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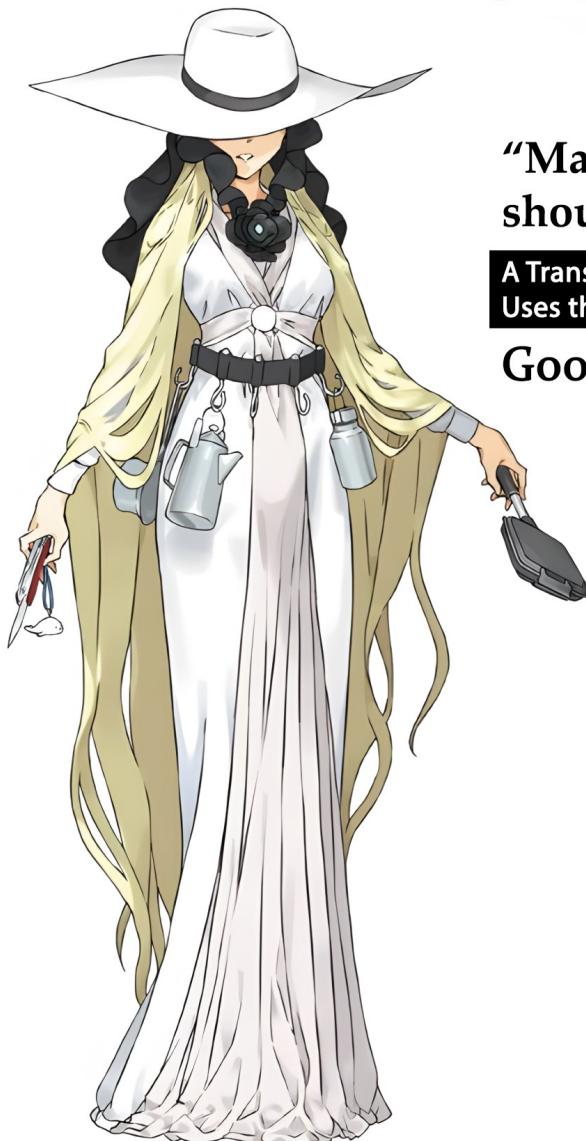
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**“Mama’s resurrection
should work just fine.”**

A Transcendent of the Bridge Builders Cabal.
Uses the miracle of resurrection

Good Old Mary



"I think we're about at Shibuya now.
We're still in Harajuku. Hee hee."

The brain of a Board Director of the Academy City,
and a senior at A Certain High School

Kumokawa Seria

"What's wrong, Touma? Why are you
trembling and sticking your head
between my back and my hood?"

A pure white nun who memorized over 103,000 grimoires

Index

"Abwahhh!!!!"

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

Kamijou Touma

"What is your deal with Shibuya?"

Former Magic God of Gremlin. Has lost her power
as a Magic God after being saved by Kamijou

Othinus



"Hold on a tick. Aradia,
don't tell me..."

A Transcendent of the Bridge Society.
A female demon whose purpose in life is to
protect the reputation of the falsely accused

Bologna Succubus



"Killing you would be easy."

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

Aradia

A CERTAIN MAGICAL INDEX GENESIS TESTAMENT

創約

とある魔術の 禁書目録 インデックス

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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.)

“Dinah's our cat. And she's such a capital one for catching mice, you can't think! And oh, I wish you could see her after the birds! Why, she'll eat a little bird as soon as look at it!”

(from Alice's Adventures in Wonderland by Lewis Carroll)

“This course is of general value to the beginner. While it is not to be taken, in all cases, too seriously, it will give him a general familiarity with the mystical and magical tradition, create a deep interest in the subject, and suggest many helpful lines of thought. It has been impossible to do more, in this list, than to suggest a fairly comprehensive course of reading.”

(from Magick in Theory and Practice by Aleister Crowley)

PROLOGUE

You Lose Less Weight Than You Would Think

Dying_Hungry.

The idea of people losing weight if they didn't eat was a fantasy. Before the body would break down its stored fat and convert it into energy, it would first destroy its vitamin and electrolyte balance, so if a fat person stopped eating altogether, it was perfectly possible for them to starve to death without losing any weight.

"Huff, puff. Ugh."

It was 9 AM on December 31.

Kamijou Touma had just reached the point of realizing how easily people died when the time came.

He couldn't even use the train for this journey across district lines. They said there was no rest for the poor and he was learning just how true that was. He had to use his own two legs to make up for it.

He was in District 11, approaching the east gate through the city's outside wall.

Where had Index gone? And Othinus? They hadn't collapsed from hunger on the way, had they?

"Huff, puff."

His money had been down to 49 yen way back on the 29th. The fridge was empty and he didn't even have any boil-in-the-bag or cup noodle meals. Due to the end-of-the-year maintenance period, the ATMs wouldn't be up and running again until January 4. They were doomed. Maybe it had been a bad idea for Kamijou Touma, Index, the calico cat, and Othinus to all live together in a single room.

With the banks closed, he couldn't even ask his distant parents to send him some money. Even when January 1 rolled around, he wouldn't be able to access his New Year's money from them until the 4th. The worst part was the largescale maintenance

being performed over the long break. All the ATMs in the banks, train stations, and convenience stores were shut down.

There was no use in sugarcoating it. There was only one possible conclusion.

“I-I need a job or I’ll die.”

That would normally require a complex process including paperwork, an interview, and registration of the bank account for direct deposit of his pay. And even if he got through all that, his first payday wouldn’t actually come until the end of the next month. He didn’t have time to mess with all of those little details. He needed a job that paid cash the very same day. No, he could wait for the money if the job provided a meal for the workers. He just needed nutrition. His high school boy body was begging him for calories.

(Away-from-home year-end jobs? This is the first time I’ve ever been glad to be in high school. And leave it to Senpai to have an answer to any request you give her.)

That “Senpai” was Kumokawa Seria.

She had glossy black hair, a large forehead, and extremely adult boobs. He recalled what his school’s most mysterious upperclassman girl had told him.

“They’re called away-from-home, but that doesn’t mean you’re traveling to a foreign country where you don’t speak the language. You’re only crossing one measly wall. Basically, you’ll be heading outside Academy City during the busy holiday season and working a short-term job to earn a lot of cash real quick. You’ll pretend to be heading home for winter break just like 30-40% of the students do.”

It was the younger kids who tended to want to head home to their parents. With the older kids, some might have a holiday plan like him, but a lot of them decided it was “more mature” to stay in Academy City and then ended up spending their New Year’s all alone.

And since the youth population was so much higher in Academy City compared to outside, the same convenience store and gyudon shop chains would pay a better wage outside the city.

“But I must warn you, these jobs aren’t meant for people in truly dire straits like you. It’s for the people who want a thoroughly masturbatory winter break where they use the laxer restrictions on leaving the city to spend most of the break on part-time jobs and then spend the last few days closed up at home enjoying themselves with all the money they earned.”

“I see. So what exactly will I be doing once I sell my soul for money? Am I going to spend New Year’s Eve at the horrifically busy Toyosu seafood market or something?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Shibuya doesn’t border the ocean.”

“Shibuya!!!???”

“I have business there myself, so I’m willing to accompany you. I’m actually very busy, but y-y’know, if you insist.”

The chilly north wind blew through and Kamijou shivered.

(Wh-who knows how this is going to turn out, but some people out there have decided this is more lucrative than just visiting your parents and getting your New Year’s money. So maybe there’s a chance it will work?)

“Oh, but this is so terrifying. Why does it have to be Shibuya? That’s a land of TV, fashion, bleached hair, and white powder. Not to mention that it’s the 31st. When they do the countdown at midnight, don’t they have these dark apocalyptic parties where they lose control and start picking up parked cars and carrying them around?”

Now he was trembling from something other than the cold. She had business in Shibuya? Yeah, that fashionable, capable, rich, and busty beauty who shined in every aspect of life probably would look at home crossing her long legs on the VIP room sofa at a club full of booming dance music, but he was a gloomy indoors creature who might just turn to ash the instant he placed a single toe inside Shibuya’s borders. They were just born different. It was like fashionable people were born with gills and you needed those to breathe in Shibuya, so he would be as out of place as it’s possible to be!!

He loathed money.

If he wasn’t poor, he wouldn’t even need to approach that district of love and desire where he was sure they were partying like the world was ending. He felt a tingling pain in his skin that foretold of a coming disaster. It reminded him of what he had felt during World War Three, while fleeing through Northern Europe with Othinus, and during the unexpected battle against Great Demon Coronzon that he and Aleister had fought in the UK.

(It’s just this once. I just have to get through this one nightmarish day. I can do this. Th-there are other people I need to protect. I need to wriggle free of this shadow of poverty clinging to me and give everyone a satisfying stay-at-home New Year’s where we don’t have to worry about a thing. I want to look into the night sky and complain that I’m gaining weight because I haven’t gotten any exercise lately!!)

Index, Othinus, and his beautiful Senpai (in life as well as at school) who had invited the starving boy along still hadn't arrived at their meetup point.

Kamijou stared up at the east gate in District 11. It looked a lot like the area around a large rural train station, but there was more to it than that. The large metal containers piled up in pyramids were too numerous for a simple terminal station. The eastern end of Academy City nearly bordered Shinjuku and the gate there acted as a logistics base forming a land route artery.

Even now, there were plenty of large trucks coming and going. It felt a lot like watching the flow of money given physical form. And he had to plunge himself into that flow to earn enough to survive. He had to visit Shibuya. Shibuya! He was utterly terrified!!

(Wait, how old is Index exactly? She's not a citizen and she doesn't even have a national ID number, so can she even get a job in Japan? And what about a 15cm god? Hold on. My misfortune sense is telling me it's going to end up that only I can work! Wait, wait, wait! So I have to journey into Demon Castle Shibuya all on my own? Oh, god. I'm going to piss myself!!)

And...

"Yes, yes."

A soft female voice reached Kamijou's ears as someone walked by right behind him. Since no one responded, she was likely speaking on a phone or something. He wasn't the only one busy on New Year's Eve.

"I promise you I've already arrived, Bologna Succubus. Hee hee. This could be bad. No, you wouldn't make it in time even if you spread your wings now and flew here. That's right. I have already completed the Triple Reload. My hand has already reached the target. Hee hee."

The voice suddenly stopped there. The moment of silence was like the lag before an SLR camera could come into focus. She may have been shifting her attention from the phone conversation to her surroundings.

Whatever the case, the same voice spoke to him from behind after that moment.

"Excuse me! You're Kamijou Touma, aren't you?"

A quizzical look formed on the pointy-haired boy's face.

This woman wasn't just asking him for directions. She was asking about his name.

But he was never given the chance to turn around. He only heard a high-pitched metallic sound similar to a small bell and glimpsed some cloth blowing in the wind out of the corner of his eye.

Without warning

a slender hand

stabbed into his back.

The slender

fingers

Jutted out from the center

of Kamijou Touma's

body while covered

in blood.

CHAPTER 1

Go Get That New Year's Eve Job Away_SHIBUYA,31.

Part 1

“...ey, you. Hey. You should probably wake up, boy!”

Kamijou Touma’s mind was shaken awake by the voice shouting into his ear. Only after realizing he didn’t know who the voice belonged to did he realize his eyes were shut.

He had to pour all his might into forcing his eyelids open.

“What is going- eh? Kumokawa-senpai?”

“I’ll admit some things came up and I arrived late, but were you really so bored you ended up napping on the sidewalk people probably walk their dogs on?”

Kumokawa Seria, his busty upperclassman with her glossy black hair held back by a hairband, gave him an exasperated look while crouching down and poking him on the forehead. The mature upperclassman’s casual clothing was a thick coat and the kind of tight skirt suit a capable schoolteacher might wear, so it was worrying in a number of ways when she crouched in front of him like that. (And wasn’t she cold wearing such a skintight blouse for a top?)

But the pointy-haired boy was too confused to focus on any of that.

Realization slowly sank in, but once it dawned on him that he had been stabbed in the back, it avalanched into his mind like panic setting in.

He sprang to a sitting position.

“Eh? Huh!?”

“Hyah?”

Kumokawa jumped and shrank down in an unexpectedly cute way, but he didn’t even notice.

Was he still in District 11? At the east gate? What had happened after that?

“Wait, wait, wait. What’s going on here? Someone spoke to me from behind and I didn’t even have time to turn around. I heard some weird and disconcerting sounds from my body and then my spine – yeah, that’s right! It pierced right through my back! So what happened to me!?”

He ran his hands along his chest and stomach.

“Huh? There’s nothing wrong with me?”

“Did you have a bad dream?”

The way her exasperation was gradually shifting to suspicion was adorable.

He wasn’t injured. His spine hadn’t been shattered, his flesh hadn’t been torn away, his clothes weren’t ripped, and there wasn’t a drop of blood on him.

The digital clock on a building wall said it was 9:15 AM.

What had he been doing for the past 15 minutes?

“You’re getting really worked up over nothing. Were you that afraid of heading out of the city to visit Shibuya? Look, your coat still has the price tag attached.”

“Eh? Huh?”

“Stay still. I’ll cut it off for you.”

Kumokawa Seria pulled a small pair of scissors from a portable sewing kit and cut the plastic thread. That upperclassman was so perfect she even showed off homemaking skills that felt incongruous with her sexy looks.

“Touma. Huff, puff.”

Then he heard Index’s voice. She had the cat on her head and Othinus on her shoulder, the latter trembling in fear while just barely out of range of the former’s front paws. The way that arrogant god was clinging to the white hood of the nun’s habit was just like a terrified girl in a haunted house.

“Huff, puff. W-we finally caught up, so let’s go get something to eat. Ugh, I can’t go on eating the mystery veggies I grew by sprinkling watered-down ketchup in a corner of the balcony.”

“Heh heh. Don’t worry, Index. Cotton candy can fill your stomach with its great size, but it started out as nothing more than grains of sugar. Humans can eat the mist or the air if they’re clever enough.”

“It isn’t fair that Sphinx has cat food *and* catches mice to eat.”

“And he’s trying to eat me as we speak. The animal lovers in this country get mad at you if you catch a pigeon and eat it, don’t they? I might try raising mice if they really did multiply as fast as people say, but apparently it isn’t true. Yikes, he’s trying it again! Human, bring me a book of your country’s laws! I need to find a legal way for me to eat this cat!!”

Technically, they were leaving the city to earn the money needed to buy food, not to directly get something to eat, but Index was skipping that first step in her head. Their New Year’s Tokyo survival life wasn’t over yet. And while they played that game, the god of poverty had grown to a hellish size.

Kumokawa placed a hand on her chin after listening to the poor student, the mysterious nun, the cat, and the god.

“Your idea of survival has a very urban slant to it and it’s based on Academy City standards. This is technically Japan’s capital, you know? And I thought you lived in the dorms where the adults are supposed to be taking care of you.”

Kamijou started to think he might have simply collapsed from hunger. People’s memories were malleable, so his mind might have invented a reason for passing out after the fact.

(Yeah, that sounds more likely. I mean, I already have amnesia.)

Now they all had to leave the city together.

They showed their departure permits at the east gate, which had a very open feel to it. It looked like no more than a small guard booth with a flimsy barrier like at a railroad crossing, but it actually had a thick shutter that would drop down like a guillotine and was guarded by dangerous firearms and unmanned weapons. Tracking nanodevices were injected into their arms with a *pshh* of air. The cat and god were exempt from that process, earning them an envious look from Index who hated injections (even when they didn’t involve a needle).

Kamijou looked back the way he had come while he stepped out past the thick wall.

“There’s usually a lot more Anti-Skill here. Are they all on winter break?”

“(Knowing the new Board Chairman, he might start using those mass-produced military clones to fill out the ranks of the city’s law enforcement. Someone has to replace everyone who was lost and, if he wants the people to support protecting them, it can’t hurt to give them an official position that lets them prove their worth to society.)”

“?”

The mysterious upperclassman was so perfect she always seemed to be a million steps ahead, but that led to one of her few flaws: she sometimes said things that were so far above his head he failed to understand what she was even talking about.

Leaving through the east gate placed them in the vicinity of Shinjuku, but since Kamijou’s gang was so devastatingly poor, they were forced to walk the rest of the way. He was so thankful for free apps at times like this. He checked his old folks smartphone and it told him they only needed to travel a few kilometers south.

“The phone bill is due at the end of the month, right? Human, that means the 31st, so if you don’t get any money today, they’ll shut off your service.”

“...”

“Also, boy. If you thoughtlessly fail to pay your phone bill enough times, it will affect your credit rating. I believe there’s even an urban legend saying two or three late payments is enough to cut you off from getting a credit card. If you don’t want to be digging yourself out of this hole for the next decade or longer, you’re going to have to work your ass off today.”

The boy too poor to ride the train was persistently marching onward with his own two legs, but nothing anyone had to say to him was making him feel any better.

He passed by a man who seemed to be out on a pleasant morning jog. Kamijou’s gang could only be described as “trudging along”, but the distances involved were more the “casual exercise” variety.

Kumokawa toyed with the hair draped over her shoulder while walking alongside him.

“Here, I’ll hail a taxi for you. All it takes is a quick wave of my phone.”

“Stop it, you bourgeois. I’m here to make money, not spend it.”

“Did you forget to do the math? The taxi fare is the same no matter how many people you have riding with you.”

He had bigger concerns right now.

He took the fateful step.

“Ugh.”

Halfway down a seemingly ordinary road, he felt something crawling up him from his feet. He had stepped on something here. It was like he had crossed an invisible barrier. He wasn’t taking a train, so there was no obvious sign or set backdrop telling him he had arrived in Shibuya. He knew that, but still.

“I think we’re about at Shibuya now,” bluntly stated Kumokawa Seria.

“Eeek!!”

“I said ‘about’. We’re still in Harajuku. Hee hee.”

“...”

“Ow! Hey, cut it out! Don’t use your fist against a girl! Stop silently giving me a noogie!”

Thanks to that, Kamijou Touma was forced to scream again once they actually left Harajuku.

“Abwahhh!!!!”

“What’s wrong, Touma? Why are you trembling and sticking your head between my back and my hood?”

Index’s voice sounded so distant.

And he lost sight of where he even was.

There was so much color. Too much. There were clothing stores, record stores, and was that a store just for sneakers? Land here was so expensive that all the stores were tiny and seemed crammed together, but they all tried to stand out by using lots of primary colors and it made his eyes hurt. It reminded him of children’s building blocks or a notebook covered in thick lines from different colors of highlighter. He ended up recalling the trivia he had learned about a certain country developing an incapacitating weapon where they launched a grenade full of LSD into enemy territory.

“Why are they like this?” He spoke in a vanishingly quiet voice while trembling behind a girl a head shorter than he was. “Why are they all so supremely confident in their extreme taste in colors!?”

“Hm, are they though? Most people say Shibuya has gotten a lot chicer lately.”

Apparently it didn’t bother some people as much.

This did a lot more damage to Kamijou since he had drawn a line between the people who could survive here and those who couldn't. He wanted to find some way of dragging this busty upperclassman onto his side of the divide.

"Do the people here hate how their surroundings look so much they feel the need to fill everything with their own colors!? That manga artist known worldwide for his sharp aesthetic sense caused so much controversy with his striped house, but the people of Shibuya don't seem to care at all! It's terrifying. If the people here can feel remotely relaxed looking at this colorful assault on the senses, then what color do they see when they look at a strawberry shortcake!?"

"I will admit things are wilder here than near the train station, but this is far from the worst area. I mean, all we've done is walk a bit south past that big shrine in Harajuku."

"Hold on, Senpai. Why are you still dressed so lewdly when we're in Shibuya? You're dressed like a schoolteacher and also showing off your midriff. Won't a group of hip hop guys in giant T-shirts surround you and harass you?"

"First of all, there aren't groups carrying giant boomboxes around Shibuya. Second of all, not everyone here hates teachers. And third of all, 'hip hop guys' aren't bad people."

"And then I'll be forced to intervene to help you. That sounds like misfortune to me, so I just know it's going to happen!!"

"Hm. I like the sound of that, so maybe I should undo another button."

He had to restrain the beautiful girl before she could invite in disaster.

At any rate, this was apparently not the center of Shibuya that Japan liked to show off to the world, but he was already feeling his HP dropping with each step he took. Demon Castle Shibuya was a fearsome place indeed.

"What is your deal with Shibuya, human?" Othinus sounded thoroughly exasperated. "You saw worse than this in the world I created. And you walked through even more fashionable areas of London and LA without batting an eye."

That was different. It was like how an actor in a foreign film speaking a foreign language looked cool no matter what they were wearing or saying, but it just seemed silly in a domestic film using your own language. He had been so overwhelmed by the scenery in the UK and the US that he had overlooked these differences, but they managed to hit home and rattle his soul when he was in Japan. The difference in style was terrifying! He was a high school boy so poor he couldn't even shop at Uniqlo and wore synthetic materials that stank of insecticide, so he was afraid he might just spontaneously combust after trying to enter Shibuya. He trembled, feeling like he was violating a taboo along the lines of carelessly placing a metal spoon in the microwave.

“What are you so afraid of, boy? You’ve never been to Shibuya before, have you? So what do you even know about it?”

“I-I know enough!! Shibuya is a post-apocalyptic underground world of fashion where the buildings have numbers like 110 or 119 on them. If you let your guard down for a second, someone will have you carrying a mysterious herb for them!! And it’s dangerous for girls!!!!!”

“Were you watching some kind of police special on TV? Is that why you think the world works like a video game rated 17+? Just so you know, your idea of Shibuya is about as accurate as a foreigner’s idea of geishas and ninjas.”

Kamijou jumped when a blaring siren and red-flashing lights drove past them from behind. He lost his balance and caught himself on his perfect upperclassman’s shoulder through her super-expensive-looking coat. For some reason, Kumokawa Seria was unable to suppress a grin.

“What the hell was that!?”

“A cop car? Oh, I guess they are fairly different from what Anti-Skill drives in Academy City. But you can find them year-round anywhere, so this isn’t even a Shibuya thing.”

“Then why is that gaudy car split in two!? How the hell did that happen? I thought Level 5s like that white monster didn’t exist out here! Or is there a wild Gemstone with some crazy power wandering around out here!?”

“Huh. Based on what I can find on this video site, it ran full speed into a stainless steel streetlight. The driver survived and no one else was hurt. Oh, and you called it gaudy, but the driver is an 83-year-old man from Osaka.”

“So if you make a mistake here, videos of it are all over the internet in the blink of an eye!? Whatever happened to privacy!?”

Kamijou was already imagining people pointing, laughing, and taking photos of his out-of-place clothing and him ending up with a 30-second rotating panorama video of him going viral on PokPok. In this land of fashion, a single fashion faux pas could plague you for the rest of your life. Scary stuff.

However.

“I’m hungry.”

The surprising number of ramen shops in the area must have been preparing their ingredients for the day. Index picked up the scent of seafood and pork and her comment provided a small injection of strength back into Kamijou’s breaking spirit.

That was practically her catchphrase at this point, but it carried a lot more weight this time. They were still living their New Year's Tokyo survival life.

He needed a job that would pay in cash today.

It didn't matter what that job was. If he didn't make some emergency income now, he would have a decent supply of dried human meat in his dorm room by the time the new school year started. As the manager of the dorm room's kitchen, he wasn't going to let that happen.

He pulled his old folks smartphone from his pocket.

"Okay, time to find a job. What should I start with?"

Part 2

It was basically a map app for his phone.

The location service only functioned in the designated area, so it unfortunately didn't show anything until he was actually inside Shibuya.

The map displayed pins on the restaurants and companies looking for workers. Before entering any kind of search terms, the screen was filled with pins.

"Wow, that's a lot. The world is overflowing with money!"

"Narrow it down with some search terms, human. You want the ones looking for same-day work that will pay today in cash."

That took away most of the pins.

All the ramen shops and discount stores were gone.

If the pins were the Amazon rainforest, then the earth was in danger.

"Awww."

"It's a miracle anyone is paying in cash in this day and age. Now let's see what's left. I already know there won't be any standardized convenience stores or chain restaurants."

"Hmm."

Kamijou was a little overwhelmed by the sweet scent coming from the beautiful upperclassman peering at the screen from the side, but he managed to tap a pin and read the bubble that appeared.

“‘Special Cleaning Service (Emergency). Urgent! Change into clothes you’re willing to get dirty and gather at Shibuya Station immediately. Tongs and baskets will be provided by the employer, but you will need to bring your own rubber gloves and boots.’ What’s that about?”

“It’s probably related to a railroad accident. So are the trains stopped right now? We were right to walk to Shibuya then. And I would skip that one. Unless you want to have nightmares full of red and black body parts, that is.”

“There’s also this one: ‘Sanitation Job. All applicants must pass an allergy patch test for formaldehyde and methyl alcohol.’”

“That would be for scrubbing corpses floating in a pool of chemicals.”

“‘¥ ¥ ¥ Much welcome for young and no disease history with healthy organ. Easy job of change into surgical gown and take sleepy pill for best sleep of life \$\$\$’”

“Do that and they’ll take your organs! Wow, every one of these jobs is urban legend tier and completely void of morals!! That last one was even in broken Japanese!”

Kumokawa-senpai was supposed to be the Shibuya expert, so Kamijou really wished she wouldn’t get so freaked out. He felt like he had been following a guide deep into the jungle only to find them half in tears and scratching their head trying to figure out where they were.

“So what would be a safe bet?”

“You are asking to be paid in cash – that is, to not leave a paper trail – in an age where all money is digitized either in your bank account or as electronic money on your phone. Most places find using cash to be a pain these days. You should have expected this sort of job when you narrowed down your search that way.”

“Hey, human.” Othinus sighed on his shoulder. “What about this one?”

“?”

“You would be delivering food on a bike. And Shibuya serves an inordinate amount of energy-boosting ramen and garlicky pork bowls, perhaps for all the workers delivering clothing and club equipment. It even says the employer will pay for the bike if you use one of their company’s rentals.”

Part 3

Kamijou Touma was mildly impressed as he stepped out of a rare(?) non-chain gyudon place.

He looked down at the weighty plastic bag he held.

“Huh, so they seal up the top of the bag and the box’s cover with tape. Not that I need to get inside it just to deliver it.”

“Touma, I smell beef. Drool.”

“I imagine the tape is to keep the deliverer from sneaking some of it like a certain nun is planning,” said Othinus. “But they could make you the perfect delivery boy in more ways than one if they attached a smaller baggie to the underside of the box. You never would know what you were carrying.”

Stop trying to scare me, he thought just as the 15cm god slipped inside the plastic bag. At her size, simply taping up the top wasn’t enough to keep her out.

“No sign of drugs or other dangerous objects. You’re in luck, human. You might not end up on the run from the police for your measly delivery fee.”

“Oh, so I’m not the only one feeling wary of the post-apocalyptic crime land of Shibuya.”

Kamijou sounded exasperated as he removed a key from the rental board. It was known as a rental bike, but it was more like a kick scooter made by attaching T-shaped handlebars to a skateboard.

Index and Kumokawa rented their own kick scooters. A white nun’s habit and a sexy schoolteacher suit were about the last outfits you would expect of someone using a kick scooter.

Whether they were powered or not, any kind of bicycle or board had to be ridden at the very edge of the road, right next to the sidewalk, but it was still pretty dangerous with all the cars parked on the curb and trucks unloading deliveries. Plus, Shibuya was a hilly place with a complex street layout. He had his phone attached to the handlebars with the map showing him where to go, but he had no idea which light to watch when he came to a five-way intersection. So it wasn’t uncommon for a gaudy coupe or a miniature one-person car to honk at him from behind.

“Why am I the only one wearing a backpack?” he asked.

“I don’t need any money, but they let you rent the scooter even if you don’t complete any jobs.”

“A-and you, Othinus-san?”

“Explain to me how I’m supposed to operate a kick scooter at 15cm tall, human.”

“Index!?”

“What’s a job?”

The cat mewed lazily atop the nun’s head.

That was too many “we’re not helping” notifications at once. *I was right about having to do all the work myself!* he lamented.

The train station area came into view.

Maybe it was the holiday season and maybe it was the railroad accident Kumokawa had mentioned, but there were a surprising number of people around. Everything around him was still part of this fashion zone, but he was still relieved to see the familiar sign for a major bookstore chain. Anyway, it looked more like people were coming here to see the scramble crossing than they were on their way to get somewhere else.

Kumokawa Seria nodded in slight exasperation while waiting for the light to change.

“You aren’t wrong about that, but it’s the 31st. You can find people gathering for New Year’s countdown events all across Japan today.”

He still thought Shibuya was weird for setting this area of road as their final destination.

Just he was wondering if there were any ordinary homes around when land was so pricey in Shibuya, he discovered this delivery was meant for the back entrance to a multi-tenant building. He nervously pressed the intercom for workers and a tanned woman emerged with cream-colored hair swaying. She was around college age, her white camisole seemed insufficient for December 31, and one of the shoulder straps had slipped down.

“Oh, good. My gyudon with extra meat and red pickled ginger is here!”

She was a very fluffy person. She made no attempt to cover up and various parts of her were quite jiggly. They didn’t know each other’s names and they could only confirm each other’s identities using the one-time-use 8-digit ID number displayed on their phones. He felt like this was managing people’s data even more coldly than they did in Academy City. The fluffy tanned woman checked the contents of the bag first and then turned her interest toward the boy who had delivered it. She waved the phone she had pulled from between her jiggly breasts.

“So you’re stuck working on New Year’s Eve too, huh? I sympathize, so hold your phone out so I can give you a full 5-star rating! I’ll even give you a 2-coin tip for braving the cold☆”

“You’re working too?”

“As a call girl. I’ll finally be getting some sleep after eating this. I’m always so tired once morning arrives.”

“...”

Japan’s largest shopping district was too much for him.

He scrolled through the list of jobs and found someone nearby who wanted a special winter meal from a burger shop. (It was a chain known around the world, but it was only found in Shibuya in Japan.) He had seen this meal advertised in LA, so it must have arrived on Japan’s shores as well. He figured he might as well, so he accepted the job and set out to use his kick scooter to deliver a fast food meal that included a giant burger with beef, pork, and chicken between the buns.

“What a weird place. When you look down any of these narrow roads, you see nothing but bars and small theaters.”

“This is Dogenzaka after all. And boy? That sign you’re staring at is for an adult establishment,” nonchalantly explained Kumokawa Seria-senpai while walking alongside him.

Index didn’t seem to know what that meant, but he could feel the great pressure of Othinus glaring from his shoulder.

At any rate, he continued making similar deliveries.

Before long, he could spot his fellow bike deliverers riding around. He even exchanged a nod with a young man in a helmet who was passing by going the other way. It was a small thing, but it made him feel like he knew what he was doing.

“I think that’s ten deliveries now. Touma, I want to eat lunch.”

“Holy crap. Look at my phone. I have money. I was so poor, but now my funds are going up, Index-san! Man, I’m a little afraid the yen is going to collapse if you can get money this easily!”

“How much did you make? I’ve heard you’re supposed to eat soba on New Year’s in Japan! I want juwari soba with big shrimps on top.”

“I have a whole 980 yen! It’s a miracle. How much is that divided between you, the cat, the god, and me, Index!? We have to divide that by four and then by three meals for each day, so that means-”

The nun kicked off the ground to take her kick scooter on a journey somewhere, so he had to grab her shoulder and stop her.

“What, do you have a problem with this, Index?”

“I want shrimp soba! How much more do you have to work before we can get a least 100 yen per person each day!?”

“You have to be crazy to think we’ll be eating shrimp tempura, Index! Besides, soba tastes better if you go with the nihachi noodles that mix in some wheat and thickener instead of being pure buckwheat!!”

“In your personal opinion, boy.”

“Index, you fool, you can’t expect us to be rolling in money after this. This delivery service is only marginally more expensive than picking it up yourself and the company and the government have to take their cut first, so we’re never going to end up with more money than what the customer paid for the food themselves. This is what happens when you get complacent. Apologize to the money, girl!!”

Index glanced over at something.

There was an unapproachable group of gyarus who didn’t just look like the most popular people in their class or their school but in the entire galaxy. They were lined up at a donut shop where the handwritten blackboard-style sign gave a price of more than 1000 yen for a single donut sitting on a paper plate with a massive pile of whipped cream on top. The price would go up even higher if you added photogenic colorful powders made from cinnamon or mint. Candles and sparklers that had no affect on the flavor or nutrition were listed as 300 yen each.

“Interesting. So those things are popular outside of Academy City too.”

“Touma, look at that number.”

“E-eating out is always expensive. You can’t base anything on those numbers.”

“Do I need to read it out loud for you?”

It was too depressing, so Kamijou quickly covered Index’s mouth with a hand.

It was already midday. At this rate, how much could he even make if he worked his rear off all day? He could probably make a decent amount if he focused on doing this

for an entire month, but they didn't have time for such a long-term plan. But after leaving Academy City for this, he wanted to earn enough to stop worrying about collapsing from hunger.

Also, the delivery job paid the same whether he was delivering a premade meal from a convenience store or a fancy bottle of wine. Nor did he get more for delivering over longer distances like a taxi would. That meant completing more jobs was the only way to earn more.

So...

