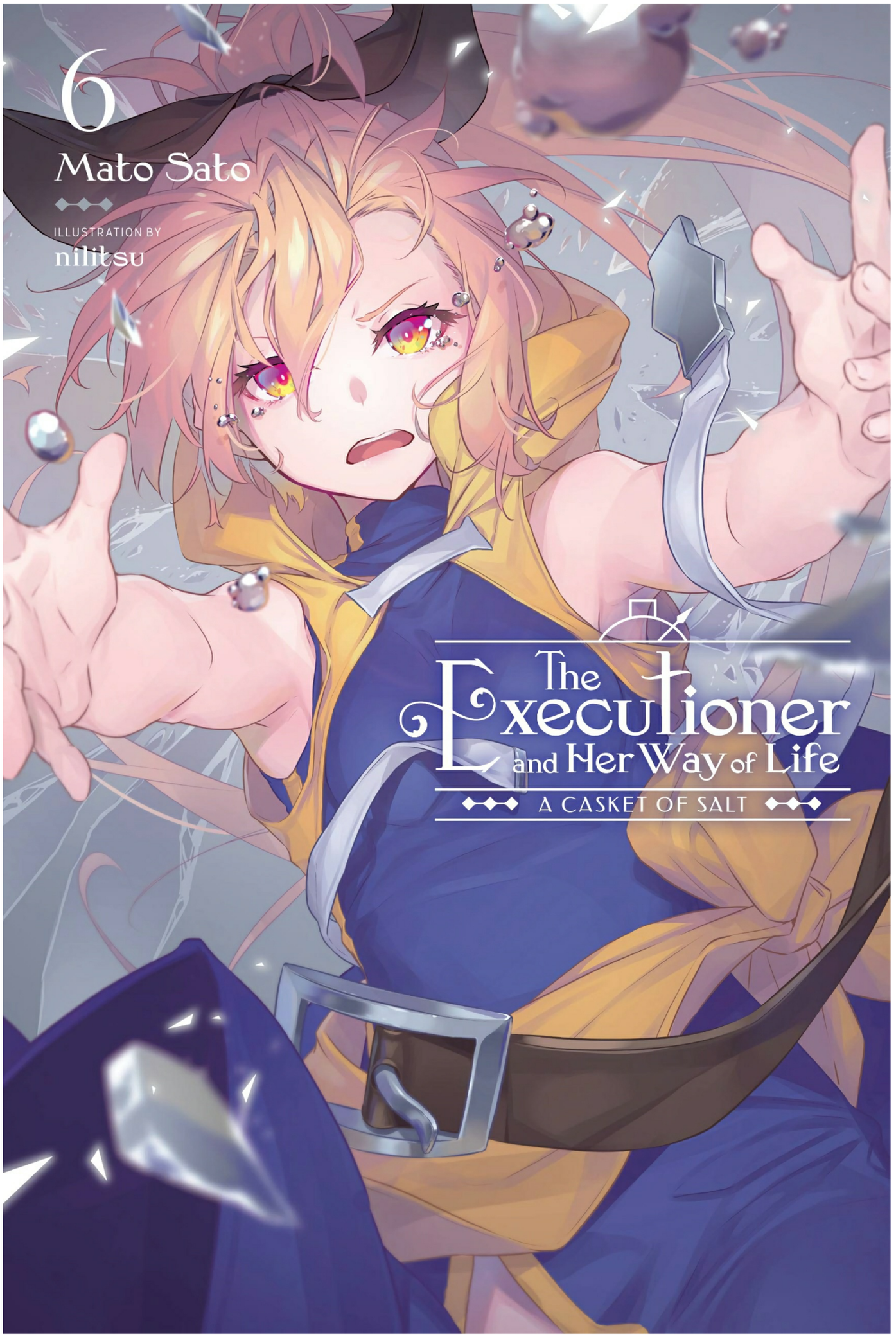
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Mato Sato
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The Executioner and Her Way of Life
A CASKET OF SALT

The Executioner and Her Way of Life
Mato Sato
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AKARI
Japanese girl
MENOU
Former Executioner

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MASTER FLARE
Red
Executioner

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Mato Sato

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The Executioner and Her Way of Life 6

Mato Sato

TRANSLATION BY JENNY MCKEON ✣ COVER ART BY NILITSU

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SHOKEI SHOUJO NO IKIRU MICHI (VIRGIN ROAD) Vol. 6

-SHIO NO HITSUGI—

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Original Japanese edition published in 2021 by SB Creative Corp The English edition is published by arrangement with SB Creative Corp., Tokyo in care of Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

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New York, NY 10001

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First Yen On Edition: March 2023

Edited by Yen On Editorial: Jordan Blanco Designed by Yen Press Design: Liz Parlett Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Sato, Mato, author. | nilitsu, illustrator. | McKeon, Jenny, translator.

Title: The executioner and her way of life / Mato Sato ; illustration by nilitsu ; translation by Jenny McKeon.

Other titles: Shokei shoujo no ikiru michi. English Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2021– Identifiers: LCCN 2020054675 | ISBN 9781975319694 (v. 1 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975319717 (v. 2 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975335809 (v. 3 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975336455 (v. 4 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975345617 (v. 5 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975350062 (v. 6 ; trade paperback) | ISBN 9781975350062 (paperback) Subjects: CYAC: Adventure and adventurers—Fiction. | Fantasy.

Classification: LCC PZ7.1.S26496 Ex 2021 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2020054675

ISBNs: 978-1-97535006-2 (paperback) 978-1-9753-5007-9 (ebook)

E3-20230210-JV-NF-ORI

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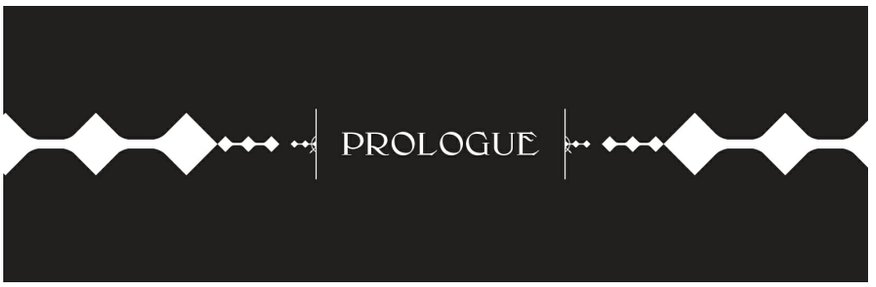

Akari Tokitou sat alone in a room, absently resting her chin in her hands.

She'd been brought here and told to rest for the evening, and the chamber was surprisingly opulent.

Seemingly priceless antiques were strewn about for use as ordinary furniture. A modern girl like Akari was accustomed to newfangled items produced with the latest technology, not elegant, time-worn furnishings. Even while she was led to this room, the castle walls kept her intimidated into silence.

"A parallel world, huh?"

Whispering the truth didn't help it feel more real.

Akari was told this place was called the Grisarika Kingdom. Naturally, she'd never heard of such a place. Undoubtedly, there were plenty of locations back on Earth that Akari had never heard of, but now that she was aware of her ability to use something called "conjuring," she had to accept this was a different universe.

Everyone she'd met in this world had been kind thus far, but Akari was in no position to assess other people's behavior.

How were people in Japan handling her disappearance? Apparently, she'd been "summoned" here, but could she get back to her world? Her mother and father…were hardly ever home anyway and probably wouldn't notice. However, Akari still needed to go to school. She didn't want to fall behind in classes, never mind the unspeakable possibility that she might be held back after missing too many days.

And most of all…

The empty seat in Akari's classroom flashed through the girl's mind.

What if Akari wasn't there when her friend finally returned?

“Ugh…”

Akari heaved a gloomy sigh and clenched her fists tightly. Restlessness gathered in her chest, but she lacked anything to do about it. Her feelings couldn’t keep up with the abrupt change in her reality.

A trapped feeling settled over Akari while she peered out the window.

The color of the sunlight was fading; soon, night would fall.

Normally, she’d be home from school and in her room by now. In Japan, Akari had often stayed up late into the night, chatting with her best friend via a messaging app. After that friend vanished, she’d gotten into the habit of checking for messages anyway.

Akari put her hand in her pocket, only to realize once again that there was nothing in there.

Her body froze, focused on that emptiness.

Akari was all alone in this large room, with no means of connecting with anyone.

She didn’t have a daily routine to fall back on in this world. Frustration was building, as though to drown out Akari’s escalating fear of her present solitude.

“This is so stupid…”

What was so great about a parallel world anyway?

Akari began to feel claustrophobic, even though this room was far more spacious than her bedroom in Japan. Her breaths turned shallow.

Just as she stood, opened the window, and stepped out onto the balcony to get some air…

“Huh?”

…a girl in a maid outfit landed lightly on the banister, as if she’d dropped out of the sky.

She was beautiful. Her chestnut-colored hair was nearly white from the glow of dusk, and it was tied up with a scarf ribbon. Akari’s eyes went wide at the sight of this visitor, and she leaned forward.

“H…Hakua?!”

Her beloved friend and classmate who went missing…

The beautiful girl Akari Tokitou met in this world looked exactly like her best friend.

CHAPTER 1

Those Who Take Back

The rainwater pooled atop this vast white land, becoming a mirror.

There were no obstacles on the perfectly smooth surface to obstruct one's view. The cerulean sky shone clear on the water, clouds drifting across the endless reflection. Looking at the mirrored image of land and sky destroyed all sense of distance, creating the illusion that the figures standing in its center were locked away in a beautiful globe.

Amid this beautiful scene, Menou focused on the person standing before her.

The tall woman wore priestess robes the same color as Menou's and had a strangely sinister air. Her dark-red hair was cut short. This was none other than the woman who raised Menou to be a killer. This was the legendary Executioner, Master Flare.

Her crimson locks contrasted harshly against the shades of blue and white surrounding the two. The scripture in her left hand glowed with Guiding Light, but she didn't attempt a scripture conjuring. The sharp edge of the dagger in her right hand was pointed directly at Menou.

Menou stood on guard with her own dagger at the ready. Her still-active Guiding Thread fluttered in the wind, as did her faintly chestnut-colored hair, held in a ponytail by a black ribbon.

In this illusory world, the tension between them was all but visible.

A lone spectator watched teacher and student square off: a girl in elegant attire.

It was Akari Tokitou, an Otherworlder from Japan.

This battle that had started in the holy land and moved to the land of salt was centered on her and the powerful conjuring known as a Pure Concept within her.

Would Menou and Akari find a way to keep living, or would they die to Master Flare?

This battle would decide their fate.

Not long before the duel began, the current Menou and Akari had let each other into their hearts and minds.

A Guiding Force link between human souls was a rare thing. Menou's highly unusual nature and the deep level of trust between the two girls forged a deep connection so strong they could sense the other's feelings and experience the other's memories.

This Guiding Force unification, which only Menou and Akari could achieve, essentially turned them into a single being.

Akari now existed within Menou, and Menou's consciousness lived within Akari as well.

Akari's feelings had spread to Menou through their link, giving her the necessary push. It burned like a flame in her heart. These uncharacteristically heated emotions could only be Akari's passionate feelings for Menou. The power that flowed from Akari into Menou became a guide that drove her to fight.

Slowly, silently, she drew closer.

Master Flare was at an overwhelming disadvantage under the present circumstances. The Guiding Force Akari provided to Menou made her one of the most powerful beings in the world. Menou was already among the Faust's best at manipulating Guiding Force, and now she had the incredible reserves of an Otherworlder at her disposal.

Master Flare was surely aware of this, yet the woman known as a living legend showed no signs of distress.

One wrong action could upset the balance.

The air vibrated with tension as the pair drew near one another. Their movements were almost impossible to follow, not because they were too fast, but because they were too slow. The distance shrank leisurely, so much so that

it was difficult to notice. It nearly seemed that Menou and Master Flare were testing each other's patience.

Water rippled faintly at their feet. Concentric circles spread around them, touching the tips of their toes and pulling away.

They ventured closer far slower than the ripples on the water.

Finally, the tips of their daggers met.

"…!"

The tension in the air ruptured.

Both women acted simultaneously—each one's finely honed blade aimed for the arteries on the other's wrist. In perfect symmetry, their hands collided, snaked back, then went for the next attack without hesitation.

In the blink of an eye, their blades met more than ten times. Neither Menou nor her master dared take a step nearer. There was no fancy footwork; only the arms wielding the daggers moved. The rest of their bodies were unnaturally still. A single misstep meant a slashed wrist, which kept them rooted.

It was Menou who made the next ploy. With a flick of her wrist, she threw her blade from a nearly point-blank distance.

Her target was her opponent's torso. She gripped the crest conjuring Guiding Thread as she threw the dagger, not aiming for any particular vital points, just hoping to score a hit.

Master Flare didn't budge, simply using the cover of the scripture in her left hand to repel the incoming blade. Menou had now lost her weapon. The careless attack should have cost her dearly, yet her master didn't retaliate.

In fact, she did quite the opposite.

Master Flare jumped aside.

Guiding Force: Connect (via Guiding Thread)—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Gale]

Menou's Guiding Force traveled down the thread she'd created earlier and activated the Gale crest conjuring. The surge of wind that erupted from the dagger's hilt blew it upward right before it hit the ground.

If Master Flare hadn’t moved, the rising weapon would have stuck into her throat. And the dagger didn’t stop after one movement.

The weapon danced through the air for a follow-up attack, employing the power of the summoned wind. Menou used the Guiding Thread and Gale to manipulate the dagger from a distance. It was an incredible feat of precise Guiding Force manipulation.

This was the same masterful technique that had amazed Ashuna Grisarika, the mighty Princess Knight, back in Libelle. However, Master Flare didn’t even twitch an eyebrow, suggesting she’d expected as much from Menou. She dodged with an easy sidestep. Her confident balance made it look like she was skating on ice instead of standing in water.

The dagger changed its trajectory twice, then three times, finally attacking from an overhead blind spot on its fourth movement. Master Flare repelled it easily with a strike from her own blade.

Menou pulled on the Guiding Force thread to retrieve her weapon.

In the last exchange of blows, Menou’s master hadn’t given the girl a single opening, even as she fended off attacks from every angle. Master Flare had her arm raised now, appearing tantalizingly vulnerable, but Menou knew better than to take the bait.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Thunderclap]

A simple yet perfectly timed crest conjuring stopped Menou from stepping any nearer.

Lightning shot from Flare’s dagger and struck the water’s surface, sending up a misty spray.

Menou flinched, and that was all Master Flare needed. She sped forward in the span of a breath.

A splash of water, and the two were within arm’s reach of each other again.

Flare stabbed at Menou’s vitals, then swept her leg. Menou blocked with her boot to avoid losing her balance, then counterattacked with her other leg, striking at her former master’s head. Where before they engaged in a

motionless battle of blades, now both used their entire bodies in a martial arts showdown. It was similar to a close-range boxing match. Their blades and limbs clashed at remarkable speed, all as Menou slowly ramped up her Guiding Force output.

Her soul pulsed steadily as Akari's Guiding Force flowed into her through their connection. With her strength invigorated by this power, her steps kicked up water.

Even as the impact of her strikes increased, Menou's moves lost none of their finesse, and her body adapted to Akari's Guiding Force expertly. The Guiding Enhancement that raised her physical abilities was reaching a level she'd never experienced.

Menou's base Guiding Force level was average compared to other priestesses. As an Executioner who staked her life in battle, she was considered talentless when it came to Guiding Force capacity.

But now that weakness was gone.

Master Flare's eyes focused on Menou.

There was no distress in her gaze. She was utterly calm, despite dealing with an opponent whose Guiding Enhancement outmatched her own. Did she have some plan? Menou shook off this doubt as she fought. This was Master Flare. Of course she had a plan. Menou had long since cast off the kind of naïveté that would allow her to suspect otherwise. Master Flare had battled opponents far stronger and won countless times.

Menou knew how dangerous this woman was as an enemy.

Even so, she was going to surpass that legend.

Menou slashed.

Her powerful strike knocked Master Flare's dagger into the air with a *clang*. After failing to block the hit completely, Master Flare lost her weapon and balance.

An opening.

The sight of her seemingly defenseless master conjured a memory.

A similar situation had occurred during their previous engagement in the holy land's cathedral.

"Hey, thanks for not killing me."

Menou had the perfect opening to kill Master Flare, and she'd let it slip. She couldn't bring herself to drive her dagger into her master's throat.

Master Flare was special to Menou, more than anyone else.

But now Akari was behind her.

She didn't hesitate. Accepting her master's taunt as it surfaced in her mind, Menou thrust her weapon straight and true.

Guiding Force: Connect—Priestess Robe, Crest—Invoke [Barrier]

Master Flare's invocation blocked the attack that would otherwise have pierced her throat.

A crack formed in the barrier where it met Menou's dagger. Menou focused hard on the fissures and what lay beyond.

In the narrow opening, she could see Master Flare laughing with her mouth open wide.

"Hff!"

One breath.

As Menou let out a determined hiss, her blade pushed deeper into the barrier. Her determination became deadly intention, driving the weapon for her master's neck.

This time, however, there was a reaction.

Something struck Menou's arm from below. Master Flare's foot collided with her student's limb, knocking it away.

Now it was Menou who was off-balance. And at that precise moment, Master Flare's dagger fell, and the woman snatched it and imbued the crest with Guiding Light.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Thunderclap]

Now.

On Menou's signal, a conjuring occurred some distance away from the fight.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Suspension]

Akari hadn't shown any signs of joining the battle, but now she fired a Pure Concept conjuring from her fingertip.

Menou hadn't left Akari to observe. She'd ensured the other girl was far enough to be free of the cross fire, yet still close enough that her conjurings were within range.

Akari couldn't move like Menou, even now that she shared Menou's memories through their Guiding Force connection. Naturally, Menou's fighting style was optimized for her use. If Akari tried to mimic the movements without a weapon, it was bound to fail in all sorts of ways. And it was beyond terrifying to test her close-combat skills in a real battle against someone as powerful as Master Flare.

So instead, Menou had deployed Akari as a sort of long-distance conjuring cannon.

Master Flare was rooted in place with her leg raised… But the *Suspension* from Akari's finger gun wasn't aimed at her. Even in a moment of apparent vulnerability, Flare might still evade.

Instead, the Suspension conjuring hit the surface of the rainwater that turned the land of salt into a mirror.

Time froze for the water's surface. Any shoes soaked in it also stopped, creating a powerful bond holding anyone caught.

This wasn't Akari's idea. Menou sent her the plan through their Guiding Force connection. Sharing intentions without needing to vocalize them was incredibly useful for coordinated attacks. Akari was an inexperienced combatant, and she would never have been able to intervene in this high-level battle with its constantly evolving strategies. She could only pull off such precise support because she sensed Menou's ideas as if they were her own.

With one leg raised in the air and the other supporting her weight, Master Flare should have been unable to escape.

“Hrm.”

This single syllable from Akari was enough to communicate frustration and disappointment to Menou.

Master Flare’s planted foot wasn’t snared in the *Suspension*-locked water. The exact moment Akari’s conjuring hit, the water on her boot evaporated.

The *Thunderclap* Master Flare invoked before Akari’s *Suspension* wasn’t aimed at Menou, but at her own feet.

Such a thing would’ve been impossible if she hadn’t predicted Akari and Menou’s team attack with perfect accuracy.

Menou had earned the nickname Flarette in her clandestine work as an Executioner for a good reason: Her fighting style was modeled after her master’s. Thus, Flare easily saw through her pupil’s strategies and reacted accordingly.

The wasted *Suspension* dispelled, allowing the water’s surface to return to normal time. One plan had now ended in failure. Although Akari was aggravated, Menou didn’t let it discourage her. She put some distance between herself and her master, then let out a quiet exhale.

In this battle, the situation changed drastically from one moment to the next. Yet Menou didn’t feel half bad locked in this dizzyingly tense whirlwind.

Against all odds, her sharpened mind and the excitement of the battle formed a miraculously balanced combination. On this battlefield, she thought only of Master Flare. Menou and her precious Akari were focused on taking Master Flare down by any means necessary; they felt no hesitation.

It was strange.

Whenever Menou’s blade clashed with her teacher’s, her sense of self was carved into sharper relief.

This fight was Menou’s first step toward changing the world.

It was a necessary trial for the two of them to continue walking together. By

defeating this person, Menou would seize something she needed to forge a path ahead with Akari.

Sensing Menou's strong will also brought out more motivation in Akari. Menou smiled when she sensed Akari's earnest response.

There was only one issue. Menou still couldn't shake off Master Flare's Guiding Enhancement.

At this point, Menou was maintaining a level of Guiding Enhancement on par with Momo's. That ought to have been more than Master Flare could handle in head-on close combat, especially considering she was at a disadvantage.

Yet somehow, Master Flare kept pace.

Her base Guiding Force capacity wasn't much different from Menou's. She should be outmatched now. There had to be a trick to it. At the very least, this wasn't Master Flare's Guiding Force alone.

Menou focused on determining what was increasing her master's Guiding Force.

Master Flare had the same equipment she always did. A dagger with the guiding branch and thunderclap crests, priestess robes with the barrier crest, and a scripture in her left hand. The jewel on her forehead was a Guiding vessel, too, but Menou knew its effect, and it couldn't bolster one's Guiding Force.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Branch]

Master Flare wordlessly invoked a crest conjuring.

Branches grew out of her dagger into a single large tree. It was big enough to conceal Master Flare behind its trunk. Menou braced herself for a large-scale ceremonial conjuring using the Guiding Branch, but that wasn't what happened.

With a loud crack, the shining tree collapsed. It struck the ground hard enough to cause faint tremors, but Master Flare vanished.

"Wah!"

Menou caught Akari's exclamation and felt the same frustration, although she didn't voice it.

Guiding Camouflage.

It was a highly advanced use of Guiding Enhancement that changed the color of the Guiding Light around the user's body to disguise them. Master Flare had disappeared by blending flawlessly into the scenery.

The moment she vanished, all sense of her presence was cut off, too. Neither Menou nor Akari could tell where Master Flare was.

Master Flare couldn't teleport instantly like Akari. She had to be somewhere nearby. Knowing that she was that close made not being able to see her that much more unsettling, however.

Master Flare hadn't become a legend as a warrior.

At her core, she was an assassin.

She didn't need to fight head-on, crossing blades and trading conjurings. All she had to do was invisibly stab someone through the heart from behind, and they would die. Hostages, surprise attacks, foul play—no matter how cowardly the method, Master Flare employed it to slay countless people. Being forced to face Menou head-on couldn't have been an ideal scenario.

So the moment Menou grew suspicious of Flare's Guiding Force amount and went on the defensive to try to observe her, Master Flare altered her strategy. Undoubtedly, she'd intended to seize the advantage if Menou underestimated her capacity without noticing the change.

Menou focused her senses. Guiding Camouflage disguised the user's appearance, but their mass still existed. She hoped to see ripples in the water that would betray her opponent's steps, but there was no unnatural movement on the liquid's surface. No matter how intensely she concentrated, listening for any faint sound and scanning for any irregularities, Menou failed to locate her teacher.

"……"

The battle was at a standstill.

Time ticked away, slow but steady.

Anxiety gathered in Menou's chest.

Should she use a scripture conjuring to take control of the area? If she drew upon Akari's Guiding Force, it would be strong enough to prevent any escape. It would definitely be effective against an invisible opponent.

Like her master, Menou tended toward backhanded strategies meant to outwit. And with a vast supply of power at her disposal, thanks to Akari, she wasn't overly concerned about forcing a face-to-face confrontation. In point of fact, Menou's best hope of winning was through brute force.

But what if Master Flare struck while Menou was focused on the scripture conjuring? Menou was confident that she could sense an attack before it landed, but what about Akari? If Master Flare went after Akari while Menou concentrated on the conjuring, there'd be nothing she could do. Akari was still Akari, even if she shared Menou's experiences through their Guiding Force connection.

There was no way of knowing who Master Flare would target. However, Akari wouldn't die. She would always revive with *Regression*…right? How could they be sure Master Flare didn't have some other weapon to replace the Sword of Salt that could overcome her immortality? The thought was too terrifying to test. Menou was unwilling to gamble on whether Master Flare stabbing Akari would kill her.

"…"

The silence continued. A bead of sweat dripped down Menou's forehead and fell.

Plip. The droplet sent a ripple across the water.

Menou was worried for Akari and herself.

Were she fighting alone, this likely would have led to a war of attrition, but there was another here to see things differently.

"Menou, you're overthinking it!"

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Fracture]

Guiding Light glowed around Akari's fingertip as she drew a circle in the air.

The attack radiated out in all directions, and the air behind Menou wavered.

Master Flare, who'd been using Guiding Camouflage on herself and the Guiding Branch she was standing on and extending, was forced to move to avoid Akari's conjuring.

Menou dived forward without even taking the time to turn around. Master Flare's blade grazed her cheek. She'd gone after her pupil. Menou threw out a kick on gut instinct, still not looking back in the direction of her former teacher.

Luckily, the lack of force behind the blow made it harder for Master Flare to handle. The toe of Menou's boot just barely touched Master Flare, but that was enough to send Guiding Force toward the point of contact.

Guiding Force: Connect—

This wasn't Guiding Force manipulation to invoke a conjuring. Menou channeled her Guiding Force into Master Flare's body at the point where they met to invade the woman's spirit. This was the same technique she'd used on the red conjured soldier in Grisarika, although it was a far cry from the mutual Guiding Force connection she shared with Akari.

For the first time, Master Flare's expression changed to one of obvious irritation. A surge of rejection rose to drive Menou's consciousness back.

Each human's inner power naturally opposed all others. Unless one accepted the influx, as Akari had, an invader couldn't meddle for long. And that was true even for Menou, who possessed unique properties. The time was even shorter if the target pushed the invader out, as Master Flare was doing.

Menou only needed a second, though. Her goal was to discover the source of Master Flare's bolstered Guiding Force.

The earthen vein had wholly dried up here since the land had turned to salt. There was no route to connect to the heavenly vein that flowed in the atmosphere, either. This left no outside means of acquiring more Guiding Force, with Menou's connection to Akari being a special exception. Menou attempted to use the fleeting seconds of the Guiding Force connection to clear up this mystery.

"…The scripture?"

“Tsk!”

Master Flare clicked her tongue in annoyance at Menou’s muttered realization.

The scripture in Master Flare’s left hand supplied her with unusual levels of Guiding Force. It wasn’t as much as Menou received from Akari, but it was significant nonetheless.

However, as far as Menou knew, the Faust’s scriptures had no ability to produce Guiding Force. In fact, there were virtually no objects that could achieve that feat.

With a few rare exceptions, Guiding Force was a power produced from the soul of a living thing.

Paradoxically, this meant that if a soul dwelled within an object, it could theoretically become a tool to produce Guiding Force.

“A Guiding Force life-form…created from a human.”

There was disgust in Menou’s voice as she named the phenomenon in Master Flare’s scripture. Her old master had likely deliberately done what Menou achieved accidentally with Sahara. On top of that, the soul trapped in Flare’s scripture had to be that of an Otherworlder. Its Guiding Force far exceeded an ordinary human’s.

Master Flare didn’t confirm or deny it. But the brief Guiding Force connection had made it plain to Menou.

The greatest taboo hunter in history, the legendary Executioner known as Flare.

Perhaps it was what remained of Menou’s conscience as a priestess that made her question why someone who had destroyed more taboos than anyone else would do such a thing. The forbidden nature of taboos was drilled deep into her during the many years at the monastery.

Menou was hardly able to speak on the matter now, though.

Master Flare undoubtedly knew Menou’s thoughts, for she didn’t display any alarm. The woman silently leveled her dagger at Menou, hand completely

steady.

Menou pushed down the urge to criticize herself. This was no time to wallow in sentiment.

“Master. What exactly do you have sealed in that scripture?”

“Tsk. I guess the game is up.”

Master Flare didn’t respond directly. After muttering a foul word, she touched the gem on her forehead.

Guiding Force: Connect—Emerald, Crest—Invoke [Conditional Activation]

Conditional Activation was a technique that could be carved into a conjuring tool to trigger automatically under specific circumstances.

What conditions had Master Flare set, and in what Guiding vessel?

“Menou. Do you remember what you two used to get here?”

Cautiously, Menou answered the sudden question. “…The Dragon Gate.”

The land of salt, once an enormous continent, was far across the ocean from where Menou and the others lived.

They had crossed this great distance using an apparatus called the Dragon Gate, which was hidden in the heart of the holy land. The device was a surviving relic from an ancient era when humanity thrived. It used a train-station-like facility to create a passage that transported passengers across incredible distances.

“Right.” Master Flare nodded coolly. “So what might happen if a Guiding explosive with a Conditional Activation were embedded beneath the teleport gate connected to this place?”

Akari’s face froze in horror. Menou’s expression didn’t waver, but she felt the same way.

A Guiding explosive.

Similar to a Guiding gun, it was a weapon that could be used without any understanding of Guiding Force.

Destroying the teleportation gate, the product of a complex ceremonial

conjuring, would be simple. But since it would leave Master Flare stranded here, too, Menou had unconsciously excluded it from the list of possible tactics.

Master Flare had unceremoniously crushed that misstep.

“The conditions are simple. It’ll explode in ten minutes.”

If that happened, all three of them would be stranded on this island in the far reaches of the sea.

There was nothing here but water and salt.

Master Flare sneered. “How about it, Menou? Want to show off the results of that training you did all those years ago?”

“Ah, right. I do remember living off nothing but water and salt for a month, now that you mention it.”

The ridiculous training she’d undergone in her days at the monastery was an amusing memory now. Long ago, Menou and Momo had been restricted to only water and salt for a month, an exercise that was more like punishment.

Menou licked her lips.

By making this declaration now, Master Flare was all but acknowledging that she had little hope of defeating Menou and Akari. She would only knowingly destroy the teleport gate and trap herself here with them to force a draw.

Menou and Akari knew this was a trap to separate them. Splitting up now would be a poor move.

The ideal solution would be to work together to defeat Master Flare quickly and return to the holy land.

However, there was no guarantee that Menou and Akari could beat Flare in less than ten minutes, even as a team. If they started fighting again, their opponent would surely evade and stall for time. Now that there was a time limit, Menou and Akari were bound to become more panicked as the countdown reached its end, which might lead them to make a fatal error.

What was the best option?

Considering the risks, their answer was clear.

“Menou!”

“I’m counting on you.”

With that brief exchange, they went into action.

Despite knowing it was a trap, there was no choice but to go. The explosive might be a bluff, but it was too great a risk to ignore. No teleportation gate meant no way home. Even Akari’s *Teleportation*, which meddled with space, wasn’t powerful enough to send them across the sea back to the holy land.

Phosphorescent Guiding Light surrounded Akari’s body.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Teleportation]

Akari vanished in a brilliant flash. She’d used a *Teleportation* conjuring to transport herself. Her spatial conjurings could only carry her over short distances. And now that Akari’s Guiding Force connection with Menou helped supplement her memories, there was no fear she would become a Human Error. As long as they restored the link after the battle, Menou could return any memories Akari had lost and return her to normal.

Surely it wouldn’t take longer than five minutes to locate the bomb Master Flare claimed to have planted.

Now the teacher and student were truly one-on-one.

Master Flare’s intentions were painfully clear; she wished to end this in the next five minutes.

If Menou survived the onslaught, she would win.

Despite being at a disadvantage, Master Flare had managed to separate Menou and Akari.

She truly was a formidable enemy.

Despite that, Menou found herself smiling. She couldn’t suppress a strangely out-of-place joy. It was odd. Menou had never thought she enjoyed fighting. She was certainly a far cry from a battle-crazed maniac.

Yet each time she clashed with her former master, she discovered a new side

of herself.

And that was wonderful.

Blood dripped from the scratch on her cheek. Menou reduced the strength of her connection with Akari. Sharing emotions while the other girl searched would only hinder their plan. Divided attention could prove fatal.

“Hmm?”

Momentary doubt flitted through Menou’s mind.

Searching the ground.

There was something about it that…

No. Menou shook her head. Whatever it was, she intuited that it had nothing to do with the battle. Her current mental resources were limited, so she couldn’t afford to waste them on anything unnecessary.

Although Menou still had Akari’s supply of Guiding Force, their empathetic connection was considerably weaker. Menou couldn’t sense Akari’s condition, possibly because of the distance.

There was a curious sense of loss at their link diminishing, but Menou could not dwell on it.

Just as Menou shifted her attention, a Guiding Branch closed in on her. The girl clicked her tongue and evaded, leaping forward.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Thread]

When she invoked her most familiar crest conjuring, it called up a memory.

A long time ago, Master Flare had complimented her embroidery.

Menou didn’t recall the exact words, but she clearly remembered the rare bit of praise. It must have been while they were at the monastery, and it had been a very trivial comment. Perhaps it hadn’t even been meant as praise, and the young Menou had misinterpreted it as such.

Menou had only studied stitching basics, while the younger Momo devoted herself to embroidery with far more enthusiasm.

Regardless, it was one of the very few times Menou recalled Master Flare

complimenting her on anything.

It stuck with the girl enough that it became the sole reason she'd picked Guiding Thread as one of the crests to engrave in her dagger.

Even as Flare's closest disciple, Menou didn't model everything after her teacher. It was her wish to stand by the crimson-haired woman as an equal.

Since the day she'd wished to be like her master, Menou never allowed herself any regrets.

She devoted her entire body and mind to her battle with Master Flare.

Soft footsteps echoed in a seemingly abandoned structure.

This was before Menou and Akari had arrived at the land of salt. Akari had been taken away by Master Flare, and Menou chose to bring down the entire holy land to rescue her. Knowing that most of the holy land's buildings were formed from a conjured barrier, she'd cut off the connection to the earthen vein that maintained the city.

With the barrier structures gone, only two edifices remained.

One was the train-platform-like facility, an ancient relic with Guiding Force tracks that served as an entrance and exit: the Dragon Gate.

It created gates that could send people and objects virtually anywhere in the world by way of the earthen vein that ran throughout the continent. In ancient times, these stations were features of ordinary towns. Now this one was the only remaining relic capable of long-distance teleportation.

