this level.

She had developed each of the fundamentals far enough to assassinate a superpower's president with it.

And they were just as effective against *mere* expert magicians.

"That isn't enough for me to relax," said the blonde woman in a beige habit – or rather, Aleister who was borrowing her body. "Because this means someone else could do it too. Like the Transcendents and Anna Sprengel. We can't get the upper hand unless we can outdo someone on their level."

“Yes, yes.”

Kingsford only smiled gently in response to his low, unsteady voice.

A lot like a mother viewing her disobedient teenage son.

There was a decent crowd on the other side of the fence, but they didn’t appear to mean any real harm. A group of Anti-Skill with a tough-looking Doberman were clearly annoyed by the obsessive young men trying to volunteer. Anti-Skill were all teachers, so joining without a teaching license was apparently out of the question.

These young men saw it more like a survival game or like online play in an FPS, so they just wanted to hold real guns and ride a real tank. One of the Anti-Skill officers grabbed a device supported by a metal stand and redirected its aim toward the young men, who scowled and looked a lot less enthusiastic all of a sudden.

Aleister glanced that way.

“Is that low-frequency demoralization audio?”

Anti-Skill was playing an irritating sound too quiet to consciously hear so those young men would decide to leave. The city made it all sound so nice on TV and online, but this was the truth of the matter across the entire city. An invisible labyrinth had been constructed. Not that Aleister was one to talk as the person who had built the city in the first place.

At any rate.

Aleister’s group had no use for an airplane. They were here for the Science Tower. The rest of the district was airfield after airfield, making it very flat, so that 400m tower with an observation deck was highly conspicuous. In addition to broadcast purposes, it was currently being used for 49 different high altitude experiments, including laser lightning induction which could hit a desired location with a lightning bolt and research into what affect the large structure had on the human mind.

The observation deck at 350m also contained a restaurant and a hotel.

After they checked in under a false name at the automated front desk, Anna Kingsford took a look around the hotel rooms that were designed to look like the interior of an airplane.

“My, my. So many vacancies. And during the break.”

“People are restricted from leaving home,” softly replied Aleister. “And the observation deck isn’t in much demand after the New Year’s sunrise anyway.”

“Hee hee.”

Kingsford whispered while walking over to their room’s window.

It was the perfect place for *a pursuer to hide out in*.

“Now, then. Where have those lost 🐾 gone ↓ there?♪ A wide-area scan should 👁 them soon enough.”

“You certainly lost track of them quick given how confident you sounded heading out,” said the exasperated golden retriever.

“I will admit that Secret Chief was something of a surprise. And that wasn’t an issue of 🐾. I just didn’t expect her to use him for direct ✕. How sloppy. A lot like grabbing a thick 📖 full of knowledge and throwing it at my head.”

But that wasn’t an option anymore.

Anna Sprengel wouldn’t think that same method would work again either. If it would, she would have used her trump card as soon as they turned her into a human film canister. That she had held back so long was a sign of her fear.

But she had used up her trump card now, which worked out in their favor.

Kingsford knew how to control herself. She wouldn’t let her own anxiety and hatred get the better of her here.

“Now, you need to decide on a 🎯 target. Are we after Anna Sprengel? Or Mut Thebes?”

Anna Kingsford remained flexible.

“*Or Kamijou Touma?*”

A dull thud echoed out.

In a very un-magician-like move, Aleister had slammed his fist against a nearby wall.

He had seen what Anna Sprengel was like during the battle against Great Demon Coronzon back in the UK.

Yes, Aiwass had been taken from him and he had died.

Anna had escaped even after being turned into a human film canister with no arms, legs, or torso. That meant the only option left was to kill her.

So.

That human's answer carried resentment itself in his voice.

"Give us the location of the one we must defeat."

"Then that is what I will do☆"

Part 5

"Why is Anna being so nice all of a sudden? Wh-why would that wicked woman hand me a blanket? Wait, hold on. She hasn't fallen in love with me, has-"

"Do I need to bite your dick off, fool?"

Kamijou shrank down a size smaller. No, two sizes at least.

Her personality and appearance were just too different!! She had been in adult woman mode not long ago, but she apparently couldn't stay in that form for long. So that line had come from what looked like a mini-size girl. The way she tilted her head and asked it in an innocently gentle way only made it more terrifying.

Anna put on a thoroughly exasperated look and handed him a jelly drink that apparently contained a lot of iron.

"I can't have you making a habit of collapsing when we are trying to stay off the grid. Haven't you heard that cavities and appendicitis are deadly for fugitives? You seem to be short on blood, so drink this and command your body's factory to start producing more."

"Let me guess, Aradia. You're only giving me that fruit-flavored nutrient block because you tried one and realized you don't like it."

"I have no idea what you are talking about."

At any rate.

He had gotten quite an eyeful earlier and the vehicle was filled with the heat and sweet scent of girls, so he felt unnecessarily nervous. He was beginning to think living together in this armored vehicle (or whatever it was called) wasn't going to work. He now had two big sisters(?) with only a single living space between them all! He might have a cat, a nun, and a god living in his no-pets-allowed boys dorm, but even there he made sure to sleep in a separate room!

The witch goddess stared at him

"Are you still hung up on that, you pervert?"

"You don't know how to handle adolescents, do you, banana woman? Your sulking insult caused it all to rush back into my mind. The image is in there this very instant, in fact."

Aradia blushed a bit and wordlessly kicked his chair.

Why didn't she understand that being attacked by an older woman like that made his heart pound in something like the suspension bridge effect!?

"Then do you want to sit in the driver's seat, fool?"

Kamijou was doing his best to focus entirely on his jelly drink when little Anna gave him a thoroughly scornful look.

"The vehicle can be operated from any one of the console monitors, so there's no real need for a vehicle commander or a gunner anymore. But there is still a diver's seat in case there are technical issues with the electronics. It's located right up in the front instead of below the gun."

"You can't make me drive! I don't even know how to drive a car or a moped!"

"I just got through saying my console monitor can handle that. A fool like you only needs to sit in the seat. Being all alone in that cramped space probably won't be fun, but you could move in there whenever you need to take a break in your own private world."

"I guess I could do that."

"(Of course, the Predator Octopus's driver's seat isn't really necessary, so I bet it was redesigned to stop projectiles from reaching the rest of the vehicle. A separate space at the front of the vehicle would be perfect to sacrifice so it can stop any Munroe effect blasts or metal jets. Hee hee.)"

“You need to give all the detailed warnings so I can hear them, Anna-san! You can’t just whisper them real fast at the end like a consumer credit ad!!”

Meanwhile, it could be easy to forget in the sweet girls’ room that the military vehicle had become, but they had work to do.

“Okay.”

Kamijou Touma opened the overhead hatch and climbed out of the Predator Octopus. It was already dark out. Sunset came early in the winter, but his fight with Alice had been in the morning. He must have been passed out for quite a while.

He could see his breaths.

He felt refreshed like he had just washed his face.

The January 3 night air carried the biting chill of midwinter.

He was surrounded by true darkness. The fact that the city was under martial law was much more obvious at night. He could hardly believe the city had been lit up with Christmas and New Year’s decorations so recently.

The spiky-haired boy finally climbed down to the ground.

“A 20ton mobile combat vehicle can only travel on certain roads.”

So someone had to walk out ahead and check on the road to ensure they weren’t going to break through an aged overpass or something. And they of course also had to avoid the checkpoints set up around the city.

There weren’t any checkpoints here – because Anna had found a poorly guarded spot – but he got the impression there were more cleaning robots, security robots, and fixed surveillance cameras than normal. While inside the vehicle, he had spotted several of them staring their way from where they had been attached to makeshift metal poles. Those were meant to track down Kamijou’s group, so he had to be careful.

“Now, then.”

The tool Anna had given him looked like a 50cm stick.

He had expected a disturbing superweapon when she called it an ultrasonic sonar kit, but it was more like the glowing red staffs used for guiding traffic but with a small monitor

attached near the bottom. The entire side apparently functioned as a scanner, so he was supposed to pass it close over the road surface.

(Hm. Do I really have to stoop over the entire time I use this? It would be so much easier if it had a long handle like a mop.)

“I don’t have to scan every centimeter. We only need to know the general condition of the pavement, so I only need to get a few samples for every square meter, right?”

Kamijou muttered his instructions to himself while teasing the switch with his thumb.

Like an AED, it was best to simply follow the machine’s instructions.

He noticed the cold shutters lowered at a shop selling strange, toxic-looking donuts. The posted notice suggested it was closed for good, not just for today. Even when a trend looked like it would last forever, you never knew when it was going to end.

(Still...)

He saw some faint light in the distance.

The martial law had its advantages.

Most every business had closed up and lowered its metal shutters, so the light at the checkpoints was hard to miss. That considerably reduced the risk of running into one on accident. Even at this distance, he could make out the military vehicles blocking the street and a bunch of outdoor lights like you would find at a construction site.

(What are they doing? They aren’t just stopping that truck passing through – they’re opening up each and every one of the packages its delivering.)

The driver stood outside the truck, scratching his chin uncertainly.

So much for privacy. If they were checking through any vehicle at that level, then one of Anti-Skill’s own 8-wheel mobile combat vehicles would be at risk too. Staying away from the checkpoints looked like the best plan.

The checkpoints were located at large intersections, tunnels, or other areas where multiple routes converged.

But there were bright spots at other points as well. It scared him that he couldn’t determine the pattern.

“What’s this, fool? Too stupid to figure it out on your own?”

Little Anna poked her head out from the hatch, holding some smart glasses that looked a lot like sports sunglasses. It apparently gave her control without being in the commander’s seat. Using her gaze and voice had to feel a lot different from using her fingers on the large monitor and it probably didn’t give as much control, but she had said something about it being a lot like remotely operating a ground-based drone.

She gave her usual toxic laughter, but she also gave him the answer.

“I will only explain this once. That light is likely a carwash or a taxi maintenance shop.”

“?”

“Or it could be a shipping company or rental car lot. Fool, they are using a preexisting industrial garage to maintain their tanks and armored vehicles.”

Academy City’s Anti-Skill probably weren’t bad people, but letting them find Anna now would only complicate matters. He was afraid they would shoot without even trying to talk it out and things would get even worse if Mut Thebes or Aleister’s group showed up to join the fray.

Those schoolteachers could find themselves in the middle of a deadly battle between magic users so powerful their presence had been kept a secret even on the magic side.

Kamijou took a look through a pair of binoculars he had found in the vehicle.

(Tch. I know the Sisters were helping bolster security during the holiday, but I don’t see any around here. Nothing but grownups. I should probably assume they won’t listen if I try to explain the situation.)

The Sisters’ absence bothered him.

Even though he knew intellectually that he simply felt so trapped that he was searching for special meaning in every little thing.

Were the Sisters alright? And what about Index, Mikoto, and the others?

How many Transcendents had been at that consulate? The confusion caused by the martial law hadn’t redirected the pursuers toward anyone else he knew, had it? Because those people probably would come running to save him. Even if he couldn’t get their help, he wanted to know they were safe.

(I know Anna said using my phone would be dangerous, but still.)

“You haven’t turned on that amateur phone of yours, have you? Don’t you dare post anything on social media. Even carelessly marking a message as read would be a mistake.”

Kamijou looked away from the binoculars.

He looked down at the asphalt below his feet, but...

“Fool, don’t even think about leaving a message with chalk or stones. That might be better than using a phone or computer, but any code you can come up with on the spot will be cracked in seconds by an Academy City supercomputer. And I don’t just mean textual or numerical codes that are easily represented as 1s and 0s. Even messages left in fuzzy graffiti or color patterns can be cracked using image linkage algorithms that find common factors between them.”

“Kh.”

“Were you unaware this city’s scientists seriously analyzed the crop circles left in crop fields and announced at an academic conference that they found no trace of actual language and concluded they were merely pranks? What a dreary way to view the world,” lamented Anna. “Your friends will of course be monitored. And they could be taken hostage if you give any sign they could be used to lure you out. So if you want to protect them, cut off all forms of contact. To the point that this city’s giant computers can’t find a single thing. That is what it means to take this seriously.”

“Okay, okay.”

Anna seemed legitimately exasperated with him, so Kamijou raised his hands in defeat.

Anything that his friends would instantly recognize probably would be discovered in seconds by their pursuers.

That meant their only option was to find their own way ahead while avoiding those lights – the checkpoints set up by Anti-Skill.

“But can we really find a way around the checkpoints? That 20ton thing can’t fit in the narrow alleys and Anti-Skill is set up at all the major intersections, so we’re bound to run into them no matter what wider road we choose.”

“Try using your brain for once, fool. It will rot in your skull otherwise.” Anna shrugged. “Not every route is found on the map. And if we find those hidden routes, we can pass

right under Academy City's collective nose. Especially when those Anti-Skill people are using their computers to share information and monitor their surroundings."

"Routes not found on the map? What, are we going to dig our own tunnel like bank robbers?"

"Nothing that involved, but surprisingly close to the mark for a fool. It's scary how wild guesses are correct on occasion."

"?"

He had meant that as a joke, so her response took him by surprise.

Apparently Anna hadn't given him a trick question with no real answer.

"Hint 1: these routes are invisible when viewed from the ground. Hint 2: map apps provide detailed information on public roads, but are much less thorough when it comes to private property. Hint 3: they are more common in densely populated areas with limited land. After so many generous hints, I seriously hope you have figured it out by now."

"Wouldn't it be faster to just give me the answer?"

"Not happening, fool. Those so-called intellectuals of the Golden cabal all let their brains rot in the same way. If they hadn't all been conceited enough to think they were the world's greatest magician, the Battle of Blythe Road never would have happened. Either side could have withdrawn and kept things peaceful."

With that, Anna Sprengel ducked back into the hatch.

Then the turret turned to the side.

Part 6

Night had fallen.

The wind had a biting chill outdoors on January 3.

This was a District 12 storage unit lined with large containers.

"Mhh."

The Bologna Succubus raised her arms overhead and stretched like she had just woken up. The flapping sound came from the large bat wings she spread wide to either side of her slim silhouette.

She no longer needed the bandages or IV stand.

The District 12 consulate had only been Alice's plaything. The other Transcendents had no reason to stay there now that she was no more than an empty shell. In fact, staying there would have meant an unnecessary confrontation with Academy City.

But more than that, *slaughtering innocent people went against the Bologna Succubus's principles.*

After stretching to one side and then the other, the demon whispered into the emptiness.

"What, admitting defeat already?"

"Seeking out the enemy is not my forte," said a voice from nowhere. "Just give me a list of where I need to go and who I need to kill."

"Aye, aye. Your demon sister is on it."

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"I am Mut Thebes. I provide punishment."

"And why would that bother me?"

The Bologna Succubus looked puzzled as she pulled out a vial and poured a cloudy white liquid onto the ground. She crouched down, extended a finger, and drew out a sinister magic circle with it.

She was surrounded by deserted, desolate, and completely artificial scenery.

The only light came from the bright moon overhead.

This was her home ground as a demon.

Several presences *stirred* in the darkness. Bologna Succubus laughed among it all.

“I have no reason to fight Kamijou Touma. The same goes for Aradia. But Anna Sprengel is a different matter. Given what she has done, I don’t see any way to call her falsely accused. She does not meet my conditions for salvation.”

“Your reasons don’t matter as long as you take our side. I wasn’t aware succubi could use divination, though.”

“Don’t be silly. Prophecies that lead to the subject’s ruin no matter what they do are standard practice for demons.”

“What kind of divination do you use?”

“Tah dah! I use a mixture of unspeakable male and female bodily fluids.”

“ ... ”

Silence followed.

A certain of succubus would seduce a man and then use the acquired substance to assault a woman. Which meant they would have a technique for searching out a target who met the appropriate conditions.

The Bologna Succubus chuckled and flapped her wings.

“But not so fast! Did you know a man can ward off a succubus attack by placing a spoonful of milk in a saucer by his pillow because the succubus will mistake it for the fluid she’s after? So I can use this spell artificially by mixing my saliva with some milk.”

“I see.”

“What’s this? You sound relieved. Eh heh heh. What two fluids did you think I was using, Little Miss Chaste?”

“Are you trying to anger me?”

Meanwhile, the Bologna Succubus was completing her spell.

As time passed, sinister live sacrifice ceremonies usually began substituting other materials like dolls or grains. Look into the ancients roots of modern festivals and you will generally see it growing more harmless over time. Sex magic was complicated and took a lot of effort to perform, so it too had grown more simplified and harmless over time.

You could think of magic as a scam used to cheat your way into activating a legitimate contract or transaction. Anyone who stuck to the original rules and failed to develop their own methods of economizing would wind up deep in debt. And a demon was supposed to be the one making the deals, so it would be embarrassing indeed if she was weighed down with debt.

“Now, then.”

Of course, their target group included Witch Goddess Aradia and their actual target was *the* Anna Sprengel. Your average divination would easily be shut down. But it was impossible to fully eliminate the reading detected when shutting it down.

That technique would only work once.

But if that once was enough, it was the perfect trump card for tracking them down.

With a sizzling sound, the cloudy white liquid forming the perimeter of the magic circle turned brown.

“They are 2.5km SSW. Oh, and that’s from my position.”

“They detected your search, didn’t they? Then I need to be quick about it.”

Part 7

Something had changed.

Someone now floated in the night sky over District 12.

The skinny girl showed off most of her brown skin and wore her wavy blonde hair long.

She was Transcendent Mut Thebes.

Aradia was on top of the gun and she shouted down at Kamijou on the road.

“Get in! Hurry!!”

“Eek!?”

The 8 thick tires began to turn before Kamijou had even climbed onto the Predator Octopus's gun by grabbing Aradia's hand while she practically leaned out of the hatch.

And Anna Sprengel shouted an old-fashioned phrase from inside the cutting-edge mobile combat vehicle.

"The Apostle Peter forbids Simon Magus's demonic flight!!"

Mut Thebes lost her balance and plummeted.

But she did not bat an eye.

She landed on her feet a short distance away and metal tubes burst from her brown shoulders. They were arranged a lot like a bouquet of flowers. Kamijou didn't know much about weapons, but he had seen these before. They were the barrels to the guns he had seen on all the tank and mobile combat vehicle driving around the city during the day.

Except these were all colored pure white.

"Oops."

Mut Thebes staggered from the weight of the weapons she had produced.

"I forgot this."

With that emotionless and weirdly carefree comment, a ladder truck's stabilizing legs emerged from her thighs. They pressed firmly against the ground to forcibly keep her balance.

There was no escape. She was faster.

She spread the gun barrels like an ominous bird's wings and then flapped those wings to aim each gun toward Kamijou's group.

"Fire," she whispered.

Boom, boom, kabooooooooom!!!

A concrete building wall was blown away and the road's asphalt was torn from the ground over a distance of several meters.

120mm shells were scattered like a massive shotgun blast.

The muzzle flashes alone produced an explosive blast that fanned out.

The Predator Octopus's eight tires shrieked. The front four were turned right and the rear four turned left, so the mobile combat vehicle spun like a turntable to escape. Aradia only had her upper body sticking out of the hatch, but Kamijou was still fully out on the roof. Even a fragment of a shell would kill him instantly and he would be thrown from the speeding Predator Octopus if he wasn't careful.

Mut Thebes tilted her head.

"These can't hit from this distance? Are the biggest guns alone not enough? Why must Academy City make everything so complicated?"

She had fired several pure white 120mm tank guns at once.

A hit from any of them would obliterate a three-story building, but she was operating it like a smartphone she had picked up *to try out and see how it works*.

What happened to the division between science and magic? Where was the treaty?

Necessarius's Stiyl Magnus would probably have a fit if he saw this.

Meanwhile, Kamijou wasn't exactly calm himself. The armored vehicle provided something of a shield for him, but he didn't trust that too much. A shoulder-fired rocket could blow a hole in that armor, so a direct hit here would blow all three of them up along with the entire vehicle.

Mut Thebes threw away the white gun barrels like a toy she had grown tired of and held her hand to the side. A car was parked on the curb below the streetlight there. Kamijou heard a dull sound right before large white wheels and thick suspension emerged from her hips.

They contacted the ground.

Kamijou heard the scream of rubber and his eyes bugged out as he clung to the roof of the gun.

She was pursuing them on the high-speed roadway.

"What the hell!? Did she absorb that!?"

"Mut Thebes specializes in punishment."

Aradia, also from the Bridge Builders Cabal, clenched her teeth.

She wrapped her arms tightly around Kamijou's spiky head and held him to her chest to make sure he didn't fall off.

"Which means she has a way to supply an appropriate method of punishment for each target. This is not good. Academy City gives her access to so much bizarre technology."

"More importantly, fool, this is causing quite a scene. The Academy City guards twiddling their thumbs at the checkpoint are headed this way! And if this lasts long, Kingsford will be here too!!"

As soon as little Anna shouted up from inside the vehicle, the siren began sounding across the city once more.

That meant Academy City had noticed them.

This just kept getting worse.

Anna Sprengel had given them a warning while she operated the touchscreen that gave her control over everything from the driving to the gun control, but she didn't seem particularly concerned about the next-generation weapons.

The rhythmic noise circling in the sky above was a HsAFH-11 Six Wings attack helicopter. That cold weapon was unmanned.

Mut Thebes did not even glance up at it.

With a dull sound, a honeycomb of white missile launch pods emerged from her back. That weaponry was supposed to belong to her pursuer. Before the Six Wings could target its moving target, several missiles blew up the unmanned attack helicopter. This time, she knew what she was doing.

This was very bad.

Academy City technology was 20 or 30 years ahead of the outside world. Military weaponry was no exception. The more attention this battle gathered, the more advanced the weaponry that would be brought in and the more toys Mut Thebes would have at her disposal!

But Aradia and Anna were focused on something else entirely.

The witch goddess looked down toward her navel and shouted into the vehicle below.

“Did you notice that?”

“More or less, yes.”

Kamijou had no idea what that short exchange was referring to.

Aradia adjusted her grip on Kamijou when he nearly slipped from her arms.

“There, there. That helicopter was way up there in the sky, but she absorbed its weapon just as easily as she did that car. That means distance isn’t the condition for her absorption.”

“Wait.”

“She uses the same thing I do,” said Aradia stiffly, still holding Kamijou tight. *“She can make use of anything if her shadow touches its shadow.”*

“ ... ”

Come to think of it.

Back at the consulate, H. T. Trismegistus’s surprise attack had hit Aradia because their abilities both came from the number 3. Good, Old Mary with her resurrection and Bologna Succubus with her ability to use sexuality as an attack could both be seen as directly using “life”.

Did all the Transcendents overlap like this? They seemed completely different at first, but was that hiding some hidden logic?

If so, what did that make Alice Anotherbible who the rest of the Transcendents so feared?

“That’s why she didn’t need to fly up and approach the airborne helicopter to absorb it. She only had to combine her shadow with the shadow it cast on the ground. Anna!!”

The rear four tires slid roughly along the pavement as they made a sharp turn at an intersection and Anna Sprengel even fired the 120mm gun in the middle of the unsteady curve.

The boom made Kamijou duck down and his eardrums briefly forgot what their job was.

Instead of directly hitting anything, Anna had detonated the tank shell in midair to hit everything with the shockwave. In other words, it was an air burst. All of the nearby streetlights were torn from the pavement.

That should have prevented Mut Thebes from using her shadow which she needed for her spell. But...

“Ah!?” shouted Kamijou.

He heard something like a bursting firework.

Mut Thebes raised her right hand overhead and launched a bright light into the sky. The flare floated gently down thanks to the small parachute attached.

“Why would she use magnesium instead of a flashlight or a handheld fluorescent light? Does she need a certain level of illumination? If it’s based on natural sunlight, it might require tens of thousands of luxes.”

Anna carefully analyzed the situation, but Kamijou was not so calm.

The blinding light was more like welding light than a firework, so deep shadows stretched long across the ground all around it.

As soon as the brown girl’s shadow contacted the shadow of a giant object abandoned on a construction site, Mut Thebe’s right arm seemed to explode. A white club disproportionately large for her body emerged. Anna sent the 8 wheels weaving across the road to try and escape, but then Kamijou saw it.

That was not in fact a meters-long blunt weapon.

It was a reel containing wire thicker than a thumb. It was big enough to function as a table if set down on its side, so it had only looked like a giant club when it emerged from her thin arm.

The vehicle was moving at more than 100km/h now. If she whipped them with that wire, it could easily take out the thick military tires. If it so much as grazed a human, it would tear off a limb.

Mut Thebes herself staggered because the enormous wire reel threw off her balance.

But she still swung it horizontally.

“Oh, no!! Anna, you need to turn there! Hurry!!” shouted Aradia while very nearly biting Kamijou’s shoulder as she held him.

The thick tires screeched against the pavement. Kamijou had to hold on with all his might to avoid falling off. The Predator Octopus had not turned onto another road. It had turned toward a giant church. Unusual for District 12, it was a standalone building instead of part of a skyscraper.

But instead of plowing onto the church’s grounds, the eight wheels took them down below ground.

The church was *painted to look* old, but a concrete slope led to a parking garage directly below it. Was that just Academy City’s style?

Orange sparks scattered everywhere outside.

That pure white shadow was joined by the roar of death slicing through the air. The thumb-thick metal wire crashed into the entranceway, tearing away a concrete wall.

Mut Thebes must have decided the table-sized wire reel would keep her from entering the narrow entranceway because she cut it loose. She walked nimbly down the slope on her own two feet.

But it was a single straight path in there.

Miss Sprengel only had to make the command on the touchscreen.

Her small finger tapped the console at the commander’s seat.

“And done.”

A 120mm blast roared out.

It struck Mut Thebes square in the gut.

The Transcendent doubled over as she was launched back up the slope like a human rocket.

“Hee hee. Now is the time to compliment me to death, fool!!”

Of course, one hit wasn’t enough to relax. Kamijou could still sense the tingling tension of imminent death at the back of his head. The tires tore at the ground as the mobile combat vehicle raced through the parking garage. Anna kept the gun aimed backwards for defense

while breaking down the metal shutter on the slope back up to another road on the other side of the building.

“Wait! Is this what you meant by hidden routes we can use to avoid the checkpoints!?”

“Good job. It is always worth thinking for yourself and reaching the answer on your own, fool. We can pass through the large parking garages to reach another street. That lets us sneak right past the barricades Anti-Skill set up while staring at their map apps which only show them the public roads.”

“Great, wonderful. By the way, if Aradia hadn’t yanked me into the hatch just before you crashed into that shutter, the mangled wreckage would have taken my head off!!”

Part 8

I am so sorry, thought Mut Thebes.

She lay face up on the ground, painfully aware she had squashed a sidewalk flower bed below her rear. That was meaningless destruction. The flowers were not her target and would not boost her strength. They weren’t even in the way of her job. A punisher was meant to minimize destruction and only use it to keep the peace.

She heard a heavy metallic clang.

A lot like someone had dropped a wok onto the pavement.

(But it’s a good thing I chose the composite armor at the last second. Reactive armor sounds cool, but an armor piercing round would have passed right through it.)

The blonde-haired, brown-skinned Transcendent looked up at the moon in thought.

Punishment had to be administered fairly. Exceptions would not be tolerated. The human world could only function properly when good deeds were rewarded and bad deeds punished. That created a society where the people living their best lives would find happiness. Following the rules required patience. And people deserved to be rewarded for the patience they demonstrated.

Mut was an Egyptian goddess, but she did not grant people happiness in the afterlife. She had visited the giant city of Thebes millennia ago, where she fought enemy countries in the real world and physically protected her people.

That made it all the more painful that this target had escaped her here.

She only had herself to blame.

(The Shrink Drink...is safe. Of course, after *shrinking it* in its binder, it is smaller than a matchbook, so I can hide it just about anywhere.)

She heard what sounded like a metal belt moving.

She also realized the deep siren was still playing in the night sky.

That meant Academy City hadn't given up the fight.

A deep voice shouted from a loudspeaker.

"You there!! The entire city is currently under martial law. If you are a resident, pull out your student ID or some other reliable form of identification! If you are a guest, get your travel certificate out where we can see it! We do not want any unfortunate misunderstandings here, so do not do anything that could be misconstrued. We have been given authority to fire!!"

Mut Thebes ignored him and stood up.

Bright headlights surrounded her from a distance. The beams were reminiscent of eyes because of the asphalt dust hanging in the air like fog thanks to the treads.

She didn't know if they were technically classified as tanks, antiair tanks, armored troop transports, or mobile combat vehicles. A voice came from one of them, but with Academy City technology, she couldn't even be sure there was anyone onboard. They did have an unusual number of antennae on the roofs.

But the many light sources cast long shadows all around her.

She appreciated their cooperation.

"Society and its rules are not to blame for my inability to complete my job." Transcendent Mut Thebes remained expressionless. "My own lack of strength is to blame."

"Um?"

"So I will absorb as many shadows as necessary to create a free and fair society."

Mut was an Egyptian goddess of protection and war whose symbol was the vulture devouring unclean dead flesh.

Between the Lines 2

Board Chairman Accelerator's eyes and ears remained active while he remained inside the most strictly guarded cell in District 10's prison. He could not manage Academy City otherwise.

Population density and the flow of people, things, and money.

A list of online trends, especially dangerous rumors.

The state of the deployed troops.

Organizing and prioritizing witness accounts of their target and of the dangerous element known as Transcendents.

Etc., etc.

However, he did not use the Underline nanodevices distributed to every corner of the city by previous Board Chairman Aleister. He had already frozen the usage key for that largescale peeping tom tool.

Then again, what he was using may have been even more unfair: a scientific angel and a magical demon.

They could fly freely throughout the city, so the #1 used them as his eyes and ears.

Accelerator sat on a bed far too luxurious for a prison cell and viewed the large LCD screen embedded in the wall while he thought quietly.

He scanned through all information available to him, but it wasn't enough.

He didn't even have a solid definition of the Transcendents who were at the base of it all.

At any time of day or night, he could pick up the receiver on the wall and a nervously sweating guard would bring him a veal fillet, but he was too preoccupied to even take a sip of water at the moment.

(Did I declare martial law too soon? No, the city was already swept up in that ridiculously named Kotatsu Syndrome thanks to those Transcendents. If I can't predict what the people will do, it's safest to keep them at home. Some external factor has been injected into the ordinary people's decision making process, so I can't even be sure *they would stop after seeing a red light.*)

And while he had declared martial law, he hadn't expected everyone to accept it so readily.

He had been prepared for some harsh pushback, so it was frankly creeping him out that everyone just went along with it.

"Tch."

This focus on defense was a large departure from Accelerator's normal way of thinking. But the fate of the city had been left in his hands, so he had a responsibility to keep the city peaceful and safe. Gone were the days when he could focus on his pride and aesthetics and *pull off a win* by making a reckless attack all on his own.

Or maybe he hadn't accomplished anything back then. Maybe he had only convinced himself he had.

Qliphah Puzzle 545 continued her report while she flew through the night sky.

"As far as I can see, there's a clash between tank-size guns in District 12. It's throwing the checkpoint layout into chaos. They still haven't reported in to the central datalink, but I'm trying to identify the vehicles that fired. Also...wait. Y-you're kidding, right?"

"?"

Was it Mut Thebes?

Or was it Kamijou Touma, Aradia, and Anna Sprengel?

(What does that bastard think he's doing working with a world-class wicked woman?)

Accelerator expected one of them had made some kind of move, but the answer was beyond anything he had imagined.

"Someone's entering the city by crossing the eastern wall. Th-they're Transcendents! And a lot of them! Wait, am I seeing this righ- kssssshhhhhhh!!!"

The tides were turning.

Even though she was artificial, Qliphah Puzzle 545 was still a demon. Her demonic powers allowed her to single-handedly trap the UK in the passion and confusion of war. Anyone who took her down that easily had to be quite powerful.

Plus, cutting him off from the artificial demon was like taking out one of his eyes and ears.

But panicking wouldn't change that.

He had to stand firm and assume this wasn't over yet.

"Kazakiri."

"U-um, uh?"

"The demon can take care of herself. If you're okay, then report. Don't you dare disappear before you do. If you want to rescue Qliphah Puzzle 545, you can do so *after* reporting."

"Okay!!" the angel replied with excess enthusiasm.

She was obsessed with doing the right thing.