"Distance is the most important factor."

"?"

"I want as short a distance as possible between the store and the client for a higher turnover rate. That has to be the trick to making the most money."

Unfortunately, the map app didn't display elevation differences, so the simple distance wasn't always the best metric in such a hilly area.

The list of jobs would not stop scrolling as more and more came in. Since this was all food, it made sense there would be peak hours, but that also meant there would be dead hours. If he wanted to complete a lot of jobs, he needed to really hustle during the lunch hours.

"Let's see. The closest one would be...the hell is this?"

One job had him bringing food to the center of the public square in front of the train station. On his way toward the bus terminal, he saw a bunch of people in the crowd making weird poses with their phones covered in lenses and microphones bigger than the phones themselves. Shibuya contained a lot of colorful people who barely seemed real, but this looked more like cosplay. After all, the most conspicuous girl only wore something like a training swimsuit below a translucent raincoat. She had the coat closed in front, but that did nothing to hide the slim body within. The large hood and baggy hem of the raincoat made her look like a comical ghost or maybe a clone. She wore a colored contact in one eye and an eyepatch over the other. The eyepatch was presumably see-through from the other side so it wouldn't hinder her depth perception.

Kamijou was nervous to approach the younger girl.

"Your food is here. Will I get in the way of the cameras if I approach from here?"

"Don't worry. I'm not streaming right now. But I might have had to kill you if you let the viewers see a guy anywhere near me on stream."

The small girl looked to be around the first year of middle school, but since she was a customer, she didn't bother being polite with him. Fortunately, Kamijou didn't mind after spending so much time around that arrogant, belligerent electric middle schooler (with a flat- well, never mind that).

The cosplay ghost asked him a curious question.

“What is that on your shoulder? A bipedal dancing robot?”

“Shut up, little girl. Keep your hands off me.”

“And it talks!? Wow, do you do tech review videos or something? And the cat on your head is the gold standard! You have my support since I don't do the robot or animal genres.”

Now the middle school girl was being casual with a cat and a god. Did kids fear nothing at that age? The eyepatch ghost confirmed the delivery on her phone before taking the bag in both hands.

“Oh, right. This Japanese-style pasta has mentaiko with extra butter but no shiso, right?”

“Eh? I honestly couldn't tell you.”

“Sorry, my bad. I forgot the delivery workers can't see inside. There's nothing wrong with shiso, but people tend to just shove a whole bunch of the chopped leaves in their food and then the whole thing tastes and smells like nothing but shiso, shiso, and more shiso. The miracle that is shiso requires a more delicate touch♪”

It was hard to tell if she liked shiso or not.

She had also mentioned streaming, so she must have been active on a video site. Kamijou had wondered if this was her and her friends having fun in the big city for winter break, but apparently not. The baggy sleeves girl started discussing something with her friends who were carrying phones covered in so many extra lenses and microphones that they looked ready to evolve into six-legged mechanical lifeforms.

“Hey, so how are my numbers doing? No, not my viewer count. What are the donations looking like? Nice, I already have 19 silver coins! Just 10 minutes and I've already got about 150 thousand going straight into the bank account I have in my sister's name. I told you midday on the 31st was the best time. All the people who couldn't get a ticket to an idol's New Year's concert are going to be online with their would-be ticket money burning a hole in their pocket☆”

“I hope lightning strikes you to teach you a lesson about life, you spoiled brat” would be a very rude thing to say to a customer, so Kamijou instead kept a smile while sending waves of dark energy her way.

The friendly ghost most not have been very attuned to other people feelings because she chose to speak to Kamijou’s group some more while opening the clear plastic lid to her Japanese-style pasta (skillfully avoiding getting the baggy plastic sleeves dirty in the process). She apparently opted for chopsticks even though it was pasta. Instead of giving him a tip through her phone, she gave Index the very first bite.

“Hee hee. Is it good?”

“Yeah! Restaurant food is always so good!!”

“It doesn’t taste like shiso?”

“You just wanted a taste tester, didn’t you?”

The ghost shrugged off Kamijou’s exasperated comment and started eating the skinny pasta after mixing in the chopped green onion, mentaiko, and melted butter.

“The Dr. Police are already here. I saw them earlier, but it looks like they’re just sneaking around keeping an eye on things for now.”

“You mean those police officer doctors who show up on TV during Halloween?”

“There was an underground ad from what looked like a burner account offering 100 thousand yen worth of crypto for anyone who punches those showoffs in the middle of the scramble crossing. But they’re cops, so it’d probably be safer to make money by streaming it than by trying it myself.”

“...”

Was this place completely devoid of morals?

The list of jobs shrank considerably after 1PM. People’s mealtimes stayed fairly consistent even during winter break. An older guy who had ordered a large cutlet curry (was it listed as Kanazawa curry?) had told Kamijou he would have to wait until after 10 PM if he wanted to make some real money. There would apparently be a rush of orders for New Year’s soba.

“We’re in high school, so we aren’t allowed to work past 10.”

“Did that accursed misfortune follow me all the way to Shibuya!?”

But he still gave it his all.



The more he rode his kick scooter around, the more money he made.

“W-wow. This job is incredible! I already have 2500 yen!!”

“Human, take a look at that convenience store. It’s help wanted poster says they pay 1500 yen an hour.”

“I hate to wipe that smug grin off your face, Othinus, but are you stupid? We could never do that job. We’re beginners at this working thing. Convenience stores do just about everything from home deliveries to accepting public utilities payments, so amateurs like us couldn’t just step in and start working there. That’s a job for specialists. Every time you line up to check out, make sure to thank them for supporting our everyday lives.”

Kamijou’s group quit working just as the big wave of jobs faded away into nothing.

But one thing still bothered him.

“How do I convert this into cash?”

There were small boxy structures similar to unmanned convenience stores located here and there. They functioned as stations for the kick scooters and accepted the synthetic backpacks used by the delivery workers. There was a machine about the size of a vending machine at once corner and he held his old folks smartphone up to that when the artificial female voice told him to.

“Whoa.”

With a surprisingly deep metallic sound, a few cheap-looking gold coins fell into the opening near the bottom. They reminded him of toy coins or casino chips.

He hesitantly collected them.

“I’m supposed to trade these for cash at a convenience store or drugstore, right? That seems unnecessarily complicated. Why not just give me the cash to begin with?”

This technically qualified as paying him with cash on the same day, but it seemed convoluted. He didn’t use the service much himself, but couldn’t they just have you pay with your phone instead?

Then Kumokawa muttered something under her breath.

“(The idea is probably to have people circulating pieces of ordinary plastic like they have value. It’s an investment meant to eventually allow a limited number of private companies to take control of the currency system away from the governments of the

world. You can't say White Spring has no ambition. Their lack of tradition makes them a lot less reluctant to attempt bold new ideas.)"

"?"

Since he had to receive his cash at a convenience store, Kamijou was afraid he would spend it all immediately. The hot snacks next to the register were awfully tempting. The fried chicken and fries they had in the glass case were basically a trap. The sound of the frying oil joined with the visual and olfactory allure to ensnare your soul.

The convenience store worker seemed accustomed to the process. Registers these days had you insert the coins into the machine like with a vending machine, so that apparently determined if the coins were real or not. At long last, he had some paper money in his hands. After receiving that like he had turned in a winning token at a candy shop, he just stared at the money with one foot still on his kick scooter back on the sidewalk.

After taking a break for that, he couldn't regather the mental strength needed to start working again.

And something else surprised him as he stared blankly at the alternate dimension that was Shibuya.

"Huh? I'm weirdly used to it now."

"The way you were freaking out over it before was the weird part," said Kumokawa Seria.

All his hard work had only earned him 2500 yen. But once he got over his nerves as a beginner, he would get more efficient. If he worked through the evening snack time and the late-night mealtime, he could earn 5000 yen or even a fantastic 10,000 yen. Although a high schooler was only allowed to work until 10 PM.

"Are you going to grab lunch somewhere, boy?" casually suggested his busty black-haired upperclassman.

"I take it back! That donut shop from earlier had a single donut costing more than 1000 yen! I could spend 100 years here and I swear I'd never get used to it. Eating out in fashionable Shibuya has got to be like highway robbery. I came here to earn money, so I refuse to head back in debt!!"

"If you say so. By the way, a multinational restaurant at the Miyashita Ark near the station is doing one of Japan's ridiculous food challenges. If a single person in the restaurant miraculously manages to finish their XXL bucket-sized shrimp and cheese French ramen, then everyone in the restaurant at the time gets their food for free.

Here's a photo from their website. You can judge the width of the bowl by comparing it to the chopsticks next to it. Use the position of the light source and the bowl's shadow to calculate its depth.

"Index, I need an expert opinion here. Could you polish this off, soup and all? What about those gross-looking shrimp heads?"

"Bring it on!"

"That settles it then."

"Wait, I was suggesting this as a challenge for your stomach of a growing boy," muttered Kumokawa Seria, but he ignored her. He wanted to make sure he could win this one.

These kinds of challenges were used to draw in customers, but they were designed so no one would succeed. Serving size affected the customer's satisfaction just as much as flavor and it also directly affected the ingredient costs. The experts at a restaurant had already researched everything from their small size to their XXL size, so they had all the data they would need on making an amount that looked doable but no one could actually finish. This would have been calculated out as coldly as the height of a prison fence. But there was one thing they wouldn't have accounted for: a being whose gastronomical limits far surpassed humanity's had been released from the giant cage that was Academy City. By the time they realized their mistake, it would be too late. This was about talent, not technique. There were monsters out there who could bring down an entire casino by accurately predicting where the roulette ball would end up just by listening to the subtle differences in the spinning of the wheel. In the same way, some people had had inborn eating talent that no amount of hard work could ever match. She was one of them.

"This French ramen is incredible. Is this photo modified? The soup looks like a neon orange. What did they boil in there to give it that color? Okay, Senpai, which way to that Ark-"

For some reason, he stopped talking midsentence.

He felt a chill.

He felt a painful tingling in his skin, but what had caused this?

He didn't understand where this extreme tension was coming from. He felt paralyzed while his instincts took over and he froze in place.

This wasn't the first time.

This had happened once before.

Just like the anaphylaxis that set in after being stung by a venomous hornet, once your body had learned the sensation, it would violently reject it the next time around. After some thought, Kamijou Touma arrived at an extremely simple answer: this was a trauma response.

But what in the past had left such a powerful emotional scar on him?

(No.)

He naturally pressed his hand against the center of his chest.

His palm was soaked with sweat.

There was no wound or blood there. His clothing wasn't even torn.

But.

When Kumokawa Seria had helped him up near District 11's east gate, she had cut the price tag from his coat with the small scissors in her sewing kit. But hold on a second. *How could such a desperately poor boy have afforded new clothes?* There had to be more to this. Something had happened to him outside of his own memory. In other words...

(No! That wasn't a dream after all!! I don't know what happened to the big bloody hole through my chest, but someone must have at least bought new clothes to replace my torn and bloody ones!)

He gulped and realized that he *could* gulp.

His self-imposed paralysis was gone.

If fear had seized his body because he had sensed something in common with that last time, then a threat had to be approaching in the same way. He spun around with all his might. He didn't care if he broke his hipbones doing it.

And...

“Impressive.”

He heard a voice.

An alluring and bewitching female voice.

It slipped into his ear, seemingly separating him from the peaceful scene around him.

The first thing he saw was a large cloth. She was standing right in front of him, but it felt so unreal that each individual part seemed to be going wild in his vision. It all refused to form a single cohesive image in his head, like a Rorschach inkblot test that kept transforming into shapes that would horrify the psychologists familiar with all the most dangerous responses.

But he could understand her voice.

“You actually managed to turn around this time.”

A woman’s hand shot straight toward him and swung to the side, tearing away so much flesh from his side that his spine was visible.

CHAPTER 2

Goddess of the Night, the Moon, and Witches “ARADIA”x03.

Part 1

Kamijou Touma was dead.

If that hadn't been a dream, then he must have died from having that bare hand pierce right through his torso.

Yet he still heard a voice.

“Really!? Good, Old Mary, I need to *borrow a second life*. I'll pay you back with interest later. I just cut off the boy's right arm, so if you resurrect him now, I can take him back!!”

All of a sudden, he felt the pull of gravity again.

No, that wasn't it. Something was pulling him in a different direction. Which direction? Into the sky. He suddenly found himself looking down from 10 or 20 stories up. His sense of height honestly vanished once he was high enough. It was still scary, though. He heard a loud sound like whipping bedsheets next to him.

They came from giant, thin batlike wings.

They were colored a light pink and looked horribly organic and lifelike.

A woman with a pair of goatlike pink horns sticking through her fluffy blonde hair was carrying him under one arm. If he had to guess her age, he would have gone with college aged. She had the curvy silhouette of a fully-grown woman. He was so close he had failed to notice at first, but on closer inspection, the only thing covering the bright skin of her torso was a lacy pink one-piece corset similar to what a bunny girl would wear. In other words, this was lingerie with rose thorn decorations. She also wore stockings and arm covers, but they did nothing to cover up her underwear.

“Wh-wh-what the hell!?”

“Oh, dear. Are you afraid of heights? Once we escape that scary woman, I’ll let you down on a rooftop, so just hold on tight until then.”

“Why do you sound like an old lady!? That’s a Japanese monster thing, but you look like a Western demon to me!!”

“Hm, is my common tone creation not working right? Japanese is a tricky language, so combining the Far Eastern Ocean version and the Altaic Language Family version might not be enough. Brlbrlgrlgrlbeep!! Ahem, is this how y’all talk in this part o’ the world, dearie?”

“No, it isn’t!! But I am used to people talking weird thanks to Tsuchimikado and Tatemiya!!”

“Vrbbrjr! Then I’ll stick with the initial version since it introduces less lag into the real time speech synthesis. As long as you know what I mean, the details don’t really matter.”

She called this common tone creation.

Did that mean she was combining a few standard sounds to speak, much like mechanically synthesized voices? Kamijou had heard that the voices heard on the phone weren’t actually identical to the real person’s voice and his brain was simply interpreting it as if it were a human voice. It was a chilling thought.

And magical people didn’t use machines, so he could actually see when the voice coming from her mouth changed. That made it all the more frightening. But when he thought about it, he realized all the Western magicians he had met had been weirdly familiar with different world languages. Did they study them to travel the world and read grimoires?

He had a lot of questions. Like why he didn’t seem injured despite all the blood on his clothes, what had happened to Index and Kumokawa Seria, if Othinus was down on the ground since she wasn’t on his shoulder now, and who the woman attacker had been.

But all those questions were erased from his mind by a woman’s voice shouting up from the ground.

“Bologna Succubus!!”

The woman had white skin and long silver hair.

She wore a wimple so long it fell to her ankles and something like a modified bikini that left her navel exposed. The contradictory outfit made it hard to tell if she was a

holy woman or a dancer. But she wasn't like the ghost at the train station plaza who had clearly been cosplaying. It didn't look artificial on her. She wore the skimpy outfit as comfortably as a sweater or coat and gave off an atmosphere all her own that easily pushed back the great pressure of the Shibuya shopping district around her. It was like she made no attempt to make herself a part of the ordinary world.

That was his attacker.

She was the woman who had shattered Kamijou Touma's spine and destroyed his torso more than once.

"Oh, god. I can just tell she's some monster from the magic side."

"Ding, ding, ding! Correct☆ She's Aradia, goddess of all witches, who rules over the night and the moon. You should probably keep that name in mind, laddie."

The demon woman grinned (even though there was still an occasional issue with her language).

The long-haired woman remained on the ground, but she didn't look particularly worried. That seemed to hint that flying in the sky wasn't enough to escape a magician who could surpass the laws of physics.

Fortunately, it looked like the woman was so focused on her midair target she wasn't paying any attention to Index and Kumokawa who were still on the ground. She spoke toward the flying demon with pure anger in her voice.

"You have strange tastes yourself. The Bridge Builders Cabal does not wish to derail Alice Anotherbible. Bologna Succubus, you and Good, Old Mary are only pretending to be peaceful and reasonable. You are only wasting what little chance you still have left. You belong to the Bridge Builders Cabal too, so you must know that killing that threat is the quickest way of correcting Alice's condition!"

This came as a shock.

Kamijou was held high in the sky below that demon woman's arm, so he knew breaking free of her grasp would mean plunging to his death.

But now he knew this Bologna Succubus was from some group called the Bridge Builders Cabal and the woman trying to kill him was as well. There was also someone called Good, Old Mary. They had even mentioned Alice Anotherbible. He was hit by a flood of new questions, most directly related to his own survival.

Meanwhile, the Bologna Succubus was undeterred and stuck out her tongue.

“Aradia? It goes without saying that this boy only has the one life. Even if Good, Old Mary fills in the gaps with her ability to control miracles using note compilation techniques. Killing him would be easy. Easier than bringing him back, anyway. But do that and you won’t have anything left to stop Alice if she goes completely berserk. I agree we need to stop her current deviation, but I oppose killing Kamijou Touma and simply hoping that works. I can’t agree to those methods.”

“You foolish Rescuers!!”

“I’ll take that title over Killer any day of the week.”

The woman apparently named Aradia gained a new tone to her anger: exasperation.

“Alice is a problem, but don’t you find it odd that our Bridge Builders Cabal has split into two factions like this? And that never would have happened if not for him!!”

“Are you sure about that? The real problem isn’t him or Alice. All the blame falls on Anna Sprengel if you- vwoovhsfa- ask me- vwoorl.”

“Also, all those weird noises are making you hard to understand! Is it supposed to be some kind of psychological warfare?”

“Sigh. How about a brief truce so I can borrow your common tones?”

The line went dead there.

Kamijou Touma shouted aggressively at the woman holding him under her arm.

“Anna Sprengel!? What is she up to this time!?”

“I can fill you in on all the dull details once we lose Aradia, so could you please keep your mouth shut for now?”

“But I need to know how Anna and Alice are involved in all this!!”

“I’ll drop you if you keep struggling!! If you won’t shut your trap, I’ll silence you myself by jamming my pointy tail right up your asshole, boy.”

The way she smiled told him that wasn’t an idle threat, so he obediently clamped his mouth shut.

At the same time, the scenery around them melted into flowing lines.

He managed to follow the first two and a half rotations, but his eyes couldn’t keep up with the rest.

But why was she performing these acrobatics?

Two and then three blinding beams of light shot from the ground and tore through sky, slicing off a corner of a nearby building rooftop. The skyscraper's basic structure must have been damaged because all the windows shattered at once.

Kamijou had forgotten they were being targeted, so his throat dried up.

It was New Year's Eve in Shibuya. He couldn't even hazard a guess at how many people were walking around below, but now they were all going to be shredded by the shards of glass. It was so horrific Kamijou shouted out loud, entirely forgetting how close to death he was himself.

"Hey!!"

"Oh, dearie me," said an exasperated Bologna Succubus after coming to a stop in midair.

Then all the sharp shards stopped in place. Now they wouldn't reach the people below and injure them. Kamijou wasn't sure what kind of magic the Bologna Succubus had used, but he was seriously impressed.

"Bloody hell. *That wasn't me.*"

"..."

Kamijou had a very, very bad feeling about this, so he clung tightly to the demoness's hips as a tremor ran through the thousands or tens of thousands of glass shards. Someone's willpower entered them and then they all rushed toward him.

The transparent blades attacked from all sides with the speed of bullets, but their guided routes actually gave the Bologna Succubus an opportunity. She flew to the right, pulling the many shards with her, and then flapped her wings to launch herself the other way, slipping herself into the gap created when they gathered on the right. She just barely managed to fit through the opening in the surrounding glass.

She escaped the 100% fatal downpour of razor sharp death.

Like some kind of joker that could manipulate the numbers themselves.

But she didn't linger on her impressive feat and kept a casual tone.

"This could be a problem. Aradia's *Rule of Three* spell is supposed to be hard to use in practice, but she isn't having any trouble at all."

"Rule of what?"

“It’s about time I landed over there. There’s nowhere to hide in the open air and my strength won’t last in an aerial battle against a real witch.”

That was a shock.

Kamijou glanced back from under her arm, but he didn’t see Aradia there.

“An aerial battle with a witch? Wait, wait, wait, wait!! Are you telling me that Aradia woman is going to wave a wand around and fly in the sky with lots of heart and star effects like Kanamin does!?”

“Witches can fly thanks to the ointment they coat their broom with, not the broom itself. Also, wands are like staffs and clubs – they’re a symbol of patriarchal power, so female witches don’t really use them.”

Kamijou’s thoughtless comment earned him a serious critique from an expert(?). It made him feel like an uneducated dimwit, so he really wished she would stop.

With a flutter of her wings, the Bologna Succubus landed on a large shopping mall’s roof. She gave Kamijou a squeeze before releasing him from under her arm.

The carefree (underwear) woman raised her arms and stretched.

“Nhh, so this the Miyashita Ark?”

“That’s supposed to be near Shibuya Station, isn’t it? So did we circle around back there!?”

“Ah ha ha. Indubitably! It’s the last place she’ll think to look☆”

The Bologna Succubus gave a smile she never could have gotten away with without her good looks and then snatched a windblown pamphlet out of the air between two fingers.

“Let’s see. This says the Miyashita Ark is a large shopping facility created from a park that used to be a major landmark in its own right. It has everything from restaurants and boutiques to hotels. It has several entrances and a lot of foot traffic and I bet the small stores crammed inside will give it lots of blind spots.”

“Um, why does that matter?”

“Wherever we end up going, I thought it would be best to hide here until she loses our trail☆”

She might sound like an excessively kind tutorial navigator, but she was in fact a demon with no common sense. For one, she had pink horns and wings. Just like with

Alice, he couldn't simply follow her instructions. He was afraid he would find himself in Antarctica or something if he did that.

He reminded himself to stand up for himself.

"Wait, you can read Japanese? I thought you could only speak it because you were combining different tones into a false voice."

"These kanji, hiragana, and katakana are either pictograms or derived from them. I can estimate the general meaning based on the dot pattern."

She snapped her fingers proudly, but he had no idea what she was talking about. He knew phone cameras recognize text nowadays, so was it something like that?

That was when he felt a tremor run down his spine. Having his feet on solid ground caused the fear to fade, so maybe the reality of the situation was finally catching up to him.

"Y-you have got to be kidding me. We were flying around all over the place, but you never set up a people clearing field, did you? I'm not going to worry about the magic side's secrets, but this is Shibuya! Do you have any idea how many phone cameras there are here!?"

"I don't care about the magic side's secrets either. But the crazier we make it, the less real it will seem to them. Humans will refuse to accept that someone was murdered by a yeti. Even if they glimpsed a furry shape in the blizzard, their rational mind will tell them it can't be true, so they seal away the memory all on their own."

"Maybe, but they'll have camera footage of this."

"So what?"

The Bologna Succubus folded up the pamphlet and stuffed it in Kamijou's pocket. As sexy and alluring as she was, she must have been staunchly opposed to littering.

"No one knows what's going to happen in Shibuya when everyone is waiting for the countdown. In fact, they would *find it unusual* if nothing ended up happening. Most people will assume this was either a phone company's PR stunt or some kind of video prank. Videos can be altered in real time these days, after all. It's true R&C Occultics briefly brought magic to the general public, but how many of the youths here will connect that to this? Plus, Japan has a shame culture. People will be too afraid of embarrassing themselves by falling for something so obviously fake, so there's nothing at all to worry about."

She was very blunt about it. Although she may just not have particularly cared if the general public started freaking out or not.

Kamijou was worried about Index, Kumokawa, and Othinus who he had left down on the ground. He could only pray that Aradia didn't turn her attention toward them.

But why was he so reluctant to say so out loud? He wasn't sure how much he could really trust this demoness.

The Bologna Succubus herself bent over, raised a finger, and gave the boy a bewitching smile.

"The first and greatest barrier clouding your vision is the common sense you don't even remember being taught. That's a lesson any magician will have heard ad nauseum."

"Magician?"

Were these people *really and truly* magicians?

Aradia, the Bologna Succubus, and even the unseen Good, Old Mary *used magic but didn't seem like magicians* to Kamijou. It was obvious at a glance how great their powers were. In fact, Aradia's was so great she had to kill him more than once before he was even properly aware of it. He wasn't sure how Good, Old Mary's resurrection worked, but he was afraid to touch his chest and check. His caution was only natural when the bits and pieces of conversation he had overhead told him they were from the same group as Alice and Anna Sprengel.

"I'd really like an explanation now," he said in a daze.

"And you'll get one."

"This isn't the kind of thing where learning the truth makes me a target, is it?"

"Sigh. Now I see how even Alice was affected by you. I really need you to get it into your head that Aradia has already mercilessly killed you more than once and stepping peacefully down from the stage is not an option for you. Think of yourself as stuck up in a mountain mansion with a rockslide blocking the only road, a storm making hiking impossible, and the only bridge collapsed."

She used a bewitching finger to gesture for him to follow her. As far as he could tell from behind, her wings and tail were entirely biological and moved all on their own. She did nothing at all to hide those unusual body parts or the rest of her lingerie body. She acted so superhuman that it felt strange she was leading him through an ordinary stainless-steel door into the building.

He watched her tail swishing side to side, wondering how it worked.

“Oh, you naughty boy. Do you mind not leering at my butt quite so much?”

“(What do I even say? This isn’t exactly what I would call an admirable way to live your life. They say you’re supposed to find something no one else can do, but I don’t think they meant things like showing up at the park at night in only a coat.)”

“I can hear every word of that.”

She didn’t turn around, but she did gently wrap her pink arrowhead tail around his neck. That may have been a demonic sign of affection, but it made him feel like she was leading him around on a leash. She was superhuman in more ways than one, but she appeared to enjoy being a target of attraction for the younger boy.

“Ooh, now you’re really staring something fierce. I take it you’re more of an arse man, then?”

“This is, ugh, only because, bleh, you’re pulling my head forward with your tail!”

The way she occasionally slipped into a variety of dialects continued to weird him out.

(Come to think of it, wasn’t Alice kind of similar? It was more her tone of voice, but she did seem to talk in different ways sometimes.)

Once through the door, she released him from his collar. The indoor heating warmed his entire body, reminding him just how cold it had been outside.

Customers weren’t supposed to enter from the roof, so they found themselves in a staff only passageway. A pushcart resembling a giant cage on tiny wheels was sitting by the wall.

This was the Miyashita Ark.

Kumokawa had mentioned it earlier, but what kind of shops did they have here?

The Bologna Succubus opened a random stainless steel door to reveal a women’s boutique. Some quiet screams followed. Yes, that mysterious demon still had her wings and tail out and she only wore a pink one-piece corset, stockings, and arm covers. To repeat, she was in her underwear.

But the Bologna Succubus actually posed with her hands behind her head.

“Yes, yes. If you’re going to snap some photos, just get it over with. This was all the boy’s idea, FYI. Sigh, why was I cursed to love younger boys so much I just can’t say no to anything they ask?”

“What the-!? Don’t even joke about that! They’re going to believe you! And Hell City Shibuya has so many phone cameras this kind of information spreads at the speed of light!”

Kamijou shoved on her back with both hands to get her out of there before the commotion grew to the point a security guard showed up. Although in this case, he was less afraid of getting arrested than he was of having the guard killed by this monster. Like a cat playing with a toy.

“Oh, dear. And where are you taking me for your next scandalous request I can’t ever seem to say no to? Eh heh. To the relative privacy of a dressing room, mayhap?”

“I can’t take any more of this! If you put any more pressure on me, I’ll start longing for a slow life in another world!”

The succubus let him push her through the hallway while everyone stared at them. She didn’t fight it, so she must not have had a destination in mind. While he hadn’t done it on purpose, pushing on her back with his palms caused her to arch her back and push out her chest, so every step she took caused her extra-large boobs to jiggle wildly. He was shielded from seeing them directly since he was behind her, but the glimpses he caught reflected in the show windows was enough to make him blush bright.

But no one made any real fuss about it since she didn’t protest or struggle. People must have been more willing to accept bizarre sights during a Shibuya New Year’s Eve because they were becoming no more than another piece of the background. (Did people think she was a lingerie model for a luxury boutique, or perhaps a model hired for part of a corporate event?)

The Bologna Succubus herself leaned back into his hands and let him lead her from behind while she talked.

“First of all, you can’t ask Good, Old Mary for any more help. I can understand your confusion after she brought you back from the dead a couple of times, but the next time you die, it’s for good. Keep that in mind.”

“?”

His sigh must have been enough for her to understand his confusion. She also happily let him push her around (they had to look like a lovey-dovey couple) and even smiled and waved to a small child staring at her, earning her a sharp glare from the boy’s mother.

“Hm, a detailed explanation of the alchemical formula lost in the 1st or 3rd century would probably just confuse you more. Simply put, Good, Old Mary can only repair your body’s injuries, but sealing up a wound doesn’t return the lost blood. Do you see

where I'm going with this? If you've lost too much blood, healing your body doesn't restart your mind. That would be meaningless."

"Oh."

Even if they intervened immediately after his death, it would be his third death in short succession.

And Aradia had already shattered his spine and torn a huge chunk out of his side. He had probably died of shock from the pain, but he would have lost a lot of blood too.

What happened to a human who had lost too much blood?

The Bologna Succubus spotted a rest area with a few chairs and tables near a shop with a seal mascot plastered on all their products. The lingerie woman stopped leaning against Kamijou and instead sat on a round table. Squishing her tail must have been painful or at least felt weird because she lifted her shapely butt a few times to subtly adjust its position.

"Good, Old Mary's resurrection spell essentially repairs a dead human's body to a clean, uninjured state at the moment of cardiac arrest. It might look like a miracle, but it is a purely medical phenomenon affecting only the physical body. She cannot directly bring back the soul itself. They will still need CPR afterwards. But repairing a body *with all the blood missing* is meaningless since their heart will not beat and they cannot breathe on their own. The great cost of the spell would be entirely wasted and all you would have is an intact hunk of flesh that would begin to slowly rot."

"Seriously?"

She must have been restless because she pulled a paper napkin from the dispenser on the table and made a doglike animal out of it.

"If you're going to die, I would recommend a bloodless method such as suffocation or poisoning, but with homicide, you don't exactly get to choose the method. And in your case, *that right hand has to be severed each time so it doesn't interfere with Good, Old Mary's magic*. That requires some blood loss no matter how you die. It would be best to just assume you can't die again." Kamijou knew it had been to save him, but he still shuddered at the thought of such a dangerous choice being made without his knowledge.

Anyway, the Bologna Succubus sitting on the small table meant some part of her feast of a body would be right in his face no matter which seat he chose, so he remained standing.

"Hey, wait a second."

“Yes?”

“So the blood I lost doesn’t come back. I get that, but what about my clothes? I didn’t have any blood on my clothes after the first time I was killed. For some reason, they were brand new and even had a price tag attached. Does that mean what I think it does?”

She didn’t answer him.

The sexy succubus seated on the round table with her long legs crossed looked the other way and whistled instead. She was so tense she crushed the dog in her hand, transforming it into a crocodile.

“Eek! Officer, this woman is a necrophile freak who loves stripping brutally murdered corpses and making them into her personal dress-up doll!!”

“Now hold on!!”

She sprang down from the table.

The superhuman didn’t care what society thought of her, but she liked to be in control of the conversation.

“B-but you would have been confuzzled if you woke up healed and found your clothes all bloody. And District 11 is a land route distribution base, so it wasn’t hard to search through the containers and find clothes from the same company. Think of it as a kindness from your all-knowing benefactor.”

“Then why do you look so flustered!?”

“I ain’t flustered!”

“There must have been a lot of blood after being pierced through the middle, so I honestly doubt it was limited to my shirt. Wait, wait. Don’t tell me you had to change my pants too.”

“...”

She silently refused to look him in the eye with a tinge of pink in her cheeks. She muttered to herself and awkwardly poked her index fingers together in front of her large chest.

Kamijou Touma’s adolescence finally exploded.

“Wahhhhhh!! You mean you saw everything from top to bottom!? And out in the bright morning sun!?”



“No, I- glrwrwr- I only- kshhh- you don’t under- hdfhliwrcw- verily I say- xcyq!?”

“Oh, shut up! All these weird noises are proof enough you’re badly shaken!! Just try and tell me you did nothing wrong while I record a video with this old persons smartphone!!”

“Kssh!! But, wait, why would you want to record such a meaningless conversation!?”

As expected, the woman with a guilty heart covered her eyes with a hand and tried her hardest to stop him. She was willing to fight a fierce aerial battle with countless cameras aimed her way and she would walk through a crowded mall in nothing but her underwear, but she actually got flustered once it was one-on-one. And as much of a pervert as she was, she was still crazy strong. She had Kamijou Touma pinned to the floor in no time. With a very soft and squishy pinning technique.

After straddling a boy in her underwear at only 2 or 3 in the afternoon and stealing his phone, the woman worked to catch her breath.

“Pant, pant!! A-anyway, we need to stop Aradia now. We don’t have time for this poppycock. You do understand that, don’t you!?”

“I’m a little short on understanding at the moment, actually! For starters, who are you people and why is one of you trying to kill me!?”

That caught her by surprise.

Still straddling him, she placed a hand on her cheek and peered down at him.