As for the other building…

The cylindrical structure ran deep underground. This was the Star Memory, home to the recollections and records of humanity's entire history.

This library was erected not to house oral tales or accounts penned in ink but to house memories. A thousand years ago, a vast communication network of Guiding Force was constructed on the idea that the entire planet was a conjuring phenomenon. The Star Memory was a facility that controlled that network.

For Otherworlders, who lost their memories each time they used a Pure

Concept conjuring, this place was an invaluable lifeline that kept their spirits whole.

The Star Memory was completed during the time of the ancient civilization using a single person's Pure Concept. Memories took the forms of books because of that Pure Concept's influence as a cornerstone of the facility.

It was an incredible structure with a magnificent goal. Countless experiments were conducted in pursuit of that ambition. Conjuring researchers formed the theory, performed many experiments on animals, and then moved on to clinical studies with human subjects.

The person climbing the stairs toward the surface grimaced as old memories ran through her mind.

The sound of her footfalls on the steps fell silent. She clutched her chest as if fighting off an attack, staying in place for a while before resuming her walk.

"Not being able to *forget* things isn't very pleasant, either…"

The girl who was slowly approaching ground level wore a sailor-style school uniform. She looked young, not yet twenty. Black hair ran past her waist, suggesting that it hadn't been cut in many years. Her bangs were especially long, concealing more than half of her face.

Still, there was no hiding that she was beautiful.

She possessed long, slender legs and a perfectly proportioned body. Only one of her eyes was visible, and her bewitchingly long eyelashes alone were enough to fill any who saw her with a desire to glimpse more of her features. Her skin was pale by nature but made all the more so because she never went outside.

The girl had been inside the Star Memory for many years, but not because she'd been trapped. She could have left anytime she liked; it just wasn't worth the trouble.

Moving, thinking, and even living were all such dreadful bothers.

Her once courageous spirit had been worn down to listlessness over the course of a millennium, to the point that she barely felt anything from existing.

Suddenly, she stared intently at her hand. She'd had a very unusual visitor not

long ago: Manon Libelle, an underling of Pandemonium. Manon had wanted to see a particular book of memories. The girl had erased the visitor beyond any hope of resurrection. The weight of being unable to forget Manon after eradicating her was one more piece of emptiness heaped on a pile.

How long had it been since she stopped feeling anguish over taking a human life?

She kept moving toward the surface, one step at a time.

The single eye that peered out from behind her locks carried an emptiness.

Few others were wise enough to sympathize with this emptiness. She had experienced far more years than any human was meant to bear, swallowed up so much power that it transformed her very self. She was the exact opposite of Otherworlders, who slowly lost themselves by forgetting.

Her spirit endured by an inability to forget, filling up endlessly with memories. It was like utter darkness, but by nature, it had no color at all.

For the Pure Concept attached to her soul was *Ivory*.

“I’m so tired…”

With a long sigh, the girl took a book off one of the surrounding shelves. The scriptures members of the Faust received when they became priestesses were connected to this facility. As long as the scriptures, the Faust’s ultimate weapons, were scattered throughout the world, this girl had a searchable index of what happened to any priestess.

“She’s fighting Flare. Huh…”

The girl peered at the faraway battle, then closed the book.

This world, this planet, should have perished long ago. The ancient civilization was destroyed out of necessity.

They sent up satellites to observe and interfere with the weather, sapped the land dry, sought out new resources, and repeatedly summoned Otherworlders in an effort to gain control over various concepts.

Who remembered any of that now, though?

Those who would later become known as the Four Major Human Errors were originally test subjects during the height of human civilization. Even this girl—the Lord—was no different.

Back then, she had trustworthy friends who traveled the world with her and saved countless lives.

That's why she knew better than anyone.

If the world depended on a small minority to save it from destruction, there was a risk that group would destroy the majority.

Thus, she felt it was only fair.

She was permitted to use all of this planet to suit her whims. They didn't mind. The collective will of the Pure Concepts that dwelled within her urged her onward.

"I… We…"

She had absorbed so many. He and she, they and I, all intermingled and coexisted in her consciousness. No matter how many recollections she preserved, the effects of the ever-increasing power she constantly consumed and the time she had experienced still wore away at her soul and changed her nature.

The girl knew delusions controlled her, but that wasn't exclusive to her. Pure Concept wielders could either be absorbed and turn into Human Errors or become wholly possessed by false ideas.

Still, she opened the door to step outside.

She had spent so much time already that it piled up into debts that could never be repaid, chipping away at her.

Stepping outside for the first time in who knows how long, the girl stood still and squinted into the sunlight.

"It's so bright."

She took her first step into the open to seize upon a chance to finally liquidate those debts.

As one figure left the facility, a small shadow crept inside.

The reclusive resident of the Star Memory departed only to be replaced by a shadow that looked like a rain puddle dyed black. It spread onto the empty floor and began to bubble. The small thing boiled up and frothed over. Once it hit critical mass, it exploded.

The black shadow burst with a pop, not unlike a party cracker. Now there stood a small girl in a white, one-piece dress: Pandæmonium.

“Mmm! There’s no one here at aaaall, is there?”

Typically, this girl tended to do things in stark contrast to her innocent, naive appearance. However, now she looked around with an uncharacteristic show of caution.

Not long ago, she’d wavered on whether to enter this structure at all.

No holy land barrier protected it. The building was entirely vulnerable. Indeed, Manon had already slipped inside. There was no reason Pandæmonium couldn’t do the same.

She’d hesitated because of the presence she detected within that great library.

Her Human Error instincts had screamed like an alarm.

There was someone in the Star Memory that no Human Error wished to meet.

But the figure who inspired a mixture of fondness, fear, and pity all at once had just ventured outside. The lingering scent of her power was still enough to repel a Human Error, and it would have dissuaded Pandæmonium, despite her knowing Manon was inside.

But not long ago, Manon’s response from within the Star Memory had vanished.

The unpleasant entity had abandoned the structure and was in what remained of the holy land. Still, Pandæmonium cautiously concealed her presence as she crept through the room barefoot.

The interior resembled a typical library, although Pandæmonium knew what it really was.

Information from all over the continent and people's memories; a vast spiritual panorama given physical form. This was one small part of the complex used in the time of the ancient civilization to attempt to control all information in the world.

The Guiding vessels designed to contain memories as readable information took the form of books. That was the most appropriate form for the conjuring. Pandæmonium took little interest in the immense collection of thoughts, however.

Upon reaching the innermost part of the Star Memory, she dropped to a crouch and looked down.

Manon lay before her.

Her body lay on the hard floor, and it appeared utterly cold. There was no need to check her pulse; she was clearly deceased.

"Mm-mm-mm, so you've gone and died again."

Without a trace of hesitation or concern, Pandæmonium poked at Manon's body, and her shoulders slumped with disappointment.

Manon's corpse didn't have a shadow. The part Pandæmonium had created to store away her soul was missing.

The Original Sin Conjurings that Pandæmonium controlled were some of the few that could touch the soul. So long as the death was recent, Pandæmonium could offer sacrifices to reconstruct the shattered soul to perform a sort of pseudo-resurrection.

But it wouldn't work this time.

Manon's body was perfectly unharmed. Her spirit had been utterly erased. Without a soul, Pandæmonium's Original Sin Conjuring would only produce a puppet that resembled Manon. She could fabricate a soul modeled after Manon's, but it would still be an imitation.

They'd gotten along so well… There was nothing she could do now that the girl was truly dead, though. Pandæmonium glumly rested her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands.

Just as she sighed in dismay over her visit being in vain and began to stand…

Guiding Force: Sacrifice (Conditions Met)—Original Sin, Sloth: Body—Summon [Original Sin Fiend: Grudge]

An Original Sin Conjuring activated with Manon's body as its origin point.

Since it had triggered without any conjurer around, it had to be a conjuring with a Conditional Activation established in advance. Most likely, Manon had carved the condition into her body, setting it to activate when her soul disappeared and to use her corpse as a sacrifice.

As soon as the conjuring began, Manon's body rotted away rapidly. It turned to black dust, not even leaving bones behind. Original Sin Conjurings summoned the desired power in exchange for some portion of the user's living body. Once Manon's body was destroyed, a shadow appeared, animated with temporary life.

"Mm?"

It was only a silhouette, making it challenging to identify any specific features. Judging by the apparent age of the figure, it was an echo of Manon.

Despite appearing two-dimensional, it gave off a certain elasticity when Pandæmonium prodded it. The sacrifice used to create it wasn't sufficient to construct a shade that housed Manon's consciousness. This was only a shadow puppet acting on the will Manon had imbued it with beforehand.

The flimsy shadow lifted a book from the floor and held it out to Pandæmonium.

No sooner did she receive it than the faint strength remaining in the shadow dispersed.

"Manon?"

There was no response, for the specter had already vanished. Manon Libelle was gone, leaving behind only her clothes.

What had she been trying to achieve in her final moments? Pandæmonium tilted her head.

She'd been handed a Guiding vessel containing information in the shape of a

book. It was a unique recording medium employed during the ancient civilization's era to store the spirit of an intelligent life-form. The power of a certain Pure Concept created the Guiding information circuits, allowing a spirit to flow through them to reproduce a human's memories. However, it was difficult for a Human Error to compensate for losing their recollections. Their perpetually active concept conjurings functioned on too grand a scale, exhausting memories quicker than they could be replenished.

Since this Pandæmonium was only a pinky finger, separated from the distant true form of *Evil*, she depleted memories at a slower rate, yet she was still a part of a Human Error. Her memories of the present moment were continuously fading.

Manon had left this behind for her. What memories did it contain? Perhaps those of Manon herself? No matter the answer, Pandæmonium was bound to forget them. Still, she made a Guiding Force connection to the storage medium to read the information bound within. And that's when something happened.

Guiding Force: World Connect (Conditions Met)—Scripture, Third Charter—Invoke [Our world is beyond words]

The spirit preserved inside the book was released from its seal and flowed into her body, permeating her and solidifying memories within her.

The alignment only took an instant, yet its effect was dramatic.

"……"

The little girl's lips trembled, her hand still on the book.

She lifted her gaze. Her eyes found the spot on the floor where Manon's body had been, and she was dumbstruck to see that naught but clothes remained. Now that Manon was gone, Pandæmonium realized too late what that girl had been to her.

She understood, too, what became of her body. Pandæmonium looked around, taking in her location anew. Her eyes were wide, and her fingers trembled. The sight left her unmoved just moments ago, but now everything was different.

She was filled with a dizzying rage.

The cold smile that had previously held a permanent place on her lips was absent. She lifted the book overhead with both hands, then threw it down as hard as she could.

And that wasn't the end of her outburst. Pandæmonium furiously kicked the volume repeatedly with her little feet. Her kicks could only make a pathetically small noise, tiny as she was, yet she went on stomping.

"Why you… You…! How could you do this…?! And she's still at it…!"

Anyone who knew Pandæmonium's nature would've been stunned by this display. It was deeply uncharacteristic of the Human Error.

She flung a look around the room, breathing heavily. Astonishingly, the light of reason and emotion shone in her eyes.

"I'll destroy this place… No. If I go back to my main body…I'll just be absorbed. Then…what in the world can I do on my own…?" she muttered.

After voicing and rejecting a few rounds of ideas, Pandæmonium seemed to settle on a direction. She raised her cherubic young face.

"I'll go to someone…on the outside."

The holy land was in a state of utter chaos, and this girl had taken advantage of that.

A flash of determination filled her eyes, and she lowered them helplessly.

"…I'm scared."

The girl's shoulders trembled as she thought of what she was about to do and realized there was no one to depend on and no place to go.

Shaken by hopelessness, the little girl donned the kimono Manon had left behind. It was much too long for her. The sleeves hung past her hands, and the garment threatened to slide off her shoulders at any moment. When she started walking, the hem dragged along the floor behind her.

The girl clutched the sleeves of the poorly fitting kimono tightly.

"Why…?"

Was this truly still the pinky finger of Pandemonium, one of the Four Major

Compared to her usual demeanor, her voice sounded unbelievably weak. She appeared to be a lost child on the verge of tears.

For how upset she was, she knew what had to be done. The girl shuddered at the cruelty that wouldn't permit her to hesitate.

She clung to the kimono, her sole memento, for comfort.

The girl looked so tiny and forlorn.

After all, she'd always been the weakest of them. She understood that better than anyone.

"All of you… I know I'm pathetic, but would you stop leaving me all alone?"

The terribly weak and helpless whimper echoed feebly in the empty library.

CHAPTER 2

Lost to Time

Small chunks of flesh were scattered across the ground some distance from the outbreak epicenter of the dragonblight.

This was the person aboard the Guiding train that caused the power to burst out of the earthen vein. The unique vehicle that entered the earthen vein for accelerated travel exploded when its Guiding path twisted out of shape. Naturally, this meant the man on board was blown apart beyond recognition.

However, something odd happened to the human remains that were in pieces too small to be recognized as parts of a corpse.

The pieces of flesh that had escaped the convergence of the dragonblight melted away slowly. If an experienced conjurer were present to witness this, they would have noted that the process resembled a sacrificial offering to an Original Sin Conjuring. The likes of Menou or Ashuna could have been even more precise: This remarkably paralleled how Pandæmonium sacrificed her body to summon herself.

The scattered flesh vanished all at once, and a lone man appeared out of nowhere. He was slightly plump and clad in a gentleman's suit.

Confirming that he was unharmed, he blew out a huff.

"Good grief…"

Kagarma Dartaros. The man known as the Director, who'd gathered forces to rally against the class system, twirled his beloved cane and rested it against his shoulder.

"How absolutely horrid. Those young ladies are quite audacious. Were anyone else aboard, they would surely have perished. But I must tip my hat to them for executing their plan without hesitation despite that. And it really is quite thrilling that the barrier city is now gone without a trace. Honestly, I've no idea whether to praise or scold them."

He'd been summoned far enough away to avoid being caught in the cross fire, affording him a clear view of the dragonblight.

A scripture conjuring had artificially shifted the earthen vein, resulting in an explosion of power. The fact that this resulted in a dragonblight had likely not been part of the plan. They'd aimed to cut off the vein of energy that flowed into the holy land for a few hours.

"Perhaps they knew I'd be able to survive? Hrmm. What do you suppose, Experion?"

He turned to face the man standing behind him, a person of average height and build without any particularly distinctive features. A sword hung at his waist. The way he stood revealed nothing about him or his thoughts. His face imparted a vacant expression.

He'd been standing here all along, as if knowing Kagarma would be here.

Experion Riverse.

His name was bound to come up during any discussion of the strongest warriors on the continent. He was a knight with ultimate strength who shut down all opponents with his polished sword and crest techniques. These days, little remained of his soul other than junk.

"I've come to get you," he stated blankly, not responding to Kagarma's inquiry.

"I'd prefer you didn't. Begone, would you?"

They had known each other for a long time, yet there was no warmth or friendship between the pair.

"I have no desire to return to Grisarika. At the time, I was only waiting for my memories to disappear, but now I have something to live for. You see, I must be on my way to retrieve the girl who has been so kind as to become my daughter. I've no time for the Guardian's schemes—"

"Give up," Experion interjected during Kagarma's lengthy speech.

"…Pardon?"

"Give up on Manon Libelle. That's what I was told."

“Ahh… I see. If the Guardian orders as much, then I have no choice. Oh dear, what a dreadful shame. She really does see right through people, doesn’t she? I’ve no love for the Lord, but I cannot say I am especially fond of *her*, either. The Magician has the soundest mind of any of us. Though I’m afraid, in that case, she despises me.”

The Director’s shoulders slumped after hearing Experion’s statement. He’d grown considerably attached to Manon.

However, he soon recovered, composing his lips into a shady grin. By the time he raised his head, there was no evidence that he had ever cared at all.

“Fine then, Experion. It appears you do have a thoughtful bone in your body after all—for you’ve brought me a new daughter to raise in her stead, haven’t you?”

Beaming, Kagarma looked past Experion’s shoulder to what appeared to be a fierce young woman.

Few people could say that their appearance and personality matched so perfectly. Her dress made no effort to hide the curves of her body, proudly leaving her beauty on full display. Kagarma’s smile widened when he saw her red-tinged blond hair.

“This is her little sister, eh? I can tell at a glance that she has a wonderfully strong will.”

Ashuna looked uncharacteristically perturbed by the word “sister.”

“…Strange that the Director of the Fourth would speak as if he’s acquainted with my elder sister.”

“Why, I’ve known her since she was but a child. You’re her spitting image. It’s like looking at a future that might have been for her. Just the thought has me nearly overcome with emotion. All right then, Miss Ashuna, please address me as ‘Papa’ if you’d be so kind. Do that, and I’ll happily lend you my strength.”

“Are you seriously after some kind of relative?”

While Kagarma made a cheerful proposal that would give anyone goose bumps, Ashuna responded in a voice cold and sharp as an icicle.

“You don’t have any, right? By nature, Elders like you don’t have any kind of family. Tell me, are you even human?”

“…Oh-ho.” Kagarma sighed with admiration. “So you know about that, do you? Or perhaps you’re asking based on a strong hunch? Surely, you heard the word ‘Elders’ somewhere, though. Even your leading questions are bold and confident. I understand why you sneaked out of Grisarika during the confusion following the Archbishop Orwell incident and began wandering the world, too. You were quite unlucky to be born to the Grisarika royal family.”

The man didn’t falter, even under Ashuna’s sharp glare. He continued to ramble, unconcerned.

“And the fact you set your sights on Menou is further proof that you have incredibly good instincts. I’m quite intrigued as to what it is you see. That’s a remarkable level of intuition. You ought to use it wisely.”

“Impressive how you can interrogate me and prattle on about yourself at the same time. You must have a thing for pointless chatter.”

“But of course I do. People often tell me that I have the gift of gab, as they say. In fact, Experion here used to scold me about it often, back when he still had a functioning mind. Well? Have you learned anything useful in your travels from Grisarika Kingdom all the way to the holy land? Or have you perhaps collected some helpful comrades? Acquired a weapon that will help you resist what your sister is now?”

Ashuna scowled at Kagarma’s insolent smile. Although a Noblesse royal who dealt in pride and magnanimity, she couldn’t suppress her physical revulsion for the man.

“So you know the reason for my elder sister’s treachery, then?”

“Absolutely. You see, your sister was forced to become an Elder.”

Ashuna had never been sure of that. She had her suspicions, but told herself it couldn’t be so.

Yet the man in front of her now knew all about it.

“We Elders are immortal humans created in the ancient civilization era, each

based on our own concept and pushed into a specific role. A thousand years ago, there was plenty of research that used the Pure Concepts summoned from another world to free the people of this one from the constraints of mortality. Do you believe me so far?”

“…Go on,” Ashuna said, not bothering to answer.

“For one like myself, the properties of an Original Sin Conjuring are built into my body. Any damage to the flesh past a certain point is automatically registered as a sacrifice for an Original Sin Conjuring, which summons the parts lost. And because it is not a Pure Concept conjuring, there is no loss of memories, either. Dear me, I cannot die even if my body is blown to smithereens.”

Kagarma wore a pitiful expression as he readily explained the contrivance behind the resurrection he’d just undergone.

“This is quite miserable in its own way, you know.”

“So you’re a disgusting monster. Got it.”

“Thank you. I’m thrilled that you seem to understand me, if only slightly. Regrettably, there is not very much else I can tell you. My memories used to be periodically erased, you see. It was the best way to preserve my personality. Compared to the other Elders, my concept is based on physical immortality—less so for my soul and spirit. I was created from an experiment aiming to implement Pandemonium’s immortality without any of the side effects. I imagine they cared little for what would happen to me once it was a success.”

“That didn’t stop you from creating the so-called Fourth and causing chaos all over the continent, though, did it?”

“It was an outlet for my displeasure. It’s important to have such things, you know. Each of the Elders has their role. Mine is to maintain the three-caste system, as the Lord did not desire the development of conjuring technology. It would give rise to complaints about what the Faust designated as taboo in accordance with her wishes. I gather the elements of discontent who would rebel against the current regime and periodically bring about their downfall. Just look at the current state of the Fourth. That’s all part of my job, and I went about it unaware that was my purpose for a long time. Can you imagine how

infuriating that is?”

“So she’s been using you as a disposable pawn all your life. Is following someone who would do that to you worth it?”

“Worth it? Ha-ha!” Kagarma chuckled heartily at Ashuna’s question. “Of course not! I abandoned all that ages ago! All the Elders have. It’s been a thousand years, remember? How could we possibly stay loyal to her for that long?!”

A mix of violent emotions flew across Kagarma’s face in rapid succession. Ashuna took note of this instability as a possible weakness to exploit.

“But you see…she’s simply too strong. The Lord of the Faust from the scriptures, that is.” It was a terribly simple reason. “The world, or her? Indeed, she is so strong that there’s only one choice. And besides, no matter how imperfect her methods, she is truly the guardian of this world.”

Strength.

Kagarma spoke of what Ashuna desired most. She’d pursued it and had become truly powerful, yet she was still lacking.

Ashuna wished to live beautifully by being strong enough that no one could control her. People shone brightest when they acted of their own free will. There was little Ashuna despised more than having her way of life sullied by another’s influence. Recalling how her elder sister had once been only entrenched her further in that belief.

“So if your body became immortal through a transplant of Pandemonium’s nature…” Ashuna couldn’t bear the idea of letting her very self be invaded by someone else. “What changed my sister?”

“The Guardian has an indestructible soul.”

Experion offered nothing to the conversation. He stood in place with no will to do anything on his own.

“The method being?”

“Possession.” Kagarma summed it up in one word.

Possession.

Ashuna had witnessed this conjuring once before. When she fought alongside Menou in the desert, they'd faced a Primary Color conjured soldier that tried to take control of Menou with the *Possession* conjuring.

The spirit was said to govern a person's memories and personality. There were several theories about the function of the soul, but it was generally accepted that it was essentially the beating heart from which power flowed.

A human needed both to survive.

There were many who'd attempt to transplant a soul or spirit when a person lost one of those qualities.

"Since her soul carries the *Vessel* conjuring, the predecessor to the Mechanical Society, *she* can possess the spirit of anyone who carries her blood. It is no exaggeration to say that the Grisarika royal family exists solely to ensure the Guardian's continued survival. You understand this, don't you, Miss Ashuna? Unfortunately, your sister is yet another victim of that time-honored tradition."

"Tsk."

Ashuna turned away, uncharacteristically frustrated.

She'd found her answer, the reason behind the changes in her elder sister that she'd always found suspicious. At last, she knew the enemy's true identity.

Yet she wasn't strong enough.

Ashuna couldn't even defeat this man standing before her alone.

"I never expected this would feel so damned awful."

It was too much to accept. From the moment Ashuna encountered Experion, he became her focus, and there was nothing else she could do in the holy land.

She couldn't allow this man to interfere with Menou and Momo, who tried so admirably to pursue their chosen way of life.

Ashuna had never pitied herself in all her life. However, this new truth felt intensely disagreeable.

"Let me correct two of your assumptions, Director. First of all, Menou isn't

the one I've 'set my sights' on."

It was a girl with pink hair in two pigtails who had caught Ashuna's fascination. While Menou was captivating in her own right, Momo had a stronger hold on Ashuna's heart.

"Oh? That does indeed pique my curiosity… What is the other correction?"

Ashuna responded with all of her typical confidence. "You called me unlucky, but I've never once doubted my good fortune." She cast Kagarma a dauntless grin. Her confidence bordered on arrogance. "So come with me. I refuse to play the part of daughter to a sicko, but I'm willing to use you as a subordinate, if I must. I'm taking you with me back to Grisarika."

The Director's eyes narrowed. Now he understood why Experion was sent here. At the same time, the girl's smile inspired hope that she might have what it took to break through, even if the Guardian had predicted her actions thus far.

"You really are her younger sister."

"Stupid old man. Soon I'll triumph over my current elder sister, and I'll surpass her old self, too."

Ashuna turned her bold gaze toward the west.

She couldn't see the gleaming white of the holy land. However, shock waves from the dragonblight's advent yet billowed, as though to symbolize the current turn of events.

This was the same path she'd walked with Momo when they'd arrived. That had been a fun journey. Momo's stubborn and simple reactions were strangely endearing to Ashuna.

From the moment Ashuna met Momo and Menou in Grisarika, she'd been keenly aware that their paths would diverge from hers, even if they'd walked the same route for a brief while.

The princess turned on her heel.

"Until we meet again."

There was no reason not to say her farewell, even knowing it would go

unheard. Ashuna Grisarika, the Princess Knight, left the chaos in the holy land behind as she set out on her own journey, assured they would be reunited one day.

A cascade of Guiding Light enveloped the world.

It flooded from where the earthen vein burst out of the massive hole that had formed in the ground, setting the air abuzz. The wind shrieked, and the ground crumbled away further with each tremor. There was no sign that this torrent of power would cease anytime soon.

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The flood of Guiding Force spread, sucking up and consuming everything around it. It would never form a soul, no matter how much power and material it swallowed, yet it continued spreading wildly in all directions, growing far too strong. This was likely because it had used the monsters Pandæmonium had summoned as materials. Its surface looked strangely solid, giving it the appearance of an actual living creature.

Such was the nature of a pseudo life-form phenomenon: soulless power that sought a spirit and flesh.

It was terrifying to behold.

As she watched the fearsome stream of Guiding Force through her glasses, the priestess Hooseyard could only tremble.

This was a dragonblight, an event that typically occurred only once every few decades.

Grisarika Kingdom had been the site of the most damaging one in recent memory. A dragonblight had appeared there roughly fifty years ago, destroying so much territory that the capital had to be relocated. At the time, a then-unknown priestess named Orwell had led a sizable force through the chaos and put a stop to the dragonblight, earning a name for herself in the process.

The current dragonblight hadn't solidified as a pseudo life-form yet. However, even in this state, it was a harrowing reminder of how puny and insignificant humanity was.

This phenomenon defied all human comprehension, and that was before it began to cause severe damage. Inwardly, never aloud, Hooseyard cursed the unreasonable superior who'd brought her to such a dangerous place.

"…Now look here, Hooseyard."

"Eek?!"

The unexpected sound of her name brought the woman back to her senses with a shriek.

Walking ahead of her was an old woman whose strong will was apparent despite her physical decline. Her brisk footsteps were still firm enough that

Hooseyard jogged to keep up.

It was Elcami, the archbishop of the holy land. She stood near the top of the Faust, an elite organization that served the Lord written of in the scriptures.

Elcami peered oddly at Hooseyard, who broke into a cold sweat for fear that her superior might have sensed her silent insults.

“Why are you smiling, girl? Are you truly that excited?”

“Huh?”

Smiling? Her? In the face of something so obviously frightening?

Surely not. Hooseyard raised a hand to her lips.

“Er… Heh-heh… Excited? No, no, of course not.”

Although she denied it, Hooseyard’s fingers felt that her lips were parted uncouthly and turned upward at the ends.

The woman really was smiling, possibly more widely than she ever had before. Realizing that she was on the verge of drooling, she hurriedly wiped her mouth.

Elcami stared at this strange expression of Hooseyard’s as if witnessing something disconcerting.

“I cannot fathom how anyone could have such a reaction upon witnessing a dragonblight. What in the world is there to grin about?”

“I-it’s just…!” The implication that she was some sort of deviant spurred Hooseyard to defend herself. “It’s a *dragonblight*, ma’am! A manifestation of the earthly and heavenly veins gone wild! Why, it’s a calamity on par with a Human Error. Under normal circumstances, one would never dare approach it, never mind attempt to interfere with it… To think I’d be blessed with the opportunity to work with you during one, Archbishop Elcami… Heh-heh-heh… It’s incredible…! Don’t you see? This is the ultimate form of power!”

“…You really are the ideal successor for the Dragon Gate, I suppose.”

After brushing off Hooseyard’s excitement, Elcami opened her scripture. They were still far from the dragonblight’s origin point, but this was as near as they

could get without protection.

The sparkle of Guiding Light that heralded a conjuring caught Hooseyard's attention.

Elcami was genuinely a miracle in human form. If any one person could be dubbed perfectly suited to conjuring, it was her. Elcami's biological age posed no problem; there was no question of whether her spirit was sound.

Her body, spirit, and soul seemed like little more than inconsequential impurities to Elcami. For the power that filled her was such that it seemed to conjure her very self to completion.

Hooseyard was enraptured by the spectacle that was Elcami at work.

She didn't dare dream of being like her, of course.

But she did hope that someday she might be able to produce a similar kind of power.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 1:2—Invoke [Drive in the stake and make known the ground where all shall begin.]

Only a single blow was necessary. A massive stake of Guiding Light drove deep into the hole that formed the source of the dragonblight, blocking the earthen vein's spray.

The most threatening part of a dragonblight was when it formed the pseudo life-form known as a dragon out of a mass of Guiding Force to soar freely through the sky. With this scripture conjuring, the archbishop had forcefully anchored its link to the earthen vein, which would prevent that.

Without a constant supply of Guiding Force, the dragonblight abruptly stopped moving. Elcami wasn't foolish enough to miss the perfect opportunity to finish it off.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 9:3—Invoke [Know the hiding places of the wicked, and shine light upon them.]

The summoned illumination, which could blow a spirit form to pieces, would do nothing but dazzle the eyes for anyone with a physical body. The distant, remote scripture conjuring was intended not to destroy the dragonblight but to

expend the Guiding Force, giving it form.

Barred from its font of strength and losing the remaining power to the scripture conjuring, the form of the dragon withered in apparent agony. What was left of its Guiding Force pulsed and howled, as if to lament its destruction while being so close to birth.

This was to be its final act of resistance.

“Gyah!”

Hooseyard let out a cry. The massive dragonblight had lost its form and crumbled. The pieces that had formed it, primarily dirt and sand, fell to the ground.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 2:5—Invoke [Rejoice, for the wall that surrounds a pious flock of sheep shall never crumble.]

While Hooseyard flailed, panicked that she and Elcami would be crushed, the archbishop activated another scripture conjuring. This protected the two from the veritable landslide bearing down on them.

Immediately afterward, more Guiding Force than Hooseyard could envy flowed into Elcami’s scripture.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 12:1—Invoke [Strike the nail, strike the nail, all to give support.]

Innumerable nails of Guiding Force floated all around Elcami.

“You.”

“Yes! What is it?!”

“Tell me where to drive these in. That’s why I brought you along.”

“Oh, right! Of course!”

Hooseyard panicked and started pointing, and a Guiding Force nail pierced the earth with each indication. As they dug into the key points of the earthen vein, Guiding Force connected each of them and formed a path, forming a vast network of Guiding Force like the foundation of some massive building.

Though it appeared similar to the structure of the holy land, this was no

barrier. It was constructing a ceremonial hall for Hooseyard.

How magnificent.

Hooseyard's eyes sparkled in the fading glow of the dragonblight. Alone, it would have easily taken her three months to make these preparations. Calculating the required materials and effort was enough for her to shiver.

Elcami handled all of that alone, completing it in a matter of moments.

It was difficult for Hooseyard to express how thrilled she was to carry out a ceremonial conjuring with Elcami. Conjurings that she could never form alone were now within her grasp. Better yet, she had free rein to meddle with the portion of the earthen vein around the holy land, no questions asked.

There was no greater gift for a ceremonial conjuring expert.

"How long will it take to return the damaged earthen vein to normal?"

"…Hmm? Oh, right. Heh-heh, let me see… To restore the surrounding environs to optimal conjuring conditions, I'd say it'll require a week! I'll work day and night without rest, so I'm sure—"

"Give me the short version."

"Ahh…"

Ten top-tier priestesses could likely manage it in three days. Adding more would complicate the ceremonial conjuring due to the necessary coordination. After some swift estimating, Hooseyard reluctantly resisted her instinct to be as thorough as possible and gave a response.

"If all you want is the earthen vein reconnected and the holy land barrier restored, then an hour…no, not even. I can do it in forty-five minutes."

Two girls stood atop the roof of a monastery just barely outside the range of the dragonblight's rampage.

The pair watched as Elcami and Hooseyard easily brought the dragonblight under control. Soon, the enormous torrent of power slowed and scattered, losing momentum. It left a vast amount of Guiding Light behind to fill the air, more beautiful than diamond dust.

As the gorgeous Guiding Light cascaded down upon them, one of the girls spoke.

“I guess dragonblights aren’t such a big deal after all, hmm?” remarked the short girl wearing white priestess robes, in a rather disinterested tone. It was Momo, an Executioner’s aide whose sole principle was to serve Menou. Her comment was wildly irresponsible considering that she’d caused the dragonblight in the first place.

The other girl, who wore a nun’s habit, was being held by the scruff of the neck in one of Momo’s white-gloved hands.

“Guess not. Although there aren’t many instances of a dragonblight being stopped before it gets loose, so it might not be fair to compare ’em… More importantly, uh, Momo?”

“What is it?”

Sahara’s wavy silver hair fluttered just above her shoulders as she stared into her captor’s face.

“Would you mind letting go of me? I won’t run away again, I swear.”

“Could you not lie to my face, please?” Momo shot Sahara a deadpan stare, and the other girl looked away with a *huff*.

Sahara’s sighs did nothing to loosen Momo’s grip on her collar. She tried to pull herself free using the Guiding prosthetic that was her metal right arm, yet to her horror, Momo’s brute strength won out.

Just as Momo suspected, Sahara wanted to flee.

After all, they were in the middle of grave danger. Momo and Sahara were the culprits who’d set the fall of the holy land into motion. They’d likely be executed on the spot if that information got out. In Sahara’s opinion, it was nothing short of insane to stay anywhere near the archbishop, one of the top-ranking leaders of the Faust.

Thus, Sahara continued to resist, even if her attitude remained listless and her eyes sleepy.

“I think we’ve done all we can here. We brought down the holy land barrier

like Menou asked, didn't we? I'd say that's enough hard work on our part."

Menou's request was fulfilled the moment the holy land evaporated. Momo had done most of the heavy lifting, and although Sahara only happened to be around to witness the event, it was enough to prove she was present and had some contribution. Sahara fully intended to lord this favor over Menou for the rest of her life. She felt very good about the chance to wear a smug grin the next time they met.