She was delighted by that option even though it didn't benefit her in the slightest and wasn't worth the effort.

If that was the combined will of Academy City's espers, then apparently the entire city was too nice for its own good.

Accelerator scowled and held a hand to his ear.

"Give a rough estimate if you have to, but how many Transcendents crossed the wall?"

"I-I'm sorry, but, um, I'm not really sure what a Transcendent is."

"Just tell me how fucking many got into the city!"

"I can't say for sure, but I saw maybe *20 or 30* from here."

Did that mean the Bridge Builders Cabal was taking this seriously?

It sounded like the Transcendents already in Academy City had been the minority.

CHAPTER 2

Transcendent Mut Thebes. *The_Death_Penalty_WH.*

Part 1

It was all right there in her head.

When you got down to it, the old R&C Occultics magic database was no more than a collection of notes jotted down by Anna Sprengel herself. So journeying to District 15 and searching the database would only turn up Anna's own knowledge.

The lights were off inside the cold metal box and the little wicked woman didn't look away from the screen as she whispered to someone.

"What do you want, Aiwass?"

"Nothing really. Just noting how uncharacteristically patient you're being."

"Come to see me because I haven't stepped on you recently, fool?"

After that, little Anna laughed but otherwise ignored him.

So only the unknown being's voice continued.

"You finally have your body back from Madame Horos, so you can perceive this world as you like and go wherever you desire within it. I assumed you would be rejoicing in your newfound freedom, so I found this odd."

Miss Sprengel clenched and unclenched her little hand.

"In this body?"

"You don't seem all that fixated on fully reclaiming your original power and form."

“Hmph,” snorted Anna.

Bull’s eye.

That being was meant to deliver divine knowledge to humanity, after all.

She wanted something else.

Something not found inside her.

“I will start with the Bridge Builders Cabal.”

“Not with Anna Kingsford?”

“I am starting with what I know I can do.”

She knew the Bridge Builders Cabal’s plan and was in the unique position to stop it, so she could negotiate (or threaten) them.

Furthermore, Academy City needed her for the same reason.

So traveling to District 15 was her best option.

On the other hand...

“I currently *have no countermeasure for Kingsford*. Even with the full power of my Secret Chief.”

Aiwass was supposed to be her trump card, but he hadn’t been enough to defeat Kingsford. What would have happened if she confidently used him to escape her human film canister form? The thought sent a small chill down her spine.

However...

“Maybe I can’t do it, but maybe that cabal of Transcendents can. And unlike Kingsford, I can take control of them. Either by manipulating Alice or by using the Shrink Drink that contains a portion of her power. They’ve left me a lot of openings for such a powerful group.”

“I see. Just as wicked a plan as I would expect from you.”

‘I wish I could have sent Alice Anotherbible against that woman, but how would that have influenced my current partnership with Kamijou Touma? Still, there are other

Transcendents with bizarre specialties. Perhaps one of them is such a poor match for Kingsford that she goes down easily to them. Like a necromancer or a machine killer. Giving up doesn't improve my situation, so my best bet is to keep struggling no matter how ugly it gets."

So she would start with what she knew she could do.

She most likely had her Bridge Builders Cabal countermeasure constructed in her mind.

But that was why she wanted absolute certainty.

That meant comparing the idea in her mind with the database she had created.

She felt some nagging doubt because of how extraordinary the cabal's plan was.

Even seen through Miss Sprengel's eyes.

"Do you think they can pull it off?" asked Aiwass.

"I don't know. But it's never a good idea to immediately reject something because it sounds crazy. That reflex isn't about a lack of validation or credibility – it's you trying to deny the worst case scenario. When there is a very real threat out there, what could be more foolish than letting your fear take hold and shutting yourself away for peace of mind?"

That was why she wanted more than her own thoughts and emotions – why she wanted to rely on the cold, hard data.

She wanted objective corroboration that her prediction was in fact correct. Even if it was so horrifying that even a wicked woman like her didn't want to think about it.

To repeat, Anna most likely had the answer already.

Now she only needed the final confirmation.

Then she only had to download it onto a physical medium she could present to a third party.

"It's times like this that I curse my lack of a perfect memory."

"It seems to me that would bring its own problems."

Whether a disk or nonvolatile memory, all physical media deteriorated and eventually grew unreadable as time passed, but if she kept the information in her own mind, the pressure of her own self-restricting questions would distort the answer. And unlike someone with a perfect memory, her memories provided no objective trust or proof.

She knew their plan.

She was familiar with all of their Achilles heels, so she could crush them at any time.

“But you can’t negotiate with the cabal’s Transcendents unless you can *objectively* prove it,” said Aiwass.

“Isn’t that your specialty? You are a messenger who provides oracles while pretending to be some secret divine messenger. It all began when you borrowed Rose’s mouth. That message was then written down in a form anyone could read. And it became known as the Book of the Law.”

“But that was all a new seed you had me plant because you were so disgusted by the Golden cabal’s rapid decline after the Battle of Blythe Road. But...”

“Yes, fool.” Miss Sprengel sighed. “Negotiation is not my primary goal here.”

“That plan must not be brought to fruition. In your mind, anyway. I am honestly mildly surprised you see any room for negotiation left.”

That was why she had installed a backdoor in that unseen organization so she could throw them into disarray and crush them from within. All she had to do was tell Alice Anotherbible the “personal legend” of Kamijou Touma and make sure the girl adored him like a character from a children’s book.

(So what am I doing now?)

“Keep in mind I can hear your thoughts, Miss Sprengel. Because I am your Secret Chief and you are my priestess.”

She kicked her little foot at that.

But Aiwass was right. If she were focused primarily on destroying the cabal’s extremely dangerous plan, negotiation would be meaningless. It would be much faster to slash their Achilles heels without warning.

Was she here to save the world? Nonsense.

She had only just reclaimed her physical freedom from one of the greatest frauds in the history of Modern Western Magic. The little wicked woman should have been living it up and greedily taking everything she wanted from the world around her. So her battle against the cabal and her drive to crush their plan could not be classified as good deeds.

So what did she hope to protect?

What did she want most?

“My king,” whispered Anna Sprengel.

Part 2

January 4. Early morning.

Kamijou Touma awoke to a light slap on his cheek.

He first thought the calico cat had play swatted him, but he quickly realized that couldn't be it.

It was Aradia.

“Wake up.”

“Ugh.”

He opened his eyes to find they were at a gas station. There was no clerk there thanks to the martial law, so they had refueled and he had taken a nap on the bench by the vending machines. Aradia was crouching next to the wooden bench and teasing him, so her face was a lot closer than strictly necessary. Her silver hair spilled down and tickled his cheek.

But that aside...

“It's already 5:30. Based on the work schedule posted in the office, a manager normally arrives at about this time. If the concept of martial law is enough to make the ordinary citizens nervous, the manager might drop by to make sure their workplace is safe.”

“Wah, wamh, ah, arh?”

“Are you trying to be cute?”

He was simply so sleepy his tongue wasn't working right, but she coldly criticized him for it.

(It's January 4 and I'm being told it's "already" 5:30 in the morning? Has the world gone crazy?)

"Hurry up. Your mind will clear once you get up."

"Mhh."

If she said he had to get up, that's what he would have to do.

But right as he did, Aradia stuck her lithe hand between his back and the bench.

The timing was unfortunate.

Kamijou's lips contacted something: Aradia's cheek, which had moved unexpectedly close.

At first, he thought he had to still be dreaming.

"Hm? H-huh!? Wait, did I really just do that!?"

The fog in his mind instantly cleared away.

He doubted she would be kind enough to let him off with a simple head chomp. This was the Great Aradia who had already killed him more than once on December 31.

And yet...

"Relax. That was clearly an accident."

"?"

Confused, Kamijou froze with his arms crossed in front of his face.

Aradia was avoiding his gaze a bit, but that was all.

The lack of any repercussions scared him in a different way. Like he was building up an unseen debt somewhere.

"You still need to get up. We can't stick around here forever."

They were on the run.

He had chosen this path for himself, so he couldn't complain now.

His head felt super heavy, but he somehow managed to get up on his own. Thanks to the wooden bench, he ached all over. He left the vending machine area which had a blind pulled down over it and was greeted by the biting cold. He saw a white haze outside.

"Why do you seem wide awake at this hour, Aradia? I don't know what country you came from, but are you jetlagged?"

"Witches follow a strict schedule and receive the blessings of nature – I just haven't been able to do so recently because you had me tied up. It shouldn't surprise you to see me up before sunrise."

Aradia threw the response at him like a slap.

Then the witch goddess winked.

"What? You look like you have several things to say."

That wasn't true at all, but if Aradia had read too deep into his expression and opened the door to questions, he couldn't pass up the chance.

Because wait.

Did this mean he could have her clear up the mysteries surrounding the Transcendents and the Bridge Builders Cabal?

"Um, uh! I-if you insist!!"

"Calm down. I'm not going anywhere, so relax your shoulders and try that again, boy."

"A-are you actually a red android?"

"You're starting there!? I suppose it's best to be careful, but still!!" shouted Aradia, bristling at his question.

But she no longer had that air of a cool witch lady. Didn't she seem more open to anything, and even a bit indulgent?

"Um, then to cover a more immediate issue, what do you know about Mut Thebes? I could be killed without knowing that. But I understand if you don't want to give up info on a fellow cabal member."

“You don’t have to worry about that. Not anymore anyway.” Aradia shrugged and sighed, the breath appearing white in the January morning. “Then I will start with the basics. Mut is a goddess found in Egyptian mythology.”

“Right.”

He was pretty sure H. T. Trismegistus had told him that at the consulate.

He wanted to know more than that.

“She is a war goddess who uses the vulture as her symbol. While the other gods promise happiness in a vaguely defined afterlife, she is a ‘physical goddess’ who actually fought on Earth and protected her people from their enemies. She is specifically said to have defended the ancient city of Thebes from an outside enemy.”

“Seriously? So she’s a god who specializes in war *and nothing else*?”

“It was believed that was one of the many abilities of a protective mother,” Aradia subtly corrected. “Mut was special in that she was both a goddess and the wife of the Ancient Egyptian pharaoh. Technically, the queen and Mut were seen as one and the same. Of course, that would mean each pharaoh’s wife was Mut again, which would make her the pharaoh’s mother, wife, and daughter all at once.”

That sounded very confusing, but Kamijou decided it was silly to apply a modern conception of romance to Ancient Egypt which existed millennia ago.

“Also, some suspect that she was created later on because Amun, the top god, needed a wife. Of course, I’m Aradia, so I’m not one to talk there.”

“...?”

That was something that had bothered him for a while now.

Index had said the goddess Aradia was thought to have been invented by an Italian witch. Then what was this Aradia here?

What was the point of borrowing the name of someone who never even existed?

Had the witch actually been telling the truth, but the story had been so extraordinary that the man writing it down hadn’t recorded it properly?

“What’s wrong?” asked Aradia.

“Nothing...”

Why did he hesitate? She was willing to answer his questions. And even if she refused to answer, the fact that she had openly refused could act as a major hint.

Or was he afraid of receiving confirmation?

He felt like the temporary peace they had established would crumble before his eyes.

Anna walked in from outside and grinned as soon as she saw the witch.

“Nice ankle.”

“I don’t want a word out of you.”

“?” Kamijou tilted his head.

Come to think of it, why was she still doing that? Thanks to Kamijou’s hesitation, Aradia had switched modes. And given how prickly she was being now, he doubted she would answer even if he asked.

The fuel pumps were dangerous since they worked with gasoline. And they were located outside, so they would have been locked down separately to the office. But that hadn’t been much of an obstacle to Anna Sprengel’s technology.

The wicked woman gave a snort of laughter.

“In the end, single use passwords and two factor authentication are still patterns. Once you decode the pseudorandom number generator, it might as well not be locked at all. At least they seem aware that biometric data like fingerprint or eye scans are a lot less safe given how high quality cameras are these days.”

“I’m suddenly glad my dorm room uses an old-fashioned analog key.”

“Trying to set a new record for foolishness? That’s an even simpler combination of patterns. The best security system a fool like you can manage is being too poor to own anything worth stealing.”

Meanwhile...

Kamijou spotted an old-fashioned payphone nearby.

Even a high schooler like him knew using his phone was a bad idea while on the run, but since a payphone wouldn't leave a record of who made the call, couldn't he contact Index or Misaka Mikoto that way?

Little Anna glared up at him.

"Again, don't even think about it, fool. Get us in trouble by trying it and I will kick your ass headfirst into a doghouse."

"Alright, alright."

It looked like he had to abandon that idea. She refused to explain why, but this must have been riskier than he thought. Anna had singlehandedly built up R&C Occultics as a global IT company, so he doubted he could outdo her when it came to computer knowledge. Academy City technology was 20 or 30 years ahead of the outside world, but Kamijou hadn't designed that technology himself.

(I hope they're okay. It's so frustrating when they're in the same city as me.)

He had to believe that the pursuers' attention on him meant less focus on Index, Mikoto, and the others.

The mobile combat vehicle stood out thanks to its 8 wheels and swiveling tank gun, but they had shoved it inside the carwash on Anna's suggestion. Apparently no one would notice it as long as it fit inside.

Little Anna unfolded a large paper map on the concrete ground. She and Aradia stared at the map through a magnifying glass they had found somewhere.

"Let's see. Based on my scrying, it should look something like this."

"Anyone's spell would reveal the same thing. And it seems to be showing water-based danger on the horizon."

They didn't seem to be reading miniscule text or setting down small game pieces to simulate the enemy(?) formation. This sounded like occult divination. When Aradia slid the magnifying glass across the map, Kamijou noticed small flashes of light dancing inside the distorted lens.

"Don't be shy. If you want to see the map, move in closer."

Still crouching, Aradia scooted a bit aside.

Kamijou did as she suggested, but he still couldn't tell what he was supposed to be seeing. He just didn't want to be standing behind her because he felt guilty seeing her butt while she crouched like that.

The oblivious woman was still focused on the map.

"I'm using crystal divination. It's a common enough technique in Wicca. You stare into the crystal and *decode* the information you want from the vision you see within. This is a variation on it. I bet you didn't know the crystal doesn't actually have to be a ball, did you?"

He was more interested in what she had discovered than the method she was using.

Aradia removed the magnifying glass from the map and raised it like an old-fashioned detective.

"Lend me your right hand."

"?"

Kamijou held out his hand as asked and she touched the rim of the magnifying glass to it. It made a high-pitched cracking sound.

Aradia was apparently done with the magnifying glass now, so she spun it in her hand and brought her lips to the rim like it was a giant lollipop she was about to lick.

"Imagine Breaker makes this so much easier."

"It does," agreed Anna. "It lets you omit the entire process for exorcising the summoned power. And you don't have to worry about the backlash if you screw up. The Golden cabal was a sorry excuse for a cabal that kept growing more bloated until it ruptured, but I can see why they had it stored deep within Blythe Road as a last resort."

Kamijou wasn't sure how to interpret this assessment. Should he view this like the young woman next door asking him to get a stubborn lid off of a bottle?"

...If so, he wasn't going to complain.

"Wipe that smirk off your face, fool. And we should keep the divination to a minimum. Academy City might not know much about magic, but Mut Thebes or Kingsford might notice and use it to track us down. Like suddenly noticing a presence in some abandoned ruins."

Little Anna pouted her lips and swiftly folded up the map.

“We are in District 6 now, so we still need to cross Districts 5 and 7. So, fool, let’s continue on toward District 15.”

“I get that,” said Kamijou while climbing for the hatch on top of the gun.

The interior was still cramped and the seats even more so. There was a reason they had refused to spend the night inside there.

“But I still can’t believe we got an armored vehicle inside the amusement park district. I would have thought they had a solid gate at the entrance to make sure no one gets in without a ticket.”

“You really are a fool. This is a mobile combat vehicle.” Anna made sure to correct him every time. “If you refuse to learn, I’ll start shoving the vocabulary sticks up your asshole.”

“ ... ”

What was a vocabulary stick?

Whatever the case, he got the feeling she would also get furious over the debate regarding whether corn was a grain or a vegetable.

“Also, fool. Amusement parks have industrial vehicle entrances located out of sight of the guests. How do you think they receive all the food and souvenirs they sell across the entire park? Or what about replacing the heavy metal rails and thick wires for upkeep of the thrill rides? You didn’t think it was all carried in by hand, did you?”

“That’s not what I meant. District 6 is one giant amusement park, right? It just feels like the end of the world to see a military vehicle intruding on this land of hopes and dreams.”

“
Do not interrupt me again.”

“Most fairy tales are more like horror stories if you follow them back to their roots,” added Aradia.

Was that supposed to be helpful?

Also, the expert on witch stories spoke down from above the other two. The nature-loving mountain girl couldn’t stand being cooped up in that tin can all day, so she had her upper

body sticking out of the hatch to enjoy the breeze. Which meant she had one leg on the ladder up to the hatch.

“Bwah, Aradia!? Have you no sense!? Don’t just show off that angle!!”

“?”

“If she isn’t aware, don’t bother her. And it’s her decision to do it or not. I know you are a hopeless fool, but you don’t have to tackle every single problem you come across with fists flying.”

A skirt-wearing girl version of a kasa-obake was staring down at them from above, but Anna Sprengel seemed a lot more interested in trying the mentaiko, corn, and mayo bread she had bought at a bread vending machine earlier. Even though they had stocked up inside the vehicle just yesterday. She was also enjoying a health drink that claimed to contain a trillion lactobacilli, which sounded to Kamijou like a battle manga with so much power level inflation nothing had any meaning anymore.

Generally, the other two let Anna operate the Predator Octopus.

Kamijou was still in high school, so he wouldn’t know how to operate a steering wheel. And this used a touchscreen, so it didn’t even have a steering wheel. Aradia was skeptical of technology, so she was out of the question too. That meant Anna was the one swiping her hand across the console monitor in front of the commander’s seat.

Kamijou Touma continued to pour all of his willpower into ignoring Aradia’s crotch that seemed unnecessarily conspicuous only a meter over his head. (Was this some kind of mental training!?)

“So is the plan for today the same as yesterday: look out for Mut Thebes while avoiding Anti-Skill’s checkpoints?”

“Thank you for pointing out the obvious, fool. Do I need to shove enough things up your asshole you look like a restaurant’s chopstick holder?”

She may have been even more foulmouthed than that human.

Kamijou couldn’t help but sigh, but...

“I notice you failed to mention Aleister’s group who have been concerningly silent. Do you want to die?”

The mood clearly changed when she mentioned Aleister.

Surprisingly, the majority of the tension came from Anna herself.

“Unlike a fool like you, Anna Kingsford seeks certainty. She goes beyond never making a wasted move. If any of her moves fails to accomplish anything, she will change her point of view to transform it into a useful card in her deck,” whispered Anna.

That little wicked woman was revealing her own weakness to someone else.

Kamijou didn’t see that as regression. It was only one step, but she was making progress.

“Even if she does locate us through divination, she wouldn’t launch an attack on that alone. She will increase the certainty of her information by relying on multiple sources, work out the most meaningful move she can make, and then make that move.”

“You mean...?”

“Yes, fool. We fought a highly conspicuous artillery battle to escape Mut Thebes last night. Word of that must have spread through Academy City. Assuming she intercepted those reports and has been analyzing the situation based on them, *it won’t be long now*. Kingsford will make her move soon.”

Part 3

Aleister Crowley, Anna Kingsford, and Kihara Noukan.

Since they looked like a foreign nun and a mysterious near-future glasses woman out walking a large dog (after martial law was declared), they had to make for quite a bizarre sight. Except they didn’t. When they walked right in front of an armed Anti-Skill group, not one person demanded they stop.

Was it Kihara Noukan who had said they were bound to be caught if they snuck into Academy City again?

Aleister sighed.

(This simple recognition manipulation won’t work on anyone with a deep knowledge of magic. That of course applies to the Transcendents, but also to the artificial demon working for Academy City – Qliphah Puzzle 545.)

He could imagine all this so easily, but he could never make sense of the human mind.

He was constantly making mistakes.

Meanwhile, Anna Kingsford curiously viewed the vehicles parked on the curb. The tanks and armored vehicles were all painted dark because they were meant for use in an urban environment.

They were closer than expected. Much too close.

The great knowledge goddess took small steps up to within a meter of one, looking just like a tourist with one of the red guards at a certain English palace.

If not for their magic, they would have been instantly discovered and forced to fight.

“Oh, how fun. It’s like a parade.”

“Don’t place too much faith in that preserved corpse. It might look just like a living body, but it’s still only a corpse being forced into motion. You can’t use any magical defenses, so if you were held in place by the ground collapsing below your feet or exposure to a high voltage current, an ordinary tank gun could blast you to smithereens.”

“Then am I relatively safe from the ones ✕ in a vehicle?”

“How did you find a way to ‘look on the bright side’ of that warning?”

When Kingsford pointed at an Anti-Skill group from less than a meter away, Aleister shut an eye and held a hand to his forehead.

That she went unnoticed was proof that she was the spell expert Aleister was not.

A true expert did not neglect these fundamental of magic.

Or rather, it was all part of a single large system. There were no unnecessary gears in the world of magic.

So instead of learning a single special move, you increased your overall strength by thoroughly honing your skills in all the most common spells until they were their own special moves.

An expert like Kingsford probably resented the very act of designing a spell exclusively for killing.

The golden retriever sniffed at the cigarette smoke exhaled by an Anti-Skill officer on break and reacted with disgust when he detected the vanilla additive.

“Explain it to her, Aleister. I would understand if you had explained it over and over and she refused to learn, but she can’t be blamed for her ignorance.”

“I know that, but still.”

The great knowledge goddess’s knowledge stopped in the 1800s, so while her magic knowledge was unmatched, she didn’t know much about the threat posed by science. The lack of knowledge wasn’t necessary a problem, but her inability to appreciate the threat was. She was too innocent, like a young child who had never touched a hot kettle.

Eventually, Aleister pointed up into the early morning sky.

“Academy City has developed 200mm self-propelled grenade launchers and multistage rocket launchers with a range of more than 30km. They can accurately drop a grenade on you anywhere in the city. And if they don’t care about damage to civilian facilities, a single Anti-Skill officer can give a signal by radio, laser, or even smoke to summon a downpour of explosives. A single volley of the rocket launchers will cover the designated area with ten thousand bomblets. Do you still feel safe?”

A sound like an electric shaver passed by overhead.

This one was not for aerial photography.

The 45cm plastic isosceles triangle was joined by hundreds more clustered together like a flock of starlings. From a distance, they appeared to undulate like a great serpent. These were self-destruct drones designed to spread out in the sky, locate their target, gather overhead, lock on, ignite their solid fuel, drop toward their target, and explode.

Aleister sighed.

“Each of those Snakeheads is loaded with as much explosive as an anti-tank rocket. The sky above is the hardest place for a ground vehicle to attack, so if those things attack from there, the tanks and armored vehicles don’t stand a chance. A person outside of a vehicle even less so.”

“My, my. The 🌍 has become a very 🏰 place in my absence.”

Anna Kingsford held a hand to her cheek and elegantly tilted her head.

She had lived in the late 1800s. That was before World War One, which meant a world without tanks, aircraft, and poison gas, so some might call it a nice place to live. Especially in an age where war without nuclear weapons sounded like something from an impossible fantasy world.

Of course, small drones commonly lost control and crashed due to signal interference and crosswinds. What would happen if those armed explosives were constantly flying through the city? As the numbers went up, what seemed like small odds of an accident would rise as well. Instead of launching a missile or artillery shell in response to a threat, explosives were *already* filling the sky above. Instead of avoiding the small odds of an accident, the city had ordered its people to stay home to avoid anyone coming to harm by the accidents. These next-generation weapons could only be used with martial law in place.

“What’s the plan for today?” asked Aleister right in front of the enemy.

“I 🍀 it is about 🕒 to take this seriously☆”

Part 4

Kamijou’s group slowly drove the mobile combat vehicle through the District 6 amusement park.

There was a biting chill outside, but the cramped vehicle was filled with the sweet warmth of girls.

In the commander’s seat, Anna made occasional adjustments to the self-driving while she messed with the communications. Kamijou thought she was accessing a civilian frequency to listen to the radio, but she was apparently watching an online TV station displayed in a corner of the touchscreen. How much could she access with that thing?

“Today is January 4. Good morning and welcome to the Children’s Q&A Advice Show. You’re in for a treat because today’s New Year’s special is two hours long☆ Now, our first Scype call is a question from Azumi-chan, a 2nd grader from District 13. Happy New Year, Azumi-chan. What is it you want to know?”

“H-Happy New Year. Um, why do you catch a cold when it’s cold out?”

“That’s actually a really interesting question, Azumi-chan. But first I need to correct a misunderstanding there. It’s hard to tell because they’re too small to see, but colds are

caused by germs you can find floating in the air any time of year. We see more cold patients in the winter because the air is drier. See, people have something called an immune system and..."

"Hee hee," someone laughed.

It was Anna Sprengel with her hand over her mouth. It was an unusually gentle laugh for her how harsh she tended to be. It lacked her usual edge.

"Excellent. She honestly asks the question on her mind and then listens to the answer. She earns a perfect 100 as a student."

"Really?"

"You need to be careful, you dull fool. All of you fools like to ask the question before even trying to think for yourselves. Instead, you need to listen, work to comprehend what you have learned, and – if you still do not understand – gather up what you know, put it in your own words, and feel no shame about asking. That is what I call perfect."

So did he have to learn to act like a 7 or 8 year old to please Miss Sprengel? That honestly sounded way too hard.

"The problem isn't how much or how little knowledge you have."

Anna elegantly crossed her legs in the highest seat, rested her elbow on the armrest, and her head in her hand.

And she whispered in Demon Lord mode.

"Knowledge you never use grows rusty. If you avoid writing a word for fear of misspelling it, you really will forget how to spell it before long. So the greatest barrier to true knowledge is the silly pride that believes you are too good to study and master the fundamentals. Feel no shame, learner. The textbook lies before you. It might look intimidating, but your predecessors have proven that you will eventually achieve mastery if you take it slow and complete each step in turn. You must not skip past the basics and immediately attempt the practical side. Even worse is to fail to realize you have given up on thinking, fail to learn a single thing, and find all you have left is an inflated sense of pride."

This advice had arrived unexpectedly.

He needed to listen, work to comprehend, and if he still didn't understand, gather his knowledge, put it in his own words, and ask without shame.

Kamijou decided to put Anna's advice to practice.

"So...what were you hoping to accomplish?"

"I didn't have a lofty goal like guiding all of humanity in the right direction."

Miss Sprengel's thoughts had been transported elsewhere while she listened to that innocent exchange on the radio.

And the words spilled from her lips now.

"I wanted to share what I had if it could quench people's thirst for knowledge. But only if they sought that knowledge in the proper way. In the end, that never came to pass. The incomplete knowledge I brought them only created hopeless conflict and self-proclaimed geniuses who arrogantly mocked everyone they met."

"Let's see," continued the radio show. "Next we have Shunta-kun, a 4th grader from District 7."

"Gyah! Wah!!"

"U-um, Shunta-kun? Shunta-kuuun?"

"What- ah ha ha! Wait, it's about to start- (wham thud!!) Did you hear that!? Kya ha ha! Ah ha ha ha!!"

"..."

"You don't have to get that upset!" shouted Kamijou. "It's not like he's your kid!!"

Kamijou quickly restrained little Anna who looked so furious she might utter a mysterious curse that not even the Anglicans were familiar with.

"That pissed me off almost as much as those self-proclaimed geniuses in the Golden cabal."

"I'm really not sure what to say about that, but should I update my mental image of them?"

"Pant, pant. M-Miss Host," said a new voice on the radio. "I'm a 47-year-old baby. Hee hee. C-can you tell me where babies come from? Bweh heh heh heh."

“Yikes!” shouted the host. “H-how did this call get past the screening!? Producer!!”

“Anna? Him you can curse,” said Kamijou, staring into the distance and feeling very glad he didn’t have to deal with a live broadcast.

Maybe everyone just had too much time on their hands while forced to stay home all day. Choosing to stay home during the holiday and being told you couldn’t leave the house were two very different things.

(This martial law thing is scary. I never thought being able to go where you want could feel like a luxury.)

Anna wasn’t driving their vehicle at full speed, but not because she was focused on the online TV show playing on the screen.

“I don’t trust the quality of the pavement on private property. Worse, this looks like tile, not asphalt. I hope we don’t break through all of a sudden.”

“Break through to where?”

“That question earns you 0 points. You didn’t even try to think first.” The little wicked woman’s voice was ice cold. “There is more to an amusement park than what meets the eye. There is a lot built underground like the giant motors and industrial power transformers for the thrill rides. For example...yes. Just imagine it, fool. Have you ever seen an amusement park with power lines strung up overhead? Any realistic equipment that would break the illusion are buried underfoot.”

Was that how it worked?

Kamijou took a look at the monitor Anna was messing with.

“But it looks like the Ferris wheel and the other rides are all stopped. Is it just too early in the morning?”

“You have a fool’s imagination. The attractions are put through test runs before the park opens to ensure safety, so amusement parks are actually quite busy early in the morning.”

Anna poked at the touchscreen as she answered. The exasperated sigh was quickly becoming her default state. She was probably making an adjustment to the self-driving, but the lack of a steering wheel made it hard to think of her as operating a vehicle.

Their motionless surroundings made it look like the giant amusement park had frozen in the winter cold.

But did that mean the martial law was to blame? The amusement park was district-wide private property, so if the people at the top – the management? – decided to shut it down, it could be shut down in a matter of seconds.

“But aren’t there a lot of people here? This has facial recognition boxes popping up all over!”

“Do not breathe on me in your panic, fool. Do it again and I will shove yellow mustard paste down your dickhole.”

“I would’ve thought a wicked woman would understand male anatomy better than that! Do that and it would explode!!”

“It makes sense to me,” said Aradia, also sounding exasperated.

Kamijou bristled at the thought of her shoving something in there too, but that wasn’t what she was talking about.

“You can demand people stay home all you want, but some people are going to head out regardless.”

It was before the park even opened, so these people weren’t breaking the rules to enjoy a day at this land of dreams. They appeared to be here for work. About half seemed to be park staff and half seemed to be truckers. The sudden declaration of martial law hadn’t shut down District 17’s unmanned factories (because no one had to show up for work there) and what were they supposed to do about the cakes, twisted donuts, and other park exclusive foods they had prepared the day before? Maybe it was a good thing Kamijou’s group had left the gas station early on Aradia’s suggestion.

Anna shut off the online TV show and displayed the outside footage on the full monitor.

“Wow. Hey, Anna, what are things like outside? The lack of windows scares me.”

“Foolish fool. There is a periscope linked with a camera at your seat. That is the loader’s seat, so it has secondary 360-degree observation equipment separate from the gunner’s.”

“If you say so.”

“.....
You’re the one who asked.”

“Wait, no, put that yellow tube away! You lost me at the peri-whatever part!! And unlike with my phone, I can’t exactly learn how this equipment works through trial and error! I could press the wrong button and launch some weapon or another!!”

“It’s called a periscope. You know, like on a submarine? Oh, are my words converting properly here?”

Aradia was actually speaking a mystery language called “common tones” rather than Japanese, but she still helped him out like a kind older sister. The way he could actually hear her saying two different things at once was kind of scary.

“Coddle him like that and his foolishness will only grow.”

“I didn’t start it. You can blame a certain Magic God for that one.”

Anna had no interest in a child with no drive to learn, so she ended up doing everything on her own. She poked her fingers boredly at the thin touchscreen from the commander’s seat.

“I’m still scared, Anna. Can’t you let me see outside too?”

“Sigh. Do you never shut up, fool? Here.”

Anna stood up from the commander’s seat and let him take it. He was worried about her leaving the controls, but she seemed fine reaching in from the side to make the necessary adjustments.

So the spiky-haired boy sat in the warm commander’s seat.

Then something happened.

Little Anna sat down in his lap.

What now? He was seriously unsure where to put his hands.

He ended up holding them overhead.

She also seemed weirdly smooth, so he looked down to discover she only had her baggy dress held up at her chest. This was more than he could have imagined. Her defenses from the rear were as nonexistent as with a naked apron!

His eyes widened further when Miss Sprengel did not hesitate to lean back against him.