“Really? This world never ceases to surprise me. But I guess it would take a natural to pull off such a feat.”

“What feat?”

“Alice Anotherbible.”

That name made him gasp.

The demon woman flapped her wings behind her and sighed in exasperation.

“I suppose I should ask: how much do you know about her?”

“She’s a weird, invincible girl who’s working with Anna Sprengel in some way.”

He heard the quiet slap of the Bologna Succubus smacking her palm against her forehead while still straddling him. Perhaps making such an extraordinary monster facepalm was worth a reward in and of itself.

“Cripes, you mean I have to tell you about the Bridge Builders Cabal and the Transcendents too?”

“In as much detail as possible please.”

She granted the request asked from beneath her.

Maybe she liked to talk and maybe she liked to help out those in need, but the demoness stretched on top of him and answered.

“Nhhh, okay! You don’t really have to understand what that girl is as long as you’re aware she possesses an *extremely dangerous power*. Alice is a step above the other Transcendents in the Bridge Builders Cabal. But I hear you’re her ‘teacher’. That makes you the only person in the world who Alice Anotherbible respects and will listen to. Do you really think the rest of us Transcendents in the cabal are going to sit idly by with someone that dangerous out there?”

Teacher.

Come to think of it, hadn’t she called him that all throughout the incident on the 29th?

And thinking back, why had someone so powerful been so fond of him and done everything he asked? He didn’t have a clear answer there.

But that aside...

“Alice directly rejected me. She said I didn’t need her.”

“The people who need her and the people who she respects are two very different things. Really, she only feels exasperation for the people who refuse to face reality, withdraw into a fairy tale world, and reveal their bright, selfish colors.”

“...”

This still left the fundamental question of what exactly Alice Anotherbible was.

The Bologna Succubus knew the answer, but she considered the imminent threat more important. And that threat was of course to Kamijou Touma’s life since he was weak this demon could pin him down with ease.

“This sent shockwaves through out cabal. We couldn’t decide on how to deal with Alice’s ‘teacher’.”

“So you split between the Rescuers and the Killers?”

"Right. The Killers want to kill the source of the change forthwith to return Alice to normal. It's certainly a simple plan, but also a risky one since it leaves no way to influence Alice if killing you doesn't return her to normal. Then there's the Rescuers like Good, Old Mary and me. We want to leave you alive and monitor the situation because we don't know how your death would influence Alice."

"So you're-"

"Not so fast." She cut him off and placed a bewitching finger on his lips while still seated on him. "To be clear, that does not make us your allies. That is our plan *for now*. If we run the numbers and discover that killing you wouldn't influence Alice at all or that allowing her 'teacher' to live would exacerbate the situation, then that plan changes. The threat is Alice, so we have no reason to protect you personally or any obligation to never betray you."

"..."

The Bridge Builders Cabal was their own side. The Transcendents (is that what she called them?) were acting in their own interests.

This was a group Anna Sprengel had chosen to join, so he shouldn't have expected them to be decent people.

The Bologna Succubus returned his phone to him and finally lifted her hips from his stomach.

"We are using you to influence Alice who controls the future of our cabal, so you use me to protect your own life. Do you understand the rules now?"

"No." He looked up at the ceiling in thought before continuing. "I'll be doing this for Alice too. It doesn't matter to me what you and your cabal think."

"I see. So this is her 'teacher'."

She breathed an exasperated sigh and extended a slender hand. He took it and she pulled him to his feet.

"You and Alice certainly are incompatible. *Fundamentally so*. You might have as much desire as the next person, but you lack the openings she needs to get at you. But that may be why she sees something in you she lacks herself."

"What are you talking about?"

He gave her a puzzled look and she bowed before rubbing his stomach with her mystery pink horns.

“Ugh, really?”

“Ow!! Those horns kind of hurt!? Enough with the cow attack!”

“Having big boobs doesn’t make a cow, you know? Demons traditionally have goat horns. And I’m not explaining any more of this because Alice would kill me if I ruined it for her.”

He only had more questions than when he had started, but something unrelated to him caught his attention.

Why were the supposedly transcendent Bologna Succubus and Aradia so afraid of Alice? Yes, she had fearsome power, but she had the personality of a cheerful girl and that didn’t seem so dangerous to him.

He asked and she reacted with utter disbelief.

After giving him the look Academy City residents gave the PR posters claiming Academy City was a clean and superb educational institute where you would know your child was safe and in good hands, Transcendent Bologna Succubus leaned her face in front of his and replied.

“You don’t actually believe Alice must be safe because she’s an innocent child, do you?”

“Eh? But she doesn’t seem to be hiding anything.”

“That’s not the point.” The demon woman shrugged. “I’m asking if you believe there is no danger in *a young heart too innocent to even hold any interests or beliefs*. To be blunt, I think children are a violent and cruel lot. They flood anthills and laugh about it. So what happens if you give one of those tyrant tots enough power to destroy the universe?”

“...”

Was that part of being childish?

Had it just never shown itself with him because she was willing to do anything he asked?

“Alice is frightening,” said the Transcendent. She even held her own bare shoulders and shrank down like a lost child. “*Shit-your-pants terrifying even*. Around her, her mood trumps everything else in the world. There is no surefire method or guaranteed strategy. The same exact thing could get a different reaction each and every time. She might have smiled about it yesterday, but what if she happens to be in a bad mod today? Speaking with her is like trying to dig up all the randomly-distributed mines in a minefield where the layout changes every day.”

“Seriously? I find it hard to believe we’re talking about the same Alice here.”

“That’s the thing. She seems entirely different to you because you didn’t even realize what you were doing. Getting through an off-the-cuff conversation with Alice Anotherbible and living to tell the tale is a miraculous tightrope walk. And you even scolded her when she did the wrong thing. That I’ve never seen before.”

She was innocent and pure

For better or for worse, Kamijou Touma was her favorite, but this was an interpretation of those traits he hadn’t considered.

He shook his heavy head and the Bologna Succubus continued while coiling her tail around her index finger.

“You might have a hard time believing it after we dragged you into this mess and killed you twice, but the Bridge Builders Cabal is a gathering of people who want to fulfill a selfless dream. And that includes Aradia.”

“Eh?”

“Over the long span of history, she has fought to save the persecuted witches, protect them from prejudice and discrimination, and give them a safe place to live. So she will do whatever it takes to accomplish that goal. The scary part is she won’t compromise with anyone fighting for a different goal. Because she doesn’t care what happens to anyone *other than the witches she has dedicated her life to.*”

“Persecuted witches? But that’s ancient history. Why is she still fighting for that?”

“How would you respond if the goth girl who moved in next door came up to you, smiled, and introduced herself as a real witch?”

“...”

“You wouldn’t know how to respond, would you? And yet you wouldn’t mind at all if she was a shrine maiden, a nun, or any other identity that society has decided is legitimate, *no matter how outdated and unscientific it is.* From that very first moment, you’ve built a big old wall in your head. You might not even be consciously aware of it, but the old prejudices still exist there on the subconscious level. It doesn’t matter how many smartphones, drones, and scientific espers the world has created.”

“Then...” Kamijou gulped before asking. “*You have a goal like that too?*”

“That’s a question for after the sun sets, boy. My hot and steamy secrets are a little too spicy for the daytime crowd☆”

She refused to answer him while holding her hands to her cheeks, twisting her body restlessly, and smiling like this was all a big joke.

Could he track down what it was she wanted to protect if he learned where the name “Bologna Succubus” came from?

“The point is we all have our reasons to want to change the world.”

“...”

“That would be fine on its own, but the problem is we all have to agree how the world needs to change. You see, each and every one of us Transcendents is powerful enough to rival the entire magic side on our own.”

That casual revelation left Kamijou speechless.

The claim was absurd, but the way she looked weirdly proud of it made it sound real, which scared him.

“Hence, the Anglicans and the Roman Catholics can’t stop us in their usual ways. Well, some of us may be closer to what the Russian Orthodoxes are used to dealing with. But anyway.” She threw out that topic like it wasn’t important. “If one of us forces what we want on the rest, another one won’t be happy and they might just obliterate the ideal world we had spent so much time and effort creating. Because *destroying a world is so much easier than creating or protecting one*. So whatever we end up doing with the world, the entire cabal needs to be onboard before we can start working on it.”

Was it similar to two countries with fundamentally different religions and economies discussing their plans for the future with massive armies staring each other down?

If either side got fed up and left the negotiating table, the world could be torn to shreds.

The button triggering war sat within reach of them all.

“Which is why Aradia isn’t the biggest threat in the cabal. Her goal of protecting the witches gives you a carrot you can dangle in front of her to control her. Maybe you can’t fully control her that way, but you at least know what landmine to avoid stepping on at all costs with her. In other words, she might be hard to bring to your side, but you can challenge her any number of times without her causing too much trouble. The more we talk, the better my chances with her. Because once I know the trick to avoiding that landmine, I can avoid it no matter what.”

In that sense, there was one joker who couldn’t be controlled and didn’t even have a clearly-marked minefield.

“And then there’s Alice, huh?”

“She is innocent, capricious, and endlessly cruel and merciless toward anything she doesn’t like. The rules with her are poorly defined in both directions, so it’s hard to work out how to handle her. And the going rate is so absurdly high that a single mistake could mean losing your life. But no matter how hopeless it looks, we have to speak with her. Because without everyone’s approval – even hers – any world we make will fail and be destroyed.” The Bologna Succubus’s tail swayed side to side. “That is why we have decided to have Alice create the new world herself. Because no matter what complaints she might have, we can press her to look after her own creation.”

“She’ll be doing it herself?”

“Who makes it doesn’t really matter. As long as the new world gives us all what we want.”

Was that similar to how everyone just let America take the lead at international conferences as long as it helped create a peaceful world?

“Once god creates a world, he won’t give up on it and create a second one next door just because the humans living there keep screwing up and polluting the land. He might wash it clean with a massive flood or something, but that’s just god making some adjustments. He’s still sticking with the world he created in the first place. That’s basically the cabal’s plan for crossing the verbal tightrope walk that is the Alice problem. *Or it was.*”

But it hadn’t worked out.

Anna Sprengel had barged into the Bridge Builders Cabal and done something to Alice. Something that made her unnaturally attached to Kamijou Touma despite having never met him before.

This was on a completely different dimension from the cold military and financial calculations.

Kamijou Touma’s importance had skyrocketed like the first lady whispering in the president’s ear to take control of the international conference.

This was why she scared them.

Alice’s unpredictable innocence truly terrified them.

They could have everything 99.9% settled in their discussions and then some last-second emotion could send it all tumbling down, shattering the world they were trying to build. So even if they inspired some short term anger in Alice Anotherbible, those transcendent beings had decided it was worth taking the long view and killing this source of instability before he caused any real problems.

Actions born of a grudge or desire might eventually fade away on their own.

But actions fueled by fear would never spontaneously disappear.

They were two very different things. Just like the exact same number in a bankbook would mean very different things if it was in the savings column or the debts column.

“Do you see how ridiculously important you are now, boy? Think of it like you hold a big button in your hand. You can whisper in Tyrant Alice’s ear to manipulate her actions, so you are capable of obliterating the entire world along with our cabal. Of course, that would mean absolute extinction where no one wins.”

“You can’t be serious. Alice was basically dragging me around everywhere. And what makes you think I can just control her like that? I’m not that #5 I’ve heard rumors about.”

“Oh, it would be very possible for you. And frankly, it doesn’t matter if you personally intend to do so nor not. *Whether we’ve sided with the Killers or the Rescuers, every single Transcendent in the Bridge Builders Cabal is prepared to pull out all the stops over how we should deal with the kind of ordinary high school boy you can find anywhere.*”

“You must be joking.”

“Now, we need to come up with a plan. Aradia is coming and I remind you *she is one of the Transcendents who singlehandedly rivals the entire magic side*. Losing her for the time being isn’t enough to declare yourself safe. She can search us out and make another attack.”

“How can you be so sure she’s coming? What can she even do when she doesn’t know where we are?”

“I reckon she’s already workin’ on that.” The Bologna Succubus shrugged in apparent unconcern and spoke in a tone that didn’t hint at her true feelings. “She’s already preparing her attack using a Wiccan spell named Triple Reload.”

Part 2

In the Shibuya shopping district, another Transcendent, Aradia, was the center of attention.

That was to be expected when she didn't bother concealing herself with a people clearing field. It didn't take any knowledge of how magic worked to tell this witch goddess was firing beams and trying to shoot down a flying object.

However, this didn't trigger a panic with people shoving or even trampling each other.

"Wow."

An eyepatch ghost girl wearing a translucent raincoat over a swimsuit-based costume was standing a short distance away and aiming her phone's camera toward the woman with long silver hair swaying side to side. The excitement had begun without warning, so the girl had failed to record the climax. That was a common enough problem for video posters, but she had still tapped the record button even if just to provide a timestamp for the event. A video that missed the crucial moment people most wanted to see could still gather enough attention to get some serious numbers.

(That is really high quality. Is this a corporate PR stunt combining live magic tricks with a video zooming through the sky? This is professional stuff. There must be a film crew somewhere around here because she wouldn't dare walk around in that modified bikini otherwise. Really, her bare feet are the most impressive part. I mean, it's New Year's Eve. But I thought Blau said the Magical Powered Kanamin stuff was going down in Ariake today.)

"Damn, grownups have such big boobs. Oops."

Something dripped onto her screen.

The bright yellow drop covering one corner of the LCD screen appeared to be melted cheese. It must have fallen from a hot snack someone in the crowd was eating. Probably a mysterious Korean item being sold at one of the food trucks in the area.

"Ugh, really?"

She reached for her pocket on reflex, but the translucent raincoat was for streaming. It would be a buzzkill to have a handkerchief or tissues visible in her pocket, so she didn't have any. She also couldn't wipe the drip off with the baggy sleeves. The melted cheese stretched stickily down the entire screen, but if she got even the sleeve of this costume dirty, the stain would still be there during the countdown.

Just as she was trying to figure out what to do, someone held out a pack of tissues.

That someone was the silver-haired witch dressed like a dancer plus an ankle-length wimple.

"Take one."

“Um!?”

She had been recording this person from afar in order to post a video just for the hell of it, but now the woman was right next to her. The pressure coming from the woman was powerful indeed and the girl was frankly terrified. She had a bad feeling about this.

The woman must have been used to gathering attention because she ignored the rest of the crowd.

“Don’t worry about it. I only just received them over there.”

“I-I see.”

The eyepatch ghost was surprised to learn even this otherworldly professional(?) would accept the packs of tissues people handed out. The ad on the pack said they were recruiting women and provided a location and time without any further description, which set off her sexual harassment alarm. She felt like a model’s manager was supposed to prevent people from approaching you for a job like this on the street.

But a voice interrupted that thought.

“Listen, that is melted cheese, not mustard. The heat can damage the protective film and maybe even the liquid crystals if you don’t wipe it up soon.”

“Yikes, really!? But this is the top-of-the-line model that only came out this fall!!”

The fuzzy unreality of the situation vanished and she took one of the tissues. It was a similar feeling to hearing a disaster alert from her phone while trembling within a haunted house. Now that she had taken the tissue on reflex, she balled it up and wiped off her phone’s screen.

The skimpily-dressed witch was already wandering off somewhere else. From behind, her ankle-length wimple hid her silhouette and even her long silver hair. She might as well have been wrapped in a bedsheet.

The raincoat eyepatch ghost called out to her as she left.

“Th-thank you?”

“No need to thank me.” The woman didn’t even look back. “*I have already been rewarded with triple interest.*”

“...?”

The ghost didn’t like the sound of the word interest there.

She felt like it was a little rude after what just happened, but she aimed her freshly cleaned phone toward the alluring witch again.

That woman was up to something.

The ghost watched it all through her phone camera.



“Thanks!”

At one point, she pulled a dropped train card out from under a vending machine and received the thanks and smile of a small child.



“My, my. How kind of you.”

At one point, she separated two fighting dogs and received a polite bow from the elderly couple who were having trouble holding onto the leash of their powerful Doberman.



“Wait, how did you do that? This truck doubles as a temporary stage, so it has to weigh more than 10 tons.”

At one point, she used a mysterious barrier of light to push back a truck about to plow into the scramble crossing, turning the truck half to scrap, saving the lives of the pedestrians, and earning a fearful look from one of the young men she had just saved.



Eventually, the ghost looked up from her phone’s screen.

She was unable to believe what that brand-new LCD screen was showing her, so she had wanted to see it for herself.

“What the heck?”

And the Shibuya girl had seen something truly unexpected.

It was often said that seeing is believing, but that wasn’t always the case.

She had seen it for herself, but she still couldn’t believe it or even understand it.

That woman used her bare hands to separate two fierce dogs and then to deflect an enormous truck without even touching it. She was clearly doing something here and that power was growing at an accelerating rate.

Now that something was clearly wrong here, the Shibuya crowd kept their distance, giving the creepy witch enough space to wander around on her own. That distance was usually a terrible insult for anyone living in Shibuya, yet the witch somehow managed to shine brighter than anyone else there. And something strange and unseen began to swirl around her.

All she ever did was small good deeds.

But each new kindness expanded the spatial distortion around her. It was like a small snowball growing ever bigger as it rolled down a snowy mountain.

“No need to thank me.”

The witch’s concerning words replayed in the ghost’s head.

“I have already been rewarded with triple interest.”

She looked down at her own hands and clenched and unclenched them a few times. Almost like she was checking on the strength they contained.

The phone’s lip-reading function drew a box around her lips and tracked their movement with greater precision than human senses ever could.

That told the ghost what the silver-haired witch said with a thin smile.

“Yes, this should do nicely.”

Part 3

Inside the Miyashita Ark, the demon wearing a one-piece corset similar to a pink bunny suit costume stopped absentmindedly massaging Kamijou’s earlobe and looked to the side.

“Here it comes.”

“?”

Kamijou didn’t even have time to tilt his head.

Splat!!

A realistic human face was pressed up against the large window in that fashion space.

The sticky ochre color formed an expression of agony.

The features were distorted like someone with a stocking over their head.

It was an entrails-like liquid that felt out of place in the shiny, artificial Miyashita Ark. Terror crawled along Kamijou's spine as he watched it change color into something even less pleasant, like bile or rotten butter.

Gravity gradually pulled the human face goop down the glass.

Or so it seemed.

In truth, a more complicated force was at work. It formed a neck, a torso, and finally limbs. As the shape grew like dripping ink spreading across a surface, it gradually formed a full human silhouette.

“We need to skedaddle, boy.”

“Eh? But what is that?”

“Aradia has begun her *search!* If that catches us, the witch goddess will know where we are and attack!!”

The yellowish silhouette began to move like a shadow sliding across the floor or wall. It moved faster than the average car. The Bologna Succubus didn't wait for him to respond. She held him to her large chest and placed her butt on a nearby round table, removing her feet from the floor. As soon as the sticky silhouette slid across the floor below them, she tugged on his hand and ran in the opposite direction.

It immediately turned back around.

Almost like their feet had touched the surface of a river teeming with piranhas.

“Tch! Can the spell detect anything that contacts the same surface, be it the floor or a wall!?”

The Bologna Succubus picked Kamijou up again and caught the air with her pink bat wings.

She took flight.

Kamijou felt their tremendous acceleration while he heard screams erupting from all around. The Bologna Succubus made sure not to contact the floor, the walls, or the

ceiling. She soared down the center of an empty passageway with the precise control of a fighter jet skimming just off the ground to fly below an overpass.

The yellowish silhouette on the floor seemed to hesitate for a moment.

The next stage was already underway.

Splat, splat, splat, splat!! More sticky faces appeared on the walls and ceiling around them to pursue the fleeing Bologna Succubus. They were like the line of bullet holes from a machinegun. And each one of those faces drew out a new silhouette.

“They’re chasing us! Doesn’t that mean she already knows where we are!?”

“If she did, she wouldn’t use this search spell that gives us advance warning. Once she knows our coordinates in 3D space, she would fire an insect repellent spell that tears through all the buildings in between us and her current location.”

“Insect what???”

“Insect repellent. Controlling nature to help crops grow is one of the most common jobs for witches. Although Aradia’s version locates all of the insects and exterminates them.”

Kamijou had no words. Magic was always absurd and unfair, but he had never expected to be killed by the cousin of a scarecrow or one of those big eyeball balloons.

But the Bologna Succubus wasn’t done yet.

“So don’t get the wrong idea, boy. I doubt this is limited to the Miyashita Ark!”

“What?”

“These faces and silhouettes will be inside every single indoor space in Shibuya! We were simply caught in her thorough search!!”

That meant leaving the Miyashita Ark wouldn’t be enough to escape the search. Once their location was discovered, Aradia would attack with her full power. And that woman had already demonstrated her ability to tear through Kamijou’s body with her bare hands and to fire brutal beams of light at the flying demon.

“Then what’s happening to Index or Kumokawa-senpai right now!? And Othinus too!”

“Imbecile! Worry about yourself first!!”

The Bologna Succubus must have realized the same thing as him because she landed on the model blimp decorating the central area. The model hung in midair with its

weight distributed over several hundred wires thinner than hairs. It looked a lot like a balloon, but it had to weigh as much as a small truck.

Yes, the face and silhouettes were on the floor, walls, and ceiling, *but everywhere else was safe.*

The yellowish goo silhouettes slid along the walls and ceiling around them, but none of them arrived at the blimp. But none of them went away either. The flat figures moved endlessly around the area as if to surround the two of them.

“Doesn’t look like this will fool them forever. There are so many people in Shibuya, but they’re waiting here and ignoring all those other people.”

“Indeed. But this gives us some time to think. A few minutes at least.”

“So these are Aradia’s eyes and ears, right? If we can’t escape them, I could always destroy them with my right hand.”

“Think of them like security cameras. If they start failing in one specific area, Aradia will notice. That would bring her straight here.”

Maybe it was to keep wingless Kamijou from falling off the unsteady footing, but the Bologna Succubus sat on the balloon-like blimp, wrapped her arms around his head, and pulled him to her chest.

“Witchcraft includes plenty of divination using water or fire as well as wind spells using rope knots, but use of ointments is far more common. From the look of things, I would guess Aradia is using bear grease.”

“Mgh.”

“I believe it was in May of 1940 during World War Two that some British witches attempted to curse Germany in order to protect their homeland. Stripping nude in the freezing forest and dancing throughout the night sounds like suicide, but they attempted to fight the cold by covering their bodies in an ointment made of bear grease. Although in the original ceremony, some of them froze to death along with the old woman who had volunteered to be their sacrifice.”

“Mghghgh, bghghghgh.”

“But how did she transform that into a searching spell? Bear grease is meant for defense, so did she designate us as the human skin it needs to cover in order to protect us from the cold? If so, what exactly is she using to search us out? Oil, grease, wax? I know witches can curse someone by placing the target’s blood or fingernail in a wax

doll and piercing it with a nail. No, that isn't it. Then what is it? And what is with you, boy?"

"Bwah, cough, cough! Are you trying to suffocate me to death with these bags of happiness!!"

Kamijou finally managed to extract his red face from the young woman's very large chest. She must have been doing it subconsciously like she was holding a stuffed animal, so she simply smiled politely and waved a hand dismissively.

"My bad. When a cute and sexy young woman like me sees a head right in front of her, she can't help but start patting it."

"I don't care what you're into and this isn't about the hands on the back of my head – it's about the suffocation of my face!!"

"Don't act like you didn't enjoy it. Besides, I already apologize hm?"

The red of his face was probably more than just embarrassment. It was a more serious SOS signal sent from his oxygen-deprived brain.

However.

"I see. I didn't think of that."

"Wh-what now? Why are you staring at me?"

"I'm just realizing that worrying over things on your own doesn't solve anything. The secret to a long life is listening to others☆"

Part 4

Splat, splat, splat!!

The thick and sticky white and yellow was reminiscent of rotten slugs.

It was in fact raw animal grease.

An unbelievable number of those disgusting faces were plastered to the windows and walls where they dripped down to form bizarre silhouettes. The process was disgusting to watch. Screams erupted from all around and a crowd fled from a shopping building offering excellent New Year's Eve bargains. There were some young people holding clothing not in a bag and some of them may have used the panic to avoid paying.

“Phew.”

Aradia, goddess of witches and ruler of the night and the moon, sighed below the night sky.

The Wiccan world operated under the Rule of Three.

That rule stated that any magic used by a witch – whether it was used for a good deed or a bad – would be returned to the user at thrice the strength.

So a witch that used magic to steal money would lose three times as much and a witch that used magic to kill someone would receive a wound three times as lethal.

Aradia heard a dull thud.

She looked down with her long silver hair swaying and saw a small boy on the verge of tears. She also saw a crepe-like stain on her ankle-length wimple.

“*I see.*”

Someone must have stolen some clothing using the panic caused by her magic and now she was paying for it. The sartorial loss had returned to her three times larger.

The witch goddess placed her hand on the boy’s head and soothed his tearful emotion.

(I should really consider myself fortunate three times the negative result wasn’t any worse than that. The biggest concern is people getting trampled in the commotion. Even if I do have a spell prepared to dodge any trouble caused by these events.)

Aradia existed to save all witches, so her own personal issues were secondary. Her priority was Kamijou Touma who was indirectly guiding Alice and could end up ruining the Transcendents’ plans for his own personal ends. She knew he meant no harm, but with the entire world at stake, he was more dangerous than a wicked temptress leading a king astray.

In the area known as Shibuya, there were 38,020 buildings with 5,030,750 rooms. She only knew the exact numbers because the bear grease had told her.

She had eliminated all the artificial blind spots, but she still hadn’t found Kamijou Touma and the Bologna Succubus.

“I suppose they wouldn’t just be standing out in the open.”

That meant her next task was to see if there were any faces or silhouettes caught in an unnatural loop anywhere. Half of half of half of half of them were. She used that

additional search condition to narrow things down. If the Bologna Succubus was somehow deceiving the search, her quarry had to be near the grease behaving oddly.

“Time for some good deeds.”

If she wanted to find someone, she just had to invite in that result.

If she found someone that someone else was searching for, she would be repaid threefold.

The crepe boy appeared to have gotten separated from his parents in the panic. *How fortunate.* She crouched down to his eye level, smiled, and worked at “reloading” her spell. The good deed of finding the boy’s parents would return to her but three times as powerful.

She didn’t want anything from the boy.

She only wanted *the simple act* of performing a good deed.

She used her conversational skills to earn the boy’s trust, so he held onto the side of her hip while she performed a simple divination to find his parents and walked through the streets of Shibuya.

“Now, is this the destiny of the world handing out fortune and misfortune? Or is it the sparks of disaster created from the interphasal pressure caused by the magic I use? Either way, I will be taking back my action with an exorbitant amount of interest.”

Part 5

A clear change came over the yellowish silhouettes moving along the walls and ceiling.

Their endless looping ended and now they were focused on their target.

“Drat,” said the Bologna Succubus while spreading her wings.

A moment later, the disgusting grease rushed in along the thin wires supporting the model blimp. They would have been trapped if the demon woman holding Kamijou didn’t have wings.

“Did she increase the quality of the search!?” asked Kamijou.

“Clearly so! This is going to be rough flight, so hold on tight and don’t let your embarrassment stop you!!”

But it wasn't going to end with just that.

It no longer mattered that they were in the air. The Bologna Succubus took a zigzagging path akin to a lightning bolt to avoid touching the floor, walls, or ceilings while she flew across a space containing a matcha cafe and a boutique. The number of yellowish silhouettes pursuing them was growing by the second. Did that mean the search spell was almost certain they were here now?

"But I've figured out some things myself."

"?"

"Aradia's ointment is bear grease. That was originally a defensive ointment meant to protect a naked witch from the winter chill. But if she had set the search to simply attach itself to any human skin it was meant to protect, all the girls around here would be coated in the sticky stuff. But she only wants to track us down, so she must have given it a more specific search condition. No doubt about it."

"But what is that condition!?"

"Something that would mix with the animal grease rubbed on the witch's body: the microscopic ecosystem of germs and bacteria found on anyone's skin! That is also what determines your skin quality and the scent of your hair, so it will always differ between two people. The witches have always known a lot about handling medicinal herbs, so they used nothing but their own experiences to figure out fermentation and decomposition!!"

"But that means there's no escaping it!"

"Does it, though? Heh heh heh☆"

The Bologna Succubus used her full speed flight to break through an aluminum alloy door and rolled across the floor, using her arms and wings to doubly protect Kamijou. He felt like they must have rolled all the way across one room and into another. He groaned and extracted his face from her chest.

He saw a tile floor.

Triple sets of faucets, showerheads, and mirrors lined one wall. And the intense humidity came from a bath so large it could be mistaken for a small pool.

The room they rolled right through must have been the dressing room.

Which made this...

“Is this a hot spa!?”

“I was already interested in Japan’s strange bath culture, so this kills two birds with one stone!”

Instead of getting up, the Bologna Succubus used her tail to pull the closest faucet’s lever.

“You might be interested to know that this is the women’s bath.”

“Is now really the time!?”

At least there wasn’t anyone else there.

Scalding hot water poured down on their heads just as several yellowish silhouettes passed through the door they had broken through and crawled along the tile floor and walls.

The room was twice the size of a classroom, but it was taken over in no time.

According to the Bologna Succubus, Aradia’s search spell was pursuing its targets using the microscopic ecosystem on their skin. That meant it could perhaps be evaded by either washing that off or by covering themselves in a liquid film.

“...”

Kamijou and the demoness soaked themselves in water above 40 degrees and rolled into the large tub.

Then they watched the silhouettes crawling along the wall nearby.

This was terrifying. Too terrifying to even gulp.

With white steam filling the air, the silhouettes of yellowish grease moved stickily around like they were dripping down the walls toward the mirrors. And just as it looked like they would reach the mirrors, they slipped into the gap between wall and mirror. Kamijou was so close he could hear the gross sounds of the bear grease moving. He also noticed a stench similar to rotten butter.

The movement stopped there.

At precisely Kamijou Touma’s eye level, something wriggled out from behind the mirror and onto its surface. Water and oil didn’t mix, so even after washing himself off with water so hot it hurt his skin, he wouldn’t have gotten rid of the entire threat. But the yellowish silhouette staring at him was only a shape, so it did not have any functional eyes. Nevertheless, he imagined the pressure of its gaze.

He wanted to fight back.

He wanted to shout at the top of his lungs and slam his right fist into the mirror. He wanted to be freed from this situation.

His body writhed unnaturally along with his heartbeat, but the demoness held him tight.

“(Be strong. You’re a boy, aren’t you?)”

That clued him into something.

The yellowish grease silhouette at his eye level did not react to her whispered voice. It lacked any auditory organs. The bear grease did not react no matter how close it was. If they lacked eyeballs and eardrums, they probably lacked every other senses as well.

This one was right in front of him and shared the same space as him, but that wasn’t what mattered.

The landmine would not trigger unless they touched it.

(Bear with it.)

He heard a sticky sound.

The yellowish grease on the mirror slid to the side and away from them like it had finally lost interest.

“Phew.”

And just as Kamijou let out the breath he had been holding the entire time, something dripped onto his head.

“.....”

It had an ochre coloration.

A yellowish silhouette was stuck to the ceiling and a single drop had fallen onto his head. And he touched it. First with his head and then with his right hand when he thoughtlessly reached up to see what he had felt on his head.

The gross liquid burst with a quiet popping sound.

And just like with security cameras, its destruction would be relayed to Aradia.

“Uh, oh.”

Not a moment later, the concrete wall was blown away as a witch beam shot their way.

Part 6

It was actually a pair of lips.

But Kamijou only identified the 10m squished elliptical shape torn in the wall after blowing away the beam with his right hand.

He was looking at a massive, deadly kiss mark.

Even her attacks had a somehow sexual aspect to them, perhaps because she was a witch.

The slender woman appeared in the hot spa like she had passed through a natural cave, but even that was odd.

Her long silver hair and giant wimple were spread wide behind her.

Maybe it was the temperature difference with the outside air, but the bath's white steam was even more noticeable now.

Still soaked, Kamijou raised his fist and his voice.

“H-how the hell did you get in here!? We’re nowhere near the ground floor!”

“What kind of witch can’t fly?”

The yellowish grease silhouettes gathered around Aradia’s feet on the wet floor. They surrounded her like a strange flower or like cultists bowing toward the statue of their goddess.

The Bologna Succubus joined the conversation with her feet planted on the floor covered in bathwater, rubble, and filthy grease.

“Aradia!! How do you plan to survive the massive triple return for all this destruction!? All your bad deeds are turned back on you, so any magic you use here will only come back to destroy you in the end!”

“Will it? Then how am I standing here *after killing him more than once?*”

“?”

Kamijou gasped.

Aradia pressed two fingers against her lips and blew gently through the gap between them. That was enough to produce an earsplitting high-pitched roar and an invisible shockwave passed right by Kamijou and the Bologna Succubus, breaking down the hot spa's wall.

"Tch! The witches of the forests can control the winds to shake the royal ships! But doing this will only hurt you in the end!"

"It is true I am destroying this building, but who says that counts as a bad deed?"

"Hold on a tick. Aradia, don't tell me..."