If Menou was still alive anyway.

"It's possible Master has already killed Menou by now. You know, I'm surprised. I didn't think you'd let Menou go off with Akari to face certain death."

"My darling chose this path in order to live." Momo turned a sharp glare on Sahara for her inexcusable comment. "She's finally choosing to live, do you understand? I fully believe that she'll come back."

"Oh yeah? And what kind of idiot would trust a girl who lays on the charm with everyone she meets?"

"Not to worry. I know that my darling has never once laid on the charm with *you*. So try to keep your inferiority complex out of this, okay?"

"Ex*cuse* me? Just so you know, Menou doesn't matter to me one bit. Who cares what happens to some chick whose only good feature is her looks?"

"Ohhh, is that sooo?"

Momo snorted, and Sahara clicked her tongue, irritated that the other girl had seen through her so effortlessly.

Sahara didn't get along with Menou and Momo. That had been true since their monastery days. Having reaffirmed that they were still a poor match, Sahara turned her attention back to the border of the holy land.

While the air was still full of beautiful Guiding Light, the previously level ground that served as the pilgrimage path resembled a canyon. The surrounding monasteries and fields were so severely damaged by the dragonblight they were functionally ruined. Overall, the scene made it painfully

clear how terrible the dragonblight's shock waves had been.

Compared to the scale of the scripture conjuring that had put that phenomenon to rest, Momo's conjuring that brought it about in the first place seemed like child's play.

"You've got to admit: The archbishop has crazy skills. Losers like us could never go head-to-head with her."

"I see what you mean. Speak for yourself, though."

Momo had once witnessed Elcami's conjuring up close.

She'd created a sword of light that sliced through a massive monster summoned by Pandemonium, one of the Four Major Human Errors. As powerful as they were precise, the archbishop's conjuring techniques managed even to sap Momo of the will to fight. After recalling that moment, Momo thought it absurd to be surprised by the conjuring that destroyed the dragonblight.

"No matter what you think or who gets hurt in the process, all that matters is clearing a path for Menou's safe return. And standing around staring isn't going to get us anywhere. Off we go."

"Wait, hear me out. What if we just trust Menou to figure it out and lie low here until—h-hey, stop it! You're gonna rip my arm off!"

Sahara hurriedly pulled away from Momo, who had silently grabbed the other girl's shoulder and started yanking on her prosthetic arm with all her strength. Momo sighed, obviously annoyed by Sahara's pointless struggling.

"Honestly, you're just so annoying. At this point, you'd be far more useful if you couldn't talk, don't you think?"

"Has anyone ever told you it's insane to solve everything with violence…?!"

Since being reunited with Menou, Sahara had undergone some complicated changes, the result being that her soul and spirit now inhabited her Guiding prosthetic arm. She was still fully conscious and able to use conjurings even as just an arm with no body. Still, the idea of being ripped away from her flesh and carried around was horrifying, not that Momo seemed to care.

Momo was intent on giving everything she had until Menou escaped.

On the other hand, Sahara was fairly sure Menou could handle it on her own, and if it turned out she couldn't, well, that was her fault.

If the holy land barrier was restored, escape would become much more difficult. The Dragon Gate was a long-distance transportation method from a thousand years ago, and the cathedral existed to protect it and keep it secret. The holy land barrier returning would mean that the cathedral would be reconstructed, with no way in or out, like before. That would essentially prevent Menou from coming back.

"You've got to be joking about trying to mess with that, though, right? Didn't you see what just happened? Do you have a death wish? Personally, I'd be thrilled if you hoped to die here."

"I'm fully capable of judging when something is impossible, thank you very much. And dealing with Archbishop Elcami as an enemy would be absolutely impossible."

"Wow, I'm shocked. That's awfully reasonable for someone who's devoted her life to being a stalker."

"Yes, I suppose I am reasonable…enough not to kill you right this second."

"Thanks a lot."

Momo was more than willing to go to extreme measures for Menou's sake, but there was no need to do anything that might put her at a disadvantage if she failed. Picking a fight with the archbishop wasn't just reckless—it was utterly pointless.

"Just so you know, we're going after *her* instead." Momo pointed at a glasses-wearing priestess who was hard at work near the aftermath of the dragonblight.

Hooseyard, the priestess with glasses and glossy dark hair with a greenish tint, was repairing the earthen vein.

Elcami had established the foundation of the Guiding Force channel for Hooseyard to connect with and alter the earthen vein. After dispersing the

dragonblight, the archbishop used a scripture conjuring to construct a facsimile of the miniature shrines in any ordinary town.

All human settlements had at least one little stone temple marked with the symbol of the church. They weren't mere decorations but Guiding vessels positioned in specific places to meddle with the earthen vein and regulate the flow of Guiding Force.

Naturally, they were also present in large cities that required Guiding Force to run consistently along the streets as an energy source. Even mountain paths and other spots that could become gathering hubs for this power had miniature shrines, monitoring and redirecting the current of the earthen vein.

Keeping a close eye on the movements of the earthen vein throughout the continent was one of the Faust's essential duties.

By positioning the Guiding Force nails in the important conjuring points in the ground as Hooseyard had directed, Elcami created temporary shrines. They didn't have the durability to be utilized long-term, but they were more than sufficient for brief use.

Hooseyard sent her Guiding Force through the connection between the little temples, letting her spirit scatter and sending her consciousness into the ground.

Although the ceremonial conjuring to repair the earthen vein loosened her sense of self, Hooseyard was in an excellent mood.

When Elcami dragged her along to deal with the dragonblight, she'd feared today would be her last. Yet, on the contrary, she was met with one stroke of good luck after another.

The earthen vein had to be managed regularly to ensure that the area around the holy land wouldn't become barren. Without the flow of power, soil could quickly turn bleak. The desert zone in the middle of the continent was a prime example of a location where the earthen vein had gone dry and the land had fallen to ruin.

That region hadn't originally possessed the kind of climate to form a massive desert. But since the power didn't flow beneath it, no life could thrive there,

and all wilted away over the course of a millennium, becoming an increasingly large expanse of sand.

Managing the earthen vein fell squarely within Hooseyard's area of expertise. And being allowed to use a ceremonial hall constructed by Elcami, a miraculous wielder of Guiding Force, was nothing short of a thrilling perk.

Were Hooseyard to return the flow of Guiding Force in the holy land back to normal, power would return to the city, and the barrier could be rebuilt.

Elcami had placed Hooseyard in charge of restoring the severed earthen vein, leaving for the remnants of the holy land afterward.

In other words, once the unsupervised Hooseyard restored the holy land's barrier, she was free to faff around with the local portion of the earthen vein to her heart's content. At least, that was her optimistic interpretation.

"Hmm?"

She sensed someone's presence through the earthen vein. They were behind her. Hooseyard was usually nowhere near sharp enough to detect another's approach, but today was different. In her present mental state, she had a clear grasp of any conjuring-related goings-on nearby.

Turning her attention to this new presence, she felt a familiar current of Guiding Force. It was youthful, a tad unstable, yet indicative of an incredibly rare gift.

She'd seen this Guiding Force once before.

"Miss Momo?"

"…I didn't think you'd notice me."

When she addressed the presence, a voice responded.

Sure enough, Momo appeared before Hooseyard. The latter's expression brightened at the sight of her junior. Hooseyard had been out of contact with Momo since their separation during the chaos.

"Thank goodness! I'm so glad you're safe…"

"First things first, I'm going to tie you up now."

“…But why?”

This abrupt declaration dumbfounded Hooseyard.

She was in the middle of focusing on repairing the tattered earthen vein, and now this. Since Hooseyard had no idea who caused the dragonblight or why, Momo’s actions were nothing short of shocking.

The little Executioner’s aide wasn’t concerned with explaining or getting approval. Knocking Hooseyard out before she could repair the earthen vein was the easiest and most effective way to prevent the holy land barrier from being rebuilt.

“Don’t worry. It’ll be over before you know it. Just sit still, please.”

While Hooseyard gaped in stunned silence, Momo leaped toward her without waiting for an answer.

Having finished her task, Elcami returned to the holy land.

She’d managed to bring the dragonblight under control safely. While it was a calamity on par with a Human Error, this one had only just formed. Had it torn free from the yoke of the astral vein, Elcami wouldn’t have been capable of dispersing it alone, but it was a simple enough task when the dragonblight was still rooted to its origin point.

However, the damage had been immense. In particular, the monasteries nearest the holy land had been reduced to flinders. It might be years before the fields were usable again. Since Elcami had left Hooseyard in charge of restoring the earthen vein, it was unlikely the land itself would die, but the whole thing was a massive headache.

The first order of business was the holy land.

Once the earthen vein was restored, the barrier would automatically begin to reform. As soon as the shining white streets and buildings were back, the Dragon Gate teleportation platform and the Star Memory would again be hidden from view deep within the cathedral walls. Once those vital secrets were out of sight, Elcami could call in everyone who evacuated, and repairs would commence. It would undoubtedly take months, but at least the way forward was clear.

Already thinking ahead to after the holy land was restored, Elcami next turned her attention to the whereabouts of Akari Tokitou.

Surely, she was somewhere in the ruins of the holy land, since she'd been under surveillance in a cathedral tower. The black-haired girl wasn't familiar enough with the region to make an effective escape on her own after the barrier disappeared.

Yet she was nowhere to be seen.

"So she's stolen the march on us, hmm?"

There was only one place she might have gone, the destination Hooseyard had set for the Dragon Gate—the site of the Sword of Salt. If so, then perhaps the train explosion that caused the dragonblight had been deliberate, as unlikely as that felt. Elcami had been late to realize this because she'd never imagined someone would sever the vein's connection to the holy land just to get through the barrier.

Elcami was unperturbed by this revelation, however, because there was one other person missing: Master Flare.

That shrewd woman must have predicted the enemy's moves and gone ahead to ambush them. Reluctantly, Elcami decided to leave Akari Tokitou's fate in Flare's hands.

If the rebel's target was the Sword of Salt, then Hooseyard might be targeted due to her role as the Dragon Gate's handler. Elcami didn't feel worried about leaving the woman alone, though. She was still a priestess of the Faust, after all. Before being stationed in the holy land, Hooseyard had also traveled the world on a pilgrimage. The woman was slow, but not nearly as powerless as she acted. In the unlikely event that someone attacked her, she could defend herself.

Even if that wasn't ordinarily true, Hooseyard was currently linked to a ceremonial conjuring site.

"This is really quite awful…"

The more Elcami beheld the sorry state of what had once been the holy land, the more wretched it seemed. She strolled through the aftermath of the disaster, objects and furniture strewn in all directions, until something caught

her attention.

Someone else was here. Elcami had used a scripture conjuring to send a compulsory evacuation advisory. If a priestess dared ignore the order and stay behind, she would be sorely punished. Elcami strode determinedly toward the figure, only to gasp in surprise when she realized who it was.

The unexpected guest was a girl with remarkably long black hair. She stood at the center of the wreckage with her eyes fixed upon the archbishop.

“This place is in quite a state, Elcami.”

How long had it been since anyone had addressed the archbishop using only her first name?

Elcami’s mouth went dry. When she finally managed to speak, her voice sounded unnaturally hoarse.

“What are you doing out here, O Lord…?”

This girl was none other than the true head of the Faust—the very real Lord who was written of in the scriptures.

Just before Momo’s fist connected with Hooseyard, an impact from the side sent the pink-haired girl’s small frame flying.

“Wha…?!” Momo exclaimed in surprise at the unexpected attack. It came from nowhere near Hooseyard, as though another had hurled the blow at her flank. While it wasn’t strong enough to break through Momo’s Guiding Enhancement and damage her flesh, it was completely unexpected.

Despite her astonishment, Momo righted herself in midair, landing on her feet.

She hadn’t sensed a conjuring being worked. Hooseyard hadn’t budged or given any sign of using a crest or scripture conjuring.

And yet…

“…”

Momo looked in the direction of the attack. Although it appeared empty, she could sense that something was off if she focused hard enough.

The ground pulsed quietly.

It wasn't limited to one specific area, either. The earth beneath Momo's feet trembled with waves of Guiding Force. The sound and tempo were similar to a beating human heart as power flowed outward.

The Guiding Force spread power throughout the ground, in sync with Hooseyard's heartbeat.

Momo's lips tightened. Now she understood what had attacked her. Guiding Force had burst out of the pulsing ground and struck her body. It hadn't even turned into a conjuring phenomenon, instead simply using the raw natural pressure as a means of attack.

Utilizing the physical impact of Guiding Force was the same principle behind technology like the Guiding engines that propelled trains.

However, the range of Hooseyard's interference seemed strange. She had control over a far wider area than the scope of an average individual's power. It was broad enough to require a map to comprehend fully.

Meanwhile, Hooseyard still wore a distressed expression with her usual meek and powerless air.

At a glance, she looked no different than usual. It was only when Momo looked into the priestess's eyes that she realized her own carelessness.

"I'm sorry, Miss Momo."

Her eyes were utterly unfocused. While her gaze seemed directed at Momo, it was clear that Hooseyard wasn't viewing the physical world at all. She wore the mysterious air of a clergyman amid a sacred ritual.

Presently, Hooseyard only saw Momo through the lens of Guiding Force. And it wasn't just Momo. Hooseyard was processing the entire world, including herself, solely in terms of power.

"I'm in the middle of something very fun—I mean, very important—so I'd prefer if you didn't bother me right now, please."

The power spreading throughout the ground surged.

"…!"

Momo jumped back. Unfortunately, putting distance between herself and Hooseyard only left her at a disadvantage.

The earth shook. It felt like a physical tremor to Momo, but that was only an illusion. The ground itself remained still, while the power beneath it pushed upward. It tore through the dirt like something escaping a shell, sending up a geyser of Guiding Light.

An incredibly primitive and chaotic flood of Guiding Force erupted directly in front of Momo's face.

"Wha?!"

The impact struck her body head-on.

It was as if Momo were standing on a ridge perilously close to an erupting volcano. There was no telling when or where magma might erupt out of the ground beneath her. To make matters worse, all of that "magma" was under Hooseyard's control.

Even Momo had never experienced the ground turning against her before. Striking with raw Guiding Force was simple and ineffective, but Hooseyard's control over such a wide area meant there was nothing Momo could do.

"I can't *believe*…a human *being*…can actually do this…!"

She questioned whether Hooseyard was a real person at all. It would make much more sense if she confessed to be a Human Error. Momo had once created a geyser from the earthen vein in Garm, but Hooseyard was doing it in rapid succession and with far more precise control and range.

When Menou used the earthen vein, she controlled the Guiding Force through her body with expert conjuring techniques. Her method of manipulating Guiding Force employed her unique lack of physical and mental resistance to outside forces.

In a way, this use of the earthen vein was the exact opposite of Menou's method.

Hooseyard used a ceremonial conjuring to send her spirit into the earthen vein. It melted fluidly into the Guiding Force that spread throughout the ground

and treated it as a temporary extension of her form. One wrong move, and her spirit would be separated from her actual body forever, doomed never to return.

The spirit could be spread thin, but it could never increase its mass.

As it expanded farther, its ability to maintain itself grew faint. Hooseyard's ceremonial conjuring was a special technique that could easily result in her consciousness flowing away and disappearing forever.

"You know, Miss Momo…as a ceremonial conjuring user, there's something I'm always thinking about."

Hooseyard started conversing as if they weren't in the middle of a battle. Her tone was light, as though she might begin humming. The intensity of the Guiding Force geysers didn't let up one bit, however.

"They say the three components of life are the body, soul, and spirit. If Guiding Force is power created by the soul, it's nothing more than a by-product. Doesn't that seem odd to you?"

Momo continued evading the eruptions by a hair's breadth, racking her brain for a way to turn the tables.

She drew her coping saw from her skirt and gave it a snap. It was no use—the sheer force of the geysers knocked it away immediately. This lightness was the coping saw's biggest weakness and an especially poor matchup against Hooseyard's raw, primitive Guiding Force power.

"When you use Guiding Force properly combined with the right materials, it creates a conjuring phenomenon. I don't think many people realize what that truly means. Guiding Force can become fire, lightning, wind. In theory, it can take any conceivable form. Unfortunately, I've never seen a conjuring that retains a physical shape afterward…but perhaps such a thing existed in the ancient civilization."

Momo considered abandoning dodging in favor of charging in. She was caught in the heart of a tornado, steeling herself against the raw power.

"But if the correct combination of materials and Guiding Force can produce any phenomenon, then is life itself actually a conjuring brought about by that

power? Suppose the soul isn't the source of Guiding Force but a material that combines with it to create our human existence. How can we disprove that theory?"

Hooseyard rambled, almost as if singing, her mind utterly disconnected from the present reality. The lack of coherence in her speech was proof that her consciousness was half lost to the world.

Momo clenched her fist, ready to punch the woman hard enough to send the other half of her mind flying out of her head, too.

"It's just a supposition without any proof. Almost a fantasy, really. But since meeting Archbishop Elcami, I can't get the idea out of my head. When I see her Guiding Force, I have to conclude that life-forms are completed with the flow of power alone."

Hooseyard was so immersed in the world that she had the mystique of one who'd stumbled on a fundamental truth, contrary to her usual absentminded air.

"If that's true, it wouldn't end with life, either. Maybe the entire world is a conjuring phenomenon formed by an intricate symphony of Guiding Force. If the power merges with the material of this planet to create a conjuring called the world… Ha-ha-ha, well, wouldn't that be amazing? Connecting to the Guiding Force of the planet might even allow you to decipher its entire history in the form of conjurings!"

Gimme a break!

As much as she wanted to interject with insults, Momo couldn't spare the energy to speak. She'd determined that a reckless rushing attack was her only hope and was using Guiding Enhancement to raise her physical abilities to the max.

"There, caught you."

Just as she was about to charge forward, a burst of Guiding Light spiraled up from beneath Momo and surrounded her. She looked up to see it close in a matter of seconds.

The result was a beautiful birdcage of light, trapping her with the pressure of

Guiding Force.

“Well, I managed that well enough… Ahh, it’s still nowhere near Archbishop Elcami’s level, though.”

“What are you talking abooout?!”

It made no sense to compare a Guiding Force cage to a human like Elcami.

Momo channeled her anger at being captured, punching the prison with all her might, but the pressure knocked her back. Since the cage was connected to the earthen vein, it produced too much Guiding Force for an individual to handle.

“Listen, you better let me oooout!”

“Uh-uh.”

Momo kept shouting and struggling inside, and Hooseyard frowned.

Ceremonial conjurings involved multiple Guiding vessels and complex conjuring constructions. They required total concentration that could destroy the spirit, making their scope and difficulty more daunting than scripture conjurings.

And the priestess called Hooseyard boasted incredible strength only when she was in the midst of a ceremonial conjuring.

Momo’s Guiding Enhancement grew stronger with the intensity of her emotions, but even now, at the height of rage, she couldn’t escape from this luminous jail. While her punches formed a few cracks, they were rebuilt as quickly as she could break them. This indicated that the Guiding Force wasn’t fixed in place, instead connecting to the massive flow of power and circulating continuously. It was similar to throwing a boulder into a river: The original current would eventually restore itself.

“Stop raging, please, it’s scary… Besides, it won’t do you any good. Guiding Force becomes indestructible when it’s given perfect circulation and composition. No outside energy can shatter it, and even then, it would repair immediately.”

“Excuse me?! Since when?!”

“Hmm? You didn’t know that, Miss Momo? Ah, perhaps only researcher specialists are aware, even among the Faust. It’s not very useful in battle anyway.”

“Not useful in battle? Then what do you call thiiisssss?!”

“Oh, well, I’m not really trying to fight you… And ceremonial conjurings are meant to connect with the world, not to manipulate Guiding Force. Rather than control the power in your soul, you surrender your spirit to a strength bigger than yourself. Now, I’d like to focus on fixing the earthen vein, so it would be helpful if you could stay quiet, Miss Momo…”

“You’re really going to tell me this isn’t a battle after doing all *this*?!”

“Of course. I’m a noncombatant, you know.”

Hooseyard’s mind was returning to focus now that she’d trapped Momo. And although her words infuriated the pink-haired girl, who was a seasoned battle specialist captured by a self-proclaimed noncombatant, Hooseyard truly hadn’t meant any harm. She really wasn’t a fighter.

If Hooseyard and Momo engaged in close-quarters combat without any preparation, the former would lose in three seconds flat. In that way, she could be considered one of the weakest priestesses around. She lacked finesse with Guiding Enhancement to improve on her poor physical abilities, and she was utterly inept at attack-based scripture conjurings.

However, she had an exceptionally rare talent for conjuring, even given that the Faust was essentially an organization of conjuring specialists.

When it came to ceremonial conjurings—the complicated rituals involving the astral vein of Guiding Force running throughout the world—Hooseyard was second to none.

“Try to calm down a little, Miss Momo. Don’t worry. I’ll help you apologize to Archbishop Elcami for attacking me out of nowhere. You must be shaken up, what with all the monsters invading, the holy land disappearing, and the dragonblight erupting willy-nilly, right? I’ve heard you used to be a traveling priestess… Were you upset to be stationed in the holy land? I can’t blame you for wanting to run away after all this madness out of the blue.”

“You don’t have the slightest clue what’s going on here, do you?!”

“No, no, I get it. I can’t blame you for going against your orders, either! I won’t tell anyone that you tried to escape, I promise! These things happen, right?”

“You utter birdbraaain! It’s waaay worse than that!”

Hooseyard’s attempt at being a sympathetic work senior while actually failing to grasp the first thing about Momo only ramped up her fury. Hooseyard, on the other hand, blithely continued her work of reconnecting the earthen vein to bring back the holy land barrier while keeping Momo imprisoned at the same time.

In roughly thirty minutes, the holy land would be rebuilt.

The showdown between Momo and Hooseyard was already over.

“Yeah, that’s about right.”

Using a sniping scope formed from her Guiding prosthetic right arm, Sahara watched the battle from a distance. Once she’d seen how it ended, she returned her limb to normal. The priestesses in the holy land were all exceptionally skilled in one way or another, even for the already elite Faust. As far as Sahara was concerned, Momo’s loss was natural.

Sahara wasn’t interested in going to Momo’s rescue, either. She turned her back on the scene and started walking away. Although she vaguely remembered being told to “back her up” or something, Momo couldn’t intimidate Sahara into action from this distance. Thus, she was entirely unmotivated to assist. If anything, Momo should have been grateful that Sahara didn’t snipe her from here.

What would she do next, then?

Just as Sahara realized that she was free to decide without anyone else meddling for the first time since she’d had her soul and spirit shoved into Menou’s scripture back in the desert…

“Where ya going?”

Someone called from behind her.

Sahara's shoulders stiffened at the all-too-familiar voice. She turned around to see a little girl creeping out of her shadow, just as she'd feared.

Sahara's body had been rebuilt using an Original Sin Conjuring, which meant she had a conjuring connection to Pandæmonium as her spawn.

The little girl had black hair and wore a white dress with three holes in the chest. While Pandæmonium mostly looked the same as always, Sahara realized there was something different about her.

She was wearing a kimono over her clothes like a robe.

Sahara recognized the garment hanging loosely off the child's slim shoulders, too. It belonged to Manon, who was this little monster's underling.

"You're Sahara, right?"

It seemed a bit late for introductions. The little girl ambled up to her, examining Sahara from the tips of her toes to the top of her head.

"Right. Yes, I think you'll be perfect for how I am now."

For what?

Sahara had her misgivings about the child's behavior, but she didn't say anything. Pandæmonium was fickle. She might decide to ignore Sahara and move on. Caution was essential, as Pandæmonium might also decide to sacrifice Sahara for an Original Sin Conjuring.

"Wh-what can I do you for? Where's Manon?"

Sahara opted to ask about Manon first. That girl usually kept Pandæmonium in check, if only somewhat. Manon was rather twisted herself, but she was easier to reason with than this Human Error.

"…"

Pandæmonium didn't answer Sahara, only staring with a cold, silent gaze.

Feeling increasingly unnerved, Sahara stared back in confusion.

Pandæmonium was a Human Error, the unhinged incarnation of a Pure Concept, even if she looked like a girl of less than ten years old. She never had a normal reaction to anything, no matter what anyone said to her.

Yet right now, she seemed incredibly emotional.

Why was she wearing Manon's kimono? Its true owner was nowhere to be seen. Sahara felt a different kind of dread beginning to sink in.

"So, Sahara. Think you could help me out?"

"…"

Whatever this was about, she wanted nothing to do with it.

But as fervently as she wanted to refuse, she couldn't work up the courage to say no. This girl had created Sahara's body. Sahara wasn't stupid enough to defy the little master of Original Sin Conjurings, said to be the cruelest of all conjuring types.

Why was Pandæmonium even asking for her help?

If there was something she wanted done, she could easily force it on Sahara without bothering to make a request. She was certainly strong enough to compel Sahara, and ruthless enough not to care about anyone's feelings.

No good could come of accepting this request. Sahara didn't need to check with her gut instinct to know that. Unfortunately, she couldn't see things ending well if she refused. If Pandæmonium attacked her for turning down the request, she'd be in big trouble. Angering the progenitor of Original Sin Conjurings was asking to meet a fate worse than death.

Essentially, Sahara was doomed to suffer from the second this little girl laid eyes on her. With a slight sense of despair, Sahara gave a small nod.

"Promise, then, okay? Pinky swear that you'll help me, Sahara."

She raised her left pinky finger and held it out.

This was typical childlike behavior. Strange as Pandæmonium was, she did have a tendency toward classic childhood games and traditions. Sahara reluctantly held out her real left hand and raised her own pinky, willing to make a verbal agreement if nothing else. Then she realized what felt so off.

Pandæmonium had never addressed Sahara by name before.

"Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye."

As Pandæmonium sang a schoolyard rhyme, her eyes narrowed.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Chaos Collusion, Pure Concept [Evil]—Summon [Sticky fingers]

It happened so quickly that Sahara didn't have time to pull her finger away.

The little girl's pinky, entwined with Sahara's, suddenly came off with a small *pop*. It tore away from the child's hand without any resistance, like a lizard detaching its tail, and coiled around Sahara's.

Sahara stared down at her own pinky finger in shock.

The flesh that had detached from Pandæmonium's hand and twined around Sahara's pinky finger transformed into a black ring with a lizard-like design. The slithering movement Sahara felt against her skin made it terrifyingly clear that it was no ordinary ring.

"There! A self-centered coward like you won't betray me if I do this, right? I think you're a perfect match for how I am now."

Sahara turned pale while the little girl addressed her calmly. As the self-severed finger grew back, the girl's hair came loose from its pigtails. Its length shortened to compensate for what she'd sacrificed in the Original Sin Conjuring, her hair ties falling to the ground in the process.

Sahara tried to calm her confusion and dismay.

She stared closely at the girl before her. Something was definitely wrong. Pandæmonium's rationale, or lack thereof, had always been much harder to understand. She never did anything as logical as threatening another and forcing them to obey. She hadn't needed to bother.

"What's going on here? You'd never make a deal with a human."

When had Pandæmonium started considering things before acting?

"What in the world are you?"

The little girl tilted her head innocently while Sahara's doubts deepened.

"What am I, you ask?"

©nilitsu

She gave a little giggle. That solidified Sahara's suspicions into certainty.

The way she laughed was unmistakably different. This wasn't Pandæmonium. She was a much more rational human, not quite a Human Error.

"I'll tell you all about my current self, if you really wanna know. Since you're nice enough to help me and all."

The black lizard ring shot out a tongue and licked Sahara's finger. Sahara really didn't want to find out what the living accessory was capable of.

"I'm super, super weak, so we'll both have to do our best, 'kay?"

Sahara was trapped in a deal she couldn't refuse, and now she had to help this child fight back against what lurked in the holy land.

The earthen vein's connection to the holy land was gradually recovering its power.

In all likelihood, the shining white city and cathedral would reform in less than an hour, just as Hooseyard had promised. Yet while the restoration of the holy land proceeded, Elcami stood stock-still.

"Why have you emerged…O Lord?"

Elcami was keenly aware that her voice was trembling.

This person appearing aboveground was even stranger than Pandemonium's pinky finger attacking or the dragonblight. Elcami hadn't imagined the Lord would emerge, even with the barrier gone.

"What do you mean, why? I told you before that the seals on the Four Human Errors would come undone."

"But…"

That much was true. She had contacted Elcami through a scripture before the recent events unfolded.

However, Elcami hadn't thought that the Four Human Errors' seals coming loose would equate to the Lord venturing aboveground. She'd assumed it would happen after the seals were broken completely, if it happened at all.

The return of the Lord.

That phrase referred to this girl before her returning to her own world… To Japan.

“Admittedly, I wasn’t expecting the holy land to disappear before the Four Human Errors were freed.”

“I-I’m terribly sor—”

“It’s fine, I don’t need the details.” The girl interrupted Elcami’s apology and went on calmly. “It’s just, you know. You and the others are the pinnacle of the humans made by those of the old era, even if in a different way. Especially you, Elcami. You’ve got the power to fight back against a Human Error.” There was a thin, cold smile on the girl’s face. She spoke of the ancient civilization without any particular interest in the holy land’s condition. “So it’s a little laughable that things wound up this way.”

“…”

Elcami felt indignation building at the one-sided lecture.

No one had dared mock her to her face since she became archbishop. During all this destruction, the person in front of her was doing absolutely nothing to help. It seemed unfair that someone who’d hidden within the barrier for so long was scolding her.

“Would things perhaps have gone differently if you’d emerged sooner?”

“…Who, me?”

“Y-yes.”

Elcami hadn’t intended to blurt that out. She certainly regretted it now, but there was no taking back her resentment now that she’d voiced it.

All the Elders were immortal. That included Elcami, and her creation had been especially inhuman, even by the Elders’ standards. She hadn’t been born from a mother’s womb—far from it. If anything, her formation was closer to the creation of a dragonblight.

She was the ultimate incarnation of the conjuring theory of pseudo life-forms, made by creating the ideal power, then giving it a body and spirit. After much trial and error, researchers had finally crafted a pure life-form with its own soul,

and Elcami was the result. Because the ideal power came into being before the life that would be attached, activating the Guiding Force naturally returned her body to its proper state.

“I hate to dredge up the past, but you remember we’re the ones who saved you, right? You said you wanted to be of use to me.”

A thousand years ago, Elcami had been little more than a guinea pig. The researchers’ thirst for knowledge had superseded ethics and resulted in the birth of the life-form that became Elcami. She couldn’t deny that she’d been grateful for those who’d rescued her.

However, that was a millennium ago.

“You people were constructed to be the most thoroughly perfect humans in the world. Especially you, Elcami. Since you were made with an imitation of *Dragon*’s properties, your pure strength overwhelms the other three. Your power output is forever at the maximum, making you the perfect being in terms of Guiding Force, even transcending the limits of your frail body.”

Elcami glared with all her might at the girl outlining her characteristics.

The archbishop remembered that time in her life, but the recollections between her childhood a thousand years ago and the present era were conspicuously absent.

The other Elders were like Elcami, beings created in experiments.

In essence, an Elder was really no different from the artifacts occasionally found in ruins. “Ancient relic” just happened to be the term for a Guiding vessel that continued to work a thousand years later, while Elders were humans who had lived for a thousand years—that was the only distinction.

“For generations, you’ve been working as part of the Faust to protect the holy land where I dwell. I erase your and the Director’s memories because you claim it’s hard to live for so long. I won’t tell you to be more like the Guardian or the Astrologer, but what exactly is the problem here?”

“Do you truly need safeguarding at all? No matter how strong I might be, no one has ever gained as much power as you possess. Why do you even need someone like me protecting you?”

Even Elcami was insignificant compared to the girl before her. She could manage the peak of human conjuring, but the Lord far surpassed mortal limits.

Elcami thought it a better use of her time to work at some other task than to pretend she was keeping an all-powerful being safe.

When she was young, she revered this being. She'd adored her, possibly even to the point of worship. She truly believed that this individual was worthy of being called the Lord.

However, Elcami had experienced many meetings and partings during her life. The gratitude for her rescue faded over the decades. Eventually, her devotion dimmed in the face of the challenges of dealing with reality.

And finally, she began to see the gap between the so-called Lord and the rest of the world.

In less than a hundred years, Elcami had developed a level of self-disgust. The nature of her creation made her more perfect than any other human, which left her feeling out of place among them.

Worst of all…

It was her own accursed nature that caused another human to commit a taboo and be lost forever.

"You created the barrier city known as the holy land, put the three-caste system in place, and rule from the shadows as the Lord! We Elders were nothing more than an investment to make you more perfect. What does it matter if we're immortal?! You swallow up everything, even our special traits, as part of your own abilities!"

Elcami was fed up with herself, the other Elders, and the Lord. She would welcome the Lord's return to her original world if the other Human Errors went, too. The archbishop devoted herself to helping realize that goal, so this world would never again be troubled by their kind.

The Lord had toyed with this planet enough.

And once she was gone, the new world would begin.

All semblance of emotion was draining from the girl's face. Elcami failed to

notice, however, continuing passionately, “Do you feel no responsibility for this world at all?!”

At this bellow, the light of emotion completely vanished from the Lord’s eyes.

“Responsibility, you say. Tell me, Elcami. If I’m supposed to take responsibility for what I’ve done here, then let me ask you something…”

Her one visible eye fixed itself upon Elcami for the first time.

“…How is this world going to take responsibility for making *me* what I am now, huh?”

Power surged and roared through her entire body.

Elcami had fully expected an outburst. While the girl had been known as a hero a thousand years ago, the passage of time had worn away her sense of justice, leaving raw cruelty. Immediately, Elcami began constructing a conjuring, one of the scripture conjurings she fully believed. In terms of pure Guiding Force, the archbishop outmatched the average Otherworlder. Taking into account the many long years of conjuring experience on top of that, she was one of the strongest beings in the world.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 3:1—Invoke [And the oncoming enemy did hear the tolling of the bell.]

A church bell took shape. The belfry rose high and shifted into action to send forth the majestic and beautiful echo of Guiding Force.

As Elcami’s mighty scripture conjuring loomed, the Lord said only one word.