“Um, Anna-san?”

“I’m kind of busy right now, so stay still. I don’t have time for questions. Besides, I doubt a fool like you would learn much from looking at the screen.”

“I thought you were being unusually accommodating, but you’re still upset, aren’t you?”

“Oh? Finally figured something out on your own, did you? Good job. I’ll have you know I am the type to hold a grudge.”

Kamijou felt a kick at the base of the seat bolted to the floor.

He looked over to see Aradia refusing to look his way. Nothing he did got any reaction out of her.

But he had bigger worries.

He took a look at the screen past Anna’s head and noticed a shocking development.

Ice filled his stomach.

“Those aren’t workers, are they? I knew Anti-Skill would be here. Yikes, that’s a lot!! And they have tanks!!”

The deep rumble of diesel engines approached from up ahead. One would be bad enough, but this was several lined up in a column.

Little Anna sighed in a bored way.

“Those are not tanks. They are infantry fighting vehicles.”

“What’s the difference? And that longer name sounds stronger if you ask me!”

“How many times must I remind you to think before you ask a question, fool? These are only about half the weight of a tank and they only use smaller guns with barrels the size of a clothesline pole. Those are 35mm autocannons. They might as well be peashooters compared to a 120mm. And the armor is aluminum to keep them lightweight enough for air transport.”

“Y-you mean they’re lower grade than ordinary tanks?”

“Yes, I do. Although they can still punch right through the Predator Octopus’s armor since it’s only armored vehicle class.”

“So I should still be terrified!!”

A sweet tremor ran through small Anna’s back while she sat in his lap. The wicked woman was apparently willing to be riddled with bullets if it let her torment Kamijou like this.

A convoy of tanks(?), armored vehicles, and military trucks arrived from up ahead. But they must have already been here. If not for the many military vehicles driving around this private property like they owned the place, the Predator Octopus would have aroused suspicion among the workers.

If Kamijou’s group was discovered, it would mean a battle, but the amusement park employees were all around. Not to mention that the Anti-Skill officers were all teachers.

If that deep siren began to sound, it was all over.

Aradia rubbed her bare feet together while still occupying the gunner’s seat. That was how she used her magic. The look on her face said she was willing to take action at a moment’s notice.

Kamijou gulped, but Anna casually flashed the headlights. Drawing attention to themselves like that sent ice down Kamijou’s spine, but the other vehicles returned the greeting in kind.

And they continued on.

The siren remained silent.

Apparently their identity wasn’t apparent from the vehicle’s exterior.

Did that mean it was better to move around like they belonged than to sneak in the shadows like a ninja?

Kamijou took another look around and saw a lot of Anti-Skill beyond the fixed checkpoints. They were stopping their vehicles in the area and receiving large artillery shells from the gunless tanks.

“Those are specialized ammo supply vehicles, fool. I believe they reused the same frame.”

“I feel like it would be more efficient to do this in the city.”

Was the risk of accidents lower if they kept things simple?

Anti-Skill was also gathering carts loaded with the kind of metal trays seen at all-you-can-eat buffets. More than hold food, they appeared to also heat the food with a heating element, allowing for cooking. The adults were gathering around and receiving breakfast from a strange vehicle that Anna smugly explained was a field kitchen. Unlike the students at school, they formed an orderly line without any fighting. *This martial law thing is just like being at war*, thought Kamijou (one of their prime targets), which would have angered certain people had they heard it. Anti-Skill really did look more like soldiers than schoolteachers here.

After nonchalantly driving by, Anna bit her thumbnail in his lap.

“Don’t relax yet, fool. They will discover who we are eventually. A military vehicle not found on the central datalink’s timetable is wandering around and loaded with live ammunition, after all.”

And there was no real reason they had to get through this without being discovered.

The fuse had already been lit. They only had to reach District 15 before the explosion.

“?”

The Predator Octopus came to a slow stop.

Not even Kamijou had to ask why.

He lowered Anna from his lap and grabbed the ladder. He opened the hatch and poked his head out to view the 50m-wide obstacle blocking their way.

“A river.”

“Failing to find the right answer while looking right at it is unusual indeed, fool. That is technically a canal since it was intentionally dug by the amusement park.”

Anna’s voice pursued him through the hatch smaller than a manhole.

River or canal, the 20tn mobile combat vehicle could not float in water. Crossing would require using one of the bridges and bridges were crucial for transportation. There was of course more than one, but even from here he could tell Anti-Skill had checkpoints set up on all of them.

They had built barricades from steel beams and barbed wire and they were shining large construction site lights. They also had the firepower of tanks and armored vehicles at their disposal. Were those stacks of boxes full of ammunition?

Approaching any of those bridges would be a bad idea.

Kamijou looked down into the vehicle which had become an oddly warm and sweet girl zone.

“Could we drive right by them in this vehicle like we did before?”

“That may have looked simple to an ignorant fool, but that was a risky gamble. And at an official checkpoint, they will not even let their own people through without an ID check for the vehicle and its occupants. Try it there and we will be exposed and forced to fight. ...Which will lead the Bridge Builders Cabal and Kingsford right to us.”

Anna was right. If they could drive right through, they wouldn't have had such a hard time last night either.

“If they're watching all the bridges...oh, I know. Could we create a floating bridge or something?”

“With some wooden boxes and ropes we find lying around? I do appreciate the attempt to think for yourself, but anything sturdy enough to allow a 20tn vehicle across would be extremely conspicuous, fool.”

Aradia seemed unusually happy given he was letting the cold air in through the open hatch.

“Ugh, I can't resist any longer. Move aside so I can get some fresh air too.”

“Wait, Aradia, there's no room!”

With two of them, the small hatch was cramped indeed. There was only one ladder to stand on, so it was a lot like having two people crammed onto the same side of a kotatsu. What was she, a kind but weirdly careless big sister?

They were practically in each other's arms while Aradia took a deep breathe of the chilly air.

But...

“What are you looking at, Aradia?”

“The park workers. They do us a great service by giving witches a positive image of magic and dreams, so I need to make sure they’ll be alright.”

But you don’t care about Anti-Skill? wondered Kamijou, but did that mean he was too distracted by their surroundings? When he thought about it, if a normal person came to the amusement park, they wouldn’t be here to see the armed enemy force.

“For me, people watching is more than just a hobby.”

“?”

Kamijou looked puzzled, so Aradia changed the subject to the main topic at hand.

“Couldn’t we abandon this vehicle, cross the river on our own, and steal a different military vehicle on the opposite bank? This 8-wheeled thing can be remotely controlled to an extent, can’t it? We can send it into one of those dangerous bridge checkpoints as a diversion.”

“That can be our last resort,” said Anna. “I want to avoid stealing another vehicle if possible to reduce the odds of them noticing I hacked the datalink. Both because it robs us of transportation and because I don’t want to give them even the slightest hint that our goal is data related – that is, accessing the magic database in District 15.”

Kamijou felt they should also spend some time addressing the fact that crossing the river without a bridge during the middle of winter meant jumping into water that was near freezing and giving off a white steam. And wasn’t this river more than 50m across? The Transcendents might be fine going for a celebratory New Year’s swim since they were walking around in what might as well have been swimsuits, but an ordinary high school boy like Kamijou would freeze and be swept away before he made it across.

Anna kicked the ladder with her small foot as a warning, so the other two ducked back down and shut the hatch.

Kamijou heard the rhythmic sound of a Six Wings helicopter passing by overhead.

“We need to think up a way to safely cross the river.”

“I already told you it’s a canal. Get it right or I’ll drag you around town with a nose hook, fool.”

The other two tilted their heads with “what’s a nose hook?” written on their faces and Anna cleared her throat for some reason.

The girl(?) had stepped on the gas a little too hard, so she stammered a bit before continuing.

“But Academy City aren’t the only ones we have to worry about. Let’s just hope Mut Thebes and Kingsford are polite enough to wait for us to find a solution.”

Part 5

“Brr.”

Mut Thebes bent over, wrapped her arms around her shoulders, and shivered.

She was generally the strongest, but she was also a girl who couldn’t stand the cold.

She hated seeing her breath.

During her time in the cabal consulate, she had loved staying indoors and curling up next to the fireplace to keep warm. In fact, she had only ever gone outside to welcome Alice. Before going to bed, she would soak in the tub to warm her body, perform a thorough stretching routine to further increase her body temperature, drink some hot milk, cover her bed with three layers of blanket, and even set the air conditioner to 28 degrees. Not at all environmentally friendly.

(How are the Bologna Succubus and Aradia fine walking around dressed like that? Have they developed an insulation spell to keep themselves warm? And they didn’t tell me? No fair.)

She was in District 6.

But not because she had located the enemy here.

“You can move closer to the heater if you want, miss. Don’t be shy!”

“Thanks.”

“Are you part of the parade? I know it’s important to take the rehearsals seriously, but you’ll catch cold dressed like that this early. Make sure to wear your staff coat during off time! Y’know, the fluffy waterproof one!!”

“If you say so.”



“Oh, I know. Want some hot cocoa?”

“I would love some.”

The Transcendent made sure to bow politely to the man with the gravelly voice of a smoker.

The board chairman at the top had declared martial law, but since it was a holiday, not everyone had been able to contact their employer. And employees couldn't afford to be late the way students could. Thus, a decent number of employees and truckers had arrived at the amusement park for work and were now stuck there. Mut Thebes had joined one of the small groups that had formed across District 6. The people were gathered around an outdoor heater someone had dragged out from the back of storage. It was a giant metal umbrella containing the kind of compressed gas cylinder used for a portable stove and it was likely meant to be placed at a café's outdoor tables or alongside the lines for the popular attractions.

“I'm a trucker myself, but I can sympathize with your situation. How can they declare martial law like this? How are you supposed to do your job if no one can reach the park, right!?”

“Well, I don't actually work in the park...”

“Want some mochi? I have some left over from the holiday.”

“I will take four.”

“Oh, you've got an appetite. That's what I like to see!”

The man shouted for someone to bring over a metal mesh. But how did a truck driver manage to cook these on January 1?

Mut Thebes dunked the fresh-cooked mochi in her hot cocoa for something resembling cocoa shiruko and enjoyed the multicultural flavor before looking into the sky above.

A giant craft flew by at surprisingly low altitude.

It looked like a large passenger plane with a giant plate on its head.

“An AWACS plane.”

The man appeared to be more traditional. He poured some soy sauce on a small plate and added sugar from a café-style packet to achieve the perfect tare sauce.

“It’s probably flying so low because District 23 is so close, but what’s the point of that thing in such a small city? Feels like a waste of tech, but maybe it shows how panicked the board of directors is. What’s the point of the martial law, for that matter? I’m not even sure who we’re supposed to be fighting.”

“What is an AWACS plane?”

“Basically a giant reconnaissance plane.”

“I’m not even sure what reconnaissance means.”

“Hm. It really just means you send it out to find the enemy. With the Academy City HsAWACS-05, that plate-like radome has a range of 1000km. It also has a big server and computer aboard, so it can order around its unit based on the data it receives. It can perfectly track more than 1500 enemy and ally craft and share lock info on 500 of them so its allies can attack them. If it gets a lock from afar, the fighters don’t even need to circle behind the enemy craft and carefully take aim. The thing is, it’s only meant to secure air superiority by circling the airspace in question from a distance. Oh, and I only know all this from video games. I love me some flight simulators! Lately, there’s been some great ones even on cheap smartphone VR.”

“Hm.” Mut Thebes looked overhead while poking her fork into and stretching the mochi she had dropped in her sweet mug.

This hobbyist had given her quite the lengthy lecture.

She hadn’t understood even half of it, but she didn’t need to understand every little thing.

The Bologna Succubus’s divination only worked once. She had already played that card. That meant her biggest necessity now was locating the enemy.

And she did not need to fly up into the sky and directly tear the parts from the craft.

It was early morning.

The holy sun had appeared in the eastern sky once more.

Its low altitude was convenient too. The AWACS plane’s large shadow was already moving across the ground and rapidly approaching her.

The brown girl crouched down and lovingly held the steaming mug between her hands. She took a sip of the sweet hot cocoa she had forcibly dunked her mochi in.

“Yes, this combination is a winner.”

Part 6

The first to feel a tremor up her spine was Anna Sprengel whose legs were gracefully crossed in the command seat.

A moment later, the Predator Octopus’s interior lighting switched to red.

“A radar signal? But wait – how wide range is it? You’re kidding. This entire area is awash with microwaves!?”

Woo!!

That din played outside again.

Academy City had detected something amiss. That siren signaled imminent death.

Kamijou paled.

“Can I speak? Explain to me exactly what the hell is happening and why!!”

Anna did not answer the idiot.

The 8-wheel mobile combat vehicle rapidly accelerated. They had been keeping their speed low to avoid suspicion, but that ended now.

Anna finally opened her mouth while glaring at the LCD touchscreen.

“Short answer: someone figured out where we are, fool. But that is a powerful signal... The worst part is we don’t know exactly who it was!”

“That’s not much of an answer! You’re only talking to yourself there!”

“Shut up. If you aren’t going to use your head to think, how about I squash your face below my butt?”

She had mentioned radar.

That would suggest Academy City since they were the science side, but Kamijou's limited knowledge of the Transcendents was enough to know that wasn't the only possibility.

Mut Thebes could absorb an object's power by contacting its shadow with her own.

(And if Academy City noticed, they would have sent word by radio and Anti-Skill would move in from all of the checkpoints.)

Aradia frantically placed her hands on Kamijou's shoulders, pushing him gently into his seat.

"We need to run because some dangerous tech is after us, right? But we can't keep going because we can't cross that large canal?"

That was correct.

So Anna was limited to the road running alongside the canal. By climbing the small bump and sending the entire 20ton vehicle onto the road.

But that wasn't enough.

They knew some unseen person had located them and was closing in on them, but they couldn't pull away from that pursuer and escape.

If this kept up, they would be caught eventually.

But if they charged across one of the bridges, Anti-Skill would notice them.

Anti-Skill had enough firepower to blow away their thinly-armored military vehicle in a single attack. The Predator Octopus had a tank gun atop 8 wheels, but it would have a hard time breaking through on the confines of the narrow bridge. They would have no escape from the concentrated fire coming from the checkpoint on the opposite bank. And if Anti-Skill blew out the bridge itself before the mobile combat vehicle's full speed could get it across, they were done for no matter what its specs were. They wanted to avoid being trapped inside the thick tin can while it sank to the bottom of the frigid water.

Kamijou's eyes widened.

"Anna, what's the direction and distance of the enemy!?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe they're from science and maybe they're from magic, but they're using microwave radar, aren't they!? If they're sending such powerful EM waves over such a wide area, *they must be at the center point!!*"

Anna quickly jabbed her index finger at the touchscreen.

She updated the online map data. Like a typhoon prediction map, a large red circle was displayed with an X in the center.

“That was well done for a fool. I will reward you by gently stepping on you later.”

“Didn’t you threaten that as a punishment earlier?”

This wasn’t moving like an airborne AWACS plane. It was on the surface and moving along a District 6 street.

“So is it a truck?”

“It’s too powerful for that. This is at least AWACS level, but that would mean the size of a large passenger plane. It makes no sense for it to be on the ground.”

That settled it.

And she was close too.

“Mut Thebes!!” shouted Kamijou.

Something rounded a corner behind them with the movements of a speed skater.

It was white.

It looked like a giant object.

But it wasn’t. That was a girl with brown skin and long wavy blonde hair. The Transcendent was leaning forward and sliding along the ground with a massive rotating radome growing from her back. It was 9m across. That made it larger than a small bus, so her slight forward lean was enough for it almost entirely hide her from view.

Anna Sprengel was about as self-centered as they came, but she was left nearly speechless by this.

“It really is an AWACS. That radar rivals an anti-air cruiser’s system and she’s really using it in heavily populated area at an altitude of 90m? It’s not as bad as a microwave oven, but that will at least burn anyone outside. It could even blind them.”

Explosive shockwaves shook the 20-ton vehicle.

But not because someone was shooting at them

It was more like accidental explosions were occurring elsewhere all of a sudden.

“The powerful EM waves are setting off the artillery shells packed in boxes at the checkpoints. The exposed electric fuses are reacting.”

Aradia clenched her teeth at that.

Burns, blinding, and exploding ammo cases.

The witch goddess, who was bound by her conditions for salvation, gave a roar.

“Mut Thebes. You don’t deserve the title of punishment expert if you would cause this much collateral damage!!”

“Anna. Aradia too. We have to do this. We have to fight and stop her!!”

The 8-wheels continued racing along while the gun turned to face backwards.

Did Mut Thebes’s smooth movement come from using wheels she absorbed from a drum-shaped security robot? She gave a jerk of realization while she pursued them. With that radome larger than she was, she could see every movement their vehicle made.

“That isn’t going to hit, “ said Aradia. She was on the magic side, but she must have picked up on something.

They couldn’t afford to miss here.

The explosions triggered by the powerful microwaves were a serious threat. If even one shell detonated, the rest in the stacks of wooden boxes could go with it. That could easily kill some of the Anti-Skill officers or even the ordinary park staff.

“Don’t aim at her!” shouted Kamijou. “Aim at the road in front of her!!”

With a loud boom, the vehicle was hit by a sharp kick of recoil it couldn’t fully neutralize. Mut Thebes had been ready to dodge to one side or the other, so when a wide section of pavement was torn from the ground like a large wave, she stared with her jaw dropped before crashing right into it.

If she could predict their actions, their best bet was to create a wall fanned out in front her so there was no escape.

But that was unlikely to kill her.

Kamijou didn’t hesitate here because he had developed an odd trust in her.

But much to his surprise, the brown girl did not pursue.

Of course, this wasn't because the attack had been effective. Something had crashed sharply into her from the side. A series of sharp crashing sounds arrived shortly after as she bounced several dozen meters along the road, taking her away from the canal. The vehicle's interior lighting returned to white, suggesting the radar signal was gone.

That hadn't been a metal artillery shell. Nor had it been a magic beam.

It looked like...a person.

“ ... ”

Kamijou heard a small shaking sound.

It came from Anna Sprengel who had a cold sweat pouring down her brow.

“ ”

“Anna? Hey, Anna!!”

Kamijou quickly reached over and grabbed the thin touchscreen.

The Predator Octopus was currently racing alongside the District 6 canal at more than 100km/h. But he had no idea how to drive it without a physical wheel or lever.

He had leaned in toward the command seat, so he was nearly pressed up against Anna Sprengel. This let him hear her whisper.

She had seen something out there.

And the sight had broken her violent and arrogant pride.

“Anna...Kingsford?”

Part 7

Anna Kingsford's method was quite simple.

She had not actually defeated Holy Guardian Angel Aiwaass the day before. After fighting him enough to make it convincing, she had intentionally avoided a finishing blow and let him escape.

He belonged to Miss Sprengel.

By tracing his path, he would guide her right to Anna Sprengel.

“My, my.”

And Kingsford opted to spare the Predator Octopus for now and instead attack Mut Thebes first.

She had a clear and simple reason for this.

“You must ✕ do this, Transcendent. I don’t know what these ‘micro🐙’ things are, but you must ✕ harm the ordinary people who know nothing of ✂.”

“What?”

Mut Thebes’s back was embedded in the side of a smashed tank and the white radome caught between her and the solid armor cracked before breaking apart.

Freed from the weight on her back, the brown girl extracted herself from the tank.

“Did you seriously pick a fight with a Transcendent over something like that?”

“✂ was originally meant as a 🍴 to serve those around you,” replied Kingsford with a smile.

She was willing to bet her life on “something like that”.

Because she remained as dedicated to her magic name now as she had been a century before.

“...”

Mut Thebes’s silence did not mean she was overwhelmed by the great goddess of knowledge.

Her area of expertise was punishment.

And Transcendents could be heartless when someone did not fit their conditions for salvation.

She could separate herself from her emotions and present condition in order to coldly gather information on her target. In this case, she heard the rumble of a diesel engine driving away.

She used that to estimate her target's location.

(I can't use the AWACS anymore. And I don't have direct line of sight, so I have to rely on sound. I will lose them if I can't resume the pursuit within three minutes.)

"That is ✕ a good idea."

Kingsford's soft but smooth voice interrupted Mut Thebes's thoughts.

She placed her finger on her slender chin.

"Do ✕ ignore the immediate threat to focus on your distant ☺. For that matter, what makes you 🐼 you can win this at all?"

"Are you Anna Kingsford?"

"I am indeed ☆"

"The original?"

"Of course ✕."

She didn't even try to claim otherwise.

Casually abandoning that legend may have been something Miss Sprengel could never do.

"I am well past worrying about that. She too is an original. She has done a splendid job of achieving what I can ✕. Although she seems unaware of that fact. So I am willing to let her be the main 'Anna' in the history of Modern Western 🗡. I am ✕ more than a spell user. As long as I can serve those around me, I am ✕picky about what form that takes or what people call me."

"Hm."

Transcendent Mut Thebes's behavior was unchanged.

With a dull sound, the color white burst from her right shoulder. She had absorbed the tank she had crashed into, so a 120mm gun suddenly emerged.

"I absorbed the shadows of the laser targeting and microwave radar this time."

Kaboom!! She didn't hesitate to fire.

The shell tore through the air and was compressed to the absolute limit before its course veered to the side in front of Anna Kingsford. It looked so natural Mut Thebes nearly overlooked how odd it really was.

“?”

“True understanding is ✕ found in ✕.”

Anna Kingsford shook her head.

With that large witch hat on her head.

She was not bragging. The eyes behind her glasses displayed the look of a teacher marking a question wrong on her student’s test.

“Sadly, all you will find there is misunderstanding. I did ✕ do a thing. It was you that missed the shot, Transcendent, ✕ me.”

“Nonsense. That kind of pedantic argument can’t alter my spell.”

“My. My. We are both wielding the uncertain system of techniques known as ✎, so how can you claim anything is reproducible or absolute, Transcendent?”

That meant Mut Thebes either had to overwhelm her with enough attacks or physically tackle her to break through whatever barrier had sent the shell off course.

But Mut Thebes was a moment too slow.

Kingsford clapped her hands together in front of her large chest.

“✎ *power.*”

That was all.

There was no light, sound, color, or shape. But the brown girl sensed something – an unseen, unknowable field of oppressive density – appear between the two of them.

Anna Kingsford did not use flashy special attacks.

She took the common magic and ceremonies that even the beginners were sick and tired of and she honed them past the limit.

No more than that. But no one else could achieve this, so it allowed her to overwhelm all others.

It even let her gather up and harness the immorality, tragedy, and misfortune found all throughout this incomplete world.

“What did you do?”

“Nothing really. Hee hee. This rebuilt body appears to be more fragile than my original one. If I refined ⚡ power at my full 💪, it would destroy the ☯ parts. So I emit all the excess energy outside my body, which makes it easier for ‘nonexistent things’ to manifest. Think of it like how ↑-ing the humidity with a humidifier makes it easier for frost to form on the 🍷.”

A true expert did not normally say much.

So when the 2nd Anna did so, she was doing it for her opponent’s benefit.

The brown girl still didn’t understand, so the expert gave her a look of pity.

“In other words, it is ✖ me who will defeat you.”

A heavy footstep rang out.

It came from a blonde woman in a beige habit. ...But was that really who this was? If so, how was her footstep powerful enough to shake the world around her?

The unknown entity approached with head lowered and radiating a bestial aura.

She held her hand straight out.

“Your number is 333, your nature is dispersion. You obstruct all bonds and I ask that you mercilessly tear apart this force building a tower of immorality and sacrifice.”

Something beat hard against the air.

A pair of bat wings had emerged from her back.

She slowly raised her head to pierce all with her gaze.

“Lend me your identity, *Great Demon Coronzon!!!*”

“Kee kee ee ha ha! You would willingly use me, human? That’s quite the taboo you’re breaking. Feeling like naming yourself the wickedest man in the world again, Aleister!!?”

A series of bright lights and explosions followed.

An even more colorful spectacle had to be playing out in a territory invisible to human eyes.

Part 8

Kamijou Touma jumped within the mobile combat vehicle.

He had heard that explosion even through the Predator Octopus's armor. It had sounded like a nearby lightning strike.

"D-did one of them get the other? But which one got which!?"

"That's no cause for celebration! Once this three-way battle ends, the winner will be after us!! And they'll have just proven they're the most dangerous of the bunch!!" snapped back Aradia.

Anna Sprengel remained dazed. She had met that woman – Kingsford? – yesterday too, but her reaction today was entirely different. Her head rocked with the movement of the vehicle, almost look like a doll.

The tiny arrogant wicked woman was nowhere to be found.

(Aiwass, was it?)

Kamijou Touma desperately grabbed at the touchscreen inside the moving vehicle.

(She used her final trump card, but Kingsford is still walking around just fine. She doesn't even seem injured. That means Anna's secret weapon didn't work at all! *She had her worst fears proven correct!!* So the dread she was feeling turned to actual fear all at once!!!)

She had been turned into a face on a film canister – with no arms, legs, or even a torso.

In fact, there had to be something between the two Annas going back *before that*. Something involving their overwhelming difference in power.

But for now, Kamijou had to gain control of the vehicle or it would plunge right into the freezing canal. Whether Mut Thebes or Kingsford emerged victorious, they would catch up the instant they resumed their pursuit if the vehicle wasn't across the 50m width of the canal first.

But a high school boy like Kamijou didn't know how to operate the vehicle using the flat touchscreen. He didn't even know how to apply the brakes. He could guess it probably

worked similar to a 3D game, but he was terrified of touching the wrong thing and firing the gun. Things never ended well when Mr. Misfortune left matters up to luck.

“Anna...”

He clenched his teeth and shouted into the little wicked woman’s ear.

“This isn’t over yet!! I don’t know what happened between you and Kingsford, but it’s not too late to turn things around!! But if you’re going to get over this, you have to make the attempt yourself. So wake up, Anna Sprengel!!!”

“To hell with this!!” shouted Aradia, fed up with it all.

But she moved to the ladder, not the commander’s seat.

“What are you doing!?”

“I’m not interested in figuring out this hunk of tech. But we’re in trouble, so I have to do something about it! And I can only think of one way!!”

Aradia shouted back her answer before pushing up the hatch.

The icy wind of their 100km/h movement rushed inside and the witch goddess climbed on out.

A yellow warning appeared on the edge of the console monitor. A laser emitter had detected an error. It was meant to detect slight deviations in the gun barrel caused by the heat distribution when firing and Kamijou couldn’t make heads or tails of the displayed message.

When he returned his attention to the external footage on the screen, he saw Aradia straddling the gun barrel.

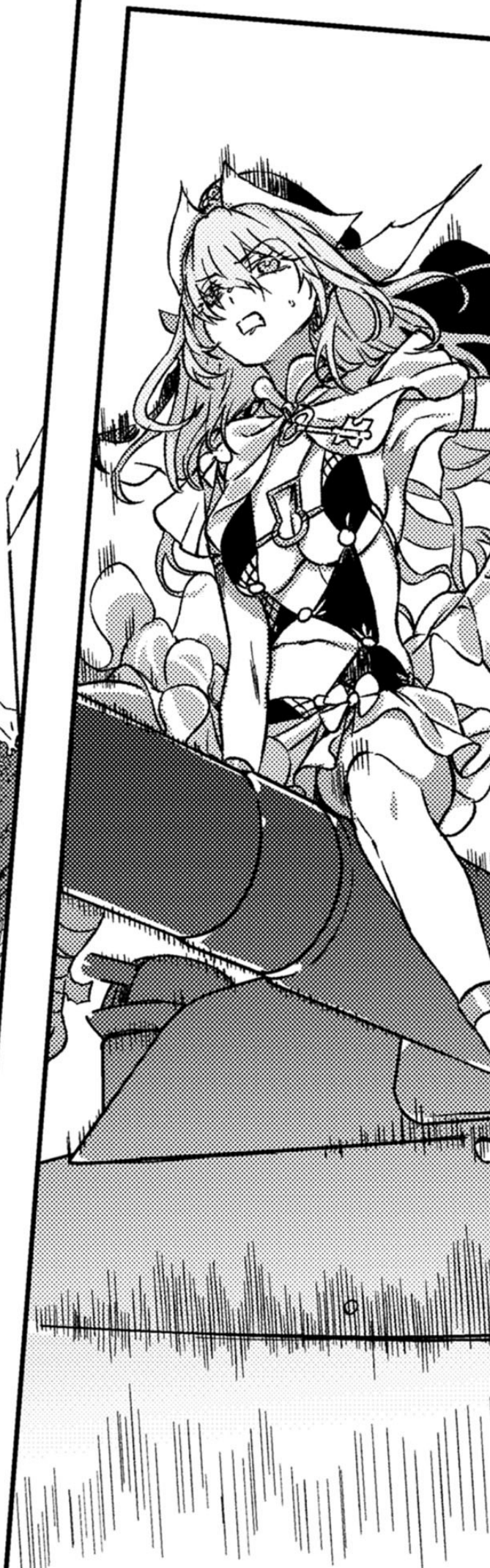
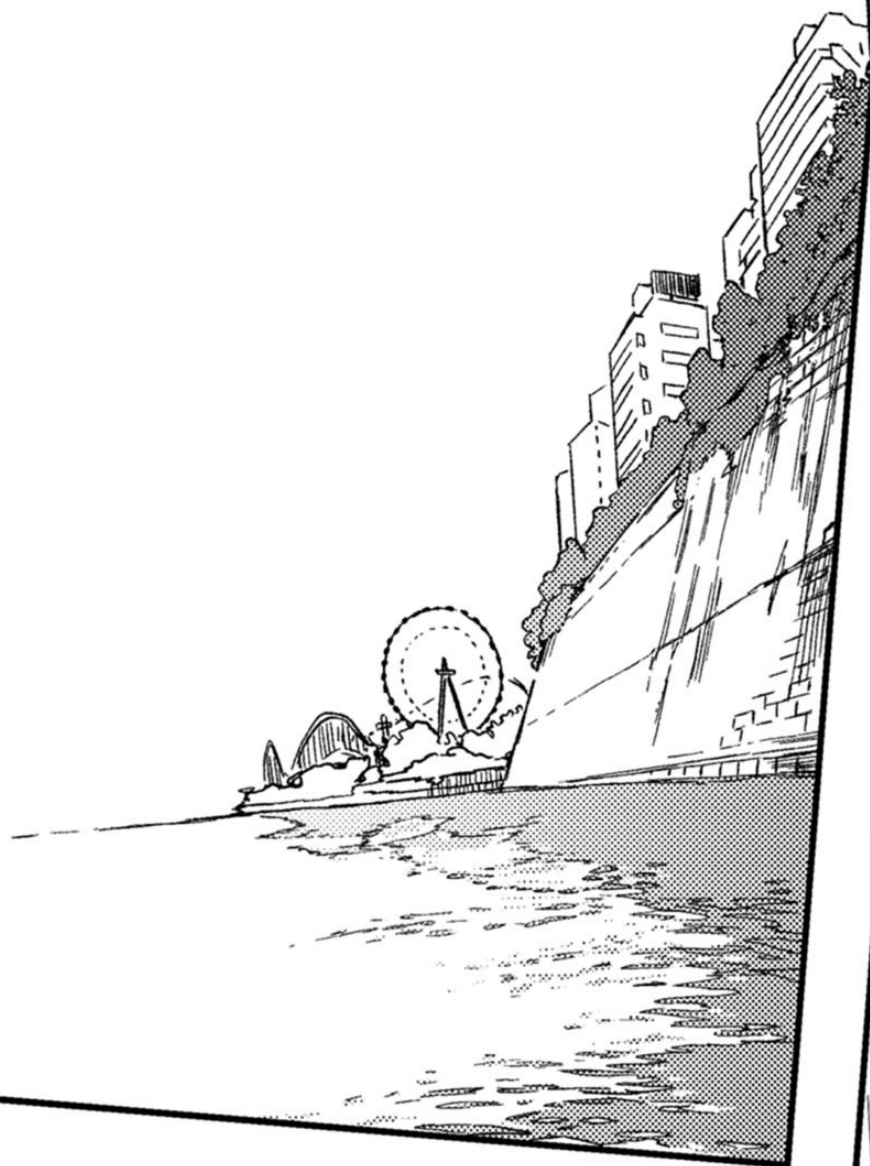
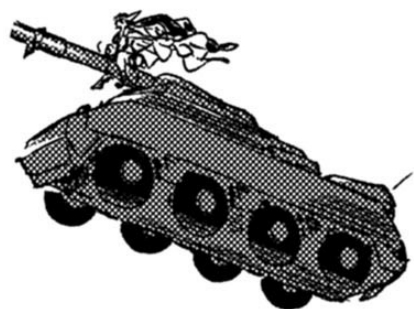
Just like a witch might ride a broom.