"What about someone who holds a grudge against the spa after being refused entrance? I bet the environmentalists worried about CO₂ emissions would inwardly rejoice and claim I was saving the future by destroying a large bath that runs its giant boiler nonstop. Whether an act qualifies as a good or bad deed *depends entirely on your point of view*. So all I have to do is acquire the necessary point of view or interpretation needed to make me the good guy in everything I do. After that, Triple Reload loses its thorns."

In that case, Aradia wouldn't be affected by the triple return of her bad deeds that usually ensured witches did the right thing.

She snapped her fingers and several lights and sounds burst out.

Kamijou froze after realizing that was the gas pipe rupturing, but a soft sensation had already surrounded his mind by then. Aradia herself had tightly surrounded his body with her ankle-length purple fabric to protect him.

But he knew what that had to mean.

"I have protected an innocent life from an explosion."

"Dammit. Dodge, Bologn-!!"

The Bologna Succubus had not been protected from the blast, so she flinched just long enough for Aradia's long leg to jab her barefoot heel into the center of her gut. It didn't look like an ordinary kick. The demoness had already been hit by the gas explosion, but then it was like a thick invisible wall slammed into her with three times the force. She was flung through the air and rolled all the way into the dressing room.

Aradia gently rubbed Kamijou's head and gave him an adoring smile.

"This is what it means to receive triple the blessing of your own good deeds. Hee hee. And that triple can be stacked on top of itself as many times as necessary. Give me the chance and it will snowball far beyond anything you can handle. All I have to do is

perform good deeds throughout my everyday life – *or set things up so my actions are interpreted that way* – and my power will eventually grow to the point that I can one-shot a Magic God or a Transcendent.”

“Kh.”

“And that judgment is made by the invisible monster known as the local ‘mood’. Or maybe you could call it the general consensus. Just like a class rep can criticize students for breaking the rules, but that very class rep can be labeled a tyrant if an outsider who doesn’t care if they are criticized manages to tilt the class’s consensus in their direction. All I need to do is monitor the current local ‘mood’ and adapt my actions accordingly. Then everything will be judged good.”

She saved people for malicious reasons.

She used people’s appreciation of good deeds and kindness to obtain the power needed to take lives.

Or in other words, she was a witch.

“Aradia!?”

“Killing you would be easy.”

Shouting her name was all Kamijou could manage.

He felt like his arms and torso were being squeezed by a thick crane wire or something, but that wasn’t the case. The constriction came from the two slender arms contained within the giant piece of cloth that fell to her ankles. Had kicking away the Bologna Succubus somehow been interpreted as a kindness or a good deed? He couldn’t break free. He heard a disconcerting creaking coming from his body, but was that his arms, his ribs, or his spine?

“Gah!?”

The squeezing of his ribs may have been applying pressure to his lungs because he had trouble breathing.

But he doubted he was going to suffocate to death. If he was going to die here, it would be from his flesh, bones, and organs all being crushed together.

“I must protect the witches.”

Aradia, on the other hand, was smiling thinly.

She displayed the unique joy of someone who had completed their task and was freed from all that tension.

“You would lead Alice to ruin our cabal’s plans and possibly even destroy the world we already have, so killing you is the same as saving the world – making it a very good deed indeed. So rest in peace. You have no chance of a comeback now. If you give in and let yourself pass out, it will be quick and painless. I do hope you accept *this kind advice I am offering you.*”

“No chance of a comeback? You have a pretty poor opinion of your fellow Transcendents.”

Someone else interrupted.

They didn’t throw a punch or a kick and they didn’t send out a beam of light or a shockwave.

Nevertheless.

“Bh?”

The next body to squirm wasn’t Kamijou’s. Transcendent Aradia had been trying to crush a full human’s worth of weight with her arms, but now Kamijou felt an irregular tremor coming from her.

(What the hell?)

Again, there was no obvious injury.

The only thing he noticed was...

(*Goose bumps?* But what is she so afraid of? Or is she feeling sick and nauseous? Yes, like from a crawling sensation along her skin.)

“Jgbwh!?”

It was like she couldn’t help herself.

Her seeming invincibility had vanished. She weakly shoved Kamijou away from her with her palms and then staggered back. No, she failed to do even that and collapsed to the filthy tile floor. Her legs lay weakly below her while she covered her mouth with a hand. Her face was pale. And not just her cheeks and forehead. The lips visible between her fingers were as well.

The Bologna Succubus stepped over the broken wall to reenter the spa. She used her spread wings and her tail to prop herself up like a tripod or a crutch, but she had a grin on her exhausted face.

She still made no attempt to cover up her underwear with rose thorn decorations.

“My Cold Mistress spell is nothing like your Rule of Three magic, but that’s why you’re helpless against it, isn’t it? After all, if used right, this could make me the only Transcendent in the cabal who could *fight back against Alice!!*”

“Ba...lo...gna!?”

“And the cat’s out of the bag now that you’ve experienced it, so there’s no point in hiding what it does. ...Here’s a history lesson for you, my pure boy. During the Inquisition so long ago, there were quite a few sinners who claimed to have slept with an incubus or a succubus. Of course, these were confessions extracted with torture. Still, their recorded confessions generally come in one of two flavors. Either it provided pleasure too great to be of this world or it was painful, cold, and disgusting.”

“...”

“Cold Mistress is a spell that replaces any and all pleasure signals with pain. The desires for food, sex, and sleep are all instructions meant to efficiently guide people toward survival and reproduction through their attempts to fulfill those animal desires. My magic turns that on its head. All pleasure is converted into pain, so I can easily kill anyone through starvation or sleep deprivation. And I’m sure you know what happens if everyone in the world stops having sex.”

Was that why?

Victory had been within reach, so Aradia would have been awash with the pleasure of achieving her goal. And all of that had been flipped around and replaced by the greatest agony. The greater someone’s happiness, the greater the hell the Bologna Succubus could condemn them to.

Aradia’s ability to intentionally misuse good deeds and kindness was horrific itself, but the Bologna Succubus’s magic carried the sweet scent of the profane.

Both the witch and the demon would never be known as good people no matter how great their deeds were.

“Bh.”

Nevertheless, Aradia slowly stood back up with her legs trembling below her. Her face was pale and her shoulders were slanted, but she had not lost her will to fight.

She was the goddess of all witches.

No matter how twisted her methods, the weight she carried may have been very real.

“I will save the witches who continue to suffer around the world. No matter what it takes.”

“I have no issue there.”

“So I will kill this dangerous boy who could lead Alice to destroy the world. It does not matter if he intends it or not. The fact remains that he could very well direct that innocent tyrant in the wrong direction. So he cannot be allowed to survive.”

“That is where our views differ. The real threat is Alice, not Kamijou Touma. No matter what he might think himself, he is no more than the kind of ordinary high school boy you can find anywhere. Thus, you are attacking him over a false accusation.” The usual flightiness in the winged demon’s voice was gone. “And I am the Bologna Succubus, the demoness who appears in the story of a death sentence handed down over history’s most absurd charge: running a brothel full of wanton succubi. This is no April Fools joke – someone actually died over it. Thus, *my purpose in life is to protect the reputation of the falsely accused*. I can never bring myself to overlook your barbaric and deadly false accusations here. Even if it means battling a fellow cabal member.”

“Ah...”

As unsteady as she was, Aradia glared at the boy.

No matter what, he was her actual target here.

“Aradia, my goal overlaps with yours some. If you would calm down and recall the absurd excuses for a trial that brought such hell to so many witches long ago, perhaps you could have become the benevolent goddess of the peaceful night who would actively shield Kamijou Touma from these very accusations. ...Boy, I will assist you here, but if you wish to survive, you will need to settle this with your own fist.”

“Grahhhhhhhhh!!!!” roared the goddess.

Kamijou took a step forward at the same moment.

Maybe Aradia’s intimidation was actually directed at the contradiction within herself rather than at someone as puny as Kamijou. She was telling that voice in her head to shut up and just let her mind break apart if that was what it took. In the face of that self-loathing, she chose to instead become an empty shell that continues to save the witches who rely on her.

Aradia’s bestial fingers started to cross with Kamijou Touma’s right fist.

But even under the effects of the Bologna Succubus's Cold Mistress, the witch goddess carried the greater weight on her shoulders. She clenched her teeth, ignored the extreme pain, transformed herself into a wicked being for selfless reasons, and took careful aim.

She did not bother blocking the fist.

Even if his fist found her jaw, her nails would slice right through his torso. And if she could power through all the pain, then there would be no convenient accident to save him. If nothing else shook her even further, the vast gap in power between a high school boy and a Transcendent would become all too apparent.

However.

"*Gotten used to the pain yet, you masochist witch?*"

"Gah!!!???"

A tremor ran through Aradia's body.

Kamijou could guess what had happened. The Bologna Succubus's Cold Mistress spell converted all pleasure signals into pain. With hunger, lust, drowsiness, and all other desires sealed off by that pain, any human or other lifeform would be trapped.

To take that step forward and continue to fight for the witches, Aradia had needed to accept so much pain it led people to reject the very act of living.

So what if the Bologna Succubus *switched off* that magic at the last second?

This didn't shake her in the way the pain did by stealing away her concentration. The twisted agony vanished and all the pleasure and joy she should have been feeling came rushing back into her mind at once, so she found herself unable to control her emotions.

It only created less than a second of lag, but that was enough for Kamijou's fist to catch up.

Kamijou Touma's fist smashed through her approaching fingers and slammed dead center into her face.

Part 7

With a dull thud, Aradia crashed to the wet tile floor with her long silver hair and giant wimple spread out around her.

Kamijou Touma remained standing.

He was out of breath and covered in aches and pains, but he was still on his feet.

He kicked a small piece of concrete on the floor so it hit Aradia's arm, but she didn't noticeably react.

At long last, Kamijou Touma brushed a hand through his wet bangs.

"Phew."

"No!! Do not let your guard down, boy!"

He tensed at the Bologna Succubus's shout.

"Aradia is a stubborn one, so you need to punch her again and tie her up or whatever it takes. We can't give her another chance at this, so if she manages to escape- gh!?"

She made a weird sound, so he spun around to find that seemingly invincible woman collapsing to the side. No, the pink wings and tail she was using to prop herself up like a tripod or crutch had given out. She couldn't get her hand on the nearby wall, so she crashed down to the filthy tile floor.

And face down at that.

She had her mouth in the gray dust-filled bathwater, but there wasn't a single twitch of movement from the hair spread out on top of her.

That reminded him of a question that had occurred to him earlier.

The Bologna Succubus's Cold Mistress rejected all desire by replacing the pleasure signals with pain. That did sound powerful enough to singlehandedly fight against the entire magic side. But at the same time, it did nothing to defend against enemy attacks. So how had that demon defended herself from Aradia's attack after using the gas explosion to power her Rule of Three magic?

Had she defended herself?

"Hey!!"

Kamijou had misinterpreted what exactly a Transcendent was. Alice probably shouldn't have been the first one he saw. He had ended up applying her extraordinary standards to the others as well.

The Bologna Succubus was a Transcendent, but what if *she could still get injured and bleed like any human?* If so, why had she gone so far to protect a complete stranger

like Kamijou!? Why had she risked her life to leave herself exposed to a gas explosion and then take Aradia's attack head on!?

"Listen. Gh, you need to deliver the finishing blow to Aradia! Cough, cough. Grlhwfy- let her escape and you may not have another chance at this."

Kamijou looked alternately between Aradia and the Bologna Succubus.

But there was only one real answer.

The floor was soaked and people could drown in a puddle if they were too weak to get up. Plus, that demoness might as well have been hit by a car, so he had no idea what her condition was like on the inside.

He didn't even have to think about it.

"*Bologna Succubus!!*"

"Are you daft?"

The injured demoness cursed under her breath when she saw the boy running her way, but he thought he noticed a slight smile on her face. She might complain about his decision, but she must have been in serious need of help.

Aradia had vanished from the floor.

Had she escaped outside through the broken wall? If so, she would treat her wounds and prepare to take Kamijou's life again. But that was fine with him. As long as he could assist the Bologna Succubus now. Because she had no reason to even be here. If she had given up on Kamijou's life, she never would have had to fight anyone. But after seeing a stranger being attacked over *false accusations*, she had felt compelled to travel all the way to Shibuya, Japan, and stand in her fellow cabal member's way.

He couldn't let someone with such a good heart die.

He could never live with himself if he did.

He picked her up from the wet tile floor and lent her his shoulder. He clenched his teeth at how weirdly soft her limp form felt.

"Listen, Bologna Succubus. We need to get away from here for now. I can't lay you down and treat your wound in this damp hot spa."

"Aradia will be...back soon."

"I understand that."

“No, you really don’t.”

She was weak, but she got her words out clearly.

She was very obviously displeased with his decision.

But not because she was letting her emotions get the better of her.

That kindhearted demon knew harshly scolding him would improve his odds of survival even a little, so it was a show put on for his benefit.

She was the Cold Mistress, a scorned being who brought a painful death to everyone she held in her embrace. Or that was the claim made by all the “educated” people talking about her behind her back.

Kamijou thought they could all go to hell.

“Aradia has her own pride as a Transcendent of the Bridge Builders Cabal. The two of us have left that pride in tatters. Both her pride in her combat abilities and in her ideology. Yet we failed to deliver the finishing blow to truly end this conflict. We cannot expect her to hold anything back now. She will pull out all the stops next time. Witch Goddess Aradia really will tear apart Shibuya and the rest of Tokyo – which includes Academy City – in order to kill you and you alone. And you will die for good next time.”

She might show exasperation, she might criticize his decisions, she might tease him, and she might insult him, but the Bologna Succubus never once attempted to abandon Kamijou. She had lost the only pathway to victory she could think of, but she was still determined to fight alongside him to protect him.

She was worried for him, so she couldn’t bring herself to abandon this complete stranger.

That was the only reason.

His newfound understanding of that allowed him to detect the feelings packed into the core of her rebuke.

“That was our one and only chance to peacefully end this battle against Aradia, but you threw it out. That was the worst decision you could have made. Ugh, and I too am a magician of the Bridge Builders Cabal, remember? I am one of the Transcendents attempting to change the world to fit my personal ideal and I am sure we would find ourselves in conflict over how to deal with Alice. So you should have let your future enemy die- ksh- and dealt with Aradia!”

“Shut up,” he bluntly cut in.

Each and every member of that extreme cabal supposedly rivaled the entire magic side. To Aradia and the Bologna Succubus, Kamijou Touma probably was a truly puny being. Whether they wanted to kill him or protect him, they simply expected to have their way there, so his fate wasn't in his own hands here.

But he said it anyway.

If she intended to stab him in the back, she should have kept her mouth shut, but that kindhearted magician had openly called herself his enemy.

So he spoke plainly to the woman who had selflessly saved his life.

“Do you really think I could have done that?”

Transcendent Aradia would be back. And soon.

But he wanted to be the kind of person who wouldn't even hesitate to say he had made the right decision here.

Between the Lines 1

The two of them walked through the automatic door, fully ignoring the “no pets allowed” sticker on the tempered glass.

That door led into the Miyashita Ark, a large shopping mall in Shibuya.

A golden retriever stuck his tongue out next to a blonde woman in a beige habit.

“The place is deserted.”

“Not surprising after a commotion like that. We’re talking about a battle between two Transcendents here. Even the *guards* fled for their lives.”

A dull clattering sound came from the two stuffed duffel bags the human was carrying.

Aleister, the magician who had hijacked Great Demon Coronzon’s body, showed no hesitation in his gait. There were more than 90 small shops in the mall, but he led the golden retriever straight to a multinational restaurant.

He viewed the photo of French ramen with shrimp and cheese and a toxic neon orange soup displayed on a poster that would provide further information on your phone.

“This half-assed campaign is challenging people to eat an XXL serving of ramen, but the best dish they make is the fish & chips. And that’s coming from someone who was born in England and eventually came to hate the place, so you know it has to be good.”

“So is the multinational thing *a bluff* and it’s actually an English restaurant?”

“Oh, the entire restaurant is a front,” he casually responded on his way inside.

There was no one inside the restaurant either. Which was perfect. Aleister wouldn’t shy away from bloodshed, but he would prefer to avoid wasting perfectly good food.

“Now this is a surprise,” he said. “This really is convenient.”

“Is it really that much help? You had already checked the place out, hadn’t you?”

“Even so. *They* are generally a group of wandering treasure keepers who don’t even give their group a name to keep people from tracking them. It is highly unusual for them to stay in one place for so long. A restaurant isn’t the only place you find largescale refrigeration equipment: labs, factories, harbor warehouses, refrigerated trucks, cargo ships, wood dryers, and so on. So they can change their disguise as often as necessary.”

“But why would they run away? Even if these treasures are small enough to carry with you, that seems like all the more reason they would stay here and defend them with their lives.”

“The people onsite don’t even know what they’re storing, so why would they throw away their lives away for it? Ha ha. For once, the extreme information restrictions set in place by their central group has come back to bite them.”

They crossed the deserted restaurant to the very back.

The vibe given off by the wallpaper and lighting changed once they were inside the professional kitchen. It was all cold fluorescent lights and sterile tile. Aleister found this more comfortable. The large silver countertop was so systematically organized it was reminiscent of a hospital’s autopsy table. It was hard to imagine any food prepared here making a pleasant meal that put a smile on people’s faces.

This was the place’s true face.

By adding on more and more camouflage to keep this icy atmosphere from escaping the confines of the tiled space, a popular restaurant had eventually formed.

They were originally an organization tasked with eternally preserving the remains of holy men and women deep in the snowy British mountains. Of course, these people

couldn't come back to life and disappear like the Son of God. They were a little more grounded."

"Eternally preserved corpses? I occasionally hear that legend from the former Soviet Union, but it looks to me like they just froze their dead people. That does not qualify as preservation on the microscopic level. The cells will be constantly breaking down."

"That doesn't really matter to them. I know you haven't lost your love of romance in your old age, so would you be interested in seeing Robin Hood's corpse? What about Jack the Ripper's? That's the kind of person *they* now specialize in preserving. But the death of someone that charismatic can be a powerful thing. A nearly eternal amount of time is needed to soften the blow and lesson the people's sorrow."

"You know an awful lot about this."

"I dabbled in the topic *in relation to the previous Imagine Breaker*. Although that was something the Golden cabal stole and modified for their own purposes."

Aleister was referencing the weapon stored in a certain armory that he had used to deliver the finishing blow to Mathers.

But he also hung his head for some reason.

"And back in 1947, I was very nearly made a part of *their* collection. And I only avoided that fate because that perfectionist of a doctor put me in *too perfect* a state of suspended animation."

Several pieces of industrial equipment were lined up by the wall. No ordinary home would have one so large or one that only had a freezer with no refrigerator.

There were seven in all and Aleister stopped in front of the fifth one.

"But not even a group dedicated to preservation can do so indefinitely. It became clear that all forms of sanctuary were being ransacked during World War Two."

Aleister lowered his two duffel bags to the tile floor.

"So the occult sphere was so *overwhelmed by anxiety* that some British witches even performed a strange cursing ritual in the nude until some of them froze to death. British witches fighting the approaching German army with curses sounds like something from a B-movie, but it was very real."

"So this group needed to evacuate their 'treasures'?"

"Ever since, their most dangerous stash has only ever been kept in temporary locations. Because that war taught them that the national borders are not a trustworthy defense."

If you want to hide something, you spread it around and constantly move it around instead of keeping it all in a single secure building. Heh heh. The Miyashita Ark, huh? *They* claim to be travelers, but I get the feeling *they* were the ones behind the opening of this new shopping mall. If I missed them here, it might have been decades before I tracked them down again.”

He used both hands to fling open the doors to a refrigerator larger than a drink vending machine.

A white chill pushed out at him.

At first glance, it only looked like it contained frozen blocks of shrimp soup, a curry separated into frozen blocks of meat and a frozen paste, and other restaurant food. If a chef who didn’t know the truth happened to open the door, they would likely find nothing amiss. But after moving that camouflage out of the way, Aleister spotted the true prize found in the very back.

He saw a 49kg mass measuring about 150cm long.

A modern preserved corpse was wrapped in several layers of plastic wrap and coated with a layer of frost.

“Found her.”

“So do we now make a swift withdrawal?”

“I would love to, but I am not lugging 49kg of frozen corpse home with me.”

“Sigh. You’re getting old, Aleister.”

“I think I’m doing pretty good for someone born in 1875.”

Meanwhile, Aleister pulled out the solidly frozen mass (using the great demon’s youthful body). He laid it on the silver countertop with a dull thud.

Then he unzipped the heavy bags he had placed on the floor. They contained a roll of thick plastic sheets, ethanol disinfectant in a spray bottle, and a UV light so powerful direct exposure to the skin would be dangerous.

By disinfecting the entire space – including floor, walls, and ceiling – and forcing the air to swell out from within, he could create an isolated space on the same level as an emergency operating room during a disaster or a field hospital on the battlefield.

Next, he pulled out some precision equipment nicer than anything found inside a smartphone and lined it up on the countertop.

“So I’m at least going to fiddle with the contents before taking her back to my lab. That way she can walk back herself – no carrying necessary.”

“With battery power?”

“Wireless power. Fueling the human body with the nutrients found in their food is terribly inefficient, really. We live in a more ecofriendly world now, so let’s turn this legendary magician into a sustainable something-or-other.”

The golden retriever pulled out a cigar, but Aleister snatched it away. The thorough sterilization of the room would be meaningless with the dog puffing away on that.

The dog looked upset, but started chewing on the bone-shaped gum he was given instead.

“So this is a ‘she’ to you? Sounds like you think this corpse still has a personality.”

“This is all a waste of time if I can’t *rebuild her* that way.”

Aleister sounded so casual as he turned to face the 150cm mass.

And the human who created the very concept of the science side spoke to it.

“Rise and shine, Anna Kingsford, our true starting point.”

CHAPTER 3

The Transcendent Blossoms Sabbat_VS_Witch_Hunt

Part 1

Kamijou threw open the stainless-steel back entrance.

The winter sky was still blue since it was 3 or maybe a bit later. Soaking themselves in the hot spa had been a bad idea even if it had been part of a plan. He thought the north wind was going to freeze him solid.

“Damn!!”

He didn’t have time to worry about that.

Transcendent Aradia would be back soon. Kamijou and the Bologna Succubus alone could not protect that large shopping mall with so many entrances. Aradia already knew they were in the Miyashita Ark, so staying there would be like asking her to launch a surprise attack and kill them.

He lent the Bologna Succubus his shoulder and half-shouted his questions. But not because he was overexcited. He was afraid she wouldn’t hear him otherwise.

That was how weak she was.

But she still wrapped him up in her light pink wings like a cloak. She wanted to give him as much of her remaining body heat as she could.

“What do we do now!? We need somewhere to hide if I’m going to treat your wound!!”

“Hee hee.”

“What is it now, Bologna Succubus?”

“I’m just thinking how glad I am I risked my life to save you. Here, I’ll reward you with a nice tight hug☆”

“T-take this seriously!”

She pouted her lips at that.

“Goodness gracious. So you want my request? Then I say a sauna or a capsule hotel would be safest. A sand bath or an enzyme bath would do if you want to have more fun with it.”

“What is it with you and baths?”

“Fine, would you prefer a love hotel or soapland? At a massage parlor, you can put on paper underwear and get a mystery gel rubbed all over your back. Do they have showers you can use there?”

“What is it with you and...that stuff!?”

Kamijou was blushing now and the Bologna Succubus giggled weakly. She could barely stand up straight, but she was amused by his reactions.

“First, I’m interested in Japan’s strange bath culture. And second, an indoor facility with lots of small rooms separated out like honeycombs suits our needs best. Karaoke boxes and manga cafés don’t give you much privacy as a deterrent against crime, so we have to look at the more *adult* destinations instead.”

So was the lowest hurdle among them the capsule hotel?

Kamijou checked his map app with his empty hand.

“Damn, I’m getting more and more poisoned by the smartphone culture. I get worried whenever I can’t look something up on here first.”

They made their way to the map icon closest to the Miyashita Ark.

The place was deserted.

Had everyone left with all those creepy faces appearing? Or was the place made so you could check in without interacting with a real person? Either way, no one stopped them as they walked right through the front desk area. Kamijou’s clothes were still soaked, so he appreciated the warmth of the heater. It was enough to make him teary-eyed.

“What the hell is this?”

Something like coin lockers for giants lined the walls. The doors were 1m squares of translucent frosted glass, but that was it. Each box was a room just big enough for someone to get some sleep inside. It reminded him of a sterile spaceship in an SF movie or maybe an extremely efficient prison.

He wasn't sure he could carry the weak Bologna Succubus to a higher level and he didn't need to anyway. He pushed her into a box on the bottom level and had her lie on her back.

He was chilled to the bone, but treating her was more urgent than heating himself.

He leaned into the same space and immediately detected a sweet scent. He hadn't noticed it before, but it probably came from her hair.

"So I want to treat your wound, but *where were you hit?* No covering up with your hands! Or your wings! Just let me see. Actually, are a succubus's organs even in all the same places as human ones?"

"Oh, you licentious lad. Are you that eager to get into my underwear?☆"

"I'm going to assume these jokes mean it's not that serious. Do you want those to be your last words!?"

"But how else do you plan to see underneath this?"

He froze. She must have liked the attention because she slapped his cheek with her pink tail.

That light pink lingerie was the only thing she wore and it was a one-piece corset that covered her from top to bottom like a bunny girl. When Aradia had kicked her back in the hot spa, it had been in the stomach, but that was the hardest spot to check with that outfit. The waist was fitted pretty tightly. In fact, it had to be the tightest part of the entire thing. Q: You want to see a bunny girl's navel without having to see her boobs or butt in the process. How do you accomplish this? A:Why wasn't there an answer!?

This was first aid. It was a necessary medical procedure!

Kamijou kept trying to convince himself of that in front of the defenseless young woman, but he couldn't seem make himself actually do anything.

"Oh, no. I don't think there's any other option. But how do you even take one of these off?"

"Sorry, boy. I can't help it I'm such a natural virgin killer, so try to be patient with me."

"Why am I taking such massive psychological damage when I'm only trying to selflessly help someone!? It's like my heart is a hunk of ice being chipped away with an icepick!!"

He got carried away and bumped his head into the low ceiling.

He was left to sob with his hands over his face, so the Bologna Succubus put her hands on her hips while still lying on her back. But she didn't seem angry with the pathetic boy who couldn't just enjoy the situation he found himself in. Instead, he heard a strange *ziiip* sound from either side of her hips. She was undoing the zippers there.

She used her wings to push her back up from the bed.

"There we go."

"Ahhh!?"

She pulled the thin material down to her navel and rolled it up there. It was a lot like someone pulling off their school swimsuit's shoulder straps and half removing the swimsuit.

"Hee hee. I appreciate the mighty big reaction, boy. It's a real confidence booster."

Being a succubus, she didn't seem to mind at all. She even placed her hands behind her head. The two big things jiggled on top of her chest and Kamijou blushed so bright he thought his face was going to explode. It was super awkward because she made no effort to cover up and even grinned up at him. He wanted to politely look away from that part of her that now had only her hair to cover it, but that wasn't an option. She was injured and needed treatment.

"I would recommend getting this over with quickly. Aradia is working to recover as well. If we can recover faster, than we have a chance to send an attack her way. Every second wasted reduces our odds of survival."

"You're certain Aradia will come back for us?"

"Unquestionably."

He couldn't send the Bologna Succubus back into such a deadly fight while still injured. He needed to at least provide first aid to stabilize her condition. He looked back down at her body and noticed a purplish discoloration above her navel. A large one too. About the size of a child's fist.

"Yikes."

"Hell's bells. That kind of reaction is a lot scarier than any kind of scientific threat, you know?"

"But what do I do about this? Is this internal bleeding? Since I don't see an open wound here, I don't think disinfectant or a bandage will help. Applying a compress seems like the only thing I can do."

“That should be enough. It’s only a bruise, albeit a severe one. It is internal bleeding and I know it looks bad, but it doesn’t look like a major artery or organ was affected.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“If the internal bleeding was that serious, I would have passed out from blood loss as soon as I loosened the waist constriction. This is very tight to protect the dreams of boys like you.”

The simple store in the hotel sold most basic medical equipment.

Kamijou soon returned with a variety of options.

“Is a warm compress or a cold one best for this?”

“A nice, cool one. You wouldn’t heat up a lump on your head, would you?”

He just took her word for it and peeled off the compress’s clear film like he was unwrapping the single-slice cheese used for toast.

Then he faced her again.

“Okay, I’m going to apply it.”

“Hee hee☆ Have at it, boy. I’m ready for- bdflkbhldfh!?”

“Yikes!! Bologna!”

“Krlrlrl- ah ha ha. That was chillier than I expected and I have very sensitive skin. You did nothing wrong, so keep going.”

Was that just her common tones breaking down?

He thought something had exploded inside her.

“This compress really smells.”

“Aromas are more noticeable in a small space like this.”

The Bologna Succubus reached out a hand while lying on that minimal bed. It made her look like a good-looking but lazy young woman reaching for some snacks. He wished she would cover up those large things with her hands since her hair was doing a very poor job of it. Or she could use her pink wings or tail. She had plenty of options!!

The topless Western woman (!?) remained oblivious to that wish.

“Do you have any painkillers?”

“I brought over everything they had, but don’t ask me what any of it is. Oh, this says it’s a cold medicine. And this is a sleeping pill?”

“My, oh, my. What is some loxoprofen doing here? Don’t you normally need a prescription for that? But I want a little more than that. Ooh, an anticonvulsive. Since it isn’t from my flesh or bones, I’m guessing this pain is related to my smooth muscle, so I’ll be taking that☆”

“Wait, um, taking it? But I just carried this over for you to see! You can pay for it yourself, I hope!?”

Kamijou didn’t know much about painkillers (despite having been in and out of the hospital more than the stereotypical sickly girl), but if she was happy with it, he wasn’t going to argue. In fact, he was a little surprised that ordinary drugs even worked on her.

“I think that’s all you can do for me. Oh, but this drug is supposed to be taken with food, so I should eat something. Hmm, I’ll probably heal faster if I eat this takoyaki, tenkasu, and mayo sandwich they’re offering.”

“Why would you go for a mass of grease and carbs that even a high school boy like me would shy away from?”

The demoness really did buy the mystery sandwich. She turned out to be the type who eats triangular foods by holding the bottom two corners in her hands while she nibbled at the top corner. That was weirdly cute. Maybe her younger habits never faded since demons(?) didn’t age. Whatever the case, Kamijou thought his heart was going to stop from the combination of the childish mannerisms and her large and topless chest.

She again demonstrated her opposition to littering by balling up the sandwich wrapper for easy disposal later.

“Mmm. That was good. And a full stomach makes me sleepy.”

She stretched her arms up while sitting up on her knees now. She was once more leaving herself with nothing but her hair to cover up and the ceiling was so low her palms ended up pressed against it, but she looked happy enough. Had that greasy sandwich really healed her? Surely not. The more he learned about Transcendent physiology, the more confused he got.

“Now we need to get our clothes dry. Oi, quit leaving the capsule every chance you get, boy. Climb back in here with me.”

“Why should I?”

“Because the capsules let you set their temperature and humidity. If I lower the humidity as far as it goes and crank up the heat, it should function like a dryer.”

“Are the SDGs just a joke to you!?”

But it was true he was going to freeze to death as things were, so he had no choice but to crawl into the cramped space with her.

He made sure to apologize to the god in heaven before succumbing to the demon’s temptation.

“What is this sweet scent? The compress didn’t smell like this, so is there something in the air conditioning filter?”

“Buzz. Wrong. That would be my cleavage. The bare skin may give off more milky pheromones than the half-dried underwear.”

“...”

“Sorry for being a virgin killer in more than just the visual way, boy.”

Does she have to keep bringing that up!? Kamijou did his best not to look at the winking young woman a mere 50cm away from him. She must have enjoyed teasing him because she was in a very good mood and even cackled while switching to a cross-legged position.

But what were they supposed to do now?

He was honestly unsure how healed she was, but she had been hit pretty badly. And Aradia had apparently received a weird boost to her power brought on by desperation. Kamijou couldn’t instantly power himself up and it would be heartless to throw the Bologna Succubus into the line of fire every time he sensed danger.

He could only think of one option.

“Let’s meet up with Index and the others,” he whispered.

“You mean the grimoire library?”

“And Othinus too. They might give us the clue we need. You keep talking about the Bridge Builders Cabal and Transcendents, so I think it would be best to see what some magic experts have to say.”

“I suppose that makes sense,” said the Bologna Succubus while belatedly putting those big things back in the chest of her underwear and adjusting their position a little. Kamijou blushed, but he was more fascinated with the discovery of how a bunny girl costume was actually put on.

“However, that is easier said than done. How exactly do you plan on doing it? I doubt you would run into them if you just ran around the large open world of Shibuya.”

“So would it be best to send them some kind of sign that we’re in this capsule hotel?”

“What if Aradia sees it? Then the inevitable battle would begin before we had time to prepare.”

“Th-then it just has to be a subtle sign that only Index would notice.”

“A quiet whisper will never reach every corner of Shibuya.”