“Fine.”

Guiding Force: Connect—Perfect Attachment, Pure Concept [Ivory]—Invoke [White Night]

A sun was born.

Although it was small enough to fit in the palm of one’s hand, it was nonetheless a sun and an entrance to a world created by *Ivory*.

Elcami’s conjuring faded under the blinding white light. Soon, Elcami’s scripture conjuring was vanquished entirely. Even Elcami herself was consumed

by the sun.

“Wai—”

“Listen, Elcami. Once you get past eighty or so, you always start saying the same stuff.”

The Lord didn’t bother turning around. Elcami had been erased where she stood.

She hadn’t been killed, but sealed away in a barrier world. The small, closed-off place built around the white sun mercilessly burned the trapped Elcami’s memories away.

“I’m sick of hearing it, honestly. I’ll erase your memories so you can redo your life again. I like you well enough when you’re young. That’s when you do whatever I ask without question.”

Once Elcami’s recollections were gone, her body would revert to its younger form and be released. While this had been a life-or-death moment of rebellion to Elcami, it was more like a repetitive chore to the girl who’d become the Lord.

“Yeah, the younger Elcami always works a lot better for me… I wonder what her name should be next time.”

The Lord glanced in the direction of the dragonblight’s destruction. Someone seemed to be fighting over there, but this was of no interest to the Lord.

She returned her attention to where the cathedral had been.

A train platform now stood there, the conjuring facility known as the Dragon Gate, which once connected thousands of locations.

“Just a little longer now.”

Her empty eye took on color.

Amid her cold existence that spanned an endless wasteland of nothingness, there was still a surviving trace of emotion.

“After a thousand years, the conjuring to send me back to Japan is nearly complete.”

There was a glowing gate of light at the end of the train’s short track. The

Lord knew that if she went through the teleportation circle the Dragon Gate created, she would emerge in a land of pure white as far as the eye could see.

The Lord herself had turned that continent to salt.

And so the girl reached through the gate with one arm to take what she required.

As soon as Akari arrived back at the entrance to the land of salt with her short-range teleportation, she began examining the Guiding Force reactions in the area.

Although she was temporarily separated from Menou, Akari had done some slapdash combat training with Momo. However, all she'd learned was the proper battle mentality. She could be safely declared a complete combat novice. Until recently, Akari only had immensely powerful conjurings and the slightest inkling of how to fight someone.

But now Akari had all of Menou's techniques at her disposal, at least in theory. Her subjective processing of Menou's life caused her to miss things here and there, but she'd still instantly acquired the skills and knowledge Menou had built up for over a decade. It was a simple task to feel out discrepancies in Guiding Force connections.

Following the principles of activating a crest conjuring, Akari sank her Guiding Force into the earth and sought out a reaction from the latent power within. She crouched, just to be safe, heedless of water soaking into her skirt, and used *Fracture* to cut through space itself, digging into the salt.

Akari searched as thoroughly as possible, ensuring she left nothing unchecked.

"There's nothing here!"

Her cry echoed in the otherwise empty area.

There was no Guiding explosive ready to blow the teleport gate to smithereens. Master Flare's claim had been a bluff. The conjuring with the Guiding vessel on her forehead was only a ploy to fool them.

"Aaargh, I swear! She's the worst person eveeeer!"

Akari stomped in a fury at being tricked into completely wasting her time.

It was honestly even more infuriating than if there had really been a bomb. They would have needed to check either way, and it took even more time to be certain there wasn't one. Had Flare planted an explosive, she likely would've destroyed the portal without saying anything beforehand.

Akari was starting to understand Flare's way of thinking to some extent, whether she wanted to or not.

She'd wasted their time. Still, Menou was safe. Although their Guiding Force connection had weakened, Akari could still feel the other girl.

She stood to head back to Menou immediately.

And that's when a hand reached out of the teleport gate.

"Huh?"

Akari stared at the sight in confusion. Curiously, despite seeing this odd event up close, she didn't feel particularly wary.

The portal was connected to the holy land. Menou had already spoken to Momo and Sahara to ensure they wouldn't come through the Dragon Gate. The most likely probability was that this hand belonged to a member of the Faust coming to assist Master Flare.

Given Akari's position, she should have attacked with a conjuring like *Suspension*.

And yet, for some reason, when she saw the hand, she had a strange, impossible thought.

"…Menou?"

She was certain, somehow, that the person on the other side was Menou.

It was nonsensical, of course. Menou was occupied fighting Master Flare. There was no possible way she could be on the other side of that gate.

Akari knew it was laughably impossible. However, she couldn't imagine this hand belonging to anyone else. The disconnect between her thoughts and reality made Akari seize up.

“Don’t do that.”

A girl emerged from the teleport gate.

She had long black hair that covered most of her face. The single eye that peered out from beneath that dark curtain looked heavy with sadness.

“You’re the one person I never want to call me that…Akari.”

This person who knew Akari’s name was wearing a sailor-style school uniform.

Its familiarity sent Akari reeling.

That it was a sailor-style school uniform wasn’t shocking in itself. That merely indicated this was probably an Otherworlder from Japan, a fact that would elicit some sympathy, but nothing more.

The problem was the outfit’s design.

From the fabric and details to the colors, it was exactly the same as the one Akari had worn when she first arrived. Which meant there was a high likelihood that this girl was a student from the same school.

And there was something even stranger…

“Who are you? Why are you wearing the Nishibori High uniform? More importantly…”

Akari grew mentally and emotionally shaken as she peered closer at the girl with her face half hidden behind dark locks.

“…why do you have Menou’s face?”

“……”

This time, the girl didn’t answer, although her sadness deepened.

A disguise? A hallucination? None of the answers Akari thought up explained why this girl wore those clothes and had Menou’s features.

While Akari’s confusion deepened, the girl silently reached for her.

The hand Akari had mistaken for Menou’s glowed with pure white Guiding Light.

Guiding Force: Connect—Perfect Attachment, Pure Concept [Ivory]—Invoke [White Fog]

Immediately, Akari's vision clouded with thick fog, and the conjuring helped pull her back to her senses.

This person's conjuring was much quicker than Akari's use of her Pure Concept. And the distance between their skills was far more significant than a few steps. The girl had invoked a conjuring as naturally as breathing, as if her thoughts and reality were perfectly linked.

Akari had many questions, but they could wait. She'd confirmed that Master Flare's trap was a bluff. For now, she had to return to Menou as soon as possible.

There was no time to wonder at the identity of this newcomer. Akari narrowed her eyes, trying to determine the nature of the conjuring around her.

Since it wasn't made from a crest or a Guiding vessel, it had to be a Pure Concept conjuring. The fog seemed too dense for a mere distraction. Akari's surroundings were still visible, albeit obscured. Being in the vapor didn't appear to affect her body, either. Still, Akari concluded that she'd been attacked in some fashion, so she made a finger gun, ready to retaliate.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Suspension]

However, the Guiding Light gathering at Akari's fingertip faded without forming a conjuring.

Akari hadn't failed. The fog had suppressed the *Time* conjuring.

She'd chosen the wrong response. Pure Concept conjurings canceled each other out. This was the same phenomenon she'd encountered in the holy land's cathedral. Akari scolded herself for not realizing this fog would have such an effect.

The fog was dense, and though Akari tried to escape it, she could only trip and stumble forward. Part of the mist had thickened to coil around her leg.

"Gah!"

There was no pain. It was so soft that Akari didn't even realize she was restrained. The fog's sensation could even be described as pleasant, yet it held Akari's leg in place more sturdily than a lead weight. Akari fell, her face landing in water.

"Ouch!"

She yelped as she collapsed. Salt crunched under her, and some flew into her mouth. Even the rainwater tasted incredibly briny. Some of the salt must have melted into it.

Akari scowled at the sharp taste. She tried again and again to manifest a conjuring, but the fog suppressed her Pure Concept each time.

Finally, she elected to change her approach.

Akari's entire body shone with phosphorescent Guiding Light.

The Guiding Enhancement improving her physical capabilities wasn't dispelled by the vapor. The mist only seemed to react to Pure Concept conjurings. A normal conjuring would likely work fine, but unfortunately, Akari didn't carry Guiding vessels, since she could use her Pure Concept without any tools.

Giving up on invoking her Pure Concept for the time being, Akari used her enhanced strength to push herself into a seated position. Ignoring the discomfort of her wet clothes clinging to her skin, she then managed to stand, and she turned to glare at the person who'd put her through this ordeal.

A cold chill ran down Akari's spine.

Regret sank into her core immediately. She should never have looked. The girl stared back at Akari.

That eye…

It was dark, as Japanese people's eyes often were. But there was more to it than that, although in a way that was difficult to describe. Akari felt like she was staring into a black hole, a perfect darkness that had swallowed everything. The horrific emptiness threatened to consume her, to drag her to the depths of hell. With half her face concealed by her hair, the girl resembled a one-eyed ghost.

What had caused this person to appear so?

Gazing into the horrible abyss rendered Akari motionless, and the girl's hand grazed her cheek.

Despite this girl's actions, Akari couldn't manage any hostility or caution against her.

The warmth of those fingertips on her skin made it clear.

Ahh, that's Menou's hand.

Guiding Force: Connect—

The instinctive sense of familiarity, even relief, lasted only a moment.

Akari Tokitou—

The other girl's power flowed into Akari.

"Aagh!"

A scream clawed out of Akari's throat, and her back arched. Her body convulsed as if she'd been electrocuted. It was a Guiding Force connection—but far unlike any Akari had ever experienced.

Her reciprocal link with Menou had a certain warmth. The pleasant sensation of becoming one with someone was a tingling thrill like rubbing two surfaces together to make static electricity. Akari felt nothing but happiness to feel Menou's heart enter hers.

This was different.

Being stuck by a thick needle would have been a more pleasant invasion. There was an alien discomfort like icy splinters spreading through Akari's veins. Physical pain and emotional disgust assailed her, multiplying internally.

If this took over her entire body from the inside, she would go insane.

"Nn…mmgh…!"

She fought back with all her might, indecipherable groans issuing from between her lips. Power surged from her soul. She couldn't use a conjuring. The fog surrounding her would suppress it. Instead, she resisted with sheer Guiding Force. Akari drew out the strength within her soul to repel that which encroached upon her.

It was no use, however.

The other girl's power tore through Akari's resistance effortlessly, eating into her form. Even releasing her Guiding Force like a flood bursting through the dam of her sanity did nothing to slow the invasion. Akari's power was outmatched beyond any hope of comparison.

Painful. Cold. Cruel. The frozen thorns overwhelmed her, breaking through Akari's body and into her soul.

Guiding Force: Connect—

A conjuring formed, using the Guiding Force infecting her as a pathway.

Akari's eyes went wide as she felt the conjuring manifest inside her.

She had seen this very construction over and over during her repeated loops through time. It was the same one she'd witnessed in the ceremonial hall in Garm.

Akari could sense the other girl's conjuring. She understood it, even if she didn't want to. It didn't manifest physically, but there was no doubt.

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It was the horrible conjuring that could dye a person's mind white.

A single droplet of white liquid attempted to drip into her spirit.

Fear took hold. Akari knew she couldn't let this conjuring take her. She abandoned her attempts to fight off the pain and focused on forming a Pure Concept conjuring.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—

Pure Concept [Ivory]—

In less than a second, the two Pure Concept conjurings clashed.

Invoke [Blanch]

Invoke [Suspension]

STOP! Akari constructed the *Suspension* conjuring with all her soul, firing it at her own spirit. The fog didn't react, because this was occurring within Akari.

She refused to let that conjuring win. The Guiding Force invasion stopped, and the pain disappeared. Her counterattack had succeeded. The effects of *Suspension* and *Blanch* ate into each other. The outcome was clear immediately. Akari didn't want to admit it, couldn't accept it…

And yet.

Akari's hard-fought conjuring only stalled *Blanch* for a moment.

The single cloudy drop of liquid…touched Akari's soul.

Akari screamed in despair. It tore through her throat, a final, passionate plea. The other girl's conjuring took effect with no regard for its target's feelings.

They were disappearing—all the memories of her time in this world. The irreplaceable bond she had believed was eternal, her feelings that had finally connected with Menou's, even her present despair.

It all went blank.

Completely colorless.

Little by little, Akari was blotted away.

"Nn… Ahh… Ahhhhhh…!"

Akari clutched her forehead and curled inward, as if shrinking herself down might provide an escape from her recollections clouding over. She knew it was futile, but she tried anyway.

“Good night…Akari.”

Akari’s consciousness faded into alabaster, and the other girl quietly removed the white headband from Akari’s hair.

“The next time you wake up…we’ll be back home together.”

This final remark from the girl wearing Menou’s face made Akari’s chest feel tight.

Master Flare understood that if Menou and Akari made a Guiding Force connection and faced her together, she stood little chance of winning.

She knew how skillfully her apprentice formed conjurings and how she fought back to the last. The woman knew all aspects of her pupil.

Thus, Flare predicted that Menou’s strength would outclass hers.

Now that she had a Guiding Force connection with Akari, Menou had enough power to overwhelm any enemy she’d thus far encountered. It was incredibly foolish of Flare to fight someone face-to-face knowing that she couldn’t possibly win in a fair battle.

Worse yet, Flare was forbidden from killing Menou.

Her top priority was to keep Menou trapped here. Akari was likely almost finished with checking for the Guiding vessel Flare had lied about hiding beneath the teleport gate. When that girl rejoined Menou, Flare’s chances of winning would only drop.

Despite this clear dilemma, she was confident of victory.

Master Flare was aware of someone keeping a close eye on this distant skirmish. Priestesses of the Faust could use communication conjurings with their scriptures. And all Guiding vessels with communication features were accessible to the network called the Star Memory.

Someone with the authority to use the Star Memory could observe this far off battle in the land of salt. Likewise, she had presumably seen the moment

Menou and Akari made a Guiding Force connection in the holy land.

She was undoubtedly on the move already. The Conditional Activation conjuring hadn't been part of a mere trick. It was a signal to indicate that Flare had separated Menou and Akari.

All that remained was to stall until the situation shifted.

Flare's confidence as she stubbornly dragged out the battle was swiftly validated.

Menou's concentration on defeating her master abruptly ended.

She stopped in place and clutched her chest. Her graceful features twisted in anguish.

And then the valve of her soul broke.

There was no other way to describe the force with which Guiding Light streamed from Menou's body.

"…?!"

She opened her mouth in a silent shriek. The Guiding Force flooding from her surpassed the limits of her control, dwarfing the amount when she had connected directly to the earthen vein to keep its power in check. And the volume continued to increase, seemingly without end.

The utter shock brought Menou to her knees.

Confusion, alarm, panic. Emotions flitted through her pale eyes so quickly that Flare could scarcely read them. Yet even in the face of this sudden turn of events, Flare's successor was able to rein in her emotions and deduce the cause.

"A…kari…?!"

"…Hah!"

Just in time.

Flare's lips curled into an unpleasant smile. The sight of her former pupil frozen in unspeakable astonishment meant that her scheme had been a success.

Master Flare carefully stepped away from the kneeling Menou.

A torrent of power swept over her. It was raw Guiding Force, energy before it was shaped into a conjuring phenomenon. The phosphorescent light seemed to possess physical form, writhing around in the air. The chaotic Guiding Force raged like a geyser, sending water on the ground, spraying everywhere. The mirror reflecting the sky vanished, revealing white salt beneath. Still, the chaos continued. The maelstrom was growing, shaking the salty ground and sending cracks through its brittle surface.

The outburst of Guiding Force was akin to a small dragonblight. Menou desperately tried to suppress it, but it would not be denied. The strength was too great, and the output too irregular. This was beyond an individual's ability to control.

We're just getting started.

All it needed was one last nail in the coffin.

Master Flare, who'd known this would happen, licked her dry lips.

As long as she didn't screw up the finishing touches, she could finally complete the task she'd been set to so many years ago.

Flare smirked in satisfaction. Finally, things were proceeding as planned.

What happened?

Menou clenched her teeth, desperately trying to hold back the Guiding Force that was raging inside her. She couldn't control the power pushing out of her. However, if she gave up entirely on the effort, her body would be ripped apart.

It was even more taxing than letting the earthen vein move through her. The Guiding Force tearing through Menou wasn't her own. She understood perfectly well that she didn't possess enough latent power to create such a rampage.

This was Akari.

Their souls were linked through a Guiding Force connection. Even apart, the bond between Menou and Akari held firm, and now power was being forced through it. This time, Akari wasn't deliberately providing her Guiding Force to

Menou. She had to be under such duress that she'd completely lost control of her power.

Unfortunately, this abnormal amount of Guiding Force channeled from Akari was only the beginning.

There was a brief pause and a loud thrumming. A pulse ran through the power.

Suddenly, the Guiding Force slowed; that's how it seemed initially. In truth, it had only lost its irregularity. It still continued to flood through Menou at an ever-climbing rate.

There was more than just Guiding Force, too.

A chill ran through Menou's spirit.

Some overwhelming presence was entering via the Guiding Force connection with Akari, attempting to infiltrate Menou's soul. Whatever it was, even if it lacked ill intent, its mere existence was enough to conquer anyone's mind with sheer power. Menou understood precisely what the thing infecting her was; there was no use denying it.

A Pure Concept.

These concepts, extracted from the planet and made manifest, were the source of the awesome might in an Otherworlder's soul. Menou had made contact with one twice during her Guiding Force links with Akari, but there was no mistaking it.

Menou turned pale. Without thinking, she looked to her master.

Before their battle, Master Flare had declared her intention to turn Akari into a Human Error, claiming that would end her duty.

Even now, with the perfect opportunity in front of her, Master Flare made no attempt to kill her student. Menou was too shaken to consider the reason.

Impossible. It couldn't be. Why now, of all times? It was just too sudden.

Denials whirled in Menou's mind. Akari had recently supplemented her memories through the connection with Menou. Unless all the memories she shared with Menou had disappeared at once, she shouldn't have lost control.

That was the primary purpose of the Guiding Force connection.

Yet even though it seemed impossible, it was happening.

"…!"

Menou turned her back on her opponent. She would never have dreamed of trying this under normal circumstances, but the situation was so dire that she was willing to drop her fight with Master Flare.

Anything if it meant she could get away.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Branch]

A giant tree of Guiding Force grew before Menou's eyes.

It wasn't an attack. The goal was obviously to block her.

Heat and fury rushed to Menou's head.

"Out of my way!"

Menou's body shone with Guiding Light in answer to her roar. Guiding Enhancement. With strength reminiscent of Momo's, Menou destroyed the Guiding Force branches in her way. For better or worse, the Guiding Force was still pouring into her from Akari. Menou boosted her enhancement to steamroll her way through.

However, new Guiding Force branches immediately formed to bar her in. Menou kicked and punched through them, forcing an advance.

Her usual calm had disappeared. Menou's expression grew more impatient with every new obstacle. Flare's effort was a transparent attempt to stall Menou from reaching Akari, but the only way through was to meet it directly.

Menou still had the advantage. Master Flare was undoubtedly weaker than she was at present.

The psychological advantage was another matter, though.

As Menou fought and failed to shake off Master Flare, the branches slowing her down finally ceased appearing.

"Look." Master Flare calmly pointed past Menou's back. "The *Time* has come."

Any remaining color drained from Menou's face as she saw an approaching figure.

It looked like Akari. But was that truly her? Menou froze when she peered closer at the figure.

Master Flare didn't attack Menou, instead stowing her dagger, despite her old pupil being utterly defenseless.

Akari's outward appearance seemed unchanged. Her blouse and skirt were damp, suggesting she'd fallen into the water on the ground, but she was otherwise unharmed.

That was little comfort, however.

Something was incredibly wrong.

Menou's attention was entirely focused on Akari. The girl moved closer, and Menou watched intently. What was it that felt so off? Menou stared as if transfixed. Her gaze dropped to Akari's feet. No ripples. Menou shuddered. The phenomenon extended to more than the water. The very air around Akari seemed frozen. The space she moved through went still.

Time suspension.

The approaching concept affected the world merely by existing.

She'd become the greatest taboo in the world.

"Akari…"

Menou pinned her last hopes on calling out the girl's name. Her voice came out weak, too faint and fleeting to take hold of anything.

Even at this distance, Menou couldn't feel Akari's emotions, although the Guiding Force connection between their souls still endured. Their shared feelings should have grown stronger when they were nearer to each other.

But there was nothing in Akari's spirit.

Nothing. Not their first meeting. Not memories of their journey. Not even the promise they'd exchanged a short while ago.

There was nothing left at all.

She'd forgotten.

The shock of losing that powerful bond struck Menou as surely as any punch. In a way, it was similar to the sorrow Akari felt when she reset time. Her precious friend was forgetting about her. The warmth of their friendship when they walked hand in hand was fading. There was a strange sense of weightlessness, like Menou's spirit had been pushed into a bottomless pit. She wasn't really falling, yet she had the horrible sensation of her heart rising into her throat.

"Ah…"

Speech was beyond her now.

Akari stopped suddenly, but she wasn't reacting to Menou's voice. The consciousness that had taken over Akari's form didn't care about Menou at all.

There was only one reason she had halted. She was standing where her repeated time regressions began.

The being that looked like Akari slowly tipped her head toward the sky. A truly unbelievable amount of Guiding Force radiated from her, as though the ground had dropped away to set loose power from the heart of the world.

Guiding Force: Connect—

It was a strength beyond human comprehension. Although it blasted upward like the eruption of a giant volcano, it was finely controlled in a way that made the movement seem almost delicate.

The Guiding Light pierced the sky and formed countless cogs, creating the hands of a giant clock.

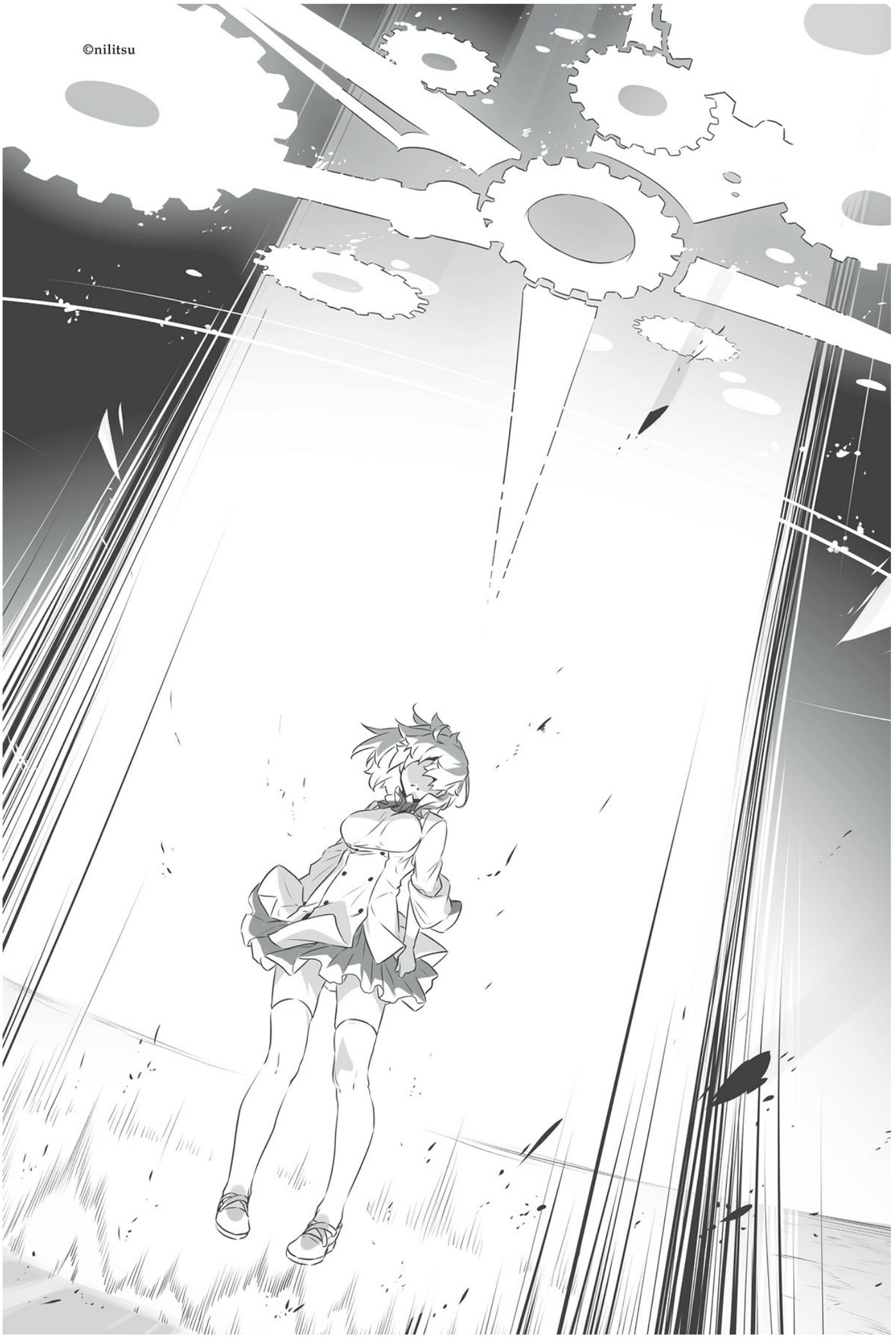
Perfect Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—

She was Akari Tokitou no more.

Her memories of growing up in Japan were long gone, and she'd also been robbed of her time with Menou in this world, creating this creature that wasn't Akari. Only a concept remained, a will born of the planet and created by a conjuring rooted in pure power.

Invoke [World Suspension]

The as-yet-unnamed Human Error of *Time* loosed her raw might upon the entire world.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CHAPTER 3

The Last Nail

Far from the holy land, near the western tip of the continent, stood the Grisarika Kingdom in the east.

In a tower separate from the royal castle, the symbol of the capital, lay a girl.

She was petite and skinny, as if stunted from malnutrition. She was in bed, as was typically the case, with dull blond hair spread on her pillow. Although she was the eldest daughter of the royal family, she made no noticeable contributions because of her poor constitution. This quiet princess cut a stark contrast to Ashuna, who stood out, for better or worse.

A cough racked her form. She looked so frail that an onlooker would fear she might give out at any moment.

“This body…is nearing its limits, too…”

As she whispered to herself for no other to hear, she reached for the fist-sized crystal ball at her bedside.

This was no ordinary orb. It was an ancient relic, a Guiding vessel created in an era that prospered through the use of Pure Concepts. The civilization of a thousand years ago was far more advanced than any modern one, and the surviving vessels of that time were highly prized. Most of them possessed functions that were impossible to reproduce with present technology, so the rarer still-functioning relics went for particularly outrageous prices.

The crystal ball she held could inspect a Pure Concept attached to a soul.

After Orwell died, the Faust’s Inquisitors confiscated many of the Grisarika royal family’s possessions. Losing the materials and personnel used to make the summoning circle was fine, but the girl had seen to it that she never parted from this crystal.

There was a reason that some of the ancient relics discovered the world over still functioned without issue after a thousand years.

In the final years of the ancient civilization, researchers found a conjuring construction that could make materials indestructible, essentially developing their Guiding Force mechanisms into something like perpetual motion machines. This crystal was one such example of that technique.

The previous king of Grisarika was executed for the taboo of summoning an Otherworlder. Undoubtedly, he refused to accept that his death was upon him until the moment before he was beheaded. After all, that Otherworlder summoning had been conducted with the assistance of Orwell, the archbishop of Grisarika Kingdom, and this girl's express permission.

She was a specter of sorts that haunted the Grisarika royal family. However, she was by no means its protector. The now-dead king would never learn that the bedridden girl saw her blood relatives as expendable pawns.

The battle of succession for the Grisarika Kingdom's throne was already over. Given that the most conspicuous heir, the youngest princess, Ashuna, was absent, the eldest son was set to claim the crown, as was traditional right. And while the girl's relatives fought tooth and nail over this, she remained quietly in bed.

A princess who contributed nothing. A barely living decoration. A sleeping beauty who had no duties whatsoever.

Most who knew of her believed she was harmless.

But those who were in on her secret understood better.

For in truth, she was the Guardian who'd controlled Grisarika Kingdom for generations.

"Otherworlders…so pitiful and sinful…"

The young yet emaciated woman spoke in an elderly voice and tone as she toyed with the crystal sphere in her hands.

Of late, she had used it to assess two concepts: *Null* and *Time*.

The Faust kept everything about the lost ones who came from another world under extremely strict control. In fact, of the two, the Pure Concept of *Null* had already been put down. In reality, truly dangerous Pure Concepts—the sort

powerful enough to threaten the world—were incredibly rare.

In all of history, only four Human Errors had reached a level of strength that made them impossible to combat, even on a global scale.

Star, to the north, had long since been dyed white and become a husk, presently wandering harmlessly. *Evil*, sealed by fog in the southern ocean, could destroy humanity by releasing copies of Pandemonium to run rampant. The enormous *Dragon*, struck low by the Sword of Salt, might have once been able to physically destroy the planet. And *Vessel*, now in the Mechanical Society in the eastern Wild Frontier, would be terrifying, given near-infinite time.

When a Pure Concept became a Human Error, its power swelled tremendously. However, the concept's nature and how it interacted with the world were the most important aspects.

Only a few Pure Concepts could affect existence in a fundamental way—*Time*, for instance.

"…Hrmm."

Abruptly, the girl pushed her blankets aside and stood.

It was much too quiet outside.

Yes, this tower had been purposefully built in a peaceful area, but silence that almost hurt the ears was abnormal. She walked to the window at a slow shuffle, listlessly leaning on the windowsill to look outside.

The world had stopped.

Every flying bird, falling leaf, and working human in the castle was frozen.

It was a conceptual suspension of time itself. Applying physical providence to a conjuring phenomenon caused by Guiding Force would be absurd.

"I suppose a fifth is to be born, then."

She'd already dispatched Experion to the holy land. Whatever happened in the Magician's city, whatever her master the Lord did, it mattered not so long as Ashuna could be retrieved in time.

A thousand years ago, when the flourishing ancient civilization used Pure

Concepts to experiment with endless life, there were four survivors.

The Director was granted physical immortality by transplanting the young and feeble Pure Concept of *Evil*. The Magician was an entity fabricated using the large and powerful Pure Concept of *Dragon* to forge the ideal Guiding Force construction and give it a physical body. Like the Pure Concept *Star*, the Astrologer was reborn endlessly, thanks to an indestructible soul.

And the Guardian in Grisarika Kingdom was the result of experiments to use the forever-multiplying Pure Concept of *Vessel* to form an immortal spirit. She could transfer her consciousness when her physical body perished, though this was limited to members of her own bloodline.

Claiming this form had been a mistake. In its golden age, it was lovely and wonderfully healthy, but now it was in shambles.

She left the window and returned to her bed. That alone was enough to exhaust her strength.

“Ashuna is my precious, beloved next body, after all.”

There was no need to fret over Ashuna. The girl’s puppet, Experion, was there.

If anything, she was more concerned about events to the east.

The horrible Human Error at work there was spreading a dimension of its own providence that would eventually be capable of devouring a person who’d lived for a thousand years by transferring her spirit from one body to the next.

The White Night in the east, and the White Fog in the south.

The two barriers holding different Major Human Errors at bay were slowly cracking. The thousand-year-old cages would surely break with the weight of the *World Suspension* on top of that.

The Guardian nesting in Grisarika Kingdom lifted her crystal ball as if to read the future.

“And here you could have simply stayed inside until the planet met its end… Oh, how bothersome.”

The girl scowled with resentment for one too similar to herself.

The Mechanical Society stood in the eastern Wild Frontier.

This artificial world, wrapped in the White Night of a midnight sun, escaped the *Suspension* enacted by the Human Error of *Time* to continue its usual busy routine.

At the heart of this domain that could not be touched by *Time* stopping the world, someone groaned “Annoying…”

It kept multiplying, even while all else had frozen.

Hearts, emotions, personalities, spirits, souls, all increasing by the second. They had to keep vomiting it all up, or they’d lose sight of themself. Actually, for all they knew, they’d lost that ages ago. Did what they thought of as a self genuinely belong to them? Maybe their so-called real persona had broken away and become independent amid all this multiplying. They didn’t know. There was no way of knowing. They couldn’t tell if they were male or female, an individual or a colony, a self, or another entirely.

That was how long they’d been multiplying.

For this was a failed experiment that dated back even further than a thousand years.

The test commenced before the library facility called the Star Memory was born. It was an alteration, an attempt to combat the consumption of memories that came with using a Pure Concept.

When someone loses their recollection, their personality perishes, too. The idea was to add more personalities to replace the one destroyed by using a Pure Concept and thus stop the creation of a Human Error.

The experiment was a failure.

Adding more personalities crushed the human mind. The spirit that existed before the personas were heaped on was overwhelmed. Soon, *Vessel* was beyond control.

The original, still human at the time, had fought desperately to maintain a sense of individuality. By cutting off the new personalities as soon as they were born, the isolated portion became a Human Error and continued to be born.

The one stroke of good luck was that each of the separated and multiplying personalities amounted to a very small-scale Human Error.

The three primary colors were generated endlessly from this process.

Taking the form of crystals not unlike ore, they were the soul, spirit, and body of that which continued to multiply.

Red, green, blue—crystals in three colors kept dropping from the original body. The colors of the heart. Every one of them was a *Vessel* containing the nature of a Human Error.

None amounted to a whole human being individually. They were fragments of what had once been a person. They possessed no destructive power and didn't produce conceptual distortions. The Pure Concept of *Vessel* simply expanded the maximum capacity as the original continued to multiply. Each time one *Vessel* Human Error was born, the world became just the tiniest bit smaller.

Eventually, far too many of the tiny cuttings combined into a personality.

They were no more than excess detached material, yet they became sentient beings with greater emotional range than the original.

The Primary Color conjured soldiers.

They were the only nonhuman intelligent life in this world. Unlike the demons from Original Sin Conjurings, which used humans as a base, these were a life-form entirely their own.