“A witch’s life is at risk here.”

“Aradia?”

“Don’t you dare underestimate the goddess of all witches!!!”

The 20 ton mass began to float.



In Shibuya on December 31, Kamijou had seen Aradia fly on a crosswalk signal. But still. Nothing could have mentally prepared him for her flying on the entire vehicle with him inside. He made sure to bite his right hand. He felt he deserved some credit for remembering to avoid touching the walls or floor.

If the LCD monitor was to be believed, the 8-wheel mobile combat vehicle had crossed the 50m canal. They hadn't used a bridge, so they had slipped past Anti-Skill's checkpoint network.

Aradia was right outside, but he heard her voice coming through the screen.

That helped it seem all the more unreal.

"Ah ha ha!! How about that, Kamijou Touma? This is a witch's spell – the essence of witchcraft! It's a liberating power that frees all men and women's hearts from the world's bonds!!"

"Hey, are you sure this is safe? Hey! Being this high up is terrifying!!"

Kamijou felt the same tension as if a cramped elevator had stopped unexpectedly.

But the witch goddess was in complete control, so she basked in the elation of soaring through the sky. These things were a lot easier for the one holding the reins.

"Hey. We're already flying, so do we even need to land on the opposite bank? Seems to me flying all the way to District 15 would be faster."

Now that she mentioned it, maybe she was right.

And now that they were this high up, the fear of heights vanished. Had they risen 400m? The average building rooftop was below them at this point.

Kamijou Touma was just starting to entertain the idea when the vehicle's interior lighting went red again.

That meant radar.

The fast approaching sounds of rotors came from an entire group of Six Wings unmanned attack helicopters.

"Take us down right this instant, Aradia, you stupid sexy banana woman!! The airport radar detected us and decided we're an enemy aircraft!!!"

“Uh, oh! Will this city’s stupid tech never give us a break!?”

Between the Lines 3

Mut Thebes’s right half was embedded in a wall. And not close to the ground either. That wall was on the side of a bungee jump platform.

Aleister and Kingsford had already moved on.

Academy City’s focus must have followed them because the siren had stopped.

“.....”

The brown girl cracked her neck as she extracted herself from the wall and used the simple elevator to reach the ground.

(Ordinary airbags are surprisingly useful.)

She tore away the deflated white shape tangled around her skinny frame.

A difference in strength was a nonissue. *No matter who she was up against, she would eventually fill the gap in strength with a snowball effect.* She was a Transcendent of the Bridge Builders Cabal. That meant she used a broken spell that could singlehandedly achieve victory against the entirety of the magic side if used right.

So more than that, she felt surprise from the side of her that was a punishment expert.

(She didn’t even check to see if her defeated enemy was dead? That Anna Kingsford must be *too* strong. A strange concept.)

“Brr, it’s cold.”

Mut Thebes shivered and held herself. She wanted to get this job done with and head back home where it was warm. Hopefully the consulate still existed.

The commotion had grown a lot.

Those Anti-Skill people had decided their checkpoints weren’t working and had started to spread out more. They used tanks, armored vehicles, and what were those other ones

called? Whatever they were, Mut Thebes doubted those *puny tools* would be enough to repel Kingsford.

That woman was not Mut Thebes's target, but it was worth coming up with a plan for her if she insisted on interfering with this punishment job.

Needless to say, Kingsford did not fit the brown girl's conditions for salvation.

(But this could be a problem. Kingsford isn't a Transcendent, so the Shrink Drink won't work on her the way it will for the other Anna.)

She could protect something by killing. It was all for a free and fair society.

Mut Thebes fought to protect whatever she had decided was her territory. *For now*, she was the goddess and queen who did everything in her power to protect the Bridge Builders Cabal from external threats.

Which was also why she had made no move to stop the internal conflict between the cabal members in the consulate.

"Hm," muttered the girl as she took a look around. Was there anything here she could use?

She wanted something larger and more bizarre. She wanted something on an irreversibly large scale.

This amusement park district was lacking in reality. She spotted something while walking alongside the canal. Something was moored to the side of the canal by several chains thicker than her arm.

Was this an amusement park attraction? But it didn't appear to be a movie replica.

A nearby sign gave the specs of the new prototype being displayed.

Next Generation Aircraft Cruiser – Fugaku

Length: 300m

Total Displacement: 106,000 tons

Speed: 50 knots

Power System: fluid dynamic power generator + support diesel engine (Output: 45,000 kW)

Based on a “bigger is better” philosophy, the ship produces unrivalled firepower and extraordinary long range with 35cm guns and large cruise missiles. But it does not end there. All excess rear firepower was removed to make room for an electromagnetic catapult. This allows it to also carry 40 HsF/A-49 Sharp Frame single-seater multipurpose stealth fighter craft. The latest version is also equipped with 200 laser attack units, allowing it to fully neutralize any airborne objects, including enemy aircraft and ballistic or cruise missiles.

The fluid dynamic power generator is exactly what it sounds like. The resistance of traveling through a fluid such as the air or the seawater is utilized to generate energy. A cargo ship weighing tens of thousands of tons can be broken in two by a storm or large wave if the containers are loaded poorly. This demonstrates the unimaginable power carried by waves, so by harnessing that power, limitless power can be acquired while effectively only floating in the ocean.

The aircraft cruiser classification went out of style for a while, but it has been revived as the world’s most powerful warship using the latest Academy City technology, which allows for direct and indirect attack and defense using its various armaments. In particular, the antiair radar and ballistic prediction supercomputer provides the ship with strategic-level missile interception infrastructure even if it is cut off from the central datalink by an attack on the land facilities or by high-level electronic warfare.

“Hmm.”

The sign was exceedingly long, so Mut Thebes didn’t bother reading past the 4th line before nodding.

“300m. It should at least catch them by surprise, right?”

CHAPTER 3

Relying on R&C Occultics.

Secret_DB.

Part 1

Woo!!!

The siren was deafening.

The Six Wings attack helicopters were approaching.

Aradia was straddling the gun barrel and the 8-wheel mobile combat vehicle had been interpreted as an unidentified flying object violating restricted airspace.

Anna Sprengel had made a mess of Academy City, so they had plenty of reasons to want to kill her.

“Can’t you destroy that stupid tech with the weapons!?” asked Aradia.

“All I have is this flat console monitor, but it doesn’t say what controls what! And Anna still isn’t responding!!” shouted back Kamijou, holding the dead-eyed little wicked woman along with her chair back.

And that wasn’t the only threat.

A giant shape passed by unexpectedly close overhead.

On the flat monitor, Aradia looked up.

“What now? Come to think of it, there has to be real one of that AWACS thing flying around for Mut Thebes to use its white shadow.”

“No! That’s a...transport plane!!”

Kamijou didn't know the details. He only shouted the text displayed over the footage on the command seat's monitor.

The craft's large, wide shape resembled a whale and the cargo door at the rear sat open. It was in flight, but roofless unmanned military 4-wheel-drive vehicles slid out into the air as if on rails.

The mobile combat vehicle's armor did nothing to protect Aradia while she was outside making the 20ton vehicle fly. If one of those landed on her, she would be squashed between the two vehicles!

"Aradia!!"

"I...know!!"

The inertial force shifted to the side as the flying mobile combat vehicle curved in an S-shape to avoid the falling metal. After a vehicle missed its target, it fell a bit further before deploying a trio of parachutes that blossomed like flowers. The transport plane continued pursuing them from overhead, dropping air cargo containers like dice. Maybe they were full of fuel and maybe ammo, but they weren't guided air-to-air weapons and they couldn't reach their target.

For a brief moment, everything was still, like the eye of the storm. The interior lights returned to the ordinary LED lighting.

But it wouldn't last.

Something slowly arrived at an even greater altitude than the transport plane.

"Another large shape?" said Aradia. "C'mon, your sketchy tech can't bring us down if it wasn't designed for air combat."

"No, this is something different. What, I'm not sure, but it's bad news!!"

At first glance, its shape looked similar to the transport plane.

But it was not the same.

A portion of the fuselage slid open and a Gatling gun, a grenade launcher, and a tank gun emerged.

A strange term appeared on the console monitor: gunship.

Kamijou wasn't sure what to make of the English term, but then the interior lights turned red again.

That was a lock-on warning. Did that mean this attack would be guided!?

“Evasive action! You can't let this hit us!!!”

“Don't boss me around when you're just sitting inside yelling! I'll obey this particular instruction, though!!” shouted back Aradia, forcing the mobile combat vehicle to swerve side to side.

A storm of destruction rained down on them. In addition to the bombing, the Gatling gun opened fire. It was like a searchlight made of lead and explosives. Each speck was a piece of lead larger than a thumb and they attacked at a rate of between 6000 and 8000 per minute. Aradia swung the Predator Octopus around to avoid the line of fire sweeping side to side from overhead. She slipped them right underneath one of the Six Wings still in pursuit.

The line of gunfire contacted the unmanned attack helicopter.

The fearsome Six Wings was torn to pieces and exploded in mere moments.

But they had survived.

Unfortunately, their umbrella made of composite armor and an aluminum and stainless steel frame had been shredded.

“Make sure you don't bite your tongue!!” warned Aradia.

“Yikes!!”

Kamijou clenched his teeth hard while pulling in Anna who still sat limply in the command seat.

The screen showed Aradia running her hands along the gun barrel she was straddling. As soon as she took a forward-leaning pose like she was riding a motorcycle, the ground rapidly approached.

The explosion of the attack helicopter must have briefly blinded the gunship overhead.

They quickly passed the 4-wheel-drive vehicles still floating down on their parachutes. When the pursuing Gatling gun fire pierced one of the containers, tracer rounds scattered

in every direction with the force of a firecracker. An ammo case must have been ignited. The way the container's contents continued to go off while it floated down on its parachute was terrifying. It was like a disco ball of death.

Aradia made quick evasive action to the sides while nervously shouting to Kamijou.

A major road was quickly growing to life size.

"Here goes. 3, 2, 1!"

They fell.

The 20ton Predator Octopus had flown from the giant District 6 amusement park, passed right over District 5, and now set its thick tires down on a District 7 road.

Instead of crashing straight down, they landed diagonally as if sliding down onto the road.

The screech of the tearing and burning rubber sounded like a broken whistle.

Kamijou could feel the tires and ground below them for what felt like the first time in forever.

"We're falling!!"

"Don't worry. You have a witch's guidance – and the goddess of all witches at that. I won't screw up this landing."

The Gatling gun fire pouring down from the sky easily chewed up the hard asphalt and drew out an S-shape like an approaching serpent.

If the landing killed their ordinary momentum, the gunfire would catch up. Aradia twisted her hips atop the barrel to push the Predator Octopus toward a side road. Technically, it wasn't really a road. It looked more like a large common utility duct...or maybe a disaster shelter.

The metal sign indicating the sloped entrance burst like a balloon, but it ended there. The downpour of lead could not reach them underground.

"Incredible," gasped Kamijou.

"What is? You had better not be complimenting those hunks of metal over me."

Aradia twisted around on the barrel to glare back toward him.

Magic was convenient, but they would still be too conspicuous if they paraded down a major road with a lovely young woman straddling the thick gun barrel. She had chosen to do it herself, but it looked more like some kind of punishment.

The siren was still going.

The enemy remained on alert.

The slope provided a small view outside.

The Six Wings continued circling overhead for a bit, but they eventually flew off elsewhere. Had they decided they were no use with this terrain? An urban area filled with buildings of various sizes reduced radar accuracy in the first place and they must have had an even harder time scanning an underground space.

(But how long will it take for Anti-Skill to collect the vehicles and containers they sent parachuting down? We can't stay here forever!)

The disturbing siren finally ended.

The actual threat remained, but Kamijou still breathed a reflexive sigh of relief.

Aradia reopened the hatch and climbed back in.

"So has Anna recovered? We need her back by the time we reach District 15 so she can explain the cabal's secret for us. Is she still trembling in nightmare mode?"

"She's better than before...I think."

Anna's head was lolling to the side in the command seat, but when Kamijou waved his hand in front of her face, her eyes did follow it. She hadn't fully recovered from the shock, but she did seem conscious.

Kamijou put on his best "helping a lost child" smile.

"Everything is going to be alright, Anna. That weird Kingsford person is gone now."

"Eep!?"

"You probably shouldn't say that name out loud," sighed Aradia.

Anna was behaving like a small child after a nightmare.



“It’ll be alright! She was certainly a scary lady, but she hasn’t caught up to us here. We got away.”

“She’s gone? That monster is really gone?”

“Absolutely.”

“Sniff, uh. Wahhhh...”

Anna Sprengel clutched Kamijou’s jacket with her small hands and rubbed her forehead against him. It was actually quite disturbing coming from her.

Given her past behavior, that is.

Kamijou stared into the distance.

“Hold on. Could we nip a lot of problems in the bud by saying ‘Kingsford is coming to get you’ whenever she misbehaves?”

“Yeep!?”

“Bh!? She’s not here!! She really isn’t! You’ll always be our choice for the #1 Anna!!!”

“Don’t you dare cause a relapse. Even if I do understand the desire to get even with her,” complained Aradia (while missing the mark a bit on his intentions).

Climbing a mountain was slow-going, but falling back down happened in an instant.

Consoling crybaby Anna felt like stacking up rocks at Sai-no-Kawara.

“Why do I get the feeling you’ve done this before?” asked Aradia, sounding somehow exasperated.

“Because I have. I mean, all Transcendents – not just Alice – are basically selfish brats who never pay any attention to their surroundings, so getting along with them is a real pain in the- ow!? U-um, Aradia-san? Present company excluded, of course.”

All in all, it took longer than expected.

The passage of time was hard to notice in the windowless vehicle, but it had to be well past midday by now.

That said, Aradia's flight had broken all the rules. Academy City hadn't expected it at all, so they had made a significant shortcut.

The pursuers had to be confused and it would take time for them to piece together the information and track down Kamijou's group, so they had to make what progress they could in that time.

And finally...

"Sniff."

Anna of all people was sniffing.

But she still glared past her tears to view the command seat's console monitor.

She hadn't fully recovered, but she had raised her head and was facing forward again.

"Let's keep going. As much distance as we gained, we're still in the same city. If we spend too long here, Kingsford will catch up again."

"Thank goodness. Anna's back to normal."

"I was not crying!! I was never anything but 'normal'!!"

The 8-wheel mobile combat vehicle slowly resumed driving and emerged on the surface.

There was no sign of the adults who had gone to collect the roofless 4-wheel-drive vehicles.

Had they gone elsewhere afterwards, or were they having more trouble than expected separating the parachutes? Kamijou could imagine the vehicles being immobilized because their own equipment got all tangled up in the tires and steering wheel.

The streets weren't quite deserted. The group wearing their school uniforms during the break were likely Judgment members sent out on patrol or assigned to keep critical areas organized. The distinctive armbands confirmed it. But Kamijou also saw the occasional boys and girls wearing casual clothing. They were aiming their phones at the city from elevated locations, so they may have been getting footage of the empty streets to go viral on social media. Maybe they wanted to transmit to the world that they had violated the rules, but Kamijou could only pray their accounts weren't banned for it.

"Aren't those adults part of that Anti-Skill group?" asked Aradia while playing with the periscope-like device meant for Kamijou's seat.

“What about it?”

“They keep looking at us. Let’s hope our license plate doesn’t tell them we weren’t assigned to this area.”

That was a worrying theory, but not one they could verify.

Even if they were rousing some suspicions, no one was making a radio call and sending in a tank or attack helicopter, so it was best to continue obeying the traffic laws and leave before those suspicions grew to certainty.

District 7 bordered District 15. District 7 was longer north-to-south, so it would be fastest to travel to the southwest end of the district.

Which brought them to...

“I recognize that out-of-place European architecture. Is that the School Garden?” wondered Kamijou while watching the monitor.

That said, all he could see was an extremely tall wall and metal fence. But even the outer wall looked fancy in that exclusive territory of girl’s schools.

He stared at that European style.

Since he fled the consulate without a word of warning, he couldn’t help but worry about Misaka Mikoto when he saw anything associated with Tokiwadai. But if he pulled out his old folk’s smartphone and gave her a call, he would have to worry about her using Academy City’s #3 Level 5 power to track him down.

That probably wouldn’t end well for Misaka Mikoto herself.

Meanwhile...

“Fool, how long is Academy City’s winter break?”

“Huh? I think it depends on the school, but...generally until the 8th or the 10th maybe? Oh, but I have no clue when it comes to the universities. Then again, winter break can’t be that different can it? Unlike summer break.”

“Then is that some kind of club activity?”

He finally noticed thanks to Anna’s warning.

A few girls were standing in front of one of the gates. They all wore Tokiwadai uniforms and coats.

“Uh, oh,” groaned Kamijou.

Was that Shirai Kuroko of Judgment and a few of the Sisters? That was an unusual combination, but apparently the new year meant new rules.

Also, they were all looking this way.

Aradia tilted her head while viewing the monitor.

“Can’t we just ignore them and leave?”

“You must be joking! Underestimating Japan’s middle school girls is a bad idea. Shirai there is a teleporter. We couldn’t escape her driving full speed in a sports car. In the worst case, she could even teleport right inside the vehicle with us!!”

This was so frustrating.

He knew Shirai Kuroko and the Sisters weren’t bad people, but he couldn’t ask them for help.

The overly broad category of “Academy City” was such a nuisance.

The external microphone picked up their voices.

“Isn’t that an Anti-Skill vehicle?” asked a Sister.

“So what if it is? This street is still off limits to large vehicles due to its weight limit. We should warn them all the same,” replied Shirai

One Sister wore a heart necklace, so she was likely #10032.

“Hm.” Misaka Sister stared expressionlessly into the distance. “Involving ourselves in those grownup problems is inefficient. Misaka is more interested in the dashi vending machine she saw earlier, says Misaka as she pours all her efforts into distracting you.”

“Hey! Where do you think you’re going!? You have been tasked with preserving order, so you can’t just leave your post!!”

“Oh, shut up. Perhaps a hug will silence you, says Misaka as she attempts a stronger approach.”

“You must be joking. Onee-sama is my one and only goddess, so- ohhhhh, I’m being smothered in hugs by girls with Onee-sama’s face! My brain is glitching out!?”

Kamijou saw the Misaka Sister bow his way while they left.

(Did she know this was me?)

He had no way of confirming that.

After passing by the School Garden, they kept driving the Predator Octopus. The attack from Mut Thebes that morning felt like it had only just happened, but it was already late evening.

They passed below a blue road sign crossing the wide main road like a pedestrian bridge.

The scenery soon changed.

Looking up showed rows of high-tech high-rise buildings. Looking at the ground level showed trendy accessory shops that looked straight out of a fashion magazine. The signs seemed to reject ordinary customers by saying they had no space for products that were simply meant to sell. Kamijou had never had much reason to visit this district during his time living in the city.

This district contained the cutting edge of fashion, but it was currently deserted.

Maybe the people who frequented this district were so accustomed to breaking the rules to stand out that they knew how much you could get away with before getting in real trouble.

“We’ve finally arrived, fool,” said Anna Sprengel, tapping her finger on the command seat’s console monitor. “This is District 15.”

Part 2

The sun had fully set.

It was already dark out.

And the mobile combat vehicle had come to a complete stop.

“Another standstill?”

“Not to worry, fool. No one has found us this time. This is District 15, the most well-known shopping district in the city, so Academy City is being more careful defending it.”

Anna Sprengel kicked her little feet below the command seat while observing things outside through the screen.

She appeared to have recovered some from her previous panic.

“Also, this doesn’t look like your average security. It’s probably a patrol by unmanned ground vehicles. After using their map app to follow their preprogrammed course, they should move elsewhere.”

They were in a back road just off of the main road where the military vehicles were holding a parade.

The Predator Octopus had been installed with a drone, so they were using that now. Kamijou was kind of impressed. Safety was a wonderful thing. The way they had a top-down view of things outside while hiding behind cover reminded him of a video game minimap. This way they didn’t have to worry about emerging nervously from around a corner, running into Anti-Skill, and having that eerie siren start up again. There was of course a risk of Anti-Skill spying on them from above in the same way and the control signal could always be traced back to its source.

Also, Kamijou was alone with Anna right now.

Aradia had left the vehicle again. The witch goddess loved the forests and nature, so she found it stifling to go without fresh air for too long. When Kamijou rotated the rooftop camera – the periscope? – he saw the scantily-clad woman stretching on the pavement.

Kamijou wished she would stay inside because he feared someone would happen to see her while she was out there.

With her back to the camera, Aradia raised her arms overhead and stretched upwards and then smoothly bent her upper body from side to side.

She was also saying something.

“Ah, eh, ee, uh, eh, oh, ah, oh.”

Was that voice training? Maybe that was necessary for reciting incantations.

She was probably aware of the camera, but had she realized the microphone would pick up her voice too? She was so weirdly unguarded that Kamijou felt like he was peeping on her bathing even though she wasn't doing anything indecent.

"On second thought, this is pretty indecent. Twisting her hips and arching her back while dressed like that in public qualifies if you ask me. Curse that flexible banana woman."

"What are you watching, fool?"

Little Anna got after him. And she sounded miffed instead of her usual exasperation, so the boy felt ice down his spine. He quickly moved away from the periscope.

(Aradia's the one who went out there dressed like that! I didn't do anything wrong!!)

The silence in the vehicle suddenly felt extremely awkward.

"Man, you can't see anything out there. See, I was trying to keep an eye on things outside, but it's completely dark out thanks to the martial law, so there's nothing to even see. Talk about a waste of ti-"

"To interrupt your suspiciously fast explanation there, were you aware this vehicle includes a crew recorder? It automatically activates upon detecting a voice, so everything said inside here is logged."

"Please keep this a secret! I'll do anything, Anna!! If Aradia hears what I said, she'll kick me right through the gut, killing me instantly!! And I know she can do it!!!"

"Then hand over what you're hiding."

Little Anna smiled her wicked woman grin while holding out her little palm.

"When we were stocking up at the discount store, you bought some junk food you kept hidden from that nature witch, didn't you? The extremely processed kind. That store had the customer bag their own purchases, so anything you didn't want Aradia knowing about you could easily slip out of the bag and – for example – hide it in the pockets of your new jacket."

"Ugh."

"The high school mind is little more than an explosion of hunger and lust, so it isn't hard to predict. When you have extra money, you would never stick to just meals. I can see

right through you, so if you want my silence, you had better fill my mouth with junk food. Trick or treat☆”

Kamijou gave in and emptied his new jacket’s pockets. Anna licked her lips and began making her selection.

She had made fun of him for it, but apparently she too would die without the occasional junk food.

“What is this? It’s so thin and crispy. Is it a ham cutlet?”

“Trying it is faster than attempting to logically work out what it must be. But as surprising as it might seem, that is in fact fried fish. Never underestimate the quality of Japanese snacks, Anna.”

“Heh heh. I see. This is excellent. Hee hee. A wonderfully cheap and depraved flavor.”

Anna could be awfully honest at times like this. She grabbed the junk food bag in both hands and began nibbling at the cutlet-like food that emerged from one end.

With mystery gummies made with 0% fruit juice and ultra-sweet sugar-free chocolate, everything here would have caused nature-loving Aradia to evolve from kind older sister to furious mother.

Kamijou began munching on a round snack called Mr. Cabbage, which didn’t look like it had cabbage in it at all.

“Anna. What’s your plan after this is over?”

“After it’s over?”

She sounded puzzled, like she hadn’t even considered that possibility.

And eventually...

“Search for a king.”

“You mean to rule over you?”

“Of course, fool,” quietly confirmed Anna Sprengel.

One snack wasn’t enough for her, so she grabbed a large spiral lollipop.

“A king who will bind my wicked nature. I don’t know if someone like that exists, but if they do, I can make a compromise with this world. As you can plainly see, I bring only ruin and destruction when I am left free.”

“If you know that...”

“If I could quit on my own, I wouldn’t be searching for a king to force me.”

She laughed and narrowed her eyes in amusement.

Kamijou could sense something was wrong here.

“I am sick of reigning supreme.”

The wicked woman pulled her legs up into the command seat to take up less space.

When she spoke, it seemed directed at herself more than Kamijou.

“I am sick and tired of trying to teach people things. I keep explaining it for them and I even write it down in letters anyone can understand, but no one ever even bothers to try and achieve the correct answer. They want to know the secret art of miracles so badly, but they want it faster and simpler and they end up skipping steps and taking shortcuts. I have shown them step by step how to take the safe and certain path, but they omit the fundamentals and ultimately fail in devastating ways.”

Anna Sprengel was enshrouded in mystery.

What exactly was the Rosicrucian magic cabal? How could she be the original owner of Aiwass when Aleister was supposed to be his master? And why was she so terrified of that mystery woman named Anna Kingsford?

Of course, Kamijou knew he wouldn’t receive an answer if he asked her here.

She would undoubtedly rebuke him for taking the easy route.

So he instead touched on a core point he already knew about.

“I hope you find your king.”

“Yes.”

While curled up in her seat, she rested her chin on her knees and narrowed her eyes in a smile.

“I do hope they are out there somewhere, fool.”

Part 3

“Now, I ☹ it is ⌚ to get moving,” whispered Anna Kingsford.

Miss Sprengel, Mut Thebes, and Kamijou Touma. When she had asked who to target and pursue with her divination, her injured student had given the following answer.

“It is ⌚ to find *the one we must defeat*.”

Part 4

After confirming with the drone that the patrolling vehicles on the main street had left, Kamijou called Aradia back into the mobile combat vehicle.

“Huh? Why are you so warm, Aradia?”

“You should try getting some exercise too. The heater isn’t enough to warm the core of your body.”

They drove slowly through the shopping district night, obeying the traffic laws within the wild military vehicle.

“Wait, wait, wait. Everything’s dark. And we’re on District 15’s main street. This is supposed to be a terrifyingly bright and shining land of fashion. District 15 should be a poison zone for me. I should be taking damage each step I take.”

“This is nothing compared to true martial law, fool. Japan really is a peaceful country. The higher ups have declared martial law, but they still have the traffic lights running for the people sneaking out into the city. And they haven’t shut down communications like TV, radio, phones, and internet.”

“If they shut all that down, it would cause a panic.”

“Yes, fool, but declaring martial law is supposed to mean you are prepared to handle the consequences like that.”

They drove slowly through the dark and silent city.

“Stretchy, stretchy.”

Aradia was again stretching her cheeks while staring into Kamijou’s old folk’s smartphone. She even pushed up on the corners of her mouth with her fingers to form a smile. Kamijou felt as awkward as seeing a schoolgirl set up her phone by the train window and start dancing when she thought the car had emptied out.

A staticky voice came from the console monitor Anna was messing with.

“Delta here. Do you read me?”

“Whisky. The encryption is working perfectly. It does introduce lag to the conversation, though.”

Kamijou tilted his head.

“What are you doing? Accessing the Anti-Skill radio?”

“This is amateur radio. Some students questioned the safety of smartphones since everything passes through a large server somewhere, so they appear to have set up a radio forum. This isn’t much safer, though,” said Anna as they drove by a 10m-tall mobile interception antenna tower.

They may have used an outdated term like “forum” because they were trying to distance themselves from cutting-edge smartphones.

“Tango here. Take a look through your telescopes. Something huge is blocking the moon.”

“Charlie. That’s not standard orbit. Are they doing something on the space station?”

Maybe that was accurate and maybe not, but the thought of something happening in space was pretty scary. Kamijou decided it was best to end this before an even more dangerous trigger could be pulled. They were already inside District 15. He wanted to avoid being hit by a major attack at this point.

“This is the place,” said Anna.

That phrase carried a lot of weight.

The Predator Octopus had arrived at a certain location.

A large shape loomed overhead.

The mass of concrete weighed tens of thousands of tons.

But...

“*This is?*” asked Kamijou after sticking his head out of the hatch.

He had been imagining something like a secret military base, but he instead found something completely ordinary, even if he didn’t recognize it.

It was...

“Um, this is a cinema complex?”

“Yes, it’s a collection of movie theaters. An unusually large collection, but still.”

The skyscraper was so tall that panning the screen up with the camera wasn’t enough to see the top and it was entirely filled with movie theaters. This was such a popular place that it was rumored the results here determined which movie was considered the year’s most popular. It was also famous for having the director and cast make an appearance on opening night.

Little Anna Sprengel sighed at the other two.

“Why would I hide my secret in a blatantly suspicious fortress? A sturdy safe would only draw attention. To win on the intelligence front, you need an inconspicuous location that will blend into the background.”

Was that how it worked?

Kamijou remained nervous and Anna laughed wickedly.

“In Academy City, most movies are not played by shining light through film. With an adequate optical network, you don’t even need to distribute physical media to each movie theater. Heh heh. It’s sad really. Hee hee. Video aside, the analog audio is superior to a digital signal, but the people traveling all the way to the theater can’t even tell the diff-”

“Huh, that’s fascinating. And it’s a lot more convincing coming from a wicked woman who was once turned into a human film canister.”

Little Anna’s shoulders jumped.

Aradia had rudely interrupted her, but she forgot all about being angry.

She really did behave better when someone mentioned Kingsford. You could probably get her to eat her vegetables by telling her Kingsford could come to get her if she didn't.

District 15 was Academy City's largest shopping district, so it was short on land. Similar to an area with tons of convenience stores but no parking lots. So the cinema complex apparently had its staff parking built underground.

"Won't someone question a military vehicle entering here?"

"Not to worry, fool. This was only meant to bring us to the magic database. It doesn't matter much now that we've arrived."

Apparently Kamijou's worries were unnecessary.

They entered the staff parking without permission, but no guard got after them. The place was deserted. The parking garage's fluorescent lights weren't even on.

Kamijou doubted they were just closed for the holiday. The martial law had to be the cause. The confusion of that declaration was obvious from how the lights and air conditioning were deactivated, but the shutters remained open.

"Let's go, fool and rural witch. ...I-I said let's go!"

Anna Sprengel grabbed the smart glasses that let her operate the mobile combat vehicle from outside, but she seemed somehow nervous as she exited. But wasn't this where she had hid her secret?

"Uhh."

She clung to Kamijou's left side.

Was arrogant Anna Sprengel really trembling as she stared into the darkness ahead? Almost like a child afraid to walk outside at night.

"Anna?"

"Shut up! You saw Kingsford, fool. Anything goes with her – in a bad way. The thought of her smiling face emerging from the shadows is just- ugh."

Telling her she was overreacting wouldn't help.

This reaction was based in fear, but that woman had inspired this much fear in Anna. She had to be extraordinary. It was best to assume she wouldn't enter through the door like a normal person.

And...

“ ... ”

Kamijou felt a soft weight on his other side.

Witch Goddess Aradia had taken his right arm.

Tears formed in the corners of Anna's eyes.

“Hey! Leave the fool's right hand free so he can use it at a moment's notice, you lewd seductive banana woman!! What if Kingsford appears without warning!?”

“Shut up, you lonely crybaby wicked woman,” Aradia replied quietly but sharply.

Kamijou felt a strange pressure of a sort only a higher being could understand.

“Wait, the elevators still work with the power shut down?”

“My, my. D-don't let that surprise you, fool. This is far easier than hijacking an online military weapon. Hee hee hee. I can close someone in and send it plummeting to the ground from outside.”

(Maybe because she was doing her best to distract herself from her fear of Kingsford,) Anna Sprengel's voice was unusually unstable and hyper. Kamijou also had a feeling he needed to give her a talking to later on. Although if he used the Special Kingsford Attack too often, he feared it would lose its effectiveness.

Meanwhile, Aradia sounded thoughtful in her own way.

“The theater...the stage.”

“?”

The giant cinema complex had countless movie theaters stacked on top of each other, but Anna wasn't taking them to any of those. She opened a plain metal door and stepped into a behind-the-scenes control room.