She shot down his every idea. Unfortunately, she was right.

A noticeable sign would be noticed by Aradia, but a subtle one wouldn’t reach Index. He wracked his brains for a solution until...

“Oh.”

“Hm? Wh-what now, boy?”

“I’ve found the answer. There really is a way of sending an obvious sign to Index no matter where she is in Shibuya while that transcendent magician Aradia remains none the wiser!!”

“Th-there is!? O-out with it then! Gulp.”

He raised his trembling head and gave her the deadly serious look of someone revealing an apocalyptic prophecy.

“I can message her phone.”

“You had a mobile this entire time!?”

The sexy demon rapped her knuckles against the top of his head.

He pulled out his phone to find a flood of messages from Kumokawa-senpai.

Part 2

“...”

When Index arrived at the back-alley capsule hotel, she crossed her arms and puffed out her cheeks.

Othinus and Kumokawa Seria weren't much different.

The only one who wasn't upset was the calico cat on the nun's head.

Kamijou Touma was confused. The Bologna Succubus was the one crazy enough to go around in nothing but underwear, so why were their piercing gazes focused on him? Not to mention that the god was trying to act like a reasonable dresser when her outfit was just as revealing.

Maybe it was all the time he had spent in that capsule full of sweet female pheromones to dry his clothes.

Whatever the case, he wasn't given a chance to defend himself.

“(My plan is in complete shambles now. It wasn't supposed to be like this. I'm supposed to be the mature beauty of his group, but then she comes along out of nowhere and steals that position away from me!)”

“(Human, why are you falling for a mere big-titty demon when you are already have an ultra super rare god?)”

The ones muttering under their breath were giving off a terrifying dark aura. And one of them was a god, so she was probably uttering curses that would drive all who heard them to madness.

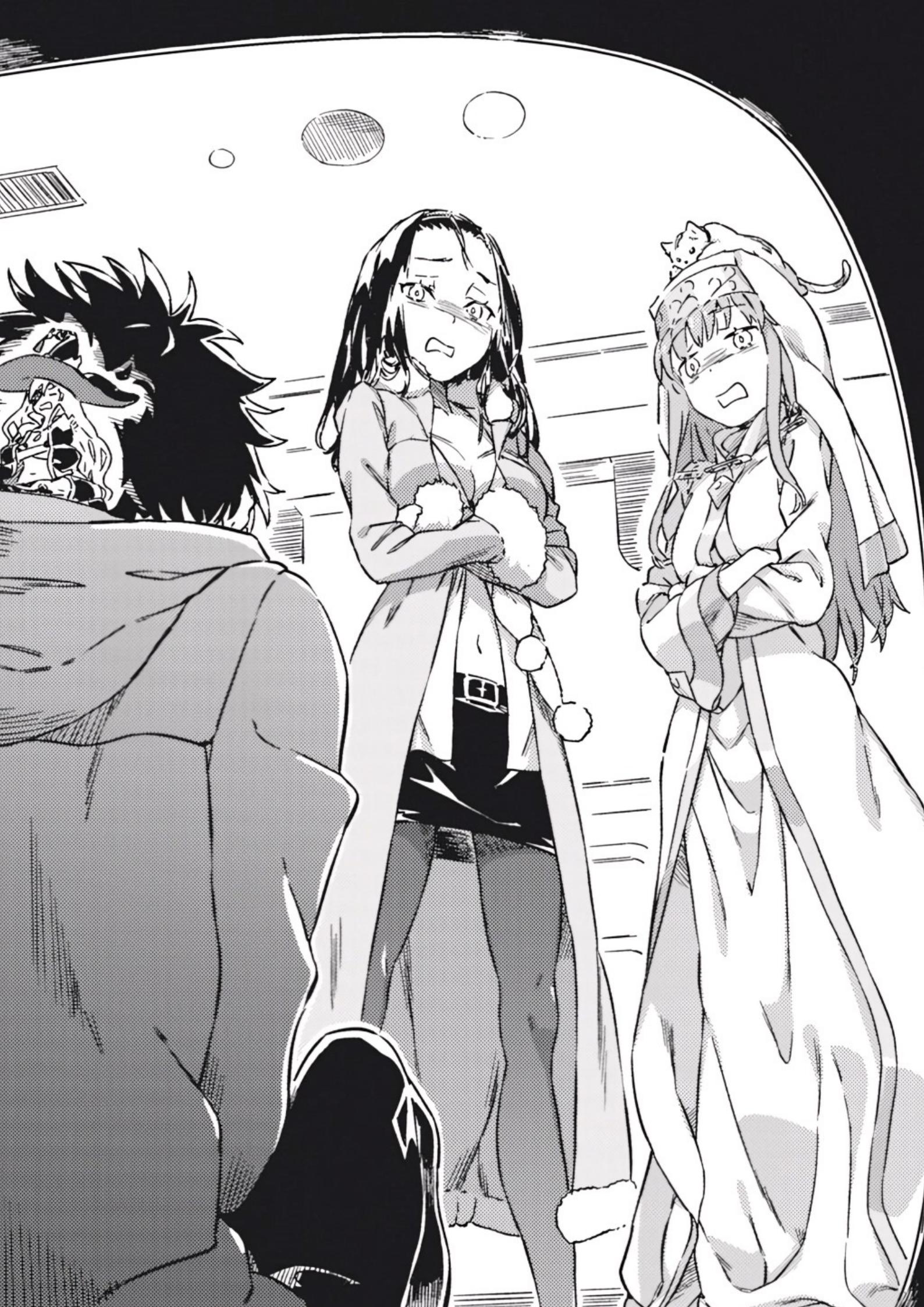
“(He's clearly a phone newbie, yet he can summon a swarm of girls with a single message? And he didn't think twice about calling in more girls when he was already with me. Not to mention that this is a *hotel*. I can't believe he didn't have an issue asking them here or that they didn't have an issue coming here.)”

“Shut up, you winged freak!”

“Shut up, you winged freak!”

Kumokawa and Othinus appeared to have become friends at some point.

Index didn't seem to realize what the Bologna Succubus had been implying, so she alone watched on in confusion.



They couldn't all fit in that capsule, so they remained in the hallway. The Bologna Succubus used the edge of the capsule entrance like a bench since she was injured. When Kamijou tried to leave the capsule, her pink tail coiled around his neck and yanked him back to her side. The super sweet and sexy young woman's lonely gesture nearly sent him (quite literally) to heaven.

Othinus got the conversation started, sounding somewhat irritated.

"So, human. Did you drive everyone out of this building to claim it for yourself?"

"Do you really think he could do that? It is still the late afternoon outside, but the guests will start returning once night falls. Capsule hotels are generally built alongside saunas, but they are still hotels."

Kamijou wanted to get down to business.

What did his two experts – Index and Othinus – think of Transcendent Aradia?

"I've never heard of a person called Aradia." The nun still looked upset, but she answered his question while seated on the hallway bench. "But I have heard of a book called Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches."

Kamijou's heart skipped a beat.

Aradia. And witches.

"But a lot of people think that was a story a witch made up on the spot to tell the author what he wanted to hear."

Kumokawa seemed to prefer being in the corner because she leaned back against a square pillar and held the bored-looking cat while tilting her head at that answer.

"So that witch used the same technique as a streetside fortuneteller?"

"More or less. *According to a fortuneteller who has since abandoned their authority*, the entire field is about drawing out the words a hesitant person wants to say themselves."

"The witch herself probably wanted to be seen as a good talker and a clever doctor," cynically added Othinus while climbing up onto Kamijou's shoulder.

But this wasn't any help at all.

If it was only a book, then what exactly were the Transcendents of the Bridge Builders Cabal?

Kamijou glanced over at the Bologna Succubus, but the demon seated next to him was only smiling. When she noticed him looking, she winked and squeezed her upper arms together to accentuate her cleavage. But he did recall that she had said her purpose in life and actions were centered on someone being sentenced to death for the absurd charge of running a succubus brothel.

Anna Sprengel had apparently joined that cabal and the magic side generally believed that she was no more than a name that appeared in the letter Westcott forged when founding the Golden cabal. Kamijou had assumed that forgery theory only meant that Anna herself had never appeared directly on center stage to spread any those global disasters, but what if there was more to it than that?

And then there was *Alice* who stood at the top of the Bridge Builders Cabal.

“Don’t let them confuse you, human.” After finally reaching her usual spot on his shoulder, the 15cm god tickled his ear with an exasperated sigh. “There is no way of proving one way or the other if a goddess named Aradia really existed in the distant past. The same is true for the entire Bridge Builders Cabal. The issue we need to focus on is the fact that a magician going by that name is here in Shibuya today and that she is attacking you with some kind of powerful spell. Whoever she might be, you can eliminate her as a threat if you defeat her.”

That was true enough.

But this was a big problem Kamijou didn’t think he could just ignore.

“If she is using witchcraft, then it should be based on natural chemicals.” Index attacked the issue from a different angle while kicking her legs atop the bench in the shared hallway running between the locker-like rows of capsules. “A witch’s supernatural feats of healing, divination, cursing, flight, and crop growth should all be derived from medicinal herbs and minerals. They are basically priestesses living deep in the woods after all.”

“So what is that Triple whatever thing, Index?”

“You mean the Wiccan Triple Reload?”

The Bologna Succubus, who was of uncertain age, was playing with the cat. The cat had slipped from Kumokawa’s hands to chase after her wiggling tail, so she was skillfully sending her tail darting this way and that to just barely dodge the kitty punches.

Her clarification meant nothing to the high school boy, but it was valuable information for Index.

"I see. *That* explains the Aradia name. In that case, you can call what she uses witchcraft, but her spells are not based on a specific mythology or religion like Greek or Celtic."

"U-um, Index?"

"This is something newer and more like a *superstition*. Instead of digging up the ancient techniques, this witchcraft was created new by mixing together bits and piece of the thoroughly Christianized culture. That means she won't just use the Rule of Three. Wicca has plenty of rules and taboos all its own. Use those against her and you should be able to defeat her no matter how much more powerful she- oh."

Index was cut off by a rattling sound.

But what was rattling?

The floor was. No, was it the entire multi-tenant building containing the capsule hotel!?

The Bologna Succubus whispered into Kamijou's ear while sitting next to him and resting her head on his shoulder (and receiving threats from Othinus for invading the little god's territory).

"Aradia is here."

Part 3

The sun had set.

The sky was dark and, true to the December date, the winter season became impossible to ignore once sunset arrived. However, it was also New Year's Eve, so Shibuya was only starting to get fired up.

"..."

One girl wore a translucent raincoat over a swimsuit-based outfit. She wore an eyepatch and looked something like a comical ghost or a clione, but she was currently staring at the scenery of Spain Zaka.

She saw a large piece of cloth fluttering there.

A small girl of about 10 was trotting along in a witch outfit, probably on her way to the scramble crossing. "How cute," said the ghost, but on closer inspection, that witch girl had her navel exposed and she was barefoot. She could easily freeze to death in that

modified bikini, so did she have a thick layer of some kind of heat insulating gel applied to her bare skin?

“A witch.”

The ghost had had a frightening experience with one of those earlier in the day.

Her hand froze up while reflexively reaching for her phone to record the possible news in front of her. But this witch costume looked a lot cheaper than the last one. The clasps didn’t look like real gold, for one. It may have been made with a clothing printer that used a remote machine to perform automatic high-speed sewing based on the supplied pattern data. Recently, White Spring had a deal where you could order a printed garment online and then have their delivery service deliver it to you in less than half an hour.

(But is that really a popular enough character for someone so clearly new to cosplay to choose? For that matter, *is that even a character from something?* Well, someone may have thrown together the pattern data based on the uploaded videos and then released it for public use.)

Just then, the ghost took a step back and nearly bumped into a witch.

But this witch looked to be of high school age.

“?”

(Um!?)

A moment later, the ghost realized there were even more of them.

Everywhere she looked, she found witches wearing ankle length wimples and modified bikinis. There were 5 or 10 or maybe more. The number gradually increased like stepping on the white beach and seeing dark oil start to seep out from below the sand. It was like the scratchy sound of cheap bells were drowning out the crowd’s chatter.

None of them were looking her way.

They were only respectfully holding some folded clothes in their hands. For whatever reason, blank pieces of looseleaf paper were stacked up on top of the clothing.

They were all muttering the same thing under their breath.

It was a forbidden, profane, and sweet utterance that brought the word “secret” to mind.

“*May the holy witch guide us.*”

For some reason, when the ghost heard those whispered voices, something started to grow in the back of her mind.

This was something she had tried to forget. It was an unseen scar on her heart that formed the foundation of her current life and could not be removed at this point.

She belonged to a group who posted videos to a video site. She was always conscious of her numbers, but that wasn't always a battle against herself.

She had once had a rival.

She hadn't heard anything from that rival ever since the girl made the mistake of uploading a shoplifting video and had to move away.

They had been friends...or she thought they had. But the silly number of followers tacked onto the end of their account names had always led them to compete, for better or for worse. And if the ghost hadn't come out just barely on top, that friend, whose real name she didn't even know, may never have felt the need to gather attention with a shoplifting video.

She had been terrified of the guilt catching up to her.

So she had grown even more obsessed. Because if she dressed in crazy outfits and received the praise of so many people online, she could forget all about the more colorful reality she lived in. And who was going to complain about that choice if she also earned more money than most adults made?

But she couldn't shake off, wash away, or escape reality.

She was wearing a translucent raincoat over a costume based on a practice swimsuit. That cheap, meaningless outfit wasn't enough. That plastic and synthetic fabric had no mystical significance and couldn't free her from reality. It couldn't relieve the weight suffocating her.

So what else could she do?

What could she do to finally shake free of the reality doggedly pursuing her?

"May the holy witch guide us."

"Oh."

There was the answer.

The witches continued to multiply.

Just like with Halloween costumes and video posting, it was so much less frightening when you weren't the only one doing something.

There were more and more.

More and more and more and more and more and more.

More and more.

They came from every direction. Witches emerged from every street corner to flood the scene. There were some suppressed screams as people were overwhelmed by the sight, but everyone was paralyzed by it and no one began recording with their phone.

The ghost should have felt the same.

But this didn't even seem strange to her anymore, much less frightening. She instead felt an all-encompassing sense of calm. Most everyone understood what a follower count was these days and it was so much easier for new content creators to get started. This worked the same as video sites and the rest of the internet. Once enough people were doing something, it gained legitimacy.

Everyone was doing this too, so she had nothing to worry about.

“May the holy witch guide us.”

One witch must have sensed something because she held out some folded clothes and a stack of looseleaf paper.

The ghost smiled as she accepted the invitation and opened a new door by repeating the secret keyword.

“May the holy witch guide us.”



Meanwhile, someone was humming atop Shibuya Scramble Squiz, a skyscraper complex connected to Shibuya Station.

“Hm, hm, hm, hm, hm.”

On the special observation deck at the 46th floor, Transcendent Aradia raised her arms and stretched in the large space with a view of the city's nightscape through the surrounding glass.

She snapped open the clasps to her modified bikini, letting the garment fall away. She only ever exposed her naked body to the green trees, but in artificial Shibuya, the temporary botanical garden being held here was the only option available.

Her long silver hair became much more noticeable.

Witches were meant to bathe in the moonlight and live secret lives deep in the forest, so if she wanted to eliminate the noise from her thoughts and get a fresh look at her situation, moonbathing and forest bathing were her only real options.

(I had prepared myself for the lack of starlight, but this is bad. Even the moonlight is barely leaking through.)

So this was little more than a way of calming herself.

Aradia spread her arms and bathed in the night air of the artificial greenery.

The witch goddess slowly walked naked across the 46th floor observation deck, stopping to snatch a free pamphlet from the magazine rack along the way. The action had no meaning. She was only relaxing her body and eliminating all biases from her thoughts.

The ad campaign described on the pamphlet was apparently a common thing in the shopping district lately.

"Help grow more greenery and kick global warming's butt with Magical Powered Kanamin! Get your free flower seeds now! If we all do our part, we can save the planet with our flower pots!!"

"Hee hee."

Aradia laughed when she saw the magical girl drawn on the pamphlet in primary colors.

But not because she found it laughable.

(So this teaches people to love the deep forests and to assist those close to them?)

This was an Academy City entertainment product made for small children and the campaign's claims had little to no scientific basis behind them. But ironically enough, it hit a lot closer to the essence of a witch than those texts written to criticize witches that based their beliefs on all the ancient parchment documents they had gathered.

Aradia glanced to the side while toying with the pamphlet in her hand.

She saw some billowing clothes there.



But they weren't hers. They were worn by the girls who were serving the witch goddess in the hopes of receiving even a small fraction of her blessing. They were watching Aradia as a living model of a perfect witch, making note of everything from her gait to her breaths, and jotting it all down on their looseleaf paper.

That was known as their Book of Shadows. Modern witches bound by the Rule of Three were given a stack of blank paper when they first started down that path. The newcomers would continue writing down all the knowledge they obtained until the day they died to create their own personal grimoire.

The girls kept writing without even looking up and they all spoke in unison.

"May the holy witch guide us."

That sounded important, but the phrase was actually meaningless.

It was the same as youth slang and online memes.

Having some kind of secret shared term or phrase created a sense of unity while also creating a sense of superiority over anyone who didn't understand it. Those in the know were separated from the world at large and formed a loose community. But it was easier for people to get onboard if the phrase felt like it had some history or tradition behind it. Repeating that phrase created the illusion of invisible bonds and made them think they were protected as part of some great purpose. The same method had been used at the Sabbats during the Middle Ages, a time when some people wanted to return to their ancestors' ways after Christianity had taken over.

I want to know too.

It was an intellectual poison that silently spread using that common desire.

When a demon (or something forced to bear that title) were summoned at those gatherings, the process to perform the summoning tended to be a lot lengthier and more complex than the part where they actually did anything with the summoned being. Why? Because those arcane rituals were the best part and it was so relaxing to be actively working on something. Perhaps it would be too romantic to liken that to the period leading up to an unrequited love being fulfilled.

"Hm."

With influencers on social media and whatever-tubers on video sites, the world continued to transform and evolve at an accelerated rate, but the basic desires at the bottom of it all had not changed. Aradia saw the world as a living fossil.

“May the holy witch guide us.”

I want to live an active life without anyone knowing who I really am.

“May the holy witch guide us.”

I want to be an entirely new person.

“May the holy witch guide us.”

I don't want to screw up or fail.

“May the holy witch guide us.”

I don't want to make a fool of myself in public.

“May the holy witch guide us.”

I want to learn how it works without needing to be an expert.

“May the holy witch guide us.”

But I also want a skill no one else can imitate.

“May the holy witch guide us.”

And I don't want to work hard for it.

“May the holy witch guide us.”

I don't want to bow down to the know-it-alls.

“May the holy witch guide us.”

I want a trick that makes reaching my goal easy.

(This city's people have so many openings for me to utilize. I don't think it's as bad as New York, though.)

So these girls would not rely on the mythologies and religions linked to great political power. They were only using their young sensibilities to link together some slang and memes they all knew, but that was to be expected when they all lived separate lives. It was selfish, willful, and entirely for themselves. They were driven by their own desire, so they could never get along with the mythologies and religions that asked for a unified lifestyle before seeking happiness – in other words, *that demanded their followers protect their teachings that had already been finalized so long ago.*

This is what witches had always been. The Sabbat had always been this sort of gathering.

Transcendent Aradia was the one who gave concrete form to those desires and provided the witches with the necessary knowledge and a place at which to practice it.

The nude idol spread her arms at the center of the Sabbat and sang loud.

“It is time to begin the second round.”

She would keep this simple.

If she could not settle this on her own, then she would crush her target with an onslaught of 100 thousand witches.

Part 4

The entire building containing the capsule hotel shook violently.

The demoness shrieked and clung to Kamijou’s side. He stuck just his head out of the capsule and took a look around, but since the capsule hotel was basically a portion of a sauna or bath, it lacked windows.

“Well, something’s happening, but what do we do about it!?”

“With just you, I could have flown you away from the roof, but I can’t do that with three or four people and a pussy cat. And I couldn’t sleep at night if I coldheartedly abandoned the cat.”

The busty upperclassman and busty god glared at the demoness as if to say “so you could sleep like a baby after abandoning us?”

But the Bologna Succubus had a mind tougher than depleted uranium, so she sat up from the edge of the capsule and winked at only Kamijou.

“So our first job is recon and intel gathering. We can fight, hole up in here, or run away, but we’ll want to see what Aradia is up to before choosing.”

“In other words, you don’t have an actual plan. Got it.”

The capsule’s wonderfully ecofriendly heater had fully dried their clothing.

Aradia could easily break through the concrete wall to get into the building. The Bologna Succubus had already mentioned that flying away wasn't an option with more than just Kamijou, so she had likely already ruled out staying in the building too.

They needed to get a look outside. Inside a smoking room that had somehow survived into the current day, they found a window covering one of the walls.

Kamijou was dumbfounded by what he saw.

The sidewalks, streets, and every other part of the ground were covered in witches, witches, and more witches!!

"What the hell is this?"

It looked like a riot. Every single person crammed in like on a packed train wore an ankle-length wimple and a modified bikini. Kamijou initially thought she had *multiplied*, but a closer inspection proved that wrong.

"Blast it, Aradia. Have you started proselytizing?"

"Prosely-what?"

They all stood at different heights, wore different hair styles, and were of different ages. They were all dressed in the same witch outfit as Aradia, but those had to be the ordinary people of Shibuya exposing their skin to the frigid air. Some of the witches were even standing on the roofs of the cars parked on the curb and on the supports for the blue road signs crossing the large road.

"*May...tch...us.*"

There was a good distance between him and them.

"*May the...witch...us.*"

There was a thick layer of tempered glass in between too.

"*May the holy witch guide us.*"

But a great vibration still reached him.

"*May the holy witch guide us!!!!!!*"

It wasn't just the glass or the building shaking – it was the ground.

Their fearsome chorus may have shown up on a seismograph. Kamijou was pushed beyond dumbfounded. He was terrified. The visual alone had blanked his mind, but his instincts were telling him he would die if he wasted what little time he still had.

“What is going on?”

“Witches never make their presence known. They slowly spread below the surface, silently corrupting a family, a town, a country, or any other community,” explained Index, standing on her toes atop a bench to better see straight down.

The Bologna Succubus bent and stretched her body and flapped her pink wings one at a time to see how her recovery was going.

“This is what Aradia’s dangerous charisma can accomplish when she puts her mind to it. She already has a new coven. The youngins of Shibuya are highly receptive to the latest trends, so that may’ve hastened the spread.”

“Dangerous charisma? Are you saying she started a cult?” groaned Kumokawa Seria.

They could only see one side of the building from here, but they had to assume the other three sides were much the same. They were completely surrounded and the disturbing shaking of the building suggested some of the witches were already breaking holes in the walls to get in.

It felt like fleeing inside a rundown shack in the humid jungle to escape a swarm of army ants.

“Um, quick question.”

“Yes, boy?”

“Are *all* of those Aradia? That is, can they all do everything she can!?”

“She is the witch goddess who rules the night and the moon. She appears at the secret Sabbats to grant the witches the knowledge they need to escape the cross’s persecution. They can’t do everything she can, but they can easily *borrow* a portion of her power temporarily.”

“H-how big a portion!?”

“They should be able to use Triple Reload since that’s built into Wicca itself.”

Sweat poured from Kamijou’s brow.

The Bologna Succubus’s body temperature was a bit elevated after she finished her stretches and she started leaning against him while clearly amused by his reaction.

"With some exceptions like Magic Gods, Saints, and Alice, any spell you see someone use is built from the basics of magic. *And she is a generous goddess who does not hesitate to grant the witches her greatest techniques.* I don't know if they gather their knowledge in a paper notebook or on their phone's memo app these days, though. Still, the Rule of Three is a double-edged sword with a serious chance of self-destruction, so it takes experience and a certain style to use it at Aradia's level. Really, it comes down to whether or not you can grasp the boundary lines of that taboo well enough to survive your very first experience with it."

If that was true, this could hardly get worse. They had barely managed to drive off Aradia alone, but now the witch goddess had abandoned all kindness and carelessness and strengthened herself with an army large enough to cover the ground below. Meanwhile, the injured Bologna Succubus had only been treated with a compress and painkillers. Index and Othinus's knowledge was a help, but they couldn't provide direct violence. That went double for Kumokawa Seria who was only an upperclassman at school.

Kamijou's right hand carried Imagine Breaker, which could negate any supernatural power.

But he was the only one capable of physically fighting against those 10 thousand or even 100 thousand witches. How much could they even do in this situation? A group that big would physically crush him before the supernatural even came into it.

"H-hey, Senpai? Or Index? Forget my fantasies – how much does the average girl actually weigh? 40kg? Maybe 50?"

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

For some reason, everyone else there glared at him. Even Othinus and the Bologna Succubus who couldn't be described as "average" by any stretch of the imagination.

But this time Kamijou wasn't just being rude.

"There are adults and children out there, so let's just go with 40kg as a rough estimate for the average female weight. If we also assume there are 100 thousand of them out there, that would be..."

"Sigh. 4000 tons, human."

“I wish I could disbelieve that number, but this is deadly serious. Even if we hide in here to avoid getting crushed by the group, I get the feeling that flood of bodies could directly tear this building from its foundation.”

However...

“You don’t need to worry about that.”

Kamijou couldn’t believe it, but the Bologna Succubus was actually smiling.

“You might think this can hardly get worse, but only due to your own lack of imagination. I expected this much and there is nothing to fear as long as that holds true. Aradia actually *takes her work very seriously*. The thing is, that’s what gives her such a short fuse. She can be a pain to deal with, but that’s probably the 1st requirement for becoming a witch. She puts her fears at ease by throwing out the wild, eccentric tricks and sticking with the tried and true fundamentals. Ha ha. She would make a good civil servant, but she could never make it as a gambler. And the thing is, we aren’t doing boring paperwork here.”

The Bologna Succubus stepped away from the window and stabbed the arrowhead of her tail into a device on the opposite wall: a fire alarm.

Afterwards, she took in a deep breath that sent a tremor through her alluring bodylines, spread her wings wide, and shouted at the top of her lungs.

“Watch out for the dust!! They’re tearing down the building walls! Is there no line those freaks won’t cross!? You need to run away before they get you too! Also, I’d rather not mention what’s in that dust hanging in the air, but breathing it in is enough for it to harm you! If you start to feel dizzy or faint, that’s means it already got to you!!”

The clangor of the alarm squeezed at Kamijou’s heart.

But he was also confused.

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, it’s just a bluff.” The Bologna Succubus grinned. “But the primary enemy of the witch has always been the witch hunt. In psychological terms, that’s known as mass hysteria. With sufficient data, you can trigger one yourself like you’re following a flowchart.”

“You’re pitting mass hysteria against a cult!? So many people are going to die!”

Kumokawa Seria’s eyes widened, but the Bologna Succubus readily nodded.

“Listen. The witch hunts began with the virtuous citizens accusing each other, *so you could say it was history’s worst neighborhood dispute*. You don’t know why, but you’re pissed off, nothing is going right, and something must be to blame. And wouldn’t you know it? That one neighbor seems awfully sus, don’t they? Humans love to blame something close by and eliminate it to reclaim peace of mind. And what’s the first thing anyone in Shibuya is going to see or hear about at the moment? Aradia’s witches.”

With a flapping sound, the demon spread her pink bat wings with her hands clasped below her navel.

“And I believe I already showed you my magic. Cold Mistress converts all pleasure signals into pain. But if I adjust its strength, I can create a *nagging irritation* that creates a subconscious source of unease. They might be hesitant at first, but there is no avoiding it. They can try drinking some tea or petting their dog, but all attempts to soothe themselves will only make it worse. Before long, that small irritation will rule their mind. Just like with disease, weather, accidents, and recessions, when humans have trouble understanding some large, invisible factor, they try to calm themselves by directing their hate toward a target closer at hand and then they can’t stop themselves.”

“I see,” said Othinus from Kamijou’s shoulder. “But that only works if people can hear you. There weren’t any ordinary people in this entire building. You can’t fill out the ranks of your witch hunt army without anyone to corrupt.”

“True,” agreed the Bologna Succubus. “But who ever said my Cold Mistress is limited to this building?”

A new rumbling reached them.

Kamijou spun back toward the window to find the witches were being overrun. New colors were flooding the unified colors of the witches like muddy water entering a clear river.

“Touma, something’s happening down there!”

“The fire alarm and the lie about the dust were only the ignition needed to get the ball rolling. The actual seed of displeasure that spreads through the people could be anything. Then Cold Mistress amplifies that feeling into a great irritation and they start searching out for any rumors that might give them a reason or a cause for their unease. If there is an obvious outsider nearby, it’s so easy to convince them they can solve everything by attacking that group. That is how witch hunts work.”

No, that “muddy water” was the hair atop people’s heads.

A mixture of blacks, browns, yellows, reds, and even some obviously dyed greens and pinks formed a single mass that attacked the witch army. This group was a mix of genders and they had no uniform. They were less organized, but they were larger in terms of both numbers and momentum.

Kamijou could hear an earth-rattling rumble through the tempered glass.

“It’s you outsiders refusing to obey the rules that give Shibuya a bad name!”

“Ugh, shut up! My head hurts so bad! What the hell did you do to me!? Argh!?”

“I’m calling the police! This is an unauthorized assembly! Scram and quit bothering the rest of us!!”

It scared Kamijou that the rumble came from human voices instead of bombs or gas explosions.

This was the result of Transcendent Bologna Succubus’s Cold Mistress spell.

From the looks of it, that spell’s range covered all of Shibuya if not more.

He could see now why she had said she might be able to fight back against Alice with that power. When you didn’t need to specifically target each individual, you could attack a general group over a large range.

The sexy demon wiggled her tail and smiled scornfully down at the surface.

“100 thousand witches? Don’t make me laugh, Aradia. Today is New Year’s Eve. *100 thousand is a tiny minority*. Did you even consider how many people from all across Japan are gathered in Shibuya for the countdown tonight? And what if we include foreign visitors too?”

What was happening down there?

Which side was overwhelming the other? Could it have reached the level of bloodshed?

“And magic will lose to the ordinary crowd. Bodyguards, companions, slaves, a best friend – every Transcendent belonging to the Bridge Builders Cabal seeks it in different forms, but in the end, we all long for the human world. Aleister may have tilted the scales toward science for the general public, but that is still the world we live in. Humans cling to the easily visible and controllable things. They might claim otherwise, but when they find themselves on a sinking ship, do they reach for their holy talisman or for a lifejacket made of petroleum? When their life is on the line, no one ever relies on their capricious and unfathomable god.”

“Bologna Succubus!?”

“Ah ha ha. Yes, I’m the demoness who hates any and all false accusations. The witch hunts are such a perfect example of it that they left their name in history. *They weren’t even attacking the real supernatural demons at the center of the issue.* They were lashing out at anyone they found suspect to forcibly stabilize their imperfect society. Really, it was little more than a human sacrifice ceremony. Watching this here isn’t at all fun for me, let me tell you.”

The Bologna Succubus laughed lightly with her mouth hidden behind her large wings.

Perhaps she was redrawing the lines of what she needed to protect after seeing the boy worry about the very witches who were trying to kill him.

“But these casual witches fell for Aradia’s temptation, went to her for easy help, found an excuse for their own weakness, and decided to attack complete strangers like you. *They were bad people to begin with.* Don’t kid yourselves, you rioting criminals. Did you think there wouldn’t be any consequences as long as you were just a face in the crowd? Did you think you counted as a victim for letting yourself get agitated into violence? I protect innocent people who have been falsely accused. So, boy, my concern is limited to kind people like you who have a penchant for getting themselves into trouble. We demons haven’t fallen so far we go around saving even despicable villains.”

“But you can’t let this continue! Stop it! No one wants it to end like this!!”

“Ha ha! Yes, *that’s the look* that makes me want to help you out so badly. And I’m sorry to say they don’t have that same appeal. Concern for others is undoubtedly the greatest virtue ever discovered, but do remember that being weak does not mean someone is pure of heart.”

Kamijou heard a shattering of glass as the demon’s pink tail swept horizontally like a whip.

A downpour of sharp shards burst out with terrifying force.

The Bologna Succubus had just finished saying not even demons would save the wicked, so she wouldn’t care what happened to the witches on the ground far below.

The Transcendent was indeed transcendent.

He had been caught up in some nerve-wracking rescues when working with Alice Anotherbible. Anna Sprengel’s many misdeeds may have been similar in that they were unpredictable and capricious. These people could not be judged as either good or bad. He was working alongside a Transcendent from the Bridge Builders Cabal, so he should have considered the possibility of her resorting to *capricious violence based on a desire to help!!*

She flapped her wings, jumped out from the window, and soared into the night sky.

“Wait, Bologna Succubus! Stop those witch hunters! You aren’t running away after all this, are you!? You’re they only one who can switch this off!!”

“Hah hah hah! This is where we say goodbye, sightseer boy. Serious and short-fused Aradia has a difficult time with unexpected trouble and can’t adlib to save her life, so now’s our chance to show her what for. And it’s a Transcendent’s job to clean up this Transcendent mess, so you can rest easy, join that young crowd, and head back to Academy City. That city’s thick wall will protect you from any riots in Shibuya☆”

He wasn’t in the mood for that kind of nonsense, so he reached out his hand on reflex. But...