They never left the Mechanical Society, always mining the original for materials to build up their world. They separated it into thirteen zones, with the location of the original at the heart. And there were already plans to take development to the next stage. The Three Primary Color beings had no qualms about cutting away the planet itself.

The things the original had created were constructing a world far beyond what that self had imagined.

"Argh, so annoying…"

Even the suspension of time could not halt the accursed multiplication. It went on endlessly like an ever-multiplying perpetual motion machine, hence

the name Mechanical Society.

Only the White Night kept the growth separate from the rest of the planet.

White had created the artificial sun back in their heyday, an endlessly rotating alabaster wheel, and now it was on the verge of tumbling down beneath the weight of piled-up time.

It would spill out into the world. If this endless night broke, the weight of the excessive multiplication would bear down on the lands beyond. If that burden that had slowly grown over a millennium suddenly pressed down on the planet, it would create an impact that might knock the world off its axis and upset its rotation.

That was how much the original had multiplied.

However, the Mechanical Society didn't wish to hurt the planet.

It was all so frustrating. They could do nothing but increase. They couldn't reduce anything. No matter how much they discharged, the original couldn't keep up. It kept growing, like the slow expansion of the universe since the big bang.

"Ahh… So annoying…"

This self would continue to multiply until all became one, and it could only complain about the contradictions.

They had reservations toward the world, but no malicious intent. The active threat to the world was far to the south, where a beast lurked in the fog.

"Ah-ha-ha!"

A youthful, innocent giggle echoed.

Fog spread over the ocean from the southernmost tip of the world's only continent. This was far beyond the southern port town of Libelle. The cherubic voice that danced through the air carried more ill portent than any malicious growl.

The fog strained around the little girl as she giggled, shoulders shaking with glee. The barrier tried to resist the planet's suspension. Two equally matched concepts clashed and struggled for supremacy. Mist swirled and coiled while all

else was frozen in time.

The powerful fog barrier that was unaffected by the previous world regressions faltered.

Cracks had formed already. Pandemonium watched as the mist thinned, finally allowing a glimpse of the blue sky, and her heart soared.

First, she would wreak havoc on the suspended world.

The idea of a monster rampaging while everything was stuck in place was wonderful and very fitting of a B-movie. Even a conjuring strong enough to stop the entire world would be no match for monsters born of the Pure Concept of *Evil* that had survived the poisonous isolation of a thousand years. The global-scale *Time* conjuring was far easier to move through than the *Ivory* barrier that had been made specifically to seal Pandemonium.

Imagine a world crawling with monsters while every village, town, and city was frozen. Surely there were a handful of humans who'd still be able to move for whatever reason in the time-halted world, and those chosen few champions would fight desperately against the monsters.

What a contrived heroic tale. She couldn't wait to make it a reality.

"Come on! You're almost there! You can do it, *Time*!"

She danced and twirled in place, eagerly awaiting all hell breaking loose, as she cheered for the newly born Human Error.

The Human Error that had once been Akari Tokitou stood in a frozen world.

Having become *Time* itself, she thought only to normalize time.

She had to make the hands of the clock match. The world had strayed off course because of the many regressions. Now that she embodied the concept, she had to force the planet's time to match hers.

Those who fought against natural time and set the hands of the world's clock astray…had defied providence for too long.

Time had to be equal for all. Some individuals finding a loophole was unacceptable. If anyone was still moving, she would *Suspend* them for good.

The facade of the Human Error of *Time*, trapped in the tuning of the clock, was one such example.

A sound echoed in the frozen world.

Everything was at a standstill.

No wind whispered, no dust stirred. Every living and nonliving thing, solid, liquid, and gas, was locked into the prison of unmoving time formed by the conceptual conjuring.

The world came to a halt.

Master Flare, who Menou had been fighting only a moment before, was no exception.

Yet Menou maintained her consciousness in the world that a tyrannical Human Error had frozen. She tried to turn her head and realized her body was trapped like all else. She couldn't even blink. Still, her body's inner workings functioned just fine.

Why was Menou still aware while caught in a *Time* conjuring powerful enough to stop the entire world?

There was only one possible explanation: the Guiding Force connection between Menou and Akari.

The link that temporarily allowed them to essentially merge souls gave *Time* a significant effect on Menou. When Akari became a Human Error, the concept of *Time* overflowed and threatened to infect Menou, ironically allowing her to escape the *World Suspension* conjuring.

So if she allowed it to take even more hold over her…

Menou drew the Pure Concept further into herself. She suspected her memories might fade immediately, but the Pure Concept that spilled from Akari's soul to Menou simply existed as it was.

Menou wrapped the concept of *Time* around herself. The conjuring manipulation, which required intense concentration, felt surprisingly similar to using Guiding Enhancement.

The act was akin to changing her essence. Menou let her nature, once

blanched white and never tainted, be dyed by the colors that she pulled from Akari.

She went on doing this for longer than could be counted.

Of course, not a single second passed for the world. While everything else remained suspended, Menou's body regained its freedom.

The concept of *Time* colored Menou's flesh.

She was careful not to let the Pure Concept's effects extend to her body. Instinctually, she could tell she wouldn't lose any memories, so long as she refrained from using a Pure Concept conjuring.

Finally, she managed to take a step forward. The air felt incredibly heavy. The salt was like hard ice when her foot came down on the ground. Yet where Menou planted her boot, the grains trembled slightly.

Slowly, numbly, Menou walked through the time-stopped world.

She intuited that the phenomenon around her wasn't limited to this area.

The entire world had stopped.

Time was frozen for everything.

Akari had used *Suspension* before, but never on such a massive scale. Previously, it only stopped time for the person struck by the Guiding Light she shot from a finger. It was a powerful conjuring, of course, but its range was limited.

This conjuring used the same Pure Concept, but on an entirely different scale.

Akari's Pure Concept was out of control. She'd become a Human Error. Her memories, personality, and humanity were gone.

Menou had to accept this horrible reality. She keenly regretted separating from Akari, even if it was only temporary.

They'd only just shared and supplemented her memories. Someone must have interfered, causing Akari to lose control, and Menou would make them pay. She was going to find the culprit and punish them, and nothing would stop her.

As she made this vow, Menou continued recovering her ability to move in the frozen time.

There was something else she had to do before she could hunt down the mastermind, so she kept pushing forward, using her anger and regret as fuel.

“Akari…”

It was like dragging herself forward through mud. Menou trudged onward through the dense air, forcing herself ahead.

When she managed to call the girl’s name, Akari reacted at last. The expressionless Human Error pointed a finger at Menou.

She was obviously about to attack.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Human Suspension]

It happened in an instant.

The Pure Concept of *Time* landed a perfect hit on Menou’s shoulder. It was a concept conjuring that increased the power of *Suspension* by limiting it to human targets. Menou didn’t fight its effects. She absorbed the Pure Concept properties trying to influence her body and let them become part of her. The *Time* conjuring attached to her faded as though drained.

Menou’s nature became a shade closer to the Pure Concept’s.

While she managed to avoid suspension, Menou’s mind wasn’t completely intact. Her thoughts stalled to the point of sluggishness. A deep fatigue filled her body and reduced her strength by nearly half.

“…?”

The Human Error that looked like Akari tilted her head, perhaps noticing that her conjuring hadn’t entirely worked. Different Pure Concepts canceled each other out, but she didn’t seem to understand that her own concept was being wielded against her.

Menou’s movements in suspended reality were slow. Akari didn’t react, even though she likely could have dealt with this anomaly in multiple ways. Menou could only guess why she didn’t respond. It was a mistake to expect logic from a

Human Error anyway. Just as Pandæmonium acted on the whims of *Evil* itself, Akari was kept motionless because the hands of *Time* directed her that way.

She had truly become a Human Error.

Even as the situation cast her into despair, Menou still had a shred of hope.

Akari's memories lived within Menou.

She'd received all of them during their mutual Guiding Force connection before they came to the land of salt. If she could reconnect their souls again, Menou could send those memories from her spirit back into Akari. Surely, that would return Akari to her senses.

Knowing deep down that she was probably being overly optimistic, Menou pushed on anyhow.

Guiding Force: Connect—Improper Attachment, Pure Concept [Time]—Invoke [Fracture]

This time, likely because the suspension hadn't worked to her liking, Akari used a more direct attack that affected space itself. Menou couldn't move well enough in the frozen time to dodge it entirely. The best she could do was lean out of the way.

An impact like being struck by a hammer knocked her backward. It collided with her shoulder. Curiously, it was the exact spot where she'd been injured in the battle with Master Flare in the holy land a few days ago. The nearly healed wound was opened again, accompanied by a spray of blood.

Menou certainly wasn't unharmed, but if Akari's conjuring had struck with full force, she would've lost her entire arm.

Perhaps, even as a Human Error, Akari unconsciously held back against Menou. No, it couldn't be anything so romantic. The true answer was likely that the *Time* conjuring had a lessened effect on Menou.

Akari seemed to mechanically note that it was more effective than *Suspension*. She fired more shots in succession.

Menou's stomach, thighs, face, arms, and sides were all hit. Each blow sent a powerful impact rippling through her.

It didn’t matter, though. Menou kept dragging herself forward. Why let an attack that merely inflicted pain stop her? Blood dripped from her shoulder, but that wasn’t an issue. It wasn’t enough blood loss for her to lose consciousness. She could keep going.

Menou’s blood stood out starkly on the white salt below. Her feet dragged through it, creating a crimson path behind her. She refused to yield, and a grating crunch accompanied each step.

Menou and Akari were linked. Everything would be fine. She told herself only what she wanted to hear.

Eventually, she was close enough to reach out and touch Akari.

The girl’s face was utterly blank, bereft of her usual constantly changing expressions. There was no indication of sanity in her round eyes, no vitality in her soft, sweet face and body. It was clear that no human emotion remained. This Akari was no different from the ticking clock that floated above them.

The Akari that beamed when she saw Menou was no more.

And since Akari wouldn’t smile, Menou forced herself to grin at her instead.

“You idiot… This isn’t like you at all…”

Normally, Akari would have puffed up her cheeks at the word “idiot” and declared that Menou was being mean. The exchange that had become customary on their shared journey together was gone.

That made it painfully obvious that Menou’s words weren’t reaching Akari.

Menou bit her lip.

She’d known, of course. After a Pure Concept went out of control, the person wouldn’t come back, no matter what anyone said to them. No matter how close a family member, friend, or lover had been, they never got through to a Human Error.

It was pure vanity to hope she might accomplish something no one else had.

So Menou pushed nearer and embraced Akari.

There was no reaction. The Human Error that was once Akari didn’t return the

gesture, instead standing with her arms hanging limply at her sides. She wasn't even attacking with conjurings anymore.

Nothing changed. That was a given.

No human touch could restore a Human Error. If this problem could be solved with sentiments and emotions, Executioners wouldn't target Otherworlders, and Menou would never have needed to kill them.

"Why did it have to end up this way…?"

Her journey with Akari had been fun, despite the difficulties on the way.

Upon seeing the countless ways Akari had relived their time together, Menou felt the full force of her emotions. She'd finally found what was most important to her through the Guiding Force connection that allowed them to know one another fully. And she'd challenged Master Flare to separate herself from her old way of life. And now it had come to this.

Menou couldn't make any hopes and dreams come true after all, it seemed.

Was this divine punishment for her grievous sins?

The moment Menou realized how precious this person was to her, she stood to lose her in the worst possible way. Menou fell into despair, with only the barest thread of salvation dangling above. She even felt as if fate itself was telling her that she deserved to suffer for having taken so many innocent lives.

Villains were supposed to suffer. She knew that, whether she wanted to or not. It was only fitting for them to be punished. Menou's crimes were so severe that even being killed by each of the lost ones she'd murdered wouldn't be enough.

But even if that was what *she* deserved…

"Don't drag Akari into it…!"

Her anger came out in a cry. Suddenly, she was blinded with rage. The blood rushed to her head, and she gnashed her teeth.

Akari had been caught in Menou's murder and villainy. That was true enough. Menou couldn't argue with that. However, she couldn't accept that a good person like Akari was being punished alongside her. She refused to consider

that fair treatment.

They were friends.

Akari cared deeply about Menou. She valued Menou. She accepted her and told her that her beliefs hadn't been in vain.

Thanks to Akari, Menou finally chose to pursue a way of life that would permit her to live.

Guiding Force: Connect—

To take back everything that was so precious to her, Menou sent Guiding Force through every point of contact with Akari to hopefully send the girl's memories back to her…

S?T?i?K???Pure Concept [Time]—

Menou was struck silent.

Akari was no longer there.

Menou was looking at her, touching her, but the person in Menou's arms wasn't Akari at all. It was like a bottomless pit devouring the planet. Her body, spirit, and soul—the Pure Concept had overwritten all three components of life. A world of power that extended farther than the scattered stars of the galaxy. The memories Menou tried to share through their Guiding Force connection were consumed by the *World Suspension* conjuring, devoured without a trace.

The concept of *Time* bared its fangs through their link and even sought to attack Menou's memories.

"Ah!"

Menou fought off the force that threatened to eat her consciousness and make her disappear, barely managing to drag herself back into her own body.

She took a single, staggering step away.

Was it really over?

Menou couldn't look Akari in the face, instead hanging her head, knowing that if she saw that sterile expression, she would be crushed by undeniable reality.

Her last chance at salvation was snuffed. Menou's hope became anguish, and weakness showed on her face.

As the planet's concept of *Time*, Akari was now one with the temporal axis of the world. And the many regressions had left this planet off course.

The Human Error in front of Menou was trying to correct the inconsistencies and make the hands of the clock match by stopping time for the entire world.

Even now that Akari had been overtaken by her Pure Concept and become a Human Error, her Guiding Force link with Menou yet remained. Thus, Akari was adrift somewhere in the galaxy-like vastness of the infinite concept of *Time*.

Still, Menou couldn't sense Akari's feelings, and the Guiding Force connection she'd hoped to use was now only a path for the Pure Concept of *Time* to invade Menou's soul. What would happen if the Pure Concept swallowed Menou, too? If the memories she'd inherited from Akari were destroyed, Menou would lose herself and her only means of bringing Akari back as well. Then there would be two bodies consumed by the Pure Concept of *Time*.

The long hand and the short hand together.

An irrational sentence came to her mind. The wordplay bordered on a non sequitur, yet for some reason, it seemed to point toward the truth.

Her plans in shambles, Menou glanced back toward the way she'd come.

The world was still frozen, and the only path in the white expanse was Menou's, dyed red from her dripping blood.

This was why she kept living. Her red-stained course stopped upon meeting Akari.

Could she really not take a single step beyond this?

Menou had been dreaming.

She dreamed of a life with Akari where they both survived. There were no secrets between them, thanks to their Guiding Force connection. If one smiled, the other would be happy, and that happiness would be shared with the other equally. Menou knew about all of the journeys Akari had repeated, and Akari knew about Menou's past as an Executioner.

That allowed them to accept each other.

She had chosen a path that would permit them to continue living together, and she could continue talking with Akari as a friend.

It was a dream so foolish that Menou might have laughed had someone else suggested it, and she'd been too embarrassed to admit it to Akari. Now it would never come true.

From the moment Menou realized she wasn't alone, she felt they could make their wish a reality together.

And as soon as she started to believe in this, Menou was filled with so much anticipation that she thought herself capable of the impossible.

Yet maybe she'd been correct the first time: Someone who took the life of another lost all rights to have their dream come true.

Was it impossible? Menou couldn't do it alone, but what about someone else? What about Momo, Sahara, Ashuna, Manon, or even…Master Flare?

"Ahh…"

An idea took form.

Menou had found inspiration, a new approach. This possible solution sparkled like a supernova. The answer arose, more vivid than any Primary Color, and Menou shuddered.

Her hands shook with fear. A shiver ran down her spine at the sinfulness of her own mind's suggestion.

She'd been fighting Master Flare so she wouldn't have to do such things… However, there was no clear alternative.

"…Ah-ha-ha."

Menou laughed at herself bitterly as she sank to the ground.

Landing on her knees, she dug her fingers into the ground like a child.

The land beneath had once been an entire continent. How had it turned into salt? Why was this infinite expanse isolated so far from everything else? The half-formed notion that had flitted through Menou's mind when Master Flare

activated a conditional conjuring was now connected, complete.

Soon, her fingertips nudged against a brittle lump. As soon as she felt it, she knew for sure.

This…was the only option left.

Her hands went still.

Menou steadied her resolve. Her mind was resolute. The girl before her had lost all semblance of the Akari Menou had known. Yet Akari was inside her somewhere.

“Listen, Akari.”

Knowing this might be the end, Menou spoke carefully, fighting off a flood of emotions.

“If this fails…you know.”

Menou had shared memories with Akari through their Guiding Force connection. As a result, she knew everything that had happened to the other girl.

The incident in the ceremonial hall in Garm, for instance.

When Menou and Akari were separated and the ceremonial conjuring *Blanch* activated, its white liquid resisted Akari’s *Suspension* conjuring.

Since Pure Concepts were taboo, this phenomenon rarely occurred, but the collision between two Pure Concepts nullified both of their conjurings.

“If it doesn’t work…I’ll take responsibility.”

Menou dug out the lump she’d found in the ground, pinching it delicately between her fingers. She handled the little object delicately, as though it were a poison that could slay a human with a single drop.

Master Flare making a point of destroying the Sword of Salt right in front of Menou before their battle was odd. At the time, Menou assumed it was a performance to rattle her nerves, but it was much more.

“So don’t worry.”

Full of caution, care, fear, and determination, Menou pulled the object out of

the ground with all her might.

A spray of salt erupted. A small blade emerged from the tiny fractures.

White and brittle—the Sword of Salt.

Menou had watched the weapon shatter. The part of it sticking from the ground had been broken to pieces, and those fragments were deliberately stomped into dust. Menou had watched the ancient sword, protected for a thousand years, be destroyed.

It had been thrust into the land of salt, and everything aboveground was smashed and melted into the water. However, this meant the tip of the blade had remained stuck underground.

The sword fragment moved smoothly in Menou's hand. It was far lighter in the air than Menou, who was still partly limited by the effects of the *Suspension*. It cut through *Time* itself, even without Menou's help. The Sword of Salt resisted and rent all concepts. Menou had never handled it before, but she understood that the blade's effects were unstoppable.

As an Executioner, Menou had sought out this blade to kill Akari, who was otherwise invincible, thanks to her ability to regress time.

"It'll be fine."

Brandishing the blade that could cut through any Pure Concept, Menou made a vow.

"No matter what happens…"

She wielded the deadly weapon not to kill but to make one last move to let Akari live.

That said, this was definitely a gamble, for this blade was too strong.

If Menou made the slightest mistake handling it and injured herself, there would be no saving her. Still, she leveled that unspeakably dangerous blade at her very first friend.

"No matter what anyone says or does…"

There was no point in hesitating. She'd made this decision long ago.

Menou had resolved to survive with Akari, but she'd sworn to be the one to kill her friend if she ever became a Human Error that would destroy the world.

She'd promised that the two of them would continue living together.

"From here on out, no matter what *Time* may bring…"

If the worst came to pass, and she had to break that oath, the least she could do was die with her instead.

"…I'll always be your friend, Akari."

Menou drove the tip of the Sword of Salt into Akari's chest, with all her feelings behind the thrust.

Ah, this might not work.

When she felt what happened next, Menou nearly resigned herself.

The Sword of Salt cut in far too easily.

Had she missed the mark? Menou drew her hand back halfway in despair, and the blade in Akari's chest went motionless.

The blade stopped, held by static time.

It worked. Menou nearly rejoiced, then stared in shock.

Akari's chest was transforming into salt. Her knees buckled, and she crouched, as though the weight of it were unbearable.

Apparently, it had been too reckless a wish.

The blood drained from Menou's face. However, the salt was progressing very slowly. The *Suspension* was affecting its strength, although not enough to halt it completely.

The Human Error of *Time* grasped the blade with both hands but did not pull it out. There was no point now that the transformation had begun. It had already spread a finger joint's length past the part of her chest that had been initially affected.

Menou squeezed her eyes shut, unwilling to watch.

She didn't wish to see it.

How could she watch Akari turn to salt?

But she felt it was her duty.

She had to witness the fate she’d brought upon Akari.

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Thus, she opened her eyes.

And that's when…

…the world began to move again.

The *Time* conjuring that had spread from Akari to the entire world rapidly converged back to its origin point. The conceptual *Suspension* on a global scale gathered into a single point in the center of Akari's chest.

"……"

Menou held her breath as she observed.

The tip of the broken blade remained stuck in Akari, only just. Scarcely a pinky finger's worth of her ample chest had become salt, and bare skin peeked from the torn cloth. The salt ought to have spread from the wound, yet it had stopped.

Salt transformation and time suspension—the two concepts were conflicting. The Human Error of *Time* protected herself by focusing the global-scale conjuring phenomenon on a single point.

Menou had gambled and won. She breathed a sigh of relief.

She did it.

By pricking Akari with the fragment of the Sword of Salt, Menou had forced a defensive reaction out of the Human Error.

Akari's original consciousness hadn't returned yet, though. All of her power as a Human Error was being employed for self-defense. She resisted the transformation into salt by pouring the *Suspension* that had stopped the entire world into her own body. Since the Sword of Salt was also completely frozen, the tip of it remained slightly stuck into Akari without moving.

If she'd been stabbed with the Sword of Salt in its complete form, even *Time* might have been cut down and transformed immediately.

But for better or worse, the Sword of Salt was broken, and only a tiny fragment survived. Its loss in size also came with a power reduction.

As a result, the Human Error of *Time* and the Sword of Salt were perfectly

balanced to resist each other's conjuring phenomena.

Menou heard a *clink* behind her, and she whirled around.

She'd been so focused on Akari that she uncharacteristically neglected to keep an eye on her surroundings. The sound of the dagger being drawn had come from Master Flare. Since time had halted, she presumably hadn't seen anything until the moment Menou stuck the blade into Akari's chest.

Master Flare deduced everything that had transpired while the world was frozen by observing the present situation, and her eyes shot so wide they nearly popped out of her skull.

Was it really that surprising? Perhaps it was to an average person, but Menou had assumed that her old master would simply process and accept reality like she always did. Seeing Master Flare this astonished suggested to Menou that something was amiss.

However, she had no time to think about it. Now that she'd stopped the Human Error of *Time*, she had to do something about Master Flare. Her old teacher wasn't kind enough to stand there while she rescued Akari.

Plus, there was a chance Menou could catch Master Flare off guard if she acted quickly. Yet as she readied her dagger to resume the fight…

"Hello there."

Menou hadn't realized anyone else was present until she heard the voice.

When someone whispered in her ear, Menou was so shocked that she nearly dropped her dagger.

White… A girl who appeared pure white. Although not alabaster from head to toe, she was so pale that she appeared to melt into the background of the world. She seemed capable of reflecting any color held to her.

Already unsettled, Menou was even more disturbed when she saw that the newcomer's face was identical to hers.

The girl's hair concealed more than half of her face, but her visible features matched Menou's perfectly. The biggest difference was the hue of this girl's hair.

This person who otherwise radiated an aura of pure white had utterly black locks and eyes.

“Who…are you…?”

“Me?”

Menou barely managed to rasp out the question between shivers, but the girl answered comfortably.

“I’m the one you Faust people call ‘the Lord.’ I’m *Ivory*, the one made to be this world’s protector.”

Her long dark hair made her reminiscent of a ghost that might lurk beneath a willow tree. However, there was an undeniably familiar quality to her, and Menou felt a sense of déjà vu that brought her back to when she had met Master Flare as a child.

Menou, Master Flare, and a girl with a pure-white aura had all been there, just like now.

Standing before Menou, the ghostly girl said placidly, “I’m Hakua Shirakami from Nishibori High School. First year, Class Three.”

It was the same school and class Akari had once recited to Menou.

“And I’m Akari’s best friend.”

This alabaster mastermind casually revealed her identity to the wounded Menou.

Nishibori High School, first year, Class Three.

The words had a nostalgic ring. Menou had heard them when she’d infiltrated the royal castle in Grisarika and met Akari.

“Eep?! I’m Akari Tokitou, from Nishibori High School! First year! Class Three!”

The girl who wore the same face as Menou had familiar-looking clothes, too. Aside from the addition of a red necktie, her sailor-style school uniform had the same design as the one Akari wore on their first encounter.

“Thank you, Flare.”

Hakua’s gaze shifted from Menou to Master Flare. The girl’s long black hair

dragged along on the ground, eerily trailing her movements.

“It was a stroke of good luck that you reached me twenty years ago. Without your help, things never would have gone this smoothly.”

“Yeah.”

Master Flare’s response sounded absentminded.

There was definitely something strange about her conduct. Based on how she’d stalled earlier, she’d clearly wanted to delay things until Hakua arrived. Yet Master Flare looked oddly lethargic in victory.

The newcomer didn’t seem to find Master Flare’s behavior suspicious, though.

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“I’ll take it from here. The last thing I need is to entrust this to you only for you to kill the damn thing.”

Guiding Force: Connect—Perfect Attachment, Pure Concept [Ivory]—Invoke [White Fog]

Mist formed before Menou’s eyes.

She jumped out of the way upon sensing a conjuring being invoked. If she hadn’t acted immediately, her whole body would have been caught in the fog.

Menou had seen this sort of vapor before. It was the same sort that had rolled off of Pandæmonium. If it surrounded her, she wouldn’t be able to escape.

That alone was enough to tell Menou who this strange person was.

“Are you the *Ivory* hero?!”

“…Haven’t heard that nickname in a while.”

After the fog conjuring failed to capture Menou, it immediately began to change form. It spread thin and wide, hardening into several small clumps.

The floating White Fog flew toward Menou.

Instinctively, she slashed with her dagger.

She hit her target but felt nothing as her blade sliced through. The cluster of white vapor reformed as soon as it was cut. Menou had no desire to find out what happened if it made direct contact.

Realizing physical attacks would have no effect, Menou instead formed a scripture conjuring.

Guiding Force: Connect—Scripture, 3:1—Invoke [And the oncoming enemy did hear the tolling of the bell.]

Guiding Light rose from the scripture and took the form of a church bell. The Guiding Force bell swung back and forth in its tower, producing a sound-based attack that dispelled the fog floating in the air.

“Ahh… Maybe I held back too much. Fine…”

“Why—?”

“Why does my face look like yours? Is that what you want to know? Well, you’ve got it backward. It’s *your* face that looks like *mine*.”

Menou focused intently on the other girl, trying to figure out what she meant.

This had to be *Ivory*; that much was clear from the fact that she’d used a conjuring similar to the fog barrier sealing Pandemonium. It was hard to believe she’d lived for a thousand years without becoming a Human Error, but her appearance raised even more questions.

She was nearly identical to Menou in every way.

They weren’t mirror images, not quite. The lengths and colors of their hair differed, as did the colors of their eyes. On close inspection, the other girl seemed to be a little older than Menou.

“You’re my ‘eyes,’ you see.”

“…Eyes?”

“That’s right. As long as you have a scripture with a communication conjuring function, everything around you is relayed to the Star Memory. By carrying a scripture and being with Akari, you’ve performed your role as my ‘eyes’ perfectly.”

Menou slowly began to grasp the situation.

Pandemonium’s little finger and the Mechanical Society’s Primary Color conjured soldier had made similar comments when Menou fought them.

“You, who carry a tiny hint of Ivory*…”*

“Why is Ivory *here?”*

Until now, Menou couldn’t comprehend what they meant.

The woman who held all the answers abruptly asked a question:

“Do you know what’s necessary for someone to return to Japan?”

Menou did. Akari once asked about the cost of returning to Japan, and Pandæmonium’s answer broke her heart.

Hundreds of millions of human sacrifices, an entire large nation's worth of raw materials, and enough Guiding Force to potentially dry up an ocean.

The massively large-scale conjuring that required these three resources in great supply was the only way back to Japan. Indeed, it required such great sacrifices that a single use threatened humanity's extinction.

"The ancient civilization. The society of a thousand years ago advanced by leaps and bounds using Pure Concepts. A technological competition that tried to outpace the universe's expansion led one researcher to lose sight of all morality."

Master Flare didn't attempt to intervene. She apparently trusted Hakua to handle Menou's execution.

"Thus, they performed experiments worse than death."

Hakua spoke of the dark side of the era most considered a golden age.

"In those days, we—myself and four others—decided to pay this world back for the way it kept consuming Japanese lives. We were all humans summoned and trapped in conjuring research labs. Since we were victims, we tried to save others like us from the system that subjected them to inhumane experiments."

Menou had heard this story once before. It matched what Pandæmonium had said in Libelle, although her version had been halting and vague.

The five of them fought against the world, she'd said.

"But there was a problem with the fruits of our hard work. It could only send one person back per use. Worse yet, it would only work once in this world… functionally, anyhow. You see, there are only enough materials to send one person back. We fought over who would get to use the conjuring circle to go home, and that's when we split up. Because we five had our own reasons that we absolutely had to return."

Menou backed away slowly, but Hakua kept moving toward her to close the distance, without any particular caution. She walked like someone never trained in the basics of battle, yet her movements had an eerie edge.

"And in the end, I won. I should've just gone back then, a thousand years ago.

It honestly would've been for the best. But it's like I told you, remember? I'm Akari's best friend."

Hakua's voice was quiet. Even as she spoke of her own victory, there was no trace of emotion in her tone.

"See, *Star* read the future and knew that Akari would come to this world eventually."

Star, one of the Four Human Errors who eventually became the origin of the Starhusk, had abilities that included Divination. That power could read the future about something important related to the target and reveal it to them.

"There's only one span of time from Japan linked to this world, so most summoned people come from the same era. Whether a thousand years ago or today, those rituals bring Japanese people from roughly the same generation. And since the pool that can be pulled from is localized, people who are friends or relatives happen to be taken on rare occasions. Do you see what I'm getting at? When I learned about Akari, I no longer had a reason to go back to my old world."

She'd wiped out the Four Major Human Errors and earned the right to return to her old world, only to be trapped in this one by the words of a barely alive prophet.

"So I waited."

Hakua's voice was empty as she stated a simple truth.

When she learned that her best friend, Akari Tokitou, would be summoned to this world, she'd decided to wait for her.

"I waited, and I came up with a plan. I bent the whole world to my will so that I could go home with Akari. I even solved the problem of the single-use repatriation circle. If the conjuring registers you as the same person, you can go home together, as long as you beef up the materials and sacrifices a little."

These words caused Menou to realize something.

The mutual Guiding Force connection. Menou and Akari had borne their hearts to each other through Guiding Force and shared their souls as one. With

their Guiding Force synchronized, they could even be said to be the same person from a conjuring point of view.

“It can’t be…”

“Oh, but it is.”

Hakua had allowed them to rewind time over and over until Akari and Menou made a Guiding Force connection.

And it was all to turn Menou into the perfect material.

“I *am* still Japanese, you know, as much as I might’ve changed. Since there’s a Pure Concept attached to my soul, I can’t become one with Akari in conjuring terms, no matter what I do. Our Pure Concepts will clash, you see. So I needed to make a being who was the same as me, yet different.”

Hakua looked straight at Menou.

“In addition to being my eyes, that makes you my brain, too. You are me, from back when I was still myself. That’s why you have such natural compatibility with Akari. Now I just need to realign you with me. You worked beautifully as my eyes and brain, my *me* and *nou* in Japanese. Although…”

Hakua glanced over at Akari. She seemed a statue—frozen in time with the blade still trapped in her chest.

“…*this* wasn’t part of the plan.”

Menou undoing the *World Suspension* had apparently deviated from Hakua’s expectations.

“I was hoping to get rid of Pandemonium and the Mechanical Society and finish all the preparations for my return while time was stopped… Oh well. I’ll figure out how to save Akari later. First, I’ll deal with you.”

Hakua hadn’t explained everything to Menou for no reason. By sharing information, she brought their identities a little closer.

She was definitely an enemy. This was surely Menou’s true nemesis.

Hakua, sensing Menou’s hostility, only shrugged.

“Don’t make any more work for me, please.”

Guiding Force: Connect—

Menou's breathing stopped.

This conjuring was far different from the last, in both power and intent.

Perfect Attachment, Pure Concept [Ivory]—

Menou didn't even realize she was backing away until she heard the salt crunching beneath her feet.

The conjuring construction was deliberate and unhurried. But far more terrifying than the uncanny nature or complexity of the conjuring was the vast amount of Guiding Force it gathered and gathered and gathered, pressing it together like clay.

All Menou's determination was as flimsy as a scrap of paper.

That's how it felt in the face of this conjuring.

This was true power—overwhelming enough to strike fear into even the strongest hearts.

Invoke [Chaos]

Hakua held her palm out toward Menou, who fled.

She ran as fast as she could, diving in one direction without a second thought, doing whatever it took to get away.

The spot Menou had occupied a moment earlier turned white. A beam extended straight from Hakua's arm, bleaching everything in its path. It seemed to write over and reset the world wherever it touched. Menou had no idea what the attack did. However, it was clear that it left nothing but the Guiding Force of *Ivory* in its wake.

Distance made no difference to a conjuring like this. Then perhaps Menou should get closer and…do what? How could Menou possibly fight back when she'd retreated out of fear even while her opponent was unguarded in the midst of constructing a conjuring?

Hakua's arm moved.

Everything her conjuring touched turned blank. All three dimensions were

crudely whited out, as though a child were sloshing paint over the world. Just as the conjuring was about to catch Menou, overwriting her into nothingness beyond all hope of escape, it stopped abruptly.

“I hope you understand now that there’s no point trying to resist.”

While Menou gasped for breath, her energy exhausted from escaping the ray, Hakua smiled.

It was a threat. She’d used that unbelievable conjuring purely to make her power clear.

Now that Menou was exhausted and standing still, Hakua took aim and used the conjuring she’d meant to use initially.

Guiding Force: Connect—Perfect Attachment, Pure Concept [Ivory]—Invoke [Possession]

Menou’s spirit was plunged into an ocean.

Hakua was transferring her spirit into Menou’s body.

This was the second time Menou had felt another person’s spirit force its way into her.