Kamijou had seen something similar on TV.

Specifically, he saw an audio console lined with more a hundred sliders, just like at a TV station or a recording studio. Monitors showing what was being played in each theater were lined up like in a security room and several industrial computers larger than refrigerators were lined up along the wall.

“This is the central theater control room. I’m sure you know they don’t hand-crank a projector nowadays, but if you extended the fiber optic cable to your home, you could watch it from there.”

“So this is the place?”

“Correct, fool. This equipment is used to download the movie file from a central server located elsewhere and then play it on the appropriate screens. But they can’t afford for the line to be busy, so they have more than 5 large capacity lines running in parallel to ensure they won’t experience even 0.2 seconds of lag. Which makes this a treasure trove of unused space the theater staff isn’t even aware of.”

Maybe magicians just liked to explain things because Anna talked on and on as she walked further in. She sat in a chair much too large for her and started up the equipment like she knew what she was doing.

As usual, Aradia’s dislike of Academy City had her over by the wall where she could keep her distance from the monitors. She apparently wasn’t aware that “wall” was actually the large computers. Was she trying to master the careless older sister class?

“More strange tech? Can you really reveal the world’s secrets with this?”

“Oh? Isn’t all magic much the same?”

Surprisingly, the equipment looked like an ordinary computer as it booted up.

But before that boot up was complete, Anna pressed a key combination Kamijou didn’t recognize and a different screen popped up. It was only white text on a red background. This was either an industrial mode or a special mode the computer’s actual owners weren’t aware of. Anna selected a few options written in English and directly typed in what appeared to be a command to search through the data she had hidden in the unseen space of that vast storage device.

The screen became a lot more understandable then.

It was the R&C Occultics homepage that Kamijou had seen on his old folk’s smartphone. Maybe this was an older version, but she had apparently kept a full backup.

The little wicked woman typed a language other than Japanese and English into the search box. She had probably switched modes in some way, but Kamijou was surprised to see she could use the keyboard to type characters that looked like the ancient writing from an other world fantasy.

(Then again, maybe Japanese keyboards look just as strange to everyone else in the world. They let you type hiragana, katakana, kanji, numbers, the alphabet, symbols, and even emoticons with the one device.)

The screen arrived at a certain entry in the magic database.

“Here we go. This is it, fool. Reviewing the material leads to the same result.”

Anna was speaking under her breath, so she probably wasn’t really trying to explain anything to Kamijou or Aradia.

Her eyes followed the text on the coldly glowing screen and she spoke her knowledge aloud in order to compare the past with the present.

“The Transcendents of the Bridge Builders Cabal. H. T. Trismegistus is most likely from BCE times. Good, Old Mary is from around the 3rd century at the latest. Yet the spells they receive from their Secret Chiefs display hints of Magick.”

The R&C Occultics magic database came from all the secret knowledge and techniques Anna Sprengel had typed up herself.

She was only relying on her own reference material because she wanted solid confirmation outside of her own head. This was similar to reading back through her mountain of notes in chronological order to organize her thesis.

This meant something had that wicked woman so concerned that she needed to check each and every little thing to put her mind at ease.

“Fool. The first thing you have to keep in mind is that the Transcendents exist to protect others. Just like Aradia there.”

“ ... ”

Aradia didn’t respond to the mention and remained by the wall with her arms crossed.

Anna shrugged.

“But they each want to protect a different group. It could be persecuted witches, the falsely accused, anyone not in the privileged class, or the people unseen among the masses who are satisfied with their current lives. There might be some overlap, but never a perfect match. If any one of them tries to protect someone, they will bring harm to the people another Transcendent is attempting to protect. So none of the Transcendents is allowed to act on their own.”

The Bologna Succubus had already explained this to Kamijou.

That was why the Transcendents had gathered and started talking things out. They had wanted to create a world where all of them could save their targets of salvation without interfering with each other. It was like an extremely complex puzzle, so they had talked on and on in search of an answer.

Alice Anotherbible was independent and capricious, so she threatened to ruin all of that.

Alice was still young(?), so she likely hadn't decided on her conditions for salvation yet. So she might wield extreme violence on a whim, or she might save the innocent on a whim.

Did they save people based on a list of rules?

Or did they save people on a whim?

Kamijou still couldn't decide which was more ordinary and human.

“So they decided to create a certain person.”

“?”

This deviated from what Kamijou knew.

It gave him a discordant feeling like the record needle had just skipped to a different song.

What kind of corroborative evidence did Anna have of this? She slowly scrolled down the screen and viewed the many formulas displayed there to reinforce her knowledge.

“They concluded they could never reach the answer on their own. No matter how hard they tried to solve the complex puzzle, someone would inevitably bring harm to someone else's salvation target. *But if they could create someone capable of solving that problem, they concluded they could save the entire world.*”

“What...are you talking about?” asked Kamijou, astonished.

They were dumping the problem on someone else?

Something was wrong with the world and the people they cared for would die if they didn't start fixing the problem immediately. They understood that perfectly, but they ultimately let go of the world's lifeline and handed it off to someone else entirely?

But when he thought about it, the very idea of there being Transcendent people tasked with saving the world was based on the assumption that there were *special geniuses* who were superior to everyone else. Unlike the Magic Gods, the Transcendents did not expect to be worshipped. Was it H. T. Trismegistus who had said that? That meant they didn't seek the understanding or sympathy of those below them. The decision of the majority was final and they didn't bother to explain to the 7 or 8 billion people how they were being saved.

Take that reasoning further and the Transcendents themselves formed a pyramid hierarchy with a special being at the very top.

They believed they could save the entire world if they created that one person.

"Think back, fool. I said they displayed hints of Magick, didn't I? That is the Crowley brand of magic."

"You mean *that* Crowley?"

Kamijou was of course very familiar with the name.

Anna sighed.

"Correct. Aleister theorized that what you could call a soul enters a baby's body three months after conception and he released a spell based on that theory. His theory implies *there is no soul there until the 90th day of pregnancy, so he thought you could guide whatever soul you wanted into the body during that time*. That would allow you to give a physical body to a superhuman beast or spirit and then *manage* it as your own child."

Kamijou had known Aleister had a bad reputation as a magician, but had he really gone that far?

"Specifically, you impregnate a woman using a special method, place her in the center of the ceremonial ground, and arrange the appropriate magical symbols around her. Cursed gems, a special magic sword – things like that. Then you use purification and barrier spells to thoroughly clean away all forces that would have an unnecessary influence on the

process. An empty place like a desert is convenient there. That way the child in the woman's uterus receives only the necessary forces, so the magician has complete control over the creation and growth of the body and they can create exactly the child they want."

"Wait...you're dressing it up in a lot of magic terminology, but how is that any different from taking a delicate pregnant woman and pumping her full of nasty chemicals based on some human recipe you created!?"

"Did I ever say it was different, fool? Keep in mind that Aleister Crowley was known as the wickedest man in the world and the 20th century's greatest villain because his magic research included the use of young boys and drugs in his ceremonial grounds. That magician ignored the moral issues in pursuit of what he wanted, so do you really expect him to make an exception because someone is pregnant or not even born yet?"

"..."

"By violating that taboo, you can acquire a beast or spirit beyond human understanding. *Of course he would do it.* This is the human who created a temple known as Academy City in the Far East, developed esper powers by using drugs and electrodes on children as young as 1st grade, and created more than 20 thousand human clones only to have them killed."

After all that, Anna Sprengel shrugged. She must have seen the look on Kamijou's face.

"He completed the logic of the spell. That much is true. But, fool, you should already know how emotional Aleister could be about his family. The annoying thing about that human is how his outward actions don't tell you everything about who he is."

Kamijou recalled when Aleister had held the baby Lilith and wept in the UK. Or the reason he had begun the Battle of Blythe Road all on his own.

From a young age, he had been persecuted by those who claimed to be good and moral, so he had sought familial love more than anyone else. But at the same time, he had also carried out heartless experiments and research. He was an extremely complicated person.

Perhaps that was why he was so thoroughly hated by the majority of people who needed no excitement in their lives and, for better or for worse, sought a peaceful life. They had seen him as an unstable and incomprehensible detonator for the world.

"But..."

Why had she brought up Aleister Crowley's spell here in the first place?

What did it have to do with the mysterious Transcendents of the Bridge Builders Cabal?

Seeing how puzzled Kamijou was, Aradia spoke up.

“We chose a method that doesn’t use a pregnant woman.”

“So? You were still messing with the fertilized egg undergoing cleavage in the test tube. Even in the original Crowley version, the mother remained an ordinary human. Birthing a special child did not remake her into a holy mother who could cause miracles.”

The little wicked woman patted her own stomach while laying out her accusations.

And she winked.

“Crowley used the word karma in reference to the current or directionality of the force that binds the soul. And he said that karma could not be judged good or evil – high or low.”

“You mean...?”

Kamijou looked over at Aradia by the wall.

Anna laughed as she continued.

“The Transcendents were the people who could not find a perfect form of salvation even with their connections to the powerful Secret Chiefs. I said an empty desert would work best, but they attempted to grasp perfect righteousness by surrounding their sterile container with imperfect good. Whether we are talking about a Saint, a Magic God, or a Great Demon, any perfected form of good will not function as the karma needed to draw in a different sort of being. The Transcendents theorized their imperfection and incompleteness would allow them to function as the unique trigger capable of drawing in their savior like a magnet. Hee hee. You were willing to use anything, weren’t you?”

“ ... ”

“But in the end, the sin is the same. They blotted out an existing life to bring an inhuman being to this physical world. That is merely another form of human sacrifice – an exchange ceremony used to obtain the mystical.”

What had the Bridge Builders Cabal wanted badly enough to do that?

Or rather, who exactly had they created?

There was only one candidate.

“Alice-”

“*It was not Alice Anotherbible,*” quietly interrupted Witch Goddess Aradia.

She was still leaning against the equipment by the wall and refused to look at Kamijou.

While Anna was an irregularity and a traitor, Aradia was a pure and genuine Transcendent. She had to know what their plan was.

Anna Sprengel had messed with Alice because she wanted to stop that plan. That was why Alice adored Kamijou as her “teacher” despite him never having met her before. But if Alice was the core of the Transcendents’ plan, Anna would have had other options.

She could have directly harmed Alice to remove her from the picture.

Or if killing her wasn’t an option, she could have embedded a poison-like spell in the girl’s body to immobilize her.

Someone as wicked as her was bound to know some tricks for defeating an opponent too powerful for a traditional attack to work.

Kamijou had always thought she seemed to prefer indirect methods.

Alice Anotherbible certainly stood out as unusual in the cabal, so she probably could have done considerable damage to the cabal’s plan if she opposed their decision regarding Kamijou.

But was that enough to say the plan’s destruction was a sure thing?

Anna had turned Kamijou into Alice’s controller(?). Now, Kamijou didn’t know if the Transcendents’ plan to save the world was good or bad, but what would Anna have done if they had explained their plan to him and he decided it wouldn’t be a problem and they should go through with it?

In other words...

Alice Anotherbible was an important part of this, *but she was not the very center.*

So who was?

Who was this monster capable of pushing aside Alice of all people?

“Fool, you already have the answer. The name has been right there in front of us all along.”

Anna’s next statement was brief but tense.

“Which is why I want to stop their plan.”

“?”

Anna did not give any further answer and instead worked at extracting the data from the audio console. However, that did not mean searching out a port and inserting a USB memory stick. She took out an aluminum-looking device resembling the heated tobacco products Kamijou had seen in convenience store ads and simply placed it atop the console. It apparently read and forcibly saved the faint magnetic field produced when a computer sent electronic signals back and forth. Which meant she didn’t have to consider passwords or security when copying it over.

Either the data she wanted didn’t require much space or that extraction device was incredibly efficient. After seeing the LED flash a few times, Anna picked the device back up.

“Would H. T. Trismegistus be the best one to contact? He is something of a manager. Either way, this lets us directly negotiate with that cabal of Transcendents. As long as we know the details of their ceremony, we only need to remove one of the many conditions needed for success and the rest of the plan will come crashing down. ...Also, this isn’t the only bombshell I have on them.”

Anna toyed with the metal device, but made no attempt to explain further. She shut off the large computer screen since she no longer needed it.

But just before she did, Kamijou’s eyes happened on a certain piece of text.

Alongside the symbol of a special cross, he saw the name of the person the Transcendents had unanimously chosen to recognize.

Their savior was named...

...Ch...s.....ut...

“Chris...?”

Part 5

Meanwhile, Transcendent Mut Thebes whispered to herself.

She was focused on some distinctive tire tracks left on the cold road.

But she was observing them from a large distance.

“Found you.”

Part 6

Kathoom!!!

A tremor thrust up at them from below. Kamijou seriously did lose his balance and fall to the floor before he heard the sound of snapping metal. The anti-earthquake supports broke and the refrigerator-size computers by the wall began to topple, one after another.

“Whoops.”

Aradia tugged on little Anna’s hand and then picked her up to protect her from the falling machinery.

And...

“The trouble I go through for you.”

Kamijou heard a high-pitched sound.

As soon as Aradia ran her bare feet across the floor, a circular shockwave formed around her. The professional computers had to weigh at least several dozen kilos each, but all of them were smashed against the wall.

“Saving this little wicked woman despite her misdeeds counts as a good deed. So as a witch, you owe me thrice the benefit in return, world.”

Kamijou stared in astonishment after she saved him from the group of machines that possibly weighed as much as a ton.

“Th-thank-”

“Hmph. It is only natural for the witch goddess to save you,” interrupted Aradia, brushing her silver hair back from her shoulder with her empty hand.

She then released Anna whose face had been pressed into Aradia’s chest.

“Also, we don’t have time to discuss it. What caused the tremor matters more than the tremor itself. This reinforced concrete building has to weigh 150 thousand tons, so it would take more than a traffic accident to shake it that badly.”

The deep siren ended suddenly.

Unnaturally suddenly.

That meant Academy City likely hadn’t used their online controls to shut it off for some reason. Most likely, all of the outdoor speakers had been destroyed.

All of them? Over how wide an area?

“What’s happening?”

Kamijou was creeped out, but he wasn’t going to find an answer in this small room. It had no windows.

While on the run, that siren had been a symbol of death, but it was still part of the infrastructure meant to warn the city’s people of danger.

If that had been destroyed...

“This isn’t Academy City’s next-gen tech. Why did the siren cut out like that?”

This meant someone was here.

But who?

Was it Transcendent Mut Thebes of the Bridge Builders Cabal? Or was it Anna Kingsford who was working with Aleister? Either option was about as bad as it could get.

The instant Kamijou kicked open the bent door and rushed out into the hallway, he found he had wandered into another world.

Everything had changed.

The cinema complex was well soundproofed since it was designed for screening movies. Now Kamijou knew why he had suddenly heard the siren through that soundproofing.

“!?”

He heard an endless series of dull sounds like something hard being chewed apart.

He moved to guard little Anna who was clinging to him.

He didn’t need to investigate the source of the noise.

The thick wall of reinforced concrete had collapsed. The piercing cold wind of the January 4 night blew in, but Kamijou was beyond sensing such things. What he saw was too overwhelming for that.

He saw Mut Thebes.

The brown-skinned girl whose long, wavy blonde hair spread out behind her.

A massive white flower was spread out behind that hair. Armor and gun turrets stretched out for dozens – no, hundreds – of meters. This was a large cinema complex, so each floor was extremely tall. This floor was the equivalent of dozens of floors up on an ordinary building, but Mut Thebes was at his eye level. And not because she had used a flight spell.

She was standing. On the ground.

That Transcendent could absorb any shadow cast on the ground and use it as her weapon. It worked for a tank, an attack helicopter, a security robot, and even an AWACS aircraft.

But this?

Could this be real?

“A...warship!?”

“It is called an aircraft cruiser. Its exact name and specs were given, but I don’t remember what they were. Ask a military nerd if you care.”

The brown girl was careless even with this.

She felt no attachment to it.

She treated this even more casually than selecting a hot snack next the convenience store register. She saw a new product and didn't know what it was or if it was any good, but decided to buy it just because. But for her, that meant absorbing the shadow of a 300m...aircraft cruiser?

And not just one.

Five of them formed legs arranged around her like a long skirt. Another four were spread out behind her like wings. Another continued on behind her like a bird's body or tailfeathers. Altogether, 10 aircraft cruisers formed a giant white bird. Didn't that mean she had an entire carrier group with her!?

"I absorb shadows," casually explained Mut Thebes. "So by providing multiple light sources, I can increase the number of shadows on the ground and absorb multiple copies of a single weapon. The number of physical objects is irrelevant. Admittedly, it did take some time to absorb multiple 300m shadows at once."

".....
Goddamit."

She had previously used multiple tank guns at once. Did this mean she hadn't necessarily stolen the shadows of multiple weapons for that?

And these weapons were on another level altogether.

The giant bird she formed even had legs with a proper avian backwards joint. That meant the white aircraft cruisers were forcibly bent near the center.

If you sliced apart a tanker, aircraft carrier, or other ship measuring several hundred meters long and then painstakingly welded all the parts back together like that, you could indeed construct a similar silhouette. Just like forming a long cylinder from stacking coins. But even so, no one would think to bend a ship down the center to produce a walking joint.

She would use any weapon she came across, but she only saw them as materials for her white shadows.

She didn't care how they were meant to be used.

Was that because she was ultimately a magician?

How many main guns and antiair guns did she have in all? What did the aircraft part of the name mean?

It was bound to have cruise missiles and ballistic missiles, but based on the flight deck, it might also have stealth craft.

The weapon specs were frightening enough, but at the same time...

“How did you do it?”

“?”

“Where did you acquire that and how did you get here from there!?”

“I walked. It should be fine. Thanks to the martial law, I probably didn’t step on anyone while walking here.”

Kamijou shuddered.

Should be?

Probably?

How could she talk about people’s lives like that?

They were speaking. Probably using the strange technique known as common tones. But the conversation did nothing to help him understand Transcendent Mut Thebes.

And even if they did find common ground, she was bound to put her own convenience first in the end. She would pursue them when necessary and kick them aside when they were in the way. No matter how much she praised peace and benevolence beforehand.

If no discussion came with a guarantee, then he couldn’t trust anything she said.

She was likely the reason the creepy siren had suddenly ended.

It didn’t matter if she had meant to do it or not. Had she directly stepped on them, or had the tremor of her footsteps knocked them over? The countless temporary speakers for the siren must have been destroyed more on accident than intentionally.

And the damage wasn’t going to end there.

With those white “wings” spread, that white colossus was over 600m wide.

That had walked through the city.

What had happened to Index, Mikoto, and the city they called home!?

This was on another level entirely. She wasn't even attacking people with a powerful intent to kill. In all seriousness, what had happened to Academy City when that thing simply walked across it? The Transcendent hadn't tried to hide what she was doing, so some people would have tried to run away in fear but tripped and some people would have stood up on trembling legs and tried to defend their city. What had happened to them? How far did the damage spread? Some of the casualties could be people Kamijou knew. No, this was beyond that!!!

The Transcendents of the Bridge Builders Cabal could singlehandedly fight the entire magic side and emerge victorious if the conditions were right.

Mut Thebes definitely qualified there.

The entire building raised a groaning cry. The earthquake countermeasures at the base must have reached their limit. Mut Thebes had smashed a hole as large as a theater in the building, but some armor or a gun still caught when she tried to enter.

But that wouldn't last long.

If she made a powerful horizontal sweep with her massive wings or fired with the guns sticking out from them like feathers, she could probably destroy the entire cinema complex building.

Kamijou shouted to her on reflex.

If he let his momentum die here, he would be paralyzed by fear. Or so it felt to him.

"Mut Thebes!!"

"Yes?"

The brown girl at the center of the armor flower was surprisingly responsive.

She tilted her head like this was only a casual chat.

Was that because she didn't feel a single twinge of guilt over the violence she was causing?

"We know what your cabal wants! You're inserting a special soul in a fetus to create a savior, right!?"

“Is that all you know? Then I have no reason to stop. The best way to achieve our goal is to swiftly and surely eliminate the source of our information leak. As the Transcendent in charge of punishment, I will fairly carry out the will of the cabal.”

What did Mut Thebes want to protect as a Transcendent? H. T. Trismegistus had said she would do anything to protect whatever she had defined as her territory. Aradia had said she was the goddess and queen who protected her country.

Was she an ancient Egyptian god, or was she a human?

Was she a Transcendent who protected Transcendents?

Or was she a Transcendent who changed what group she would save from one moment to the next?

He couldn't get caught up in this.

Better to keep speaking than be overwhelmed into silence. Otherwise, her fierce attack would begin.

“That's not my point!! Your plan should need all of the cabal's Transcendents. *Which includes Aradia!* That's right. Won't your plan fail if you let her die here!?”

His logic was sound...he thought.

The Transcendents had to surround the container holding the fertilized egg with their imperfect good to distort things in just the right way to give physical birth to the ultimate being they were willing to bow their heads to.

But.

(Huh? But wait.)

Something cold ran down Kamijou's spine as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

(If that were true, why were the Bologna Succubus and Aradia trying to kill each other on the 31st? And what about when Good, Old Mary and H. T. Trismegistus fought and when Alice knocked them all down on the 3rd? I get how I could be a hindrance to their plan, but *if any one of the Transcendents is lost in trying to save an outsider like me, wouldn't that ruin everything for them?*)

Or had they decided any of their own members that died could be brought back with Good, Old Mary's resurrection?

That was Kamijou's best guess, but he was completely wrong.

The truth was much worse.

"That is not a problem."

Transcendent Mut Thebes remained entirely expressionless and tilted her head as she explained.

We already have a new Aradia."

Kamijou heard footsteps.

But these were not the sound of solid shoes. It was the lighter sound of bare feet on the floor.

"Ah."

Kamijou couldn't believe it.

"Ahhh."

Or maybe it was better to say he had believed a little too much about the enemy.

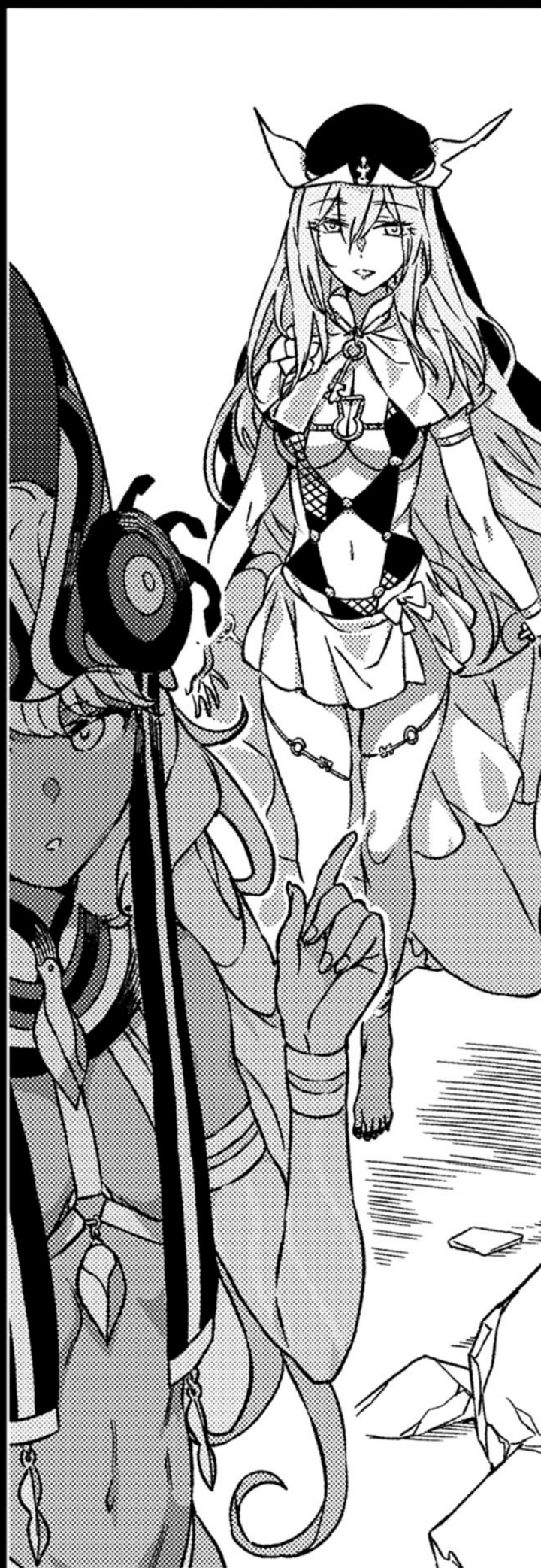
He had believed that there couldn't be all that many Transcendents out there since they were so powerful. He had believed they must be special, irreplaceable beings like Academy City's Level 5s or the magic side's Saints.

He had been naïve.

A woman with pale skin and long silver hair emerged from the shadows in the same cinema complex and joined Mut Thebes at the broken wall. She wore an ankle-length wimple and an unusual purple bikini. That Transcendent could create various witch ointments by rubbing together her outfit's decorations to sprinkle metal powder in with the chemicals at her feet and mix that with the sebum from her bare feet.

In other words, she was the witch goddess who ruled the night and the moon.

She was *a second Aradia?*



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Othinus, High Priest, Nephthys, Niang-Niang, and the other Magic Gods from the underside of the world hadn't known anything about the Transcendents.

For that matter, Aradia hadn't seemed to know about the Bologna Succubus's Cold Mistress spell until she was hit by it in Shibuya on the 31st.

In the consulate on the 3rd, H. T. Trismegistus and Good, Old Mary had only then been working out what each other's secret techniques were.

How could you explain that if they really had been working together in the Bridge Builders Cabal for centuries, if not millennia?

Which suggested...

"*I had it wrong?*" blankly muttered Kamijou Touma.

He looked back and forth between the Aradia standing with him and Anna and the perfectly identical silver-haired girl standing with Mut Thebes.

"The Bridge Builders Cabal *wasn't* a legendary magic cabal going back millennia? The Bologna Succubus and Aradia, *are magicians who only started using those names recently!*?"

"It's called ceremonial magic, fool. They play parts in the ceremony." Anna Sprengel smiled softly. "By systematically positioning the necessary symbols and an imperfect good around the sterile container holding the fertilized egg, an inhuman beast or spirit's soul will enter the human child and manifest in the physical world. And in their case, they seek their savior. I explained that was the point of the cabal's spell, didn't I? So the Transcendents are just more symbols for the ceremony. But the colors and forms are what they need, not the actual goddess Aradia or the actual sage Trismegistus. So each member of the cabal has changed form by dressing up in the appropriate costumes and truly dedicating themselves to their respective conditions for salvation. Using a borrowed power gives them a strong sense of how imperfect their goodness is, right? And it is all to perfect the ceremony meant to summon a special high-level soul."

Kamijou felt faint all over again.

Hadn't H. T. Trismegistus himself said *the Transcendents were not like Magic Gods*? Kamijou should have thought harder back at the consulate about how they differed!

Their names and appearances were only costumes.

Their spells were all connected to the Secret Chiefs, weren't they? In other words, they were borrowed.

Each of them had tremendous power, but they were entirely different from Othinus in every conceivable way!!

"But...but..."

Kamijou was at a loss for words.

Why did this shock him so much?

He should have been happy to have the enemy's illusion broken. Had he started to hope that the Transcendents were higher beings than him at some point?

He found himself shouting at Anna in defense of his supposed enemies.

"Th-that can't be true! Oh, right. The Bologna Succubus said she wants to save the falsely accused because of an incident that happened centuries ago!"

"Don't modern people feel their heart ache when they read articles about wars and crimes from the distant past? Fool, how old does she look to you? You aren't going to tell me you think she's more than 500, are you?"

Come to think of it, what was it the Bologna Succubus had said in Shibuya on December 31? She could never forgive the people who executed a man for the absurd charge of running a brothel full of succubi.

He had accepted that reasoning at the time, but thinking back, it didn't add up.

He still didn't know for sure if the Bologna Succubus he knew was a human or a demon, but if she had been in Bologna hundreds of years ago, she would be the living proof that beings known as succubi really had existed there. So whether or not the charge was true, it at least wouldn't be "absurd". If the Bologna Succubus had really existed back then, she would have looked down at herself and thought, "yeah, I could see that happening".

But...

Even then...

"What about Witch Goddess Aradia!? If she didn't exist in ancient times, who were the real witches worshiping back then!?"

“Forget it, fool. The goddess named Aradia almost certainly didn’t exist and was a legend invented on the spot by a witch in Tuscany, Italy. The story only got out of hand after Gardner, the top witch researcher, included the story in his own theories. So why does the magician using the name now need to actually be that goddess?”

“...Um...”

“Despite the danger we were in, Aradia was picky about what she ate and made sure to leave the cramped confines of the vehicle to stretch. Those unnatural actions were a continuation of her daily routine to keep up the Aradia persona. You could think of it as training to prevent her behavior from slipping. She needs daily corrections to ensure the margin of error doesn’t reach a noticeable level.”

Kamijou couldn’t find anything to say.

Harsh truths sounded better coming from a wicked person’s mouth.

“Why was she doing voice training? The witch goddess’s spells are based on her witch ointments, so incantations aren’t all that important to her. Why was she so upset about falling out of her exercise routine during the few days you had her tied up? My guess is it came from the fear that her Aradia persona would fall apart.”

Kamijou stopped breathing and his head wobbled atop his neck.

Not even Aradia – either Aradia – said a word.

Was this true of Good, Old Mary and H. T. Trismegistus too?

Thinking back, Good, Old Mary had called herself the one who *rules over* the Tribikos, Kerotakis, and the other experimental tools that had built the foundation of alchemy, but she had never said she was the person who had *invented them* in the 3rd century.

According to Othinus, Trismegistus was *only a throwaway penname* used for ancient academics to release texts anonymously. That had never been someone who needed to be declared real or fictional.

“Then...”

Hesitantly – for a different reason this time – Kamijou looked to a certain girl.

“Mut Thebes too?”

“Fool, I have heard that true military nerds will weep upon seeing an old map of Greece or Egypt – they don’t even need to visit the ruins of an old castle. Just like a train nerd seeing a regional train schedule.”

Aradia had explained that Mut was an Egyptian goddess, but *she had never said that about Mut Thebes.*

The blonde-haired, brown-skinned girl tilted her head.

Like a small bird.

Her secret was revealed, yet...

“Why does that matter?”

That was all.

She acted like it had never been a secret to begin with.

“You’re kidding...right?” asked Kamijou, dazed.

That meant they chose the clothing that fit their goal.

That meant they watched what they ate.

That meant they used exercise and stretching to achieve the ideal body down to the muscles and skeletal structure.

That meant they carefully watched the people of every job they came across.

That meant they made sure to look in the mirror and practice their expressions.

That meant they monitored their condition every single day so they wouldn’t overlook even a slight error.

That meant they used even swelling, bloating, and emaciation to change their appearance.

That meant their morning voice training was not for magic incantations.

That meant they had memorized a detailed and accurate script just like a phone scammer.

That meant it was all thorough training to perfectly rearrange who they were, even on the inside.

That meant the Bridge Builders Cabal *had not* recruited the people needed for their ceremony – they had created them from scratch?

They probably had originally loathed false accusations. Or deeply hoped to save all the witches around the world. So those ordinary people had chosen a demon or goddess that would most strongly emphasize that incomplete goodness needed to draw in the desired soul like a magnet. They had *dressed up* as those identities and become Transcendent.

“...”

It was hard to believe.

How was he supposed to believe something so ridiculous?

But there had been statements that caught his attention.

From time to time, Aradia, the Bologna Succubus, and the other cabal members had referred to “irregular Transcendents”. They had spoken the term with annoyance, but also with an envy of *those who could reach out and save or accuse others without having to follow a detailed flowchart*.

One of those was the pure Alice Anotherbible.

The other was the wicked Anna Sprengel.

They were the only two who couldn’t be reproduced.

No third party could replace them. They existed outside the usual rules for Transcendents.

Or to put it another way, the rest were *regular Transcendents*. Did that mean all of them could be mass-produced and managed and were willing to follow the original calculations?

Their irregularity – that they didn’t fit the usual definition – may have been what allowed Alice and Anna to criticize the *ordinary Transcendents* from an outside perspective.