“Stop, boy!!”

Kumokawa grabbed him around the hips and pulled back with her full body weight.

His momentum died and his grasping fingertips just barely missed the tip of the Bologna Succubus’s tail.

But without that assistance, he wouldn’t have been able to stop himself and would have plummeted from the window.

With a heavy roar of something moving through the air, the Bologna Succubus vanished into the night sky.

“Dammit!!”

“Touma!”

Index called out to him after Kumokawa pulled him onto his back.

She was implicitly asking him what they should do now.

How was that even a question? The Bologna Succubus had helped him so much this entire time. Without her, he quite literally would have died to Aradia’s hand a third and final time. But that didn’t mean he could just let her use the innocent people of Shibuya as disposable shields.

He had to pursue her.

If they didn’t stop Aradia’s witches *and* the Bologna Succubus’s witch hunt, Shibuya would be destroyed before the countdown was complete!!

Part 5

Things had gone from bad to worse.

Pursuing Aradia or the Bologna Succubus required going outside, but passing through that crowd unnoticed wasn't possible.

Or so Kamijou thought.

"Huh?"

After descending the emergency stairs and carefully opening the door, he found the crowd pressing in from nearby. But none of them were looking his way.

"Aradia may have ordered them to 'kill Kamijou Touma,'" whispered Othinus from his shoulder. "But did she ever snap a photo of your face with a phone or camera? If it was an oral command with no photographic reference, you might be able to get through undetected."

He was glad his clothes had dried. He wanted to avoid anything that would make him stand out.

"But they have access to those modern marvels too," cautioned Kumokawa Seria. "New Year's Eve is basically one giant photoshoot here. They might be tracking down a photo on social media that happened to catch you in the background. This doesn't guarantee your safety, so be careful."

But he honestly had some more immediate things to worry about at the moment.

"Whyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!?"

"Kyah!? Stop grabbing at my clothes!"

"I work so hard! Day in and day out! So why don't I ever have any more money? Someone out there must be counteracting my efforts!!!!"

The people out there were arguing back and forth.

The girl in a large eyepatch, a wimple, and a modified bikini looked an awful lot like the video site ghost Kamijou had seen near the station. Her lack of chest left a lot of openings in Aradia's costume, which actually made it more risqué. And who was that swinging around a folding chair with all her might? Yes, wasn't that the tanned call girl in a camisole?

The deep metallic sounds coming from her didn't match her jiggliness at all.

(I met them both with my delivery job, so I'm glad we didn't use our names or phone numbers. We only know the 8-digit single-use ID we gave each other.)

"Give it a rest, you- gyah!?"

A bluish-white beam shot off in the wrong direction.

Was that lightning? The eyepatch ghost had flipped through her looseleaf papers and traced her finger along something written there, but it looked like her attempt to retaliate with Triple Reload had failed.

Yes, the scary thing here was how the magically-powered witches were being pushed back by the powerless witch hunters. The Bologna Succubus had said the Rule of Three magic introduced a large risk of self-destruction. It was a tricky spell and going through the process was probably hard in this chaos and with a crowd packed around you so tightly.

"The real difference is that the witches want the help of the beneficial supernatural if they can get it, but the witch hunters will not give up until they have eliminated the negative anxiety they feel." Exasperated, Othinus watched the commotion from Kamijou's shoulder. That god of war, deception, and magic explained her thoughts. "*A group that fears death will act fearless if it will distance them from death.* That might look contradictory, but it happens all the time during riots and wars. When people are pushed passed their limits, they will step on a mine themselves or rush straight toward the incoming shells or flamethrowers. With enough people doing that, they can bring down the enemy force. When you aren't crossing the border for fun and the collapse of your country is a real possibility, anyone who still acts 'reasonable' will be overwhelmed and lose."

"I don't believe it..."

"That's the normal way to think. And war doesn't just mess with people's patience and sensibilities – it tears down their standards of normalcy. Which is why this sort of thing is best avoided."

They didn't have time to stand around watching.

There was more than one kind of hell underway here.

The cat on Index's head was growling a low warning for once.

In fact...

"Damn, this area's covered in blood!"

“Boy, the rioters didn’t do this. It was the glass shards that supposed demon sent raining down earlier.”

In her thick coat and tight skirt suit, Kumokawa pointed toward the rusty smell.

Several girls lay on the cold sidewalk at the base of the building. They were all witches. Their groans joined the rusty smell. The downpour of clear blades must have hit them directly, but everything around them was in chaos. No one was even considering treating their wounds.

And Kamijou himself couldn’t do anything more than pull out the obvious shards and tie up the wounds with whatever cloth he could find. He had no way of checking for smaller shards and, even if he saved their lives, he wasn’t sure if this would leave scars on their skin.

“Ugh.”

“Don’t say anything. I stopped your bleeding, so you’ll be fine for the time being!”

“Thank you. Now I just have to find Kamijou Touma.”

“...”

With no photo, the girl had no idea who she was talking to.

For that matter, what had they even gathered here to do? What would have happened to him, Index, and the rest if no one had interrupted? For that matter, *if the witches couldn’t determine who near the building was Kamijou Touma, could they have tried to fulfill Aradia’s command by going on a magical mass shooting of every high-school-aged boy they came across?*

“(Boy, it would be dangerous to stay much longer.)”

“(But we have to call an ambulance for them, Senpai!)”

“(I overheard some girls over there talking about your delivery job. Delivering the food uses a single-use ID, but you have to use your real name when cashing out at the convenience store. So you need to get away before they- hey, wait! You and your stupid kindness!!)”

Kamijou shook his head to drive out the fact that he was being targeted by 100 thousand witches who had given up on thinking for themselves and converted to the Transcendent’s cult.

He couldn’t do this like the Bologna Succubus.

He refused to accept that you didn't need to care about someone if they were a bad person.

After roughly stopping all the injured witches' bleeding, Kamijou tried to call an ambulance but found he couldn't get through even with the emergency line. He didn't hear the usual ringing – he just heard three short beeps before the connection ended.

“What, I can't even call the emergency number? Why are the lines so overloaded?”

“Because the entire city is like this right now, human. Unless Aradia and the Bologna Succubus are stopped, who knows how long it would take for an ambulance to arrive even if you did call for one. These people are covering the sidewalks, roads, and the cars parked on the curb.”

That meant he had to end this entire commotion if he wanted to get professional help for those girls.

That meant chasing down Aradia and the Bologna Succubus.

If the emergency numbers weren't working, then the normal internet was out of the question.

“If no one can use social media, it might take them longer to work out your identity,” said Kumokawa.

“...”

“Okay, okay. I take it back, boy. Say whatever you want, just don't glare at me like that.”

How frightening did he look today? For some reason, even that perfect upperclassman raised her hands awkwardly. When he tried to look her in the eye, she averted her gaze.

Othinus sighed from his shoulder.

“Your face was everywhere back when the two of us were on the run from the world in Denmark. No one can check that right now with no internet access, but someone with a good memory might still recognize you.”

“Are you saying they're gradually narrowing in on me?”

“Frankly, it's strange they haven't figured it out yet.”

Kamijou was so plagued by misfortune he knew better than to chalk that up to luck. He needed to be on the lookout for some even greater disaster waiting to ensnare him.

At any rate, he wouldn't be able to track down the Transcendents by checking for the latest photos posted by witnesses on social media.

"Shibuya is a big place. Where do you think they went?"

"Those Transcendents are decently skilled at magic, but too dumb to even use a people clearing field to hide their presence. Just head for the center of the commotion, human. That will get you there quickest."

"Got it, Othinus. Index, Senpai, follow me!"

The god was telling him to charge right into the most dangerous part of the riot. He would honestly have preferred having Index and Kumokawa take refuge in a sturdy building, but he had no idea where would be safe at the moment.

They kept low while moving through the crowd flooding the streets. It pained him when he saw some people grappling nearby, but Kumokawa grabbed his hand when he reached out to help. She silently shook her head.

The ordinary ramen shops scared him at the moment.

A riot like this could lead to a fire so easily.

None of them recognized him without a photo, but all of these 100 thousand witches were after Aradia's enemy: Kamijou Touma. However, the witch hunters had no real reason to protect him either. If he did anything to stand out or the witches learned who he was, both sides would attack even harder and make it impossible to move.

"(Hate me for this if you want, but for now you need to keep your head down and ignore all of these supposed witches.)"

"(But, Senpai!)"

"(If they notice you and start to attack you directly, the individuals working to protect you will be trampled by both sides of the conflict. And I mean that literally. We will be trampled to death below living people's feet. The supernatural isn't the greatest threat during a riot. It's being crushed to death *without anyone even noticing they're doing it!!*)"

He was honestly surprised there weren't any fires yet.

Meanwhile, Index spoke up.

"Aradia, huh?"

"?"

He really didn't want her saying anything that would provoke the witch hunters, but they mostly appeared to be responding to the witch outfits at the moment. Index was dressed pretty unusually (and had a cat on her head), but they ignored her completely.

But that meant the witches could attack them at any moment for not wearing that uniform.

"Touma, do you know when Wicca was created?"

"Don't use his name!" shouted Othinus from his shoulder.

Kamijou frowned.

"When? I mean, we're talking about real witches here, so long, long ago in the times told of in fairy tales, right?"

"No, it was created in 1954 AD. Yes, there may have been some prototype witches before the official textbook was released, but it was officially announced in 1954."

That was a surprise.

What the heck was this? That was after World War Two. Hadn't the story of the bear grease come from a cursing ceremony some British witches had directed at an entire country to keep the German army away during the war?

"What's this textbook?" he asked in a bit of a daze.

"The witches use what they learn to write a grimoire they call the Book of Shadows, but it is highly unusual for one of those to reach the level of a true Original Grimoire. When Gardner released his own collection of self-taught knowledge, it doubled as a report on the truth of witches."

Kamijou wasn't exactly an expert on children's stories and fairy tales, but he was pretty sure there were stories that included witches – like Cinderella, the Little Mermaid, and Hansel and Gretel – that were older than that.

For that matter, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland would have already been out by 1954. He had a hard time believing that no one around the world had ever imagined a witch flying a broom through the night sky before then.

But Index's explanation kept going. She made sure to hold down the cat on her head when he took an interest in the garbage strewn from a toppled garbage can.

"Witches are said to be the priestesses of an ancient religion that predates the arrival of Christianity, but they aren't the originals. They're a reproduction created in a later era. A magical researcher named Gerald Gardner, who even interacted with Crowley,

is said to have dug up the ancient mythologies and religions from before they were twisted by Christianity and carefully reproduced the original texts from before witches were considered villains.”

“And Aradia is the perfect witch based on his findings?”

“I don’t think so,” bluntly stated Index.

In the distance, something was being shaken up and down like a mikoshi. Kamijou glanced over at it without really thinking and gasped when he realized it was a van large enough to carry 10. Since the windows were covered by a chain mesh and the roof had red lights on it, that had to be a police vehicle here to keep an eye on the countdown. Also, it didn’t look like it was the supernaturally-powered witches who were doing it. The panicked group didn’t even care if their targets wore a witch outfit anymore.

Othinus sighed from Kamijou’s shoulder.

“It has been pointed out that Gerald Gardner had a few biases when creating his reproduction of the ancient witches. Of course, even on the magic side, that kind of skeptic tends to be the sharp-tongued type who don’t make many friends, but it is true Gardner’s supposedly ‘perfect reproduction’ included some inauthentic sexual ceremonies just because he loved them so much. Do you get what I mean, teenage boy? I’m talking about the kind of sexual ceremonies groups of witches hold in secret night after night.”

“Um...”

Kamijou wasn’t sure how to respond to that one, so he looked the other way and groaned, earning him a glare from both Othinus and Kumokawa. The teenage girls’ faces told him that response had earned him a failing grade. But what was he supposed to say when they brought it up in the first place!?

The only girl oblivious to all this placed her finger on her chin.

“The biggest story among all this was Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches.”

?

Kamijou frowned. Index had mentioned that title before and it bothered him that it included the name Aradia.

“It was presented as a report on the legends conveyed to the author by an Italian witch, but like I said before, no mythology features a goddess named Aradia. Since it even calls her the daughter of Lucifer and Diana, it seems likely that it was all made up by the witch on the spot in response to what the author wanted to hear.”

“Wait, so you mean it’s all based on nothing?”

“Probably.”

Kamijou placed his hand on the back of Index’s head to have her crouch down. Real money was flying around like confetti and the cat on Index’s head kept punching at it. He didn’t even want to know where that had come from.

And Index was a little too oblivious to her surroundings while lost in thought.

“The problem is that Gardner believed every word of the report *and included the legend of Aradia in his Wiccan spells*. And at such a deep level there is no removing her.”

“...”

That made sense.

Hadn’t a fake *female magician* who only existed as the name Anna Sprengel in some letters played a role in the foundation of the Golden cabal? The idea that Westcott had made her up entirely hadn’t seemed so likely after Anna herself showed up, but Kamijou was growing less certain of that.

Index continued over the mechanical alarm of a vending machine or ATM.

“In that sense, you could indeed say that Aradia is the goddess of all witches. How it got that way is complicated, but everyone involved in Wicca today is receiving the blessings of those Aradia-born theories. And if you follow the instructions found in the looseleaf Book of Shadows written by each witch, anyone can use her magic.”

Then what was this woman claiming to be Aradia trying to accomplish? If she only wanted the blessings of that name, just being any old witch would have been enough.

Was the story of Aradia entirely made up?

Or was she such a powerful being that the humans had failed to record her presence accurately?

A beam of light shot into the night sky with the intensity of a nearby lightning strike. Even from here, Kamijou could see what he thought was Shibuya Pelko’s roof being torn away. That was the Wiccan Triple Reload, but it must have failed again. If it were under control, it would have crushed the witch hunters (who were really ordinary people rioting).

A shrill scream burst from the cloud.

More magic had failed.

Hadn't he been told the line between good and bad deeds was determined by general consensus rather than any individual? He was starting to wonder if only Aradia could control that magic. Even if she had distributed her secret technique, that didn't mean everyone could perfectly absorb that information.

The large discount store and department store scared him. If the furious rioters stole some kitchen or hardware tools, this could easily lead to bloodshed.

Kumokawa Seria whispered to him while reflexively keeping her head low.

"You wanted to reach the heart of the commotion, didn't you? I think you're almost there."

"What? Are you saying she circled all the way around the station and returned to the scramble crossing?"

You couldn't take a direct route with so many rioters around. Had she naturally wandered back there while avoiding the streets blocked by rolled-over cars and barricades of piled-up bicycles? But was that really a coincidence? Hadn't the Bologna Succubus also flown in a circle and returned close to their starting point when escaping through Shibuya's sky?

Was there some kind of magical meaning to making a big circle and going into hiding?

Or maybe it was a common understanding within the Bridge Builders Cabal that showed itself when they were on the run.

(Did Alice do anything like that?)

During that day wandering through Academy City's darkness, he recalled a few times when he was separated from Alice and they were unnaturally reunited, but he couldn't say what route she had taken.

He thought about it a bit, but he wasn't going to find an answer right now.

Because he had seen something else.

Two Transcendents stood at the center of the scramble crossing, surrounded by the crowd of witches and witch hunters.

Car headlights shined in from multiple directions, casting their shadows in just as many directions.

Enough rioters had appeared to separate an entire ward from the rest of Tokyo and the people even stood on the roofs of a donut truck and a red fire truck that had failed to escape in time.

It was actually beautiful.

This was the center of the riot that had left Shibuya entirely nonfunctioning, but all of the rioters kept their distance so as not to disturb those two. It gave the scramble crossing the harmony and formality of an international competition. Just the two of them had overpowered and held back hundreds of thousands of people.

They were not using dreadful magic or demonstrating superhuman strength.

Perhaps this was the true essence of the Transcendents of the Bridge Builders Cabal.

They corrupted their surroundings.

They ruled the very space they occupied.

They possessed an overwhelming charisma. It wasn't an issue of good or evil, legal or illegal. Their very presence loudly announced that they made the rules and they were the true pillar from which the world was constructed. In other words, they were transcendent.

Aradia glanced over at Kamijou. With a single shadow stretching from her feet, the witch's eyes shined bright like a small child offered a sweet treat. The expression didn't match her sexy modified bikini, but that was in fact the extent of the power balance between her and Kamijou Touma. No matter how hard he might push himself.

So when she spoke, it wasn't directed at him.

"He's here."

"Verily."

The Bologna Succubus smiled bitterly and sighed with her light pink wings spread. She had multiple shadows spread out like a flower thanks to the headlights.

"I went to all that effort to help you escape the riot and then you come marching to the center of it anyway. You really are incorrigible. But maybe that's what makes me want to protect you so much."

"Are you sure about this?"

"I am."



With that, the Bologna Succubus and Aradia both took action.

But hold on.

Something deep in Kamijou Touma's chest was ringing an alarm bell. What had they just said? The Bologna Succubus had run off after irresponsibly turning the people of Shibuya into rioters in order to fight back against Aradia. That much was true. But that didn't mesh with what was happening now.

For one thing, the Bologna Succubus had been running away this entire time.

If she could defeat Aradia in a one-on-one fight, why had she been so adamant that they needed to run away?

It was over before it started.

The "legend" built up around that demoness unraveled.

They didn't even get to exchange attacks. The Bologna Succubus was sent spinning through the air before slamming back down into the asphalt. Her wings were bent and pinned between her body and the ground.

The Wiccan Triple Reload spell had done this.

But Kamijou didn't understand what exactly had happened to her. There hadn't been any obvious light or noise. That spell was something else entirely in the hands of Aradia.

Every good deed she made using magic would return to her at triple the power.

And she would have set things up so doing all this to Shibuya, spreading her witch cult, and creating 100 thousand witches were all considered good deeds.

The transformation of 100 thousand people into witches and everything they had done

The riot in Shibuya.

It had all been gathered together, multiplied by three, and sent in to attack the Bologna Succubus.

"You should have known there was no defeating me."

Aradia kept her palm aimed toward her enemy with a thin smirk on her face and her long silver hair spread out behind her.

Did even this count as a good deed in the world of witches?

“Your Cold Mistress takes every single pleasure signal – which are meant to efficiently guide us toward survival and reproduction – and converts them all into intense pain. I can’t deny it is a dangerous power that could even stop that tyrant Alice if the conditions were right, but if I soak myself in negative emotions like regret and hatred, then you have nothing left to convert. Your spell is powerless if I do not seek out pleasure or comfort.”

“...”

“Yet you still decided to challenge me directly. A demon ignoring the odds and hoping for a divine miracle sounds like a double standard to me, Bologna Succubus.”

The demoness couldn’t even get up.

Which meant she had no way of stopping Aradia from revealing the truth.

“Is he really worth going this far to protect?”

“Ah,” groaned Kamijou.

He should have realized.

Yes, all of Shibuya was engulfed in a massive riot. Objects had been destroyed and blood had been shed. But with hundreds of thousands rioting, he had yet to see a single death. How had that happened? Someone must have set it up that way.

“How shortsighted. I imagine your plan was to have him hide beyond my reach while I was dealing with you, but that fell apart the instant my foolish target trotted on up to us without even noticing what you were doing. *You failed to earn his trust.* You should have given up on the fool, so why was a Transcendent like you so obsessed with him?”

When the Bologna Succubus had broken that window at the capsule hotel, it had injured the girls directly below. But what if she hadn’t done that? If 100 thousand people had tackled the building, how many would have been crushed and killed in the process? None of them would have hesitated to do so without the blood to frighten them.

“Ah, ah.”

He should have realized.

She had taken flight, saying she would handle the rest of the fighting on her own, but was that really her being irresponsible? If she were really irresponsible, she could have abandoned the fight against Aradia, left Shibuya, and ensured her own safety.

The witches vs. witch hunters looked a lot like a clash between two Transcendents tearing Shibuya apart, but Aradia had always been the one to make the first move and the Bologna Succubus had always been responding after the fact. The Bologna Succubus couldn't take the initiative, so it was always Aradia making the surprise attacks. That was why the Bologna Succubus had flown from that window. By taking a route Kamijou's group couldn't follow, she had hoped to keep them out of this extreme battle.

“Ahhhhhhh!”

He really should have realized it so much sooner!!

The Bologna Succubus's actions had been consistent from start to finish! She had rescued Kamijou for no real reason, rejected all false accusations directed at him, and risked her own life to save all people in that position!! Yes, and she had even said the witch hunts counted as a type of false accusation. She couldn't ignore that, so of course she would have tried to protect the witches kneeling to Aradia!!

He poured all his strength into running.

He crouched in front of the Bologna Succubus and propped her up since she was too badly injured to even get up on her own.

“No, no.”

Her voice was frail and her body felt unnaturally cold. Like she was missing something.

"I didn't – cough – want you to see me looking so pathetic."

“Pathetic?”

He thought on that word.

There was nothing he could do but shout.

“In what world is this pathetic!? Goddammit!!”

Something was staining his clothes, leaking through, and soaking his skin.

It was her blood.

He started to reach out, but Kumokawa reached out her own hand uncertainly.

"That wound is bad, boy."

“Yeah, I know!!”

The blood kept flowing without stopping. It was more than internal bleeding this time. Even he could tell this wasn’t your average wound. He was a fairly experienced brawler, but not even he knew what to do about this one. At this rate, she really would lose her life.

She had already passed out in his arms.

If nothing was done, she would die.

He couldn’t remember the name at first.

But then he recalled that other name that had been key to this incident from the very beginning.

“Yeah, that’s it. Good, Old Mary!!”

“You’re going to rely on her, human?”

“What choice do I have!?”

He shouted into the night sky with the Bologna Succubus in his arms.

He didn’t know where that woman was.

But she was the only chance left.

“I know you’re out there somewhere, so save her – save the Bologna Succubus!! Please. You saved me after I had my spine and guts torn out, right? You did that for a stranger who your cabal thinks is trouble! But this isn’t an enemy! It’s another Transcendent from your cabal!! So why wouldn’t you-”

“*Because it would not work.*”

Out of nowhere, he found someone standing right next to him. Even *Othinus* was caught off guard and gasped.

“?”

The woman’s long blonde hair spread out at ankle length and she wore a long, loose dress.

The stomach looked especially loose, so it may have been a maternity brand. The thick belt lazily wrapped around her produced a series of deep metallic sounds. They sounded like jangling bells, but they were actually a variety of camping kitchen

products clanking together. He didn't know what meaning they held, but they included a fancy multitool from Switzerland, a portable pot with a collapsible handle, a small burner that could be used as a stove, and a sandwich toaster. The knife with a weird seal mascot on it made her look more like a type of Kuchisake Onna than a homemaker.

The brim of her large hat hid her eyes while her alluring lips whispered to Kamijou. He couldn't distinguish them from a physical voice, but she may have been using common tones like the Bologna Succubus had.

"She told you from the beginning that mama's resurrection is not all-powerful. Technically speaking, mama's resurrection recipe only closes up a dead person's wounds and returns them to the initial moment of cardiac arrest, making it a very boring and common sort of miracle. No matter how perfectly the body is mended, it must contain enough blood for CPR to work. Otherwise you will only have a fresh hunk of flesh to watch slowly decompose."

He didn't understand.

Yes, the Bologna Succubus was injured all over. Yes, she had internal bleeding in her gut from earlier. But he had been resurrected after having his torso pierced through and torn open. It wasn't like she was hemorrhaging a fountain of blood.

It was Aradia who gave him the answer.

"You can't blame him for not remembering what happened when I killed him so quickly. He was in no state to form the memories in the first place."

"What? What are you talking about?"

"True. And if he doesn't know, it means she intentionally didn't tell him. That was a meaningless choice, but mama quite likes that sort of kindness."

"What do you two know that I don't!?"

Good, Old Mary froze in place and Aradia shrugged.

Aradia was the first to speak.

Good, Old Mary's silence functioned as mild criticism of her revealing the truth the Bologna Succubus had kept hidden this whole time.

"You lost your life more than once at my hand. When I directly destroyed your torso."

"What about it?"

“Didn’t you find it odd? That kind of injury means a lot of lost blood. Of course it does when I calculated out a death that would prevent Good, Old Mary from resurrecting you. So why was she still able to do so anyway? And twice in a row at that?”

He thought about it and then looked down into his arms.

He focused on the disturbingly “cold mistress” he held there.

He noticed something odd on the inside of her left elbow. He pushed her arm cover out of the way and found a special bandage covering the small mark left by needle.

Good, Old Mary must have decided there was no hiding it anymore, so she provided the answer.

“She gave you her blood.”

“...”

“The blood needed to save you came from her. Enough to make up for your destroyed spine and stomach the first time and your ruptured liver the second time.”

He heard a straining sound coming from his back teeth.

He hated this.

It infuriated him.

It hadn’t been misfortune after all. He hadn’t just been dragged into a fight between these Transcendents. Which one of them had truly dragged the other one into the pit of death!? He wanted to curse his own foolishness!!

“Why?”

He was shaking.

Unable to fight the intense emotion, he shouted into the ear of the demoness held tightly in his arms.

“Why didn’t you tell meeeeeee!?”

She didn’t give a single word in reply.

Her eyes were shut, her limbs hung at her side, and her body was limp. She wasn’t even conscious anymore. Even she would *end up like this* once she hit her limit. He still didn’t have a good grasp on what a Transcendent was and maybe they didn’t even

qualify as human anymore, but he should have noticed. Before he allowed it to end like this!!

There must have been hints.

For one, hadn't she said the Transcendents tried to work out a unified plan *because they were afraid of dying* and also feared that unpredictable Alice would tear it all down with a smile at some point!?

Good, Old Mary provided the truth.

"She has lost as much blood as you did in your two deaths, so mama's resurrection will not work on her. She is already past the limit. It is honestly amazing she could still move around at all in that state." Her words were precise and cruel. "But that ends here. Third time's the charm, as they say. All that movement has ended once and for all here."

The Bologna Succubus had been laughing and showing off her skin to tease the boy.

But even that had been a desperate act to keep him from realizing what was really going on.

He thought back on all that.

He thought on what the word "savior" really and truly meant.

This had never even been her fight. She had only done all this to meddle in Kamijou's affairs when the Bridge Builders Cabal's Killers decided to take his life. If she had stayed out of it, it would only have meant a quick and near painless death for a complete stranger.

She could have kept out of it because it wasn't in her power to stop it. When he had died, she could have deemed her attempt a failure and gone home. When she found there was no way left to win, she could have left and saved herself. But she hadn't done any of that. She had given him her blood and repeatedly put herself at increasingly greater risk for a clueless idiot who kept throwing away the precious second and third chance at life she had given him. She had even thrown out all those safer options and started a fight she couldn't win to protect a complete stranger.

She refused to allow any and all false accusations.

She wanted to create a world where no innocent people were made to suffer.

That was really and truly her only reason.

"To hell with this."

What could he do? The Killers, the Rescuers, and the entire cabal didn't matter anymore. What could Kamijou Touma do for the Bologna Succubus who had literally saved his life twice!? After thinking for a bit, his trembling abruptly stopped.

He had found what he needed to do.

He focused on the path forward.

"Good, Old Mary."

"Yes?"

"Would your resurrection work if she had enough blood? What if we could get her her missing blood?"

"No."

She bluntly rejected that idea.

She didn't allow him even the small possibility he had used to gather up what little fighting spirit he had left.

"A demon can give blood to a human, but it does not work the other way around. A human blood type cannot be used to save her. No one in the world can do that."

That made sense. If ordinary blood would do, then the Bologna Succubus could have gone to a hospital, borrowed a transfusion kit, and "recharged" to give them more chances at resurrection. But she hadn't done that.

There was no way of saving her.

He wasn't even given the right to throw away his life to fight for her.

His vision started to go dark, but then...

"You Transcendents have some weird gaps in your knowledge. Or maybe these are blind spots born of unexamined assumptions."

Kumokawa Seria interrupted.

The ever-perfect upperclassman hadn't given up yet.

She was willing to keep fighting for Kamijou's battered spirit.

“You said it was human blood types that prevent us from saving her, but does that mean injecting her with a typeless blood substitute to stabilize her blood pressure would work?”

The Transcendent in a big hat tilted her head for a few seconds.

Then a slight smile formed on her lips. The Transcendent had accepted someone else’s opinion.

“I see. An interesting idea.”

“Just to be absolutely sure, can we save the Bologna Succubus by stringing her along just long enough with a completely artificial substance like saline, Ringer’s solution, an iron distribution fluid, or even artificial plasma? Think this through carefully. That boy’s future is counting on this!!”

“That method should work. If you can stabilize her blood pressure somehow or other and keep her ready for resuscitation, then mama’s resurrection should work just fine.”

“Then let’s go with that. Boy, that means you too!!”

Kumokawa slapped him on the back and then started tying up the Bologna Succubus’s thighs with some rope she found, even though the wound was on the demon’s gut. She didn’t seem to care how much blood was getting on her fancy coat and suit. He wasn’t sure what she was doing at first, but apparently she was trying to increase the blood flow to the vital organs by restricting blood flow to the extremities. That was one way of feigning an increase in blood pressure without increasing the total amount of blood. A fighter pilot’s g-suit used the same principle. A mistake here could easily lead to necrosis in her legs, but Kumokawa showed no hesitation.

But this was only buying them a bit more time.

It wasn’t a fundamental solution.

Good, Old Mary kept her eyes hidden behind the brim of her hat while she glanced down at that desperate work.

“However, it is unlikely an ambulance could reach us through this riot. The hospitals themselves will be overwhelmed too. There will be no doctors available to perform first-aid even if you carry her to a hospital yourselves.”

“What’s the actual limit?” bluntly asked Kamijou.

The answer came so smoothly it almost sounded cold.

"If you wish to complete the transfusion before she dies, you would need to begin within 20 minutes."

"Got it."

They would fake the conditions needed to save her.

They would snatch her away from the deadly grasp of fate or god.

He held the Bologna Succubus tight once more before relaxing his grip.

"Senpai, where's the closest major hospital? A general hospital that accepts emergency outpatients would be best."

"I'm searching now. The phone service and social media sites are overloaded, but the GPS isn't so bad. Only because my provider uses an Academy City satellite, though."

"Index, you help Senpai carry this biggest idiot in the universe to the hospital. That should be faster than waiting for an ambulance."

"Okay, but what about you?"

That wasn't really a question. Her tone made it clear she already knew the answer.

If the Shibuya-wide riot wasn't ended in the next 20 minutes, the Bologna Succubus's treatment couldn't begin. Then her heart would stop and there would be no saving her.

But on the other hand, she could be saved as long as the riot was stopped before then.

"Good, Old Mary."

"Are you sure you want mama going *with them*? Mama is a Transcendent who can create a small universe in a clear box and make use of any and all recipes. Mama would have much better odds of winning a fight against Aradia, who has mastered the witchcraft of the ancient forest and carries the blessings of the night and the moon."

"You worry about your job. After getting our hopes up like that, you don't get to come back and say you couldn't save her after all."

Her eyes were hidden behind her hat, but she still seemed to be examining the boy with an appraising eye.

She was judging the resolve and determination of an average, normal, and ordinary high school boy.

And she finally nodded.



From there, they didn't waste time with excess words.

"Leave it to me."

"Then you leave this with me."

He left his savior's life in her hands.

Then Kamijou Touma scraped the soles of his shoes against the pavement to turn and face his enemy.

She stood at the center of the scramble crossing.

That Transcendent could have attacked at any time, but she had chosen to watch it all play out. He had always been her one and only target. The Bologna Succubus's opposition would have been a surprise and she would probably prefer it if her fellow cabal member were saved. So she wouldn't bother pursuing the Bologna Succubus, Kumokawa, and the others. Not because she was a good person or wasn't that kind of person – she simply had no reason to.

On the other hand, she wasn't going to stop the witch riot.

Her top priority was killing the threat, not rescuing her fellow cabal member.

But Kamijou Touma was not going to let that happen.

He clenched his right fist so hard it hurt. The target of that fist stood right in front of him.

He had to get started.

He had to take that first step forward.

"Aradia, you might be a witch goddess of the night and of the moon and you might be a Transcendent of the Bridge Builders Cabal."

"Are you all done chatting?"

"But I will destroy all of your illusions in the next 20 minutes. Got that? 20 minutes. By then, I'll have ended this riot of witches covering Shibuya!!"

Between the Lines 2

Scarlet flames burned the night sky.

Every breath pulled black soot deep into the lungs, which was enough on its own to shorten someone's life.

A fire was burning deep in a forest where the old superstitions had never died.

It burned the small log cabin, the garage added to the side, and even the pile of firewood the old lady had smiled and bragged would get her safely through the winter.

What had that little old lady done to deserve this?

Because her life in the forest had taught her how to tame birds? Because she was too old and feeble to keep the black cats from sitting on her windowsill? Because she lived all alone away from society? Because her long life had left her with no shortage of old tales to tell?

Maybe it was all of those reasons together.

Whatever the case, when a mysterious infectious disease ran rampant in the area, the people concluded she was behind it.

"Don't worry about me."