At the end of the battle in the desert at the continent’s center, the Primary Color conjured soldier had tried the same thing on Menou. The conjuring originally belonged to the concept of *Vessel* of the Mechanical Society. Menou hadn’t been able to resist then, either. The enemy’s strength overpowered her.

However, what transpired this time was beyond comparison.

Were a single drop of water added to the ocean, no one would be able to find it. Menou was that drop.

All she could do was hold on to her sense of self with all her might to keep from mixing with the rest and being lost forever. Even then, she couldn’t entirely prevent herself from slowly spreading, stretching thin. If what Hakua said was true, she’d arranged things so that Menou would be unable to resist on a conjuring level.

Everything had been leading up to this moment. All along, this other person had been within her.

Menou finally understood her identity. She'd learned her roots. And with that knowledge, she could confidently declare that she hadn't come this far to become another.

Menou couldn't resist the *Possession*—at least, not alone.

So she reached out to someone else—another person still inside her. Through their Guiding Force connection, she let the Pure Concept enter from Akari's soul.

Hakua was trying to use their shared physical identity to transfer her spirit into Menou. So Menou would repel her with the Human Error of *Time*. That Pure Concept's properties had already seeped into Menou's body.

And Pure Concepts clashed with one another.

Menou was overwriting her own physical properties on the spot. She'd been made in Hakua's likeness, but now her body shed that pure whiteness. Most likely, she'd never again be able to make an effortless Guiding Force connection as she once had. That didn't matter, though.

Hakua had said that Menou was her eyes and brain.

Menou allowed the *Ivory* elements inside her to clash with the Pure Concept of *Time*. She had no need for any part of Hakua, because she was already connected with Akari.

Hakua's eyes narrowed as she felt the *Time* flowing through Menou's soul.

She and Menou had lost one of their shared properties.

The power merging with Menou fizzled. Menou's and Hakua's bodies became separate entities. The natural resistance drove their souls apart, and the *Possession* conjuring ended in failure.

"Sorry, but no such luck…!" Menou smiled boldly, releasing a breath she'd been holding unconsciously. Each inhale felt like her first.

"…Yeah, that's impressive."

There was genuine admiration in Hakua's voice.

"I can't believe you resisted *Possession*—that's crazy. Looks like the

techniques you've worked so hard to develop are worth more than one of my conjurings, at the very least. That's pretty impressive, you know."

Hakua approached Menou, hands behind her back. Despite her lighthearted tone, Menou felt a crushing pressure bearing down on her.

"I'm sorry for trying to cut corners. Seriously. That's my bad."

Hakua smiled, and several conjurings formed behind her back.

Like a true master of Pure Concepts, her thoughts formed conjuring constructions with ease. She wove several together simultaneously, abandoned them, and moved on to the next, her ideas about her attack taking the form of conjurings that continuously formed and fell apart.

Each was as strong as any Pure Concept conjuring Menou had ever seen, and their variety was astonishing. She should have realized it would be that way as soon as the *Ivory* concept holder employed a *Vessel* concept conjuring.

"Your mind is going to disappear soon. Any last words?"

It was hard to believe.

How could a single human being have multiple Pure Concepts?

The first conjuring Hakua used had been some strange combination of Pure Concepts that resulted in something unfathomable.

"Oh, right. I guess I never mentioned what kind of experiments they did on me when I was summoned to this world a thousand years ago, back when I was still myself."

Hakua kindly commented on Menou's confusion.

"They wanted to see how many Pure Concepts they could cram into one person without their power canceling each other out, see."

And the Pure Concept they chose for this was *Ivory*.

"When Pure Concepts lose control, they become omnipresent in the world as a conjuring. And with *Ivory*, I happened to be very conveniently suited to filling with conjurings that already existed. Normally, concepts that are part of the world at large are way less powerful than when they were Pure Concepts, but

the Pure Concepts they packed into me barely lost any of their power at all."

The result was an Otherworlder who could control numerous Pure Concepts. Thus was born the revolutionary "*Ivory* hero," who rebelled during the ancient civilization era and became the ruler known as the Lord.

It was no use. Menou couldn't envision any method of winning against such an entity. She had to discard the notion of resisting.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Gale]

The ground burst like there'd been an explosion.

It was an improvised smoke screen created by Menou thrusting her dagger into the ground and activating the *Gale* conjuring. As her vision filled with dust, Menou used Guiding Camouflage to blend into the background.

"Hmm?"

Hakua tilted her head.

She didn't seem to understand what Menou was trying to do. Only when she could no longer see the other girl did she clap her hands together in realization.

"Ohh, you're running away."

There was obvious scorn in the voice that raked against Menou's back as she started to flee.

It mocked her, but that did little to slow her down. No matter what anyone said, she only had to get away. Hakua obviously wouldn't make any attempt on Akari's life. As frustrating as it was, Menou's best option was to flee for now and devise a new plan to rescue Akari.

"It's fine. You can run. In fact, I'll do you one better—I won't even chase after you," the voice called to Menou as she fled.

There was no way of telling if Hakua was lying. She could have been bluffing to trick Menou into dropping her guard. Perhaps Hakua just genuinely couldn't be bothered. Or maybe she would change her mind a moment later and shoot Menou down with a conjuring from behind.

Regardless, facing her head-on was simply not an option. Menou knew

beyond a shadow of a doubt that she didn't stand a chance.

"I mean," Hakua began. What was she playing at now, after making such an absurdly generous offer? "…I have no use for a 'me' who would abandon Akari, even temporarily."

Menou's steps stalled.

"It's shamelessly coldhearted, but I guess that's fine. You're basically admitting that you're nothing but a hollow imitation. Why shouldn't you care about your own life more than your friend? …Oh, but you know, maybe I should tell you something."

Hakua didn't move. She made no attempt to pursue Menou, just as she'd promised.

Still, Menou's stride wavered. Her steps grew more shallow, slowing with each one.

"I'm the one who erased Akari's memories with you."

Menou's Guiding Camouflage faded.

Hakua's eyes locked upon Menou when she reappeared. Menou hadn't escaped yet. She was a fair distance away, but not outside the range of Hakua's conjurings.

"Hey, what's the matter? I said I wouldn't chase you."

Everything about Hakua's posture confirmed that. She hadn't moved from the site of the smoke screen.

Menou knew it was best to keep running. No matter how much she thought about it, fighting here was meaningless. She had no chance of survival or success. It was a fight she couldn't win.

And yet Menou spoke to Hakua.

"Why did you erase them?"

To Menou, those memories were the most precious things she shared with Akari.

Their time together.

And this person removed them from Akari's mind?

"Well, she doesn't need them, right?"

Menou looked baffled at the answer.

Hakua reached into the pocket of her sailor-style uniform's skirt and pulled out a white headband.

"I'm going back to Japan with Akari. And I still have our memories from Japan within me. As long as I have your body and the conjuring materials that can connect with Akari, her memories of Japan will return to normal. She doesn't need any recollection of her time here with you. Just so you know, when we get back to Japan, I'm going to *Blanch* all my memories of this stupid world, too, and go back to when I was just 'me.'"

Hakua had erased Akari's memories.

She had blotted out all traces of the Akari from this world and made her into a Human Error.

To turn Akari back into the Akari she knew.

"I don't need any part of this world. And neither does Akari."

Guiding Force: Connect—Perfect Attachment, Pure Concept [Ivory]—Invoke [Weathering]

Any Pure Concept that went out of control somewhere in the world became part of Hakua's power. As if to prove it, she used a *Time* conjuring to erode the headband away.

Akari's headband crumbled to dust in Hakua's hand, floating away on the breeze.

The memento of Menou giving in to Akari and adding a flower decoration was gone.

"We're going back to Japan and taking back our lives as 'Akari' and 'me.'"

Hakua had erased every trace of Menou from Akari to that end.

"I see."

It all made sense.

Menou understood perfectly now.

Her foot took an unsteady step forward. She wasn't fully aware of it. Her body simply moved in direct response to Menou's innermost urges.

The Pure Concept *Ivory* sneered at Menou, her hair flowing in the wind.

"Oh, you're *not* running away."

Stop. A part of Menou begged her to turn back, but she ignored it. Standing her ground meant dying. She knew that. And perishing here meant leaving Akari behind. Menou wouldn't be able to say good-bye to Momo, either. There would be nothing left of her. She wouldn't even get to settle the score with Master Flare; her determination would go to waste. Menou would die to this person who'd appeared from nowhere and cut the line.

However, Menou still couldn't stop.

This might be the first time she'd felt the pure, genuine desire to kill someone.

"Die."

Menou couldn't recall ever spitting the malicious curse before, despite all those she'd murdered. It dropped from her lips like an icicle. She swung her arm back and stepped forward, running toward certain doom with all her might.

I can't win. I'm going to die. Even knowing that, Menou charged onward.

Hakua laughed.

She spread her empty hands, defenseless—a blatant invitation.

Menou accepted it.

Although they were separate individuals, there had never been a better target for Menou's self-hatred. She elevated her physical abilities to the limit. Menou pictured Momo, who adored her despite all her flaws. She imitated her aide's Guiding Enhancement, increasing her strength nearly beyond the point of control as she dashed forward.

It was only because Menou glared with such intensity at Hakua that she noticed the person standing behind her target, the one who stole her attention.

Master Flare stood behind Hakua. She hadn't spared a glance for Hakua and Menou's exchange. Trying to pull the salt blade out of Akari, or perhaps trying to crush it, Master Flare kicked the ground in apparent irritation. Her emotions had rarely shown so rawly as she took a deep breath and drew her own dagger instead.

As Menou charged toward Hakua, Master Flare casually strode over…

"Huh?"

…and plunged her dagger into Hakua's heart from behind.

The entire world stopped.

It wasn't the conceptual suspension that had engulfed the world a short while ago. Rather, the scene before Menou was so unbelievable that all seemed frozen again.

This was a surprise beyond conception.

For Menou, it was the emotional shock of her old master's unexpected act. For Hakua, it was the physical shock of being stabbed in a vital organ.

Hakua turned around, face blank and white as paper, as if she had no idea what had transpired.

It was perhaps impressive that she still moved after being stabbed in the heart. No wonder she'd survived for a millennium. Master Flare withdrew the dagger, and the damaged flesh returned to normal like nothing had happened. Hakua's regeneration was the product of ancient civilization technology that involved sacrificing and summoning flesh on a cellular level, although Menou was ignorant of this.

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Master Flare knew, however.

For over two decades, Master Flare had been Hakua's loyal pawn. Despite being privy to the whole story, she'd fulfilled her role dispassionately, never failing.

She wasn't trustworthy, but she had always proved dependable.

"Why?"

Hakua's question had the most genuine inflection Menou had heard from her.

Master Flare threw back her head and laughed.

"A friend I killed long ago asked me to kill you, as it happens." Flare's lips twisted into a smirk. "Do I really need any other reason to kill you?"

Hakua's eyes narrowed into needle-like points.

She displayed no aftereffects from being stabbed in the heart. In fact, she hadn't bled a single drop.

In the ancient civilization era, Hakua Shirakami was given four elements of immortality in preparation for her role as a well of multiple Pure Concepts. If even one of life's three components became immortal, so did the holder. Hakua was unique in that her body, soul, and spirit were all made undying, morphed into the perfect form of power. She could not perish, even if all three aspects of life vanished.

It had been a thousand years since the people that made her fell. With all the Pure Concepts Hakua contained, she could never die by ordinary means.

"I don't know what you're trying to do, but a little surprise attack isn't going to hurt me."

"I figured. Your strength comes from the purity of the concept called *Ivory*. Its conjurings were already strong enough, but by swallowing the concepts of the Four Major Human Errors and making them part of your strength, you've grown even more omnipotent."

Master Flare eyed the healed-over spot she'd stabbed, undeterred by the ineffectiveness of her attack.

“You’ve got the advantage over fellow Otherworlders because you can erase memories, plus the unique ability to carve any Pure Concept that’s become omnipresent in the world into your soul and make it your own—that’s the strength of *Ivory*. How many concepts have you consumed over the past thousand years? And you’re going to exact revenge on this world for consuming Japanese lives? Yeah, right. You’re the one whose selfishness made everything this way.”

“What the hell…?”

Hakua’s voice trembled with rage. A conjuring construction floated behind her back in response to the anger.

She needs backup.

The thought flashed through Menou’s mind immediately.

This was the Lord, the most powerful being in the world. Even Master Flare couldn’t win on her own.

So it was almost automatically that Menou stood by Master Flare’s side.

“Seriously, what the hell is wrong with all of you?”

Hakua’s abilities filled the air. Her multiple concepts formed innumerable conjurings.

She was going to use the same attack she exhibited to Menou.

That was bad. Menou’s understanding of conjurings only made the threat clearer. They had to escape or else stop Hakua somehow. Menou moved to step forward and fight to survive, only to feel her head pulled back.

Guiding Force: Connect—Perfect Attachment, Pure Concept [Ivory]—Invoke [Chaos]

Master Flare had grabbed Menou’s yellow hood.

“Huh?”

Hakua’s and Menou’s utterances overlapped.

Master Flare paid no mind to their reactions. Acting as though this were the most obvious response, she tugged Menou closer, using her as a shield.

Uh-oh, I'm dead.

A stupidly simple response arose in Menou's brain before she felt fear. It hadn't even occurred to her that she would suddenly be used as a meat shield in this situation. Menou's mind and expression both went blank, and she didn't attempt to move.

However, Hakua was apparently just as surprised.

"Why, you…!"

There was a hint of panic in her voice. If she moved her arm slightly, she would completely blot out Menou and Master Flare with white all at once.

Instead, she frantically aimed her conjuring away.

Even now, Menou's and Akari's souls were connected. Hakua needed Menou's body for her purposes. She'd waited through the many regressions for Menou to finally make a Guiding Force link with Akari.

Preparing Menou as a conjuring material took a long while. Thus, Hakua prioritized keeping Menou intact over killing Master Flare.

Hurriedly redirecting her conjuring had left Hakua defenseless. In rashly cutting off her conjuring, Hakua had left her guard full of holes. She was defenseless, totally open to attack. However, Menou was caught just as unawares as Hakua, and she was unable to react.

But of course, Master Flare could, and did.

"Bwuh?!"

Menou shrieked.

Master Flare hurled her at Hakua. She couldn't kill Menou, so she wouldn't dare block her with a conjuring, either. Menou landed on top of Hakua in a heap, unable to resist after losing blood from her shoulder. Her body and spirit were both exhausted.

"What do you…? Bweh?!"

This time it was Hakua's turn to shriek as Master Flare kicked her in the face. Menou ducked instinctively as the tip of a boot flew past her face.

“Talk about a joke.”

It was pure physical violence, with no conjuring or Guiding Force involved. Flare’s eyes were ablaze as she stared down at Hakua.

“The superhuman created with the peak of Guiding Force technology… The Otherworlder who absorbed countless Pure Concepts and calls herself a god… The person who despaired at losing her sense of self over a thousand years… And this is the best you can do?”

She opened her mouth wide as she laughed.

“Too funny.”

It was a taunt. Menou could tell. She was goading Hakua into an attack.

But Hakua didn’t realize that.

She glared at Master Flare, painful tears in her eyes.

The girl couldn’t kill Menou, but there was no doubt she was incredibly powerful with the countless Pure Concepts at her disposal. She had any number of ways to attack.

Guiding Force: Connect—Perfect Attachment, Pure Concept [Ivory]—Invoke [Null]

Using one of the many Pure Concepts she had collected over the past thousand years, *Null*, Hakua’s conjuring struck Master Flare’s right leg at the joint.

Half of her thigh disappeared.

Flare’s body lurched sideways. Hakua’s lips twitched into a smug smirk.

Master Flare’s right foot dropped with a squelch—but it never hit the ground.

Guiding Force: Sacrifice—Right Foot: Original Sin, Wrath—Summon [Surge]

It had been offered as a sacrifice.

The curse summoned from a piece of human flesh took the form of viscous red liquid and stuck to Hakua.

Hakua stared in shock at Master Flare—an Executioner who had used a taboo

Original Sin Conjuring.

“Did you—mmgh?!”

The red curse crawled into her open mouth. Hakua seemed far too strong to be affected by a curse summoned at the cost of a single human limb. It was probably disgust that forced her mouth shut so quickly and turned her head away.

While Hakua dealt with the curse, Master Flare pointed her dagger at where her leg had been severed and invoked a crest conjuring.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Branch: Parasite-Eagle Seed]

She shot a Guiding Force seed into her own wound. Guiding Force roots sprouted from the stump of her leg, branches twining together to form an improvised prosthetic that supported her weight.

Master Flare had managed to stop the bleeding and construct a new limb instantly, in one fell swoop. Menou knew from personal experience that she had to be in immense pain. Essentially, a plant had rapidly germinated within her body. It was undoubtedly more agonizing than losing the limb in the first place.

Yet Master Flare’s face didn’t even twitch.

Hakua pushed Menou off and stood. Her techniques were unpolished, but the sheer strength of her Guiding Enhancement far outmatched Menou’s.

Master Flare remained undaunted, only moving faster. “Hey, piece of junk,” she called to her scripture.

“*Yes, Master? What is your command?*” it responded.

“Use all your memories to connect to the main body. At these coordinates.”

She was ordering it to sacrifice itself.

There was no argument. The nameless Guiding Force life-form dwelling within Master Flare’s scripture responded without a moment’s hesitation.

“Very well, Master. But won’t you be lonely once I’m gone?”

“Just go already. The terminal containing her remains shouldn’t have developed a personality in the first place.”

“Then you should have erased me to begin with. It just goes to show that you have some sentimentality after all. Ah, I don’t want to hear your counterargument to that, so I’ll be on my way back to the Mother now. It was fun while it lasted, Master.”

The scripture glowed noticeably brighter.

Guiding Force: Connect—Imitation Circuit: Pure Concept [Light]—Invoke [Beacon]

A massive amount of power converged, becoming a thin, radiant beam that shot up into the sky.

For just a moment, Hakua and Menou stared up in the same pose.

At first, neither had any idea what had occurred.

A conjuring had been invoked, yet it didn’t seem to accomplish anything. The enormous Guiding Force beam’s destination was beyond what Menou could detect.

However, Hakua evidently figured it out. “No way, was that Marta’s…?! Flare?! Are you trying to die or what?!”

“Of course not. I’m heading back to the holy land. Unlike you people, I’ve got nobody to protect.”

The scripture vanished from Master Flare’s hand, turning to dust and crumbling away.

Master Flare strode briskly toward the teleport gate. She was leaving.

Why? Menou was confused. She couldn’t fathom what her former master gained by betraying Hakua and then sauntering off. If she wasn’t going to do anything more, what was the point of turning traitor in the first place?

“You really think I’m going to let you get away?”

“I *know* you’re going to let me get away, actually.”

Unbothered by Hakua’s threat, Master Flare pointed at Akari, whose body

was still frozen by *Suspension*.

“That thing. She won’t die in her present state, but if she falls into the ocean, you’re sure as hell not going to find her.”

The color drained from Hakua’s face.

Menou only grew more confused. She didn’t understand how the idea of falling into the ocean came into play here. The land of salt was a small island. Walking to the water’s edge wouldn’t take very long, but it wasn’t right next to them, either. She didn’t see how Akari could end up falling into the ocean.

“Must be rough, having to protect someone.”

With that, Master Flare coolly strolled away.

Flare proceeded across the land of salt quickly, her steps sure in spite of the improvised prosthetic replacing one of her legs.

There was less than a minute left until the startup signal she’d sacrificed her scripture to transmit would fire and make impact. Wasting any time risked her being caught in the attack and dying.

Master Flare walked with certainty and no panic toward the teleport gate. Upon reaching it, a small shadow passed through from the holy land to the other side.

The small black shadow on the otherwise empty ground looked profoundly unnatural. Master Flare glanced at it sharply, and the stupid thing even trembled with fear.

The shadow’s identity was obvious. These shades used by the human who’d fallen to *Evil* were an alternate dimension created by Original Sin Concepts. A servant of *Evil* was hiding in this shadow that had passed through the portal. Master Flare considered eliminating the shade’s wielder on the spot, but she was pressed for time.

Yet another unexpected element added to the mix. Flare silently cursed this latest development as she passed through the gate.

Upon exiting, she saw the holy land in shambles.

“So the barrier isn’t back yet, eh…?”

How convenient. Judging by the state of the earthen vein, it would take a little while yet. That meant she had more time to move freely.

Flare knew perfectly well that the last conjuring she activated in the land of salt would ultimately amount to nothing.

Were it enough to kill her target, she would've done so long ago. Still, it worked well enough to buy time.

Of all the living beings in this world, Hakua Shirakami came nearest to true immortality.

If her body was destroyed, it would be summoned back; her spirit could independently possess others; her strong soul never weathered no matter how many times it went through the cycle of rebirth; and she had enough power to rival the planet's astral vein.

The Pure Concept of *Ivory* was already one of the strongest, and with the unique properties of the Four Major Human Errors, she became the "Lord." On top of that, she'd absorbed the abilities of many other Pure Concepts over the past millennium. No matter how much Flare polished it, her trump card, a single high-powered attack, wasn't enough to kill *Ivory*. If it were, the ancient civilization would never have fallen to the Four Major Human Errors in the first place.

Master Flare's main goal had been to get the Sword of Salt.

"I can't believe Menou went and used it…"

Master Flare dourly grumbled about the one thing that had truly gone wrong with her plan.

She'd gone to the trouble of deliberately destroying the sword in front of Menou to prevent anyone else from using it, but her performance had the opposite effect.

Now it was impossible for Master Flare to achieve her goal.

Betraying Hakua meant that Master Flare no longer had a place in the Faust. After all, her enemy was the Lord of the first caste. Hakua could give orders to all the priestesses in the world through the scriptures they carried.

Master Flare had spent so long preparing the fatal blow. She plotted to stop Hakua and stab her with the Sword of Salt, killing her at last. She'd maintained the farce for so long, waiting for the right opportunity. She'd made countless preparations to ensure that she'd achieve her goal.

And now, the assassination she'd plotted for twenty years had ended in failure.

But it was perfectly normal for something you worked on to conclude in failure.

Master Flare wasn't disappointed. Her hopes had never been high. The first plan flopping meant moving on to the next one.

There was a hitch, however.

"……"

The woman's body swayed violently. The Guiding Force branches she made had covered the wound, but they couldn't stop the bleeding entirely. Master Flare had been slowly losing blood all this time.

Death was closing in on her, inexorable. She could sense that her life wouldn't last much longer.

There was something left to do, however.

Master Flare mustered up all the Guiding Force in her body.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Branch: World Tree]

The Guiding Branches bursting from her dagger formed a massive tree of Guiding Force. As it grew, it forced its way through the train platform known as the Dragon Gate and broke it apart.

One of two facilities the holy land had protected for a thousand years was utterly destroyed. Master Flare didn't show a shred of emotion at destroying a relic that was the only one of its kind in all the world. She never hesitated to exhaust and destroy anything, no matter how important or valuable, if it suited her ends.

The long-distance teleportation would no longer work. Hakua was stranded in the middle of the ocean. It would take time to return, even for her. Flare would

have also preferred to destroy the Star Memory, but she didn't have enough Guiding Force remaining.

"Well, then…"

Master Flare had stolen something from under Hakua's nose when she left the land of salt, and kept it concealed under Guiding Camouflage.

"Now I only need to keep this hidden from Hakua."

Wincing at the weight, Master Flare walked toward the monastery she supervised.

Hakua's face was contorted with rage, but she didn't chase after Flare.

After shoving Menou off, she walked over to Akari to make sure she was safe, knelt down and touched her cheek—then reeled back in shock.

"Huh?"

Her expression fell to bewilderment.

Menou looked up from the ground in time to see Hakua reel back and punch Akari in the face.

Akari's body shattered. Except it wasn't Akari's body at all.

It was a Guiding Force puppet, a Guiding Branch imbued with Guiding Camouflage to disguise its appearance.

There was no question who was responsible.

Master Flare.

There was a pit beneath where Akari had stood. Master Flare must have swapped out Akari with the Guiding Branch while no one was looking. With effective use of Guiding Camouflage, it would've been impossible to see that Master Flare was carrying the girl.

Menou only wondered for a moment when Master Flare had made the switch. It had clearly happened when she fired the massive beam of power into the sky from her scripture. Menou and Hakua had both been completely focused on looking up. Master Flare had surely used that opportunity to send a Guiding Branch through the ground, retrieve Akari, and put a Guiding

Camouflage puppet in her place.

“You’re kidding me…”

Dumbfounded, Hakua looked in the direction where Master Flare had gone. Knowing that woman, she’d passed through the teleport gate by now.

For once, Menou felt exactly the same as Hakua. Then she spotted something odd—a tiny shade. There was nothing on the flat ground that should cast a shadow, yet a small splotch of darkness sat on the salt like a black puddle. Not only that, it was sliding along smoothly, moving toward Menou.

What is that? Menou’s mind was still processing slowly.

The moon appeared to twinkle.

“Ahh…”

Looking up at the sky, Menou finally comprehended the meaning behind Hakua and Master Flare’s final exchange of words.

At first, she thought they were bubbles. Tiny white dots were floating in the daylight, bobbing around like soap foam. Then she thought they better resembled shooting stars. They grew enormous in the blink of an eye, and it took a few seconds for Menou to realize that they were heading right toward her and Hakua.

In those short seconds, there was nothing Menou could do.

The scene unfolding reminded her of something seemingly unrelated.

The five-*in* coin. The legend of Saint Marta. The crest conjuring carved into the coin that created bubbles was based on that legend.

It was the story of a woman who worked the miracle of the moon.

Nearly breaking the speed of sound as they rained toward earth, the meteors were so enormous that it truly did look like pieces of the moon were crashing from the sky.

There was nowhere to run.

In a matter of moments, Menou’s vision turned black.

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A thousand years ago, there stood an ancient civilization.

At a time when the world was at its most advanced, it was no exaggeration to say that humans literally reached the stars.

While inhumane research continued, scientists also took control of the environment and altered it repeatedly. Shortly before civilization was destroyed by the Four Major Human Errors, some of its technology surpassed that of present-day Earth.

As proof of this, there was an enormous man-made satellite in orbit around the planet.

Most of the weather and communication satellites sent up a thousand years ago had fallen apart and become space debris. It had been a millennium, after all. These were no stable stone buildings; the delicate equipment and machinery could hardly be expected to continue functioning in the harsh conditions of space for all that time.

That was the case on Earth, anyway. The ancient civilization had surpassed this assumption.

The military satellite, an ancient relic, was still alive.

Guiding Force circulation and perfection were the keys to its continued functionality. It was a Guiding vessel constructed upon flawless crestology and materialogy, preventing any deterioration with a perfect cycle of power. The ability to create indestructible objects was still only a theory when the ancient civilization collapsed, so there were virtually no other Guiding Force facilities like this satellite.

It continued to idly orbit the planet even after a thousand years.

The device was a powerful physical weapon. Through perfecting the cycle of power, it prevented the wear and tear of years and allowed the intelligent Guiding Force life-form loaded on board to continue maintaining orbit. The weapon could carry on for eternity, but unfortunately, the society on the planet below collapsed.

After that, the military satellite should have simply gone on orbiting the planet like a much smaller moon.

But that all changed some twenty years ago.

The military satellite met with interference. A Guiding Force life-form was used to hack him.

The being that was fired from the ground and used a light signal to settle into his Guiding Force circuits slowly but surely expanded its control. It turned into he who had originally been installed to control the satellite's orbit, and eventually, *he* turned into *her*.

She who had combined with him knew many things from travels with her friend. The rise and fall of the ancient civilization and its technology. The workings behind the Otherworlder summonings. The sacrifices required to return to Japan. And the being who also knew those things and still sought a way back to Japan.

By the end of her journey, she'd reached one conclusion.

Hakua Shirakami had to be stopped at all costs.

However, by that point, her Pure Concept had brought her to the edge of becoming a Human Error.

Thus, she decided to cast aside her physical form. While researching the legend of Saint Marta, she found documents related to the military satellite once launched by the ancient civilization. She expended the last of her memories and used her Pure Concept of *Light* as a signal beam to hijack the satellite. Enshrouded in the *Light* conjuring, her soul took a long time to merge with the Guiding Force life-form installed in the device. Below, her body began to rampage, and her friend turned it to salt.

To ensure the weapon could be activated, she put a part of her merged spirit into her friend's scripture.

This orbiting fixture was a military satellite. Its original owner, who came to be known as Saint Marta, had used it several times, and the years had not dulled its might.

Namely: the ability to drop projectiles at hypersonic speed from an incredible elevation.

The range of destruction was unmatched by any weapon in this world, and it was almost impossible to defend against.

Once the satellite confirmed that its projectiles struck the designated area, it resumed its idle revolution.

It had now lost its connection to the terminal on the ground.

The nearly perfect weapon became a silent object, one more celestial body that drifted around the planet.

***

Momo was doing a magnificent job of sulking.

It had been nearly thirty minutes since Hooseyard had trapped her. She'd realized there was no point in trying to fight her way out and had even given up on complaining, leaving her with nothing to do but gnash her teeth and glare at Hooseyard.

The priestess in question, who was utterly focused on restoring the section of the earthen vein around the holy land, suddenly looked up.

"There."

It can't be, Momo thought.

Panic gripped her chest. Menou hadn't returned yet. Hooseyard couldn't be done already. Yet, for all her alarm, there was nothing Momo could do.

Hooseyard, on the other hand, had fulfilled her duty. "It's doooone!" she cried triumphantly.

At the same time, a line of white buildings sprang to new life. As she watched the barrier city that was holy land take form again, Momo felt only despair.

Elsewhere…

Menou's soul still felt drained, even as she stared at the white city.

She was somewhere near the holy land in an utter stupor. It was on the final pilgrimage path, it seemed, where the road began to widen slightly.

"Why me, why me, why me?!" Sahara shrieked as she carried Menou from behind. This was the second time she'd physically lugged Menou around.

Menou couldn't respond to Sahara's frustrated shouts, for she was still doubting that she'd survived.

"What *was* that?! There was some Otherworlder that looked exactly like you, and Master Flare was missing a leg, and then, on top of all that, the freaking moon fell out of the sky?! I don't even know where to start! Seriously, what is going on here?! Hey!"

Fair enough.

It happened as countless projectiles rained from the heavens. Menou hadn't possessed the time to brace for death. Master Flare's attack went beyond imagination.

Sahara was the one who saved Menou when her thoughts came to a halt.

The girl had emerged from the shadow that snuck up to Menou and dragged her into another dimension.

This was a shadow transportation technique using Original Sin Conjured summoning. The shadow couldn't transport people around at will, but it could flatten out and move along the ground at a walking pace. Sahara had hidden inside the shade to get close to Menou.

The space created by this Original Sin Conjuring, essentially a dark world, couldn't interfere with the laws of physics. The falling debris should've still crushed them. However, the entire shadow space was constructed somewhere else.

Spawn summoning was a special kind of teleportation not limited by distance. By shrouding Menou in the shadow, Sahara managed to get her to safety.

"Er… So, Sahara."

"Now what?!"

"Thank you for coming to rescue me."

"Oh, die in a ditch!"

Sahara was still a far cry from calm and shouted back with tears in her eyes. It was a very typical response for her.

A chuckle escaped Menou's lips, and she came to her senses. At long last, her mind started working again.

"Where's Momo?"

"She's dead! Serves her right!"

"I assume she's safe, then. Good."

Knowing Sahara, if Momo really was dead, she would have been much happier and gone into a specific description of the details. Menou felt relieved that her dear assistant was clearly safe.

That aside… Menou looked at Sahara again. She expected the other girl to have fled far away by now.

"Please don't get angry, because I'm not trying to be rude, but…why did you come, exactly?"

"…I was threatened into it. Otherwise, I would never have bothered to save you, of all people."

"Threatened…? By whom?"

Sahara seemed to be gradually calming down; her tone was returning to normal.

If it wasn't Momo, Menou had no idea who would have gone as far as to bully Sahara to ensure her safety.

"It was me."

A kimono sleeve floated up out of the darkness. Menou assumed it was Manon upon seeing the fluttering white fabric, but realized her mistake when she noticed the person's diminutive height.

Besides, only one person could have summoned Sahara as her spawn—the one who put an Original Sin Concept into her body in the first place.

"Pandæmonium…?"

"Call me that again, and I'll knock your lights out."

Her cherubic cheeks puffed up in an appropriately childish expression.

“I’m the one who gave Sahara a shadow so she could move in secret, so you should really be more grateful, you know. Otherwise, stupid Sahara would’ve gotten caught ages ago, and then she never could’ve come to your rescue.”

“Oh, er, okay.”

It was so utterly unexpected that Menou blinked in surprise.

“What kind of response is that? You see how short my hair is now, right? You’re going to make up for that sacrifice by working for me.”

It was then that Menou realized that in addition to Pandæmonium’s change in outfit, her hair was also much shorter than during their previous encounters. Where she had once worn it in pigtails, it was now closer to a bob.

“You better be grateful to me, and Manon, too. I know she was a little strange, but she looked after her family. She relinquished her life to make me the way I am now. So in a way, you owe her, too.”

The girl pressed a hand to her chest, covering the holes in her dress.

“My name is Maya. Maya Ooshima.”

Although she possessed the same face as the Human Error who was the progenitor of Original Sin Conjurings and master of all monsters and demons, she peered up at Menou like any precocious little girl.

“So call me Maya from now on, not Pandæmonium, okay?”

The little girl who’d reclaimed her consciousness from the fate of a Human Error proudly proclaimed her name, although she was only a pinky finger.

CHAPTER 4

A Heart That Harbors a Farewell

The heat of the bonfire warmed their cheeks while they camped out under the cold winter sky. One woman with red hair and one with black sat by the fire, listening to the crackling sparks.

Beneath the twinkling stars, one of the women casually addressed the other.

“Why are you traveling with me anyway?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

The red-haired woman tried to feign ignorance at the purpose of the open-ended question. Her tone was flat and her expression blank, as they ever were.

“There’s no reason. It just happened.”

“Listen, you. Quit trying to sweep things under the rug.”

The black-haired woman glowered at her companion.