Come to think of it... Kamijou had no way of knowing if there was any basis to it, but he had sensed something on an instinctual level removed from logic.

(I thought something was weird. I thought they were different from normal magicians. Aradia, the Bologna Succubus, and the other Transcendents all wear those costumes.

And it's almost like they tell each other apart using those flashy costumes instead of by their faces.)

That wasn't how it usually worked. Magicians were extreme individualists. They carved their way of life into their hearts. So no matter what might happen, they would never place the core of their being in something they could simply remove.

"The old Aradia is no longer necessary," plainly stated Mut Thebes.

Even though this meant rejecting her own purpose.

Something was terribly different between the Transcendents and the magicians Kamijou had encountered before.

"Anna Sprengel was not originally part of the cabal. She was a last-second addition of dubious origin. A guest performer may have brought the performance to new heights, but she has gone beyond some unasked-for adlibbing. So we have decided to return the plan to its original form. By preparing the sterile container as the irreplaceable target of our performance and by promoting Alice Anotherbible as our lead, we will complete our parade with only the original cast. Old Aradia, you have been too affected by Anna Sprengel's influence. And as internal distortions cannot be seen, we can never know for sure if we have removed them all. Since you are easily replaced, we can reduce our odds of failure by placing a fresh Aradia on the stage."

To the audience, the big star of the parade at the center of everyone's attention was a unique and irreplaceable performer. They *were* the world of the performance to the point that you couldn't imagine anyone else there.

But to those managing the parade, the star was just one more person who could be fired and replaced if they weren't providing the desired performance or effect. No matter how many dreams an event or festival performer inspired in people, they were little different from the person inside a mascot costume.

But how could she do it like it was nothing?

"You would throw out your fellow cabal member that easily?"

"Did I confuse you with my use of 'old' and 'new'? That Aradia by you was only *chosen to be Aradia* by proving her skill and outdoing the other candidates. I did the same. I only stand here now as Mut Thebes because I took my own audition and won the position I wanted."

“What do you want enough to do that!?”

“To bring unbiased salvation to the world.”

Her answer was quick and certain.

These people had big dreams because, unlike Saints or Magic Gods, they had only managed to create an imperfect righteousness. They were permeated by the temporary worldview they shared as performers on the stage where they would perfect their magic.

“We want someone who can really and physically – not philosophically or hypothetically – bring about a salvation that aligns with all of our hopes. *We want the holy bearer of the cross.* Unlike us Transcendents, that man can truly save the entire world, so we wish to invite him back through the process of rebirth.”

Kamijou could not sense personal conviction or a personal cry of the soul – yes, he could not sense a magic name there.

To achieve this one goal, they had thrown out their insignificant individuality to become a part of the Bridge Builders Cabal.

Just like a type of destructive cult.

“Satisfied now? I have a job to complete: punishing the traitor Anna.”

“Do you really think I’ll let you?”

“Do you think I care? You are blameless and thus not my target. This is a staff-only backstage matter. I would prefer not to involve *an outsider*, so I would prefer if you ran away.”

The wind stirred like a solid mass.

No, that was a side effect of Mut Thebes moving her giant wings. The countless guns of various sizes installed on the 300m aircraft cruisers all turned to accurately take aim.

Kamijou expected an explosion.

But giant cannons unleashed a scattershot of throwing spears from muzzles measuring more than 30cm across.

Every single spear was a spiritual item designed to kill Transcendents.

They were all the Shrink Drink.

Hadn't that weapon been created to slay even the most irregular Transcendent?

"Anna!!!" shouted Kamijou, leaping forward.

He felt like a wall of spikes was approaching fast. His right hand couldn't handle so many at once. But at the same time, the Shrink Drink was *only* designed for use against Transcendents. If he used his full body as a shield, he might be able to protect Anna.

The wicked woman spoke in an uncharacteristically weak voice behind him.

"Thank you..."

That was good enough for him.

He wished he could negate them all with his right hand, but he figured he could survive being pierced by one or two of them. At the very least, doing this was better than standing by and watching the tragedy play out.

Or so he thought.

But he was knocked away by a hard blow from behind.

"Wha-?"

From behind.

That meant it had to have been Anna Sprengel.

"But, fool, that is the one thing I cannot accept."

She had put her full weight behind her little foot to forcibly kick away the boy protecting her. She kicked him toward Aradia.

She had a point.

These spiritual items were designed to kill only Transcendents, but that meant Aradia was as much at risk as Anna. Mut Thebes did not show any concern for the cabal member she had already given up on. Kamijou had completely forgotten about her, but at the same time...

There was still the irregular Transcendent.

strength he could find inside him, no matter how small, and use it to break through this worst case scenario and save that little wicked woman!! That was the only thought in Kamijou's shaky head.

But none of that could alter the reality.

He was too weak.

He crumbled to the ground after protecting Aradia and he couldn't get back up.

Sure, she was a wicked woman.

But what did that matter, goddammit!!?

"My job is now complete," said Mut Thebes, all business.

She was a punishment expert. She knew not to let her emotions interfere and to avoid causing any unnecessary harm.

She played her role with the accuracy of turning gears.

"But since we have *updated* Aradia, the retired one is no longer needed, so I will kill her. This isn't meant to be my job, but better safe than sorry. Once that is done, I can bring the new one back with me and order will have been restored to the cabal."

"No, not yet."

"You would resist me? You are no longer Aradia. What can a retired nobody do in the professional world? Any attempt to survive is doomed to fail."

"No, I am the goddess who always finds a way to rescue a witch in need. So I figured I might as well save Anna Sprengel."

When he heard that, Kamijou slowly looked up.

The silver-haired woman had lost her position as a regular, but she still hadn't given up.

She stood in the way, just like a goddess.

"Save her?" asked the slumped and battered boy, his voice scratchy.

He looked to that faint light that continued to shine like the moon in the darkness of fear and rejection.

“She can still be saved?”

“Yes, so don’t worry. This is not a loss or a dead end. You don’t need to give up on anything. The goddess of all witches will turn it all around. Wandering good witch child, behold a miracle.”

Mut Thebes stared at the light protecting the boy who looked ready to blow away in the night breeze.

She stared at the person whose skin shined a pale white after bathing in the moonlight for so long.

The punishment expert expressionlessly tilted her head.

“That is not possible. The Shrink Drink borrows a portion of Alice’s power, so not even Good, Old Mary’s resurrection can heal Anna Sprengel. It would violate the cabal’s order.”

Deep, dark resignation threatened to blot out Kamijou’s vision again.

But the goddess would not allow it.

Aradia, goddess of witches, the night, and the moon, spoke clearly.

“Silly girl. You just gave the answer right there.”

The brown girl clearly didn’t know what Aradia meant.

Goddess Aradia gave the answer to raise the light of hope in the darkness.

The shadow of magic was not a depthless darkness.

The night was meant to be a kinder and gentler thing.

“We just have to get Alice’s help. If Good, Old Mary can do it, you can’t tell me Alice can’t. And if Alice does it, the quality is bound to be better. So as long as we get Alice on our side, we can avoid the Shrink Drink’s death sentence. It might be cheating, but there is still room to save Anna Sprengel.”

This didn’t even feel like the logic of magic anymore.

It was entirely based on the Transcendent *belief* that Alice Anotherbible was the most frightening thing imaginable.

But Mut Thebes's response was immediate.

"I will not let you."

Which meant *it would work*.

Her confidence was gone.

Something about her voice was different from before. She forgot all about the air of stability she always carried with her. She remained expressionless, but she showed some panic that said this really would work if she didn't do whatever it took to stop it.

"Alice is the biggest irregularity there is, but she is one of the main performers and has the charisma to match. Traitor Anna and Retired Aradia, you have been purged from the stage and are no longer permitted back in. Hand over your cabal member passes and begone. We cannot have outsiders disturbing the order of the cabal any longer."

"But you can't tell Alice Anotherbible what to do. There's no actual rule saying it has to be a professional member of our field. The one and only key lies elsewhere, like the performer's lover rather than the performer herself. And *that* is why you are panicking, isn't it, Mut Thebes?"

"..."

Everyone's eyes gathered on a single point.

The tension was so dense an ordinary person might have suffocated.

But.

That brought a quiet thought to a certain boy's mind.

Oh, right. If they were that cautious...

(Then it really would work.)

Of course, this wasn't the result of Kamijou's own efforts.

He held the final key to saving the girl he had thought was lost. So he didn't have to curse his own life here. This was the unique treasure that none other than Anna Sprengel had given him.

He was the only one in the world.

This was about as selfish as it got after hurting her and making her cry. He knew that. But what if he still had some slight connection left with that girl?

Then a miracle was still possible.

Kamijou Touma could change Alice's mind and have her save Anna Sprengel.

That knowledge was all it took.

The perfectly ordinary high school boy stood back up on his own two feet.

He clenched his right fist as hard as a rock and rejudged the size of his foe.

"Aradia."

"Just to be sure, you do mean me, right?"

The witch goddess who had protected Kamijou stood alongside him and glared at the woman dressed identically to her.

Yes, they had more than one enemy now.

It was two-against-two.

"*Can I leave her to you?*"

"*Of course. I will take care of the other Aradia. Witches operate on the threefold return. If that wicked witch did a good deed, then the least I can do is return her life to her.*"

Thinking back, Kamijou had always died instantly when he tried to fight a Transcendent.

Good, Old Mary wasn't around this time. Even if she was, he couldn't expect her to save him when their interests weren't aligned.

He wouldn't be resurrected.

If he died here, that was the end.

But Kamijou Touma had zero intention of falling back.

Anna Sprengel was an indefensibly wicked woman.

She had deceived Kamijou to the end with a smile.

So what?

Morality could get lost. That was a measuring stick invented by someone else. This was his life. It was up to him to decide who in this world he would save and whether or not he would risk his own life to do it.

Mut Thebes quietly tilted her head while surrounded by weapons weighing hundreds of thousands of tons.

She looked to Kamijou Touma and asked him a question.

“Are you saying you will fight me?”

“I am.”

“But you’ll die?”

“Probably!!”

She wasn’t being ironic.

The blonde-haired, brown-skinned Transcendent really was worried for the reckless boy.

“Oh, dear. But I have no real reason to fight an innocent boy.”

“How the hell am I innocent after everything I’ve done!?”

It was two-against-two.

Kamijou Touma vs. Mut Thebes.

Aradia vs. Aradia.

Power through it. No matter how impossible it seemed, if they didn’t win here, there was no saving Anna Sprengel, who had refused salvation and been pierced with a smile on her face.

This was the best result?

She had done well for the ultimate wicked woman?

If that girl would sneer and say she couldn’t escape her wicked ways – if Anna truly thought that while lying all alone on the ground...

“I’ll destroy it.”

Kamijou Touma clenched his teeth and chose to challenge certain death once more.

He wouldn’t be bound by the morality invented by someone he’d never met. If he felt any doubt at all, he only had to hold a hand to his heart and ask himself what he should do. That would tell him what was really and truly important.

Yes.

So the perfectly ordinary high school boy raised his head.

“I’ll smash that illusion until not even the tiniest piece is left!!!”

If the right person were to hear this, they surely would have been reminded of a certain theory.

The theory that a certain human had advocated until the moment he vanished from the known world, even as he was rejected by all and called a demon.

Do what thou wilt.

They had parted ways, but that power did still reside within this boy.



Between the Lines 4

Anna Sprengel was a bad person.

There was no wiggle room on that point. She had admitted to it herself.

She had of course done what she could as a wicked woman to survive. She had detected a plan she couldn't allow to continue and put together a concrete plan to stop it.

But.

Deep down, she had known all of her efforts *would never bear fruit*. Or you could say she had resigned herself to her fate. She hadn't known when exactly it would happen. But she had known her hopes and prayers would be smashed to pieces at some point. They would be destroyed at the worst possible point. She had spread her arms and done so much in this attempt, so she had known the retaliation would be coming sooner or later.

In a way, that despair may have been the core of who Anna Sprengel was.

So she had frozen up when Anna Kingsford – something capable of threatening her very existence – had shown up. She had forgotten all about enjoying the situation as a wicked woman and had grown aware of how much she disliked loss. It wasn't an issue of skill with spells or the amount of magic power they could refine at once. She had been shaken at a more fundamental level.

That had to be it.

In the end, she couldn't live free without being disrespectful.

So the more that little wicked woman struggled, the worse things got for her.

It had been all too obvious. Simply put, the bad guy is meant to make a memorable exit when it was time for their defeat.

(Well.)

She felt cold.

Ice cold.

This wasn't the biting chill of the January air or of the floor she was lying on. It was a more intense cold coming from her spine. It was the invisible hand of death spreading through her from the inside out.

Anna Sprengel slowly narrowed her eyes.

(I already told them about the Bridge Builders Cabal's grand plan. The line between Alice Anotherbible and Kamijou Touma has only been bent not broken. Really, I'm not strictly necessary...anymore...)

So maybe this was good enough.

She had advanced the game pieces far enough for the next move, so maybe she was the most expendable one in the group. If Kamijou Touma received Witch Goddess Aradia's help and smashed the Bridge Builders Cabal's ambitions, wouldn't that qualify as a happy ending?

And in a way, maybe she could call herself lucky this had ended before Anna Kingsford could reveal everything.

But.

Even so.

"Are you saying you will fight me?"

"I am."

She heard that voice.

It reached her.

"But you'll die?"

"Probably!!"

She heard the voice of someone who refused to accept that ordinary ending.

She heard the voice of the boy who would stand back up as many times as it took while he clenched his teeth and fought back against this unfair world.

"Oh, dear. But I have no real reason to fight an innocent boy."

“How the hell am I innocent after everything I’ve done!?”

It was not a voice of anger.

It was the cry of a boy who was fighting to suppress the tears and struggling with all his might to keep from trembling.

So the wicked woman found herself biting her lip while collapsed on the ground.

(Damn. And I was all ready to accept this. I had eliminated my fear by wrapping it all up with me smiling and dying, wicked to the end.)

The Shrink Drink was a special product made with the help of extraordinary Alice Anotherbible. That spiritual item had been created for the sole purpose of killing a traitor and its lethal effect was already at work within her.

There was no saving her.

She knew that.

(But how can I die when he says that?)

CHAPTER 4

Decide For Yourself Which Girl to Save.

Battle_of_HsB-AD-CVA01.

Part 1

With the siren stopped, the battlefield was silent.

Aradia's bare feet traced sharply across the floor of the broken walkway.

Collapsed and unmoving, Anna Sprengel glowed with a pale light.

Mut Thebes, having become a massive bird, tilted her head.

"A barrier? No, a witch ointment. That can help you fly or transform you by rearranging the structure of your body."

"It's nothing that fancy. Only a mild protection. I can't remove the Shrink Drink itself, but I can slow its spread."

"But this anti-explosive suntan lotion disappears if you die, doesn't it?"

"Do I really have to answer that?"

"Only one way to find out."

An explosive boom rumbled out.

Mut Thebes horizontally swung her massive right wing, which was actually a pair of 300m aircraft cruisers.

The white torrent smashed up the entire top half of the giant cinema complex and scattered the pieces into the air.

Kamijou Touma was tossed into the air as well.

Aradia grabbed him by the back collar while straddling a mic stand used when the director or cast made a public statement at an advance screening or opening night.

A witch did not necessarily need to use a broom to fly in the night sky.

What mattered was the ointment rubbed onto the tool.

“Whoa!?”

“Grab onto me, not the mic stand. I like to think we’re safe as long as you don’t touch the shadow, but if your right hand does affect it, we fall. Also, Mut Thebes isn’t the only threat!!”

The witch goddess then took a more cautious tone.

“Why isn’t she using the Shrink Drink? Oh, she might want to avoid friendly fire.”

Aradia turned a sharp glare elsewhere.

Someone else was soaring through the night sky on a long mic stand of her own.

It was the other Aradia.

Even her choice of tool when short on time was the same.

The identical silver-haired woman held her palm out with an alluring whisper on her lips.

“The Apostle Peter forbids Simon Magus’s demonic flight!!”

“You can tell it’s her first day. She needs more training. How do you call yourself the goddess of witches and then use that!?”

Kamijou and Aradia plummeted. Flying was easy for magicians, but the counter spell was also easy, making it hard in practice. They were forced to land atop one of the aircraft cruisers Mut Thebes was swinging around.

“Where’s Anna!?”

“How are you concerned about someone other than yourself right now? I covered her with a protective ointment, so she’ll be fine! As long as you don’t touch her with your right hand, she could be buried in a pile of concrete without so much as a scratch!!”

Mut Thebes again swung the two ships of her right wing together like she was shooping away a fly.

Aradia was tossed into the empty air. She knew her flight would be canceled by the counter spell, so she guided Kamijou to different footing a lot like descending in a parachute.

They were behind Mut Thebes this time.

They were on the bow of the aircraft cruiser – also at least 300m long – that acted as the giant bird's body or tailfeathers.

The other Aradia landed her bare feet atop a trio of ship's guns towering overhead like a mountain. She laughed and looked down at them with the moon behind her. Even the cheap ventilation fan cover mesh was the same. Even though there was no need to match the emergency fixes if that was an official costume.

“Don't worry. I will protect your hope. I will ensure the good witch child need not wander in the dark.”

Next to Kamijou, Aradia twirled the long mic stand like a baton and rested it on her shoulder as she looked up at her target. The two Aradias' gazes clashed head on.

And they both spoke at once.

“I will kill her.”

“I will kill her.”

Aradia jumped up from the deck to the guns in a single bound and the identical Transcendents began their battle.

However, Kamijou was in no position to simply watch on.

He needed to settle things with Transcendent Mut Thebes.

(If this whole thing is a bird, then this is the body or tail. Mut Thebes is at the center, so I need to move from the bow to the stern of this ship!!)

Mut Thebes of course responded.

The nearest trio of guns slowly turned.

Those giant ship's guns had a diameter of 35cm.

“Yikes!”

Multiple blasts erupted simultaneously.

The deck kicked up below him so hard he thought he would flip over onto his back. He was shaken so hard his vision broke apart and he didn't even have it in him to thrust his right hand out toward the source of the sound.

But unexpectedly, it didn't hit him.

Kamijou held the side of his head with a hand and wobbled on his feet while he moved to the narrow side deck. And he continued onward.

“Ow.”

(I guess I should have expected that. Aircraft cruisers aren't designed to shoot themselves. As long as I'm on the deck, this ship's guns can't hit me.)

But only this ship's.

He heard something scraping along metal rails and looked up to see movement from the ships forming the great bird's left wing. An angular white shadow was launched into the sky from the flight deck created by removing the stern weaponry.

That was an HsF/A-49 Sharp Frame, a stealth craft designed for aircraft carriers.

Although it looked weird colored entirely white.

“How much did she absorb, dammit!?”

Mut Thebes could increase her forces whenever her shadow touched another shadow, so even the aircraft cruisers were expendable to her. She had no problem with using the plane to obliterate this ship with its autocannons and aerial bombs.

And Kamijou was dead if even one shot hit him.

If he failed to defeat Mut Thebes and then reach Alice Anotherbible, there was no way left to save Anna Sprengel from the Shrink Drink.

The stealth craft circled sharply through the night sky and finally took aim.

(Can I stop that with Imagine Breaker!?)

Kamijou held up his right hand and clenched his teeth as he ran. If that thing sprayed 6000 bullets a minute from its Gatling gun, he would be killed before he could even use Imagine Breaker.

His throat went dry when he saw the stealth craft's belly open up to reveal the weapons within. Apparently it was going to launch an air-to-surface missile or an aerial bomb. If the explosive contained napalm or white phosphorus, then "bad" didn't even begin to describe it.

But Kamijou belatedly realized something.

The aircraft cruisers and the stealth craft were shadows absorbed by Mut Thebes's magic.

So he was thinking about this wrong.

The stealth craft and its bullets or bombs weren't the only thing his right hand could destroy. He could also destroy the very aircraft cruiser he was running on.

"!?"

He didn't even aim for a door – he directly punched the wall of thick armor. With a dull crash, a 2m cube was torn away. Was it divided into blocks like that? Kamijou lost his balance, so he tumbled right on inside the ship.

Shortly thereafter, the outside world was engulfed in explosive flames and shockwaves.

More than his ears ringing, he felt a pain akin to an electrical tingling across all of his skin. There had been multiple explosions out there. Like someone had tossed in a bundle of giant-sized firecrackers.

"Was that a cluster bomb!?"

"I don't know how to use it, but I assume if I simply drop it on you, you will die before you can complain."

Mut Thebes's emotionless voice played from the ship's internal speakers.

Kamijou didn't know what kind of equipment the ship had, but apparently she was tracking his location and could hear his voice.

Still, he figured he should be safe as long he remained in the indoor passageways. Whether or not the Transcendent knew where he was, the ship couldn't shoot itself, the walls were

plenty thick, and the stealth craft was too big to fit through the door. Even if he did come across a locked door or bulkhead, it was all made of magic and he could break through with Imagine Breaker.

That meant this was a sturdy and safe tunnel for him.

“What a pain,” said Mut Thebes.

“I wouldn’t be so calm if I were you! I’ve found a safe zone, so now it’s time to turn the tables on you!!”

“Are you sure it’s safe?”

Kamijou heard a sound like an electric razor.

He looked to the side to see something skillfully turn a corner in the passageway, slip through an open door, and slowly approach him at a height of about a meter.

The white shadow was only about 45cm.

Overall, it resembled the sharp isosceles triangle of a delta wing, but it had a round hole in the center and it used coaxial rotors to move vertically or hover in place like a helicopter.

What was it?

Was it another piece of the aircraft cruiser’s equipment, making it another weapon Mut Thebes had acquired by absorbing its shadow!?

“Eh?”

He was caught off guard when the lightweight solid fuel ignited and the self-destruct drone shot toward him like a missile.

Part 2

The muffled explosion was audible even on the bow deck.

Witch Goddess Aradia’s long silver hair and large wimple blew in the frigid wind, but she sighed softly.

(Well, I like to think that isn't enough to kill him when he has Imagine Breaker. No matter what it looks like or how she uses it, *everything here is magic, including the weapons and explosions.*)

She also found this a strange thought.

To think the day would come she was acting based on trust in Kamijou Touma's abilities.

She glanced down at her ankle and smiled a little.

"Now, I need to focus on my own job."

She looked back up.

The two of them stood directly above the bow's trio of main guns.

The moon shined down on the two identical witch goddess. Their long silver hair and ankle-length wimples blew in the frigid wind and they breathed identical white breaths as they smiled thinly.

There was no signal.

The two Aradias took action simultaneously.

They moved their mic stand brooms to their left hands.

One swung her right hand horizontally and the other did the same.

Their voices overlapped in disturbing synchronicity.

"I will bring peace to this city by defeating my enemy. Which makes this a good deed."

"I will bring peace to this city by defeating my enemy. Which makes this a good deed."

They sealed a cutting edge in their nails and took a step forward.

Their slicing fingers intersected for their first attack.

They jumped from gun to gun. When one threw an open-hand slap, the other struck that wrist to send it off course. They both twisted around while aiming a palm at the other.

Witch Goddess Aradia's magic was based on the Triple Reload.

They didn't need to defeat their opponent in one strike.

As long as they gave meaning to their attack, each consecutive one would grow more powerful in a snowball effect. It was an endless triple increase. There was no upper limit. As the chain continued, they would reach the point where they could fight the entire magic side and win.

A shockwave exploded out.

The aircraft cruiser's gun barrel bent.

Fists flew, stainless steel mic stands roared, and roundhouse kicks tore through the air.

The rubbing of their feet squeaked like during a basketball game. The shadows at their feet grew more apparent. Both Aradias rubbed down the metal clasps of their decorations, sprinkling medicinal herbs at their feet, and used their bare feet to mix in sebum to create their witch ointment.

Their witchcraft mostly relied on that ointment.

Their shadows writhed in a disturbing fashion as the two witches shared a Sabbat dance.

The giant guns exploded below them, so one witch goddess gently landed her bare feet on the side deck another level down.

The other woman also landed with a smile.

"Oh? You aren't leaving the human realm?"

"Kh."

She clenched her teeth but couldn't fully suppress the breath of slight exhaustion.

The other Aradia's smile grew.

"Hee hee. That's right. Using the Secret Chief's power is a broken spell that lets us fight the entire magic side on our own. But it is not enough to come out on top when fighting another Aradia."

Immediately after, the two blurred into motion.

They clashed.

Aradia and Aradia ran along the side deck, tore into the ship's armor, and scattered sparks as they crashed into each other a few times. Their fingers sharply intersected, their feet ran, and they either swung their mic stand around in a hand or straddled it to fly in the night sky. They drew out large, twisted arcs and turned those into unorthodox loop-the-loops while their lights collided over and over before the two witches dropped straight toward the aircraft cruiser's deck once more.

(If I only knew where the unseen rail is.)

Even as they fought fiercely enough to melt and distort the side deck's armor, the witch goddess kept her thoughts cool and calm.

(Triple upon triple upon triple upon triple. My Triple Reload increases my power threefold with each new good deed, which is like creating a single rail. If I can predict hers, I can block her and keep her dominos from continuing to fall.)

Even in a battle between Aradias, how they used their spells could create a difference in strength. If one continued to grow her power with Triple Reload and the other had that process stopped early, the resultant difference could be used to end the battle.

Aradia knew she could predict that rail.

After all, her opponent was another Aradia.

She could easily tell what in this environment could be converted into a good deed.

But if she tried to take advantage of her opponent's weakness that way, her opponent would do the same to her.

Stopping the falling dominos was meaningless if it was mutual. Then the shadows at their feet would lose everything they had built up and both of them would have to start over from scratch.

Whether she tried it or hesitated, it wasn't enough to end the battle.

And...

"Tch!!"

She clicked her tongue and they exchanged a few more attacks.

The air vibrated and even the ship's thick armor creaked concerningly.

Maybe it was for the best that they were on an aircraft cruiser cut off from the Academy City streets.

Even without the giant gun barrels breaking and flying away, wielding this kind of power would have done untold damage to the city.

“Oh, no. Are we stuck in a permanent stalemate?”

“Maybe so, if our power really is equal.”

They continued to clash like beams with a cutting edge, but that couldn’t go on forever.

One of them came to a stop and the other stopped on the deck in kind.

The Aradia fighting for the boy in trouble tried to surreptitiously catch her breath.

Her attempt failed.

“Huff, puff.”

“What’s wrong? Worn out already? I guess you are *the old Aradia*. Feel free to say you only lost because you were still worn out from your previous battles.”

“Do you really expect that to happen?”

“No, I doubt it will be that easy. But if this continues, we really will be pushing ourselves to the limits of our identical specs. And that gives me a small opportunity. One you lack.”

“Won’t you be in trouble if you’re wrong and we defeat each other?”

“Not really.”

That was all she had to say.

(Mut Thebes must have given her a lot of information on me.)

If both Aradias were defeated here, did she assume it wouldn’t affect their ceremony because another performer would fill the role? Had she added the ventilation fan cover mesh to her official costume to ensure their specs were truly equal, thus not giving the “old Aradia” even the slightest chance? And as long as their savior arrived, the witches she wanted to protect would be saved.

That wasn’t good enough for this Aradia.

She smiled a little upon discovering that feeling inside her.

If their specs were completely identical, they were stuck in a permanent stalemate. That meant she needed something *other than* her Aradia identity. With that something extra on the scales, she could achieve victory.

(I already gave him hope as a goddess, so I can't let myself be defeated now.)

Would that feeling give her something that let her overcome her physical exhaustion?

It would.

A heavy breath appeared white in the winter chill.

Aradia's shoulders heaved on the side deck as she glance to the side.

"Hoping to ask him for support?"

The other noticed and smiled thinly.

The other magician taking the Aradia name shrugged with her mic stand broom still in hand.

"Seems to me that would only complicate matters. We look and act the same and we use the same spells. Can he look at the two Aradias here and tell which one is on his side?"

"Oh? Do you really think he can't?"

"?"

Then.

A certain woman focused on one point of the Aradia standing in front of her. She noticed the difference between them.

The other one had a single loop of duct tape around her right ankle.

"Ah."

"Our appearance and specs might be identical, but the things we've experienced and the memories we've made make a difference."

Kamijou Touma rushed in from the side, his fist crashing into the enemy Aradia's cheek.

Not even the triple goddess beyond human territory mattered.

No secret move was enough to block that boy's right fist.

(I only wrapped this duct tape around my ankle at the gas station. Mut Thebes must not have seen me between then and our arrival at the cinema complex.)

“Also.”

The witch goddess wagged her finger down at the other Aradia who had been knocked out by the blow to the head. She winked and whispered.

“The goddess of all witches isn't all that physically strong. A solid hit from Kamijou Touma's fist is enough to knock her out. ...I know that firsthand from Shibuya on the 31st.”

Part 3

Defeating the enemy Aradia wasn't enough to end this.

An earsplittingly shrill sound exploded out.

A formation of four HsF/A-49 stealth craft passed by overhead. The aerial bombs that separated off in midair accurately dropped toward Kamijou and Aradia, but Aradia extended her left hand into the air just before they hit. One after another, several explosions burst in the frigid night sky.

“I will hold back her aerial forces. You go deal with Mut Thebes herself!!”

“Thanks!!” shouted Kamijou, running to the side deck. Aradia did not join him, instead mounting her mic stand broom and taking off toward the bridge roof.

More explosions burst like fireworks overhead while Kamijou ran until his surroundings changed.

The floor below his feet was flat.

He had arrived on the flight deck equipped with an electromagnetic catapult that launched planes using the same principle as a linear motor. That meant he was at the stern.

(Sure, you can use this to take off, but how are you supposed to land again!? Stupid Academy City and its stupid, stupid weapons!! Are they VTOL? Or do they use floats to land in the water and then the front of the ship swallows them like a landing ship!?)

He heard a dull tremor.

Mut Thebes had apparently separated the 10 aircraft cruisers attached to her back like a giant bird. The massive white shadows remained standing like shed skins as she slowly turned toward him.

And she stepped onto the flight deck.

The newly flat surface made it look like the entire environment was prostrating before Mut Thebes as its master, ensuring it would never end up looking down at her.

Kamijou Touma and the Transcendent faced each other directly below the moon.

Mut Thebes slowly tilted her head and spoke plainly. Her expression was no different from when she had asked him to pass the French dressing back at the consulate.

“Should I shout the name of my special attack?”

“I’d much prefer you said nothing and let me defeat you.”

“Leaving human territory. Risk 4: Life and death, pure and impure, quiet and noisy, holy and evil, correct and incorrect – releasing the dual seal. Swiftly activate, Dead Phoenix.”

“So much for my preference, goddammit!!!”

Kamijou clenched his right fist and Transcendent Mut Thebes swept her hand horizontally at the same moment.

Something white moved.

An object with a nearly 3m diameter emerged from her shoulder. It looked like an enlarged version of a circular saw for cutting lumber, but it was actually a giant 8-bladed propeller.

“!?”

It rotated rapidly at a diagonal angle from her shoulder. If it so much as grazed Kamijou, he would be torn to pieces. He hurriedly held out his right hand to negate it, but something wasn’t right.

It was so large that mere contact would mean instant death for a human-sized target like Kamijou, but one look at the massive bird wings from before was enough to know that a warship's propeller should have been more than 10m across.

(*She changed its size?* Could she always do that, or is that what the inhuman Dead Phoenix mode does!?)

And Mut Thebes was already expressionlessly summoning another weapon.

A white object covered her back like a giant armored snail shell. It was in fact...

"A boiler."

"Wha-?"

Roaring flames flew straight toward him. He negated them with his right hand, but the dark smoke obscured his vision. She made her next move while he was still choking. She swept her arm to the side and something like a white beam of light shot out.

"Water jet auxiliary power."

(Water.)

The dark smoke was sliced through along a diagonal line.

There was no time.

The blade of ultra-pressurized water extended without end. After all, this was a propulsion device meant to push a warship weighing more than 100 thousand tons. A hit would easily slice apart a human torso. Kamijou ducked low to the ground to just barely avoid the horizontal sweeping attack, but the aircraft cruiser's bridge was sliced off at the base, causing it to collapse.

Mut Thebes tilted her head and readily threw away the weapon boasting so much destructive power.

And next...

"Grounding plate."