Black pieces crumbled from what the witch goddess held in her arms.

Beautiful, noble, and resigned words spilled from the old woman's cracked lips.

The people who proudly held their giant crosses high probably had no idea this was happening in one corner of the world. With more than 2 billion believers, they would probably complain if they were asked to take responsibility for the actions of a mere 1% who had lost control.

But that didn't mean it didn't happen.

These things happened and then were always written off as a margin of error so small it could be ignored.

A life had been carbonized to the point she had no recognizable eyes or mouth left, but she still gathered her last ounce of strength to get out one final whisper.

"So please. Save the next one instead."

A mere 50m away, the curtain of dark trees opened up onto a highway. A giant billboard stood there for the drivers to see: *Grapple's latest phone – the MilliPhone 15 High End – makes its debut this fall!!*

...Yes, I will rid the world of this.

The witch goddess roared into the moonlit night while holding a stranger's corpse so close her hair and cheeks were covered in soot.

Her job wasn't done yet.

Even in the present day, the world hadn't changed in the slightest.

It never would unless someone worked to change it.

She couldn't abandon this mechanism of salvation just because the age of witches was a thing of the past.

So Aradia continues to roar in a world full of true contradiction and cruelty.

She had decided to save any and all witches.

No longer would she be a mere witch.

She swore to herself she would become a goddess.

CHAPTER 4

What's Wrong With Being Only Human?

Save_the_Stray_Devil

Part 1

20 minutes.

If Transcendent Aradia wasn't defeated and Shibuya wasn't freed in 20 minutes, the Bologna Succubus would die even if she did reach the hospital.

But that meant she could still be saved if Kamijou Touma ended it here.

He stood at the center of the scramble crossing surrounded by the rioters who had even climbed onto the roofs of the abandoned donut truck and red fire truck.

"Each good deed goes rewarded and at triple strength."

The witch goddess with just the one shadow sneered at him.

Her long silver hair and enormous wimple spread out behind her.

She twirled the index finger pointed his way.

"Defeating the Bologna Succubus counts as a good deed because it will free Shibuya from these rioting witch hunters. Thus, Triple Reload will reward me. So feel the power of my triple-boosted good magic, root cause!!"

An explosive boom shook the air.

But it *did not* come from the beam of light launched from Aradia's hand.

It came from directly in front of Kamijou Touma where his right fist had obliterated that attack.

"You say it was *good* that the Bologna Succubus collapsed from her injuries?"

He was fully confident now.

He held his fist out and roared with something entirely different from a solid strategy.

“I’m gonna destroy that shitty illusion right this instant!!”

That was their cue.

Kamijou made the first move, leaning his weight forward and taking off running.

A motley mixture of people surrounded the scramble crossing. He would normally have been crushed to death by the 100 thousand witches and a lot of the witches would have been killed along with him.

But that didn’t happen.

The Bologna Succubus was on death’s door, her body was disconcertingly cold, and she couldn’t support her own weight, but she hadn’t released the subtle version of Cold Mistress she was applying to Shibuya as a whole. The witch hunters held back the witches, giving Kamijou Touma freedom to move. The timing was so perfect it felt like a miracle.

And why cower in fear when he could fight?

He had to repay her.

They had never met before today and she shouldn’t have known anything about him, but she had still decided he was innocent and trusted in him. He had to repay her for that and help her survive! Surely that would end far better than listening to the tempting words of a witch who toyed with the concepts of good and evil for her own benefit!!

“Ohhh!!”

He ran right up to her.

Aradia swung her lithe right hand. She snatched an empty sweet roll wrapper from the wind. That counted as picking up litter – a *good deed*. Instead of stepping back out of his range, she had chosen to reload and keep her chain of good deed attacks going.

His own actions had guided her in that direction.

She could fire projectile attacks and the Bologna Succubus said she was skilled at aerial battles. That meant his best chance was to move into punching range before she could use any of the many cards in her deck.

He had not set this up. The Bologna Succubus had.

Both of those Transcendents could fly, so the fact that they had been staring each other down in the scramble crossing meant they had both already taken a decent amount of damage.

He wasn't going to waste that.

No matter what.

All he could do was slam his fist into her face!!

"Wind."

"!?"

A dry popping sound diverted the course of his fist.

Aradia had pressed two fingers against her lips like she was about to whistle. He had seen magic that produced an explosive gust of wind before.

Imagine Breaker could destroy any magic.

But at the same time...

(I see what she did.)

He had been overwhelmed by extreme numbers before.

Othinus had even tried to break his right arm with magic too powerful for him to fully negate.

But this was different. This was no more powerful than the magic the witches serving her had recorded in their looseleaf papers.

(She used the negation to alter the path of my fist!)

It was similar to how a bullet fired through a thick tank of water would have its ballistic path altered. Destroying the magic had caused his fist to waver just a bit.

And it didn't end there.

"I let you avoid that 'collision'."

His fist swung right past her face while she stepped up past his wrist and placed her palm on his chest.

"Wasn't that kind of me? Now take that good deed back at triple strength."

"!?"

The simple “collision” energy was multiplied by three, so an impact far more powerful than his original punch tried to shatter every bone in his body.

At the last second, he twisted his body to avoid a direct hit. His jacket was caught in the wind and it was shredded like a hail of gunfire had hit it. A direct hit from that would have smashed up his ribs and stabbed them into his organs.

However...

“I’m not done yet.”

“Damn you!!”

“I let you avoid that ‘collision’. Hee hee. Good deeds are still praised no matter how many times you do them. Hit or miss, my Triple Reload keeps the chain going.”

A direct hit could be fatal.

But every miss tripled the risk from the next attack. And it had all begun when he allowed her to snatch an empty sweet roll wrapper from the wind.

There was only one path to survival.

“Then I’ll stop that snowball from rolling any further!!”

“I thought you’d say that.”

She made it sound like she had read his mind.

He didn’t have time to tense his body. He had already started swinging his fist.

Aradia instead gently spread her arms as if welcoming her enemy. Then she tapped her bare foot against the ground.

Almost like she was popping an invisible balloon underfoot.

The boom sounded like a bomb going off. A thick wall of wind spread out around her in all 360 degrees.

There was no defense against it. The donut-shaped shockwave hit Kamijou and he doubled over like he had been hit by an invisible tackle. The breath was knocked out of him and he flew several meters back before hitting the ground. Even though he had been leaning forward with his full body weight.

“Kah, gwah!! Agh!?”

He couldn't get up from the hard, cold crosswalk.

While he was struggling to get new air in his lungs, an alluring voice slipped into his ears.

"The overall power should be tripling each time, but that didn't seem as powerful, did it? It isn't as deadly against an individual when I spread that power out over a wide area, is it?"

Kamijou's breaths were still shallow.

He knew where Aradia was going with this.

The witch goddess removed her finger from her chin, gently spread her arms, and smiled thinly at the center of the cracked scramble crossing.

She spoke below the moonlight distorting the nightscape behind her.

"Aren't I such a merciful witch for sparing your life like that? Another good deed to be tripled."

Part 2

The riot never ended no matter where they went.

Kumokawa Seria and Index worked together to carry the Bologna Succubus who kept bleeding despite the handkerchief against her wound, but there was so much violence everywhere that they didn't stand out much.

(Really, keeping her upright where gravity drags the blood down to her legs is a bad idea when her blood pressure is so unstable.)

"Ugh," groaned the Bologna Succubus.

But not because she had regained consciousness. The words leaving her mouth were complete nonsense. Her pink wings were asymmetrically half-opened like a broken umbrella and she appeared to be having a terrible nightmare while on the verge of death.

Yes, she managed to speak even with her voice breaking apart at times.

"You need to run away, boy. Kshrrrr. Aradia is coming..."

(Damn, now we definitely have to save her!!)

Kumokawa operated her phone with just one hand while supporting the injured demoness.

“A general hospital accepting emergency outpatients would be best, but where even is one near here?”

“What about that arrow sign pointing toward a Centroid General Hospital!?”

“It’s too far! It’s around a kilometer from the scramble crossing, but that’s a long way at the moment. Do you have any idea how long traveling just 100m will take in this riot!?”

They heard a deluge of angry voices as loud as a roaring stadium.

It came from nearby.

Kumokawa ducked while supporting the limp Bologna Succubus, glanced down at her phone, and clicked her tongue.

“The other side of the station has been completely swallowed up by people. And there was a large hospital with a cross mark on it there.”

“What about an ophthalmologist? Or a dermatologist?”

“Or a dentist? I doubt they would have enough fluid for a transfusion, though. Damn, should I eliminate the one-room clinics from my search?”

The woman in a long maternity dress and a large hat interrupted their discussion.

“Use that.”

“?”

The first to react was Index, not Kumokawa.

An ambulance was parked on the curb below the toxic neon sign for a club.

The driver’s side door, passenger side door, and the back door all sat open. It was empty. It must have been caught in the riot without an emergency patient inside, so the crew had been forced to abandon it.

Index’s face lit up as she supported the Bologna Succubus from behind with the cat still on her head.

“I know what an ambulance is! It might have tools for treating hurt people!”

“I have my doubts. Just look at it.”

Kumokawa was skeptical, but she still approached the ambulance.

“I don’t think it has any of that fluid you were talking about,” said Index.

“No saline and no Ringer’s solution. Only disinfectant for washing wounds. Damn, and an ordinary blood pack doesn’t help us here.”

The driver and EMTs must have felt they were in serious danger when they abandoned the ambulance. The doors were still open and the glove box sat unnaturally open.

“The ambulance’s registration and radio were both stolen.”

Kumokawa Seria checked through it all before looking in a completely different direction.

Then she smiled.

“But this might be our chance.”

“?”

She led everyone to a nearby coin-operated parking area. It was full of boxy light vehicles with sleeping bags inside and four-wheel-drive vehicles full of audio equipment, so they likely belonged to club workers who couldn’t get a parking space. But there was one big truck that didn’t fit in. Kumokawa circled to the rear container and whispered a suggestion to Good, Old Mary.

“(I don’t know how exactly you people do what you do and I don’t care. Just tell me whether or not you *can* do one thing.)”

“What might that be?”

“(There are two people inside. If you can you incapacitate them through the door, then do it.)”

It didn’t even take a second.

Good, Old Mary stood entirely still, so it wasn’t clear what she even did. She didn’t pull out any obvious weapon or even touch the camping kitchen tools hanging from her thick belt.

Several loud explosions sounded from within the rectangular container, the metal double doors on the back bent outwards, and one of them was blown off, spinning toward the girls. Kumokawa and Index quickly dodged out of the way. It stabbed deep into the hood of a car parked behind them and its alarm started blaring.

Good, Old Mary had not moved a millimeter the entire time, but now she tilted her head and large hat.

“All done.”

“Okay, maybe it was my fault for not specifying you do it quietly, but I thought that went without saying!!”

“What is this?”

Index peeked inside the truck and tilted her head enough the cat had to scramble to avoid slipping off. A man in a white coat and a sexy nurse lay collapsed and motionless inside the container. Something violent had clearly happened in there, yet nothing other than the targets received so much as a scratch.

Kumokawa didn’t remove her coat or her shoes. She just climbed inside, started to step over the unconscious man, remembered she was wearing a skirt, and opted to walk around him instead. The walls and ceiling were covered with thick tarps and a movable chair similar to a dentist’s sat in the center.

Lots of medical equipment was installed all around it.

“This is probably a back alley doctor’s base of operations,” said Kumokawa with some exasperation in her voice. “An ambulance’s radio uses the same special standards as the police and fire fighters. Someone might steal that to call the police for help since their phone doesn’t work. But they wouldn’t have any use for the ambulance registration. Only someone who needs an example to counterfeit their own would have any use for it, so I knew someone like that had to be nearby.”

“But how did you know that back alley doctor would be in this truck?” asked Index. “There were a lot of buildings around.”

“These people from the underside of society love their metal containers. There are a lot of container labs and homes in Academy City too. Although those workaholics on the dark side may have seen their lab and their home as one and the same.” Kumokawa shrugged and got to the point. “Anyway, we just need something that won’t trigger a rejection. Where do they keep a kit of usable fluid? This place is meant for surgery. Whether they’re setting bones, burning off fingerprints, remaking a face, or handling a runaway criminal’s cavity or appendicitis, they would need some way of cleaning the wound.”

Good, Old Mary commented while standing tall and motionless.

She spoke plainly but managed to sound friendly.

“There is no need to hurry. The quality of the preparations and work matter more than the time. As long as you get her blood pressure stabilized, mama’s resurrection will work even if you were injecting the fluid into a very recently deceased corpse. So it is not too late even if the Bologna Succubus has been declared dea—”

“Shut up a moment.”

“...”

She really did shut up.

That Transcendent was weirdly obedient, although it may have been a way of teasing people or of demonstrating her superiority. Kumokawa herself found it kind of awkward because it made her feel like the bad guy.

They tilted the chair back as far as it would go before laying the Bologna Succubus in it. Then Kumokawa faced the wall, opened the fridge there, and found several thick plastic bags full of fluid.

“Here we go.”

“Hm? Is that the fluid?” asked Index. “But it isn’t red at all.”

“It doesn’t have to be blood. The shock of blood loss is actually caused by the rapid change in blood pressure. It’s better if the fluid can transport oxygen and nutrients, of course, but beggars can’t be choosers.”

Kumokawa pulled out a pack of a translucent and somewhat yellowish fluid. The truck only had one in stock, which was just like a back alley doctor. They weren’t a general hospital prepared for emergency patients 24 hours a day.

“This is an iron distribution fluid. Really, any fluid that wouldn’t trigger rejection would work if all we need is to keep the blood pressure from dropping too much. You there, find a vein in her elbow. Wipe her skin off with some ethanol and then-”

Bang!!

Kumokawa Seria was cut off by the blast of an explosive.

It came from the back alley doctor’s handgun.

She held the right side of her face and shouted with all her might.

“Good, Old Mary! Do it right this time!!”

“Sigh. (Mama incapacitated him just like you asked. If you wanted him dead, you should have said so.)”

“Hurry! And don’t kill him!!”

With a wet splat, the plastic handgun burst and the man’s futile attempt to get up from the floor ended. His groaning meant he was still alive...for now anyway. His body seemed weirdly distorted, like a roach that refused to die after being partially squished by a slipper.

(Does everyone named Mary or Maria have to be a troublemaker? My sister also gets carried away and never plans anything out properly.)

Index looked at the hand Kumokawa was holding to her face.

“A-are you okay?”

“Yes. That’s not my brains splattered on my face. It’s the package I was holding.”

But Kumokawa did not look happy. With the pack of fluid blown away, they couldn’t heal the Bologna Succubus. A fluid full of salt, iron, and electrolytes could be created with kitchen tools, but she had severe doubts they could disinfect it enough to be safe for transfusion.

That meant they had to find a replacement somewhere.

And a properly sealed product with guaranteed professional quality.

“Damn, I guess we need a proper medical facility after all. The closest hospital is- oh, hell! The fluid is all over the screen! Let’s see...”

“It has to be closer than Centroid General Hospital,” said Index.

“I know that,” muttered Kumokawa.

There was another large hospital with a large cross mark on it, but there had been a largescale riot in that direction. Breaking through the rioters while carrying an injured woman wouldn’t be possible.

“This looks like the only place that would have everything needed to keep her blood pressure from dropping and save her life.”

“?”

Index peered at the screen and tilted her head. Kumokawa understood the confusion, but it was their last option.

The level of service at such a place was wildly variable. This one could be little more than a tanning salon, but there were more of them in Shibuya than there were gyudon shops.

The problem was if they would be open during the riot. Breaking the glass door was always an option, but not causing the workers unnecessary trouble would be preferable.

Kumokawa glanced over at the Transcendent.

(Having an overpowered fighter is convenient, but I don't want to get too reliant on her. That back alley doctor with a handgun is one thing, but I don't want to leave decent people twitching on the floor like that.)

"Do you need something?"

"No, not really."

"(Mama didn't kill him just like you asked. Mama kept her promise, so why look at her like she's a monster? It hardly seems fair.)"

"What is this mama nonsense? Are you lonely because your daughter is in a rebellious phase? Anyway, we need to try everything we can. This is Shibuya and it's New Year's Eve. If this riot settles down, the building should open its doors."

The Transcendent was dejectedly poking at the cat's forehead and radiating a desire for soothing, but Kumokawa just lifted the Bologna Succubus onto her back again.

And then she noticed something.

"Hold on. Where did that little one go?"

Part 3

Kamijou was spinning.

He had twisted out of the way of the beam, but it had caught his clothes.

He and the bright beam flew through the air and he slammed back down into the asphalt. He rolled across the scramble crossing a while after that before slamming back first into the side of the donut truck abandoned in the riot.

"Gah!!"

But if Othinus hadn't tugged on his ear to tell him when to dodge, he wouldn't have managed even that. And letting the beam catch at his clothes a bit had caused this much damage. He felt a dull, twisting pain in his hip and his right leg only twitched when he tried to get back up.

"Human!!"

"I'm- I'm fine...gahh."

He heard a light clapping sound a short distance away.

Aradia had pressed her palms together in front of her shapely chest. He knew that had to have some kind of magical meaning.

“You survived that thanks to my decision. Such a wonderful good deed, don’t you think?”

“...”

Transcendent Aradia gave him no openings. Had the small snowball already grown lethally large? Was it too big to possibly stop it by waiting for it at the foot of the snowy mountain?

The witch goddess sang with her long silver hair and large wimple blowing in the night breeze.

“Did you hear that, world? Did you hear that, flashing interphasal sparks? My good deed deserves a blessing thrice as powerful. Because a good witch must not come to harm.”

“Human.”

Just then, Othinus whispered on his ear after managing to cling to his clothing during that violent spin.

She was the god of magic, war, and deception.

“Remember what the grimoire library said.”

“?”

“The Wiccan Triple Reload spell is admittedly capable of overwhelming the entire magic side if used correctly, but Aradia’s magic is not based on words. The grimoire library already told you that a witch’s supernatural feats of healing, divination, flight, crop growth, and assassination are all based on the use of natural ‘potions’ extracted from plants and minerals.”

“Wait a second.”

“Cinnamon, garlic, vanilla, ginger, cacao, lavender – the herbs used by witches aren’t necessarily obscure deadly poisons. It is possible that they are much more ordinary and thus, human, we overlooked their presence.”

That would mean it wasn’t just about her phony judgments of good and bad. Did she have a physical tool she used for her magic? Did she have a spiritual item like a fortuneteller’s crystal ball or a witch’s broom? And hadn’t Aradia said it herself? Her spell was a triple *reload*. Didn’t that mean there was *an actual weapon* she was loading those “bullets” into?

All the blood gathered at a single point in Kamijou’s head.

What was his true target for Imagine Breaker?

He had to lean against the metal truck and couldn't even get up, but he desperately observed his surroundings. What was Aradia's spiritual item? Was it the ankle-length wimple? Or the noisily clanking gold clasps? The midriff-baring modified bikini? He could ignore her feet since they were bare. He had just reached that point in his thoughts when Aradia made her next move.

"Now."

She slowly separated the hands held together in front of her shapely chest.

But they enclosed a blinding light that seemed to fill the 1cm space between.

The light blew away all of the darkness lurking in the scramble crossing.

"Are you quite done? Killing you will stabilize Alice. And with Alice stabilized, we can bring peace to the world. Who can argue with the goodness of that deed?"

That was when he noticed.

The light Aradia was producing was his biggest hint. He lowered his gaze once more.

And he confirmed what he saw there.

"Aradia."

"?"

She gave him a somewhat puzzled look.

She would have understood if he broke into tears and begged for his life. Or if he desperately hurled invectives at her. But she found it very odd for him to speak rationally, steadily, like they were equals.

"I want to make one thing very clear up front: I have rotten luck. You could say I'm made of misfortune. So I can promise you this wasn't my doing."

"What are you blathering about?"

"Good or bad, witch spells are returned to their user at triple strength, right? Then maybe your attempts to make everything you do look good are starting to fail."

"Are you trying to stall for time until someone can come rescue you!?"

Aradia spread her hands another centimeter apart.

That released the light within.

The deluge of light shot straight toward Kamijou.

“So.”

But *that was exactly why* Kamijou Touma smiled.

“It was you who carelessly knocked me over to this food truck, Aradia! And can’t a witch’s herbs be found all over the place!? Like mint and cinnamon!”

He did not use Imagine Breaker.

Despite the risk, he just barely dodged the beam by rolling to the side. The food truck he had been leaning against was blown away, but its contents were also scattered everywhere.

That jiggly call girl had sung an improvised song after seeing the *red pickled ginger* in her gyudon.

The eyepatch ghost had been afraid her Japanese pasta might have *shiso* in it.

Index had stared enviously at the donuts covered in *cinnamon* and *mint* powder.

None of it had been a waste of time. All of his experiences in Shibuya had returned to aid him. But unlike with Aradia, this wasn’t about mysterious charisma or proselytization. His own actions had created connections with other people and those connections had become a real strength he could use.

Even this donut truck counted.

He had mentioned the mint and cinnamon himself, but vanilla and cacao had also been known as medicines in an older age.

And the coffee and tea available as drink options were made from beans and leaves containing stimulants.

What if all of those things were spread across the area?

“It’s your shadow.”

“Kh.”

Aradia froze just before making her next attack.

She must have noticed that her Triple Reload spell had suddenly *jammed*.

“Your shadow never changed no matter how much light shined from your hands! And it was always just the one shadow even though all the headlights around us should have given you

several!! That dark shadow was always waiting right at your feet, regardless of the actual light source. That's the true identity of your power. It's also why you're barefoot. You mixed your sweat or sebum or whatever other oil with some herbs at your feet to create an ointment whenever you used your magic!"

"I'll add that I expect your 'palette' of chemical compounds is stored in the gold decorations you wear across your body." Othinus smiled fearlessly on his shoulder. "Gold is malleable. If you kneaded the herbs into the gold for storage, you would only need to rub the clasps together to produce the powder you needed. Gravity would bring that to your feet, so you just needed to step on that barefoot to mix in your sweat or sebum and create that 'shadow'. Those clasps are shaped like keys. Perfect for creating the chemical palette that acts as your entrance into magic."

So what happened if vanilla, mint, and other extra herbs are rudely mixed into her "canvas" on the ground?

That goes without saying.

"This isn't enough to stop me!!"

"Probably not. She's going to recover soon enough, human!!"

Aradia had already recovered a bit from the damage. She stomped her bare feet on the ground twice to purify it and used her big toes to remake the witchcraft ointment in what looked like a bewitching dance. In the few seconds that took, Kamijou ran toward the other truck abandoned on the scramble crossing: the red firetruck.

More specifically, he ran to the valves on its side.

He again relied on his memory. Why was it the Bologna Succubus had always relied on baths and saunas like the hot spa and capsule hotel with Aradia as her enemy?

Oils, herbs, powders, and ointments.

These witch potions wouldn't play well with water.

"Ohhh!!"

"Tch!?"

Aradia clearly clicked her tongue when the firehose explosively unleashed a stream of water. Chemical cleanup was usually done by using a liquid, be it water or ethanol. If he wanted to keep Aradia from mixing her ointment by rubbing together the metal clasps, creating a powder, and letting it fall to the ground, his best bet was catching the invisible metal powder in the air and blasting it far away.

For some reason, Othinus smiled coldly from his shoulder.

"Ha ha. The Christians do say wicked women have a weakness to holy water. Are you trying to prove them right, witch god!?"

"Gahh! I don't want to hear anything from the lingering remnants of a god who forgot to protect the forest-dwelling priestesses!!"

There was a dull snap as a thick piece of metal broke.

Aradia had thrown a roundhouse kick. Her big toe's nail had torn through the air along a beautifully circular path and sliced through the base of the pedestrian traffic signal located alongside the scramble crossing. She spun it in both hands as lightly as a baton, spun herself around, and sat on it.

She had completed the storybook image.

By the time the tension crackled through Kamijou's body, the witch's feet had already left the ground.

Herbs and water were effective, but keeping his distance had been a mistake. Aradia was apparently even better at aerial combat than the Bologna Succubus. Kamijou had to fight with his fist, so vertical distance was devastating for him. She could just stay in the air and kill him with falling objects and projectiles.

"A witch mixes her sebum and sweat with powdered herbs and minerals to create the ointment we need."

Something flashed.

It came from Aradia as she sat on the severed pedestrian signal like it was a witch's broom.

Lines of light filled the night sky around her like a planetarium. A satellite viewing the earth may have seen it as a glowing net capturing the planet itself.

"So I will claim the assistance of everything floating in the air! Around 10 thousand tons of cosmic dust pour down on the planet ever day after burning up in the atmosphere. With invisible pieces of the moon in hand, I can even absorb all of the carbon dioxide out of the earth's atmosphere. The witch goddess will use her ointment to save humanity from global warming! *And the good deed of saving the world will be returned to me at triple strength.* Then I will concentrate all of that power on a single point to obliterate the enemy before my eyes!!"

There shouldn't have been any way for him to win.

Spraying around a firehose could never spray all of the extraterrestrial dust from the planet's atmosphere.

If she was absorbing carbon dioxide, would her actual weapon be related to the wind or air? Whatever the case, not even any dust would remain of him after she crushed him with triple the power needed to save the world.

Othinus whispered up at the witch seated on the pedestrian signal.

"So a witch uses the same ointment to make her broom fly, huh? But you do realize you're showing off your weak point this way, don't you?"

She showed no mercy.

"There you have it, human. End this already."

Kamijou tossed aside the firehose and clenched his right fist.

Yes.

No matter how high Aradia flew, the shadow that provided her power remained on the ground.

"Gah!!"

The shadow shattered and she fell from the sky.

The pedestrian signal she was using as a broom loudly bent and the Transcendent rolled along the pavement.

Back down at the center of the scramble crossing, Aradia trembled within the large cloth that had gotten wrapped around her. She groaned from the first physical damage done to her.

She looked so pitiful and seemed to be in pain.

But this pain was nothing compared to the suffering the Bologna Succubus had gone through after throwing out her own life without hesitation.

It was nothing compared to the pain she would have felt at having to fight a fellow member of her cabal.

Othinus crossed her arms and sneered from atop Kamijou's shoulder.

"Never forget the first rule of magical flight: it's easily thwarted. Let's not forget what happened to Simon the Magician when he foolishly challenged one of the 12 Apostles: he lost the protection of his demon, fell from the sky, and died."

Part 4

“Gh, gah.”

Aradia had fallen and hit the ground hard.

She worked to keep her woozy mind in focus.

She wasn’t going to let mere pain stop her. She clenched her bloody teeth and sent strength back into her legs.

She wanted to be someone who could protect all witches.

Some might mock that as an outdated idea. In the age of smartphones and the internet, anyone could do a quick search and see that the witch hunts had been wrong. They would assume no one would ever do that again.

But they were wrong.

This wasn’t a fantasy from centuries ago.

The emotional witch hunts had never ended.

The words and framework used had changed with the times, but similar social attacks could be seen in the real world and on the internet all the time. Even today at this very moment.

Now, this violence was not led by the pros of the Anglican Church. It wasn’t part of a system for carrying out investigations and meting out punishments for magical crimes.

But that didn’t mean they weren’t involved.

It was easy enough to say the witch hunts had been wrong and they were a terrible mistake made in the distant past.

But no one ever went on to say who had been in the wrong or why they had made that mistake. They sealed it away as a thing of the past and avoided talking or thinking about it. That let the people feel no responsibility and didn’t allow any feelings of guilt to take root, so by swapping out the names and framework used, the same social phenomena could continue forever in new forms.

The true violence came from the ordinary people who had no real power and were ready to believe just about anything. It came from the common folk who raised their crosses high and clung to “history” and “tradition”. It was always those “innocent” people who didn’t think twice before burning to death a little old lady who lived a short distance from their village and raised small birds because she liked cute things! It was those pieces of shit who, after it was over, would shrug it off as “mass hysteria” and return to their lives like nothing had

happened!! They're just normal people? Those "peaceful" and "carefree" slaughterers think "we didn't mean to kill an innocent person" is an adequate excuse. Are those rotten sadists trying to say laughing as you burn a woman to death is acceptable if she really was a witch!?

So Aradia would protect them even in the modern day.

She would protect the people accused of being witches, no matter how much power they did or didn't have.

She would become someone who would hear the lonely cries of the person isolated behind a solid wall of "common sense".

She would become the last defense of those who had been ostracized from all other systems meant to provide help.

She would become the goddess of all witches.

And she was willing to dirty her hands if it was to that end.

She might fall from the sky, cough up blood, curl up in a miserable ball, and tremble.

But she would not stop here.

She was a Transcendent of the Bridge Builders Cabal. It was time she demonstrated the *strength* of a magician with a wish she would make sure came true even if it required dealing with that fearsome tyrant Alice!!

Part 5

As expected, the long silver hair and giant wimple continued to tremble.

Aradia was still moving.

She wouldn't be broken so easily. Her trick had been revealed, but she would not step down from the stage. She trembled and squirmed, but she finally, slowly got up from the ground.

She wanted to save the witches.

She wanted to create a world that would protect the people ostracized from society.

Kamijou didn't know the exact conditions or the details of her goal, but he knew the basics.

But he did not back down.

“I can’t help but like the Bologna Succubus better.”

“?”

Aradia could tell this wasn’t just a joke or provocation.

A single mistake or a single moment looking the wrong way would mean instant death for him.

Anyone, even the Transcendent, could tell he was placing his life in these words.

“She doesn’t *just* want to reach out a helping hand to the persecuted witches. She doesn’t need to limit herself like that before rushing toward certain death with a smile. It’s way less realistic and I like it way more.”

And.

Kamijou Touma was willing to risk his one and only life to save her.

How much time did she have left now?

She had to still be fighting on the verge of death while Index’s group helped her. She wasn’t a cold demon who could only provide pain. He refused to let her die after she underwent so much abuse to rescue a complete stranger like him. He wouldn’t allow it.

He still couldn’t reach the depths of Transcendent Aradia’s heart.

But peering into her darkness and reaching out a helping hand could wait until after he had saved the Bologna Succubus.

“The night, the moon, and the witches. Hecate, Isis, the Morrígan, Freyja. The ancient goddesses of wisdom have always viewed the world from three perspectives while providing a powerful protection for the priestesses serving them.”

Aradia spread her arms and raised her voice even as she coughed up blood from the fall.

“No more...holding back! Risk 4: Releasing triple seal – leaving human territory. Activating the *triple goddess* within my flesh!!”

Aradia’s shadow stretched out in three different directions.

They spun around her in a circle, dyeing the glowing pavement like an ink stain. It may not have had a fixed shape and it looked something like a Rorschach test that held a different meaning to everyone who viewed it.

This was something inhuman.

The beautiful woman standing there may have only been a temporary form and this was the true essence of the Transcendent.

What had happened to Triple Reload? And the ointment at her feet?

Perhaps she had thrown all of that away and a completely new transcendent magic was about to come his way.

He couldn't say anything for certain.

The rules of the battle had suddenly *blurred*.

The flow of battle normally would have changed here.

In an ordinary battle between magicians, the poor victim would have been overwhelmed and torn to shreds by the Transcendent before even managing to analyze her new magic.

But.

Something shattered before Aradia's eyes and her extreme mystical power was negated.

It ended far too easily.

“?”

“Allow me to introduce you to Imagine Breaker, false goddess.”

Othinus's whispered words were like a death sentence.

Her first mistake had been allowing a certain boy to get this close to her. Her last mistake had been thinking she could fight back with the occult. After all, his right fist was the greatest enemy of that sort of thing.