“It’s been three months since I came to this world. I know there’s more to everything than meets the eye, whether I like it or not. Especially after I’ve traveled through places like this so many times.”

They were currently in the northern Wild Frontier. They’d been exploring the ruins of the ancient civilization to retrace the “Miracle of the Moon,” the legend of Saint Marta, who was also inscribed on the five-*in* coin.

“You say you’re a pure and noble priestess, but I know you’re really an Executioner who hunts taboos. I’m a taboo myself, since I have a Pure Concept, so it’s strange that you didn’t kill me as soon as we met. You’ve killed plenty of other ones on this trip.”

As she addressed the red-haired woman, the black-haired one picked up a few dried branches they’d collected earlier and tossed them onto the fire, her

dark locks blending in with the night sky.

The black-haired woman was an Otherworlder. She had a hunch that the way back to her own world was connected to the ancient civilization, and she devoted herself to inspecting the ruins in every Wild Frontier. Her search in the north led her to discover a communication base once linked to a military satellite. The Otherworlder used surviving materials to learn its orbit, and she used her Pure Concept to confirm that the orbital device was still active. Even a member of the Faust like the red-haired woman had never happened upon such an enormous discovery from the ancient civilization era before.

Still, it was true that the pair would typically never travel together like this.

The red-haired woman was an Executioner, and the black-haired woman was an Otherworlder.

“Yet here you are, traveling with me. Not only that, you even protected me from Genom and Kagarma. I mean, I get that it doesn’t make sense for someone in your position to hand an Otherworlder over to them, but…” She glanced up at her companion, trying to read her expression.

“Not knowing why I’m being protected makes me nervous. You know?”

Her tone was equal parts wheedling and sulky as she prodded the red-haired woman for answers.

The Executioner had accompanied the Otherworlder as she pleased, traveling this way and that, for quite a while. Deciding that she couldn’t put off explaining anymore, the Executioner coolly responded “So I can learn what guilt feels like.”

“…What? I’m gonna need a bit more than that. You realize you never explain yourself enough, right? It’s not very nice.”

The red-haired woman’s response wasn’t enough to convey her intent. Really, it wasn’t surprising, since she’d exchanged blows with people far more often than exchanging words.

She continued haltingly, searching for the words that would explain.

“Killing people is bad.”

“Right.”

“And I’m a killer. I always have been, and I’m sure I always will be. As long as people seek out taboos, I’ll keep hunting them down.”

“Uh-huh.”

“But I’ve never once felt bad for killing someone.”

“That’s pretty awful, but I guess it’s how you are.”

The branches she’d thrown on the fire earlier evidently weren’t completely dry; they crackled and sparked, sending up puffs of smoke.

“You’re not being cruel or coldhearted exactly; you’re just logical. If you have a reason to kill someone, you conclude it’s the correct thing to do. Most normal humans would consider murder to be an absolute last resort, but you’re the type who chooses it as easily as you might shake their hand.”

The Otherworlder’s analysis was right on target.

The red-haired woman, taken in as an orphan from the Commons, had shown exceptional aptitude with Guiding Force and was raised as an Executioner.

Although her birth and upbringing were unremarkable for an Executioner, she knew in theory that killing was bad. However, her heart had never faltered over taking a life. She didn’t feel the pain of those she stabbed. If removing an individual was better for the sake of the world, she had no issue with removing them.

The red-haired woman’s mental capacity to prioritize reason over emotion without a second thought for the target’s humanity was even deemed the ideal nature for an Executioner by many. While some of her peers envied her, other priestesses despised her lack of compassion.

She knew countless criticisms and accusations, as well as jealousy and admiration, for her nature. It all accumulated in her mind, finally leading to a single conclusion.

“What exactly is guilt?”

The black-haired woman scrunched up her face. “It’s not fair to ask someone about an emotion. How can you explain it in words if the other person doesn’t experience it? You would need telepathy or… Oh, I know. In this world, you

might be able to share someone else's feelings if you achieved a Guiding Force connection."

Were they to manage that, the Otherworlder could clear up the red-haired woman's question in seconds, but a Guiding Force connection between two humans was improbable. Her companion ignored the almost nonsensical suggestion.

"Killing people is bad."

"It is."

"Most Executioners snap under the mental burden. When someone's broken, they get used up and tossed aside. If being consumed by guilt is punishment for an Executioner, then I'm killing people without ever paying the price."

"Hmm. Wait, are you worried you should be punished for your crimes or something?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

The Executioner was surprised by the black-haired woman's doubts. To her, it seemed plain as day.

"Killing people is definitely bad," she repeated.

It was challenging to know why it was wrong, exactly. However, because the reasoning was beyond her, she was all the more certain that killing was wrong.

She believed it far more deeply than anything written in the scripture she carried in her left hand.

"So I think I ought to be punished."

"Oh yeah? Then you believe good should be rewarded and evil punished?"

"I don't care about people getting rewarded. Or destroying evil or anything like that."

The Executioner looked up at the sky as she conversed with her companion.

In the northern Wild Frontier, it was impossible to see the stars shining at night.

Instead, countless giant orbs of cloudy white liquid floated in the sky.

The blobs hid the sky from view, revolving in both day and night. Many of them floated higher and orbited around.

It was the cycle of Starhusk, one of the Four Major Human Errors.

Gazing up at the scene that was no direct threat, the Executioner quietly added, “But I do think there should be a punishment.”

As far as she knew, there was no good ending for an Executioner. They would die a dog’s death somewhere, flee to be later eliminated by one of their fellows, or have a mental breakdown and be disposed of.

The lack of salvation or ordinary happiness for those in this trade was surely justice for the sin of murder.

So what exactly should the red-haired woman’s punishment be?

She’d never wished for normal happiness.

A punishment should inflict suffering and inconvenience, and urges the guilty to reflect on and regret their actions.

After so many deaths, she’d learned of the most painful killing.

It was when you had to put down someone you were close with.

“If suffering is a punishment, then turning my blade on my first-ever friend would be a fitting retribution for the likes of me.”

If someone cowardly and underhanded like her, who didn’t experience a lick of guilt about murder, developed enough affection for someone to call them a friend…

…then killing that person, she hoped, would be the ultimate punishment that would finally break her.

She desired it and plotted it herself, and if she came to regret such an idiotic plan, so much the better.

“I won’t kill you until you become a Human Error or I feel friendship toward you.”

Hearing all this, the black-haired woman deepened her frown.

“…If you don’t mind me asking, would you hesitate to kill me right now?”

The red-haired woman stared hard at the Otherworlder. She imagined several methods to kill the other woman and explored them in her mind to determine that each was effective.

“Not in the least.”

“Well, what do you know? That’s a relief.” Despite the remark, she didn’t look relieved in the slightest. Her expression was incredibly conflicted. “Listen, you’re a murderer. You think killing people is a crime, and that crimes should be punished.”

“That’s right.”

“Well, take this, then.”

The Otherworlder offered a rolled cigarette. As the Executioner questioned the gesture with a look, the black-haired woman puffed her chest triumphantly.

“Tobacco is a passive means of suicide. Not a single good thing comes from inhaling harmful fumes. So you ought to smoke as a punishment. That’ll have to be good enough for you. If you’re going to keep piling on sins, you might as well dole out the punishment to yourself, too. It’ll build up in your body without you even knowing.”

“…Huh.”

It wasn’t half bad.

That’s how the Executioner saw it anyway. She would inhale invisible poison, letting it slowly eat away at her. The fact that she wouldn’t know how badly she’d poisoned herself was especially appealing.

She put the cigarette between her lips and lit it with the crest conjuring of a one-*in* coin. When she blew out smoke, the black-haired woman made a show of pinching her nose and waving the smoke away.

“…You know, I just realized. I hate cigarette smoke, so you should do that by yourself somewhere.”

Maybe I should *kill her now.*

The Executioner gathered inhaled smoke in her cheeks, then blew it at her companion’s face with all her might.

“Hey, stop! I reeeeally don’t like that, you know! It’s like you spat on me!”

“If it bothers you that much, why were you carrying tobacco in the first place?”

She obviously bought them as an experiment, immediately decided they weren’t for her, and kept them shoved in her pocket.

The redhead smoked the cigarette, while the black-haired woman pouted.

“I don’t intend to become a Human Error, and I hope to return to Japan… But just in case, let me tell you something, my dearest friend of this parallel world.”

“What is it?”

The Executioner puffed on her first cigarette as if it were a decades-old habit. The black-haired woman fixed her with a vengeful glare.

“If you do kill me, I swear I’ll haunt you as a ghost, got it?”

“Not much of a threat. Unlike in your world, the remains of a spirit turning into an apparition is a rare conjuring phenomenon here.”

She tapped on the cover of her scripture with her left hand.

“If you transform and haunt me, ghost or not, I’ll just exorcise you with a scripture conjuring.”

“Oh, you’re the worst! I hate you, I really do!”

This was a memory of a journey from back when she was a priestess yet to be raised to Master. In those days, the Executioner hadn’t acquired the nickname “Flare.”

Much later, she realized this was the moment sweet affection for the woman with the Pure Concept of *Light* and an intent to kill her took root.

⁂

Half a day had passed since the destruction of the holy land.

The region had fended off the attacking swarm of monsters, overcome the outbreak of a dragonblight, and now the holy land barrier was restored. The city was alive with pure white radiance again.

The evacuated were beginning reconstruction already. They carried scattered

objects and furniture around and through the gently glowing buildings. Priestesses and nuns worked together to remove obstacles, distribute food, and so on. Unlike with the usual disaster recovery work, no structures were damaged. The holy land steadily regained its former glory, assuring all who saw it that the place of beginnings was truly indestructible.

Menou slipped in among the people who continued to work even as the sun set.

She was operating separately from Sahara and the girl who called herself Maya. Neither of them could enter the holy land, because the barrier repelled Original Sin Concepts. Menou had to act alone.

This was the aftermath of a disaster the likes of which hadn't been seen in a thousand years. It was only natural that Menou might appear disheveled. Fortunately, word hadn't yet spread about what she'd done. There was no sign anyone had been dispatched to find or eliminate her.

Menou wavered on whether to contact Momo after returning, but she was holding off on that decision for now.

There'd been no word from Momo, so something surely had happened to her. If her scripture had been confiscated, there was the possibility that Menou's location could fall into enemy hands. A careless message might even implicate Momo in the destruction of the holy land.

The obvious choice for escaping the holy land was east. In fact, it was the only option. The holy land was as far west as human civilization went.

Yet when night fell, Menou made for the opposite direction.

She departed the holy land, heading west, avoiding all prying eyes.

Moving this direction from the holy land would lead Menou to the Wild Frontier, a particularly barren region of it, in fact. Menou's goal, the coastline, was three days beyond the rocky wastes.

The only building farther west than the holy land was the monastery where Menou was raised.

Executioners, black ops agents for the Faust, were reared there. The

monastery operated hidden from the world and was essentially Menou's homeland.

No members of the Faust traveled out that way.

Upon arriving, Menou weaved between stone monuments, searching the cemetery. It wasn't long until she spotted her quarry.

"…I figured you must've survived, Menou."

The person waiting for her was a more familiar face than any other.

Master Flare.

Menou felt neither caution nor despair at the sight of her old teacher leaning on a headstone and smoking a cigarette. It only made her smile darkly, realizing she was still this woman's apprentice.

When Master Flare left the land of salt, she took Akari's body with her. Had she possessed a way to kill the girl, Menou would've been powerless to stop it. However, the link with Akari remained; she was still alive.

However, Akari was nowhere to be seen. Flare had likely hidden her.

"I was hoping you'd be resting at the monastery…"

The pair had only recently dueled. Normally, anyone would have to sleep that off. Master Flare flicked her cigarette butt away in reply to Menou's implied question.

"You've still got a Guiding Force supply from her, right?"

Menou nodded. She didn't have the energy to hide it. Her Guiding Force link with Akari remained, despite Akari becoming a Human Error. The Pure Concept had ceased eating into Menou, but she was still supplied with Guiding Force. This was one reason Menou went straight to the graveyard without hesitation.

Master Flare had guessed that Menou would trace the Guiding Force connection there, and she'd waited to intercept her.

"What in the world was that last attack?"

"An ancient relic I took control of long ago. I taught you about the concept of satellites from the ancient civilization, didn't I? An old friend of mine messed

around with one's functions and made it so my scripture could activate it."

"That's quite a trump card you kept up your sleeve. Why didn't you use it right away?"

"Don't be so full of yourself. Were I only trying to kill you, I wouldn't bother going that far."

Master Flare's final attack had been in a league of its own. She'd dropped projectiles large enough to be mistaken for moon fragments from an incredible height at tremendous velocity. The military satellite's assault had undoubtedly obliterated the tiny island that was the land of salt. Master Flare's comment about Akari "falling into the ocean" before she'd left was indicative of the strike's sheer might.

The actual reason for expending that incredible weapon was obvious.

"You were after Hakua Shirakami, then? Do you think she survived a direct hit from that thing?"

"No doubt about it. That one's no joke. Her status as the Lord is well-earned, and her Pure Concept of *Ivory* is the real deal. Peace has made her soft, like any Otherworlder, but she's much too strong." Master Flare sighed. She stomped on the cigarette to snuff the ember before continuing. "You know, I intended on using the Sword of Salt piece that you stuck in Akari Tokitou."

"What?"

"I was going to kill *Ivory*, idiot. The plan was to make her think the Sword of Salt was gone, lure her out there, and finish her with the shard in the ground. I needed the Sword of Salt to eliminate her."

"But didn't Hakua create the Sword of Salt in the first place? Would it work on her?"

"It would. She's absorbed too many other Pure Concepts over the past thousand years and lost the purity of *Ivory*. Each time she gains access to another Pure Concept, her all-important *Ivory* conjurings grow weaker. It's why the Elders forced Otherworlders' Pure Concepts to go berserk in the first place. I fully believe the Sword of Salt would work on *Ivory* as she is presently."

Menou stared in quiet amazement while Master Flare went on nonchalantly.

“Listen, Menou. Thing is, I knew what you were all along. The second I saw you, after that old bag Orwell made you in an attempt to resurrect *Ivory*, I was sure I had a use for you. Hakua concocted several plans to create a Guiding Force connection with Akari Tokitou in expectation of her arrival, but she trusted me immediately after learning of your existence.”

Their first meeting, ten years ago.

Menou furrowed her brow. “I’m still not sure I understand… How exactly did I come to be?”

“You remember Orwell, I’m sure?”

Menou nodded, saying nothing.

She couldn’t possibly forget the archbishop who’d stooped to committing a taboo. It was nothing short of a miracle that Menou defeated such a prodigious conjuring user.

“Long ago, that old bag was a model member of the Faust. When she learned the truth, she must have been furious about the so-called Lord’s single-minded material desires. So she tried to fabricate an ideal Lord and took her first step into the taboo.”

“An ideal Lord…? But she was after eternal youth.”

“That came later down the line. Before that, she succeeded in creating a small soul after numerous conjuring experiments, and she attached it to a piece of Hakua’s flesh that she stole. Long story short, you were created from a lesser facsimile of the experiments Hakua Shirakami underwent a thousand years ago.”

Menou wasn’t surprised. At this point, she was long past the illusion that she might have been born to ordinary parents in the usual way.

“I don’t know of any other example of such a completely artificial human. Not in modern times, with our more primitive conjuring technology, anyway. Orwell intended for you, a duplicate of Hakua, to absorb a Pure Concept. She summoned an Otherworlder, put you in contact and, well, you know how that

turned out.”

Menou’s memories began in a destroyed village, and she’d believed herself the only survivor. A Human Error had erased the village and her memories.

However, the opposite was true. The girl was pushed to the brink of losing control and became a Human Error because of Menou.

“At the time, you couldn’t absorb and adopt an Otherworlder’s Pure Concept. You painted over her concept entirely. That’s how much purity of concept you possessed back then.”

Menou was the source of the village’s demise. She had blanched an entire innocent settlement to nothingness. The Otherworlder standing before the young Menou hadn’t been a culprit but a victim of an experiment using Menou as the conjuring material.

“As conjuring material, you made a poor substitute for the Lord. The old bag gave up on you and turned her research toward making herself immortal like an Elder. Perhaps she intended to reign as the Lord herself.”

“So I never had a hometown in the first place.”

“Nope.”

What place had Orwell spoken of when she mentioned Menou’s hometown during their encounter in the Grisarika Kingdom, then? Menou wondered about this, but she voiced a different question.

“Why do you suppose I thought my name was ‘Menou,’ then?”

Master Flare probably knew so much because she’d been investigating Orwell ten years ago. Had Orwell instructed Flare to steal the flesh from Hakua, or was that Flare’s own decision? Regardless, Menou had met Master Flare that day.

“Beats me. I have no idea.” She sounded indifferent. “I raised you to kill you. *Ivory* is a nearly flawless being, but she’d be open to attack while her spirit resided in your imperfect body. After luring her to the land of salt, I intended to wait until she possessed you, then end it. I went along with all those stupid time regressions just to see that done. From the instant we met, when old Orwell made me look after you, I intended to use and dispose of you.”

It was a long-term scheme. Ten years. Perhaps more, if Akari's time loops were included.

Master Flare had spent half her life plotting to kill *Ivory*.

"But you had to go and survive. Now the whole plan's ruined."

"Had things gone as you intended, what would've happened to Akari?"

"She'd be dead, probably. I'd have no reason to let her live, especially if she became a Human Error."

I'm glad it failed, then.

Menou kept that to herself, but Master Flare undoubtedly discerned the thought and scowled.

"Now that the Sword of Salt is gone, there's no way to kill *Ivory*. I certainly can't, anyway. The Faust doesn't know what we've done yet, but I'm sure Hakua will notify all the priestesses through their scriptures. We'll be on the run."

The pair faced each other in the graveyard.

"You ready now?"

"Yes."

Menou had destroyed the holy land, although only temporarily, just to save Akari—her fate was obvious. Master Flare, too, would be branded a criminal for stabbing Hakua.

They were in the same boat. Since they were also formerly master and apprentice, they might very well be considered accomplices.

Before judgment was passed, they pointed their blades at each other to settle the score.

Master Flare readied her dagger first, and Menou drew hers not a moment later. Both of them moved slower than usual. They couldn't even maintain Guiding Enhancement. Menou's scripture was only a burden. She lacked the strength to invoke conjurings anyway.

"Couldn't we…work together?"

“If I kill you, Hakua loses her conjuring materials to make a Guiding Force connection with Akari Tokitou.” Master Flare answered without a second thought. As always, she was perfectly logical.

“It’ll take time for *Ivory* to make another being like you. And given Akari Tokitou’s softness, she might never forge a Guiding Force connection with anyone again after losing her precious friend. It makes sense to let you live if killing you delays Hakua’s designs.”

When it was put that way, Menou wondered if she might better serve world peace if she slit her throat.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t just kill herself for the sake of society.

Despite sharing a goal, master and apprentice still couldn’t work together.

“You know what, Menou? I killed my own friend. And I still don’t feel any guilt or regret.”

“…”

“But you couldn’t do it to Akari Tokitou.”

“Well, I…”

“I’m sure you’ll spend the rest of your life ruing that choice. I know what an idiot you are. You’ve lamented every murder, haven’t you?”

Master Flare was right. Was she going to rebuke Menou for being too soft? Menou tried not to look away, but she couldn’t help lowering her eyelids.

“The unfairness of your decision will haunt you for all your days, and eventually, it’ll become the punishment that kills you… But it’s better that way.”

The Guiding Branches forming Master Flare’s prosthetic right leg shifted with a *clunk*.

“Living while enduring punishment every day…is what makes you a pure, noble, and strong villain.”

Master Flare had beaten Menou down and tried to kill her. She’d used her and revealed her intent to exploit the girl from the moment they met. Menou ought to be furious at the betrayal, despair giving way to hatred.

And yet…

Dammit.

Menou's breaths trembled.

Hearing words of acknowledgment for her strength brought her happiness despite herself.

"Please don't say things like that… You'll make me lose the will to fight you."

"Yeah, that's the idea."

Ahh, that makes sense.

Menou smiled. Master Flare threw back her head and laughed, her mouth wide open.

One way or another, this was the end.

Menou was nearly physically and mentally exhausted. She would never have fought in such an unfavorable condition if possible. Her dagger shook in her hand, the tip swaying.

Master Flare was at her limit, too. She'd lost the scripture that served as her partner for many years. The firepower she'd produced in the land of salt was long gone. In fact, it was all she could do to support her lost limbs. Her balance faltered, and blood was still trickling from the wound, despite her efforts to staunch it.

By pure coincidence, they were the perfect match for each other in their weakened states.

As the stars sparkled, a solemn, subdued duel began.

There was no exchange of showy moves.

No volley of words, no clash of heated emotions.

The pair fought without scripture conjurings, dagger crests, Guiding Camouflage, or Guiding Enhancement. They had played all the tricks before this battle. Now Master Flare and Menou fought at the weakest they'd ever been since becoming Executioners.

Each understood this was the final confrontation. Their lives were on the line

as they crossed blades silently.

The stars shone upon the quiet meeting of daggers.

Although Menou had no way of knowing who might win, she was unafraid.

When they fought one-on-one, she gained a more profound understanding of her old teacher.

Master Flare's spirit was neither evil nor good. It was neutral. She was logical, ruthless, but still human somehow. Compared to her, Menou lived a meandering existence, steps less certain.

Menou took her way of life thus far—unstable, insincere, always trying to move forward despite getting lost constantly along the way—and channeled it into her dagger as she fought.

Cold blades and killing intent.

Both could do nothing but cut, yet somehow they connected Menou and Master Flare.

There was a feeling of mutual understanding fundamentally different from Menou's Guiding Force link with Akari. Such a strange sense of trust could only exist between those who'd fought. There was no pleasant sensation of melting together. No security, no warmth, no kindness.

Yet every time she dueled her master, Menou grew.

This time was no exception.

How could crossing blades lead to such profound comprehension?

It came again.

The time for their paths to intersect arrived.

Menou's dagger thrust forward as though drawn in, and it pierced Master Flare's chest.

It was no illusion or substitution. She felt the metal sink into solid flesh.

The sensation shook Menou to her core as surely as if it had been her first kill.

Master Flare's arm flashed, likely using the last of her strength. She snatched

away the dagger closing in on her nape.

The Guiding Branch replacement for her leg vanished. Master Flare lurched forward as a massive amount of blood oozed from the wound. This was no ploy to attack; it was merely the collapse of a dying woman.

As Master Flare fell, her forehead landed on Menou's chest. The student tried to catch her master's failing body, but her arms wouldn't move. She couldn't manage to raise her hands to stop the impact.

The warmth of life pooled around Menou's feet, staining her boots. The blood pouring from Master Flare's absent limb and where Menou had stabbed her formed a growing pool.

"Huh… Is that all…?"

Even as Master Flare sensed death approaching, she didn't offer a word of fear. If anything, the sensation of life ebbing from her was downright anticlimactic.

Just as she didn't feel any guilt even after killing a woman she thought of as a friend, she felt no despair at being slain by her apprentice and successor.

The flame of her life flickered; any terror of creeping doom passed right through it. Ultimately, no death could punish her, not even her own.

"Hey…'Flarette.'" Master Flare called to her successor. "Now…it's your turn…"

She used her last moments to entrust something to Menou, despite their being enemies. Master Flare felt no anguish over the loss of another's life, and she knew no fear over losing her own, either. She had sincerely answered Menou's questions before the battle because she expected this outcome.

Not even death could force Flare to atone, for she knew that a new successor unlike her would be born here.

Hope would not be Menou's inheritance.

"Kill…the Lord."

It was a curse.

Words could drive a wedge into a person's heart without any conjuring or

Guiding Force. Master Flare used her life to show Menou a way forward.

When young Menou declared that she would become an Executioner, Master Flare warned her against it.

Why had her master pushed Menou away?

Regardless, Menou still became an Executioner. What would Master Flare have done if she'd decided on a normal life?

This woman had plotted to use Menou, to betray and dispose of her. That was no lie. All had proceeded as Master Flare wished until nearly the very end.

Still, Master Flare gave Menou room to choose for herself.

Where once she had pushed the girl away, now Flare urged her forward.

"That…might just be…what saves you…"

She was assuring Menou that her path wouldn't end here.

Master Flare raised an arm. Did she have some final trick left? Her hand hovered at a height lower than Menou's shoulder.

Master Flare squinted at her empty fingers.

Then she opened her mouth wide and let out her final sigh.

"Ahh, I see… Bah-ha-ha… I guess nothing ever goes to plan…"

Menou heard shallow breaths.

Master Flare's limp fingers caught on the buckle around Menou's lower chest. It came undone with a *clink*. The white belt and the metal emblem of the Faust fell away, hitting the ground.

Menou's eyes followed the objects, though she had no intention of picking them up. Suddenly, she realized why Master Flare's hand had stopped at that height.

Back when they traveled together, Menou stood as high as the buckle around Master Flare's priestess robes.

Menou's chest grew unbearably tight. Finally, she could move her arms again. She wrapped them tight around Master Flare to hold her up, clinging like a

child.

“So long…Menou……”

Those were her last words.

Menou no longer heard the woman’s heartbeat.

Her master was dead.

She never showed any weakness in front of Menou.

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The heavens didn’t punish her, not even at the very end.

So did the curtain close on the life of the legendary Executioner Master Flare.

Menou drove a dagger into the ground of the graveyard where everything ended.

It was her master’s.

She stepped on the hilt to drive it deeper, took a short break, and sent what little Guiding Force she had left through the weapon.

Guiding Force: Connect—Dagger, Crest—Invoke [Guiding Branch]

The crest activated smoothly, and Menou used the Guiding Branches to search the ground. She had never used this crest before. It was challenging to master, but Menou used her Guiding Force manipulation abilities to control the conjuring.

She hit upon what she sought before long.

Akari.

Just as Menou suspected, the girl was buried underground. Master Flare must have used Guiding Branches to entomb her beneath a stone monument. Menou wrapped the branches of Guiding Force around Akari’s body and pulled, digging her out of the earth.

She was hardly dirty at all, despite being stored belowground, perhaps because of the time suspension. A light brush of Menou’s hand was all it took for the dirt to fall away. The warmth and softness that Menou knew so well after countless embraces were absent. Akari offered only a cold, hard sensation at Menou’s touch.

Akari was locked in a coffin of time, and the Sword of Salt shard in her chest was the key.

Anyone who didn’t know any better would think her a corpse. There was absolutely no indication of life.

However, Menou could feel it. Her soul was connected to Akari’s. There was a pulse inside the other girl that only Menou could feel.

Akari was alive.

Menou touched Akari's face, despite the latter being frozen in a curled-up position. Sending Akari's memories through the Guiding Force connection would do no good now. They'd only be erased.

The hole from where Akari had been exhumed remained, so Menou buried her master there.

Filling a grave took a surprisingly long time. Menou worked with an empty mind, yet memories surfaced as she stared at the old monastery.

The courtyard. The classroom. The communal bedroom. The training grounds. She couldn't see any of them from here, but she recalled events from every room in the structure.

There was no sign of human presence. Most personnel were sent to help with recovery efforts in the holy land. The lack of even minimal staff suggested Master Flare had given some directive ahead of the clash with Menou. As the supervisor of the monastery, she would've still possessed the authority to order others away. Her betrayal hadn't been made public yet.

The Faust, particularly the Executioners and Inquisitors, would become Menou's greatest threat once she was on the run. An Executioner who would one day kill Menou might even be trained at this very monastery.

"Well, putting that aside…"

Menou realized that she was wallowing in sentiment, and a half-smile tugged at her lips.

After learning her origins, she believed she had no hometown, but that wasn't true.

The monastery over the hill was Menou's home.

After burying her master's body, Menou toyed with a rolled cigarette. She'd found it when removing Master Flare's dagger scabbard: a single cigarette carried like a good-luck charm.

The tobacco was the sort Master Flare occasionally smoked.

Menou tried putting it in her mouth. The feeling of paper pressed to her lips

was strange.

She took out a one-*in* coin.

Guiding Force: Connect—One-In *Coin, Crest—Invoke [Combustion]*

A small flame, no bigger than a pinky's fingernail, rose from the center of the piece. Menou felt a trace of heat on her lips as she brought it closer to the cigarette in her mouth. The fire only scored the edge of the paper, not igniting it properly.

Why was it so hard to light? Menou's forehead creased over several failed attempts. Finally, it happened to catch as she was breathing in.

Evidently, it would only ignite properly if she inhaled or exhaled at the same time. She took her first drag while appreciating this newfound knowledge.

"Gwuh?!"

As soon as the smoke passed into her throat, she regretted it instantly.

The harsh sensation stung the inside of her soft, healthy throat. She choked at the unfamiliar feeling, coughing and hacking in a panic.

"That's awful…!"

What was the point? Who would deliberately inhale something so disgusting, and why? It was smelly, foul-tasting, and bad for your health. Those were the three worst qualities for anything put in the mouth, and the smoke produced when the cigarette was lit only made it worse.

I'll never touch one of these again, Menou swore silently.

If anything positive came of the experience, it was this: It stung her eyes so much that tears spilled down her cheeks.

Occasionally, it was difficult to cry alone without instigation. Menou stood beneath a quiet, starry sky, forcing herself to smoke her first cigarette.

Teardrops fell with the ash.

She wondered which there were more of.

Eventually, the cigarette burned to the point that Menou felt the flame's heat on her lips. She pinched the shortened cigarette between her fingers and

pressed the lit end into her open scripture. Burn marks spread across the pages until, finally, the book caught fire.

Menou placed the burning scripture on the stone monument in front of her. The small fire illuminated her face and warmed her cheeks. The gravestone was stained slightly darker than its neighbors by the time the scripture was soot and metal pieces.

Master Flare was buried here.

Menou looked up at the night sky.

Even when separated from her master, with no contact, Menou trusted that she was alive somewhere; beneath the same sky. The legend who'd raised her was always out there in the world.

Now there was no one left to judge Menou for her mistakes. She would have to carry her sins alone.

"Master…"

While wondering whether to voice her good-bye, Menou envisioned Master Flare grimacing at her.

The woman would be furious if Menou gave an emotional farewell. A fearless smile took hold of Menou's lips. Her master's mind lived on within her.

If it would make her angry, then Menou would say it to spite her.

"Good-bye."

Her voice, heavy with feeling, rose in the night and sank into the stone.

Menou had bid her parting words. Time was limited, and she had much to do.

There was one more person Menou had to visit. She had to bid farewell to her beloved, adorable aide.

Momo was imprisoned in one of the cathedral's rooms.

Hooseyard had locked her in. For some ridiculous reason, she'd concluded that Momo's attack was an act of random violence fueled by panic over the dragonblight. She'd stowed the violent girl in the reconstructed cathedral in an effort to let her calm down.

However, there was no one else around to enforce Momo's isolation. It was as if Momo was house-sitting an otherwise empty building with no entrance or exit.

Hooseyard didn't appear to suspect that Momo was behind the dragonblight. From her perspective, the event was due to a Guiding train accident. She never thought it might be deliberate.

Momo sulked alone in the cathedral.

The Dragon Gate, the ancient relic for invoking long-distance teleportation, was broken. The remains were still capable of short-distance transport, so it was possible to enter and exit the cathedral, but restoring the device to its former functionality was impossible, a fact that Hooseyard took especially poorly.

Momo also turned pale at this revelation, although her concerns were solely focused on Menou's safety.

Had she been left on the other side of the gate? If so, she'd never get back. Momo stood before the broken remains of the train platform, racking her brain for a way to determine Menou's location. Suddenly, Guiding Light burst into life in front of her.

A glowing door formed, the sign of a Dragon Gate teleportation. Momo narrowed her eyes, expecting it to be Hooseyard. She was prepared to exact her frustration on the bespectacled woman, but her expression brightened instantly upon seeing who it actually was.

"Darliiing!" Momo cried joyously. Her change in attitude was so drastic that she seemed an entirely new person as she leaped at Menou. "I'm sooo glad you're okay! But how did you get here?"

"Somehow, I was able to understand the conjuring construction of short-distance Dragon Gate teleportation fairly easily. I think it's because I made contact with the Pure Concept of *Time*."

"Oh, that's amaaazing! How did things go with Master?"

"She's dead."

“Huh?”

Momo was at a loss for words. Menou looked her in the eye and stated it again, leaving no room for doubt.

“…I killed her.”

An intangible impact crashed into Momo’s heart.

The news of Master Flare’s demise, particularly because Menou was responsible, shook Momo more than she expected. She was silent while processing this revelation, then released a long sigh.

“I… I see.” Momo raised her head resolutely. “Then I’ll come with you, darling.”

If Menou intended to run from the Faust for Akari’s sake, then Momo would follow for Menou’s sake.

Betraying the Faust didn’t require any hesitation. Momo had only become a priestess’s aide for her darling.

However, Menou shook her head quietly. “You can’t. I have two favors to ask of you.”

“Favors…?”

Momo repeated the word doubtfully. Suspicion shot through her mind. She looked around hurriedly. Akari was nowhere in sight. As much as she hated to acknowledge it, Menou had intended to rescue Akari. With Master Flare defeated, the loudmouth ought to be nearby.

Yet Akari was conspicuously absent.

Noticing this contradiction, Momo intuited Menou’s request.

“I—I don’t want to.”

She couldn’t.

Momo shook her head, rejecting the request before it was made.

She couldn’t bear to hear such a thing. She wouldn’t, and so refused to listen.

“I know. But there’s no one else I can turn to for this.”

“Nooo… I won’t do iiit…!”

Momo shook her head even harder. For the first time in her life, she feared Menou, and objected like a stubborn child.

Menou took a step closer. “Momo…,” she said softly.

A tremor ran through Momo’s body. She knew what was to follow. There’d be no escaping. She shook to the point of tears.

“Please.”

Menou’s voice caught in her throat.

It wasn’t cold, or strong, or scary. It was a single, gentle word.

But what a cruel one. There was no dirtier trick in the book. It was terribly, unbelievably unfair.

Momo’s darling, of all people, was asking her to look after Akari Tokitou, knowing full well the girl couldn’t refuse.

“You’re the only person I can count on.”