"What the hell!?"

“The base of the ground line. However, a ship can’t bury the plate in the ground like normal, right? Instead, the massive amount of excess electricity produced within the ship is sent out into the seawater.”

“Not my point. What’s with all these crazy things!?”

“You mean this?”

The brown girl brought her palms close together in front of her chest and thick lines of electricity crackled between them. If what she said was true, that had to be even more powerful than a train’s high voltage line.

“As I have already explained, I absorb the weapon’s shadow, not the weapon itself. I have no real reason to use them for their intended purpose.”

“So you can just do whatever you want!?”

“More or less,” she plainly agreed. “And another thing. Remember the boiler?”

“?”

“I was opening the maintenance hatch of a running diesel engine to forcibly extract the flames, but that isn’t all that emerged. What do you think happens to a human who breathes in *invisible oxygen-deficient air* created when combustion steals all the oxygen away?”

“...Gah!?”

Suddenly, Kamijou’s right knee nearly dropped to the deck.

Mut Thebes’s expression was unchanged.

“You do not need a special poison gas to kill someone. The air contains around 21% oxygen. Simply reducing that by half creates deadly air guaranteed to make a human pass out.”

“~ ~ ~!!!!”

“Or so it said in the engine room manual. Extracting the knowledge from the shadow wasn’t easy, just so you know.”

Using the items in such unusual ways may have been a privilege gained by leaving the human territory, but how far would she grow if she were to absorb the shadow of, for example, an original grimoire or Index?

And Kamijou couldn't spend any time on that thought.

He could tell he wouldn't remain conscious for long. Similar to motion sickness, he didn't seem able to fight it despite being aware of it.

He wanted to end this quick so he could at least pave the way to saving Anna before he passed out. He could have Aradia, the caring big sister, carry him to Alice. He had seen enough of that goddess of the cold but gentle moonlight to trust her that much.

So he didn't need to worry about himself.

He would focus on that life they could all save together.

"Gahhh!!" he shouted, breaking through his mental limiters like a hammer throw athlete.

He clenched his right fist tight and took a powerful step forward.

Mut Thebes only tilted her head.

She did not use the electrocution weapon she had called a grounding plate.

With a deep rumble, gravity suddenly released its grip on Kamijou. A push from below had launched his feet from the flight deck. His footing – that is, the aircraft cruiser – had moved.

The brown girl sighed softly.

"My control is not limited to the weapons attached to me."

"Gwah!?" groaned Kamijou when, a moment later, he was slammed back down into the deck.

At least his right hand hadn't touched the floor, causing him to plummet further.

But.

He couldn't reach her.

Gathering all of his resolve wasn't enough for his fist to reach that Transcendent.

He was out of breath and unable to get up, but when he looked up at her, he saw the girl raising both hands overhead with the moon behind her. Thick electricity crackled between her palms.

Mut Thebes did not hesitate.

“The ship’s fluid dynamic power generator produces 45,000kW of alternating current power at a frequency of 60Hz. That easily surpasses the power of a nuclear aircraft carrier and is enough to cause the human body to explode.”

“You think you can kill me with *electricity*? Sorry, but I’ve built up a resistance to high voltage currents.”

“There is no such thing.”

An extra-powerful discharge burst out.

Kamijou Touma tried to raise his right hand, but he was trembling too badly to move.

The light filled his vision.

One second.

Two seconds.

Three seconds.

His pure white vision did not return to normal. But that he could sense the passage of time meant he was still conscious?

“What...happened?”

He tried to speak and found his voice was terribly hoarse.

Still collapsed, he blinked hard several times before his vision somewhat returned. The deck was scorched brutally black right next to him. And Mut Thebes stood a short distance away. But she hadn’t had any reason to move away in that situation?

No, that wasn’t true.

The aircraft cruiser itself was tilted diagonally. The girl was leaning her back against a wall to prop herself up.

“What...”

She was moving her head side to side to see what had happened.

“...the hell?”

Part 4

Aradia tore through the night sky on her mic stand, bringing down one stealth craft after another.

Her magic was based on tripling. So the more she brought down, the greater her power. Once she got the ball rolling, she had nothing to fear. She weaved in an S-shape to dodge the shots from the 35cm ship guns firing from the giant bird wings spread out overhead. When anti-air missiles were vertically launched from the deck, she let them follow her for a bit before she spiraled around one of the five legs until they had all crashed into that “wall”.

The anti-air laser units could shoot down cruise or ballistic missiles with greater than 99.9% accuracy, but not even they could catch the witch goddess flitting this way and that in the sky.

She slipped through the deadly net pouring down like rain.

“I had heard laser weapons aren’t visible, so are those weird green lines the equivalent of tracer rounds?”

(The giant bird is made up of 10 ships and each one is loaded with 30 or 40 planes. That means they could carry nearly 400 in all. And since I’ve taken out- hm? How many was it?)

Aradia flew straight up again on her mic stand and smacked her forehead.

Apparently she had earned too good a high score.

The ship guns roared and an ordinarily impossible scattershot approached her like a wall.

The projectiles were all Shrink Drink spears.

In a way, this was the most fearsome attack for a Transcendent.

(With the second Aradia defeated, I guess Mut Thebes doesn’t have to worry about friendly fire anymore.)

“Tch!!”

Aradia sharply changed course to slip through a gap.

(How am I still in the air? I’m pretty sure warships and aircraft carriers need a crew in the hundreds or thousands. And there are ten of them here. Are there too many weapons for Mut Thebes to control them all? She also must be too focused on Kamijou Touma to eliminate my flight ointment.)

The ordinary firepower wasn’t a threat.

She needed to be on the lookout for something else instead.

“Oops.”

She twisted around and flew in a spiral to let a slowly-approaching 45cm self-destruct drone pass her before detonating. Fortunately, their rotors were too loud for them to sneak up on her, but she still had to be careful because they moved differently from artillery or a missile.

Aradia’s top priority was drawing the fire of the aircraft cruiser and its aircraft since Kamijou Touma couldn’t dodge or defend against them on his own. That way he could focus on his own fight. So she could accomplish her goal just by flying around.

But if possible, she also wanted to do damage to Mut Thebes.

This wasn’t even about wanting to repay him for saving her before.

That boy was already her target of salvation.

The Bridge Builders Cabal may no longer recognize her legitimacy, but that goddess had to save him.

The witch goddess flew her stainless steel mic stand in a large circle around the giant bird like a drone getting video footage. She focused on one point of that massive bird comprised of several aircraft cruisers.

It technically wasn’t a weapon.

“Hm,” she muttered quietly.

She was said to be the goddess of the night and the moon and her lips contained the bewitching shine to match.

“I bet I can use *that anchor*.”

She took aim and sharply descended.

Her target was the metal latch holding a chain thicker than her arm.

Part 5

An unnatural tremor ran through the ship.

If Kamijou wasn't careful, he would have slid to the side even as he lay collapsed on the flight deck. In this case, it looked like Mut Thebes had a harder time keeping her balance while standing up.

Yes, the giant bird created from several aircraft cruisers was clearly shifting out of place. It tilted diagonally and didn't fix itself. One of the five legs extending down like a long skirt must have been squashed like an aluminum can.

This was no coincidence.

Good fortune had no love for Kamijou Touma.

“*Aradia?*” asked Mut Thebes, looking somewhat confused.

This couldn't possibly be good fortune, so the boy had to ask which goddess had chosen to protect him.

“She must have lowered the anchor. But how did that cause so much damage? The anchor is a standard piece of the ship's equipment and it isn't even a weapon. It isn't enough to bend and break a military ship.”

“Don't be so sure. I don't know what exactly Aradia did, but if that really was the anchor, it is possible for that to destroy the ship. There are standards concerning the water depth and the chain length and there are apparently detailed rules about using two anchors at once and how to lower them. Forcibly lower the anchor in the wrong way and the power of the waves tugging on the ship can bend or even break its hull.”

“They teach these things in Academy City?”

He decided it was best not to mention he knew this from an old B movie he had seen on TV recently. Even if it only came once in your life, not every day of your first high school winter break was guaranteed to be exciting.

“And let’s not forget what you said about reaching the cinema complex.”

“?”

“*You walked here.*”

Kamijou slowly gathered enough strength to sand back up.

His head was still woozy from breathing in the oxygen-deficient air, but he could still fight.

He could pass out a little later.

“You also said it took some time to absorb multiple 300m aircraft cruisers, but that means you would have needed to rush here to make up for the lost time. You would normally run and jump in those circumstances.”

“...”

“But you didn’t do that.”

No.

Was there a reason she couldn’t do it?

“Ships are made to float in the ocean, not walk on land. Even if you can pull it off slowly, forcing it to a run would bend the hull and concentrate enough weight to crush it. I’m betting you gave it five legs because you wanted to distribute the weight. And even then, you had to walk slowly and carefully!!”

Aradia had done it on purpose. By lowering the heavy anchors one after another, each part of the giant bird had been forcibly twisted in different directions. She had broken a weapon larger than the average building by using the enemy’s weight and momentum against them like a form of martial arts self-defense.

“Tch.”

This may have been a first.

Mut Thebes clicked her tongue. And her focus shifted from Kamijou to Aradia, who was flying around in the sky.

She didn't even need to use the Shrink Drink designed to kill Transcendents.

Flying with magic was easy, but shooting her down with the counter spell was just as easy.

Kamijou couldn't let that happen.

"Ohhhh!!"

"?"

In the precise moment her focus shifted, Kamijou Touma shot to his feet and used all his strength to push himself forward while crouched low. He threw a full-power tackle toward Mut Thebes's slender hips.

He struck.

Gravity briefly vanished and then they both crashed down onto the flight deck.

Afterwards, a powerful vertical tremor hit them. Had Aradia dropped another anchor to the ground, tugging unnaturally at the great bird?

The shaking and tilting sent Kamijou and Mut Thebes rolling along the flight deck while tangled together. They picked up speed. They rolled on and on and belatedly realized the tilting of the deck was getting worse.

There was no stopping it now.

They grabbed at each other while sliding down the steep downward slope of the flight deck. Kamijou couldn't stop their momentum, but by pressing the soles of his shoes against the deck and creating resistance, he could guide their slide to the sides. They would be badly injured if they hit a wall at this speed, so he desperately directed them toward the starboard side deck, slammed Mut Thebes against the base of the destroyed deck to dislodge her grip on him, and slid another few hundred meters down. They both slid all the way down to the asphalt far below.

"Gh."

They had reached the ground.

A short distance away, the girl silently rose to her feet.

The massive bird seemed to cover the sky overhead.

A dull, heavy scraping and groaning of metal came from above. The bird could no longer keep its balance, so its upper body pressed against the remaining bottom half of the cinema complex and it stopped as if leaning against the building for support.

Most likely, that massive bird was no longer usable.

But the aircraft cruisers were not Transcendent Mut Thebes's only weapons. She took a quick look around at the bottom of the skirt-like five legs and her eyes stopped on an armored vehicle flipped over on the road. No, it only looked like one. A high pressure water weapon was crushed between the vehicle and the road.

That meant the vehicle was an anti-NBC decontamination vehicle.

Or was Mut Thebes focused on the revolving grenade launcher fallen next to it? If it was meant to distribute gas, it likely contained tear gas or emetic gas. Artillery only fired upon a single point, but these invisible chemicals would spread to cover an entire area. Was she going to use that to take out Kamijou? It was true gas was a more effective anti-personnel weapon than bullets.

And she had already had some success with the damage caused by the oxygen-deficient air.

She licked her lips and held out her palm.

"The vulture devours the flames enveloping it and devours the dead flesh. All is reborn anew. In other words, the Dead Phoenix."

"!?"

There was a powerful flash of light.

But it didn't come from Mut Thebes. A nearby streetlight was blown away by a tank gun at close range. The gun was attached to an 8-wheel mobile combat vehicle – a Predator Octopus. Only one person could have used the smart glasses to control that military vehicle which should have been abandoned in the underground parking garage.

And the shadows stretching across the road were influenced by the number and position of light sources.

So.

Blowing away the streetlight and spreading explosive flames in an unexpected direction caused the vehicle's shadow to stretch in the opposite direction, as if fleeing from Mut Thebes. Same for the grenade launcher next to it. Now she couldn't absorb the surrounding shadows and create her white versions.

Now an ordinary fist could reach her.

"What!?" groaned the brown girl.

This wasn't over yet.

Kamijou clenched his teeth and his right fist.

And he thought of the person who had fought alongside him.

(Anna...Sprengel.)

Part 6

The small girl was crawling on the floor.

That position was impossible to imagine from her usual vicious pride.

She was more than 50m from the ground.

The half-destroyed cinema complex didn't have any real floors left. Only some slight remnants of the floor still existed around the thick pillars and by the walls. Anna was crawling along that narrow space, meaning she had nowhere to go and no way to go back.

"Kh."

Maybe she couldn't defeat Alice Anotherbible's power. The amount of power *alone* was extraordinary.

Maybe she couldn't escape the Shrink Drink.

Maybe she was doomed to die.

Without ever finding the king she sought.

“But...”

She refused to give up without at least trying first.

Those two had done nothing wrong. They had not ignored her explanations and they had not impatiently skipped through the text. They hadn’t made any of those mistakes.

Anna was sick of watching people digging their own graves.

She was frustrated with this world where no one would follow her instructions.

But.

If someone who had followed her instructions and hadn’t done anything wrong were to fall, something even deeper than the core of her being would break.

(I...)

She was not a praiseworthy person.

She was a wicked woman through and through.

If Kingsford did everything the right way, then Miss Sprengel did everything the underhanded way.

This Anna had not lived a life she could be proud of.

But even so.

(I wanted to teach people. I wanted to be someone’s teacher.)

“I thought as much.”

She heard a voice.

Probably Aiwass’s.

“Finally decided to be honest with yourself? You did not want a king because you wanted someone to bind your wicked ways. You wanted to give this would-be king a proper education, didn’t you? And this time, you would keep trying no matter how many times you failed. Because you believed doing that would make the present world a better place, at least a little bit.”

Anna did not reply.

She wasn't in a position where she could explain every little thing anyway.

The goal of the Rosicrucian magic cabal was to use mystical magical knowledge to eliminate the world's sickness and restore it to a healthy state, just like a person took medicine to heal their illness.

She had simply been too powerful a medicine to take as is.

The world's sickness had definitely existed.

In that case...

(I can't die yet.)

Miss Sprengel caught something with her trembling hand's fingertip: her smart glasses.

(I can't die now that I know what I truly want!!)

It took all her strength just to place them on her face coated with gray dust. She clenched her teeth and focused like never before.

"Those innocent ones...sought out my teachings."

It was fortunate the walls and floor had crumbled away and she was stranded partway up the building.

This gave her an excellent view of the world.

She could see the city that she knew would soon be destroyed but she still wanted to remain beautiful.

She wasn't going to remain conscious for long.

She could tell.

Her vision was flickering in and out, but she managed to raise her voice just before it went dark for good.

"So keep your hands off of theeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeem!!!"

She could see two people far below.

As well as an 8-wheel Predator Octopus.

Part 7

Kamijou Touma walked on wobbling legs.

He was at his limit thanks to the shockwaves pummeling his body and the oxygen-deficient air reaching his blood.

But he still managed to clench his right fist tight.

He thought about Aradia, goddess of witches, the moon, and the night. He thought about Miss Sprengel who had played a role in founding the Golden cabal. He thought about those two who weren't physically with him, but were fighting alongside him all the same. The labels of human and Transcendent – of regular and irregular – didn't matter here. Their desire to help each other intersected and laid out a powerful web of support.

Kamijou Touma was the same. He had no grand purpose, but he wouldn't concede to anyone when it came to the strength of his feelings. If he didn't win here, those two were in trouble. He would have to helplessly watch as they were killed for the grand plan of the great Transcendents.

He couldn't let that happen.

He refused.

So a completely ordinary high school boy gritted his teeth and clenched his right fist tight.

Just like those two, he would force this to work.

Stronger. Stronger! Stronger!!

“It doesn't matter how many weapons you have. That power is only an illusion.”

“Kh.”

“True strength comes from your friends, Mut Thebes!!!”

He caught the Transcendent's cheekbone right when she finally turned his way.

Kamijou Touma swung his right fist with his full weight behind it.

EPILOGUE

Beyond Optimism. *Catastrophe_XXX*

“Gh...”

“You need to wake up.”

When he heard Aradia’s soft voice, Kamijou focused on his intermittent vision.

He must have passed out for a few minutes, probably because of the oxygen-deficient air. He felt a lot better after taking a few deep breaths on Aradia’s prompting.

The battle was finally over.

He had received Aradia’s full support throughout, but he still thought he had done quite well for a fight against a Transcendent. After all, he had directly fought an official Transcendent and he hadn’t died even once.

(Is there something wrong with me when that feels unusual? Good, Old Mary has me a little too accustomed to dying.)

But winning wasn’t the end of it. In fact, the real challenge began now.

“Where’s Anna Sprengel!?”

“I collected her. She was caught on a partially collapsed floor.”

Aradia was resting her mic stand on her shoulder.

She used that witch’s tools in place of a broom.

Magic flight seemed quite useful when there wasn’t a magician around to interfere.

Aradia placed unconscious Anna and the limp enemy Aradia at her feet and set down the mic stand. Kamijou realized he had completely forgotten about the defeated Aradia, which could have been bad later on. She could do everything Aradia could, after all.

After crouching once to lower her luggage, the Transcendent tossed Kamijou something she picked up from the ground.

“Here you go. It’s the Shrink Drink.”

“Um!?”

“You’re going to negotiate with the Bridge Builders Cabal, aren’t you? Which means you’ll be raiding them. Can’t hurt to have a trump card.”

That special weapon was designed for use against Transcendents. Aradia was in trouble if the spear tip hit her, but she didn’t seem worried while handling it. Kamijou had nervously caught it in his left hand, but he wasn’t sure what to do with it now.

(How do you use it? Mut Thebes always launched it like a guided weapon. For that matter, I can’t refine magic power or anything like that, so is it even possible for me to use it?)

The witch goddess with a loop of duct tape around her right ankle tilted her head.

“What are you going to do about the defeated Aradia and Mut Thebes?” she asked.

“As dangerous as they are, we’re not stabbing them with this spear.”

Kamijou Touma held the spear shaft between his neck and shoulder like a phone while taking out a roll of sturdy duct tape and pulling out a long piece.

Aradia held a hand to her forehead with sorrow on her face.

“Oh, no. Is this what it looked like when you did it to me? The embarrassment and humiliation are way worse seeing it so objectively.”

“We need to start with binding the second Aradia’s arms and legs and then covering the bottom of her feet so she can’t use her magic, but what’s the source of Mut Thebes’s magic? What can we take from her that would make her harmless?”

“Based on my objective observations, she can lay claim to the shadow of any object that her own shadow touches.”

“Right.”

“So what defines ‘her shadow’? At the very least, I doubt she could ride a jumbo jet and use its shadow on the ground to absorb all the shadows on the ground.”

Kamijou Touma took another look at the girl sprawled out on the ground. It didn’t stand out because so many of the Transcendents chose not to wear much clothing even in winter, but was she showing so much of her skin for a reason?

“Could the condition be only the shadow cast by her bare skin works?”

“Probably so.”

Then he would have to fully wrap her up. Mut Thebes could be neutralized by turning her into a bagworm to cover up all of her skin. But if he turned her into a tape mummy with even the face covered, she would suffocate, so he grabbed a full-face helmet that happened to be lying nearby.

With both defeated Transcendents bound, it was time for Anna. She had been hit by the Shrink Drink, a spiritual item containing the essence of the Alice in Wonderland item labeled “drink me”. Supposedly, not even Good, Old Mary could save her now. The only hope remaining was Alice, the extreme irregular. But this wasn’t going to be easy. He had hurt Alice’s feelings and he wasn’t sure if the consulate even existed anymore. If the cabal had already crossed Academy City’s walls and gone into hiding in the wide world outside, any chance they had evaporated.

“We need to get Anna to Alice. We have Aradia and Mut Thebes tied up, so...oh, I know. Let’s stick them inside a random tank or armored vehicle. Those don’t have windows and they can’t climb the ladder and open the hatch while tied up.”

“Aradia? That’s accurate, but I’d prefer if you came up with names that distinguish her from me.”

“Then how about I call you Dia-chan?”

“Please don’t. It’s scary when a guy comes on too hard.”

The minorly depressed goddess grew a bit flustered. She wasn’t sure what to do with her hands.

“Um, so would you prefer something more respectful? Like ‘the great grand goddess of goodness’?”

“Does it have to be alliterative? Maybe I was wrong to expect any good ideas out of you.”

Mut Thebes’s eyelids trembled a bit just before Kamijou put the helmet on her.

He flipped her over and grabbed the Shrink Drink spear lying on the ground. The long shaft was really hard to control with just his left hand.

“Th-the fight is already over! We can subdue you before you can absorb any new shadows!!”

“My loss does not matter.”

Mut Thebes’s voice remained calm even after being punched out and wrapped up like a bagworm. As a punishment expert, she may have had a detached view to winning and losing and to life and death.

Or so Kamijou thought, but he was wrong.

The girl had more to say.

“The 2nd Aradia and I had already completed our task.”

For a brief moment, Kamijou couldn’t respond. Or rather, his mind had gone blank. Until Aradia tapped his shoulder, he forgot even to breathe.

But when he thought about it, Mut Thebes had said it from the beginning.

They already had a *new* Aradia.

They would not have Anna join the ceremony as an irregular guest performer.

In other words...

“You...already did it?” asked an astonished Kamijou Touma.

Then his voice grew louder.

“*You Transcendents completed your important ceremony before going after us!?* Is that what you mean, Mut Thebes!?”



“Hmm.”

Anna Kingsford raised her arms and stretched her back. Her arms hit the wide brim of her witch-like hat, nearly knocking it off of her, so she had to quickly grab it.

It was late at night on January 4.

Three figures walked through the streets emptied by the martial law declaration: Aleister, Anna Kingsford, and Kihara Noukan the golden retriever.

“It took some ☺ to search them out since the consulate was abandoned, but there are ✕ many places they could carry out a ceremony on that scale. We may still arrive in ☺.”

“What are you doing?” asked Aleister, sounding extremely displeased.

Nevertheless, the great goddess of knowledge held a hand to her mouth in an elegant fashion and laughed quietly.

“Several Transcendents were reported crossing the wall from the outside. There is ✕ doubt in my ☹ that they are all gathering in Academy City to perform their ceremony. I wonder what has them rushing it so much. Do they believe they can ✕ allow any further accidents now that Alice has *frozen*?”

“I asked what you are doing! That boy is risking his life in battle somewhere else right now!!”

Aleister finally raised his voice to a shout.

Kingsford did not stop walking.

“Mr. 🐕.”

“Yes?”

“We are about to touch on the depths of 🔪. You could also call it an unsightly private matter. If you are ✕ part of the occult, I recommend you leave now.”

“Not happening.”

“Then without further ado☆” The great goddess of knowledge clapped her hands together in front of her chest. “*I am working to find the enemy we must defeat.* Aleister, that was your request.”

“And you’re way off! What does attacking that cabal now have to do with that boy!?”

“Do you know who it is the 🏗 Builders Cabal is attempting to create?”

“...?”

Aleister started to yell again, but paused.

“Who they are attempting to create?”

“✓.”

“You mean it is *a person*? They went out of their way to prepare an entire fetus for a ceremony designed to summon the soul of a superhuman beast or spirit. It could be Nuit, Hadit, Thoth, Hoor-paar-kraat, or Choronzon. If you are willing to bear the risk of violating the ethics of life in the preparation phase, surely you would choose to summon a god or demon for maximum efficiency.”

“The efforts of all of the cabal’s Transcendents influence the fertilized ○. Thus, we only need to speculate who they would all be willing to leave in charge of the ☿. This is not even about ✍ – it is a matter of the psychoanalysis begun by Freud. Focus on their actions and it should become obvious who they are attempting to create to save the ☿. What they long for can be 👁 from the outside.”

Then who exactly was it?

“But then why the fancy ceremony? If they only need to resurrect an individual, isn’t that a job for their Good, Old Mary?”

“My, my. ✕ even that Transcendent can do a thing when there are ✕ accurate records regarding the location of the person’s body. Her ✍ appears to require physical contact.”

Anna Kingsford believed simple answers were the most beautiful, so she did not drag things out longer than necessary. Whenever she talked at length, it was to place herself on the listener’s level.

So she soon gave the answer.

It was a legendary holy man symbolized by a cross.

He was someone who journeyed through the desert and healed the people suffering from disease, curses, and sin.

He was the wisest of wise men who would at times hold out his hand and at times provide a mystical potion to work extraordinary miracles and then leave without asking for anything in return.

He was a miracle worker who had fought the world’s ignorance and gathered disciples who shared his goals.

He had healed individual people and ultimately attempted to fight the sickness infecting the entire world, from its philosophies to its nations.

He was a magician of such great skill that no one could ignore him.

Not even Aleister Crowley or Anna Kingsford.

In other words...

“CRC.”



The alluring movements of Kingsford’s lips spelled out those initials.

At the same time, something blared in the sky.

Woo!!!

That siren indicated a threat to the city.

Anna Kingsford rephrased the answer as if pushed on by that din.

“*Christian Rosencreutz*. That is who the  Builders Cabal is attempting to create by gathering their Transcendents and performing a large Crowley-style  ceremony.”



In the most secure cell of the District 10 prison, new Board Chairman Accelerator glared silently at the wall.

No, he didn’t even need to view the large screen there.

His cell was sealed so tightly that not even an ant – or even a gas – could get in or out. Nevertheless, he could sense something when he switched on his choker’s electrode.

The vectors were straining.

Like they were gathering on a certain point in the world.

The satellite footage showed nothing.

But there had to be something there when he could sense such a great distortion and straining.

The large screen embedded in the wall displayed a map with a red X at one point.

Accelerator switched back off the electrode while seated on his luxurious bed.

(I know the location, but who should I send in? These aren't people Anti-Skill or Judgment can handle.)

So should he rely on the more toxic darkness? For example, there were the brutal criminals locked up in this very prison: the sisters Hanatsuyu Kaai and Youen, Rakuoka Houfu, Benizome Jellyfish, Tessou Tsuzuri, etc. Or should he recruit the help of Ladybird, Frillsand #G, or one of the other inhuman monsters still wandering the city's darkness?

"No," he said under his breath.

This was nothing as simple as ethics or righteousness. A more grounded sense pleaded with him.

"*They won't do.* They aren't right for the job, like bringing a mahjong cheat tile to a poker game. They would be crushed before they could make use of their advantages."

What would the old board chairman have done?

Accelerator had no intention of using the same scummy methods as that bastard, but it was true that human had used the cards available in Academy City to fight against *the other set of rules* found beyond the city walls.

He had to outdo him.

He had to dig deep into that human's methodology and reach for an option not even that human could choose.

A weak voice came from the machinery.

"Um, sorry. If only you hadn't had to waste time on me."

He didn't need to consider the possibility that she had taken too long recovering Qliphah Puzzle 545.

If he had sent the scientific angel named Kazakiri to attack the enemy, she would only have died in vain. He would have lost another game piece without receiving a report. That was the worst case scenario he had needed to avoid at all costs.

Those two were his greatest secrets, different again from Academy City's dark side.

The angel and demon were the rook and bishop he could play directly.

But for that very reason, if he played them too readily, the situation on the board could rapidly change and fall apart.

He could not win just by being coldhearted.

He had to be aware of the limited pieces available to him.

Every man and woman here had a purpose.

Nothing on the board was meaningless. If a great enemy had gathered here for their objective, each and every one of them had to contain an unseen cycle. They were all advancing toward their goal. To put it another way, if he knew where those rails were, he could interfere in that to cause it all to come crashing down.

(I thought the key to that was that shitty woman called Anna Sprengel, but I don't have time to collect her since those idiots spent so long running all over the city.)

“ ... ”

He was up against at least a few dozen of those mysterious Transcendents.

They all served something.

That meant someone who had not yet made an appearance had even greater power than them.

As powerful as his angel and demon were, this was too great a burden for *only* them.

“We can't stop it,” said Kazakiri through clenched teeth.

Accelerator again glared intently at the screen in the wall.

The situation was advancing to the next phase.

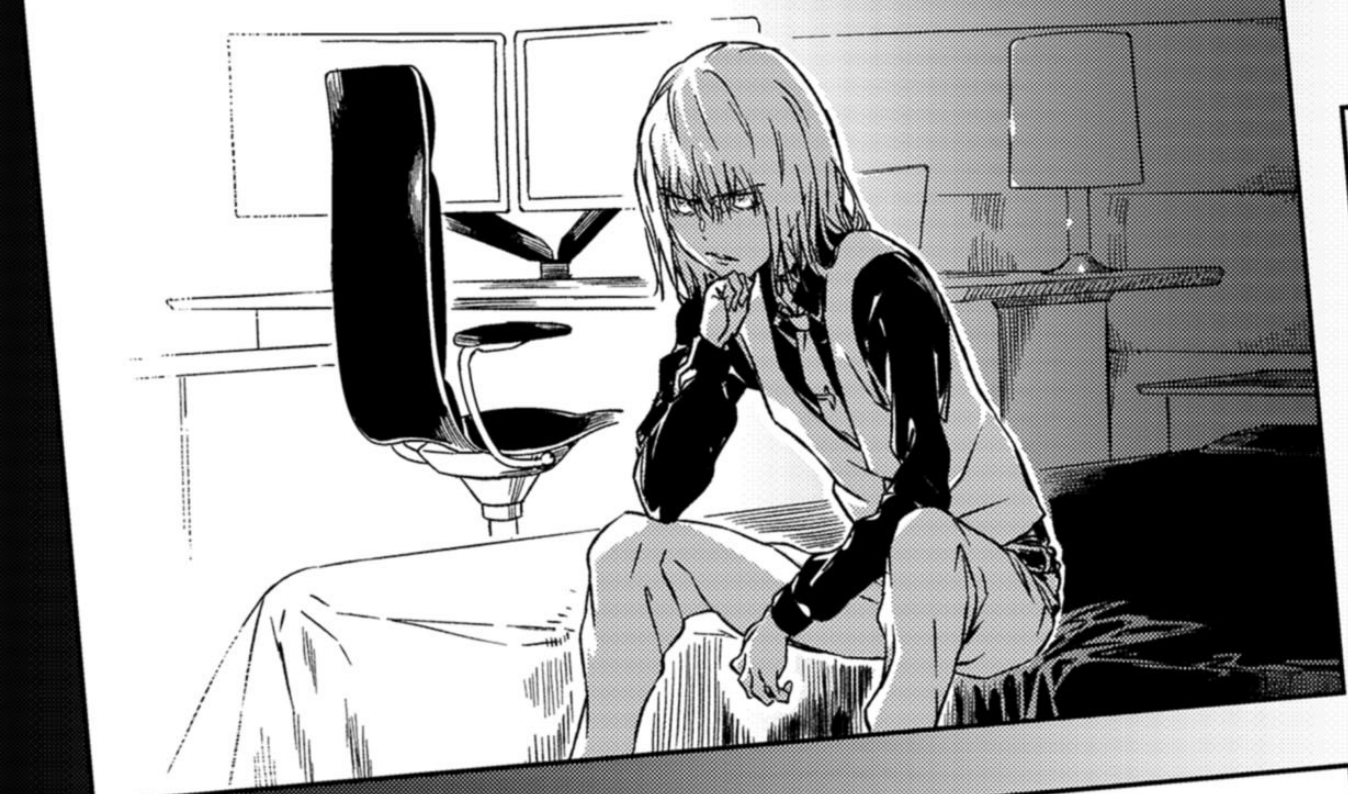
“We can't stop it!!”

Think. Do not move at random.

Accelerator was no longer *just the #1*.

He had given up fighting all alone. He was sick of drenching everything in blood and mud.

He was the top of Academy City – the board chairman. How many game pieces did he have left?





Many containers were lined up in a storage unit lot.

This was where the Bologna Succubus had first used her divination.

But that worldly scenery had been swept away.

Even the siren of doom could not distract their focus.

The siren playing across this entire area meant Academy City had finally detected something was amiss.

But it was too late.

They had purified with water.

They had altered the air with incense.