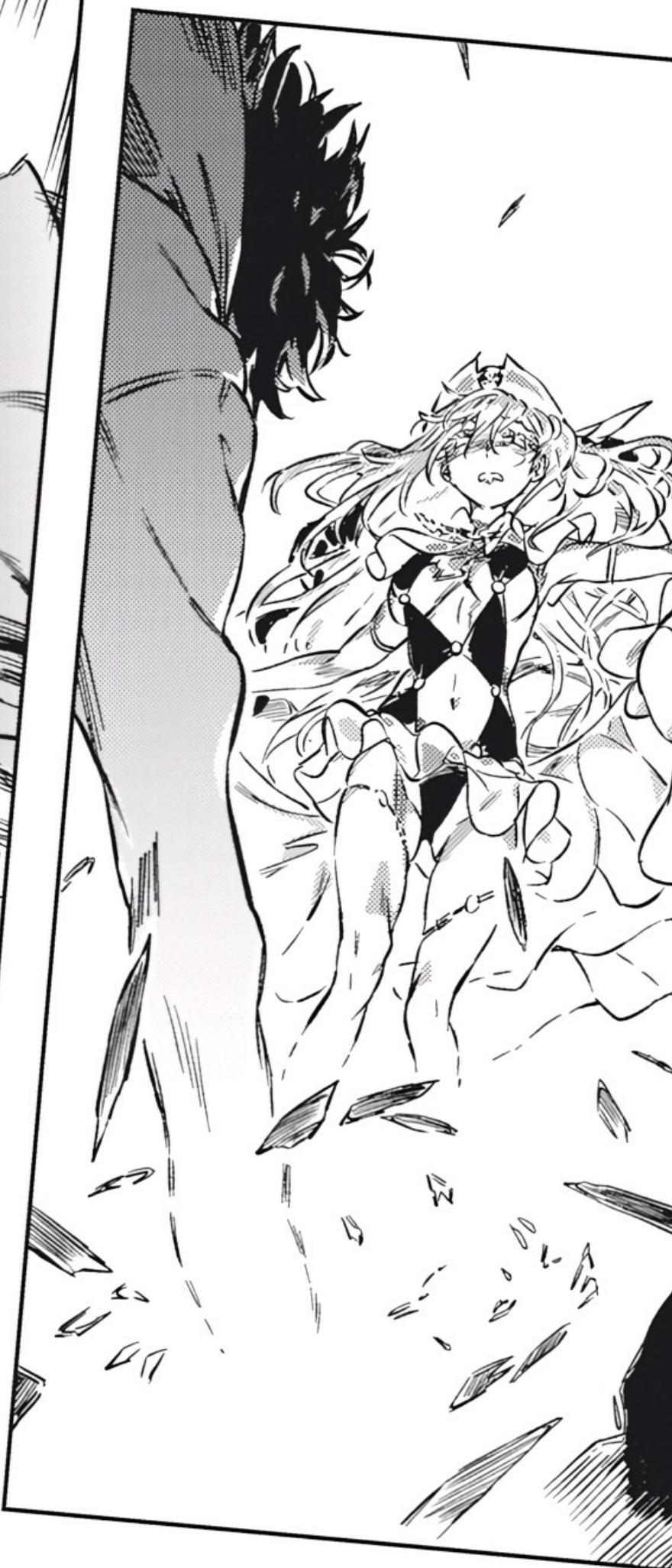
“The more you rely on magic...”

“~ ~ ~!?”

“The more I'll destroy that harmful illusion!!”

With a dull impact, an ordinary boy's fist caught Transcendent Aradia's cheekbone.

And he swung through with his full body weight.



EPILOGUE

The Record Needle Skips.

Irregular Counter.

The countdown hadn't even begun, but a few fireworks were already bursting in the night sky.

For better or for worse, Shibuya was a tough place.

The clash between the witches and the witch hunters had involved hundreds of thousands of people, if not more, but once Aradia and the Bologna Succubus were gone, the city quickly returned to business as usual. Everyone gathered at the scramble crossing and stared up at the numbers counting down on the giant screen.

These people processed information and emotions quickly.

Within the crowd, Kamijou held Aradia's limp form, but no one did anything other than occasionally aim their phone camera his way. The eyepatch ghost took a selfie with the fireworks in the background and the call girl showed the small wound on her upper arm to the young man who was apparently her driver. He looked upset because she said she was in too much pain to work for the day.

Someone weaved through the crowd to approach Kamijou.

“Touma.”

It was Index with the calico cat on her head. The cat had to be just as tough as Shibuya to hold onto his spot all throughout the riot.

“I managed somehow. Here’s Aradia. I tied her hands behind her back with a zip tie I found on the ground nearby and I put plastic bags over her feet with rubber bands to keep her from making more ointment with her bare feet, but I’m not sure if this will actually work.”

“It should be fine, but what are you going to do with her?”

“Human, you had better not be thinking about taking in another freeloader.”

Now that was a scary thought. It was unclear of anything other than Imagine Breaker could restrict a Transcendent's power, but he truly could not afford any more mouths to feed. He was supposed to be out here to earn enough money to avoid starving over winter break, so he did not want to end up with higher food costs instead.

He trembled at the thought, but then looked up and grimaced.

He had landed on the cleverest idea his brain could come up with.

"So, Index-san. How about we be really nice here and let those handsome Anglicans and their very cool Necessarius group take the credit for this one? Wait, no! I don't want to keep her!! The world is such a big place, so why isn't there, like, a prison that can hold magical criminals and keep them safe and secure!? Why do I have to pay out of my own pocket to shelter and feed the attempted murderers who show up to kill me!?"

"I don't know what to tell you since I don't know how to contact the Anglicans. A lot has happened since we last saw them, so who knows how they pass information around. Letters? Pigeons?"

"..."

Kamijou suddenly realized he didn't even know if they had an emergency contact number. Unease rapidly set in within his stomach. Whenever a magical incident was underway, they would show up, cause him heaps of trouble, and then leave, so he had never really thought about it before.

And...

"Hi," said Kumokawa Seria.

She raised a hand in greeting while approaching him. Her thick coat and suit were stained with blood, but she didn't stand out too much in Shibuya at the moment.

"That Bologna Succubus woman got her transfusion and is resting in a bed."

"Where did you even take her during all that?"

"*A cosmetic surgery clinic.*" She smiled bitterly. "Their quality varies wildly, so some don't do anything more than hair removal and tanning, but some are real medical facilities that do actual surgery like facelifts and boob jobs. So even if they're a small clinic, they will have blood and fluids for transfusion."

Kamijou may have never considered that option.

And he got the feeling they were even more common than gyudon shops in the center of Shibuya.

“I really just borrowed some iron distribution fluid to prevent shock from blood loss, so now it’s up to that mysterious Good, Old Mary woman.”

“I...see.”

That was a relief. She had already proven her skill with Kamijou himself.

And with that settled...

“By the way, Senpai, what about your business? You said you were accompanying me because you had business in Shibuya.”

“All of this threw a wrench in those plans. (I thought there was *something* hidden at the Miyashita Ark, but I would be amazed if it wasn’t far too late for that after taking so many very noticeable detours.)”

“?”

Kamijou tilted his head, but Kumokawa only smiled bitterly.

“Cosmetic clinics always feed information to the cops, but I somehow doubt the Bologna Succubus will end up in police custody no matter how suspicious the circumstances of her injuries. I’ve already seen how much of a monster that other ‘Transcendent’ Good, Old Mary is, so I’m sure the Bologna Succubus will be a major threat again once she’s been healed. To be honest, not even *my* incredible intellect can think up a way of stopping them if they teamed up.”

“That’s fine.”

Kamijou adjusted unconscious Aradia’s position in his arms and used a finger to brush her silver bangs off of her forehead.

When he spoke, the look on his face said he had suspected it could come to this.

“I’m sure I’ll run into the Transcendents of the Bridge Builders Cabal again. If I want to say anything to the Bologna Succubus or Good, Old Mary, I can always say it then.”

He had defeated Witch Goddess Aradia, but he doubted she would stay restrained for long even if he brought her back to Academy City.

The Bologna Succubus had said their cabal intended to change the entire world for their own purposes. And that she would become his enemy in the process. The difference between the Killers and the Rescuers wouldn’t matter then. Their cabal would never see eye to eye with people like Kamijou who were willing to accept the world the way it was.

Then there was Anna Sprengel.

Not to mention Alice Anotherbible.

He already had a connection to them.

He just didn't know when the next incident would happen.

"I see." Kumokawa Seria then waved her phone with the grin of a girl plotting one hell of a prank for April Fools' Day. "So are you saying you don't want this? And after I went to the trouble of *attaching a GPS tracker* smaller than a kernel of corn to the decorations on the Bologna Succubus's underwear.



A small figure blended in with the common crowd and observed the situation while licking at the two scoops of ice cream she had bought at a food truck deployed for the holiday. She had gotten the honey flavor with rose petals out of curiosity, but it was honestly a little much.

She was Anna Sprengel.

(Yes, that ended well enough.)

She held an irregular position by not siding with the Killers or the Rescuers – which really just made both sides suspicious of her – but she was officially one of the Transcendents now. And she had never had the self-control needed to tap the brakes on her own actions.

(*That would be so boring.* Aradia vs. the Bologna Succubus. The witches vs. the witch hunters. Those silly Transcendents try to act so smart, but how is this any different from the magical incitement I pulled with R&C Occultics? After pressuring them with Alice, I was really hoping they would show me more of their own world☆)

While thinking through all this, Anna reached her empty hand toward Kamijou's group. It didn't matter how many people stood between them.

This was how that Rosicrucian saw things.

"He thinks he has saved Aradia now that he has defeated her. I do hope you show me an amusing transformation when you see her killed right there in your arms, Kamijou Touma. Hee hee. I belong to the Bridge Builders Cabal now, so *I need to kill Aradia to keep her from spilling all of the cabal's secrets.*"

She was enjoying herself.

Enjoying herself so very much.

Kamijou Touma already knew that Alice stood at the top of the Bridge Builders Cabal. So what if one of its members killed Aradia while she was helpless? What would the boy think before

he investigated who exactly had done it? How long would he be able to forgive the cabal as a whole or its leader Alice Anotherbible!?

The thought was sweeter than the ice cream and colder on the tongue too.

Anna could never resist such powerful temptation.

Which was exactly why she wanted a ruler who would place a chain around her neck and keep her in line.

However.

“My, my, my. What have we here?”

She heard a voice.

The instant the soft, kindly female voice slipped into Anna Sprengel’s ears, an unpleasant sweat poured from the arrogant Transcendent’s body.

She recognized it.

She knew whose voice this was.

“All magic should be d equally to all  regardless of nation, region, occupation, class, age, or ♂. How did that simple teaching transform into a massive  company?”

“...”

“Oh? My s seem to be undergoing a strange transformation, but you can still tell what I’m ing, can’t you? You’re a smart 

“.....”

It took a few seconds before Anna could even gulp.

Was her vision growing blurry because of tears in the corners of her eyes?

She came to her senses and spun around. She searched her mind for a powerful spell that could crush her enemy along with the entire crowd around them.

A high-pitched snapping sound echoed across the entire scene.

By then, Anna Sprengel had already been *separated* from the world.

“What!?”



“You will ✗ find me using hostages. Nor will I vanish into the crowd after starting a panic using some 🔴 shed. Sigh. For that matter, a magician like you should really be using a 😊 clearing field. What an embarrassment you are. Magic is the ↘ of a phase hidden on the underside of the ✪, so it really is ✗ meant to be shown off for no good reason.”

Anna’s vision shook.

The woman stared curiously at the nails of her own fingers emerging from her gauntlet. That meant she wasn’t even looking at Miss Sprengel.

“Hm, fascinating. Since I can refine magic ↘ in this body, it must contain a lifeforce of its own.”

Existing in the same space as this woman was devastatingly bad. She should have trembled in fear simply learning the woman had appeared on the other side of the planet, so she clenched her teeth at being so careless she failed to notice the woman until she was less than 10m away in 3D space.

The woman’s long, reddish blonde hair was worn in a modified braid done up into something resembling a giant fried shrimp. Her skin was unbelievably pale and she wore thin glasses on her intellectual face. Her body looked to be maybe 30 years old. She wore a special orange suit resembling a racing swimsuit, but did Anna realize that was the same thing the Academy City android named Ladybird had worn? Thanks to the large, unnaturally shiny hat, the black sleeves, and the large pareo she wore, her overall outfit could be described as a witch swimsuit.

She looked up from her nails and made a direct announcement while something glowed faintly.

“I too am a magician, so do ✗ hold back. Come at me with everything you have. 🟨 of Nuremberg, high ranking member of the 🌷, leader of the supposed DE branch of the 🏅 cabal, and builder of 🎉s. No one else can bother us now☆”

The Golden cabal had not just suddenly appeared in England.

Its founders had not been geniuses from the very beginning.

William Wynn Westcott was a beginner once.

There was a time when Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers hadn’t known the first thing about the occult.

So.

Who had taught those legendary magicians the types of mystical and supernatural powers humans could control?

“Shit. Shit, shit, shit, shit!!”

“Hee hee.”

“That role is mine! History says so. It all started with a coded letter they received seemingly by accident, so it has to be Anna Sprengel who helped found the Golden cabal!! I refuse to accept any starting point before that!!”

“I do ✗ particularly care even if that Anna Sprengel is you.”

The woman demonstrated the confidence of someone with truth on her side.

Anna Sprengel, meanwhile, was forced to cling to a legend, so she bit her lip at the woman’s casual demeanor.

Those with a true mastery of their field did not obsess over their achievements. Because they knew they could produce something just as great whenever they wanted. That was why they were willing to snap the finest sword or break a beautiful plate and investigate the quality of the break to see if there was any room for improvement. And they did this for their own personal satisfaction, not to set an objective high score. Their interest couldn’t even be roused for a unique miracle.

They had the superhuman ability to go on smiling as they threw out a solid legend like a piece of scrap.

For Westcott and Mathers, it didn’t come from social status or cabal rank. Nor was it based in fear or social niceties. There was no outward reason like that. Those audacious founders of the Golden wouldn’t show anyone respect for those reasons, but the instant they had met her on the street, they had bowed their heads *and adored her like puppy dogs*. That great goddess of wisdom had overpowered the magicians who now ruled at the peak of Western magical history. This woman had become a legend all her own, not just from her skill but from her ideologies and beliefs as well. She loved all equally and shared great power with anyone in need. She was even said to have been the reason the Golden cabal widely accepted ordinary women as members.

She was Anna Sprengel’s true enemy.

Lady Sprengel could not help but tremble in terror.

The woman’s large hat shook, the decorations hanging from the brim clanked together, and a toxic neon light shined from her glasses.

She was smiling.

She clasped her hands in front of her large chest and smiled sweetly.

“On the other , this enclosed space means no one will get to see your humiliating defeat.

Think of this as a generous  from me to you☆”

“Anna...”

A name left Anna Sprengel’s trembling lips.

But this wasn’t a numerical value or character string referring to herself.

“*Anna Kingsford!*? But you were confirmed dead over a century ago! How can you possibly be here now!?”

“Hee hee☆ What do you want me to say, *Anna Sprengel*? That I tore the  from his throne, made him do my bidding, and kicked down the gates of hell all so I could come back from the  and punish you? Yay!!”

Miss Sprengel could not afford to hold back. She had already taken action as a high ranking Rosicrucian and the leader of Lichte, Liebe, Leben, the original temple that neither Westcott nor Mathers had ever reached. Nothing she could do could ever be enough. She shook a skinny glass vial to *activate* the contents. She stabbed it into the center of a flat, clear cylinder about 11cm across. Anyone in the know would recognize that as a glass anti-personnel mine that would cruelly take off the leg of its poor victim and that no metal detector would detect.

She was using a chemical fuse instead of the standard one. When someone stepped on and broke the vial in the center, the chemicals inside would mix together and cause an instantaneous ignition.

“Incurring my wrath was the worst mine you could have stepped on.”

For Anna Sprengel, the mine controlled its own microcosm.

First, it would extract “summer growth”, part of the four-step cycle. Then it created an environment of endless growth by stopping up the usual cycle of life and death for plants in particular. Then it linked that to the 8th operation: separation. That would create a deadly space where simply stepping on it would separate every joint and every organ from the body, and that space would expand endlessly.

She desperately threw the mine while thinking through the process in her head.

“You may have crossed the boundary between life and death to attack me, but I will stop up that same cycle to erase your unnatural existence. I hope you suffer a slow second death while your temporary body cracks open like a fragile egg and spills its ugly contents!!”

“My, my.”

A single exasperated comment was all it took for the attack to end in failure.

Anna Sprengel had definitely thrown the glass mine containing a deadly spell, but it failed to go off and remained in the air.

It flew.

The transparent explosive twirled and twirled without ever detonating.

The glass container filled to the brim with lethal force would never break if it never hit the ground.

“...”

“*This is magic. Is any further explanation necessary?*”

The words “o points” were written in glowing writing above the softly smiling face.

Miss Sprengel’s most secret techniques were overwhelmed by a single use of the far cheaper and more reliable fundamental magic.

This seemed to demonstrate that the knowledge of how to use your tools mattered far more than showing them off.

“I already told you that magic is the  of a phase hidden on the underside of the . Blathering on endlessly in front of your enemy is about the worst thing you can do. Especially when you also emphasize how much physical pain it will cause. I might as well be seeing a  desperately creating an aphrodisiac as a get  quick scheme, Anna Sprengel.”

“You don’t get to march back onto center stage after all this time and act like you’re the manager of all curses and diagrams. Are you saying all magic belongs to you and every magic user in the world needs to ask your permission first!?”

“No, no. Hee hee. I make no such claims.”

Even after all this, Anna Kingsford may not have even been focused on the Rosicrucian before her. She clasped her hands in front of her chest and did not hesitate to speak while thinking of the boy so accustomed to misfortune he had accepted it as normal.

However, she was not attacking Anna Sprengel because of who she was and she was not saving Kamijou Touma because of who he was. She would respond the same way if she saw any ordinary person threatened by magic.

In other words...

“I simply wish to aid the 😊 around me☆”

“You expect me to believe that!? Don’t act all pure and noble while showing off just how ugly Iaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaam!!”

The dull straining of bones and joints came all over the young magician’s body and then her silhouette swelled out. She rapidly transformed from a child into an adult who gave off a sweet and bewitching aroma.

She manifested her full power.

She hadn’t wanted to waste it until she had regained all the power wasted by Madam Horos, but using it here did not qualify as a waste.

She was terrified of this fear. Her wish for someone to manage her desires had been a complete lie. In truth, she was willing to wear a collar or chains as long as she found a ruler powerful enough to protect her when the time came!!

“I’ve pulled out all the stops, so return the favor. Show me all the cards in your deck! I don’t care if it’s direct Telesma control or Gnosticism, just bring out all those dark age spells from the deep, deep darkness so far from the dawn!!”

Anna Kingsford actually sighed.

She shook her head and formed an X-mark at the top of her hat.

But Anna Sprengel had not done anything wrong here. She was undoubtedly a world-class magician who “top level” didn’t even begin to describe. The problem was Anna Kingsford’s absurdly high standards for magicians.

Westcott and Mathers, the founders of the Golden cabal, had been geniuses who even Aleister had looked up to at one point, even if they had fallen out later. Their names remained at the top of the list in the annals of magical history, but even they had been no more than *troublesome children* to this great goddess of wisdom.

Trying to outdo Anna Kingsford in the field of magic was a mistake in and of itself. If you could not sense that, you were best off staying silent and doing as little as possible for as long as it took for you to understand.

“For 1 thing, I do ✗ understand the concept of a ‘spell.’” There was an air of disappointment in her voice, like she had peered into the greatest depths of this magician and found her lacking. “The ↗ we were born into was always brimming with the mystical and ⚡ing with the supernatural. Everything in the ↗ is born of and protected by the mystical without needing to focus your 🧠 with these ‘spells’. No matter how much people drain the land of its color with their 🔍tic technology, they can ✗ rid the ↗ of the mystical and the occult. Can you ✗ access that endless blessing without artificially focusing your 🧠, Anna Sprengel? Is the supernatural and the mystical no more than a brief dream that vaguely appears in your 🧠 when you hold your breath and concentrate on the center of your brow?”

“!?”

The result was known before the clash even happened.

The woman who lived in a dream smiled at the girl who was viewing a dream. To Anna Kingsford, using magic was as much a part of her as breathing and the beating of her heart. It was too late by the time the other Anna realized how much trouble she was in. Anna Kingsford did not use a special spiritual item or any fancy motions. The monster who had taught Westcott and Mathers only spoke some ordinary words with her alluring lips.

That was all.

“Soror Kingsford 1888.”

An odd sound came from Anna Sprengel’s right arm.

By the time she heard it, the entire arm had already vanished.

“Ah.”

“Truly ✨ magic does not need a special tool or 🏙. It requires no other preconditions, like inborn talent, special coordinates, or a special 🕒. The gates stand open before everyone equally and no one should be cruelly shut out due to born qualities such as gender or race or due to insufficient preparations caused by 💳 differences. No matter what. Yes, magic should be about producing a miracle using no more than a stone or a stick found on the ground. There is no need to call on a fancy four-letter name like YHVH – as long as you know the proper way to use the magic, even the most ordinary name can carry great ✨.”

Her flesh was torn away.

Body parts disappeared, vanished, and were lost.

Her arms, her legs, her torso!! Her skin, her flesh, her bones! One by one and in order!!

“Whether it is ✓ or ✗, you may have been involved with the 🎖 cabal’s founding using the name Anna. But that fact will be your undoing. If you had no ✗ carelessly gotten involved with Westcott and Mathers and your whims had led you elsewhere, you would have been just an ordinary Anna with no connection me.”

“Kah, ah!?”

With what sounded like the rustling of cloth, a thin, disk-like can appeared in Anna Kingsford's palm. It was a film can used to store film stock. She supported it with just her slender fingers, like a waitress holding her round tray.

But that wasn't just an ordinary film can!

“Magic is a powerful mutual  to the entire , including all its phases, and that  can be activated for your own purposes. Shape, color, number, action, knowledge, and the connections between  are much the same. If you had not formed this thin, thin connection with me via those disappointing children, this never would have happened, Anna Sprengel.”

Her head spun.

No, not even her disembodied head remained any longer. All that remained in Anna Kingsford's hand was the disk-like film can. It looked a lot like a miniature version of the Mouth of Truth.

But even in that state, she could still breathe and blink. The flat “face” pasted to the surface of the disk wasn’t even allowed to die.

This was of course very intentional.

“Hee hee. Even that selfish Mathers who refused to sit at the same desk ed and begged for forgiveness when I punished him like this.”

The disk was technically countless parchment charms pasted together.

And it was also Anna Sprengel's body except for the face.

“Now, do you require a spell-style explanation of what just happened?”

"Heh...heh. Storing planetary power in a charm is introductory magic. And the macrocosm and the microcosm are always linked. So you didn't actually destroy my body. You separated my limbs and organs and sealed *them* in the corresponding charms. Which is why I'm not even allowed to die!!"

“Yes, I did X think you required one. That would be redundant in the face of a visible punishment like the ♫ing disk☆” said Anna Kingsford with a smile.

One was a preserved corpse given cutting-edge tech in place of her stopped organs and the other was an undying film can with a face. They made for an unbelievable pair, but it still wasn’t enough to faze the people of Shibuya. Aradia and the Bologna Succubus had already proven that ordinary people wouldn’t even question the supernatural when it was boldly carried out in plain sight.

(From what I ☺ in the Miyashita Ark where I was stored, they seem to have created piggy 🎰 that eat up the coins with a very realistic silicon face.)

That was the only thought on her mind as she released the temporal and spatial “separation”.

Immediately, a slender finger touched her back between the shoulder blades.

That was the physical shut-off switch that Human Aleister had installed in her youthful (due to the injection of lipids and hyaluronan) skin when remaking that monster inside and out into a moving preserved corpse.

No one could defeat her in the field of magic.

So the final safety had to be placed in an entirely different field. That very human fear and caution could be seen in her very design.

That human would not allow himself the arrogance of Westcott and Mathers.

His history of failure and defeat had taught him all too well what happened when he sought too much power.

He knew from the beginning he was going to look pathetic in the end, so he had developed a habit of considering in advance what he could do in those parameters. This was the result. Aleister asked a question as his finger rubbed gently at the slide switch embedded in the woman’s skin.

“Would you be angry if I confiscated that?”

“No, X really.”

Anna Kingsford did not even look back while holding the singing face film can on one hand like a tray. The light swaying atop her hat looked like a pleasant will-o’-the-wisp.

That true master was looking past the crowd and below the New Year’s fireworks where a boy’s group was filled with bright hope at the possibility of getting at the Bridge Builders

Cabal using a GPS tracker. Those young lives would not hesitate as they moved into the new year.

The dark claws and fangs of magic had failed to reach them.

The historical genius teacher happily narrowed her eyes behind her glasses, like that joy was her own.

“My job is to aid the 😊 around me. I am willing to do anyone’s bidding if it will lead to an ✅ result. If you are willing to accept clear punishment if you fail to hold up your end, then I need not explain the process. I, Magician Anna Kingsford, am also one who has chosen to walk this path. I have long since dedicated myself to this life too much to worry over whether I live or 💀.”

“This path, huh? Ma’am, this is a silly question asked purely out of personal curiosity, but what is a magician in your mind?”

“It is that which you find before you.”

That was her entire answer.

She did things very differently from Aleister whose habits from his time among the contrarians of the Golden cabal led him to give lengthy answers to even simple questions.

But just like with E=mc², the simplest answers were the most beautiful.

Anything beyond that was mere lip service meant to help the less experienced understand. Like the reference book sitting next to the main textbook.

So when Anna Kingsford kept going, it was a sign of the great gap in skill between the two of them.

“If someone is bedridden with 😞, a magician brings them 💊. If someone’s 🌿’s are suffering during a drought, a magician makes it ☔. If a poor 🧑 requires a 💋 for the ball, a magician prepares one for her. A magician requires no further explanation or qualification. Magic can simply be defined as a strange ✨ ordinary 😊 can ✗ understand. And a magician should be one who 🎉 the blessings of magic to all 😊 whether they have any specific knowledge of any specific field. If a magician sees someone in need, that is all the reason they need.”

The great difference elicited bitter laughter from Aleister, who had singlehandedly won the Battle of Blythe Road.

But that probably was what magic really was. Just like Westcott and Mathers had failed to become the children's book idea of Santa Claus or the Kasa Jizo because they had wanted to be someone special, had been obsessed with their elite tastes, and had fought among their own Golden members for superiority, ultimately tearing the cabal apart.

Aleister of course was little different. He had been exposed to their oppression, raised in their hatred, and never attempted to hide his own desire when using magic. He had taken some serious detours before his rematch with Mathers had taught him that magic was meant to give form to people's most precious feelings.

Anna Kingsford had died shortly before the founding of the Golden cabal. That was why Westcott had borrowed the name of that outstanding magician for his lonely falsified letters (whether or not a magician named Anna Sprengel really existed in Nuremburg, Germany) and why Aleister, who had joined the cabal later on, had had never directly learned anything from Mrs. Kingsford.

Would he have seen the path of magic differently if he had been given that opportunity?

Would he not have created a technical system that would make use of a pregnant woman if it would advance his goals?

(This is all meaningless sentiment.)

Do not forget that Aleister Crowley had possessed a gloomy personality even before making contact with the Golden cabal. Even without Mathers and Westcott's influence, he would have suffered a magical fall eventually.

It was only after around a hundred years of experience that Aleister could give a simple response here. He chose to seal away his bad habits and respect his predecessor's simplicity.

"I see."

"However."

Until a moment before, that powerful Rosicrucian had thought she had complete control of the world, including science, magic, and even the Transcendents of the Bridge Builders Cabal. She had been reduced to no more than a flat face and an intangible change came over the expert who held her. She had already proven very clearly what happened to any magicians who arrogantly misbehaved in her presence, regardless of their rank or legendary status.

With that established, Anna Kingsford simply smiled.

"If your behavior moves beyond what I deem to be necessary, I will ~~X~~ hesitate to turn against you. The ~~too~~ safety you so selfishly imagine you have can be torn down at any time."

“I will keep that in mind.”

Aleister pushed up on the physical slide switch installed along the centerline of her back between the shoulder blades. He was only using one finger, but he was as cautious as someone gently slicing open a heart with a knife.

The light vanished from the top of her hat and from her glasses and she collapsed to the asphalt in standby mode. Aleister *ignored her like she was a mere tool* and picked up only the face film can.

Was he the dancer seeking a saint’s head? Or was he the lonely Norse god seeking wisdom and advice?

The human lifted the can respectfully in both arms, brought the face to eye level, and spoke.

“I think it’s time you told me everything, Anna Sprengel.”

“About what?”

“About the Transcendents of the Bridge Builders Cabal. Especially with regards to Alice Anotherbible.”

He was answered with silence.

He was willing to throw the flat film can like a frisbee as a *toy* for the golden retriever, but there was no need to rush.

Anna Sprengel could not defeat Anna Kingsford.

She could retry it trillions of times and the result would never change. Just like rock could never lose to scissors.

The battle was already over.

“Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland is a children’s story adored not just in England but worldwide. However, it carries an entirely different meaning for anyone with a knowledge of Kabbalah. That *legend* is fairly well known in the magical world.”

“...”

“But you see, I started that legend and I never even met Lewis Carroll. People also say Alice’s innocence, her fixation on other people’s inner thoughts, and the adventure that led her on are the origin of the Thelemic principle of listening to your heart as spelled out in the Book of the Law. In other words, Alice Anotherbible is *something born of the unique system of Magick developed by Aleister Crowley.*”

So what exactly was she?

Aleister didn't think she was a tarot set that reproduced a specific person's mind like he had seen when dealing with the Golden cabal, but there had to be plenty of other methods. She could be an artificial human created from specific external effects applied to a pregnant woman, she could be an artificial spirit like the Loch Ness monster, or she could be any number of other things.

Had a new life been created for its creator's purposes?

Or had an existing person had their soul reshaped?

Sex, drugs, and cults. The system of Magick allowed one to ignore all existing morals and taboos to improve their personal magic, so there were plenty of options.

This truly was the opposite of aiding others. Aleister had developed it all himself, but even he had eventually grown disgusted with how extremely self-serving it was.

"Sing for me," he said.

"Is that my role?"

"I realize I am about the last person in the world who can get away with saying this, but I am going to say it anyway: This is really pissed me off and I will not let you or anyone else toy with that boy's life any further."



The phone conversation underway did not match the mood of the shouted countdown, the cheers, or the booming fireworks.

"Eh? Touma, if you were having money trouble, you should have just asked your mother and me to send you some. In fact, I thought we sent you a fair amount for the winter after you said you weren't coming home for the holidays."

"How many times do I have to tell you it's too late to send me money now!? I said up front the ATMs don't start running again until the 4th. That's why I decided I couldn't count on any New Year's money and took my chances with a part-time job in Shibuya instead."

"Yes, but we could just use HayHay."

"...What?"

"The electronic payment service. The one you can use to pay at the supermarket or convenience store by holding your phone out to the machine next to the register. Remember when you called to tell us you were using a smartphone now – I guess just to test out the call

function – and you sounded so excited about it? We sent a gift payment to your account back then, so you should have a fair amount of funds available. Touma, you really need to learn how to use all the basic apps. Why is my teenage son more clueless about this than a middle-aged man like me?”

“.....”

Kamijou quickly covered the speaker of his phone with his hand, but it was too late.

The cheap phone was bad about sound leakage.

He trembled as he looked to the side to find Kumokawa Seria shaking her head with a hand on her forehead. The look on his beautiful upperclassman’s face clearly said, “Sorry, boy, but I can’t think of a solution to this one.”

Then the 15cm god and the gluttonous nun attacked him simultaneously.

The peaceful scene some of the world’s strongest monsters had wished for was dyed red with spilled blood.

AFTERWORD

If you picked them up one at a time, welcome back. If you bought them all at once, welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This time, it's December 31, the countdown to the end of the year!! From the moment the word "countdown" came to mind, I knew the story had to be set in either Shibuya or New York! And since I hadn't resolved the 49-yen New Year's Tokyo survival life within GT5, I decided to make it a part-time job story. From that starting point, I built up a story that could fit the main theme I wanted to do: What are the members other than Alice like and how strong are they?

Shibuya appeared in Intellectual Village and was passed through in Boo Boo. I honestly went back and forth a lot on whether I wanted Kamijou running around Shibuya or Akihabara. They're polar opposites! I think it would have been entertaining in a different way to have Aradia and the Bologna Succubus jumping between Akihabara's buildings. But I went with Shibuya because I preferred the idea of no one noticing the danger even though two strangely-dressed magicians are slinging extreme spells at each other in an ordinary city. I will let all of you decide if I made the right decision there.

This one revealed that the Transcendents of the Bridge Builders Cabal are all magicians strong enough to rival the entire magic side and their goal is to make the world a better place. But if you compare them to the Magic Gods who are satisfied creating an ideal world on their own, you can see how they have basically min-maxed their diffusion and destruction skills. The irritating thing for them is that they can destroy everything with ease, but they can't remake it all afterwards. They're so reluctant to play their one and only card that they were even caught in Othinus's destruction of the world and killed. (Because if the Transcendents had killed Othinus in that dark space, they couldn't have remade the world like she did.) With that in mind, can you see why they're so terrified of Alice whose innocence makes her impossible to predict? She has the destruction button right in front of her, after all.

Aradia, the Bologna Succubus, and Good, Old Mary.

I designed them so you could compare them and make some good guesses about the average and basic specs of the Transcendents. And after working that out, it might be a fun mental exercise to also imagine just how extraordinary Alice was for what she did in GT5 and what

the difference is between a standard Transcendent who uses their great charisma to start a cult or riot vs. Anna Sprengel who created the giant IT company R&C Occultics and used it to mess with the entire world.

I give my thanks to my illustrators Haimura-san and Itou Tateki-san and my editors Miki-san, Anan-san, Nakajima-san, and Hamamura-san. This one had the Transcendents! And a second Anna!! All the magic side characters with a weirdly powerful presence about them must have made this one tough. Thank you again for everything.

And I give my thanks to the readers. How long has it been in real time since my debut novel? And in the story we've finally reached December 31!! Yes, the endless in-story year is finally over!! ...Ahem, thank you all for staying with me to the end of that year. I hope very much you will see Kamijou Touma and the rest in the new year as well.

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.

Did you notice I changed how I spell Lucifer?¹

-Kamachi Kazuma

1. He used to spell it ルシフェル(Rushiferu), but changed it to ルシファー(Rushifaa) in this volume, which is based more on the English pronunciation.