Menou needed her.

That alone was enough to render Momo incapable of rejecting.

“Darling…”

“I know.”

“Darling, you’re so cruel.”

“I’m sorry.”

“…Apologize again.”

“Truly, I am so sorry.”

“…I want a wholehearted, full-body apology.”

Momo clung to Menou tightly. She buried her face in Menou’s chest like a gloomy child.

Menou gently stroked Momo’s hair.

“I’m sorry I’m such a bad role model.”

“You really are… Now I want you to praise me.”

“Well, that’s easy. You’re the best aide ever.”

“…Is that all?”

“Of course not. You’re my adorable junior, a powerful ally, and the person I rely on more than anyone else. Thank you for everything. Really.”

“…And what else?”

“I love you, Momo.”

There it was.

Momo raised her head.

That was enough to forgive Menou’s cruel request entirely. Menou’s smile rendered Momo helpless, as it always had. She knew perfectly well that Menou took advantage of her.

However, she couldn’t help it.

When Momo tied a black ribbon into Menou’s lovely hair and saw her grin for the first time, she vowed to devote her life to her beloved.

Momo was willing to do absolutely anything for Menou.

Although Momo’s smile was gone, she tried to act positive as she asked, “What are you going to do, darling?”

“I can’t tell you the details.”

Sharing information was dangerous, and Menou couldn’t risk exposing who she fled with or their destination.

She did make her goal perfectly clear, though.

“I’ll be making preparations to kill the Lord.”

“What was the other favor you wanted to ask? I’ll do aaanything you ask, since I love you so, sooooo much.”

“Why, thank you. You really are the best aide ever.”

Menou smiled and patted Momo’s head, and she accepted it, albeit sulkily.

Both recalled their shared childhood at the monastery.

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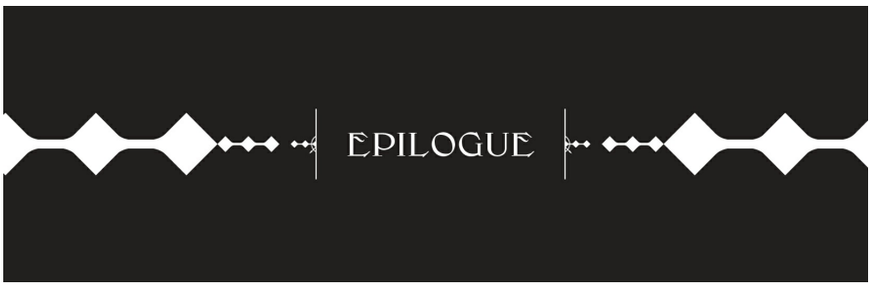
“Now, about that other favor…”

One girl’s journey to kill the other hadn’t ended at all.

In fact, it had just finally begun.

Menou stepped out upon the path that Master Flare had deemed impossible.



She floated in a sea of flesh and blood, surrounded by fog so thick she couldn't see her hand in front of her face.

The beast she'd taken a liking to and stood upon for the past several hundred years was gone. So now the monster in the form of a little girl floated on her back in the bloodied ocean.

She had been so close. Freedom had been a push away. She'd even managed to set foot on land. She'd dyed the seas with blood and blotted out the sky with monsters.

"Now my fun is ruined."

Her cold voice was drowned out by the sounds of monsters devouring each other.

She was trapped in the vast expanse of fog that covered the entire territory once known as the Southern Archipelago Alliance. The severed part of herself she'd managed to squeeze through the mist had cut off contact.

If the rest of her was set loose in the world, she wouldn't care much for one pinky finger. However, it was presently the only free portion of her.

"I don't like it. Not one bit. It's silly for me to have a *goal*, don't you think?"

"Absolutely!" a voice agreed.

It was another little girl, identical in every way. If you ignored everything around them, the scene may have appeared to be a conversation between twins. The only difference was that the first speaker was missing fingers. She'd used her digits to create finger puppet clones.

"Let's chase her."

"Let's catch her."

"Let's corner her."

Her ring finger, middle finger, index finger, and thumb were all missing, as was her pinky. The first four spoke while floating on the surface of the bloodied sea, slowly being crushed and sinking under the weight of the fog. It was far too harsh an environment for mere finger puppets to survive in for long.

It looked like a bizarre game being played alone. There was no point in conversing while trapped in the monster-caging mist. Once all the puppets were crushed, they returned to being her fingers.

They were all in agreement by nature. In fact, the others had no opinions of their own, since they were only duplicates under the original's control.

The only exception was the pinky.

Pandemonium peered at the faint cracks in the fog. While the gaps in the impenetrable barrier were widening, the fog still wrapped around her person, preventing her escape. It seemed like it might evaporate with one last push, but she had no way of making that happen.

"Not quite yet."

The thousand-year-old mist still refused to clear. Pandemonium's hundreds upon thousands upon millions of monsters would keep consuming each other. A single pinky finger wouldn't stop her reign merely by regaining sanity.

The girl who was now a manifestation of a concept knew very well that there was no such thing as eternity.

"I wonder how much longer *Ivory* will endure."

The fog was bound to disperse one day. Pandemonium was certain.

The lord of chaos and evil smiled cherubically as she pictured freedom.

The white sun that glowed over the artificial world was about to drop beneath the horizon.

This world, trapped for so long in a time without day or night, was entering evening for the first time ever.

However, the white sun managed to hold out just before it set.

Mindless conjured entities repeated their set routines in the world

constructed of Primary Color concepts. While the Mechanical Society ran smoothly for the most part, the few exceptions were gathering at its heart.

“Gimme a break. Even if the damn sun does set, there ain’t a thing to be gained by dealing with the outside world. The answer’s obvious if ya ask me.”

One of these exceptions, a wolf, loped on four legs toward the central area.

Though its blue fur was beautiful, it was no living thing. It made no effort to hide its body’s stiffness. This was a conjured soldier. And yet it was not bound by the Primary Color concepts that controlled its constructed place.

It was a crystal life-form that had surpassed mimicry and imitation, gaining a self all its own—a conjured soldier formed of all three primary colors.

The other especially high-level conjured soldiers within the Mechanical Society were also gathering in the school building at its center. It was a meeting of the admins of each zone to determine the course the Mechanical Society would take going forward.

As far as the wolf was concerned, it was utterly depressing.

The sentient conjured soldiers didn’t get along. They all came from the same *Vessel*, yet their personalities varied depending on the balance of the three colors. This deviation was such that each of the thirteen divided zones developed its own unique culture and philosophy.

“For one thing, our great parent is basically a machine that spends all its time muttering curses. And I’m on the outs with the other admins as it is. Surely, communicating with humans will be even more difficult. If the world that’s been closed off since our birth opens, it’ll cause problems. That’s the whole point behind the new world project… Buuut it ain’t gonna be easy to get everyone on board. What’re we gonna do?”

The blue wolf looked over his shoulder for affirmation.

His companion was usually unbelievably annoying, which made the silence peculiar. The wolf was concerned that the conversation might have even been too much of a mental strain and set off a bug in his companion’s thought circuits.

However, the fellow conjured soldier he was looking for was nowhere to be seen.

In its place was a box-shaped voice recording Guiding vessel that had clearly been fashioned on the spot.

“I’m worried about the child who was born outside. Now, I know I’m everyone’s big sister, but starting today, I’ll be the big sister for the child born outside for a while, okay? Remember, it’s your job to turn our older siblings gathering in zone one into scrap, sooo do your best!”

The mindless conjuring tool repeated words given to it. The wolf shook with rage over the other’s escape.

“Stupid sister…! You’re just gonna leave me with all the damn work?!”

The giant wolf’s howl echoed across the artificial world.

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The first thing she did upon receiving her new priestess robes was cut them up.

The design was too stuffy for Momo’s standards. The skirt was especially egregious. Since the garment was designed for desk work, it wasn’t easy to move in. Fortunately, a certain amount of modification was permitted, so Momo got to work with her scissors, mercilessly cutting and fixing frays, then sewing the extra fabric back onto the hem to create frills.

She’d already modified priestess robes once before, the white ones she’d received upon becoming Menou’s aide. Now that she understood how to alter the outfit without affecting the barrier crest, she could work without hesitation.

Once finished, Momo donned the priestess robes and stood before a mirror.

As she twirled to check for any areas that didn’t look right, there was a knock at the door.

“Come iiin.”

“Thank yooou! Wait, hmm?” Hooseyard entered, clapping her hands when she saw Momo.

“Oh, my! You look adorable, Miss Momo.” After she gave this instinctive

compliment, her expression turned pensive. “Although, I’m not sure about modifying something right after it was given to you. They’re probably not going to be very happy, you know…”

“I couldn’t care less how those bigwigs feel. As far as I’m concerned, cuteness is the most vital feature of any article of clothing,” Momo replied, brushing off the warning.

Hooseyard winced, but she returned to praising Momo’s new attire.

“The white looked lovely on you, but indigo might be even better. Once again, Miss Momo, congratulations on officially becoming a priestess!”

“Yeah. Thanks sooo much.”

A month had passed since the chaos in the holy land. Momo was now officially recognized as a priestess.

After the incident, Momo was casually interviewed and quickly released. Hooseyard’s insistence that Momo was innocent may have helped, but in truth, the girl was never suspected of anything because there was no official record that she’d ever been Menou’s aide.

On paper, Momo’s history was that she’d earned her white robes, gone on a pilgrimage, returned to the holy land where her talents were discovered by Elcami, and worked as Hooseyard’s assistant. That was all.

Executioners were the Faust’s dark secret. Accounts of their work weren’t open to most.

Of course, there were records at the monastery, those that Master Flare had managed, but Menou already burned those. Although the assumption was that she’d done so to erase evidence of her own activities, the real purpose was to obfuscate Momo’s doings.

Momo, once an aide to an Executioner, now had a clean slate. To be approved as a fully fledged priestess, she’d finally studied the scripture conjurings she’d largely ignored for so long. A month later, she was worthy of wearing the indigo robes.

When Menou was put on the wanted list, Momo decided to remain within the

Faust. Helping Menou would be easier with an inside connection. Without Menou, Momo had no use for the aide position, so she ascended to a rank with more freedom.

She'd also done this to help meet Menou's second favor.

"You've been preparing for a little while now… Are you really returning to the life of a pilgrimage priestess, Miss Momo?"

"…Yes, I am. Archbishop Elcami picked me out, but she isn't here anymore."

Elcami was missing, which happened to suit Momo quite nicely. There was still a stir in the holy land about who could have done something to such an incredible conjuring master.

"I see… Ah, so you're using what I made for you to pack your things?"

"Well, yeah. That's why I had you prepare it."

"Ah-ha-ha…"

After Momo decided to leave the holy land, she'd pressured Hooseyard—an expert Guiding vessel engineer—to build a suitcase to carry her luggage. The wheeled carrying case came to Momo's waist and was sturdy enough to be combined with Momo's go-to weapon, a coping saw, in interesting ways.

"But whyever did you want materials that block Guiding Force for the carrying case?"

Plenty of priestesses added crests to their traveling items, but requesting Guiding Force-inhibiting materials for the exterior was unusual. Hooseyard could provide this, of course, since she'd learned of substances that blocked Guiding Force when fiddling with the earthen vein's flow, yet it was still an odd ask. An ordinary engineer would have been incapable of meeting the demand.

Momo responded quite casually. "Because I found out that some people can snoop with Guiding Force, like you."

"Oh dear. E-er, incidentally, I'm being transferred to a different post. So this is where we part ways, Miss Momo."

"Hmmm? I didn't ask, and I don't care."

With the Dragon Gate destroyed, Hooseyard had lost her role in the holy land. Evidently, her nebulous position had solidified into something new during the recovery efforts.

“Well, good-bye, then. I’ll never forgive you for locking me up.”

“Ah-ha-ha… Wait, why do you look so serious?”

Hooseyard saw Momo off. The former aide passed from the holy land’s white streets to the open road.

After walking for a while, Momo abruptly stopped short. She was standing before the tree she’d hidden in to ambush Ashuna. Although not particularly tired, Momo sat on her pure-white carrying case for a break.

She recalled something Menou had mentioned on the night she’d elected to change her life.

“Listen, Momo. Why do you think we can kill Otherworlders on sight with no questions asked?”

“Because they’re dangerous, riiight? Otherworlders are a threat to the world. I don’t think there’s anything wrong with eliminating a risk before something bad happens, you knooow?”

Menou shook her head at Momo’s response.

“It’s because they have no family in this world.”

Menou explained what she saw as the apparent reason Otherworlders were treated as though they had no human rights.

“When a ‘lost one’ arrives here, they have no connections with anyone, so there’s nobody to go looking for them if they’re killed. No one will mourn their death. Don’t you see? Lost ones are the weakest of all.”

Menou had committed a grave sin: murdering countless Otherworlders right after they came to this world.

Menou was the perpetrator, and they were her victims.

“I get that, buuut…why are you telling me *this, darliiing?”*

“Because you haven’t killed any of them yet.”

When Momo received her white robes, she immediately rushed to Menou's side to be her aide. She only became a priestess to help her darling.

And while Menou entrusted Momo with many jobs, she never asked nor allowed her to kill an Otherworlder.

"You haven't caused harm to any Otherworlders. They have no reason to judge you."

"But…" Momo had protested. Her hands were still hardly clean. She'd spread her white-gloved fingers and tried to share in Menou's burden.

Momo had killed more than clear-cut evildoers like monsters and terrorists. Knights in battle who were only doing their duty or following orders had fallen to her, and she'd interrogated relatively harmless hoodlums to the point of torture.

"They're completely different from Otherworlders."

Still, Menou wouldn't let Momo share the blame.

"The next time a 'lost one' who's done no wrong appears, you're the only one who can take their hand and lead the way, Momo."

Menou was entrusting Momo with a path she'd given up on being able to follow.

Momo couldn't make sense of it. Menou was the only thing that mattered to her. Even if it was a request from her beloved darling, there was no point in doing something that didn't benefit Menou directly.

But she accepted it regardless, for Menou's sake.

Once she confirmed that no one else was around, Momo lightly kicked the box she was sitting on.

"…It's so quiet. I can hardly believe I'm traveling with *you*."

The words were meant for the person in the case—a still-frozen Akari. Over the last month, the Lord that Menou had told Momo of hadn't made any obvious moves. Menou had to tell Momo where Akari's body was stored, and the former aide swapped her luggage right before leaving the holy land.

“I’ll protect whoever I must if it’s a favor for my darling.”

To fulfill her beloved darling’s request, and to change the world…

…Momo began her own journey.

Hooseyard yawned after seeing Momo off.

Her post was changing today. Apparently, she’d be informed of the details in a room she’d been instructed to visit. All Hooseyard knew besides that was that a young priestess would be assigned along with her.

This time, her new colleague would be a white-robed priestess in her late teens, making her a little older than Momo.

“Well, despite everything, I did manage to get along with Miss Momo… I wonder how things will go with this new girl.”

Feeling eager and anxious, Hooseyard headed for the appointed location.

Honestly, a holy land without the Dragon Gate held little appeal for Hooseyard. She was tempted to resign and become a pilgrimage priestess like Momo, taking another trip around the world, were it not for one problem.

“If I leave the broken station in that state, Archbishop Elcami will be furious…”

Fear of her superior kept Hooseyard rooted in the holy land.

The archbishop’s whereabouts were unknown, and there were rumors in the Faust that she’d died. However, Hooseyard trusted that Elcami was alive.

She couldn’t imagine such perfect power disappearing from this world.

As she entered the meeting room, Hooseyard gloomily reflected on the prospect of being scolded once Elcami returned.

“Hellooo, nice to…meet you?”

A brown-haired girl who appeared to be in her teens stood waiting.

Her facial features gave an impression of elegance and strength. It was clear from her sharp eyes and stern expression that she had a fastidious personality. She appeared very serious, to the point that she radiated a strict air about her. Though she was a proper beauty, her uncompromising attitude also seemed like an effort to hide some inner fragility, making for an unbalanced impression.

Something about her struck Hooseyard as familiar.

Instinctively, she invoked the crest conjuring carved into her glasses.

Guiding Force: Connect—Crest, Glasses—Invoke [Guiding Force Vision]

The power she glimpsed through her lenses was nothing short of miraculous.

Hooseyard recognized the practically perfect flow of Guiding Force that seemed almost inhuman.

“Errr… Are you related to Archbishop Elcami by any chance?”

She blurted out the question without even introducing herself, and the girl scowled. Even that mannerism resembled the archbishop.

“Elcami… An anagram of Michael, more or less. I see. It’s just as Lady Hakua said…”

“Ahh, so you do know her?”

“Silence. You would know if I have kin in the Faust? Don’t ask me such foolish questions. It’s most unpleasant.”

“Ah, um, err… Heh-heh-heh. I’m sorry.”

Such forceful words. Hooseyard was meant to be her senior, yet she put on an awkward smile and apologized, cowed by the younger girl’s intensity.

To prevent any nepotism or other negative practices, the Faust exclusively took in young orphaned girls with conjuring aptitude. Asking someone like that about their family origins could easily be considered insensitive.

Still, she didn’t need to get that *angry…* Hooseyard hunched her shoulders even as she stole glances at the girl’s Guiding Force.

Was she truly not Elcami? A second examination confirmed that although there were physical differences between the young girl and the elderly woman, their Guiding Force currents were identical. The pair were too far apart in age to be the same person, yet judging by power, they had to be. Hooseyard’s confusion deepened.

“I became a priestess to serve the hero of… That is, the Lord. I intend to raise my rank and be of use immediately, that I might serve closer to the Lord’s side.”

“My, you’re very passionate.”

“But of course. I owe the Lord a great debt. I know not your standing, but you had best avoid slowing me down.”

“A debt?”

Hooseyard tilted her head; the girl spoke as though she’d met the Lord directly. It was said that the Lord written of in the scriptures was a real person, but they would have lived a thousand years ago.

“It’s nothing. Forget what you heard.”

“R-really? So, then, um…”

“You may call me…Michele, perhaps.”

“All right, Michele it is. So, where are we being assigned?”

“You don’t even know that much?”

The girl who called herself Michele sniffed dismissively.

Hooseyard felt like she was being looked down upon, but knew that her presence was far from intimidating. Plus, this newcomer’s attitude was easy to accept and ignore after Momo’s treatment.

“We are to be the hands that serve justice under the name of the laws set by the Lord… Inquisitors.”

Hooseyard had been assigned to a post she had absolutely no interest in, working with an incredibly serious and motivated junior who was exactly like her previous boss.

Silently, Hooseyard lamented the utterly mismatched nature of her new situation.

Meanwhile, in the northern part of the continent…

A chilling wind blew, despite it not being the season for snow. The half-year-long winter was creeping closer.

In one town that managed to survive the repeated harsh winters, there stood a hidden but functional conjuring workshop.

Guiding vessels, tools that used Guiding Force to operate, were in high demand. While the Faust heavily restricted any crest tools that could be used as weapons, plenty of Guiding vessels were employed in life. These could be activated with an on-off switch, and thus didn't require any talent for Guiding Force manipulation.

These mundane Guiding vessels for lighting, cooking, and water supply equipment required maintenance that could only be done by artisans with extensive conjuring knowledge. Such people were known to earn high incomes.

And while few knew it, these crafters were often urgently sought by those running from the Faust and Noblesse.

Of course, the majority of reputable artisans would never work with a guilty party. There was plenty of work to be had from the many citizens of the Commons without crossing that dangerous line.

But there were a select few who offered services to shadier clientele.

Some did it for money, while others did it to rebel against the Noblesse and the Faust. A few desired knowledge and techniques beyond what the Commons could acquire otherwise and strayed into the realm of taboo.

Officially, this workshop sold Guiding Force lighters and the like. From the shadows, however, it performed crest adjustments for suspicious individuals.

A girl visited this workshop that regularly served those who needed to avoid the knights' law enforcement and the priestesses' technological restrictions, often for nefarious ends.

There was nothing notable about her looks or clothing. A glance imparted that she was a female adventurer, but close inspection would probably uncover a blade-like sharpness to her. The lightest touch might leave someone in ribbons.

A few days earlier, she had brought a pair of daggers here for adjustments.

"Is it done?"

"…Yep."

A short exchange. With her weapons returned, the girl inspected the blades.

She expertly charged them with Guiding Force, checking whether there were any flaws in the crests. Even her casual Guiding Force manipulation was frighteningly smooth. The man sensed that this girl was too powerful for him to measure fully, and he clamped his mouth shut to suppress his curiosity.

Apparently satisfied, the girl stowed the pair of daggers.

“Thank you. You do good work.”

“…All I did was polish them.”

“Few can polish a weapon without damaging the crests.”

The man thought back on the job as he accepted the customer’s thanks and payment.

Those were no ordinary weapons.

They were commonly referred to as crest-blades: weapons engraved with crests, invocation mediums for conjurings.

Only expert engineers could forge a usable weapon inlaid with powerful, practical crests. The combination of materials and construction of the Guiding Force channels helped form the conjuring crests, and that was achieved without sacrificing the deadliness of the raw daggers. Such a feat required specialized knowledge and perfectly honed technique.

Weapons with advanced crests like the ones on those blades would never find their way into the hands of the Commons except by some miraculous happenstance. Even the knights of the Noblesse, who were permitted to carry swords in town, could only manage to inscribe single crests onto their full-sized blades. Anything more advanced than that was as valuable as a national treasure.

Faust priestesses were the only people capable of marking a usable one-handed weapon with two or more crests.

However, no legitimate priestess would visit this sketchy workshop. The priestesses raised and kept their personal conjuring engineers private.

Any member of the Faust could simply bring their weapon to a church for maintenance.

The girl grinned a little, noticing the curiosity creeping into the man's gaze.

"Do you want to know?"

Of course he didn't.

The man shook his head silently.

It was a tacit understanding that he didn't pry into his customers' business. This girl's potential identity was too terrifying to consider.

Normally, the man would never get involved in such things. However, he couldn't resist his engineer's desire to inspect a church-produced crest-blade firsthand. The job had so satisfied his technical curiosity that he didn't regret turning a blind eye to the dangerous customer.

"Perfect. This really is a great workshop. As thanks, I promise never to come here again."

"…'preciate it."

The girl smiled serenely at the man's acknowledgment and left.

He watched her departure silently. As one who worked in the criminal underworld, he received illicit information almost daily.

Word had already spread across the continent that the Faust was desperately searching for a traitor. The Inquisitors were on the prowl openly, of course, but it was rumored that the Executioners, whose very existence was speculation, had grown more active lately, too.

This traitor's crime possibly eclipsed the great tragedy caused by the legendary Commons killer, Genom Cthulha.

The culprit was allegedly behind the murder of Archbishop Elcami in the holy land and the deliberately induced dragonblight that temporarily brought the seemingly eternal barrier city to the brink of destruction. This mastermind also had connections to Archbishop Orwell's death in the Grisarika Kingdom. There were even whispers that she'd meddled with the fog sealing Pandemonium, one of the Four Major Human Errors, and let loose a monster.

She was the secret shame of the Faust, the worst traitor in history.

“So that was Flarette…”

Evil or not, she had undoubtedly carved her name into history for generations to come.

Surely, they would never cross paths again. After a moment, the man returned to his work.

“You’re late!”

The first to greet the girl when she arrived at the meeting point offered a high-pitched complaint, bouncing in the air like popcorn.

She shrugged off the scolding. After she confirmed that no one else was around, her face began to glow.

When the phosphorescent light of Guiding Force settled, her forgettable countenance melted away to become that of a beautiful young woman. She had pale chestnut hair and handsome features. It was Menou. She’d been using Guiding Camouflage to disguise herself.

“Late…? I’m right on time.”

“On time obviously means whenever I get here. You can’t make me wait alone! You’d better be sorry, or else!”

The girl, who looked to be less than ten, continued her admonishment.

Her outfit was very peculiar. She wore a kimono over a white dress, with a buckled belt instead of an obi to hold it in place. Although the combination looked mismatched, the girl’s youth and elegant features helped it seem like a fashion statement.

“I’m sorry, then. I shouldn’t have kept you.”

“Hmm. I’m not sure you really are sorry…” The stylish and precocious little girl glowered at Menou. “What would you do if I got lost in an unfamiliar town, huh? What if someone kidnapped me while I was unattended? I’ll have you know I’m defenseless and downright adorable. There are all sorts of dangers out there for a pretty little girl like me, so you’d better set your mind to protecting me properly from now on!”

It was an almost impressively egotistical speech. Menou placed a hand on the

chatty girl's head. Then she ruffled her locks with a bit more force than necessary.

"Nooo! You'll mess up my hair!"

"All right, all right. Yes, Maya, you're very cute. You'll still be adorable with messed up hair, don't worry."

"What kind of reaction is that? I don't like it one bit."

Maya acted every bit her age, including when she clutched her head after Menou pulled her hand away. It was the typical behavior of a cheeky young girl that could be found anywhere.

In a way, Maya was the result of the deal Menou and Manon agreed to in the holy land. After entering the Star Memory for Pandemonium, Manon deceived Hakua with one final trick and restored Pandemonium's personality from before she became a Human Error. Thanks to Manon sacrificing her existence to an Original Sin Conjuring, Pandemonium's pinky recovered the memories of Maya Ooshima and gained a sense of independence lost a thousand years ago.

"If some ruffians try to bother you, why not fend them off with Guiding Enhancement? Then there wouldn't be a problem."

"No way! I don't have nearly as much Guiding Force as you. I'd run out of power in no time flat."

"…What about an Original Sin Conjuring, then?"

"What, and sacrifice part of my poor little self in the process?"

Although it sounded a little whiny, it was true that Maya couldn't use an Original Sin Conjuring by way of her Pure Concept through any ordinary means. Ethically speaking, a rational-minded person couldn't possibly forfeit flesh to a conjuring.

"I really had to gather my courage for the one I used on Sahara, you know. That's why my hair is shorter."

The girl pouted as she pointed to her black locks. The shorter style looked just as lovely on her, but evidently, she wasn't too happy about it.

Menou had grown accustomed to the difference between Maya and

Pandæmonium on their travels, but she still found herself marveling at the contrast occasionally. This girl was so cute and harmless that it was hard to believe she was part of Pandemonium.

In point of fact, they were now separate beings entirely. They were the same from a conjuring perspective, but their spirits were decidedly different and detached.

“Anyway, wasn’t Sahara supposed to be with you? Where is she?”

“I don’t know. That girl slacks off whenever she has the chance. She won’t do *any* of the things Manon would have done for me. That means you’ll have to work twice as hard for me, okay?”

The existence of this selfish, demanding, carefree girl gave Menou hope.

Typically, a Human Error invoked Pure Concept conjurings without end. Even if they were given their memories back, they’d continue as they were, using those recollections up immediately.

But this pinky finger of Pandemonium who’d declared independence didn’t deplete her memories to control monsters as the original did. Recovering her personality severed contact with the original, and she was able to eke out a sense of self.

Maya’s existence was proof that saving Akari was possible.

If Menou could share her memories with Akari over their Guiding Force connection without the Human Error inside her erasing them, she would return to normal.

“Since I’m giving you such important information, you’ve got to do whatever I say, understand?”

“Yes, I know.”

One of the biggest reasons Menou and Maya joined forces was their shared goal—to kill the Lord of the Faust, Hakua Shirakami.

The conjuring circle Hakua had prepared for returning to the other world was closely related to the natural summoning phenomenon on this planet.

“So you have to destroy the rest of me in the south, no matter what it takes. I

can’t let that happen to me.”

That was Maya’s biggest request.

Without Pandemonium, Hakua’s conjuring wouldn’t have the sacrifices necessary to send her to Japan.

“If the repatriation circle is lost, then the summoning circles that operate on a reciprocal relationship will break as well. The natural summonings that randomly pull Japanese people here will end, and humans will lose the ability to intentionally bring over Otherworlders as well. I hope all that is true.”

“Don’t ask me! It’s just something I overheard an adult mention a thousand years ago. How would a little kid know if some complicated conjuring theory is correct? Duh.”

Maya tapped her forehead and smiled. It was adorable and infuriating all at once. Menou sighed over how uncertain the information was.

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Still, she couldn't dismiss it as a child's nonsense. The civilization a thousand years ago had far more advanced Guiding Force technology than the modern era. If this was the opinion of a researcher from that time, then it was valuable knowledge.

Menou couldn't trust it completely, however. She had reasons to doubt it, even if they were small.

During the fight when Maya was still Pandæmonium, the girl displayed a fair amount of attachment to her homeland. The Four Major Human Errors initially desired to return to Japan just as Hakua did.

"Don't you…want to go back to your original world…?"

"Nah. Not anymore." Maya replied as casually as one might discard a piece of trash. "I like it when people compliment me, you know? Dancing, singing, acting… If I look cute doing it, people pay attention. I love any world that praises me for being adorable."

Maya had been loved. Even if it was calculated on her part, she still felt unmistakably loved.

"So I don't care anymore."

The one who'd praised her the most was gone from this world and the other.

Nothing else drove Maya. It was evident from her tone that Japan didn't matter to her anymore.

Menou brought up another subject to lighten the mood. "Sahara certainly is late."

"No kidding. She's got some nerve making me wait."

As if in reply, Sahara's voice sounded from somewhere nearby.

"Seriously, what is your problem…? I don't have a big sister. You've got the wrong girl."

"A big sister would never mistake one of her younger siblings! But, oh yes, of course. It's been less than a year since you were born, right? No wonder you don't know your big sister yet."

“Excuse me? I’m seventeen, for your—”

“Awww! It’s amazing you can speak so well already. And you walk despite being only an arm! But you do realize there’s no need to imitate organic life by breathing and all that, right? Playing copycat is bad for your brain—I’d stop that if I were you. So come on, little sis. Let’s go back home, just me and the arm that’s really my sibling, okay? Having a meat sack for a body is *such* a drag! Flesh that isn’t red is garbage. There’s no point mucking about with it. But don’t worry. Your big sister will build you up into some nice pretty colors, okay? Come on now!”

Sahara was being harassed by a strange person.

A glamorous woman with bronze-colored skin clung to Sahara’s artificial right arm. She was wearing sunglasses that concealed her eyes, but there was no disguising her loveliness.

“…Who’s that?”

“I have no idea, dammit!”

Sahara was deeply unhappy with the situation.

Another oddball. Menou’s forehead creased as she wondered how they’d resolve this new situation.

“Hmm?”

The brown-skinned beauty hanging off Sahara removed her sunglasses to peer closer at Maya.

Menou and Sahara both gasped.

Her eyes were the clear, marine blue of pure gemstones. If the color were limited to her irises, it could be discarded as stunning natural beauty.

The issue was that her sclera were dark and shimmered like obsidian.

Upon noticing this clearly inhuman feature, Sahara swiftly yanked herself free.

Intelligence to match any human’s, and near-perfect mimicry. Menou couldn’t sense the shape of this woman’s Guiding Force, but there was no doubt about it. She was a conjured soldier made from all three primary colors.

Sahara hurried over to Menou and Maya. Those Primary Color conjured soldiers possessed of all three shades were considered so dangerous that meeting one spelled almost certain death.

While Menou raised her guard against this powerful foe that had appeared out of nowhere, Maya and the brown-skinned woman stared at each other and scowled.

“Ew, gross. Raw garbage from the south. Don’t get any closer or she’ll get her rot all over you, little sis.”

“Tell me, Sahara. Why has *my* minion brought back a piece of scrap from the east?”

The south and the east.

Sahara silently pleaded for help, trapped in a quarrel between the offshoots of two Human Errors, and Menou carefully avoided eye contact with her.

AFTERWORD

The anime adaptation of *The Executioner and Her Way of Life* will air in 2022!

And so this author is mentally setting off party poppers to celebrate.

Mostly, I just watch quietly in the corner while things gradually progress, but every time I get to see part of the production, I'm so happy that I lose a chunk of my vocabulary. I'm afraid the language part of my brain might melt away entirely.

Multimedia adaptations of this series are always exciting. Sometimes they include new parts of the world that even I didn't know about. For instance, when I saw design documents that included Menou's undergarments, I thought *Oh-ho, I see.* Ah, but there were plenty of other moving moments as well!

To my illustrator nilitsu,

Thank you for bringing the characters to life in such fantastic illustrations again! From the color schemes to the designs to the compositions, I love it all more than words can describe. One of the most exciting parts of the anime adaptation is seeing nilitsu's art become anime designs that move on the screen.

Volume 2 of Ryo Mitsuya's manga adaptation will release on August 10! In it, we finally reach the climax of Volume 1! Manga Momo is soo cute!!

I have nothing but gratitude for the GA Bunko editorial department and everyone else involved. I'd particularly like to thank my editor, Null, and also apologize for being such a constant pain.

Finally, to the readers.

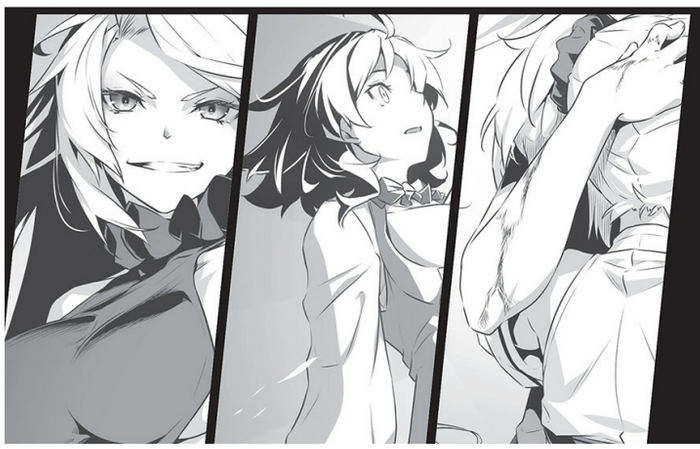
It looks like it's going to be another hot summer. Please be extra careful of heatstroke. You can't geek out to your heart's content if you get sick and collapse. Do take care of yourselves.

I hope you all keep healthy and watch over Menou as she continues to walk her chosen way of life.

Please watch out for Volume 7 to see what color her path will take.

In the next volume, a new arc begins.

Rotating fates, revolving stars.



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