They had used a magic circle to divide the interior from the exterior.

They had carefully arranged specific items in accordance with the cardinal directions and the constellations.

All of this cut the designated coordinates off from the outside world, turning it into a ceremonial ground.

That was the stage for the performers known as Transcendents.

No matter where they were located, the coordinates calculated out by the Bridge Builders Cabal would be accurate. No matter what the world built here, they had priority. By exciting the land in the proper way, it would reveal its true form as a holy ground.

“We cast our magic here.”

They all spoke together, their voices sounding like a low rumbling of the ceremonial ground as a whole.

The stage was divided such that there were two stages. The inner stage would use the strange karma of their imperfect goodness to intentionally influence the soulless child. The other stage surrounded that one. It would thoroughly eliminate any exterior elements or colorations so they could not corrupt the inner stage.

This ceremony was not directed outwards.

It was more like it compressed everything toward the center.

“Nothing in the world is good or evil – nothing is good or bad. You must not look away from the miracles of the great all-birthing mother. You must accept that essence.”

The ceremony had continued for more than a day and a night.

It had taken a lot of time and effort, but they had continued it like a parade in this trunk room even as they moved from the consulate. And not all of them were present at all times. This time, Mut Thebes and the new Aradia had left early to track down Kamijou Touma. That meant their role had been completed at the start of the ceremony.

“The number of danger is 11. It is the number of imbalance. But that does not make it evil. Evil is naught but a lesson guiding us toward righteousness. How empty the word when used as an excuse for violence and prejudice. The morals and teachings of the outside world are chains that bind freedom and only through breaking free and rising above them can you find the transcendent light. The miracle of life is already present before us, so we need only reach a new understanding by sensing it for ourselves.”

H. T. Trismegistus.

That young butler was the timekeeper managing the Transcendents’ movements down to the second, including who should and shouldn’t be on the stage at any given time. After all, this major performance required more than 30 Transcendents to intricately move in and out. It would never work without someone dedicated to keeping track.

The young butler was a Transcendent who protected the common people.

Specifically, the common people who did not veer too far toward good or evil.

He was not interested in titles like Imagine Breaker or the Magic God’s understander.

Taking action without worrying about the protests of those around you was enough to gain great power. Those people were the ones who set events in motion and left their names in history. But not everyone could make that choice.

There were the evil who couldn’t quite abandon the good.

There were the good who sympathized with the evil.

Those indecisive people were the normal, common ones, but he believed they were the ones who most easily lost their lives in this world. More so than the dangerous criminals who left the humane path without looking back. But that was why H. T. Trismegistus adored them. That *common majority* was easily shaken and easily swayed but still poured all of their efforts into their everyday lives while fighting the anxiety filling their hearts.

So by protecting the common sense and averages that influenced those people's actions, the young butler did everything in his power to prevent the unknown masses from heading in a dangerous direction.

Although he had to strongly shake off the sneaking suspicion that Kamijou Touma might be one of those people.

“ ... ”

And in that sense...

(Alice.)

They had begun the ceremony now because of her condition. H. T. Trismegistus silently clenched his teeth while he managed the whole and sent out Vidhathri when the time was right. Good, Old Mary raised a lily flower and flowery Blodeuwedd was blindfolded with her hands tied behind her back with rope, but the star of this enormous ceremony should have been Alice. She stood weakly and perfectly still at a corner of the stage. She was *frozen*. Almost like a bit part who was only on stage to play a tree or rock. He had trouble even looking at her, but the ceremony would fail without all of the Transcendents taking part.

And Alice's transformation might not end here. If her condition worsened, it would become difficult to even have her on the stage with them.

What had happened to her?

H. T. Trismegistus had obeyed Alice out of the fear that she was as far from “normal” as could be and had the power to throw the definition of “common” and “average” off a cliff. By carefully observing the actions of someone who was essentially his polar opposite, he had hoped to detect subtle omens of how the world would change.

But now she was only an empty shell standing still except when she swayed in the wind.

He found it hard to believe it had even been possible to damage her.

“ ... ”

A straining sound came from the young butler's back teeth.

Only the powerless common people were allowed to be swayed like that. Transcendents saved people based on their strict conditions, so they could not waver. Their roles would break down if they did.

Also, a solid object was positioned at the center of the stage.

It contained the seed of life and their external influence would seal the desired soul within. If an inhuman being could be captured and forced to do your bidding, then you could also create one for yourself. This was the ultimate spell created by Aleister Crowley's arrogance.

It was born of that human's cold side.

It was a symbol of the complexity that existed alongside the heart that had shed tears for his family.

“Be born and appear before us, life.”

The young butler stepped up onto the stage last of all.

When the timekeeper made his appearance, the ceremony was approaching its end.

He no longer needed to manage everyone else's appearances.

“With magick, a body less than 90 days from its creation does not yet contain a fixed soul, so that sleeping body, ignorant of gravity, functions as a container for a superhuman being, allowing this child to surpass the limits of humanity. We Transcendents guide our savior here, so be born and appear before us, you miracle carrying your own will! Take a human body, boast in your unique thoughts, shine the light of the sun on reality, and cast your shadow on the earth, our great king!!!”

The glass container shattered from within.

The mass inside was growing.

The size and weight were increasing. No, the terms height and body weight may have been more accurate. First from a microscopic speck to a fetus and then to a mature body. In a span of about 30 seconds, *he* became a naked young man of about 18 with silver hair and a beard.

Success.

This was CRC.

Christian Rosencreutz.

The Transcendents were about as eccentric as could be, but they were all rendered speechless by his appearance before them. The harsh magic ceremony had continued both day and night, but their exhaustion was instantly forgotten.

This was their savior for the world.

They felt joy at his successful creation, but they also felt deep emotion and surprise that the man spoken of in legend really did exist.

This group had used the incomplete goodness of their fictions and costumes as a weapon.

But even they were able to invite in this one greater miracle.

This was the true essence of magic.

The feat of magic was all about finding a loophole in the proper contract or deal to gain more than the actual item was worth. It was like shorting a stock. Thus, magic may have been a detestable thing to a righteous god.

“At long last we meet, Christian Rosencreutz, our savior.”

H. T. Trismegistus ignored the deafening siren and reverently held out a red robe.

The Bridge Builders Cabal was fundamentally different from the Magic God, so creating clothing was no challenge for them.

“We are the Transcendents of the Bridge Builders Cabal. We have attempted to save the entire world based on each of our search conditions, but common sense shows that we are nothing but failures whose plans are so tightly intertwined none of us can do much of anything. Please lend us your wisdom and strength as a savior, CRC. Please save the many people suffering in this imperfect world.”

“Bzz, zwrrr.”

The response was impossible to make out.

He was not using a strange code or an ancient language. His common tones likely just hadn't been properly adjusted yet. But that would not last for long.

“Zwrgrklyurr. Ksssh, kwirrrzh. Hm, is this better?”

When he did speak actual words, it was with a wrinkled old man's voice that did not match his young appearance.

But other than that mismatch, it was a completely normal voice.

“It is perfect,” said H. T. Trismegistus, bowing reverently.

“Very good.”

CRC donned the provided red robe without even glancing at the young butler.

His tone was that of someone who had prodded their fried egg at breakfast and found the yolk to have firmed up to their satisfaction. In other words, it was an unconcerned assessment. And immediately after that moment of peace...

A flash of light exploded out.

No one even remotely expected this.

Every one of the gathered Transcendents was toppled by the single attack. The only way for so many powerful Transcendents to be knocked helplessly from their feet was for none of them to understand the meaning of this sudden impact. That meant this was fundamentally beyond their comprehension. The very idea of understanding it may have seemed disrespectful to them. This was a secret power. The thick wall radiating out from that man carried so much power and meaning.

H. T. Trismegistus had once torn his own body apart in extreme emotion.

But even he was helpless.

And there had to be Transcendents with a greater specialization in defense than him.

They did not understand what had happened to them. This was a matter of life or death for them, but it had happened so fast they could have entirely missed it if they weren't paying attention. After it was over, they stared in awe. It was that impressive to them.

They could only say this had influenced the root of their being which they had remade to become Transcendents.

This was more than just brute strength.

It was unknown wisdom. Or to use more common terms, it was a cheat code or a vulnerability.

To those who didn't understand, it looked like, well, magic.

The being in a young man's body spoke with a sneer.

"Why should this old man save anyone?"

He spread his arms and spoke loud.

"Why shouldn't this old man ask for something in return?"

But no one remained to hear his operatic speech.

Because they had all been knocked out.

"Who invented those rules? Did you really think this old man would be bound by them? You are no more than a flock of weaklings hoping to rely on someone stronger than yourselves, so why would you ever think you could restrict this old man's freedom?"

They had erred.

The legend they had heard had been too good to be true.

Christian Rosencreutz may indeed possess enough power to save the entire world. But that did not mean he would supply that salvation free of charge.

He was no savior.

He was a small-minded person.

He was an individual possessing such great power.

Why had they never considered the possibility that he would ignore all rules and morality, wield his power as he saw fit, and rule the world as the greatest tyrant history had ever seen?

CRC and Miss Sprengel were somehow different. Despite both being Rosicrucian.

This monster's conflict had much, much deeper roots. And he found enjoyment in a different way from Anna Sprengel who capriciously approached people or pushed them away.

For Christian Rosencreutz, it was found in thorough destruction.

He had no interest in sweetly corrupting – he wanted to find relief through destroying everything.

Although it wasn't that one was better than the other. It was more like they had different forms of harmful desires.

The siren had been correct. It had accurately warned of a coming threat, but the Transcendents had been too excited to heed it. They had failed to realize what it was they had brought into this world.

“Ahh...”

So when the young butler squeezed out some words, it may have come from his utter disbelief.

His disbelief that CRC – Christian Rosencreutz – still possessed raw humanity.

“I thought common sense dictated...you were meant to bring salvation to all people by healing this sick world, from its philosophies to the structure of its nations.”

“Why should I do that?”

He was not puzzled. His face displayed only cruelty.

It was the twisted opposite of the *invented* legend of the holy man.

In a way, it was an extreme presentation of his raw humanity.

“Why should this old man make an exception of the humans and save only them? Why should I ever go to the effort? That is not to say I have an aversion to the act of salvation itself. But aren't you disrespecting my existence as an individual if you demand I unconditionally save all of humanity? And if you wish to take a truly philanthropic view, then you must consider all life on the planet as equally valuable. When you view humanity as just one of many species, it is clearly the most sinful of the bunch. Kah kah kah. Bah!? Philanthropy!? Hwa ha ha ha ha ha!! How much wisdom did you draw on to kill the fearsome tigers and crocodiles for their skins? You say it is wrong to hunt elephants for

their ivory, but tell me what humanity has done while this old man has slept!? Humanity has scattered its sin across the face of the planet, humanity has run around attempting to clean up its own mess, and after all is said and done, humanity has criticized its own actions as if *that alone* is enough to redefine the concepts of good and evil!! What of this species am I meant to protect? What of this species is worth supporting with my actions? The concept of righteousness is no longer worth discussing and the form humanity has taken in its extreme foolishness leaves nothing I consider worth following. If righteousness and goodness had maintained their simple and noble definitions of becoming no one's slave, none of this would ever have happened. Perhaps the original mistake was when god temporarily left the concept of righteousness in the hands of humanity. Humanity wisely banned the pronunciation of god's name to avoid using it too readily, yet the concepts of goodness and righteousness are treated with so little respect anyone and everyone speaks of them without a second thought! Hee hee. Although if you follow the tear jerking logic that all life is equally valuable, then you must also consider the invisibly small life forms used to create wine and cheese. Is the current human population 6 billion? 7 billion? Or has it reached 8 billion by now? Whatever the case, all life is not equal. Human arrogance is plain to see from the very fact that they invented the word 'primate' to describe their own classification. Have you no shame? Humanity, recall what it was that Adam ate and what it was he learned!! Humanity will not find perfection in this era. So the only way to claim equality with the other forms of life is to regress to the level of apes and return to nature. Even an ape that carelessly touches fire pulls back its hand and never repeats that mistake, meaning they are capable of feeling regret. A feat wholly beyond the abilities of humanity. Or what? Are you going to make me split my sides and laugh myself to death with that absurd claim that the special thought patterns not found in other life forms are just that important? Pff heh heh. I tell you that is a suicidal conclusion that wholly negates your own purpose. Cats and dogs feel familial love, birds and fish communicate with words, and ants and bees have a group society. Hee hee hee. Romance? What life form does not seek out reproduction? In fact, any life form that neglects to reproduce will be left behind by the currents of time. But if you tell me humanity has nothing that cannot be discarded with such shallow thinking, I have no choice but to believe you. ...Thus, the conclusion is far too simple: humanity has no purpose. I have considered the issue from every direction, both physical and psychological, but this old man feels no value in working myself to the bone to save mere humans."

He spoke on and on, but he likely wasn't all that serious about it. Anyone with a knowledge of higher magic would notice right away.

Yes, wasn't it said that a true expert *did not make longwinded speeches*?

This was a failure.

There was only one conclusion: it had all been a complete lie. They had been fools to trust in such a bogus legend.

“Al...ice...Alice.”

After all this, the young butler was fixated not on his own life but on Alice Anotherbible. *Unlike the other Transcendents, she alone could not be replaced.* Or to be more accurate, the Transcendents had analyzed the already-existing Alice to determine how to overwrite their own humanity. So she alone could not be lost here.

His injuries were not the only reason he could not raise his voice to call out to her. Any careless speech here could direct Christian Rosencreutz’s attention to Alice.

But his efforts were in vain.

For one, that girl was the only one who had not fallen from the earlier attack. She wobbled as unsteadily as an ear of wheat blowing in the wind, but it was still a miracle that she remained standing here.

And.

That inevitably led to the next misfortune and tragedy.

‘*Hm.*’

She drew Rosencreutz’s attention.

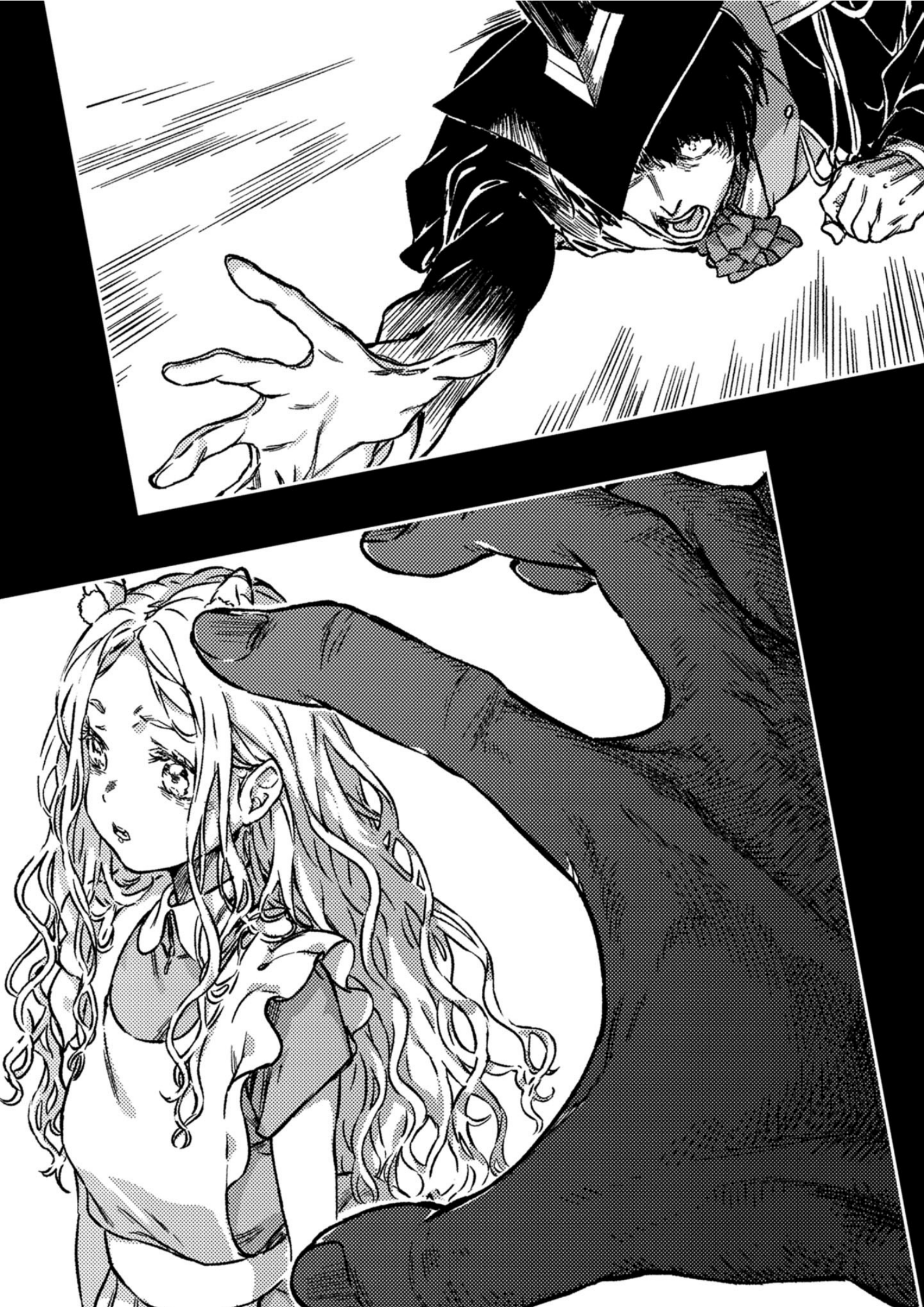
But frozen Alice did not react. She unsteadily viewed the man approaching her, but she did not run or hide.

“No,” groaned H. T. Trismegistus.

He was collapsed on the ground and his face and tailcoat were filthy, but he still crawled and reached his hand out toward the distant girl.

“Noooooooo!”

His cry accomplished nothing.



The man took swift action.

He destroyed her.

His arm grabbed the girl's small face and shattered her entire head.

Something scattered before the young butler's eyes.

Something colorful but broken.

Altogether, it should have been beautiful, but as individual pieces, it was horrifically grotesque.

"Tah dah!! This is the place!"

She had definitely been a tyrant.

For a Transcendent who guarded ordinary common sense, each of her actions was enough to inspire a cold sweat.

"Yes!! H. T. Trismegistus is amazing. He makes the best tea in the world. He also folds the girl's clothes and puts her shoes away!"

But the girl herself had been endlessly pure and innocent.

On the inside, she was the normal and common sort of person the young butler had to protect.

Alice was Alice.

Her actions only seemed so unusual because her power was unusually great.

"H. T. Trismegistus! The girl wants to show her teacher around her secret base!"

The girl's excited voice in the consulate still rang in the Transcendent's ears.

But he would never hear it again.

The memories crumbled away. They vanished beyond some rapidly growing noise.

She had thrown a tantrum about wanting to go to Academy City, her plan to surprise her teacher had transformed into a consulate, and she had rehearsed her lines over and over with the young butler.

But now all of that was no more than some inanimate pieces scattered across the ground.

"Ohh, that sounds like fun. Then should the girl share her power with the winner? You're the best, H. T. Trismegistus!"

Alice Anotherbible.

Never again would he see her *overly* normal and ordinary smile.

Never again.

Never, ever again!!!

"I do not want the strongest power."

There was no scream.

Alice Anotherbible did not react even as her skull was shattered. The rest of her remained upright, her small limbs dangling down.

The scattered blonde hair, the skull shards looking so much like egg shells, and the few remnants of her face still showing an incomplete picture of her adorable features.

After a short delay, the small girl finally collapsed backwards. A dark red liquid belatedly puddled on the ground.

But that was all.

With his hope dashed before his eyes, H. T. Trismegistus collapsed fully to the ground once more.

The young butler forgot to even feel anger.

One of the world's bright lights had just been snuffed out.

"I do not need the unexpected."

CRC.

Christian Rosencreutz.

The legends said that young man would save the world for nothing in return, but he instead gave a careless swing of his arm and stared hatefully at the sticky red that remained on his fingers and palm.

Even though no one had asked this of him and he had done it on his own.

The Bologna Succubus and Good, Old Mary could not move any more than the young butler.

Almost like he had announced that every last one of the Transcendents had already served their purpose in creating him in this day and age.

"This old man will simply do what he likes. I will tolerate no interference and I will actively hunt down anyone with even the slightest possibility of doing so."

With that, he slowly turned around.

The light shining in the frigid darkness was not silver – it was gold.

Surrounded by the eerie siren, Aleister Crowley's hair blew in the night breeze.

"I see what you mean," he spat.

He could tell.

Because he too stood on the side of evil.

Aleister and Kingsford had no idea if they could survive this fight.

But if those two extraordinary magicians fell, how much ferocity would this man turn toward Academy City or that boy on a whim?

So Aleister would crush him.

He would thoroughly defeat him no matter what it took.

“Anna Kingsford. You were right. This is undoubtedly *his* enemy and we cannot ignore him.”

“Aleister, should I prepare the AAA?” asked Kihara Noukan. “The distortion known as magic is a tragedy found in the gaps left by science. If you would eliminate it, I am willing to again act as your pawn.”

This had to be the reason behind Anna Sprengel’s scheming.

It had all been leading to this.

There was the incident Anna herself caused, R&C Occultics had fallen, and then she had interfered with the Bridge Builders Cabal full of Transcendents. All of it had been in opposition to this very outcome.

She had definitely been wicked to begin with. She had enjoyed indulging in that wickedness during each of those incidents. But this was still at the root of it all.

Miss Sprengel was, after all, a high-ranking member of the Rosicrucian magic cabal.

How could she stand idly by when she learned that a group was working to locate her cabal’s founder’s grave and then use him for their own purposes?

And what if she were secretly aware of Christian Rosencreutz’s true nature which contradicted the commonly known image of the holy man?

He was just another human.

He could not be allowed to go free.

He was an archenemy who all living things should be deeply grateful does not live in the same age as them.

To an outside observer, Anna might not seem much better.

But there was no hesitation in CRC's actions. While Anna Sprengel walked the world as she saw fit and corrupted only the things she took a liking or disliking to, Christian Rosencreutz would not be satisfied until he had returned the entire world to a blank slate. He would not tolerate even a single spot of color remaining in the world.

He did not act on a whim. He would not stop until he had destroyed everything. He would set fire to the entire mountain as casually as someone else would weed their garden.

Aleister knew people like that.

The "righteousness" that had oppressed him for so long had always come from people like this.

These monsters never gave anything much thought, never created a better future, and always poured a terrifying amount of passion into eliminating anyone who opposed them.

"I know your type. You do not fight for a purpose. You do not even feel hatred. You simply love the action of destruction itself."

"This is only the human world. Do you even need some grand purpose to crush it underfoot?"

"Mathers and Westcott were corrupted by desire, but even they were better than you."

"Hee hee. Do not compare this old man to those others, girl."

It had only been natural for that wicked woman to try and stop this at all costs. And without telling anyone. Even if she had always made the choices born from Anna Sprengel's wicked nature.

Meanwhile, CRC tilted his head.

It was the look of a man who had been witnessed committing a murder and was now offended to be seen as a bad person.

"You would fight me? With your feeble skills?"

Then he smiled a little.

The smile split wickedly across his face.

“You people are...how would I describe it? The descendants of Western mysticism and a cabal variant claiming to be the Golden? But I can already see how this ends. Your mere child’s play cannot defeat this old man.”

That was true.

At first glance, the Rosicrucian and the Golden seemed like wholly different types of magic cabal, but they were linked deep down. Or rather, the Golden cabal’s initial o=o ceremonies drew strongly on Egyptian mythology and the members would then go on to learn tarot and tattva. Once a member reached the 5=6 level, the Rosicrucian name began to appear unhidden in the ceremonies. How did it end up like that? All three of the founding members, including Westcott and Mathers, were magicians with a Rosicrucian foundation. So by baring his fangs against Christian Rosencreutz, Aleister was threatening his founder’s founder’s founder.

The same was true of Kingsford who was Mathers and Westcott’s teacher and was said to have laid the groundwork for the Golden cabal’s creation. She had had her own cabal, but she originally belonged to the Theosophical Society, a gathering of Kabbalah experts, psychics, and Rosicrucians. Thus, their magic techniques and ideology had their roots in the rosy cross – in Christian Rosencreutz.

Of course, Anna Kingsford was a legend in her own right.

And in a way, she was a superior legend since she had been a “living person” whose path in life could be traced in newspaper articles and academic theses published in the 1800s. But in another way, Christian Rosencreutz’s legend was deeper. Much deeper. Much, much deeper. Nothing about his reality could be confirmed from the official histories. He reigned supreme in a different, more unusual way.

Plus, he was the man who had easily killed *the* Alice Anotherbible.

The legend of Rosencreutz had to be more solid than the legends of Aleister or Kingsford.

What would happen if they thoughtlessly attacked him head on?

But Anna Kingsford was still the one who took a step forward.

“How disappointing.”

“You are disappointed in this old man?”

“X,” said the great goddess of knowledge, head lowered.

The brim of her large hat hid her face from view. But her voice was terrifying enough for even the deafening siren to seemingly take a step back.

“That I did nothing but 👁 as that girl was 💀ed. If I had arrived just three seconds sooner, this would ✕ have happened.”

Her voice was low.

The weight behind it grew endlessly.

“And that Miss Sprengel’s efforts amounted to nothing. She could only view the 🌐 through her ideas of good and wicked, but she still poured all of her efforts into preventing this catastrophe from being released upon the 🌐. Your very existence has trampled her determination under 🏹.”

“Silence, preserved doll. Illusionists are meant to remain silent. That is all we magicians are: wielders of substanceless illusions. Opening your mouth serves only to break the illusion.”

That was the extent of their conversation.

Kingsford silently raised her head and glared at Rosencreutz through her glasses.

To serve those around you.

She muttered someone’s forgotten ideal under her breath.

But on the other hand, that was all she said. A true expert did not give longwinded speeches. They did not self-aggrandize or defend their actions. They could overwhelm others with their simple presence, so they failed to see the benefit of such performances.

In that sense, they were the exact opposite of the Transcendents, the performers who had swept across the world.

The same was true of Anna Kingsford and Christian Rosencreutz.

They existed on the same field.

They both took another step forward.

This was not a large action.

But the frigid winter wind dropped further in temperature.

This was a critical point for the current world.

Something ignited between them.

Even the roar of the siren was noticeably warped.

The two legends wordlessly clashed.

AFTERWORD

If you picked them up one at a time, welcome back. If you bought them all at once, welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

I think I've now used everything I had built up regarding the Transcendents who began appearing around GT4. The main story already touched on a variety of issues, like why members of the same cabal had to work out each other's powers like they had only just met, but did you all notice these odd aspects about them before reading GT8? When Aradia lamented that witch's death in the GT6 flashback, it might have been in the age of smartphones.

Now, about the Transcendents. The orthodox method for a magician is to make all of their tools themselves, so they had to work with pattern paper, a sewing machine, a toolbox, and plywood to prepare for their big ceremony. When you imagine that, a magic cabal sounds kind of fun, like the preparations for a school festival. Maybe I could have created an amusing image for them if I had explored that further?

And speaking of the Transcendents, you probably thought Aradia got a lot nicer after she lost, but then I threw the truth at you. How about that?

But with that in mind, I like that she wrapped duct tape around her ankle as a sign that only Kamijou would understand. There can be more than one Aradia, so she did the same thing as attaching colorful tape to your umbrella's handle so you'll know which one is yours in the school or store umbrella stand. That harsh young woman kept her eyes on the definition of a Transcendent, accepted it, and then took another step forward. I hope you enjoyed that unspoken sign of affection.

Since Transcendent Mut Thebes was a punishment expert, I wanted an image from Egyptian mythology directly related to life and death, so I went with the phoenix. And I wanted to give her a spell that emphasized how to kill her target rather than the simple act of taking their life, so I ended up with what you saw. That weapon girl wears a skimpy dancer's costume and has no blind spots. The weird and scary part is how, in the times

and places where they actually held executions in the public square, the criminal's death was seen as a form of entertainment. But I like the fact that she will ignore the purpose of an item and attack you with a propeller or boiler since she is a Transcendent of the magic side and thus doesn't know or care much about weapons.

The Egyptian goddess Mut is supposed to have the vulture as her symbol, so I can only hope I did a good job of fusing the vulture that lives off of dead flesh and the phoenix that burns itself away and is reborn in the flames. ...Then again, there are theories that the phoenix was never actually part of Egyptian mythology. But maybe that makes it all the more appropriate for a Transcendent?

While she executes people, that is only for her job and she is not a bad person herself. It's a somewhat important point that she takes a more neutral stance. Deep down, she's an easily-chilled girl who can create a unique way of eating four mochis. She only eliminates people based on the result of a majority vote, so her own opinion of the person doesn't come into it. That said, she shows no mercy to anyone who gets in the way of an action once she has decided to take it, so she is a dangerous person all the same.

I also included martial law this time. Some of you might be wondering why they didn't declare the Code Red that Academy City has to respond to terrorist attacks. Code Red is used to lower all the barriers and trap the terrorists in a small area, but I wanted to create a situation where everyone across Academy City was forced to remain at home (because otherwise a lot of people would have been killed by all that artillery fire going on). Since this happened from January 3 - 4, I was hoping it could coincide with that winter break feeling of being at home with nothing to do, but what did you think?

I give my thanks to my illustrators Haimura-san and Kasai Shin-san and my editors Miki-san, Anan-san, Nakajima-san, Hamamura-san, and Matsuura-san. This was the combat vehicle special. Because a mobile combat vehicle is just cooler than a tank or an armored vehicle! I wrote this with that love in my heart, so that vehicle ended up playing a bigger role than I initially planned. Like the thick beam seen in a vertical-scrolling shoot 'em up. This couldn't have made the illustrations easy. Thank you.

And I give my thanks to the readers. This was the Anna Sprengel festival! Kamijou already defeated her once in GT2 yet she's gone this long without any real resolution, so I shoved her inside a cramped vehicle with Kamijou Touma so they could stew together. She had made so many suggestive appearances and hinted at so many things, but by throwing the term "villainess" over her head like a net and cooking her up like fried rice, I feel like her flavor changes in a strange way that causes her dignity to crumble away. In GT7, Kamijou

said he couldn't forgive her but that he didn't want her to be killed. You can find his answer to that dilemma here. Take this, Miss Sprengel! No more hiding behind mystery for you!! Anyway, thank you for reading this far.

It is time to close the pages for now while praying that the pages of the next book will be opened.

And I lay my pen down for now.

The Rosicrucian cabal and the Bridge Builders Cabal have finally been linked.

-Kamachi Kazuma

He had defeated Transcendent Mut Thebes, but it didn't end there.

For one, fighting and winning was not his goal.

This was all meaningless if he couldn't save this life.

He wanted to hold the little wicked woman in his arms, but he couldn't let his right hand negate Aradia's ointment which was slowing the Shrink Drink's effects. So he left her with the witch goddess.

Kamijou still held the Shrink Drink spear in his left hand while he nervously walked out ahead to ensure the coast was clear for Aradia whose hands were full.

With Anna Sprengel down, they could no longer use the high-tech mobile combat vehicle. They had to do the rest on foot.

Aradia occasionally glanced into the night sky while running by his side with Anna in her arms.

Clouds covered the moon.

That witch goddess lived in nature, so did she receive some kind of message from those thick, dark clouds?

"We just need Alice."

Seeing the arms dangling limply from the girl rocking in Aradia's arms was enough for Kamijou to feel a painful squeezing in his chest.

Was that really the same wicked woman?

Was that really Anna Sprengel?

His Imagine Breaker and Good, Old Mary's resurrection were not enough to heal the wound caused by the Shrink Drink.

But it wasn't over yet.

The boy refused to give up no matter what, so he stared into the darkness ahead and kept his feet moving.

He and Aradia pressed their backs against a building wall until the headlights passed on the main road. Then they checked to make sure the convoy of Academy City tanks and armored vehicles was gone.

No matter how dangerous she was, he swore he would never give up on that little wicked woman.

They continued running.

They knew exactly who they needed to see.

“We just need Alice Anotherbible!!!”



By then, the situation had already changed.

The boy did not yet know the darkness of the despair that replaced optimism.